Teacher Leadership:
an alternative approach to teachers' professional development in Romania

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Abstract

In an increasingly pressured environment to achieve the highest educational performance, to educate our youngsters for the 21st century challenges, teachers need professional development experiences that enable them to face this pressure, take on the challenge and thrive in it. With a myriad of educational establishments that put on offer an even greater variety of training courses, no wonder teachers are confused about their options and school headteachers and local educational authorities are turning to implementing top-down initiatives which may not fit with the local circumstances of the schools in question. With solid, first-hand knowledge and experience of what it means to be a teacher in Romania and the professional development opportunities available for teachers, the authors argue that teacher leadership is a valid, sustainable and ethical approach to professional development programmes. Furthermore they argue that Romanian teachers, students, parents and school communities would be ready to embrace such an approach, should be right circumstances and support mechanisms be in place for them. The article draws from preliminary discussions held with teachers and headteachers from the city of Iasi, Romania at the beginning of a collaboration project that seeks to offer an alternative to teachers' professional development experiences through teacher leadership.

The quality of teaching in schools is arguably dependant on several factors such as pre-service and in-service training, the recruitment of better qualified teachers, continuous professional development programmes existent in schools and on offer from different educational establishments and the structures for monitoring and incentivising teachers to develop their teaching and their career. Great leadership stands in the list above as an important feature of great schools. What does 'great leadership' look like? What is it like to work in 'great schools'? The literature in the field offers a vast array of answers to these questions. In this article, we explore the existing conditions of the Romanian educational system and make a case for developing nurturing schools and nurturing leadership; the ones that offer professional development experiences that facilitate growth and are actively creating opportunities to increase teachers' self-efficacy, thus infusing the schools' and the educational systems' central nervous system with development pathways that grow organically from the core of the educational establishment and its members.

The concept of self-efficacy has developed over time to include a growth mind-set view (Dweck, 2006) whereby what is important is not the self-doubts that arise in face of difficulties, but, more importantly, the speed of recovery from difficulties (Bandura, 1989). Bangs and Frost (2011) debate the importance of self-efficacy and the belief in one's self-efficacy in the teaching profession, linking it with the concept of agency which, they stress, is a 'fundamental human capacity', crucial in the shaping of the teachers needed in today's society. The authors make a powerful case for reflecting on the positive correlation between non-positional leadership and increased self-efficacy; a correlation we embrace and which we explore later in this article.

The professional development of teachers in Romania

Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) are essential elements of the educational system. Each country has its own initial and vocational training policies, different from each other, given the cultural, economic, political and social differences. However, considering the current increasing interactions, the educational process is also becoming a less closed one, open to various influences. In the past twenty years, the Romanian educational system saw key reform messages cascaded from government to ministry then through different means all the way to the students. Too many of these changes, however, have not been well thought out or followed through and that left a lot of teachers disillusioned in the educational reform. Cuban (1984) cited in Barber and Mourshed (2007: 48) warns against the dangers of these types of reform and mentions that 'many school reforms have had a similar effect to that of a storm in the ocean: the surface is agitated and turbulent, while the ocean floor is calm and serene (if a bit murky) […] while deep below the surface, life goes on

largely uninterrupted'. This may be the case with Romanian's educational system (Iosifescu, 2013).

An important barrier to the engagement of teachers in professional development experiences in Romania is the financial cost involved. Teachers in Romania are poorly paid and schools do not have a budget for CPD, though each has a CPD coordinator. Romanian schools are centralised; the local educational authority holds the budget as it also holds a database with all teachers and their level of professional development. All this significantly impacts on teachers' willingness to engage and participate. Thus, training opportunities financed by the European Union (POSDRU or Leonardo) are in higher demand in Romania than those where teachers have to pay for their participation:

> POSDRU projects are welcome, especially because they are those who pay for our training. […] we would prefer not to pay from our own pockets, because they are empty.
>
> (Primary School Teacher)

> I am glad these projects exist. Otherwise we would strive even harder to become professionals. And we do not refer here to the fact that we are taught how to teach our subject, but we discuss real life situations from our school, conflict situations which appear almost every day, and in this way we can clearly see the experience of our colleagues, what we can apply and what we can use and adapt to our class.
>
> (Primary school teacher)

This financial obstacle is also acknowledged in the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS, 2013) which shows Romania as a country where the level of participation in professional development activities is low, where the vast majority of training courses have to be paid by teachers and where the levels of other support which could be provided, such as scheduled time for professional development activities during regular working hours, reduced teaching time, days off, study leave, or even salary supplements for the professional activities outside working hours are amongst the lowest when compared with all the other participating countries. Thus, the recommendations made by OECD ask policy makers in countries with well below average levels of support for professional development such as Portugal, Romania and Spain to 'consider a variety of support and incentives (including non-monetary ones) that teachers can receive to help them improve their practice throughout their career' (TALIS, 2013: 108).

