

Learning Circles: Promoting Collaborative Learning Culture for Teacher Professional Development

Majida “Mohammed Yousef” Fahmi Dajani

English Language Supervisor at Al-Eman Schools
&
Al-Quds-Open University
Jerusalem, Palestine

Abstract

This case study examined Palestinian English language teachers' views of the implementation of learning circles (LCs) and their impact on instructional practices and on promoting a collaborative learning culture for teacher professional development. These learning circles involved designated English language teachers teaching from fifth to tenth grade coming together twice a month for six hours during the one year leadership and teacher development program (LTD) to reflect on and share their insights, experiences, difficulties and challenges as leaders of change. Learning circles in the LTD program aimed at providing powerful opportunities for growth and professional development. The data sources included semi-structured interviews, observation and analysis of teacher participation, presentations and reflections. The data also included several sub-questions that this study set out to be answered and explored by the teachers orally and through emails. A total of forty Palestinian teachers participated in this study. Half of the teachers were from Ramallah district and half from Qabatyia-Palestine. The results of this study were a narrative description of teachers' views of the implementation of learning circles used to impact their instructional practices and their professional development. The data from the interviews and the observation of teachers' participation and presentations suggested that teachers have positive views towards learning circles that support and positively affect their instructional practices and professional development. Teachers' reflection revealed that LCs refined their teaching practices and encouraged them to create a collaborative culture that often leads to professional development. They helped them explore new methods and techniques to advance their professional practices. Through learning circles, English language teachers share their best practices in a safe, supportive and collaborative environment.

KeyWords: Culture of collaboration, learning circles, learning communities, professional development, teacher expertise

Introduction

The Leadership and Teacher Development (LTD) program is a program that is jointly implemented by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Palestine and the AMIDEAST. It started in the fall of 2012 and will continue until the spring of 2016. It is a comprehensive education reform initiative focused on improving the quality of school education through an evidence-based approach to leadership and teacher development. It addresses core group of supervisors, as well as teachers and principals from 300 public schools in the West Bank. The aim is to develop a community of educators who share a common understanding of good teaching practice gained from the in-service professional development experiences (MoE & AMIDEAST, 2014).

It should be noted that in the LTD program, teachers were to attend face to face sessions every month for six hours to discuss different new educational theories and their implications. Whereas LCs were held twice a month for six hours to help teachers deeply understand and apply what were presented in the face to face sessions. LCs were practical opportunities to help teachers present and discuss their understanding with their colleagues. LCs in the LTD program are considered as one form of knowledge production. They aim to promote, strengthen and foster cooperation to enhance teachers' professional development based on the different experiences teachers have. LCs are intended to lead to positive action and change in teacher instructional practices.

The learning circles in the LTD program are a collaborative tool used by a group of ten to twelve teachers (community of learners) coming together with a facilitator to engage in a critical discussion and reflection on issues pertaining face to face training sessions. The facilitator's role is to support teacher's thinking and learning.

In the LTD learning circles, the facilitator listens attentively and uses questions and comments to refocus the teachers' discussion. He/ She ensures that there is a thoughtful debriefing process. The goal is to build and share knowledge of successful experiences through the process of open discussion and deep reflection around face to face issues related to teaching English as a foreign language. LCs also aim to help teachers work together and share successful experiences.

In the LTD program, LCs are expected to help teachers explore approaches that expand their knowledge, skills, and confidence with the focus on improving teaching and learning processes. In LCs, teachers invest time on discussing their hopes and expectations, identifying issues of concerns, identifying some challenges regarding the application of some new ideas, making recommendations of actions, promoting risk-taking, evaluating some practices, deepening their understanding of some of the topics discussed in the face to face meetings, giving and receiving reflective feedback, asking for alternative strategies, and then following up and discussing next steps.

Discussion and reflection are two key skills at all stages of LCs. Reflection leads to a meaningful discussion and provides opportunities for clarifying some assumptions and challenges about teaching and learning. In LCs, the facilitators and the teachers are expected to reach a shared understanding of the issues raised and presented through face to face sessions. Peters & Le Cornu, (2005) explained that "In the LCs, participants reflect on and share their insights, tensions and dilemmas as leaders of the change process" (p.1), and thus enhance their understanding of the teaching and learning processes.

