EFL teacher self-efficacy development in professional learning communities

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' efficacy beliefs exert a significant influence on their practice and their students' learning. This study investigates the contribution of two six-month Professional Learning Community (PLC) interventions to 10 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) novice and experienced teachers' self-efficacy. The data were collected through pre and post-interviews with the participants, their reflective journals, and recordings of the PLC meetings. The findings suggest that the experienced teachers' self-efficacy improved in terms of employing innovative instructional strategies and language proficiency. An increase was also observed in the novice teachers' self-efficacy for classroom management, their autonomy, and their perceived language proficiency. Finally, the participants in both groups developed a stronger sense of professional community membership as reflected in their focus on their collective efficacy toward the end of the PLCs.

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies in teacher education have highlighted the importance of collaborative learning to teacher professional development (e.g., Chong & Kong, 2012; Levin & Rock, 2003; Musanti & Pence, 2010). Teachers' collaborative practices can create opportunities for them to establish networks of relationships through which they reflect on and share their practice, revisit their beliefs about teaching and learning, and co-construct knowledge (Achinstein, 2002; Chan & Pang, 2006; Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000). One of the tools that facilitate teachers' collaborative learning is Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

PLCs refer to collaborative activities which foster "teachers critically interrogating their practice in ongoing, reflective and collaborative ways" (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p. 2) to promote student learning. Although research into effectiveness of PLCs in schools is still in its infancy in many countries, this limited study suggests that PLCs exert a positive influence on schools and teachers' motivation, their commitment to student and their efficacy beliefs (Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011; Stegall, 2011; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). The present paper specifically focuses on the contribution of PLCs to novice and experienced teachers' efficacy beliefs in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iran, where studies with a similar focus are lacking.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher self- and collective efficacy

Self-efficacy, which is a key concept in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997), is "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce a given attainment" (Bandura, 1977, p. 3). Teacher self-efficacy, then, is "the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance" (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977, p. 137). There are four sources of self-efficacy beliefs, namely mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1997). In the context of education, these refer to teachers' successful or unsuccessful experiences of teaching, observation of other teachers' experiences, the negative or positive feedback teachers receive from others like colleagues, and physiological and affective states teachers experience during a teaching-related event or task, such as satisfaction, pleasure, and anxiety.

A review of the mainstream teacher education literature shows that teachers' self-efficacy is related to effective classroom management (Hicks, 2012; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990), openness to adoption of innovation (Guskey, 1988), the effort teachers invest in their teaching and the goals they set (Woolfolk Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005), being less critical of students who make errors (Ashton & Webb, 1986), and student motivation (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Guskey, 1988). Several studies have also been conducted on teacher self-efficacy within the area of teaching EFL, the focus of the present study. These studies can be classified into the two major categories of correlational and intervention studies.

Several correlational studies in EFL contexts have reported a positive relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and their emotional intelligence (Moafian & Ghanizadeh, 2009; Rastegar & Memarpour, 2009), perceived language proficiency (e.g., Chacón, 2005; Choi & Lee, 2016; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Yilmaz, 2011), motivation to use communicative-based teaching strategies (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008), and adoption of a reflective approach to teaching (Babaei & Abednia, 2016).

Intervention studies on EFL teacher efficacy show that teacher learners' engagement with different aspects of teacher education programs have mostly positive contributions to their efficacy beliefs. Positive experiences of teaching practice in practicum placements have been reported to increase teachers' self-efficacy (e.g., Goker, 2006; Liaw, 2009), while perceived failures and the reality shock involved in this initial direct involvement with teaching may have an opposite impact (e.g., Atay, 2007). Other aspects of teacher education which have been found to facilitate teachers' self-efficacy development are peer collaboration, as in peer-coaching (Goker, 2006) and group discussions (Liaw, 2009), engagement in action research (Cabaroglu, 2014), and improvement of pedagogical knowledge (Wyatt, 2010, 2013).

Taking the concept of self-efficacy beyond an individual level, Bandura (1997) introduced collective efficacy as another major factor affecting performance. Collective teacher efficacy is defined as "the perceptions of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on students" (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000, p. 480). Regarding the significance of collective efficacy, Bandura (2000) argues, "the higher the perceived collective efficacy the higher the groups' motivational investment in their undertakings, the stronger their staying power in the face of impediments and setbacks and the greater their performance accomplishments" (p.78). Studies on collective teacher efficacy have shown positive relationship between this variable and teacher self-efficacy (e.g. Chan, 2008; Chen & Wu, 2010; Hung, 2010; Zambo & Zambo, 2008), teaching behavior (e.g., Chiang, 2014), teachers' perceptions of how empowered they are at their workplace (Baleghizadeh & Goldouz, 2016), and their students' learning achievement (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). These studies have been conducted in general teacher education, with the exception of Baleghizadeh and Goldouz (2016) as the only study identified as focused on EFL teachers.

2.2. Professional learning communities (PLCs) and teacher efficacy

Professional learning communities are "fundamentally about learning — learning for pupils as well as learning for teachers, learning for leaders, and learning for schools" (Katz & Earl, 2010, p. 28). Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) discussed five characteristics for professional learning communities: reflective dialogue, focus on learning, collaboration, shared values and norms, and deprivatization of practice which encourages peer observation with the purpose of giving and receiving feedback. The literature on PLCs shows that they facilitate teacher development. They improve teachers' knowledgebase and classroom practice (Andrews & Lewis, 2007). They support collegiality among teachers and, thereby, facilitate teachers' learning of innovative instructional strategies and meaningful interaction with students (Morrissey, 2000). They also increase teachers' self-efficacy (Reeves, 2010), which can be attributed to their collaborative nature, as argued by Porter (2014),

> Professional learning communities can add to a teacher's perception of self-efficacy through the collaborative structure that is a part of any PLC. In addition, their sense of self-efficacy can be increased using the model of continuous improvement that is also a part of PLCs (p.18).

PLCs also prepare the conditions for an increase in collective efficacy through encouraging teachers to collaborate as reflective practitioners and problem solvers (McLaughlin, 1992). The collaborative nature of PLCs provides opportunities for teachers to share their teaching experience, ask questions about how to teach effectively, and receive feedback from their colleagues (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

The four sources of efficacy information mentioned by Bandura (1997) also conceptually support the proposition that PLCs serve as a space for development of teacher self-efficacy. Teachers' collaboration provides opportunities for them to learn