

DO NOT TRY THIS ALONE: THE IMPORTANCE OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COLLECTIVE

TONY LOUGHLAND AND MARY RYAN

Professor Tony Loughland and Professor Mary Ryan explain why teacher collective efficacy is a vital part of their professional learning and how its use influences our students' learning and development...

DO NOT TRY THIS ALONE

When Tony and Mary started their teaching careers last century there were many lone ranger teachers in the schools where they worked. These lone rangers were often very good practitioners who preferred to work their magic in their own classroom. You didn't often see them in the staffroom but their students were happy, the parents did not complain and the school executive were generally of the view that "if it ain't broke it don't need fixing".

There were also teachers and executive staff back then who were very generous in the sharing of their practical wisdom. This generosity was much appreciated by Tony who struggled to teach students with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) backgrounds in inner city Sydney, especially given he had just completed six semesters of enthusiastic and expert teaching of the whole language model of teaching English K-6 in his pre-service education degree.

The collegiality of these colleagues extended to observing them in class, team teaching, sharing programs and resources, affirmation of our small wins as novice teachers and generally making us feel like we might succeed at this profession one day. Their collegiality gave us an enhanced sense of our efficacy as an individual teacher and promulgated a general sense of collective efficacy that we can teach these students well in our school.

There is strong support in the research literature that students thrive when teachers have a positive sense of their self-efficacy as individual teachers as well as a strong sense of their collective efficacy as a stage, faculty, team and school. We argue in this paper that the motivational sources of collective teacher efficacy provide a useful framework for the development and evaluation of professional learning programs at the school level.

THE COMPELLING EVIDENCE FOR PURSUING COLLECTIVE TEACHER EFFICACY

Teachers' sense of their collective efficacy is the second most important school-based influence on student outcomes. It has an effect size of 1.57 on student achievement according to Hattie's synthesis of 1200 meta-analyses relating to influences on student achievement (Hattie, 2015). An effect size of this magnitude demands the attention of school leaders and researchers invested in teacher professional learning, "Given the link between collective efficacy and student achievement, understanding collective efficacy in and of itself is a worthy endeavour" (Berebitsky & Salloum, 2017, p.2). This study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of the antecedents of teacher collective efficacy in their professional learning.

Collective efficacy is an extension of the construct of self-efficacy from the broader theoretical framework of social cognition. Collective efficacy is defined as "the extent to which people believe they can work together effectively to accomplish their shared goals" (Maddux & Gosselin, 2012, p.214). Social cognition assumes reciprocal causality exists between a person and their environment, "people respond cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally to environmental events. Also, through cognition people can exercise control over their own behaviour, which then influences not only the environment but also their cognitive, emotional, and biological states" (Maddux & Gosselin, 2012, p.199). This reciprocal causality has positive implications for teacher collective efficacy as it creates a virtuous cycle of improvement where enhanced collective efficacy contributes to student achievement which then further strengthens collective efficacy (Goddard et al., 2000).

The motivational sources of teacher collective efficacy are mastery and vicarious experiences, social persua-

sion, and affective states¹. Teacher collective efficacy is also enhanced by a team's ability to analyse the task ahead and make a judgment on their current level of competency to complete the task. All these characteristics represent what is regarded in the literature as effective teacher professional learning. However, teacher collective efficacy has not been commonly associated with a theory of action for teacher professional learning as it has been predominately employed as an outcome measure of the health of a school's collective culture. We contend that the measurable construct of teacher collective efficacy can be used as a design framework for professional learning programs as well as being an evaluative measure of its effectiveness. We acknowledge that the question of whether teacher collective efficacy is a necessary antecedent condition for effective professional learning, or a consequence of these programs remains open. We suspect that there might be reciprocal causation between teacher collective efficacy and effective professional learning where the presence of both enhances the other.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COLLECTIVE

This last section of the paper examines the confluence between the motivational sources of teacher collective efficacy and the principles of effective teacher professional learning (see Table 1 below)

Table 1 Collective efficacy, principles and design of teacher professional learning (Loughland & Ryan, 2022, p.345)