LCs aim to provide a climate of trust, respect, acceptance and support among teachers and facilitators and among teachers themselves. Teachers are encouraged to look at issues raised from different perspectives and discuss how the raised issues could be applied in their English

language classrooms. LCs create a culture of collaboration that enhances continuous learning and builds meaningful relationships for the purpose of improving teachers' practices.

It is expected that LCs enable teachers to express and explore ideas without fear of being judged or evaluated. The facilitators are the ones who are responsible to hear all the participants and to create fruitful discussions that lead to better performances.

The Significance of the Study

This study is important because it explored how teachers' perceive the implementation of LCs in the Leadership and Teacher Development (LTD) program (2013-2014). It examined the impact or the power of learning circles on teachers' professional development and on improving and changing their instructional practices.

Equally, this study is important because it helps us recognize that leadership and teacher professional development and growth are interrelated. In the Palestinian context, administrators are the ones who decide what teachers need to know without paying attention to what teachers really want to learn and need to improve. This means that many programs are not always based on critical needs analysis. Therefore, in LCs, teachers have the opportunity of getting support and of gaining different experiences from colleagues through dialogues and fruitful discussions raised among them. LCs could be an opportunity for some teachers to change their practices and to influence not only their classrooms and their students, but also the school they work in as they are viewed the agents and the leaders of change.

Research has shown the importance of professional learning circles in improving teachers' performances (Peters, and Le Cornu, 2004). The trusting, the openness and the respectful relationships through the LCs create the positive atmosphere that encourages teachers to discuss and reflect on their own and their peers' practices. LCs are opportunities to practice being a critical friend in addition to receiving and giving reflective feedback.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers' perceive the implementation of learning circles in the LTD program. It also investigates the impact of learning circles on teachers' professional development and on improving instructional practices.

What seems to be the problem

In-service teacher professional development is an ongoing process of acquiring new knowledge, experiences and skills that relate to the teaching profession. Palestinian teachers are always trying to be better, but the problem is that they do not have opportunities to pursue their professional development in a positive, rich, safe, respectful and supportive environment. Besides, in many cases their voices are not heard, and their needs are not addressed. In Palestine, like many other countries, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the most common types of in-service teacher professional development programs are almost always based on workshops designed by administrators and implemented by the supervisors. Workshops are common international tools that are used professionally to develop teachers.

Garet, et al. (2001) defines workshops as — “a structured approach to professional development that occurs outside the teacher's own classroom. It generally involves a leader or leaders with special expertise and participants who attend sessions at scheduled times often after school, on the weekend, or during the summer (p. 920)”. Teacher training through workshops is criticized in the literature as less effective than the programs that are based on teachers' needs,

expectations and changing teacher classroom practices (Garet et al., 2001). Garet et al., (2001) explains that “this is because of the limited time assigned for these workshops and the lower level of participants’ engagement in such workshops. Sometimes these workshops are not planned according to teachers’ needs and almost always they are not based on everyday classroom practices (p. 920).”

Many problems and challenges occur in teaching and learning processes. These problems and challenges can be minimized through in-depth critical reflection, dialogues, discussions and presentations in LCs. Teachers have the opportunity to assess and reexamine their teaching beliefs and practices in these LCs and benefit from the experiences that they and other teachers have.

Teachers always claim that in-service training programs are not always effective because they are not connected to their real practices of teaching or they do not provide ongoing follow-up support. As well as, they are more theoretical than practical. Robinson (2008) asserts that “We have to recognize that most great learning happens in groups, that collaboration is the stuff of growth. If you atomize people and separate them and judge them separately, we form a kind of disjunction between them and their natural learning environment. And thirdly, it’s crucially about the culture of our institutions, the habits of institution and the habitats that they occupy” (p. 2). Creating a collaborative learning cultures in schools and engendering trust, are unquestionably the ways we lead to improved performance on a variety of measures (Robinson, et al, 2009).

Research Questions

This study addresses the following main and sub questions:

1. How do English language teachers participating in the LTD program perceive the implementation of the LCs?
2. What is the impact of LCs on teachers’ professional development and on improving and changing their instructional practices?

Sub Questions

1. What is the major role of the facilitator in the LCs in the LTD program?
2. What are the objectives of LCs in the LTD program?
3. What are the expected outcomes of the LCs in the LTD program?
4. Do LCs provide real opportunities for the professional development and growth of teachers?
5. How can LCs improve teachers’ teaching practices?
6. What makes successful LCs?
- 7.

Limitations of the Study

This study is only restricted to teachers participating in the LTD program for the school year 2013-2014 either in Ramallah or Qabatya districts.

