

Scaffolding teacher leadership

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In the context of a competitive global economy, schools everywhere continue to come under pressure to raise standards as this recent comment from the USA illustrates.

A sense of urgency pervades public education these days as students struggle to meet the high standards set by their state and the nation. Teachers are pressed as never before to improve education quality and equity. Achievement gaps persist, and parents of students who attend low-performing schools increasingly seek an escape from public education.

(Knapp, Colman and Talbert, 2003)

However, it is clear that the ‘command and control’ approach to educational reform has taken us just about as far as it can. For example, a recent study in the UK concluded the following:

Excessive centralised intervention has diminished the system’s capacity to change itself and respond to wider changes that are beyond the comprehension or control of central government. The current school system in Britain is not enabling enough students or teachers to initiate change for themselves.

(Horne, 2001: 89)

In response to this challenge, the international discourse of school leadership has been increasingly focussing on ‘distributed’ or ‘shared’ leadership (Gronn, 2000). In the UK, the history of school management and leadership has left us with a contemporary contradiction or at least a tension in current policy. Secondary schools have been organised on hierarchical lines since time immemorial; typical structures included Deputy Headships, Heads of Departments and Year Heads. Primary schools, being smaller and with a tradition of weaker subject boundaries, did not have formal positions of responsibility other than a

nominated Deputy Headteacher. The pressure of the national reforms of the 1990s led to changes in the discourse about school leadership. The demands of the National Curriculum led to 'subject leader' roles in Primary schools and a greater demand for accountability in both primary and secondary sectors. The findings of school effectiveness research indicated that schools need 'strong, purposeful leadership' rather than mere management (Gray, 1990; Grace, 1995; Sammons *et al.*, 1995). OFSTED (inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education) began to focus on the role of middle managers and the extent to which they could play pivotal roles in the national reforms. In 1998, the Teacher Training Agency (a UK government agency) issued a set of competence statements for what they termed 'Subject Leaders'. However, the subject leader initiative was not developed at that time; resources went instead into projects such as NPQH (the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers) and the setting up of the NCSL (National College for School Leadership).

Leading from the middle?

At the time of writing, some 5 years later, the NCSL is piloting a new programme called 'Leading from the Middle' to address the perceived need for training for middle managers in the art of leadership. In December of 2002, its programme director said this in the national teachers' newspaper, the TES.

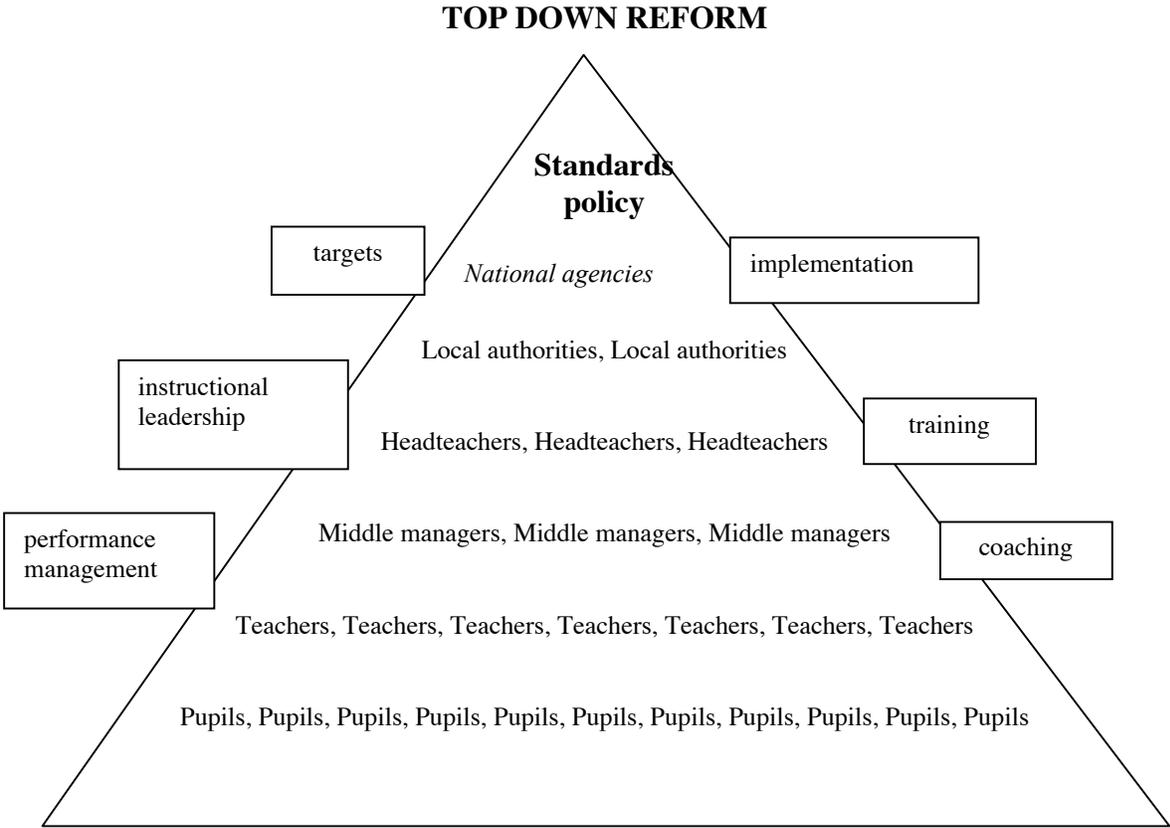
..National Standards portray both primary and secondary subject leaders as 'leading professionals', hallmarked by secure subject knowledge, an insight into contemporary pedagogy and an ability to motivate colleagues.

