Nourishing teachers' leadership for learning: Insights from practitioner research

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Abstract

This paper contends that leadership and learning are mutually supporting and reinforcing. It is only recently that attempts have been made to describe in practice the complex connections existing between the two activities by drawing on empirical evidence. To this end, this paper will depict ways in which leadership and learning are indispensable to each other in day-to-day teachers' work and the implications this symbiosis has for practice.

Firstly, the paper will consider the key foundations and principles of leadership for learning, especially as they relate to the international Carpe Vitam Leadership for Learning research project.

Secondly, the paper will discuss the features of teachers' professional learning that are likely to facilitate desirable conditions, practices and opportunities for promoting interconnections between leadership and learning in schools.

Finally, the paper will present exemplars of teachers' work at an empirical level, in which teachers' agency is enhanced when they are learners and leaders in different contexts. These exemplars are drawn from teachers' action inquiry projects designed to contribute to organisational improvement.

Collectively, the exposition will present a persuasive portrayal of teachers' agency being strengthened when teachers are both learners and leaders—in their classrooms, among their colleagues and across their communities.

Introduction

The chief argument in this paper is that leadership and learning are mutually supporting. Indeed, West-Burnham and O'Sullivan (1998) have described the relationship between leadership and learning as symbiotic because 'one is not possible without the other and the success of one is determined by the extent to which the other is available' (p. 184). Nevertheless, it is only recently that attempts have been made to describe in practice the complex connections between leadership and learning by drawing on empirical evidence.

The main aim of this paper, therefore, is to depict ways in which leadership and learning are indispensable to each other in day-to-day teachers' work and the implications this symbiosis has for practice. Accordingly, some key foundations and principles of leadership for learning are considered. The features of teachers' professional learning likely to facilitate the necessary conditions, practices and opportunities in a school for promoting interconnections between leadership and learning are then discussed. Finally, examples of teachers' work are portrayed at an empirical level to show how teachers' agency is developed when they are both learners and leaders, in various contexts.

Foundations and principles of leadership for learning

Two heuristic lenses may be used to sharpen insights into the connections between leadership and learning. First, is the 'wedding cake' model of a school's learning agendas (Knapp et al., 2003). These agendas comprise three 'tiers': organisational learning, teacher (professional) learning and student learning. Put simply, the agenda for organisational learning is primarily concerned with providing the appropriate conditions and opportunities for bringing to fruition the hidden capital of everyone associated with the school; the agenda for teacher learning is primarily concerned with building the intellectual and professional capacity of teachers in the school; and the agenda for student learning is primarily concerned with building the academic and social capacity of all the students in the school. Given this discussion's focus on teachers connecting leadership and learning, the main emphasis is placed on the teacher learning agenda. This comprises the conditions, practices and opportunities occurring within a school that encourage teachers to view themselves as powerful learners. It is important to emphasise, however, the interdependency of the three agendas. As Knapp and his colleagues (2003, p. 17) have asserted, the nature of student learning can inform teacher learning, which then can influence classroom improvement. In addition, student and teacher learning can contribute to organisational learning, and vice versa.

The second heuristic lens that may be used for revealing connections between leadership and learning comprises the five principles of leadership-for-learning practice generated from the deliberations of the international Carpe Vitam Leadership for Learning research project that was directed from the University of Cambridge.

These principles were the outcome of a rigorous and prolonged dialogue between researchers, principals, teachers and school board members across seven participant countries. Furthermore, as the principles were being developed, they were tested against practice and analysed with reference to the research literature (MacBeath, 2006).

According to Frost (2009, p. 71), the principles represent values within which leadership and learning may be embedded. Frost also asserted that a major aim of the principles is to serve as a set of 'tin openers' for continuing discourse. As such, the thinking that has taken place around the principles has evolved considerably over recent years.

The first principle of leadership for learning practice is *maintaining a focus on learning as an activity*. This is predicated on the belief that everyone is a learner, including students, teachers, principals, the school as a community and the wider education system. In its application to teachers, it is essential that they be provided with plentiful opportunities to construct meaning from interaction, discussion and professional dialogue (Harris & Muijs, 2005).

The second principle involves *creating conditions favourable to learning as an activity*. This highlights the influence of a school's culture on leadership and learning. In its relevance to the teachers' learning agenda, it is the nature of the professional relationships between the principal and the staff, as well as between teachers themselves, that will be indicative of the ways in which people within the school feel, think and act. The most indispensable components of a school's culture are deemed to be trust and openness, because they are the levers of cooperative action and social capital (Louis, 2007) and therefore lie at the heart of the processes of leadership and learning.