Literature Review

LCs are defined as a place where a group of people come together to examine an issue or body of knowledge in which they are interested. After some initial planning, the group sets up a series of meetings with a specific [(set of)] goal(s) that the members of the group wish to accomplish through the meetings (Aksim, 2005, p. 20).

Others define LCs as series of meetings where teachers discuss, demonstrate, present, reflect, or report on readings and presentations. Teachers in the LCs share their knowledge and experiences, learn new information and apply and test new skills. These circles are learning networks that create successful knowledge communities (Katz and Earl, 2010).

Research asserts that LCs provide a rich, fruitful learning situation. Teaching and learning involve communication with different people. Teachers can't develop skills without a group of people, who can support, advice, inquire, criticize and offer appropriate alternatives. A learning circle gives essential feedback to teachers from colleagues who are working on the same context, the same body of skills and information, and whose suggestions on techniques and resources are essentially valuable (Chalmers and Keown, 2006).

LCs provide a supportive and shared leadership. This shared and supportive leadership provides opportunities for effective professional development. Teachers are engaged physically, cognitively and emotionally through activities such as problem solving, sharing and discussion, application and reflection. Supportive professional development supports the teacher motivation and commitment to learning and development (Hunzicker, 2011).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) emphasized that there are many benefits for teachers who participate in LCs. They reported that teachers feel more positive and secure about their profession. Collier (2011) made an interview with Hammond in which she asserted that when teachers collaborate with each other, they can better serve their students. However, teachers are not given enough time in their workdays.

Hammond continued in the interview to emphasize "those schools with such teacher communities or circles are better places because of the open-policy where teachers share information and exchange experiences. LCs are opportunities in which teachers can see each other engage in practice. They can reflect on their and other practices. They can solve common challenges."

LCs are seen as an effective way to support teachers and bring about the changes that are considered important for teaching in the 21st century (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Cooperation and collaboration are important skills that teachers need to develop in order to improve their instructional practices. The importance of communication skill is paramount in LCs.

LCs support teachers to critically examine their practices and the assumptions underlying them "Central to the vision is a recognition that, as professionals, teachers need to update their skills and knowledge continuously, not only in response to a changing world, but in response to new research and emerging knowledge about learning and teaching" (DET, 2005, p. 2). Being a teacher in the twenty first century is based on the assumption that teachers nowadays have to exert effort to continue to learn in order to foster students' right to learn. Teachers nowadays are seen as educational professionals and ongoing learners. Teachers need to build a culture of cooperation to enhance, modify, adopt and adapt different instructional practices.

In LCs, participants are engaged in conversations that foster deeper thinking. In these conversations teachers dialogue their own practices. Feldman (1999) argued that "conversations (dialogues) are a form of inquiry which enables people to work through the dilemmas, quandaries and dissonances that relate to their living and being in the world (p. 137)".

However, teachers face some challenges in these learning circles. Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) explained the challenges this way:

Forming a professional community requires teachers to engage in both intellectual and social work new ways of thinking and reasoning collectively as well as new forms of

interacting interpersonally.....Learning from colleagues requires both a shift in perspective and the ability to listen hard to other adults, especially as these adults struggle to formulate thoughts in response to challenging intellectual content (p. 973).

In a learning circle, everyone is a teacher and a learner. Everyone has a voice to share experiences, challenges, success stories, to reflect and to gain new insights into problems and challenges. Professional development and building a culture of collaboration occur with supportive communities (Little, 2003) and (Creswell, 2008).

Teacher professional development must take place within a positive-supportive professional learning circle. When teachers are supported by a professional learning community they perform better. As researchers have explored, both the professional community and professional development are interrelated. We need to have quality training for our teachers but at the same time we need to encourage them to create their learning communities. Education has greater and greater demands placed on the teacher responsibility for on-going professional development. We as educators need to form professional communities and create a culture of collaboration for professional development.

Research Method and Data Collection

The methods of qualitative data collection were used in this study. They included semi-structured interviews, observation and analysis of teacher participation and presentations of their assignments and their classroom practices. Data also included teachers' reflection. There were several sub-questions that this study set out to answer and explore in order to investigate in depth the main questions in this research. Sub questions were answered orally by teachers during the LCs and were sent to the teachers in Ramallah and Qabatya to be answered again through email. The data from the different resources were analyzed using common themes and patterns. The researcher indexed and categorized the data and began an ongoing data analyses process. During the analysis of the different categories, the researcher was able to identify clear themes and patterns in teachers' views towards the implementation of learning circles (LCs) and the impact of these circles on instructional practices and professional development.