A closer look at the offer of professional development provision available in Romania shows other potential problems and the mismatch between the CPD offer and the needs of the teachers. An in-depth research study gathering the opinions of over 180 kindergarten and primary school teachers, of different degrees of experience and at different stages in their professional development, from rural and urban areas of Romania, concluded amongst other things that, in unanimity, teachers were dissatisfied by the in-service training opportunities

available to them, as many of them were too formal and less focused on their real needs (Masari, 2013). It goes further to show that teachers regard reflective and collaborative activities as being necessary for teacher training programmes.

In the international literature, we find evidence that headteachers as well, believe that the most effective teacher training activities are those that are school based, where teachers are learning by experimenting with practice and adapting it by responding to feedback from pupils and colleagues or by self-evaluation, where there is 'collaborative research and development and a participation in teacher networks' (Pedder, Storey & Opfer, 2008: 7). The same point is supported by Durrant (2004) who argues that the networking and collaboration opportunities give a sense of belonging and encourage teachers to feel that their experiences and ideas are worth listening to and being shared. This contributes to increased self-esteem and teacher effectiveness. It is encouraging to see that the same ideas are shared in the Romanian educational literature. Ostafe (2013) captured the opinions of UK and Romanian teachers who said that they wished to have more opportunities for collaboration with other schools and to be engaged in common educational projects where they could exchange knowledge and experiences. Duta and Folostina (2013) in a piece of comparative research sought the opinions of over 480 professionals from higher education institutions in Romania and Spain and concluded that in teachers' professional development programmes, it is important to stimulate the individual and collective reflection in solving problems arising from teachers' practice, to create and maintain an environment of collaboration and social interaction. Similarly, in a paper that explores the importance of the reflective capacity in courses for teachers', Seghedin (2011: 148) argues that 'teachers must learn to reflect, see problems, define them, find arguments […] deliberate and decide on solutions'.

Unfortunately, however, the reality as regards the offer of CPD in Romania is somewhat different. Without a doubt, there are a lot of development opportunities for Romanian teachers, what we question, however is their quality and their wider impact on the school level. Most opportunities are for teachers to attend external courses in various disciplines, but prove not to have significant impact in changing and improving teacher behaviour. Romanian studies show that schools that have a 'brand name' are very interested in academic results and are therefore interested in the teachers' development but that's more about how many certificates teachers collect rather than how good these teachers are in the classroom (Iucu, 2004).

An overall majority of the Romanian teachers involved in our preliminary discussions mentioned that the schools provide an array of professional development activities in which teachers are keen to participate, however, they mentioned that the impact, if it exists, is mainly at the level of the students' and teacher's subject knowledge, not at the level of the

institution or their own leadership capacity. In fact, the teachers we spoke with did not mention enhancing leadership capacity as an impact of any training course they underwent.

> Teachers do not practice their leadership capacity. We view our role primarily as imparting our subject knowledge to our students. We encourage each other and have good working relationships...but our school lacks innovation and team teaching.
>
> (Primary school teacher)

A small-scale study which sought to gather the opinion of Romanian teachers vis-à-vis their professional development, shows that trainers did not answer teachers' needs and that the teachers' pedagogic activity did not change significantly after these courses. Instead, teachers continue to guide themselves by their already established routine and experience of teaching accumulated with time (Ostafe: 2013).