The third principle concerns *creating a dialogue about leadership for learning*. On this point, James (2007, p. 217) emphasised that dialogue promotes the 'collaborative, strategic and reflective thinking' found to be vital to teacher learning. As such, a continuous and rigorous dialogue around leadership for learning can enable teachers to take responsibility for their learning and thereby develop their agency.

The fourth principle relates to the *sharing of leadership*. According to Harris and Lambert (2003), the key notion engendered by shared leadership is learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively

and collaboratively. In this process, the interdependence of leadership and learning activities is highlighted.

Although accountability and empowerment are often perceived to be incompatible, this is not necessarily the case, which is why the fifth principle comprises *fostering a shared sense of accountability*. Earl (2005) argued that an important distinction should be made between 'real accountability' and accounting. In this view, accountability is inseparable from 'a moral and professional responsibility to be knowledgeable and fair in teaching [and learning] and in interactions with students and their parents'. Earl also contended that real accountability 'engenders respect, trust, shared understanding and mutual support' (p. 7).

Teachers' professional learning at a theoretical level

This paper now attends to some features of teachers' professional learning that are likely to forge the necessary conditions, practices and opportunities in a school for facilitating interconnections between the leadership and learning. More specifically, it emphasises the importance of teachers engaging in reflective practice and the importance of them doing so through collaborative arrangements with colleagues.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is a concept that has been heavily influenced by the seminal work of Argyris and Schön (1978). Of particular relevance to the commentary here is the notion of double-loop learning. In this approach to learning, people become observers of themselves—a form of critical scrutiny that changes the way in which decisions are made and deepens understanding of previously unchallenged assumptions. This can lead to the construction of new 'theories-in-action', defined by Argyris and Schön (1978) as the understandings and beliefs that guide a person's behaviour. The process of double-loop learning thus enables teachers to deliberately and systematically make explicit the taken-for-granted assumptions they bring to situations and subject them to scrutiny, a process which is at the core of reflective practice.

This approach to reflection on practice is closely aligned to the principles of action inquiry, which is concerned with inquiry into action in a field of practice and entails the deliberate use of any kind of a 'plan, act, describe, review' cycle. This cycle of inquiry has the potential to enable teachers to make informed judgements about their own practice and initiate improvements. Although action inquiry understood in this way can occur individually, its potency tends to be strengthened when others are involved.

Collaboration

Little (1990) has observed that joint work such as mentoring, action research, peer coaching, planning, and mutual observation and feedback provides powerful levers of interdependence, collective commitment, shared responsibility, review and critique. Collaboration, therefore, is a natural development of reflective dialogue (Louis & Leithwood, 1998). For collaboration to promote effective professional growth, it must be based on mutual inquiry and sharing in order to lay the foundations of a professional learning community. It is when teachers engage in dialogue with each other as a matter of course that meaningful reflection and teacher learning occur (Harris & Muijs, 2005).

In addition to the advantages that may be derived from collaborative activities within a school, similar benefits may also ensue from interschool collaboration. Atkinson, Springate, Johnson and Halsey (2007), for example, argued that such collaboration offers opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas and good practice as well as expanded avenues for professional learning—which, in turn, refines teaching expertise. Furthermore, staff have outlets to voice and share concerns with a larger number of colleagues. Within an enriched support network, it follows that gains may be made in staff confidence, motivation and morale.

The sense of empowerment that can be generated from collaboration suggests that teachers will benefit not just from engaging with a community of learners but also from a community of leaders (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). In this way, teacher learning that is collegial, job-embedded and evidence-based (Ball & Cohen, 1999) has an interdependent connection with leadership.

Teacher learning at an empirical level

The University of Western Australia offers a master-level unit of study specifically devoted to leadership of learning. Learning, leadership and their interrelation are the main considerations of teachers' projects conducted under the aegis of this unit. The projects adopt an action inquiry perspective and provide an opportunity for participants to develop in-depth knowledge of an issue or phenomenon related to education leadership that is germane to the context of the individual's workplace. The unit's fundamental purpose is to contribute to organisational improvement. In keeping with Stenhouse's (1975) original understanding of practitioner research, the projects are envisaged to be an extension of participants' teaching work and are not, therefore, an imitation of academic research.

The process according to which projects are conducted is governed by the foundations and principles underpinning leadership for learning in several respects, particularly in connection with the teachers' learning

agenda already mentioned. The following discussion identifies some salient aspects of a number of these projects that serve to illustrate the five principles of leadership for learning practice. For this purpose, the voices of the participants have been elicited because they have their own validity and assertiveness in conveying the efficacy of the projects undertaken.

