Article

Teacher Learning Communities and Leadership: Insights from A DEIS Urban Second-Level School

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Abstract: This article explores the connection between teaching effectiveness and participation in teacher learning communities (TLCs) in the context of a second-level co-educational urban school. In particular, it examines the role of educational leadership in their development and concomitantly toward the enhancement of teaching and learning. Seven teachers contributed to the research across two existing TLCs at the site school. It emerged that relationships and respect amongst the participants are pivotal to their effectiveness. It also transpired that both learning communities that were the focus of this study are characterized by a democratic style of leadership. Such however was possibly largely on account of the leadership style that this study found to be present in the school. Particular importance was attached to the significance of "professional relationships" for effective TLCs. It is recognized that further research on the nature of these relationships in the context of a constantly developing and changing education system will be beneficial and of the concomitant leadership styles that will provide the optimum context for these relationships to flourish.

Keywords: teacher learning community; leadership; democracy; respect; relationships

1. Introduction

This article explores the connection between teaching effectiveness and participation in teacher learning communities (TLCs) in the context of a second-level co-educational urban school. In particular, it will examine the role of educational leadership in the development of TLCs and concomitantly toward the enhancement of teaching and learning. Teaching effectiveness is equated with the experience of teachers' "pedagogical well-being" [1–3]. Such an understanding is acknowledged as constructed "in the core processes of teachers' work, that is, in carrying out and developing the teaching-learning process, including, for example, planning classroom activities, interacting with pupils, making evaluations, and choosing and developing instructional tools" [3] (p. 737). The findings that are being reported here indicate that there is a close correspondence between successful engagement in such activities and participation in a Teacher Learning Community (TLC). It is also evident from the findings that the presence of effective TLCs can be impacted by the nature of the leadership that is practised in the school.

1.1. The Connection between TLCs and Teaching Effectiveness

The Teaching Council in Ireland, which is the statutory professional body for pre-service and in-service teachers, acknowledges that improving the quality of student learning is a principal driver of teacher learning and teachers' engagement with professional collaboration [4]. This research is equating the learning which develops from such professional collaboration with what is referred to in this article as teacher learning communities (TLCs).

Owen [5] (p. 217) contends that TLCs are effective because teachers have the opportunity to collaborate regularly over an extended timeframe, which in turn can allow for experimentation, as well as providing support to each other in skill-building and in the use of new pedagogies. key features of such communities include the establishment

and maintenance of communication norms and trust, as well as the collaborative interactions which take place when groups of teachers work together to examine and improve their practice [6]. Their cultivation within schools is made easier by having appropriate leadership [7]. It is acknowledged that when leadership is supportive of TLCs, an enhanced degree of collaboration among teachers for exchange and co-ordination of teaching and more sophisticated professional collaboration occurs [8].

As noted above, in the context of this article, teaching effectiveness is being identified with the experience of teacher "pedagogical well-being" (TPWB). The understanding of the latter was extrapolated from research by Soini, Pyhältö and Pietarinen [3]. It perceives teaching effectiveness with teacher successfulness across four domains: Interactions with students; Interactions with colleagues; Making evaluations; and Choosing and developing instructional tools [2] (p. 147).

In the following sections, we will explore some of the existing research on how participation in TLCs can impact aspects of these domains. Additionally, with the specific focus on school leadership, in the analysis of the data from the site school, there will be a particular focus on the extent to which school leadership may impact the potential effectiveness of TLCs.

1.2. TLCs and Planning Classroom Activities

With the increasing prevalence of standardized teaching and learning processes, there is an increased propensity for teachers to engage in pedagogical processes and activities, including making evaluations on one's teaching and choosing and developing instructional tools, that are removed from the lifeworld of the students. This can negatively impact student learning and engagement [9].