> We already know what we are taught at these courses, so we continue to do what we know best...meaning we apply what we know works.
>
> (Primary school teacher)

> These courses are good because we are taken out of our environment; we see something else, but it is difficult to apply what we are taught because the situations are different in each kindergarten'
>
> (Kindergarten teacher)

Given all this, no wonder then that the motivation behind the engagement in professional development activities of some teaches is questionable:

> Some exaggerate in their chase to get the credits associated with these courses, whilst others neglect their professional development giving up completely applying for PD courses.
>
> (Primary school teacher)

Our initial discussions with teachers in Iasi, Romania showed how different teachers' experiences were, depending on the culture of the school in which they worked. Without drawing any final conclusions from our discussions, there are comments that show that, in some schools, collaboration and experimenting with practice is encouraged, whereas in others, this is clearly not the case. These differences stand in the way of school and teacher development:

> Our teachers do not collaborate, quite the opposite, there are always conflicts and a lack of involvement. Each on his/her own.
>
> (Primary school teacher)

> Teachers work with their own classes, in an individualistic manner, with no involvement in the greater, overall good of the school.
>
> (Reception teacher)

If, for years, such programmes proved to have questionable long term impact on schools as institutions and on teachers as professionals, it may be high time we looked at professional development as an 'engine of innovation rather than a vehicle for the delivery of centrally designed programmes' (Frost, 2012: 207).

Challenging the status quo: an alternative through teacher leadership

We are fortunate in that we have come to know and understand teacher leadership as promoted by HertsCam, a network of teachers and schools from the UK originally arising from a partnership with the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education. Though the term 'teacher leadership' has been used for many years, it usually refers to teachers with formal responsibilities in the school's hierarchical structure, especially in the American educational literature. HertsCam however, actively promotes a non-positional teacher leadership model which aims at enabling all teachers to develop their leadership capacity (Frost, 2012).

At the beginning of this paper, we called this type of leadership 'nurturing' because non-positional teacher leadership places emphasis on cultivating not only the professional capacities that raise educational standards and contribute to the development of professional dialogues in educational establishments (Frost, 2013; Frost and Durrant, 2002; Frost, 2011; Wearing, 2011), but also because it can enhance the fundamental human capacity of agency (Bangs and Frost, 2011). We believe that this places a much needed focus on schools as organisations in general, and in Romania in particular, where many teachers are disillusioned professionals. This is not just because of low salaries and low levels of support for participation in CPD, but because of the difficulty of developing standards of professional practice when the needed 'degree of autonomy and self-governance are still missing' in the our educational system (Barzea, 1995).

We embraced teacher leadership above anything else as a means to transform education in Romanian schools because we believe it has the right ingredients for enhancing teachers' commitment. It invites reflection and engagement in this profession at a deeper level whilst at the same time enables teachers to grow as persons, practitioners and professionals. In today's society, with the requirements for 21st century education, a teacher transforms into an agent of change with a professional personality that becomes increasingly complex and exposed to new challenges and demands. Teachers' programmes of professional development have to match these new challenges and demands and equip teachers with adequate mechanisms not just for coping, but for thriving into this new, continuously changing setting.

Perfected over nearly twenty years of practice, HertsCam has developed a particular way of achieving this by cultivating teacher leadership. Tutors in HertsCam adopt a step-by-step approach where participants engage in a process of clarifying their professional roles and responsibilities, they reflect on their development needs and those of the school and their students, they negotiate a strategic action plan, reflect and collaborate with colleagues, the senior leadership team and other professionals to lead their development work.

The power of reflection

The very complex moral dimension of the teaching profession determines the need to reflect on values and principles in our practice. In order to meet the various requirements and to respond to a variety of challenges, the educator / the teacher must be able to reflect over the meanings of his actions, to be aware of his/her mission. The reflective ability facilitates the transition between the educator's professional conscience and the educator's professional conduct. We cannot develop firm convictions without reflection, just as we cannot expect individuals to respect rules or norms, without understanding them first; the reflective capability helps the individual to choose. A heuristic approach to professional ethics is important for developing teachers' reflective thought which is imposed by the diversity of the ethical dilemmas from the educational practice (Seghedin, 2004).

Amongst other components of teachers' professionalism, cultivating leadership supports the evolution of the reflective capacity. Whilst undertaking their development work, teachers put themselves in situations that require taking an initiative, influencing and inspiring others, sharing and convincing colleagues of a vision, offering and asking for support, modelling a certain type of behaviour, holding others to account. All these are not random actions. Using instruments perfected throughout time, HertsCam tutors guide participants into becoming strategic in the way they do things; actions are made coherent by ongoing reflection.

