Emancipatory education for Palestine: the power of teacher leadership

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A paper presented within the symposium:

The role of teacher leadership in the transition to democratic society

at

ECER 2015

Budapest, 8-11th September 2015

Abstract

This paper arises from the author's doctoral studies in educational leadership at the University of Cambridge under the supervision of Dr David Frost. It provides an account of the introduction of the non-positional approach to teacher leadership as a vehicle for emancipatory education in her school in Ramallah, Palestine. The paper analyses the way in which the author has adopted the UK-based, and internationally embraced, teacher-led development work (TLDW) framework, and adapted it to the local socio-cultural and educational context. Through this teachers have been enabled to develop practice and build local knowledge for improved student outcomes. The TLDW methods and tools have enabled the development of emancipatory pedagogic features among teachers and staff that include collaboration, dialogue, reflection and action for change. Interim results indicate enhanced agency, empowerment and transformation among programme participants. The paper concludes with an outline of the practical implications for professional development, organisational change and policymaking. The case is made for a locally relevant, problem-based and cost-effective educational change strategy that is favourable to such disadvantaged and under-resourced educational settings.

In 1994, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were given their first opportunity at limited self-rule. This included the educational system. Institution building at a national scale required foreign knowledge and expertise. Being from a Palestinian background and having been raised and educated in North America I found myself at the time in a position to contribute to the needs of repatriating Palestinians from Anglophone countries. So in 1995 I co-founded a kindergarten through secondary level school with a specialised dual language curriculum designed to meet the educational and socio-cultural needs of English-speaking students in the Palestinian Territory. Despite dire political, economic and security conditions, the school continues to operate successfully and has developed its academic programme to accommodate Arabic-speaking students.

Slower to arrive to the Palestinian education context, however, has been changes to teaching practices and learning outcomes. This is to do with several factors. Foremost, traditional transmission modes of teaching continue to emphasise individual outcome-based, award-bearing models of learning (Ramahi, forthcoming). Second, Ministry of Education implementation of foreign sponsored, wide scale reform programmes has led to minimal impact (Ramahi, 2013; Shin 2012). Third, both student and teacher learning are removed from local realities and problem solving (Ramahi, 2015; Ramahi forthcoming). In the severely challenged Palestinian context education cannot remain neutral grounds. Instead, it must become an instrument of empowerment and collective mobilisation for social and political change.

Emancipatory education is a means to activate disenfranchised members and groups of society towards participatory practices. Central to this view is that teaching and learning should enable critical thinking and facilitate meaningful knowledge building that is relevant to local realities, and based on indigenous norms and practices (Apple, 2013). By raising awareness of the root causes that lead to social inequalities, economic exclusion and political marginalisation, oppressed peoples are collectively empowered to transform their living conditions (Freire, 1970). Emancipatory pedagogical tools include dialogue, reflection, engagement, collaboration and action. These are represented in the literature as instruments that enhance individual and collective agency, and communal ties, ultimately preparing for strategic collective action (Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008). For Palestine, the challenge becomes how to legitimise emancipatory models of learning, enable its facilitation and obtain commitment by stakeholders, primarily teachers and learners, across a wide range of educational settings (Ramahi, forthcoming).

The educational context of Palestine

Education in Palestine has been controlled and administered by foreign powers from the arrival of the Ottoman Empire in 1517 until partial Israeli military withdrawal in 1994 (Van Dyke and Randall, 2002). Under Israeli occupation between 1967 and 1994, provision and quality of education deteriorated severely (Asaad, 2000; Sfeir and Bertoni, 2003). In 1994 the newly established Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education inherited an

outdated and dysfunctional education system inadequate for the needs of an emergent state and its aspirant citizenry (Barakat, 2007).

The Ministry has relied on politically motivated foreign assistance for subsequent education reconstruction. International donors advocacy of a global education agenda advanced foreign values and interests over local ones (Affouneh, 2007; Shinn, 2012). This compromised Palestinian autonomy in policymaking, quality of education and formation of a national identity (Baramki, 2010). Similarly, it weakened development of a distinctly Palestinian vision, leading to a conflict of values (Ramahi, 2013; Velloso de Santisteban, 2002). In 2014 the Ministry launched the third 'Education Development Strategic Plan 2014-2019, Palestine 2020: a Learning Nation' which we hope will be a catalyst for effective educational change wherein teachers contribute to local knowledge-building. This has the potential to free the Ministry from continued reliance on foreign funds and reform programmes by promoting context-driven, locally sourced initiatives.