It is evident from the literature that Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) can act as a bulwark to mitigate the impact of such tendencies on classroom teaching [5,10,11]. Owen [5] observes that at the core of TLCs which function at the most mature level is the notion of transforming the concept of teaching as a privatised practice. There is an emphasis on boundary removal and a shift towards working with colleagues. Teaching within this conceptual model emphasises genuine collaboration, joint problem-solving, debate, constructive observation and feedback and support for collegial learning as a joint enterprise.

Working in this way, according to Hardy and Ronnerman [10], extends teachers' practice-learning beyond the confines of their own classrooms, resulting in an extended and deepened understanding of practice. In their view, it also activates teachers' agency and latent critical capacities in a way that helps to build the professional understanding necessary for transforming practice. This activation of teachers' critical thinking faculties when working together highlights the potential of TLCs as incubators of ideas and approaches which promote student and teacher learning.

There is evidence to suggest that teachers' ability to work, plan and evaluate together is dependent on the degree to which school management and educational leaders view the teaching staff as a community of learners and the school as a learning environment for teachers as well as students [11]. This has significance for the focus of this research on school leadership and the effectiveness of TLCs. It will be considered in light of the data that emerges from the research site of practice as part of the findings section below.

1.3. TLCs and Interactions with Students

Drew, Priestley and Michael, M.K. [12] (p. 7) observe that the collaborative potential of TLCs open-up "new ways of working in school" with the potential of enhanced practice and outcomes for children. This in turn can have a positive impact on interactions with students, as it leads to learners who are more interested and excited and motivated to learn. In the process, the role of the teacher changes from that of being the archetypal expert disseminating information to that of being a coach, a co-learner and a learning facilitator [8]. In order to effect this change in role, Owen's [5] research on professional

learning communities points to the importance of a teacher's capacity for skilful questioning and quality feedback.

The prevalence of teacher-student interactions in schools with the concomitant positive impact on students' learning can be influenced by the prevailing leadership style that is evident in the school. Xhomara [13] for example identified a symmetry between the presence of participative and transformational leadership styles and staff's willingness to participate in interactive styles of teaching. The significance of school leadership for students' classroom participation was also evident from Sebastian, Allenworth and Steven's [14] configurational study. It highlighted the importance of principal and teacher leadership and organizational supports over and above the prior achievement of the students.

1.4. TLCs and Teacher Collaboration

Soini et al. [3] recognise that teacher learning communities (TLCs) provide spaces where shared responsibility can be enacted for pupil learning and growth. Such spaces in their view offer the necessary emotional support for each participating teacher to optimize their effectiveness as classroom teachers (p. 737). Similarly, Owen [5] describes such communities as small groups of teachers who come together as a team to help each other to improve student learning. She suggests that they are effective because members work together regularly over an extended time frame, with teachers experimenting and supporting each other in skill-building and using new pedagogies [15].

The significance of leadership in schools for the cultivation of TLCs is acknowledged by Mulford [7]. Such cultivation in his view is a developmental process involving teachers working together in schools, sharing norms and values, and respecting diversity, as well as building capacity for change through evidence-based learning.

The critical role of school leadership in this process is also evidenced in the work of Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen and Grissom [16]. Leadership is pivotal for the propagation of the appropriate culture in the school, as well as for prioritizing matters relating to teaching and learning, such as the opportunities for teachers to come together in teacher learning communities. It can be a cause of stress and burden when such leadership is absent [3]. Indeed, the TALIS Report [8] (p. 205) evidence that when leadership is supportive of TLCs there is an increased propensity for an enhanced degree of collaboration among teachers.

2. Materials and Methods

The school site which is the focus of this study is an urban co-educational multi-denominational second-level school in the mid-west region of Ireland. It has a diverse cohort of students which is reflective of its diverse surrounding community. It is also a designated DEIS School (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School). The latter is an initiative that was initially introduced by the Irish Department of Education and Skills in 2005 and subsequently revised in 2017 [17,18]. It is intended to prioritise the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. Additional supports are targeted for these schools in order to maximize the educational potential of the learners.