The first principle of leadership for learning, that there should be a focus on learning as an activity, is evident insofar as many of the projects have been primarily concerned with building the academic and social capacity of students in the participant's school. In doing so, the projects also reflect the recognition that the effectiveness of student learning that occurs in the classroom is inextricably linked to the effectiveness of teacher learning that occurs outside the classroom. For example, in one case a new mentoring program was implemented aiming to enhance teacher leadership and enrich the initial experience of new staff to the school; this, in turn, was intended to bolster student achievement. As such, teacher learning and student learning were both integral to the project in question.

Other projects have been more directly focused on student learning. In another case, a transition program for students entering high school as boarders was instigated after a gap was discerned between day students and boarders in Years 7 and 8 in their mathematical knowledge and understanding. Consequently, an online program was established to assess students' current level of mathematical ability and monitor their progress as they completed tasks. Although project focused on student learning, the teacher involved commented that conducting this work had demonstrated that it is not necessary for a teacher to hold a designated leadership position within a school in order to exert an influence on change. Similarly, another participant observed that 'stepping out as a leader among my colleagues beyond what I perceived to be my given role was a bit nerve-racking, but also, in the main, encouraging'.

From this perspective, many of the projects promoted the conditions for learning that help teachers to build their intellectual and professional capacity, an observation leading to the second principle of leadership for learning—namely, creating conditions favourable to learning as an activity. Particularly pertinent to this principle was an action research project undertaken to understand the efficacy of a school's tutoring centre. The ensuing report functioned as a catalyst for a broad discussion throughout the school about what was considered to be an ideal facility of this kind. The breadth of the discussion ensured that the designated committee was suitably briefed for designing a new centre, which was intended to be a prominent feature of the school.

This project illustrates two key aspects of the second principle. First, it highlights that a school's culture should enable opportunities for teachers to construct meaning from interaction, discussion and professional dialogue. Secondly, the project draws attention to the reality that in order to foster leadership-for-learning practices in schools, there needs to be a physical as well as an intellectual investment. This means it is important to recognise that space can and does have a significant impact on learning (Chism, 2006; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008).

A further project related to creating conditions favourable for learning investigated the potential benefits of conducting peer observations in classrooms. This was accomplished by encouraging more reflective practice, facilitating professional dialogue between colleagues and fostering collaboration for enriching the school's professional learning culture. The participant in question commented that as the peer observations progressed, teachers began to view the process as reciprocal and to realise that in conducting peer observations, they were continuously learning. This, in turn, promoted a learning culture and contributed to whole-school improvement. Furthermore, peer observations became a trial for teacher leadership, as accomplished teachers were afforded opportunities to facilitate learning among their colleagues.

The desirability of teachers engaging in interaction, discussion and professional dialogue is also relevant to the third principle of leadership for learning: creating a dialogue about leadership for learning. The process of undertaking the projects in itself facilitates this principle by enabling participants to engage in such high-level collaborative activities as peer interaction, support and feedback. These activities, occurring as the projects evolve in the participants' respective schools and throughout the progress of the unit, are likely to promote a deepening of knowledge and expertise as information and insights are shared; common issues are debated; innovative ideas are tested; and tacit understandings are developed. Indicatively, one participant commented on the value derived from focusing on a particular aspect of school life; conducting research on it rather than relying on personal feelings or experience; and experimenting with different types of communication with the staff as a whole.

In a similar vein, dialogue engenders a free flow of meaning through the group that allows it to discover insights not attainable individually (Voogt, Lagerweij, & Louis, 1998). More specifically, Morrison (2002) describes dialogue as 'suspending judgement, identifying assumptions, listening, enquiring and reflection' (p. 140). These continuous processes can clarify the principles guiding leadership for learning within a school's context as well as revealing what leadership for learning looks like in practice. Accordingly,

the projects reported here tend to entail a highly reflective process that goes beyond just 'thinking about' something uncritically. Instead, a depth of deliberation is often demonstrated, enabling a new stage to be reached in participants' orientations towards practice. An example of this level of dialogue was apparent in the mentoring project already mentioned when the participant in question referred to the ways in which the mentors may themselves benefit from engaging in dialogue with their protégés. Specifically, the participant observed that listening to colleagues and providing them with feedback had enabled mentors in the project to reassess the efficacy of their own classroom strategies. There was also a discernible development in mentors' sense of self-esteem because of the satisfaction they tended to derive from helping less experienced colleagues. In these ways, the process of mentoring can assist mentors to reignite their passion for teaching and expand their own teaching repertoire by encouraging them to engage with younger, more recently qualified colleagues and encounter current pedagogical trends.