Teacher leadership has the potential to play an important part in transforming Palestine into a 'learning nation' for two main reasons. First, teacher quality is widely accepted as the single most important school variable influencing student achievement (OECD, 2009, 2011). Second, effective school leadership is increasingly being viewed as the key to large-scale improved education outcomes and reform (OECD, 2008). Accordingly, teachers exercising leadership represents potential for mobilising the largest and most pivotal segment of the school workforce in the drive towards school improvement for enhanced student performance (Crowther, 2009). By empowering teachers to become agents of change and lead education reform, policymakers will have access to a local evidence base from which to formulate effective policy. Constructing an authentic national agenda advances prospects of establishing a truly independent Palestinian education system.

A non-positional approach to teacher leadership: means to emancipatory professional learning

The overwhelming majority of the literature conceptualises teacher leadership in terms of traditional one-person forms that assume a hierarchical, delegated role. However, there is nothing inherently different about leadership exercised by teachers from that by traditional top-down senior leaders (Frost, 2008a). Alternatively, Frost and Durrant (2003) distinguish between functions that are described as leadership and deliberate activity that is individually planned and exercised by teachers. They suggest the terms positional and non-positional as more useful for differentiating between appointed teacher leaders and self-guided teachers intentionally acting to influence their colleagues and school environment (Frost, 2012).

The non-positional approach to teacher leadership rests on a deliberate, self-directed activity to create change at the professional, organisational and policy levels (Bangs and Frost, 2011). Rooted in principles and based on strategies that involve activities and tools, and requiring the support of school members and external expertise (Frost and Durrant, 2003), all teachers are invited in the exercise of leadership to mobilise creative forces. The collective activation of

teacher potential within schools is extended beyond top-down implementation of impersonal and non-contextual teacher development programmes and into the effective service of local workplace realities that lead to teacher empowerment, self-efficacy and professional transformation (Ramahi and Eltemamy, 2014). The teacher-led development work (TLDW) model is an example of successful enactment of teacher leadership, to which I now turn.

Teacher-led development work: framework for activating teacher leadership

TLDW is a process-based teacher leadership development strategy designed to improve teaching practice and enhance professional knowledge (Frost, 2000). In this model influence occurs through the development process of consultation, reflection, evidence collection and knowledge dissemination, and ultimately adoption by others of innovative practices (Frost, 2013). Knowledge building embeds learning in a social process of dialogue, collaboration and networking that reinforces participatory practices and democratic ideals (Kemmis, 2010; Somekh, 2006).

Central to developing teacher leadership capacity through the TLDW model are the three components of values, visioning and action (Frost, 2013). Teachers are guided through exercises that assist in identifying, articulating and action-taking through development projects that lead to knowledge building and programme certification. The model's successful enactment in the UK-based HertsCam Network and International Teacher Leadership initiative in over 15 countries has led to the refinement of a set of context-friendly tools and procedures, confirming its international appeal and adaptability to varied educational systems and socio-cultural contexts (Frost, 2011). I draw on this framework as the foundation for my intervention to enable teacher leadership, and adapt its methods and tools to accord to one school setting in Palestine (Ramahi and Eltemamy, 2014).

'Teachers Leading the Way' (TLW) is a year-long, school-based programme facilitated and guided by a tutor from the school staff, in this case myself. Participation is voluntary with group size ranging between eight and 12. TLW consists of the following components: seven school-based group sessions where participants are guided in their development work, four one-to-one supervisions with the programme tutor to provide individual feedback and support, one network event that enables members to present their projects to colleagues thereby facilitating knowledge-building, a school wide event that provides an opportunity for sharing knowledge and networking, and submission of an end-of-programme portfolio of evidence that leads to certification.

Senior leaders in the school and myself comprise the Programme Team, which is responsible for monitoring, evaluating and improving the teacher leadership programme in a three-cycle review process. Data was gathered both deliberately and opportunistically to record ephemeral evidence captured during programme activity. Methods included semi-structured interviews, participant observations, participant portfolios and a reflective journal. The analysis of data led to the identification of a number of themes, some of which are discussed below.