At the site school, there are two existing Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) that come under the remit of FOLAN (Focus on Literacy and Numeracy). Both literacy and numeracy are specified as being pivotal for meeting the priority teaching and learning needs in DEIS Schools. The respective planning teams within the school set the targets for literacy and numeracy. They consist of representatives from the English, Maths and Special Educational Needs (SEN) departments. The Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) coordinator, as well as the JCSP Librarian, are also involved.

The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) has been designed to help young people who are at risk of leaving school early and who would benefit from special support when they are working towards the Junior Certificate. It is designed to ensure that these young people can benefit from their time in school and enjoy the experience of improvement and success. It does this by providing a curriculum framework that will assist schools and

individual teachers in adopting a student-centred approach to education and in providing students with a programme to meet their individual needs.

At the site school, the JCSP library provides the physical environment for the FOLAN programme. The contents of the JCSP library and regular ongoing collaboration between the teaching staff and the JCSP librarian in choosing and developing instructional tools and planning classroom activities are important resources for the FOLAN programme. The English, Maths and SEN teams provide further teaching resources and collaborate closely to deliver the programme.

Two semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with FOLAN planning teams at the site school for both literacy and numeracy (FG Literacy and FG Numeracy). These were conducted as part of an Erasmus+ European Project on Teacher Well-being and diversity 2016–2020. Additionally, the team leader of the FOLAN Numeracy group (Teacher Participant 6) was also interviewed as a follow-up to the FG Numeracy interview. See Table 1 below for a list of participants who took part in the focus group and one-to-one interviews.

Table 1. Interview Participants.

Focus Group (FG)	Participant	Subject Area
Literacy FG	Teacher Participant 1	English and History
Literacy FG	JCSP Librarian Participant 2	Librarian
Literacy FG	Teacher Participant 3	English and Irish
Literacy FG	Teacher Participant 4	English and Irish
Numeracy FG	Teacher Participant 5	Maths
Numeracy FG	Teacher Participant 6	Maths
Numeracy FG	Teacher Participant 7	Maths/IT
Individual Interview	Teacher Participant 6	Maths

The findings from the above interviews offered additional evidence to support the connection between teaching effectiveness and the presence of teaching learning communities (TLCs) in schools [2]. The findings and discussion section below will revisit some of these findings, especially as they relate to the main focus of this article on the role of educational leadership in the development of TLCs and concomitantly toward the enhancement of teaching and learning in the context of the urban second level school that is the focus of this study.

The current study resulted from secondary data analysis (SDA) of the data which was collected as part of the teacher well-being and diversity (TWBD) Erasmus+ project referred to above. The researchers who conducted the SDA were also intimately involved with the TWBD study. Of relevance to this study, their TWBD project sought to explore the apparent association between the presence of teacher learning communities (TLCs) in the context of the site school and the experience of what is referred to as teacher "pedagogical well-being" [1–3]. The existing research on the latter concept, especially that which has been provided by the Finnish researchers Soini et al. [3], informed the development of the research instruments for the TWBD study. That study, subsequently referred to as the parent study, provided the data for the conduct of the SDA.

The parent study adopted an exploratory two-phased grounded-theory qualitative approach, which utilized focus group interviews as the principal data collection tool. This data collection approach was chosen and justified for the access that it provided to the participating teachers' perceptions on their experiences of pedagogical well-being, which in effect are their reflections on their experiences of teaching effectiveness, particular with reference to the teacher pedagogical well-being rubric which was extrapolated from the previous Finnish research referred to above by the researchers of the parent TWBD study [2] (p. 152).

The parent study benefitted from a research collaboration between a university and the site school, both of whom were full partners in the Erasmus project. It extended over a three-year period and the research team involved two teachers from the site school as co-researchers and three academics from the university. Careful attention was given to the dual-role that the two participating teachers played as teachers and researchers [2] (p. 52). Their participation however provided the parent study project team with access to volunteer participants from the site school.