(Hammond, 2002)

Implicit here is a hierarchical model in which middle manager roles are defined by National Standards produced by a government agency. The emphasis is on a formal position in the organisation (Subject Leader, Head of Department) and the idea of team leadership. This initiative seems to draw its inspiration from the concept of 'instructional leadership' which

has become prominent in the USA. Instructional leadership includes activities such as defining the mission, managing curriculum and instruction, supervising teaching, monitoring student progress and promoting instructional climate (Krug, 1992; Blasé and Blasé, 1998). This definition suggests that teacher leadership could be seen as the missing link in the chain of command and control. For MacBeath (2003) ‘the concept implies overseeing, monitoring and evaluation of teaching by senior managers and contains the seeds of appraisal and performance management’. This way of thinking about standards, reform and leadership is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1



The concept of instructional leadership is seen to be pivotal in raising standards and is increasingly influential in the UK, but it may well be in tension with the parallel global

discourse of ‘re-professionalisation’ (Hargreaves 1997; McLaughlin, 1997) and the clamouring for ‘learning communities’. For Mitchell and Sackney (2000) a major characteristic of a learning community is one where leadership is evident at all levels.

...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)

I suggest therefore that the key to capacity building of the sort indicated above is support for teacher leadership, but of what kind?

Categorising teacher leadership

The terms ‘teacher leaders’ and ‘teacher leadership’ appear in the literature in a variety of contexts (see Harris and Muijs, 2002 for a review) but the concept of teacher leadership is contentious and conceptualisations reflect different strands of thinking in policy contexts. In the light of this, I want to suggest that there are perhaps four categories of teacher leadership. In some cases a specific ‘teacher leader’ role is assumed; in others the expectation is that teachers who already occupy a formal management position (middle managers) will be the ones to exercise leadership; a further category is one which includes a range of distinct professional development and research roles; a fourth category is simply leadership exercised by teachers regardless of position or designation. I discuss each of these categories in outline below.

Lead teachers

This refers to teachers who have been appointed to ‘teacher leader’ roles for specific purposes. In both the USA and UK national reform initiatives have eventually focused on ‘the classroom level’ which has led to the appointment of experienced practitioners to posts

dedicated to improving colleagues' performance. Katzenmeyer and Moller's definition is interesting.

Teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice.

(Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001: 5)

Note however that they begin with 'teachers who are leaders' which suggests that certain teachers are selected to undertake designated leadership roles. This seems to be an essential part of the American instructional leadership tradition.

