

Evaluating teacher-led development work in a secondary school

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Abstract

Val Hill is a member of a senior leadership team at a secondary school. She was responsible for the development of teaching and learning throughout the school and chose to address this through the cultivation of teacher leadership. She brought the HertsCam Teacher Led Development Work programme into her school and in this article she provides an account of her evaluation of this. Her analysis focuses on the extent to which this strategy supports the growth of a wider professional learning community and sustainable school improvement through the provision of opportunities for leadership at all levels.

In December 2006 Ofsted judged our school as ‘good’ with some ‘outstanding features’ and as having ‘the capacity to improve further’. As a rapidly improving school, this capacity and how to build it is of primary importance. Merely looking at operational changes would lead to limited improvement. What was needed was a cultural change which encouraged each member of the learning community to see themselves as both leaders and learners.

I was interested in Hargreaves’ (1999) view that without social capital, intellectual capital cannot flourish. According to a social capital audit carried out by an external researcher, our school had strong social networks but lacked pedagogical networks (Birch, 2007). It seemed to me that we needed a critical mass of teachers who saw themselves as empowered agents of change in order to create and share knowledge, but also to develop the learning community itself. Through my study into the nature of learning communities I came to see that what was required was improvement of the systems which supports teachers and the fostering of teacher leadership at all levels: what Senge (1994) refers to as the ‘deep learning’ required for organisational change. Only through achieving a conceptual shift in teachers’ belief in themselves as continuing learners, reflective practitioners and leaders would they

become empowered as individuals and bring sustainable benefits throughout the school.

I sought to establish a range of opportunities for staff by building organisational structures which allow freedom to engage in professional development activities which motivate and engage people as individuals. One of these structures was the setting up of a Teacher Led Development Work group (TLDW) in conjunction with the HertsCam Network - a partnership between the University of Cambridge, the Hertfordshire local authority and individual schools.

The concept of TLDW has been developed over many years and is well documented (e.g. Frost, 2003; Frost and Durrant, 2002; Frost and Durrant, 2003a, 2003b). Through the TLDW programme I hoped to provide a forum for teachers to develop as both leaders and learners. More than this, my aim was that the participants would become influential members of the learning community, bringing many more colleagues into a learning conversation that developed them all, thereby building the school's capacity to become 'outstanding'.

After two years, I undertook to evaluate the TLDW programme and shape its development in my school. I wanted to focus on how teacher-led development work changes participants' teaching and learning practice, develops their capacity to exercise leadership and to engage in networking within and beyond school.

TLDW in action

The teachers who joined our first TLDW group did not initially see their work as a means of improving their own leadership or contributing to the wider learning community. The realisation that they had a significant role to play in the creation and transfer of professional knowledge grew as they became increasingly passionate about their work. Now it became a matter of restructuring systems in the school so that regular forums could be found for this sharing of developing knowledge.

I used the newly established Learning Forums to provide this opportunity. Learning Forums were whole staff meetings with a specific focus on teaching and learning. They were intended to break away from the old model of staff sitting in the hall being told how to teach. Instead we wanted to give staff the opportunity to shape and contribute to the meetings and the TLDW participants did just that.

The evaluations from those first workshop sessions commented on the value of sharing practical strategies, being impressed by the passion and commitment of their peers and reflecting on their own practice. In February 2007 TLDW members presented their work at a joint training day for the Bishops Stortford consortium of schools. Having presented at this event, participants were more confident in volunteering to present at the subsequent HertsCam Network Event to an audience of other TLDW participants from across the County.

These events helped the participants to evaluate the impact of their leadership, which in Durrant's (2004) view is the most powerful feature in driving school improvement. Over time, I began to see direct evidence of development in the pedagogical networks between staff – a key objective of the project. A TLDW participant reflected on this new-found capacity.

I've started having ad-hoc conversations supporting other staff. I've always had a licence to do it but TLDW has made me realise a lot of things. I'm more willing to engage with other staff about pedagogical issues. I've got a lot of ideas, not all mine, that I can share. I know my strengths now.

(Teacher 1)

Another participant, saw a distinct difference in her role pre and post TLDW participation.

I'm quite excited. Instead of just teaching day-in and day-out I get a chance to make an impact. I know as a teacher you make a difference with the students, but with this you get to see the difference you've made.

(Teacher 9)

I began to see increasing evidence that where teachers are given the support and opportunities to lead they do so very effectively and with relish. MacBeath and Mortimore (2001) identify the vital indicator of a school's capacity for improvement as its increased learning ability. When a school becomes a learning organisation, its professional culture becomes the knowledge carrier, allowing improvement to be sustained despite changes of staff or political contexts. It seemed to me that this is exactly what TLDW and the Learning Forums were providing the conditions for.

