

A very warm welcome to you all as we share our leadership activities for Otago, Southland and South Canterbury schools and early childhood centres. This newsletter begins with research findings on the increasing priority given to supporting teacher leaders.

Teacher leadership in New Zealand and Scotland

Introduction

This paper was first presented at the 2016 NZEALS International Educational Leadership conference, and its findings published in an issue of the Scottish Educational Review (Torrance, Notman & Murphy, 2016). It reported on emerging findings from a small-scale exploratory mixed methods investigation in two education systems of similar size, Scotland and New Zealand. The study investigated how early career teachers who are progressing through programmes in developing teacher leadership, conceptualise teacher leadership and its practice. Long-term in New Zealand, the findings have implications for meeting the succession planning required, as school principals retire from the profession.

Selected literature

Four key themes informed the research topic: teacher leadership dispositions; teacher identity; the influential role of the school leader; and barriers to building leadership capacity in early career stages. Among numerous listings that describe the dispositions of those exercising teacher leadership, Danielson (2007), using the term ‘teacher leaders’, identified nine contributory characteristics: deep commitment to student learning, optimism and enthusiasm, open-mindedness and humility, courage and willingness to take risks, confidence and decisiveness, tolerance for ambiguity, creativity and flexibility, perseverance, and willingness to work hard.

The themes of personal and professional identities (who they are, their self-image, meanings they attach to themselves) have been well canvassed in the extant literature, and are important considerations as we seek to understand the person behind the teacher. For Day, Sammons, Stobart et al. (2007), there is a certain inescapability in acknowledging the “unavoidable interrelationship between professional and personal, cognitive and emotional identities” (p. 105).

What are some of the optimal conditions that may promote the prospect of teacher leadership? Day and Gu (2010) point to the prominent part played by the school headteacher/principal in teachers’ successful professional growth. They highlight formal school leaders’ attributes such as commitment, trustworthiness, collaboration, sharing a school-wide vision with staff and building “a school culture that promotes teachers’ collective agency, efficacy and professional learning and development” (p. 155).

Danielson (2007) identifies two further factors. First, the opportunity to learn leadership skills in areas of teaching such as curriculum planning, instructional improvement, collaboration and facilitation. Second, the removal of obstacles such as the *tall poppy syndrome* – where “those who stick their heads up risk being cut down to size” (Danielson, 2007, p. 19) - characteristic of Scotland as well as Australasia (Craig 2011).

Research methods

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do (early career) teachers conceptualise ‘teacher leadership’?
- What motivates (early career) teachers to aspire to become ‘teacher leaders’?
- What positive aspects do (early career) teachers associate with a teacher leadership role?
- What barriers do (early career) teachers encounter in the formative stages of developing their teacher leader role?
- How do the research findings contribute to our understandings of professional leadership development?

The study used a multi-site case study of early career teacher leaders in the Otago and Central Scotland regions that reflected geographical and socio-cultural differences. In the Scottish study, the researchers engaged with 22 teachers across two Local Authorities, with an average of nine years teaching experience who had participated in a 20 credit equivalent Masters-level teacher leadership professional development course in session 2014 to 2015. In the New Zealand study, the researcher engaged with eight early career teachers in eight schools in the Otago region who had participated in a two-day professional development course in teacher leadership in 2015 and 2016. Due to this small sample size and participant self-reporting, the study’s findings cannot be generalised to wider populations of teachers, but should rather be seen more in terms of reconstructed meanings that provide insight into teachers’ leadership thinking and experiences.

Summary of research findings

Overall, respondents viewed teacher leadership as a particular form of democratic leadership rather than an authoritative style of leadership perceived to exist in senior leadership teams. This distributed view of teacher leadership is also embedded within flatter collegial management structures and broader communities of practice (Storey, 2004).