The fourth principle of leadership for learning—namely, sharing leadership—is embedded in the teachers' work reported here as a whole. Perhaps this is because the school environments in which this work occurred tended to take an 'invitational' approach to leadership (Stoll & Fink, 1996), meaning that a focus on leadership was encouraged and the worth of participants' work was communicated.

This notion of 'invitational leadership' (Stoll & Fink, 1996) was evident, for example, in the project that sought to close the gap in mathematical ability between day students and boarders in Years 7 and 8. The participant was strongly encouraged by the school in this undertaking, and the program that eventuated from the project was continued after its initial trial. In the wake of the participant's departure from the school, another staff member was given responsibility for maintaining the program in the longer term. Similarly, the mentoring project has established a program entering its fourth year. In another, potentially contentious project examining how a school may accommodate as effectively as possible the needs of students of diverse sexuality and gender, the participant was evidently encouraged and supported in her endeavours by the senior leadership at the school. As a result, she was placed in charge of a steering committee to further policy and practice in the area, and she also received funding to engage in relevant professional learning in New York. Understandably, she claims that such experiences have made her feel 'empowered, valued, and more confident'. Likewise, for another participant whose project sought to enhance opportunities for teachers to learn and lead in the school, her involvement made her feel better equipped to embrace

leadership herself and excited about collaborating with and supporting her colleagues.

Such institutional endorsements of projects reflect situations in which the teachers involved benefit from positive relationships with their schools' administrative teams within an organisational culture that is characterised by support, recognition, respect, trust and care. These modes of behaviour are likely to be buttressed by 'collegial communication', which is horizontal in nature and enables authority and expertise to be shared across the staff (Butt & Retallick, 2002). Accordingly, the appropriate enabling conditions and expectations are present to make the sharing of leadership integral to the process (Campbell, Lieberman, & Yashkina, 2015).

Processes that support the facilitation and monitoring of change in the school enable people to develop confidence, openness and take risks in their engagement with accountability practices (Stoll & Fink, 1996)—an observation that resonates with the fifth principle of leadership for learning, which is fostering a shared sense of accountability. Earl's (2005) understanding of accountability as entailing 'the conversation about what information means and how it fits with everything we know and about how to use it to make positive changes' (p. 7) is relevant to the action inquiry orientation of the teachers' projects. For example, the legitimacy of the project examining the mathematical ability of boarders entering the school was enhanced by a comparative analysis of mathematics test results achieved by boarders and day students over several years. Likewise, the renewal of the learning centre in another school was informed by a systematic collection of empirical data to gain insights into the current use of the facility. This data was complemented by an interrogation of the literature to identify ideal tutoring centre design and practices. Similarly, the mentoring project was strengthened by research into arrangements practised in comparable schools and in other sectors of industry, supplemented by interviews with staff. This approach highlighted the gaps between what is considered to be best practice in mentoring and the school's existing approaches.

In accordance with the principle of fostering a shared sense of accountability, teachers' inclination to collect, interpret and use data effectively develops their capacity to contribute to school policy and enhance the organisation's intelligence of accountability. Indeed, one of the participants commented specifically on how emboldening it was for her to communicate clearly and purposefully with peers with the conviction of evidence behind her.

Concluding comments

Bascia and Hargreaves (2000, p. 7) have referred to the imperative of adopting an 'intellectual conception' of teaching that emphasises the need for professional judgement to be informed by knowledge, expertise, reflection, research and continuous learning. This conception requires that professional learning becomes integral to the job itself. The potential benefits of embracing such an approach to professional learning are significant. By engaging in critical reflection, teachers challenge tacit assumptions about practice, and this can lead to a reframing of theories of action through deliberation and heightened metacognitive awareness. Certainly, the portrayal of teachers' work presented here would indicate that teachers' agency is fortified when they are provided with the opportunities and conditions to be learners and leaders, not just in their classrooms but also among their colleagues and across their communities. McLaughlin (2004, p. 17) has distilled the effects that can ensue when teachers investigate their own practice with a view to improvement: a renewed feeling of pride and excitement about teaching; a revitalised sense of being a teacher; a reminder to teachers of their intellectual capability and the importance of that capability to their professional lives; a recognition that the work they do in school matters; the reconnection by many teachers to their colleagues and to their initial commitment to teach; the development of an expanded sense of what teachers can and ought to do; and a restored sense of professionalism and power in the sense of having a voice. It is fair to say that all these effects were reinforced by the outcomes of the teachers' work reported here.

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