Sources of Teacher Collective Efficacy	Principles of Effective Teacher Professional Learning
Mastery experiences	Collaborative. Iterative. Focus on teachers' work
Vicarious experiences	Collaborative. Focus on teachers' work
Social persuasion	Collaborative
Affective states	Collaborative

What is missing in the hypothesised model in table 1 is an explication of the processes that create the conditions for effective collaboration. One influence on effective collaboration and learning relates to time constraint and leadership support (Park & So, 2014). We have another

clue to this missing piece of the puzzle in the finding that the density of networks is more important than centrality in professional learning networks (Berebitsky & Salloum, 2017). Furthermore, the density of networks is significantly related to collective efficacy in schools (Berebitsky & Salloum, 2017). This suggests that more opportunities should be provided for purposeful learning interactions between teachers as depicted in the principles of teacher professional learning in Table 1. This suggests that effective teacher professional learning needs to involve more interaction between teachers than top-down delivery approaches that may be better suited to compulsory compliance training. We know that time for professional learning in schools may be limited so school leaders must make informed decisions on what model of professional learning to adopt in their school.

The literature strongly suggests that a model of school-based, interactive teacher professional learning that focuses on teachers' work in the classroom is the most effective (Kennedy, 2016). In this model, outside help in the form of academics and experienced practitioners in the system, is introduced if and when they are needed. We suspect that the arguments we have presented in this paper are not earth-shattering revelations for the readers. The principles of effective teacher professional learning are now well established in the literature. The challenge that remains is one of implementation. The challenges we identify here are very real to many teachers who are reading this article. There is the serious challenge of finding time for meaningful professional learning in the hectic schedules of schools. There is the conflation between the legislative requirements of compulsory compliance training and the real opportunities for professional growth afforded by effective teacher professional learning. There is the pervasive legacy of the cargo cult model of professional learning where the external consultant, the latest edu-guru, the international keynoter, or the social media superstar are regarded as experts and saviours. Valuable professional learning time is spent listening to them instead of engaging with your colleague next door on meaningful pedagogical discussion on how your students' learning may be enhanced tomorrow, next week and next term.

Our own post-graduate university courses at the Masters and Higher Degree Research levels are also not exempt from our criticism. Our MEd and EdD programs need to

be more adaptive and responsive so that they might produce educators with the scholarly and practical wisdom that they can use to provide the best possible conditions for student success in the schools and systems where they work.

None of these challenges are insurmountable but they require school and system leaders to build cultures of professional learning in schools that create a sense of collective teacher efficacy among their staff. Surely that is not too much to ask in an institution whose core business is learning?

End note:

Mastery experiences are those that focus on developing instructional skills and capabilities. The important goal of improving student outcomes in wellbeing and achievement is at the forefront. Vicarious experiences are those whereby teachers and leaders learn from each other. Social persuasion involves a shared sense of purpose and vision, and a collaborative effort to achieve those goals. Affective states are the social-emotional aspects that underpin effective relationships, including trust, respect and dialogic approaches that value all voices and contributions. A positive relationship between these motivational constructs and collaborative professional learning has been found (Durksen et al. 2017).

END NOTE

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NB- Sections of this text have been taken from Tony and Mary's published journal article (Loughland & Ryan, 2022) that can be found here <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1711801> (available to access through an academic

institution or paid download

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Tony Loughland is an Associate Professor and Deputy Head of School (Research) in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales.

Tony is an experienced educator who likes to think that theory should be the plaything of practice. He agrees with Marx's assertion that philosophy should be used to not only interpret the world but to try to change it. Tony subscribes to Marx as he believes this orientation towards research is vital in a world threatened by anthropocentric climate change. Tony is currently leading projects on using AI for citizens' informed participation in urban development, the provision of staffing for rural and remote areas in NSW and on Graduate Ready Schools.



Mary Ryan is Professor and Executive Dean of Education and Arts at Australian Catholic University. Her research is in the areas of writing pedagogy and assessment, teachers' work in, and preparation for, diverse classrooms, reflexive learning and practice, and reflective writing. She was formerly a primary teacher and lecturer in literacy and English and has an extensive record of program development in universities and professional learning for teachers. Her funded research projects are in the areas of classroom writing and preparing teachers to teach for diversity to break the cycle of disadvantage.