The school comprises a kindergarten through secondary section. 12 members make up the programme cohort: nine teachers, six from the primary level and three the secondary; and three from management: two mid-level managers and one senior leader. Non-teaching staff was invited to join in order to enhance school leadership capacity. Participation is voluntary.

Emergent themes

A number of themes emerged from the investigation, which can be categorized broadly as opportunities and challenges. The former includes relevance, structured support, enhanced agency, changed teaching practices and collaboration. Challenges are mainly related to time constraints and the shift from results-based learning to process-led development.

Theme significance lies in their novelty to the socio-cultural and education setting of Palestine and similar settings, and implications for teacher leadership development. I draw on evidence gathered during programme activities with group members and in my capacity as programme leader and tutor to illustrate theme sources. The voices below belong to the participants.

Relevance

In order to mobilise teachers to lead change and innovation, TLW facilitates solving problems that emanate from workplace realities and matter most to teachers. Relevance to educational and professional concerns thus is crucial for attracting teacher interest and sustaining participation. This contrasts with top-down reform initiatives that are disconnected from school realities, and delivered by outside experts and trainers unaware of localised teacher problems and students needs.

The following participant conveys the significance of both the context-based and problem-oriented dimension of the program:

> *This is the first time that I have a problem that concerns me and I'm working on finding a solution for it… Now I feel that any problem I face I can inquire into and find solutions to. Honestly, I didn't have this before. I would search for a ready-made solution, or ask someone older… Now I feel the need to search for a solution that is better than what's available, which suits my needs.*

Members indicate an appreciation for the opportunity to develop their teaching practice based on real and individual concerns and problems that lead to improved student learning. This has implications for transforming teachers' thinking mechanisms:

> *Now one feels that every problem has a solution in a unique way. So we entered this [new] mode [of thinking]… Problems are not solved in just one way. We don't stop at one method. Someone else may have different solutions… depending on the context and*

environment.

Several teachers expressed a shift in attitude towards problem-solving. Locally-based, value-laden development is impacting the way teachers approach professional learning. The change from a singular approach to one that recognises individual and contextual factors fosters meaningful knowledge building and constitutes emancipatory learning. TLW ensures that change is not left to individual experimentation or random trialling but is supported through a set of procedures and tools, the next identified theme.

Structured support

The effective exercise of teacher leadership requires reflection, deliberation, planning and action. Teachers are not left to engage in such activity on their own. Therefore, providing structured support is fundamental to enabling teachers to lead educational innovation. TLW offers a clear and methodical strategy to guide teacher development work. This is conducted through the use of specially designed activities and exercises using tools and led by a school-based tutor experienced in the TLDW method.

Early on members noted favourably the programme's clarity in guiding participants in comparison to previous CPD:

> *It's very strategic; it's very to the point. It's more hands on.*
>
> *Now I know exactly what to look for…. I have put my foot in the right path*.

Strategy and guided steps have implications for transforming professional thinking:

> *I have now developed a deep understanding that solving problems requires mechanisms and isn't done haphazardly. You need to create a strategy and proceed accordingly.*
>
> *Before the programme a person was working in an unclear, haphazard way... Once the strategy became available now you present your problem in a methodical way. Now you can deal with a problem by following steps*.

Several members recognised in the TLW tools and procedures a distinctive feature from previous CPD. Some identified them as a new set of self-empowering skills to be employed throughout their teaching practice for problem-solving and student learning improvement. There is sufficient evidence to indicate that TLW's structured support is leading to enhanced agency, another emerging key theme to which I now turn.

Enhanced agency

Teacher leadership as an exercise of deliberate and planned influence rests on enhanced human agency. TLW is designed to provide support in activities that empower teachers and

improve self-efficacy. At this early stage in the programme there is ample evidence of enhanced agency among participants, marking the precursor of teachers exercising leadership.

Teachers are beginning to take charge of their practice in ways that they did not before joining the programme:

> *It's not something that I would have done before.*
>
> *In the past if a person said something that didn't help me I would stop there. Whereas now I will stop and think that this is not working for this person maybe it'll work for me. I analyse it.*

Increased self-confidence, criticality and willingness to consider alternative options are a significant development for these teachers in their workplace.

