

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## The Teacher-led Learning Team: Collaborative professionalism in action

By Cathryn Smith, Ph.D.



### Why this research is important

The Teacher-Led Learning Team (TLLT) represents an innovative approach to professional development for Manitoba educators. Team members, recruited through an open call to the membership, include classroom teachers, counsellors, clinicians, and administrators. TLLT members receive support to collaboratively develop and facilitate high impact, research-informed professional learning workshops for MTS members. The response across the province has been overwhelmingly positive, and TLLT members credit the quality of their preparatory seminars with their increased capacity and agency. It was critical to identify the essential features of this innovation at an early stage to capture emergent learning and identify the essential elements of its success.

### How the research was conducted

This study applied a participative action research methodology. Three research questions were identified to

### What you need to know

This research focused on the first two years of the Teacher-Led Learning Team (TLLT), a professional learning initiative of the Manitoba Teachers' Society. The purpose was to identify the key features of TLLT, to capture emerging insights from innovative team development strategies, and to characterize the impact the team was having on its members.

guide the research: (1) What is the design theory that underpins the TLLT professional learning initiative?; (2) What can we learn from the enactment of the TLLT during the first two years of operation?; and (3) How have the dynamic processes used by the TLLT impacted the identity of the teacher leaders participating in the TLLT as designers and facilitators of professional learning? Artefacts reviewed to answer the research questions included all material used in developing, recruiting, marketing and reporting on TLLT within MTS; all training materials and feedback from team members; TLLT workshop participant packages and facilitation materials, and all data collection tools used with facilitators and participants. An extensive interview with the TLLT Coordinator and a focus group with volunteer TLLT members, provided opportunities to expand and clarify questions arising from the artefacts. Finally, a number of

TLLT members provided access to written evaluations from workshop participants.

### What the researcher found

A three-level design program theory synthesizes the different elements in the TLLT innovation. Level one describes the TLLT intent, composition, team recruitment, and team member criteria. Level two outlines the processes and content of TLLT training and workshop development. Level three defines the responsibilities for all involved in the deployment, enactment, and delivery of team activities. TLLT members, as teacher leaders, serve as boundary spanners, capacity builders and change agents. TLLT is a strong example of professional learning that reflects current aspirational literature in the field, and an excellent example of collaborative professionalism. Individual and collective accountability, continuous improvement, persistent action, and reflective feedback were key indicators of collaborative professionalism inherent in TLLT. This strong team thrived on diversity and developed individual and collective capacity. Team members reported increased confidence, new insights into adult learning and facilitation, enhanced self-awareness, and learning from their fellow team members.

Team members characterized their personal experiences with TLLT as transformative and reported strong rapport with workshop participants. As facilitators, they affirmed teachers' insider knowledge of school contexts and recognized them as knowledgeable, perceptive, and agentic professionals. High numbers of workshop deployments and overwhelmingly positive participant feedback provided solid evidence that the teacher-led workshops were highly effective and responsive to the field.

### How this research can be used

TLLT is a highly effective and innovative Canadian, union-based, professional learning initiative, which makes a significant contribution to practitioners in the fields of education and professional development. The design

theory can be a catalyst, providing concrete structural guidance to innovators. Lessons learned from TLLT's first two years can inform individuals and organizations responsible for developing the leadership capacity of facilitation teams. Finally, the positive impact on team members' identity as teacher leaders contributes to the scant literature on union-sponsored teacher-led professional learning.

### About the researcher

Dr. Cathryn Smith is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Leadership and Educational Administration in the Faculty of Education. She teaches courses in the Integrated, After Degree, and Graduate programs. Her research focuses on teacher leadership and developing leadership capacity.

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### Keywords

Teachers; professional development; capacity development; adult learning

### Publications based on this research

Fullan Kolton, D., & Smith, C. (2018, June). Teacher-Led Learning Team. Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF). *Perspectives*. <http://perspectives-ctf-fce.ca/2018/06/14/teacher-led-learning-team/>

Smith, C. (2018). *Final report on the evaluation of the Teacher-Led Learning Team (TLLT) of the Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS) 2015-2017*. Brandon, Manitoba, Canada: Brandon University.

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