Research Findings and Discussion

In the first-sub question, participants were asked to identify **the role of the facilitator in LCs** in the LTD program. Participants revealed either through interviews or emails that the facilitator played an important role in helping teachers present successful implications and actions they practiced in their English language classrooms.

Their oral discussions and their emails revealed that the primary role of the facilitator was to make sure that discussion took place and that almost all teachers' voices were heard. The facilitator ensured teachers' participation and involvement in discussion that were raised during the LCs. Teachers respected, listened and reflected on each other practices, even though they sometimes had differences of opinion. Teachers felt safe and secure to express and to test their opinions and beliefs. They had the freedom to agree and disagree about different viewpoints in a supportive, respectful environment provided by the facilitator. For one of the teachers in Qabatya, the facilitator played a number of roles. "The facilitator is a helper who helps teachers understand what they miss or don't understand; a coordinator who sends and receives emails from teachers, a supplier who supplies teachers with methods, materials, information, announcements; an adviser who advises teachers to do the best, an expert who provides reliable

sources of techniques and skills, and finally he/ she is the one who helps teachers to accomplish the perfect assignment for each module.”

Teachers in the LTD program emphasized the importance of the facilitator role. Teachers, at the same time, pointed out that the facilitator should try more to ensure that all voices are heard and given equal opportunities in the discussion. Some teachers were more dominant than others. Teachers said, “They realized that maintaining a discussion or a conversation over a three-hour period, around themes, topics, or assignments discussed in face to face meetings could be quite a challenging process for facilitators, especially, leading LCs was a new experience for the facilitators.” Teachers suggested that the detailed agenda of the learning session should be sent in advance to the trainee through emails in order to enrich the discussion and the presentation. Teachers assured that the most productive sessions were when circles of viewpoints and opinions were raised.

However, there were very few contradictory views towards the role of the facilitator in the LCs. One participant from Qabatya district said “some facilitators were undereducated and were not aware of the importance of such LCs,” quoting his exact words. Another teacher from the same district also criticized “some facilitators tried to play the role of expert, but the fact that they should practice the role of being attentive, reflective listeners,” quoting her exact words.

In the second sub-question, participants were asked to pinpoint **the objectives of learning circles in the LTD program**. Teachers revealed that the purpose of the LCs in the LTD program were not clear at the beginning of the program but at later stages they realized that they were opportunities for them to explore ideas discussed in face to face sessions or implemented in their classrooms in cooperative learning situations in which teachers felt secure, safe, and supported. In LCs teachers were encouraged to take some intellectual risks and to examine some new ideas through action research. LCs in the LTD program were based on inquiry and rethinking teaching methods and techniques.

Teachers believed that the objective of LCs was to develop them professionally through professional activities and through their rich expertise. They pointed out that LCs were opportunities to discuss some instructional practices and to question their teaching performances based on the discussed issues in the face to face meetings.

From my observation to three learning circles held for nine hours, I noticed that teachers achieved the objectives of LCs. They were open to talking and to discussing issues that might help in improving their practices. They were open and honest about discussing their problems of practices and the challenges they face in their English language classrooms. Some teachers expressed through their emails that they benefited from the rich experience of other teachers coming from different schools as it enabled them to share different approaches for the purpose of meeting the needs of Palestinian students. A teacher from Ramallah wrote, “My participation in the learning circles contributed to a new understanding and stronger commitment to building the desired learning communities in our schools for a better future for the Palestinian students.”

Some teachers asserted in their reflections that the experience of LCs was valuable, and had added to their understanding of how they themselves could improve their own practices. Teachers realized that they were the only ones who could solve the challenges that they face because they understand their real context more than anybody else. However, LCs were opportunities to expand their knowledge and to learn some new techniques and strategies that might help them solve some of the challenges they used to face or encounter.

LCs were an opportunity to explore common areas of concerns among teachers with the purpose of finding new and effective ways to improve the quality of teaching and learning. As it

was stated by the teachers, LCs promoted personal and professional growth that led them to positive changes in their practices. For example, how to differentiate their instructions with large size classes and with multi-level students were concerns that were discussed during the face to face meetings and during the LCs. How to create a culture of thinking and make students thinking visible was also an issue that was discussed deeply in both the face to face sessions and in the learning circles. How to convince head teachers and supervisors with the new practices they have implemented or would like to implement were also discussed.

