Researching teacher leadership and its impact on school improvement

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Abstract

Teacher leadership and its relation to school improvement and learning outcomes are at the core of recent works on educational leadership at the international level. Previous developments have advanced knowledge on the effects and conditions that influence teacher leadership and how it contributes to more effective successful school leadership. This paper explores the author's understanding of teacher leadership, how is conceptualised, how it is practiced in secondary education and how it relates to school improvement. As part of the funded project TEACH-IN by the European Commission under the Marie Curie programme (2014-2015), a review of the literature has been conducted. Initial findings are presented with regards to the diversity of factors influencing school improvement, paying special attention to teacher leadership and how is conceptualised from different perspectives and views.

Keywords: teacher leadership, school improvement, school outcomes

Introduction

(…) no matter what title I may or may not have, or what position of responsibility I may or may not have, or what salary I may or may not have – doing something like that – where you see practice developing and the children improving their understanding, because it's all about the children making progress, understanding something today better than they did yesterday, that's what makes me motivated

(Wincey Boachie-Donkor, secondary teacher, 2014)

Wincey is working in the Mount Grace School located in the county of Hertfordshire, at the southeast of England. As a teacher of Maths, she has seen many students with diverse attainment levels in her subject. She decided to initiate her participation in the teacher leadership network HertsCam, as over 300 teachers and other professionals in the United Kingdom. These teachers are from very diverse profiles, backgrounds, school realities and different places in the country, but they share a commitment for leading projects that improve teaching and learning. They have in common something that overcomes the school walls and the specific problems in their classrooms. They are engaged and empowered not only through the network events, activities, but also by the feelings and hopes they share.

The HertsCam network, coordinated by Dr. David Frost, supports processes of transformation based on the non-positional teacher leadership (Frost, 2014) within the objective of "advance education for the public benefit through the provision of programmes for teachers to improve the quality of education in schools" (HertsCam, 2014). Since its foundation, the growth of the network in number, events and related publications has been continuous. Some teachers participated a long time ago in the activities organised by the network and their involvement continues. Many others have continued to be engaged in the network having diverse responsibilities within, as for example being tutors in the Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) programme that every year is organised to support teacher leadership in primary, secondary and special schools.

Teachers' stories of change and transformation because of their involvement in HertsCam have a central role in some of the recent developments in the field of knowledge of teacher leadership (Frost, 2014). The process of leadership is reinforced by the network, which becomes a reference for teachers. This would not have been possible without the inclusion of teacher's voices in the actions being implemented, taking into account their views and needs. This innovative approach has been pioneered in the United Kingdom and has been extended abroad through the *International Teacher Leadership* (ITL) initiative. Since 2008 the project launched at the University of Cambridge has created a network that involves 15 countries, around 90 schools of which 35 are secondary and the involvement of approximately 1.000 teachers (Frost, 2012).

The dialogue created on the basis of how Freire conceptualised it (1970) has a crucial role in HertsCam and the ITL, being the conversations among teachers related to their process to lead change. When researchers are in contact with the experiences, activities and aims of the network, we can observe the diversity of concerns in the projects that teachers are leading. A wide diversity of topics is covered by teachers in their leadership projects, from self-efficacy to the fight against bullying or concrete actions for school improvement. In Wincey's words at the beginning of this paper, we can identify her concerns about children´s understanding and how to improve it. In May 2014, her project was presented in a two-day conference of the Teachers Exercising Leadership project in Braga (Portugal), organised by the University of Minho with the collaboration of HertCam. She explained in her own words how she dealt with the improvement of attainment level of Maths in one of her groups of students.

On the basis of the teacher´s work on leadership, the aim of this paper is to consider the influence of teacher leadership in school improvement, exploring some of the most recent developments in the field. First, a general framework of the research and the methodology are presented. Second, school improvement is discussed, particularly in relation to the role of teachers. Finally, the main results are discussed.