The initiating phase 1 parent study focus group interviewees were provided with information sheets and consent forms, the primary intention of which was to explore the participating teachers' understandings of teacher pedagogical well-being and also to explore their views on what could increase their likelihood of experiencing it in their work as classroom teachers.

In a grounded-theory sense, it was the teachers' responses to this latter question that informed the focus of the second phase of the research for the parent study. This phase involved the two focus group interviews, Literacy FG and Numeracy FG. As noted, the associated research instruments were constructed with reference to the existing Finnish research on teacher pedagogical well-being [3]. The latter also informed the conduct and analysis of the data which resulted from the conduct of the focus group interviews [2] (pp. 156–159). This data provided the focus for the SDA that was conducted for this study which is exploring how the presence of effective TLCs at the site school may be impacted by the nature of the leadership that is practised in the school.

Ruggiano and Perry [19] (p. 91) highlighted that the robustness of studies emanating from SDAs can be enhanced if there is a "good fit" between their research questions and those of the parent studies. This is the case with the study that is being reported here. The parent study of which focused principally on the apparent connections between the presence of TLCs and the experience of teacher pedagogical well-being. The impact of school leadership on the nature and presence of TLCS at the site school was not specifically focused on as part of the original parent study analysis. The associated SDA involved a re-appraisal of the full data transcripts from the Literacy FG and Numeracy FG through the prism of leadership.

Although the significance of school leadership for TLC presence and effectiveness was not explicitly inquired into as part of the parent study, the nature of the discursive semi-structured focus group questions allowed for such connections to be potentially made. Question 8 for example invited the focus group participants to reflect on the conditions required for an effective TLC that is supportive of teacher pedagogical well-being. The team leaders for FG Literacy and FG Numeracy (Teacher Participant 1 and Teacher Participant 6) were included as part of the focus group interviewees and this increased the likelihood for such connections to be made.

Ruggiano and Perry [19] (p. 91) also state that the inclusion of members of the parent research study as part of the SDA can add to the latter's robustness. As mentioned previously, this was the case for the study that is being reported here. Additionally, the current study included an interview transcript that had not been previously coded. This can also add to the robustness of the SDA [19] (p. 94). The individual interview had been conducted with Teacher 6 by one of the two parent study teacher co-researchers, following the same ethical protocols as had been developed for the focus group interviews. As Teacher 6 was the team leader for FOLAN Numeracy, it was felt that the resultant data from this interview may yield some possible insights of interest for the primary focus of the current student on TLCs and Leadership. And, as Teacher 6 was also included as part of the FG Numeracy interview, the incorporation of this interview as part of the current study allowed for triangulation of the data between the numeracy focus group interview and the data that resulted from the individual interview with Teacher 6.

It is acknowledged that the TWBD parent study, on which the SDA was conducted, focused on a specific second-level urban school with DEIS status. In doing so, the researchers adopted a case study-oriented approach which as Stake [20] (p. xi) points out is "the study

of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances." No claims about generalizability or transferability of the findings to other second-level urban schools are intended. What could be possible, however, is what he [20] (p. 85) refers to as "naturalistic generalizations" which are distinguished from "explicated (propositional) generalizations". The former are described as "conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life's affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves" [20] (p. 85). In a "naturalistic" sense then, it is anticipated that some of the findings and conclusions arrived at in the current study will resonate with other educational stakeholders whose experiences align with those which are described in the study. The SDA, with its focus on the significance of school leadership for the effectiveness of teacher learning communities, invited a review of the data that resulted from the parent TWBD study for that purpose. It also involved a re-appraisal of the literature which was originally reviewed for the parent study for potential references to the significance of leadership for TLC effectiveness. The researchers also reviewed and included additional literature sources specific to the focus of the current study. That said, however, as noted above, it is acknowledged that the parent TWBD study did not have an explicit focus on leadership. Although some important findings have developed from the current study on teacher learning communities and leadership, it has resulted from secondary data analysis (SDA). It is recognized that these will be further extended through primary research dedicated to that purpose, involving a larger cohort of participants from a variety of school types.