Some teachers' views about LCs were very positive. For example, a teacher from Ramallah district wrote, "LCs are like enrichment courses for us since teachers exchange their experiences. They are great opportunities for teachers to cooperate and benefit."

However, about 30 percent of the teachers had a negative perception towards LCs. To quote the exact words of a teacher from Qabatya "LCs were dedicated to discussing our implementation of the issues discussed in the face to face sessions but the real fact was that we mostly discussed things that we hadn't practiced or done, yet. We discussed things theoretically, without doing anything, or lying of doing things. We discussed the utopian students and schools that we perceive only in our imaginations."

The teacher continued, "English language teachers are jammed with school and social burdens, especially with the educational disorder we live in Palestine because of the occupation. Let us be realistic and down to earth. We face many difficulties that we can't do anything about."

In the third sub-question, teachers were also asked to restate **the expected outcomes of the learning circle in the LTD program**. Teachers noted that LCs in the LTD program helped them revisit new concepts that they encountered in the face to face sessions. Issues like, being reflective teachers, thinking as an assessor, creating professional development portfolios through action research, using authentic assessment, enhancing students' literacy skills, implementing thinking routines were some of the issues discussed in LCs. LCs helped teachers work together to develop their practices. For example, when discussing the instructional design models or theories of Wiggins and McTighe, it was not easy for English language teachers to fully comprehend this backward design without application. Accordingly, LCs were the appropriate context for teachers to discuss the method more and to apply on "English for Palestine" textbook.

The LCs provided teachers with the opportunity to exchange experiences, learn and share together both as critical friends and colleagues. LCs enhanced teachers' personal growth and professional development. Teachers emphasized that the ultimate benefit they have gained was from the rich experiences that some teachers have.

The most important outcome that teachers mentioned was that they tried to apply some new methods and techniques that might help their students learn better and achieve more. They were promoted to take risks and try new strategies that might help in improving students' learning.

In the fourth question, teachers were asked if **LCs provided significant opportunities for professional development of teachers**. Teachers in the LTD program showed themselves to be committed and caring for developing their instructional practices, with deep concerns for the Palestinian learners and for their achievements. Teachers noted that "unlike any other nation, Palestinians face difficulties and challenges that should be taken into consideration in planning and implementing new techniques and strategies." Palestinians' problems are always related to the conflict and the ongoing violence in Palestine, the lack of security, the socio-economic and educational difficulties. As a result, teachers in Palestine have greater responsibilities that they should take into consideration while designing and implementing their lessons.

English language teachers pointed out that face to face meetings were the stepping stones for the LCs meetings as they provided significant professional development opportunities to improve teachers' practices. Teachers reported that they wanted to know more about managing learning and teaching processes as well as to better understand the relationship between theory and real classroom practices.

A teacher from Ramallah district mentioned "LCs are a great opportunity for us as teachers. For me, students' involvement is a key in the teaching and learning process. I believe I have a problem in engaging students in my classes but with the LTD program and the LCs, it is getting better and students started to enjoy their English classes more and more. LCs are a great opportunity to help one another find solutions for some of the problems we encounter."

The key for their professional development in the LCs was the micro presentations that teachers implemented as a collegial professional development. These presentations were opportunities for all participants to analyze, reflect, adopt, adapt, and many others.

In the fifth question, teachers were asked **if LCs improve their classroom instructions**. Teachers stated that LCs created experiences for teachers to evaluate and improve or transform their teaching practices. Teachers pointed out that several effective practices were developed as a result of the LTD program and the LCs discussions. Some examples of improvements were provided by the teachers. Teachers stated that their classes used to be more teacher-centered rather than student-centered. However after the LTD program, and in spite of the large number of students in Palestinian classes, they have tried to apply activities that made students the center of their English language classes. They have used instructional strategies that enhance students' understanding.

Teachers revealed that they had started to construct performance assessment tasks based on real world goal, real world role, real world audience, real world situation, real products or performances and standards (GRASPS) (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). Teachers asserted that they had provided multiple opportunities for their students to use English language skills and to receive constructive feedback that help them develop and improve. For example, teachers' training on the importance of working portfolios encouraged them to ask their students create their own portfolios. These portfolios were used as an authentic assessment tool in the classroom. Portfolios exhibited students' efforts, progress/ growth, and achievement. Students demonstrated their accomplishments and then get feedback from both their teachers and their peers.