Supportive cultures

Frost (2011) argues that cultivating teacher leadership, as described above, can only happen when there are structures of support in place which allow teachers to exercise their leadership. These structures create an environment where questioning established practices is not only accepted, but used to engage in professional reflective enquiry which leads to changing, innovating and developing practice. In such a professional learning communities (Bolam *et al.,* 2005) there is a sense of shared values and vision and teachers (groups and individuals) engage in professional learning through collaboration, partnerships and taking collective

responsibility for the act of learning. Mitchell and Sackney illustrate the link between learning communities and communities of leaders as noticed below:

> ….in a learning community, individuals feel a deep sense of empowerment and autonomy and a deep personal commitment to the work of the school. This implies that people in the school form not just a community of learners but also a community of leaders (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000: 93).

In schools which embrace the cultivation of teacher leadership and develop as a professional learning communities, teachers become more than just employees. These are places where teachers thrive with the newly discovered power to transform themselves, their colleagues and their schools.

Teachers who participated in programmes of professional development which develop their leadership capacity mention that when they are directly involved in contributing to their school's improvement, they feel energised by the collaborative work and the learning process and feel an increased sense of self-worth (Frost et al., 2000; Frost & Durrant, 2002). Teachers who are provided with opportunities in decision making report higher self-efficacy scores in the TALIS (2013) and a closer look at the data provided, shows that this is particularly visible in Romania. These opportunities, however, are not readily available to Romanian teachers and this is also recognised in the report mentioned above. The initial discussions carried out with our teachers made us realise that there is a real mix in the way in which they understand leadership, the responsibility of leadership and their experience of leadership in their work places. The 'heroic leader' model where the headteacher is the one with 'the last word in decision making' (Primary school teacher), or the 'one who decides what is good or if the ideas of others are good' (Primary school teacher) appears only scarcely in teachers' accounts. The vast majority of those we talked to agreed that, by and large, decisions were made as a result of consultations with various stakeholders, mainly with the schools' Administrative Council (equivalent to the senior leadership team). Very few of those present, however, felt that everyone (teachers, parents, students, school staff, etc) had equal influence in the decision making process.

Participation in decision-making

Participating in decision making is tightly connected with the ethical dimension of our profession. There are schools in Romania where there is no real professional debate and we find that teachers struggle to be heard. HertsCam supports teacher leadership that enables teachers to become more confident, more open and willing to engage in professional dialogue, more skilled and better prepared for the decision making process. At a certain point students', colleagues', principals' and parents' interests intersect and under these circumstances it is

extremely important for teachers to have the ability to analyse the context critically and ethically and be aware of the influences which determine or ground their own beliefs and values. In HertsCam, the support programme starts with a crucial step of clarifying professional values and concerns which invites participants to start this dialogue, whilst throughout the programme vignettes are used to put teachers into different real scenarios which are debated in detail to help teachers get support from one another and model decision making. We believe that the functional knowledge about professional ethics and the experience in its practice can ease the making of difficult decisions, especially for beginners. Teachers in the latter category are unlikely to think about educational theories while educating and assessing students, or when they have to distribute limited resources like materials, time and attention. Making the correct decision might not be obvious, and that is why supporting the development of the reflective ability, as well as debating professional ethics can help professional educators in their daily activity.

Promoting and actively supporting teacher leadership, and in particular non-positional leadership, empowers teachers to participate in decision making at the school level, right where they are best placed, in the frontline of teaching, closest to students, parents, colleagues and other members of the school community. The OECD report (2013) recommends more opportunities to encourage collaboration among teachers, either through professional development or classroom practices: 'the data shows that participating in collaborative professional development or engaging in collaborative practices has a positive relationship with both teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction' (TALIS, 2013: 201). In the webinars and online discussions following the launch of the TALIS, in June 2014, collaboration was repeatedly brought forward with academics such as Michael Fullan stressing that collaboration should not be left to chance, but should be carefully orchestrated to maximise impact, and educational establishments asking for concrete examples of efficient collaborations. An approach to professional development through teacher leadership creates opportunities for teachers to be involved in a model of collaboration that works and in the decision making process of the school.

Our work is in fact, a work in progress at this stage. Our main goal is to offer schools such an opportunity for professional development and collaboration as outlined above. Our aim is to learn as much as we can from HertsCam and other such networks, adapt approaches to the Romanian system and see what a programme of support for non-positional teacher leadership might look like in Romania. We are aiming for a practical approach, where we engage teachers, headteachers and other stakeholders in the process from the beginning, so the programme of supporting teacher leadership grows organically, adapted to the Romanian social, economic, cultural and political context. With this strategic perspective about teacher leadership, we hope to help Romanian teachers to assume the 'courage to educate' (Savater, 1997) in all aspects of their profession.

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