For some members improved self-efficacy is a key development in solving work-related issues:

> *I now feel that I can face any problem.*

This is a powerful statement suggesting the beginnings of professional transformation. Several members' reflections illustrate a sense of empowerment:

> *[A] major transformation has taken place in my thinking. The idea now has to emanate from me and not be ready made from elsewhere. This for me is the biggest thing. I am the source of ideas. After I've collected the information properly then I will come up with some correct solution.*

Noteworthy is the non-random, methodical way in which this teacher intends to pursue knowledge building and improvement of practice. Elsewhere he contrasts this to the passive learning style brought on by traditional teaching methods:

> *I'm not used to doing something and evaluating it for myself. Usually, we're used to being asked to do something by someone and to have someone else evaluate it. For me to change in the way I find information on my own makes me re-evaluate my confidence… this will give me inner strength.*

Some participants characterised TLW's emancipatory potential in relation to prevailing intellectual disempowerment:

> *It's like someone who was shackled and this program removed these restraints and opened the door for me to work freely. I will obtain outcomes that I want without being afraid … this program opened the way for my ideas to be investigated in practice.*

Socio-cultural influences on learning and teaching styles are evident throughout participants' statements. Facing fears and challenges, and going against repressive societal norms mandates the presence of a risk-taking and non-judgemental professional culture facilitated by

supportive senior leadership. At the individual level enhanced agency and emerging professional self-efficacy appear to be affecting classroom practices, the next theme.

Change in teaching practices

The fundamental aim of teacher leadership is to enable teachers to improve teaching practices for enhanced student outcomes. Ultimately, this needs to translate into change in the classroom and beyond. In the TLW development work model one way this is done is by trialling new practices or improving on old ones.

Teacher leadership is changing how some members perceive the nature of their teaching subject. For one teacher students have become a source for innovation:

> *I started thinking that we need to involve students in the learning process. How do I get them to become part of the lesson, not just me explaining things to them… I never thought that they could suggest a new method… Before the programme I didn't know how to do this.*

This is a case wherein trialling new teaching methods has led to participatory learning approaches and improved student-teacher relations. This teacher continues continues:

> *Today I discussed with the 8th grade students how to use technology and multimedia in learning…. I learned that when you get closer to students you learn how they think and how you can help them in a way that reduces their fears. Some students volunteered to help me with my work, and gave me new ideas. It's nice because it brings you closer to the students… You add new methods to your teaching and ways to improve on it… now when I give them a word problem I ask them to imagine.*

This and several examples of teacher classroom innovations demonstrate concrete interim programme outcomes. Through the exercise of leadership, teachers are enhancing social capital and improving learning opportunities for all students. The experience of collaboration represents the following theme.

Collaboration

TLW encourages peer and extended collaboration within and beyond the school. As a form of situated learning, it reinforces the need to share ideas and practices with colleagues as co-creators of innovative practice and co-builders of professional knowledge. In this capacity a professional learning community emerges to support school improvement and enhanced student performance.

All 12 participants praised the peer mutual support generated by the programme. Group sessions foster discussions that establish a collective ethos and critical friendships:

> *Now we feel like a team. When we run into each other we ask about each other's progress. We learn from each other… We support each other regardless of [project] focus.*

Breaking down teacher isolation through opportunities for group discussion promotes collective self-efficacy. Dialogue and group activities reinforce a development process that replaces divisions with collective enterprise:

> *We're separated... I feel that primary teachers are in one world and secondary in another. So when we met during the session and talked about our work it was the first time we sit and listen to each other.*

Nearly all members praised a TLW group session exclusively devoted to participants sharing aspects of their projects, affirming a sense of collective spirit:

> *[W]e had the chance to hear what other teachers are working on and discovered that many of us are really connected.*

> *It was like a chain. I felt like we are all linked.*

Group meetings demonstrate the capacity for collaboration to enhance social capital:

> *It brings us closer on a personal level - Ramia, Manar and me. I felt something on a personal level drawing me closer.*

Collaboration, a fundamental feature of emancipatory education, is fostering mutual support, collective self-efficacy, critical friendships and reinforcing previously established social ties among this group of teachers and staff. Evidence generated from members' comments and supported by my reflective journal indicates that collaboration on this scale is a dimension previously unknown to the school's professional culture. However, most indicated time as a major hindrance to collaboration and other programme activities, the first of two themes categorised as a challenge.