Another example was launching the daily five routines (Boushey and Moser, 2006). The daily five program that LTD teachers implemented with their students was read to self, read to someone or read with someone (EKK: elbow to elbow, knee to knee, I read to you, you read to me), listen to reading, work on writing, and word work. Moreover, check for students' understanding was part of program.

Teachers reported that LCs were fruitful and successful. They enriched their experiences and helped them feel that they are better English language teachers. They realized the importance of changing their classroom environment by giving more responsibilities to their students. A teacher from Ramallah stated "We became more aware of the importance of giving our students more roles in our English Language classrooms."

Teachers suggested that it would be better if the program provided more training on teaching English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Since, effective professional development should also include activities for developing the teaching of the foreign language skills. Teachers asserted that they need more training on how to make their students thinking more visible and how to help their students be more critical and creative.

Regarding the last question that was related to their recommendations for more **successful learning circles**, teachers stated that the more LCs are tied to teaching and learning activities that take place in the real English language classrooms, the better LCs will be. The more successful stories presented from the real difficult and complex Palestinian context, the more successful learning circles will be.

Summary and Conclusion

The main rationale for this research was to find out teachers' views towards LCs and to examine the impact of LCs on the teachers' professional development. The results of the study presented in the findings showed that LCs were one of the tools that encourage English language teachers to speak, listen and participate in problem-solving and decision-making regarding classroom practices.

LCs helped teachers observe, comment, reflect and experience their colleagues' practices, as well as their own. LCs helped teachers broaden their perspectives by considering the many viewpoints around them. Teachers have become more familiar with each other's practices, including the power of sharing experiences and reflection that impact their professional development as well as their teaching practices. Experiences were shared and developed through LCs in the LTD program.

From my observation and from teachers' responses either through the interviews or through their emails, it was obvious that LCs in the LTD program were a tool to develop teachers' instructional practices. They were a safe environment that allowed teachers to present, discuss, dialogue and reflect on the raised issues freely and to share different points of views with their colleagues. LCs were great opportunities to help one another in finding alternative solutions for some practical problems. Teachers during the LCs were given the opportunity to reflect critically on some classroom practices and above all to learn from the experiences of other teachers teaching in different schools but nearly in the same context.

LCs had impact on improving and changing some of the classroom instructions that led/ lead to better professional development. An LTD participant from Ramallah said "Through exchanging personal experiences, many classroom performances have changed. Now we try to increase the role of the students, and we focus more on students' needs and differences."

A teacher from Qabatya expatiated, "Before the LTD, I was nothing rather than a traditional teacher. My preparation was simple and didn't cover the whole unit as I am doing today. Today I focus more on the big ideas and the essential questions in the unit. I was/ am always trying to be the best. I was always looking for modern and new methods to motivate and encourage my students be better learners. Now, I am someone who has a holy goal in the process of teaching. I have to be a better ongoing learner to educate my students. Face to face meetings and LCs were valuable opportunities for us to maintain a high level of quality teaching and learning."

Teachers realized that professional development and leadership are intertwined. They recognized that to lead means to engage in LCs for the purpose of improving and developing classroom practices. Teachers came together to share some experiences and to overcome some challenges. LCs do create a learning experience where teachers are able to improve their instructional practices and to construct knowledge for themselves and for their colleagues. LCs improve teachers' communication skills and build confidence to cultivate a culture of collaboration and teamwork. Through LCs, teachers are in the inquiry circles that help them professionally develop and be better English language teachers.

Recommendation

The following recommendations are based on the views that English language teachers had towards the implementation of LCs in the LTD program and its impact on their professional development.

English language teachers showed their positive attitudes towards learning circles to the extent that they have willingness to recommend it to other colleagues. The awareness of the importance of the LCs should be promoted in all Palestinian schools. Based on the experiences that teachers had in the LTD program, they recommended that the issues or the topics of LCs discussion should be more focused in order to help teachers gain better understating. They also recommended that the facilitator should try more to encourage the participants to think differently about the topic of discussion, and this could be achieved by better ways of questioning.

Administrators need to spare enough time for teachers to build their learning communities at school level. It is recommended to transform a school organization into a learning community where teachers collaboratively and continually conduct open-reflective dialogues about their students and their teaching and learning processes. The learning community ought to be based on continuous inquiry and continuous improvement goals.