In the two sub-sections below on FOLAN Literacy and FOLAN Numeracy background information is provided on the implementation of these initiatives at the site school. They both offered a rich context to explore the link between teaching effectiveness and the presence of TLCs in schools. The additional distillation of this data under a leadership lens allowed for evidence to emerge in the context of the site school on the role of school leadership in the development and ongoing sustainability of TLCs.

2.1. FOLAN Programme (Literacy)

The three strands of Junior Cycle English: oral, reading and writing are embedded in the FOLAN model, delivering the key literacy skills of the Junior cycle. The latter comprises the first three years of second-level school. The library space is physically laid out in three teaching stations and a co-teaching model is used. Each of the three stations focuses on one of the key Junior Cycle English strands outlined above. This focus on the learning outcomes of the Junior Cycle provides a clear focus on learning and teaching.

There are three teachers and a librarian allocated to a double class period, eighty minutes in total. The three groups divide equally between the teaching stations and instruction and activities based on the oral, reading and writing strands take place for twenty/twenty-five minutes. The groups rotate three times, and all students have access to all stations over the course of the eighty minutes. The class ends with whole group instruction, questioning, checking learning intentions, administering homework or with activities to reinforce the learning achieved that day. All teachers are responsible for planning and delivery of content, in this regard the FOLAN model is very democratic and seeks to incorporate a voice for everyone.

The FOLAN literacy initiative allows for teachers to work with students in small groups and identify the strengths and weaknesses of each of these students as they work. It is a very relaxed and flexible way of working. The collaboration and planning required are managed by regular teacher meetings and facilitated by school leadership.

2.2. FOLAN Programme (Numeracy)

The Library Numeracy Initiative is a JCSP-supported whole school approach to supporting the development of Numeracy within the project school. The initiative has developed from being targeted support for students requiring additional support in first year, to being fully embedded in the timetable for all 1st and 2nd year students.

The initiative takes place during a double Maths class, of eighty minutes in total. Three teachers are timetabled for this class at this time. It adopts a station teaching model to deliver content catering to different learning preferences and learning outcomes. This multi-modal approach has the added advantage of enhancing pupil-teacher relationships. A variety of different types of stations are used at different times. These include teacher-led, ICT-based, self-assessment, self-directed, kinaesthetic, Maths for Fun, Vocabulary enrichment and an Individual Feedback station.

All first-year students complete a numeracy competency test at the start and end of 1st year. This allows the initiative to be focused on the areas of maths that students find most difficult, individually or as a group. The results also give some indication of how effective the library initiative has been in developing maths and numeracy within the school.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings from the Literacy Focus Group evidence that the effectiveness of TLCs for the enhancement of student learning requires collective and sustained commitment from the participating teachers [5]. Teacher 4 has observed their benefits; however, she is also aware that they "take work" in order to optimize their potential [15]. Several of the other participants also make references to the work that is involved.

Teachers 1, 3 and 4 highlighted the critical importance of developed relationships between the participating teachers. The Irish and English teacher, for example, stated that "well I suppose if the relationship part wasn't happening a lot of things could fail. If that be between student and teacher or if that be between colleagues—between teacher and teacher. I think the relationships have to be there and built on" (Teacher 4). Participant 1, the English and History teacher, further elaborates on the understanding of relationships that can inform the workings of TLCs. This is evident in the following comment that he offered:

> *Because very often you've got these groups and you think 'O those three teachers they get on so well together. But they're actually piggybacking on personal strengths and personal maybe relationships and stuff. And that masks how well the group is going and a poorly performing group, the relationship mightn't be as strong but they might do more. So it's all about professional relationships and we need advice on what they might look like, y'know.*

The research literature also demonstrates the critical importance of developed peer relationships amongst teachers for TLC effectiveness. Similar to Teacher 4 above, Akinyemi, Rembe and Nkonki [21] identify positive working relationships between teachers as the "connective tissues" which bind the communities of practice together, thereby providing the main conditions for "productive relationships". Smith's [22] (p. 44) contention that such communities of practice could not exist without teacher relationships also resonates with the comments of Teacher 4.