Time

All participants identified finding time to be the biggest challenge facing them in conducting the programme. This is despite senior leadership's support and facilitation of TLW activities. The reasons and sources for this limitation vary.

The following is a common account indicating time as the main source of pressure facing participants:

> *It's time. The project needs time. And what with work, it gets tight. But it's not the project pressuring me.*

Noteworthy is that the programme itself is not being perceived as the source of pressure, rather the shortage of time, as is echoed by another group member:

> *As a project it's not difficult. However, in our circumstance the limitation of time is creating the biggest challenge, as we're employees.*

That members consider time to be the main challenge is encouraging in the face of TLW's unfamiliar features.

Other members point to the problem of timing, namely the difficulty of conducting development work during the academic school year:

> *One barrier is the nature and duration of the time that we have in which to conduct the programme, which won't be sufficient or may be hindered by events that may unexpectedly occur to derail the project course.*

Whether the availability of time or the coinciding of the programme with the academic year, time remains the most commonly cited challenge facing teachers exercising leadership. Less concrete is the challenge of understanding development as process based, which I now explore.

Process-led development

Portraying professional learning as process oriented rather than purely results based is a challenge for programme facilitators. Teachers are encouraged to focus on the development and leadership dimensions of the programme alongside improved student outcomes. A common concern by prospective participants was the extent to which certification is tied to project success. Thus guiding teacher thinking towards the development process in addition to project results was crucial.

The fixation on project success seems to be deeply entrenched as an evaluation criterion. A few participants conveyed it as a source of self-doubt:

> *The first [challenge] is the barrier within a person which always whispers to him, 'Will the project work or not?' This inner impulse creates fears and trepidations…*

Worries and anxieties appear to arise from the uncertainties of working with self-designed and self-guided development work not subject to traditional right or wrong assessment measures:

> *I don't know if I'm working right. There continues to be a lack of confidence on the personal level because this is the first project I work on where I conduct the inquiry and search for the information, and evaluate my work. It's as though I make my own exam and correct it myself. For me this is the challenge.*

Expectations of a single correct response similarly appeared during activities where questions

were intended as prompts for reflection rather than requiring pre-determined answers.

Overall, TLW's flexible and non-linear approach to professional development represents a source of unease for several participants. This is due to age-old educational practices that reinforce transmission forms of learning and lead to single Lack of familiarity with self-directed, process-led learning is an opportunity to enhance members' professional and intellectual capacities.

Meaning and significance

Interim study outcomes are significant for enabling emancipatory professional learning in one school in Ramallah, Palestine. They demonstrate the capacity to develop features of the TLDW framework that include reflection, engagement, collaboration, enhanced agency and action for change. They also provide feedback for improving the TLW programme. Similarly, they reveal my own professional development in facilitating teacher leadership at my school as a medium for professional empowerment at both an individual and collective level. Themes that emerged from analysis of the evidence underscore impact on all three levels to varying degrees.

Enabling teachers to act as agents of change requires sensitivity to context (Frost, 2011). In the case of one school in Ramallah the historic suppression and disenfranchisement of Palestinians (Barakat, 2007), traditional teaching and learning styles (MRRF-UNDP, 2011) and ineffective foreign reform programmes (Shinn, 2012; Velloso de Santisteban, 2002) are particular factors. The education system and teaching force may not be accustomed to self-empowering, participatory practices. Setting thus represents a challenge to the very essence of teacher leadership development (Frost, 2011, 2014). Accordingly, TLW needs to allocate sufficient activities that enable teachers to take control of their own development trajectory, and by tutors to fully develop facilitative capacity (Creaby, 2012).

Programme participants cited relevance to workplace realities as a key feature for joining TLW. Published teacher accounts and education literature further support this claim (Ogborn, 2002; Van Driel, 2005). A demanding job and limitations of time (Grenville-Cleave and Boniwell, 2012; Timperley, and Robinson, 2000) are offset by prospects of solving real, school related problems for improving student outcomes. This is underscored by recent TALIS Report (OECD, 2009) outcomes, which posit that support of teacher development through individual feedback on work instead of whole-school or system-wide reform offer scope for considerable improvement of teaching and learning, and are preferred by teachers.

