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The Headteacher – Guardian of Leverage for School Improvement

A discussion paper for school leaders in Networked Learning Communities

“Whether the head is leading school improvement or supporting, coaching, mentoring and facilitating, he or she is also the ultimate guardian of whether approaches to school improvement work or they don’t.”

The Networked Learning Communities context

The title of this piece is taken from a presentation by David Hargreaves, but in a way it is a self-evident statement. Whether the Head is leading school improvement or supporting, coaching, mentoring and facilitating he or she is also the ultimate guardian of whether approaches to networked school improvement work, or they don't.

That is the theme of this short think piece.

One of the underlying principles of the NLC approach to school improvement is the expansion of leadership capacity. The NLC view of leadership is not hierarchical, but federal; not exclusive, but distributed; not inextricably linked to status or experience, but to situation and purpose. In such a context, of course, the coaching, mentoring and facilitation mentioned above become the central leadership qualities, designed to support individuals and to expand leadership capacity. It is leadership within a context of active democracy – people empowered to do things. Complex, but important!

What does the literature tell us?

There is now a great deal of evidence from studies across the world that supports the view of leadership learning within context that is outlined above. In the literature, for example, from the 'learning organisations' field, it is viewed that leaders are stimulators (who get things started); they are storytellers (to encourage dialogue and aid understanding); they are networkers and

problem solvers, too. They tend to value a wider social repertoire than has been customary in hierarchical educational settings, in order to encourage openness and to foster and support relationships during times when school members are wrestling with ambiguity. They will build trust. They will model improvisation and be comfortable with risk-taking and spontaneity. They will also care, deeply, about teachers and about children and about education – because that is the source of emotional energy for others. Intriguingly, they will tend to be less personally ambitious, perhaps a long time in post, and will instead be remorseless about improvement. As leaders, they will place a priority on the school as a context for adult learning. They will support staff at all levels to be able to make sense of and interpret the emerging circumstances of school improvement.

In America, the Teacher Quality of Working Life study is one very compatible with the NLC approach, from which interesting images of leadership have emerged. In the TQWL study, leaders were viewed as facilitators. They delegated and empowered ('made teachers invent solutions to problems'). They were not preoccupied with efficiency (but were proactive; they hung around; they knew what was going on and had an open door; they encouraged drop-in and spontaneous conversation). They modelled risk-taking (including addressing problems openly and dealing with cynicism). They emphasised caring for students (a view of teachers as teaching kids as well as subjects; teaching kids through subjects). They actively used knowledge and ideas (and were seen to respect educational knowledge). They provided leadership about values (staff

saw their school as values-orientated).

When others were working on improvement activities, they were around, symbolising support, providing encouragement, prepared to be a follower as well as a leader.

The messages from these studies are highly compatible with patterns and pictures emerging from network activity in this country.

Headteacher support within NLCs

Just as staff involved in networking activities are learning as they go, so are we, as school leaders, constantly expanding our understanding of how to support those providing leadership within the NLC context. Certain pictures of leadership are clear: active involvement, direct and indirect support, encouraging risk-taking, overt facilitation, using communication networks to symbolise support – and so on. Equally clear is the view expressed by one headteacher: 'in order for others to grow, I have to diminish'. This is one of the first messages for those who coach and facilitate.

One group of headteachers in a school improvement network undertook a 'knowledge creating' workshop to trawl their collective understanding about headteacher support for school improvement as it was evolving within their network project. The following are some of the descriptors that the headteachers felt should characterise their aspirations for their work.

In terms of early initiation, the head creates the climate and the energy for change, establishing the mandate and maintaining it. He/she creates the incentives for staff to

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become involved – aspirations, time, support, resources and the freedom to act. As the gatekeeper of communication channels, the headteacher gives the project status and shares early good news stories. He or she tackles the cynics, too.

Creating space for action is a key role, raising the profile of activity through access to senior management meetings, space within the school meeting structure, time for the school improvement group and support for enquiry activities. Creating the climate is equally important, encouraging risk-taking and experimentation and supporting activity with small but meaningful rewards such as refreshments and working lunches, administrative support, praise and occasional shelter time.

The concept of capacity is crucial to school improvement and headteachers are the catalysts of capacity creation. One of the most dominant pictures emerging from successful school development is the need to shore-up the maintenance systems - to ensure the stability of today in order that there is space to plan for tomorrow. Some of the routine 'maintenance' activities of the school can also be made capacity creating for improvement – planning learning activities into meeting time, staff days, the timetable and the calendar, for example; building school improvement into the budget; linking an R&D group with the teacher in charge of cover etc. At a higher level, building in learning activities and expanding the knowledge base are capacity creating activities, as is the evolution of a language around which staff can talk about improvement and strengthening the network links with other schools.

Improving the school means changing the school and grasping restructuring opportunities. More means different! A school improvement group, with its cross-section of staff, is itself a new structure. Workshops and knowledge-creating activities 'restructure' traditional meetings. The creation of networks, both internally, (cross-school, experienced staff with inexperienced, changing partnerships etc.) and externally (the NLC network, visiting centres of good practice, accessing knowledge-sources) are other restructuring activities – doing things differently and doing different things.

Headteachers symbolise support through actions and behaviours. They are members of the school improvement group, they walk the talk; they create space for other leaders that they previously occupied themselves; they mentor and coach their leaders. They live the commitment and support the work of others, because nothing is more important than creating a climate for pedagogical learning and school improvement – for learning with and from others in the interests of children.

For a Networked Learning Community to thrive, its work has to be a part of the language and communication structures within and between schools. Some headteachers use wall space or establish an intranet. Briefings celebrate success and promote good news. Partners in the school (governors, support staff, student and parents, feeder schools, etc) are kept informed and a variety of voices are given space to provide news, tell stories or encourage opinion. Active involvement and support is encouraged, as are a variety of voices, including the pupil voice within enquiry activities.

So what is so important about headteachers?

Returning to the title of this piece, the head is both the 'guardian' and the prime source of 'leverage'. It would be fair to say that networked school improvement approaches can work without dynamic, creative, optimistic, proactive and informed leadership – but it is much harder. It would be equally fair to say that, with it, the success of both school improvement and network activity is infinitely more probable.

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

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