Participant 1 above, the English and History Teacher, when speaking about the nature of these relationships, fuses professional and relationships together into the synthesis of "professional relationships". This connation equates with Kolleck and Schuster's [23] (p. 101) coining of the concept of "trust relationships". They identified a connection between teachers' embeddedness in collaboration networks and the presence of such relationships. The interview with the Numeracy Team Leader (Teacher 6) provides some insights on the nature of these relationships and how they may be propagated in the context of the site school. He intimates that the nuanced understanding of relationships in the context of TLCs as elaborated on by Teacher 1 above is contingent on management support and leadership.

Teacher 6 elaborates on the nature of the support and leadership that can be effective. He is clear for example that it is not about "dictation" where you are told what to do. Rather, he describes a process where the responsibility for the initiative's design and implementation is given over to the teachers. This in turn allows for an understanding of "professional relationships" as outlined by Teacher 1 above to develop and which is considered a prerequisite for effective TLCs. He observes for example that, "we were given

the scope to plan and develop as professionals with nobody overseeing us constantly" (Teacher 6).

This teacher, who was the team leader for the FOLAN Numeracy initiative, describes a recent situation in which he experienced the understanding of "professional relationships" as outlined above. He recounted how he approached management about a possible modification to the implementation of the FOLAN initiative, "where we want to actually have one teacher step out and deal with the students individually, take their copies." The response from the Principal was noticeable for the respect and autonomy that was accorded to the FOLAN Numeracy TLC. As recounted by Teacher 6, the Principal responded, "You're the experts on this . . . . . . If you tell me you want to try it, you go and try it. Then come back and tell me how it went." This invited the teacher to reflect that the Principal was to a certain extent handing the power over to them and letting them know that he was not checking up on them, "is this pass or fail, is this good or bad? This is, you try something, it works. It doesn't work, move along" (Teacher 6).

The above illustration of the nature of school leadership that can be conducive to the propagation of TLCs is also evident from current research into the presence of professional learning communities in schools. Akinyemi et al. [21] (p. 5) recognised "trust and positive relationships" as being prerequisites for "productive relationships" in TLCs, allowing for more sophisticated teacher professional collaboration to occur (TALIS Report 2009). Kolleck and Schuster's [23] (p. 258) research on teachers' professional collaboration and trust relationships identifies an umbilical connection between school leadership's establishment of "high trust relationships" in a school and teachers' willingness to trust their colleagues.

It was noticeable that where the teachers spoke about the importance of relationships for TLCs they also spoke about the importance of respect. One of the Irish and English teachers observed that the latter is very important, "respecting similarities and differences, the different approaches, etc., for in a school, in all communities, respect is definitely involved. I think to work as part of a mutual team there has to be respect" (Teacher 3). The other English and Irish teacher (Teacher 4) echoed these sentiments as she reflected on the importance of respect in the context of TLCs and also in the context of Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) Meetings. The latter have been introduced into the Irish education system as part of recent Junior Cycle policy reforms. The SLAR process facilitates teachers in preparing for and discussing the assessment of students' work with colleagues. Without the presence of respect, this teacher believes that confidence in the validity of one's assessment could be undermined. This is evident in the following statement from her:

> *But again the respect thing, as Teacher 3 was saying, if it's not there for all of us, why are you going to fight for 'well I actually think this piece is above expectations and you don't feel comfortable in the environment you're in*.(Teacher 4)

The above sentiments are reflected in the findings from the existing research. Respect is in many respects the flip-side of trust. Without respect, the presence of trusting relationships will be limited [21]. Accordingly, teachers will not be as free to open up to their colleagues on their teaching and learning challenges [21]. The absence of these open disclosures will adversely impact the TLCs' effectiveness [22].

