BOOK REVIEW

Review of Borg, S., Lightfoot, A. and Gholkar, R. (2020) *Professional development through Teacher Activity Groups: A review of evidence from international projects*. London: British Council.
https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/TAG_review_final_web.pdf

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Large-scale teacher training projects carried out within state education systems, often in partnership with a professional provider like the British Council, are fairly common in the ELT world. What is also common about these projects is poor follow-up and limited sustainability of the impact, once the project (typically covering huge numbers of beneficiaries in a short time) gets over. However, in the last few years teacher training projects around the world have begun to look beyond the project endpoints and include ways of building sustainable post-project activities to ensure that the impact and gains from projects do not fade out quickly. One such experiment is Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs), developed as part of some teacher training projects implemented by British Council in partnership with various state education departments. The book under review reports on the experiment and serves as a useful guide to the concept and nature of TAGs and their potential impact on teachers, teaching and learning.

The book is an analytical study based on six TAG projects British Council carried out in Armenia, Egypt, India, Jordan, Palestine and Romania between 2016 and 2020, of varying durations between 6 months and three years, and involving teacher populations of different sizes, ranging between 78 and 45,000 teachers (a summary table of these projects can be found on page 14). The introduction gives a brief idea of how and why TAGs were conceived, and where they fit on the CPD canvas, followed by a literature review devoted to Communities of Practice (CoPs), preparing a basis for the subsequent attempt to explain TAGs as COPs in the following sections. Section 4 is a key section of the book as it provides details of the TAG implementation, an evaluation of quality of TAGs, their impact on teachers, teaching and learning, and various challenges related to TAGs. A valuable addition is a section on 'Making TAGs work', which identifies key issues and makes several practical suggestions on how TAGs can be launched, nurtured and sustained.

Some key features of TAGs are that they

- involve small groups of teachers periodically meeting about project learnings and their application in practice,

- are formally instituted by or with support from state education authorities,

- form part of or follow on from large-scale teacher development projects,

- follow pre-defined content, resources and work-plans, and

- are closely tied to effective curriculum delivery or project implementation or (usually) both.

Though these features imply some limitations of TAGs in terms of their top-down and highly structured nature and their narrow, mostly instrumental, focus, TAGs also bring some distinct advantages as illustrated in Section 4:

- they provide a collaborative space to share experiences and concerns from everyday teaching;

- they support teachers' additional engagement with their work through such varied means as recognition, time allocations, reduced workload, facilities and resources; and

- thanks to their close connection with curriculums and projects, they are directly relevant to teachers' everyday teaching work.

It seems that TAGs emerged out of pragmatic and practical concerns of project partners, especially British Council, to sustain and extend project gains through more decentralised and field-based means, without taking teachers away from

their locations and with a chance for longer-term in-situ engagement. This should be a valid justification for the nature and functioning of TAGs. However, the attempt to justify the formal institution, top-down initiation and very structured nature of TAGs by resorting to an "established educational tradition in which teachers were more likely to engage in a sustained manner in CPD when this was centrally organised and recognised" (p. 7) is unacceptable. There is an apparent logical contradiction here – if all CPD activity so far had been centrally organised and recognised but had little sustainable impact, how can one more centrally organised and recognised initiative like TAGs remedy the issue? The opposite is actually the case – while being centrally organised and recognised, TAGs have some element of decentralisation and teacher autonomy, unlike past CPD initiatives, and hence are more likely to lead to greater teacher engagement.

One major issue in promoting effective CPD is finding a balance between the opposite-pulling forces of teacher autonomy/voluntarism and state support. In an ideal CPD scenario teachers decide what they wish to do, how and when for their CPD, while the state provides all possible support and recognition for whatever they undertake. However, in reality wherever the state supports CPD it wants to have a control over what happens, when and how. A fairly common picture across many contexts then is that state-supported CPD is also state-controlled, with little autonomy or choice for teachers, while voluntary teacher initiatives in CPD remain unsupported and unrecognised by the state. In other words, there seem to be two CPD islands – state-sponsored and personal-voluntary – with little interaction or exchange between the two. The value and innovativeness of TAGs lie in their potential to create bridges between these islands. They suggest one possible way in which some teacher choice and autonomy can be incorporated within state-supported, state-controlled CPD enterprises. If read with this agenda in mind, the book has many useful insights and ideas to offer.

There are, however, some 'grey areas' which require a more critical reading. The word 'groups' in TAGs seems to be a misnomer, since TAGs are 'semi-structured meetings' (Padwad & Parnham, 2019:559) and not groups. The descriptions and discussions in the book itself give an impression not of teacher development groups, but of developmental activities. For example, *Section 4.1.2 The Structure of TAGs* (p. 15) explains the structure of meetings and not groups. It is, therefore, intriguing why they are called CoPs.

There are many other problematic issues in calling TAGs 'formal CoPs'. Strengths of TAGs are in being in-situ groups, small in size, functioning long term and closely tied up with the curriculums and routine pedagogic practice of teachers, with significant and immediate practical relevance. They are also valuable for the networking and sharing opportunities they offer. It may actually be much better and more justified for TAGs to stay as innovative project extensions; they have a lot to contribute that way. But the attempts to imagine/ project them as CoPs or TD groups seem to lead to many inner contradictions and discrepancies, both conceptual and practical.

TAGs are not organic, open-ended, voluntary or bottom-up like CoPs. The very basis of TAG conceptualisation is education reform at scale (more correctly, mass training), which is by default externally planned and managed and can afford only limited autonomy/control to TAGs themselves. As Wenger and Snyder (2000) point out, "the organic, spontaneous, and informal nature of communities of practice makes them resistant to supervision and interference." In TAGs, on the contrary, supervision, monitoring, evaluation and even interference are integral features. In short, TAGs do not have any feature of CoPs; they seem to be functioning as extended training projects, with trainer development, specially trained trainers (in the form of a fixed set of 'facilitators' always in the lead), training resources, structured programmes, external evaluation/ monitoring, all being externally provided and not organically emerging from these groups. It is also not clear whether the teacher groups carry out independent needs analyses, identify their own concerns/ interests or work out their own agendas leading to relevant actions. The feeble attempt at resolving this contradiction by using the awkward term 'formal CoPs' makes the contradiction even stronger. It is not clear why there is an insistence on moulding TAGs into the CoP frame, because there seem to be no rationale or advantages in doing so. At best it can be said that TAGs have the potential to serve as seeds out of which CoPs have a chance to evolve in due course. Giving up attempts to present TAGs as CoPs will also help resolve another contradiction between the discussion of TAGs in other sections and many (somewhat idealistic) recommendations made in the last section for "Making TAGs work" (Section 6, p. 24 onwards).

These issues about defining or interpreting TAGs do not take away from their innovative and valuable status. TAGs are an interesting and significant development in teacher training and

development exercises at scale and offer promising ways to resolve some of the conflicts of interest between state CPD providers vying for control and teacher-recipients aspiring for autonomy, choice and voice. Whether TAGs are CoPs or not should not matter much, and may remain only a matter of academic interest, so long as they continue to do their limited job well – to support teachers in doing their prescribed work better, which is what the vast majority of teachers are primarily concerned about.

References

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