Framework of the research

The Europe 2020 Strategy acknowledges the central role played by education to advance growth, employment, and competitiveness in a knowledge-based society. Education systems are struggling to meet this challenge and aim to enhance effective ways for the young people going into the labour market. This becomes even harder within the current social and economic crisis. In June 2014, the unemployment rates of people less than 24 years was 22.0% in the EU28 (Eurostat, 2014) and in 2013, 13% were neither in employment nor in education (Eurostat, 2013). In this sense, the most recent data demonstrates disparities among European countries, being this rate 13.3% for the United Kingdom, 6,3% for Germany or 22,2% in Italy. The targets defined by the European Commission for improvement are clear: to reduce school drop-out rate below 10% and reaching at least 40% of 30-34 year olds who have completed tertiary education or equivalent.

In the light of the crucial challenges faced by education systems and societies, research efforts are being developed and promoted to contribute to this end. In this sense, the DG Research of the European Commission, under the Marie Curie Programme, has funded the TEACH-IN project (Supervisor: David Frost; Postdoctoral Researcher: Gisela Redondo-Sama), a two years project to develop a comprehensive understanding of teacher leadership and how to implement it in secondary schools and communities in successful ways, promoting school improvement and social transformation. The project is based on the involvement of the

Leadership for Learning academic group at the University of Cambridge and CREA at the University of Barcelona. Its timeliness is put forward in several ways. To start with, it seeks to widen the access that teachers, schools and communities have to the development of teacher leadership initiatives, which promote the development of more solid social networks and improve the conditions in which they access the labour market as well as social participation.

The project will contribute to this field of knowledge, providing evidence that demonstrates effectives in improving the academic results of schools in the European context and in relation to teacher leadership. The analysis of existing initiatives that may promote effective leadership can allow for recreating them in different European social contexts and diverse educational areas, while advancing towards the objectives of the EU2020 strategy to enhance education, creativity for innovation and smart specialisation. Secondly, due to the need of considering the multi-factoral dimension that affects school failure and the increase of youth unemployment in Europe, the concern of policy makers is growing with regards to fostering reforms, which can achieve social cohesion in Europe. This project will contribute on how educational leadership can be harnessed in policy-making processes, as it includes the analysis of the context where it is being promoted. Importantly, consolidating synergies between communities and initiatives on teacher leadership, can contribute to the analysis of new variables to be taken into account when analysing an educational model in line with the European Commission's goals for 2020.

Methodology

In a first stage, the TEACH-IN project is analysing how teacher leadership is conceptualised and practiced in secondary education with regards to school improvement. Within this aim, the literature review of teacher leadership and school improvement includes sources from 1985 to present. Diverse databases in the fields of social sciences and educational sciences research have been examined, including ERIC, SCOPUS and the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). Particular relevance has been given to journals with high impact factor in the Journal Citation Report (JCR-ISI) in different scientific categories. The multiple combination of keywords included the terms of teacher leadership, school improvement, school performance, school outcomes, school achievement, school effectiveness, secondary schools and effective educational leadership. The search results associated with at least two keywords were selected, being a total number of around 500 contributions. In an initial stage and in order to have a general overview of the research topics dealing with school improvement, diverse articles were obtained and those with more than 20 cites were selected. Once identified, the articles were ranked on the basis of three dimensions: times cited, relevance and publication date (newest to oldest), having results on empirical and non-empirical work.

Handbooks, international reports and other sources have been also considered in this first attempt to summarize main findings. In the case of books, the quality of the publishing companies has been considered according to the first attempts to rank these kind of publications at the international level.

The analysis of the literature search results is to be done in relation to the main concepts underpinning the TEACH-IN project, which is based on the communicative methodology (Gómez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011). The CM has demonstrated to achieve political, social and scientific impact by analysing and has the recognition of the European Commission to "have a significant social and political impact on the European educational and social systems" (European Commission, 2010). Two special issue dedicated to CM has been published in 2011 and 2014 in the journal *Qualitative Inquiry*. Accordingly, the analysis will be done with the aim of identify the elements that contribute to overcome inequalities, presenting evidences that suggests to succeed in this endeavour.