Transmission modes of instruction in the Arab Middle East (MRRF-UNDP, 2011) may account for participants' uncertainty in conducting self-guided development. Group members' praise of program methods and tools highlights the significance of TLW's supportive framework. In an education and socio-cultural setting where individuals are rarely granted opportunities or means to determine development pathways, mechanisms of structured support appear to be crucial for unleashing teacher innovation. Programme tutors are thus

highly encouraged to provide ample tools and strategies that support individualised development work.

Leadership activity is fundamentally founded on the act of human agency. (Frost, 2006) However, the common belief that influence requires authority inhibits many teachers from venturing to lead change and engaging in emancipatory learning (Frost, 2012). The emergence of enhanced agency, which some argue is the precursor for teacher leadership (York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Mujs and Harris 2003; Ogborn, 2002), at this early stage in the intervention is promising. Professional learning communities frequently cite teacher agency as a key component in facilitating improved teaching (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). Facing inhibitions and challenging societal norms requires a non-judgemental, trust-filled professional culture (Mangin, 2005). Facilitators need to guide members on ways to impact the school community through teacher leadership activity bolstered by engagement, dialogue and collaboration.

Teachers trialling new classroom practices and improving on old ones is a reflection of enhanced agency and may be the first tangible outcome of TLW. Members eager to improve teaching methods indicate a newfound self-efficacy (Bangs and Frost, 2012). Involving students in the education improvement process fosters a participatory ethos among students and with teachers. There is support in the literature for teacher leadership activity having a positive influence on teacher effectiveness and student engagement (Mujis and Harris, 2003). Student involvement further enhances a contextually valid evidence base (Kuh, 2009) from which to draw on for organisational change. This has implications for local policymakers by redirecting the attention towards those most immediately affected by educational reform, the practitioners and students (Somekh and Zeichner, 2009).

Classroom innovation provoked lively discussions among members during TLW activities. Opportunities for dialogue fostered professional learning and knowledge building, which is supported in the literature (James and McCormick, 2009; Jurasaite-Harbison and Rex, 2010). Learning about each other's work also broke down teacher isolation (Mangin and Stoelinga, 2011). Challenging questions prompted self-reflection and reappraisal of teaching practices, and cultivated critical friendships (Swaffield, 2007). Projects that relate to one another broke down divisions of subject and grade level between teachers, and teachers and management, wherein genuine collaboration promotes collective self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran and Barr, 2004) and reinforces the interconnectedness of schools as communities (Crowther, 2009) not just organisations.

Collaboration facilitated linking of interests among participants and established common goals (Hunzicker, 2012). The evidence illustrates collaboration to help establish mutual support among participants and enhance social capital, reducing isolation in the face of a '*new way of thinking.*' Similarly, a community of learners provides affordable and relatable sources of knowledge that are conveniently accessible and in participants' primary spoken language. This is vital for settings of scarce financial resources, inadequate teacher preparation and a limited tradition of participatory practices. These emancipatory features foster a sense of empowerment among teachers and management. Enhanced agency and a collective self-

efficacy facilitate relevant knowledge building that leads to improved practice for enhanced student performance.

Conclusion

Teachers are capable of leading the way to effective school reform for improved student outcomes given the necessary conditions are provided. Values-articulation, dialogue, reflection, collaboration and enhanced agency are key in enabling teacher leadership. In settings with an underdeveloped tradition of democratic practices, learner-centred pedagogy, continuous self-improvement and locally driven development initiatives, interim TLW outcomes are promising.

Programme outcomes are equally significant for educators and policy makers in Palestine and similar settings for several reasons. First, development of teacher leadership in Palestine underscores the potential for trans-cultural adaptation and cross-system application of the TLDW model. Teacher empowerment, participatory practices, and professional development no longer remain exclusive to Western and industrialised nations but can be enabled in less advantaged settings. Second, knowledge building that leads to creation of a context-driven, problem-centred evidence base is likely to facilitate more effective and sustainable national reform initiatives. Third, in addition to promoting more relatable education programs, enlisting the local teaching force frees under-resourced governments from reliance on conditional foreign aid. The evidence so far is clearly in favour of developing teacher leadership in Palestine.

Abbreviations

CPD	Continuous professional development
TLDW	Teacher-led development work
TLW	Teachers Leading the Way

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