I wanted to explore the impact of the TLDW programme in more detail. I have organised my reflections under four themes: 'Impact

on teaching and learning', 'Impact on school culture', 'Impact on individuals' and 'Impact on leadership capacity'.

Impact on teaching and learning

TLDW participants all felt that the process had developed their teaching practice. This was an important outcome on the way to developing the learning community as it began to raise the profile of pedagogical discussion between teachers. For some the effect was liberating.

It's made me reflect and change the way I practice things...it gave me scope to try different things and not be worried if they didn't work because it was OK for it not to work.

(Teacher 11)

I like it because it's one idea that I've been allowed to think about so it's given me time to really work it out and think it through.

(Teacher 9)

The use of the verb 'allowed' is significant here, revealing the perception of prescription and lack of autonomy. Instead we were facilitating collaboration and autonomy in professional development and moving away from the prescriptive transmission mode of much current provision (Campbell, 2003).

The increased confidence to experiment was verified by line managers and colleagues who saw it as contributing to the improved practice of the participants and their faculty teams. One Head of Faculty, for example, attributed students' achievement of A and B examination grades to the development work of one TLDW participant who had influenced the practice of other team members as well as himself. This is where TLDW's strength lies; it is rooted in teachers' primary concerns about raising student achievement.

Surprisingly quickly the impact moved beyond participants to the wider school community as a result of the structured opportunities to share and lead development work with colleagues.

I can take that back to the faculty, which I have done, and trigger everyone else doing it, so I know it will become part of the scheme of work now and a really important part

(Teacher 3)

At a time when the national agenda is focused on re-introducing creativity into the curriculum it was heartening to hear the following comment by a participant.

I've really loved doing what I've been doing, so it's had a huge impact on my teaching...this has almost given me the licence to put creativity in without feeling guilty.

(Teacher 5)

Importantly, there was also evidence of this teacher-learning impacting on students by creating the conditions for more powerful communication about the nature of learning.

Now we've got a bit of a dialogue going on. It's nice that they're a lot more confident to put their own thoughts down and not worry what someone else is going to think... The language of 'I don't know' has changed much more now to 'who can help' so it's less negative.

(Teacher 4)

Cultivating a learning community among teachers has brought about a shift of culture for students too by modelling life-long learning.

Impact on school culture

To make the benefits of TLDW sustainable, my aim was for it to influence the whole school community and begin to shape its culture. In the first cohort this took time to develop as individuals got to grips with their development work as a piece of personal CPD¹. With the second cohort, there was an immediate expectation of wider impact. All this activity however was not proof of impact. I was pleased therefore when my interviews suggested that there had been marked changes in the way staff interact and about what.

There's been a cultural shift...when I hear teachers talking to one another now it's to do with classroom practice or things that they've learned. The school gets loads of intellectual capital from it.

(Headteacher)

Learning in schools – for teachers as well as students – is often seen as an individualised process which is separate from other activities; it is assessed out of context and collaboration is discouraged. Wenger (1998) suggests it is small wonder, given these conditions, that

¹ CPD – Continuing professional development

improvement is limited. Here I was beginning to see evidence that this solitary approach was changing.

I think there has been a shift towards people talking about pedagogy. I think the TLDW is a fantastic forum for those conversations to happen. I know I've had more conversations with people outside my department because of it. To actually have the time to focus on this is really important – massively.

(Teacher 3)

This evidence suggests a clear increase in pedagogical networking in the school, fuelled by a sense of ownership.

...it was mine and I was able to share it with other people. It made you feel really empowered. Possibly because I was enthusiastic about what I was telling them they were enthusiastic as well. I liked it.

(Teacher 7)

This positive impact on other staff can be further seen in the recent Learning Forum which was led by TLDW participants and other teachers within the school. TLDW participants had led activities in a previous Learning Forum and this appeared to have set an expectation that high quality professional development can be led by teachers. The key seems to be giving people choice and tapping into their areas of interest.

People have volunteered [to lead workshops]. It hasn't been you saying "you're in TLDW so you must deliver" which makes a difference. It's totally left it up to us. Are we passionate about it? Do we feel that it's something we want to share? And there were loads of people, weren't there? That's really good.

(Teacher 10)

This suggests that the work is not contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994) but owned by all. Staff gave feedback on the 'impressive work' their colleagues had undertaken and commented on their confidence. Those doing the leading also reflected on the benefits.

The excellent questions and answers from staff really made me think about what I was doing and how to take it forward. It wasn't anywhere near as scary teaching adults as I thought it would be. I wasn't an expert in the field that I was leading, but I could still utilise my skills from life and work to produce a meaningful

experience that seemed to engage the staff. This was empowering and I feel much more confident to do it again.

(Teacher 14)

These statements reinforced for me the value of sharing the work beyond the group. There was a common view that the work initiated by TLDW members and then taken up by others through the Learning Forums had given a direction to the staff as a learning community and had gone some way towards supporting a breaking down of some 'balkanisation' (Hargreaves, 1992) within the school, with people valuing the opportunities the new structures gave to work outside of their traditional areas.