Teachers recommended the use of the facebook page as a virtual learning circle in which teachers can share and participate in fruitful discussions that might lead to professional development. They suggested the facebook page as a meaningful and feasible online professional learning community as the page might promote a collaborative learning culture that bring professionals together to learn.

Finally, more studies are recommended to examine the impact of learning circles on students' achievement.

About the Author:

Dr. Majida Dajani is an assistant professor of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Al-Quds Open University. I am also an English language supervisor at Al-Eman Schools, Jerusalem. Currently, She is working as a consultant and in-service teacher trainer on a project called leadership and teacher development program (LTD) with the Palestinian Ministry of Education and the AMIDEAST. She has participated in many conferences inside and outside Palestinian context. She has participated in setting the guidelines of "English for Palestine (EFP)" from Grade 1-12 and she was a member of the Palestinian English language curriculum team. She was a member of the Palestinian Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (PATEFL). She is currently working on two science research with San Francisco University.

References

- Aksim, R. E. (2005). Learning circle basics. Online: <http://www.askim.org>.
- Boushey, G., & Moser, J. (2006). *The daily 5: Fostering literacy independence in the elementary grades*. Portland, Me: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Chalmers, L and Keown, P. (2006). Communities of practice and professional development, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25, (2), 1-18.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1999). The teacher research movement: A decade later. *Educational Researcher*, 28(7), 15–25.
- Collier, L. (2011). The Need for Teacher Communities: An Interview with Linda Darling-Hammond 2011 NCTE. Annual Convention General Session on Friday, November 18.

- Creswell, J. (2008). *Educational Research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Darling-Hammond L, Wei RC, Andree A, Richardson N, Orphanos, S. (2009). Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the United States and Abroad. Dallas, TX: National Staff Development Council. From <http://www.nsd.org/news/NSDCstudy2009.pdf> > (Retrieved February 13, 2012).
- DET (2005) Professional Learning in Effective Schools: Seven principles of effective teacher Learning, Department of Education and Training Melbourne <http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/teacher/ProfLearningInEffectiveSchools.pdf>.
- Feldman, A. (1999). The Role of Conversation in Collaborative Action Research, *Educational Action Research*, 7(1), 125-144.
- Garet, M. S., A. C. Porter, L. Desimone, B. F. Birman, and K. S. Yoon. (2001). "What Makes Professional Development Effective? Results from a National Sample of Teachers." *American Educational Research Journal* 38, (4), 915-945.
- Grossman, P., Wineburg, S. & Woolworth, S. (2001). *Toward a Theory of Teacher Community*, *Teachers College Record*, 103 (6), 942-1012.
- Hallinger P, Heck RH 2010. Collaborative leadership and school improvement: Understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning. *School Leadership and Management*, 30(2): 95 –110.
- Hunzicker JL 2011. Effective professional development for teachers: A checklist. *Professional Development in Education*, 37(2): 177–217.
- Katz S, Earl L, (2010). Learning about networked learning communities. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 21 (1): 27 – 51.
- Leadership and Teacher Development Program (LTD), (2014). <http://www.amideast.org/ltd/about-ltd/leadership-and-teacher-development-ltd-program> 2014 AMIDEAST. (Retrieved July 23, 2014).
- Little, J.W. 2003. "Professional Community and the Problem of High School Reform." *International Journal of Educational Research* 37 (8): 693-714.
- Peters, J. & Le Cornu, R. (2004). *Leaders in Transition: living with Paradoxes*. Paper presented to the British Educational Research Association Conference, Manchester, September.
- Peters, J. & Le Cornu, R. (2005). 'Beyond Communities of Practice: Learning Circles for Transformational School Leadership', Chapter 6 in P. Carden & T. Stehlik (eds) *Beyond Communities of Practice*, Queensland, Post Pressed.
- Robinson, K. (2008, June). Changing Education Paradigms. Retrieved from http://www.cfpscoursweb.com/pluginfile.php/1099/block_html/content/RSA%20%20Ken%20Robinson%20Lecture%20-%20transcript.pdf
- Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., and Lloyd, C. (2009). *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why – Best Evidence Syntheses Iteration [BES]*. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.
- Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria Funding Council For England. The National Council of Teachers of English. The Council Chronicle, November, 2011. <http://www.amideast.org/ltd/about-ltd/leadership-and-teacher-development-ltd-program>