Collaboration and community

Some insights on shared leadership and communities of practice

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Background information

The context for learning communities and shared leadership is underpinned by three major changes currently underway in education:

- attempts to redesign the way that schools are organised
- analyses of the dysfunctionalities of the traditional hierarchical structure in schools
- investigations of post-industrial forms that privilege collective conceptions of leadership

Distributed leadership is also nourished by a revolution in our understanding of leadership both in the broad conception of the construct and new knowledge about the skills and performances required of those in formal leadership positions. Meanwhile, communities of practice are being sustained by reform initiatives that shift the centre of gravity in school reform from centralisation and a nearly exclusive focus on government control to a more balanced portfolio that includes professionalisation and decentralisation.

Shared leadership and teacher professionalism

Shared leadership is powered by an integrated set of assumptions that highlight a specific logic of benefits. Teacher leadership is defined by a tightly linked theory in action. That is, when the engine that fuels learning communities is engaged, certain consequences are expected to follow. Specifically, shared leadership works by strengthening the professional dimensions of teaching, both for individual educators and for teaching as an occupation. Teacher leadership is thus about empowering teachers, increasing professional status and nurturing local autonomy and control. Empowerment and ownership, it is argued, capture important ends by positively influencing the commitment, efficacy and motivation of teachers. These bridging variables are linked to improvements in the ways schools operate and to conditions in classrooms that are, in turn, associated with enhanced student learning.

Expertise is the DNA of shared leadership and communities of practice

Expertise, as opposed to authority and position, provides the influence that permits teachers to function as leaders. And let us be clear, the expertise to which we refer is success in educating pupils. Thus leadership for learning networks is grounded in classrooms. Effective teaching is a prelude to leadership.

The headteacher plays a central role in making networks and distributed leadership come to life

While at first glance it may seem a bit paradoxical, evidence indicates that the headteacher occupies the critical position in ensuring that teacher leadership takes root and flourishes in schools. The robustness and viability of distributed leadership is dependent on the support and direction of the headteacher.

Professional development provides the most significant source of nourishment for teacher leadership

Professional development is the central link between policy and practice. In the area of teacher leadership in particular, because leading an organisation and groups of adults is different from teaching a class, providing teachers with the support to acquire new skill sets is a key component in all efforts to deepen leadership in schools. As Collinson and Sherrill (1997) assert: *'If we want teacher leaders, then we must work toward providing contexts that encourage learning.'*

Learning communities are not ends in themselves

While we have been arguing that fixing leadership solely to formal roles in schools is no longer an appropriate model, it is also important to remind ourselves that altering leadership structures provides no guarantee that leadership will be strengthened in schools. As we have learned from every area of school reform, including classroom change, changing organisational structures does not predict school performance. As much attention needs to be devoted to the content of shared leadership as to the form it assumes.

Professional cultures and organisational arrangements provide potent barriers to the development of teacher leadership and communities of practice

School social conditions and school contexts exert a dramatic influence on conceptions of distributed leadership. Characteristics of the school organisation such as structure, support, and culture are significant variables in the networked learning equation. The way schools are organised often acts to prevent experimentation, to lock in the status quo. More specifically, the culture and organisation of many schools does not readily nurture enquiry and collaboration. As Crowther and his colleagues (2002) sum up, *'environments that support and nurture teacher leadership are not endemic to many schools'* (p vii) and Little (1987) reminds us, symbols, norms, conventions, and *'tenacious habits of mind and deed make the achievement of strong collegial relations a remarkable accomplishment: not the rule but the rare, often fragile exception.'* (p 493)

References

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