An overview of teacher leadership and school improvement

Diverse factors have been widely addressed and analysed to identify key elements influencing school improvement, one of them being teacher leadership, which has been conceptualised from different approaches. Before proceeding with the main developments in the field and the main distinctions within teacher leadership discussions, an overview of what is understood by school improvement internationally is provided. Hopkins (2001) explains that the term can be commonly defined as the "general efforts to make schools better places for pupils and students to learn in" (p. 11) and different periods in this field are identified (Reynolds, Teddlie, Hopkins & Stringfield, 2000). As Reynolds et al. state, in each of the periods, school improvement has been focused on different topics, as the curriculum materials (60s), the documentation of failure (70s), the period of success (late 70s and 80s) and the managing phase. The research topic of school improvement is related to concepts and developments such as those related to school effectiveness and culture (Hargreaves, 1995; Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2001), social justice (Lupton, 2005; Thrupp, 2006) or school reform (Desimone, 2002).

Theoretical works (O'Day, 2002) and qualitative and quantitative studies (Harris, & Goodall, 2008; Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011) can be identified within the framework of research of school improvement, some of them related to research methods used in leadership (Robinson, Llyod, & Rowe, 2008). These contributions are identified not only in journals but also in international works, such *School Improvement: International perspectives* (Chi-kin Lee, & Williams, 2006), the *International Handbook of School Effectiveness Research* (Reynolds, & Teddlie, 2000), *The practice and theory of school improvement, International*

Handbook of Educational Change (Harris, 2005), the *The Routledge International Handbook of Teacher and School Development* (Day, 2012), or in critical works such as the one by Michal Apple, Wayne Au and Luis Armando Gandin entitled *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education* (2009).

International organisations are making special efforts to advance knowledge in the field of school improvement (OCDE, 2013; Faubert, 2012) and how it can contribute to a better education for all. Recommendations and conclusions from these international organisations include education as a key issue, with an extremely positive impact to overcome poverty in vulnerable groups and regions. This approach is in line with the developments of the work of Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, professor at Harvard University and Fellow at Fellow of Trinity College. Sen published in *Development as freedom* (1999) a framework of analysis to deal with poverty paying special attention to the capacities of people and communities to cover their basic needs, including those linked to assure the achievement of educational equality.

Developments of school improvement include as a key aspect the quality of teaching (Hopkins, & Stern, 1996) and teacher leadership has demonstrated an influential impact to promote and consolidate practices favouring it (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). In line with these developments, teacher leadership includes the topic of school improvement as one of the main goals of the research work and it has been widely addressed by social researchers (Taylor, Goeke, Klein, & Onore, 2011; Mulford, 2013). The research community has raised important concerns on this topic leading to major developments in the field of teacher leadership (York-Barr, & Duke, 2004). A wide diversity of authors has informed about its effectiveness and has developed theoretical contributions. One of the most cited works that summarises findings about teacher leadership is the one by York-Barr and Duke (2004). They state that "The hope of teacher leadership is continuous improvement of teaching and learning in our nation´s schools, with the result being increased achievement for every student" (p. 255). Although this approach is focused on the US context, similar frameworks are identified in other countries (Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Some of the contributions on teacher leadership relate this topic to the process by which teachers influence their colleagues, principals and others to improve teaching and learning practices within the objective to increase student learning and achievement. The study of the influence of teacher leadership for school improvement through concrete topics of analysis includes in many cases a vision of teachers as agents of change contributing to social transformation. It is also conceptualised including aspects such as teacher retention and recruitment, the empowerment of teachers, the quality of teaching and to learning outcomes (Muijs & Harris, 2006).

The body of literature on teacher leadership is based on different visions of the teacher´s role and they are linked to current debates in social sciences and contributions from different disciplines, from sociology to education or social work. In 1984 and 1987, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas published the Theory of Communicative Action, achieving scientific impact into the international academic community that nowadays has been recognised worldwide. His work claims that all human beings are capable of language and action, engaging dialogue addressed towards understanding and consensus. Furthermore, Habermas considers that the social reality is based on the duality of structures and agency, and both dimensions should be taken into account in our analysis overcoming those contributions focused only on the systems (Luhmann, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) or in the subjects (Berger & Luckmann, 1968; Schütz, 1993). On these bases, some questions on teacher leadership arise. If all human beings are able of language and action, does all teachers have the potential to enter into dialogue that enable them to lead projects? Could we assume that the educational system is influenced by teacher's actions and dialogues and vice versa?