When respect is present in a TLC, such as those of the FOLAN Literacy and Numeracy initiatives which are the focus of this study, there are evident benefits for the TLCs effectiveness. In the words of one of the teachers, it inaugurates the prospect of "a deeper collaboration with colleagues. A really truly professional collaboration with colleagues." This in turn helps to create an environment that allows for teaching and learning innovation, with teachers experimenting and supporting each other in skill-building and using new pedagogies [15].

This "deeper collaboration" affords a quality mark to be attached to the resources that are recommended by the TLC participants. Teacher 1 adopts a winnowing metaphor to capture the effectiveness of these collaborative spaces. They allow for recommendations to "stand out" thereby separating them from the "chaff". Additionally, he suggests that it is akin to a personal "sales pitch" from a team member, "saying, "This will really work. I

know there are hundreds of other techniques similar but this one really works. So, I think participating in groups allows that kind of sharing to happen."

The team leader for the Numeracy TLC points out that such "deeper collaboration" allows it to transcend being a mere "box-ticking exercise" (Teacher 6). He is very conscious that support from school management leading to a school culture that is supportive of collaborative work amongst teachers is a prerequisite for this deeper level of collaboration to occur. Tschannen–Moran and Gareis [24] characterize these as schools where the leadership team have nurtured "high-trust" levels. Accordingly, teachers can be confident that they will be treated fairly and with respect [24] thereby facilitating the "deeper collaboration" that is referred to above.

In a manner similar to the FOLAN Literacy Teacher above, the other FOLAN Numeracy Teacher (Teacher 5) draws attention to the positive impact of such collaboration on teachers' classroom practices. In his view, it allows for opportunities to see other teachers' approaches. Accordingly:

you see other teachers' approaches. You begin to say: 'I'll change my, I'll tweak my approach a little bit here'. You watch the other teacher's approaches so therefore you learn as well. You tweak your own approach and you say: 'Well, I'll adapt some little bit of that cos it would be of benefit to me'. Otherwise as a teacher you'd be very isolated inside in the classroom.(Teacher 5)

It is evident from the FOLAN Literacy and Numeracy participants' comments that the nature of the leadership in the school, particularly for the autonomy that it afforded to them, is vital to the nature of the TLCs that they have the opportunity to participate in. The Team Leader for FOLAN Numeracy (Teacher 6) offers testimony of the latter's effectiveness. He observed that when school management invited teachers across the school to identify areas that they would like to become involved with, "the library was one of the main ones that came up, getting involved, seeing what the station teaching was like, seeing what goes on inside the library." Similar findings are evident in Tschannen–Moran and Gareis's [24] research on the correlation between vibrant schools and the degree of trust that the school leadership has established with the staff. The nature of the said leadership is characterized by "authenticity", according to which the staff are respected as persons "rather than as pawns to be manipulated" [24] (pp. 260–261).

As noted above, the nature of the leadership in the school impacted the nature of the relationships and also the respect that characterized the FOLAN Literacy and Numeracy TLCs. It is also evident from the participant teachers' comments across both of these TLCs that they are characterized by a democratic form of leadership that is distributive in nature (for more on distributed leadership see Hickey, Flaherty and Mannix McNamara [25]). This again mirrors the type of leadership that school management extends to the design, implementation and ongoing development of the two TLCs that are the focus of this study. It is proven from the findings of this study that they are also characterized by a modus operandi that is democratic in style, thereby mirroring the democratic form of leadership that is practiced in the school. Jenlink and Jenlink [26] recognised that such learning communities are identified by inclusion rather than exclusion. It is noticeable that this democratic form of leadership, evident in both of the TLCs that are the focus of this study, is characterized by inclusivity.