Participants began to realise the power of their own work and the effect the changes were having on the wider professional community.

I think attitudes of teachers have changed and there's more of a learning language culture within the school... staff are very open – they always have been – but it's exposing people to new stuff, isn't it?

(Teacher 9)

There was a time, not so long ago, when I worked quietly and independently on my own, but during this last year so many ideas have come to me through listening to and communicating with colleagues from many different backgrounds

(Teacher 2)

Nor has the impact been confined to the wider learning community of the school. There is growing evidence of impact at consortium level and within the HertsCam community.

I really enjoy it because there are people doing the same as you with the same mind-set...I think they're really important because you're networking outside the school and hopefully the impact is then outside the school as well.

(Teacher 5)

This wider impact is what will bring sustainability to the work.

Impact on individuals

Two of the major effects of the TLDW work on the participants have been the increase of professional confidence and sense of personal value in the organisation. Part of this is attributable to the warm

reception their work has received from colleagues. Teachers value opportunities to engage in work which is grounded, pertinent and apposite. They also value that which they can contribute to and feel they belong to, and being able to exercise their individual agency enables teachers to maximise their own learning (Lambert, 1998; Cordingley, 2002).

Even if I'm not on the TLDW next year I still want to know who's speaking at the HertsCam events and go along because I really have enjoyed that. It's good to know you're part of a much bigger network. I know they show you that slide of all the groups but that's just a picture on a PowerPoint. It doesn't mean anything until you see people in a room.

(Teacher 3)

A sense of challenge has been described by several respondents. For many the TLDW experience has been stimulating and powerful, showing its impact as part of a knowledge creating community.

I feel it's changed me so much more than having a one day course here and there with limited impact when you get back into the department because there's limited opportunities to share the information. For me, for my learning and progression, TLDW's right at the top there.

(Teacher 6)

Impact on leadership capacity

Leadership has to come from all teachers in order to effect sustainable improvement (Gronn, 2003; Spillane, 2006; Fullan, 2001). All TLDW participants had engaged in some form of new leadership activity. For some it was at faculty level.

We're very good at this school in being interested in each other, aren't we? Because they [the department] have been asking, it's given me a feeling that I'm doing something, not just being in the classroom. I'm actually helping other colleagues, which helps everyone move on and it's really nice.

(Teacher 12)

While others felt a more profound change in their personal influence as a leader.

On the leadership side of things I've changed hugely. I'm more confident to say when things are good practice and when we need to change things and how we're going to change them. So it's not just

me changing them. It's working with others to change something that isn't quite right.

(Teacher 4)

It forces you to put your head above the parapet and say "I'm here, this is what I'm doing, come and listen because I actually think it's really good." It gives you the lever to be able to do that.

(Teacher 7)

These comments speak of teachers who have a real investment in their own learning community, who see themselves as agents of change for improvement and who have the confidence to speak out even when this goes against received wisdom. A newly qualified teacher sums up the purpose of TLDW.

When I started this project I did not feel that I was a leader. My opinion of my importance within the teaching profession was limited before embarking on this. I now feel that it is unimportant which role you have; if you are creating good practice and providing insight within a school you are a leader.

(Teacher 8)

If teachers feel supported in this way, then school improvement will surely follow. It seems clear that where teachers share learning it leads to the generation of a school-wide culture that makes teacher leadership an expectation. This reclaiming of school leadership from the individual to the collective, is what Harris and Muijs (2004) suggest offers the real possibility of distributed leadership in action.

Conclusion

The improvements that TLDW has contributed to our school include a more collaborative climate, a greater awareness of shared purpose, a greater willingness – through improved opportunities – to take the initiative and risks and a more concerted focus on professional development. We are becoming more of a learning organisation (Silins and Mulford, 2004). In order to create a learning community that encourages and values thinking, then it is vital that teachers themselves have experience of such a community (Smith and Sutherland, 2003) and this is what TLDW helps provide. The next stage in this development of the learning community is encouraging the participants more overtly to evaluate their leadership of school improvement which, as Durrant (2004) argues, should be the main focus of teachers' professional activity and learning, rather than an eventual response or hoped for outcome.

Through this evaluation I have gained a deeper insight into the nature of teacher leadership: it is not something one can pay lip-service to nor is it homogeneous. It is challenging, exciting and it lifts the lid on schools' capacity. I have seen teachers as individuals begin to reframe their belief systems and practices which has been tremendously exciting but, as Mitchell and Sackney argue, it is when this reframing becomes a school-wide phenomenon that it is truly transformative (2000). I have seen its beginnings, and it is this continued transformation that I am committed to in my future work. I am reminded of the Japanese proverb, *none of us is as smart as all of us*.

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