However, there were differences in how teachers perceived their previous leadership thinking and experiences. In Scotland, perceptions were framed in terms of positive and negative teacher role models, and the expectations behind the formal professionalization of teacher leadership within the new professional standards for all Scottish teachers. In comparison, New Zealand respondents understood that ‘leadership’ was associated with those in mandated positions of responsibility such as Heads of Department, and Assistant/Deputy Principals. Hence, they did not see themselves as ‘leading’ in any formal sense, despite clear evidence that they were engaged in leadership roles at different levels of the school.

What were the enablers and barriers that teachers saw to their successful exercise of leadership? It was evident, in both systems, that a supportive school culture was crucial to the exercise of teacher leadership. Supportive features included public support from the principal, collegial relationships, trust building, mentoring assistance, relevant professional development opportunities, and adequate time allocation to undertake the work. Conversely, teacher leadership barriers identified in a non-supportive school environment included time constraints, other teachers' unwillingness to follow where a colleague was leading, and an apprehension about learning to negotiate their way through staff conflict and resistance to change.

Implications for practice

A major implication for teacher leadership development in both New Zealand and Scotland comes in the provision of relevant professional learning, to support teachers in their knowledge base and practice development. Here, an additional aim is to encourage teacher confidence and build resilience in order to cope with the complexities of leadership outside the security of the classroom.

Four focus areas are recommended to help inform the development of professional learning programmes to assist teachers to develop leadership understandings and skills. The first area focuses on school improvement, as teacher leadership and professional development are inextricably linked (Poekert, 2012). The second area aims to build teacher leadership capacity within the domain of a professional learning community (Tenuto, Canfield-Davis and Joki, 2012). Within such a community that supports the principle of distributed leadership, the lines of distinction become blurred between teachers and designated leaders (Berry, 2011) as they move between collaborative leadership arrangements.

A third focus area relates to the articulation of change management processes. As the findings of this study suggest, a close partnership between headteacher/principal (along with other formal leaders) and the teachers involved is requisite in establishing the teacher's credibility in the eyes of the staff, as the teacher begins to exercise leadership influence beyond their classroom. In addition, it would be particularly useful to consider strategies for understanding and addressing teacher resistance to change.

Fourthly, a broader consideration relates to a transitional pathway from teacher identity to professional identity. In this regard, Leitch (2010) suggests that greater attention is given to the links between the personal and professional aspects of teacher leadership. She points to an increased focus on leadership learning, where:

Professional development engagements that attend to and embrace a more holistic conception of teachers' identities and the dynamics that flow between the personal, professional and political have the potential to support teachers in re-imagining and reshaping what is possible, across the varied phases of their career (p. 350).

Finally, there is an onus on each school principal, along with other formal leaders, to support, guide and develop teacher leadership in practice contexts. There is also an onus on policy makers to target professional development programmes, both to build nation-wide

capacity at the foundation stage of what Pounder and Crow (2005) call the “Leadership Pipeline”, and to develop and enhance the quality and influence of the teaching profession as a whole.

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Individual Leadership Development

At the College of Education site in Lower Union Street, Dunedin, we have an office space dedicated to the use of visiting leaders and teacher leaders from schools and centres. This office can be used free of charge by personnel such as

- principals planning for, or working on, their study leave activities
- teachers undertaking University of Otago College of Education postgraduate leadership and management papers outside of school hours / in holiday time
- school or centre leaders wanting a “quiet space” for strategic planning, building designs, etc.

The office has a desk, computer and storage space. As part of this service, visitors will have access to professional input from Ross Notman, CELA Director, and to the CELA Library which has a large number of educational leadership and management books available for use. Please contact Ross at ross.notman@otago.ac.nz to book this office or to inquire about other flexible use of the leadership facility.

Research Projects in Educational Leadership

CELA has two research projects under way in 2017:

- 1. International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP)**
Principal identity in changing circumstances. [Joint investigation with Prof Gary Crow, Indiana University]
- 2. International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN)**
Successful leadership in early childhood centres with high needs. [Joint investigation with Prof Steve Jacobson, Buffalo State University of New York]

My best wishes for your in-school and outside-school and centre leadership development in 2017. You are most welcome to contact me about any leadership matters at the email address below.

Kind regards

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