One of the FOLAN Literacy TLC Teachers acknowledges that she has built up a rapport with the two other teachers with whom she is currently collaborating. Additionally, although it would be in "her personal comfort zone" to continue collaborating with them, she is aware that in all likelihood she will be working with different teachers in the coming year. She recognises that with different personnel you have "to work a bit harder" but, "the fruits might be better because there's even more sharing and more trying of methodologies and a greater learning curve for us as teachers and for the students."

This democratic approach to the workings of the TLC was also evident from the interview with the FOLAN Numeracy TLC. Similarly, its team leader addressed how new personnel are regularly incorporated and welcomed as part of the TLC. This is evident in

the following statement: "we've had a lot of different people coming over for the last few years. They might be only in for two or three months covering somebody else. And you know I always feel it's very important that everybody has a voice in there; every teacher that comes in" (Teacher 6).

The evident democratic style of working in both TLCs has resulted in the growth and development of the initiative. It transformed from being initially confined to certain literacy and numeracy teachers and to certain students in the first year to now involving all first-year students in Maths and English, as well as involving all the relevant first-year teachers. This has obvious benefits, as noted above, from the ongoing professional development of the teachers to sustaining a student-centred and productive learning environment for the students.

4. Conclusions

It is evident that as teachers identify and solve problems of practice together, TLCs build the capacity and collective will to enhance the learning and achievement of all students [27] (p.16). Such is very important in the context of the DEIS status of the site school which is the focus of this study as it has a preponderance of students who struggle academically in mainstream education. The FOLAN Literacy TLC teacher reminded us that the learning space that is afforded by this initiative invites the students to engage in peer learning that is "really enlightening, refreshing actually" (Teacher 4). She further intimates that it encourages the students to be responsible for their learning, "putting the onus back on them the student which is making them the core of the learning experience." Her experience offers further testimony for Drew et al. [12] (p. 7) and her colleague's finding that the collaborative potential of TLCs open-up "new ways of working in school" with the potential of enhanced practice and outcomes for children.

From the findings of the site school, it emerged that relationships and respect amongst the participants of the TLCs are pivotal for their effectiveness. It also transpired that both TLCs that were the focus of this study are characterized by a democratic style of leadership. Such, however, was possible largely on account of the leadership style that this study found to be present in the school. It is evident that this leadership is distributive in nature with management providing the "broad strokes" for the FOLAN TLC Literacy and Numeracy initiatives. The finer detail however as to how they are to be implemented is left very much in the hands of the TLC participants themselves. They are "given the scope to plan and develop as professionals." Similar findings were proposed by Pristine [28]. She identified three factors necessary to creating professional learning communities in schools. These included management's ability to share authority, facilitate the work of the staff, and have the ability to participate without dominating, in the words of one of the participants in this study "management support but not a dictation."

The contributions from the Team Leader of the FOLAN Literacy TLC (Teacher 1) underscore the vital significance of "professional relationships" to its success. In his estimation, "it's all about professional relationships and we need advice on what they might look like" (Teacher 1). Further research will be helpful in explicating the nature of these relationships in the context of an education system that is "constantly developing all the time" (Teacher 3) and of the concomitant leadership styles that will provide the optimum context for these relationships to flourish in the context of school teacher learning communities (TLCs). Accordingly, they can offer the potential to nurture practitioners' sense of agency, to offer roles for teachers "as full participants in the school reform agenda as problem posers and problem solvers" [29] (p. 3).

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T.R.N.M. and M.M.; methodology, T.R.N.M. and M.M.; validation, T.R.N.M. and M.M.; formal analysis, T.R.N.M. and M.M.; investigation, T.R.N.M. and M.M.; data curation, T.R.N.M. and M.M.; writing—original draft preparation, T.R.N.M.; writing—review and editing, T.R.N.M. and M.M.; project administration, T.R.N.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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