A body of literature is focused on teacher leadership is based on the concept of 'teacher-leader' (Taylor, Goeke, Klein, & Onore, 2011) and the role that teachers have within the school system. Most of the research on different forms of teacher leadership have been promoted mainly in the United Kingdom and in the USA and diverse theoretical approaches can be identified within. For example, the *organizational leadership* (Mujis & Harris, 2006) responds to the conventional notion of leadership, which implies that leadership is associated with a concrete role or responsibility within the school, usually focused on the principal or head teacher. The creation of positions is a key question under this approach, which follows a traditional view of the leader focused more on structural aspects than on the human agency (Frost & Durrant, 2003). Leadership based on the *distribution model* (Mujis & Harris, 2006) implies the redistribution of power and authority among the organisation, favouring spaces to create different power relationships.

Within these frameworks, it could be assumed that only a few teachers have the necessary talent to lead but in Wincey's words at the beginning of this paper and many others in the HertsCam and ITL networks, there is evidence about how teachers are leading beyond the constraints of who has the capacity or is in a position to lead or not. This is the approach of the non-positional teacher leadership linked to transformative aims (Frost, 2014), which includes the works of Freire, Apple and those authors contributing to education from a transformative and dialogical basis. The inclusion of teacher's voices into research on non-positional teacher leadership is at the core of its development. By doing this, all the voices are taken into account entering into a dialogue. One of the central aspects on the non-positional teacher leadership is that the relevance of an argument given by a teacher does not rely on the power position she or he has in the school but on the validity of the arguments provided. This

allows entering into a dialogue on an egalitarian basis, allowing generalizing the teacher leadership to diversity of contexts, as it is occurring and evidenced.

Conclusions

Teachers are facing adverse situations in the European educational systems where underperformance and early school leaving rates are at unacceptable level. Increasing efficiency and inclusiveness remains one of the most pressing challenges to address in the current global crisis. Teachers are key actors in improving the quality of education in Europe, and important efforts have been made in European countries to ensure high quality teaching and provide adequate initial teacher education and continuous professional development. However, many countries still struggle with the current high rates of school failure and early school leaving, showing that effective leadership that leads to better educational outcomes (school improvement and social cohesion) is needed.

Education can contribute to turn difficulties into possibilities and teachers have a key role in this endeavour, they can act as revolutionary leaders for social change (Freire, 1970). There is a need to further research on what is defined by creating and developing "real utopias" (Wright, 2010), with the public and for the public (Burawoy, 2005). By doing this, teachers could become *heroes* in different complementary and impressive ways. Barth (2001) included this term when analysing the principals' qualities stating that: "Good principals are more hero-makers than heroes" (p. 114).

If we move from the theoretical work to the practice, or if we put together both dimensions, we as researchers could find incredible stories as the one initially explained about Wincey in the framework of the contributions of the non-positional teacher leadership (Frost, 2014). Teacher leadership for school improvement is at the core of the discussion being presented in this paper. This takes advantage of the existence and knowledge of the HertsCam network and the International Teacher Leadership Initiative. Further developments and field work foreseen in the network is expected to inform and provide new insights to advance in this field of knowledge.

Wincey, in the '*Maths teachers competition winners*' that had as an opening question "Do you have a great maths teacher?", was nominated to win but this is just the tip of the iceberg of something much more extraordinary. Among all the nominations, only three were selected because of their impressive words (Singh, 2013), being one student of Wincey one of them.

> *My maths teacher is an incredible lady. She is a lady of manners, profession and dignity. She's not just my Hero Maths Teacher, she's also the lady that promises me a 'C grade' at GCSE, and that to me means the world - no pressure, Miss. Her*

personality has changed the school for the better. She is my key to success. Now is that enough to be my maths hero? I think so (http://www.s-cool.co.uk/articles/maths-teacher-competition-winners)

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