The work of these external change agents or 'master teachers' might include organisational diagnosis and building collaborative relationships in schools (Little, 1988). The term 'lead teachers' is also used to describe a form of coaching which involves classroom observation. Judith Warren Little talks of 'school-level instructional leadership teams' where the 'lead teachers' still retain a 60% teaching commitment but the rest of the time is spent observing teaching and giving feedback to teachers. For Leiberman *et al.* (1988) the role of the 'teacher leader' is part of 'the second wave of school reform' which implies a thrust from the outside in. More recently in the UK, a large number of expert classroom practitioners have been recruited by LEAs to act as 'Teaching and Learning Consultants' with a specific brief to implement the Key Stage 3 Strategy (DfES, 2002). The 'Advanced Skills Teacher' (AST) designation is another DFES scheme in which schools can employ expert practitioners who then act as consultants for a proportion of their time. This development echoes the extensive appointment by LEAs of 'advisory teachers' or what Biott and colleagues called 'semi-detached teachers' in the 1980s. One of the contributors to Biott's book described himself as a 'support teacher' and associated himself with the American literature on teacher leadership about which he said: "I interpret this to mean a teacher whose first concern is to care about other teachers and their teaching" (Atkinson, 1991: 56).

Middle managers

It is increasingly the case in the UK that Heads of Departments, Subject Leaders, Subject Coordinators and to some extent Pastoral Year Heads are expected to exercise leadership. As mentioned earlier, in 1998 the TTA issued a set of standards for subject leaders which included ‘the strategic direction and development of the subject’, monitoring and evaluation of teaching, ‘leading and managing staff’ and ‘the deployment of staff and resources’. The wording of these standards allowed for a range of interpretations but the overall effect was to confirm a traditional view of school leadership. The British school system tends to be seen as particularly hierarchical and bureaucratic from the vantage point of countries in which schools are organised along entirely different lines. It is built on a set of Weberian assumptions about the links between authority and the structure of management roles within organisations (Katz and Kahn, 1966). In an era of national reform driven from the centre it is perhaps not surprising that there has been a strong focus in inspection reports on the need to develop middle managers, but not all middle managers accept the challenge of leadership of course and there is evidence that both Headteachers/Principals and teachers sometimes question the legitimacy of this expectation (Little, 1988).

CPD / research co-ordinators and union representatives

This refers to teachers who have been designated as mentors, co-ordinators of continuing professional development (Wasley, 1991; Sherrill, 1999) and facilitators of action research. There are a variety of roles in which teachers are called upon to support the professional learning of their colleagues. These include the induction and mentoring of teachers new to the school or the co-ordination of continuing professional development activities. In a minority of schools in the UK there are teachers who are designated as ‘research co-ordinator’, a role aimed at facilitating action research. A recent initiative by the National College for School Leadership – the Networked Learning Communities initiative (NCSL, 2002) – builds on the work of the TTA funded research consortia which has led to the development not only of research capacity in the participating schools but also to the development of the role of ‘school research co-ordinator’. There are questions however, about the extent to which teachers may be reluctant to become involved in data-gathering

activities in each others' classrooms which was seen by some as intrusive and too closely allied with inspection and performance management (Cordingley *et al.*, 2002).

In the USA in particular, it appears that teacher union representatives are seen as an important source of leadership. This has been referred to as 'invisible leadership' (Bascia, 1997) perhaps because these teacher leaders have not been appointed by the school principal, but it is widely known that they exercise a great deal of influence.

Teachers' leadership

This refers to the exercise of leadership by teachers regardless of position or designation. This is a feature of a particular strand of research and development in the UK which has sought to distinguish itself from the three categories already described by emphasising the capacity of *all* teachers to engage in 'teacher-led development work' (Frost and Durrant, 2002a). The model of support that Frost and Durrant promote depends on partnerships with external agents which are driven by the schools concerned rather than externally derived initiatives. For them:

It is not a matter of delegation, direction or distribution of responsibility, but rather a matter of teachers' agency and their choice in initiating and sustaining change.Negotiation of personal development plans with colleagues ensures that they are appropriate and realistic and that the development work is likely to be supported. Systematic inquiry and classroom experimentation are key elements of the development process, evidence being used strategically to improve learning and teaching and to build capacity through collaborative development work.

(Frost and Durrant, 2003a: 3)

Similar in some respects is the role of teachers who are members of the cross-hierarchical school improvement cadre groups fostered in the UK and elsewhere by the IQEA project (Hopkins, 2002). This model has recently been adopted by a framework of support provided directly by the DfES for 'Schools Facing Exceptionally Challenging Circumstances' and early evidence from the evaluation of this suggests that SIG members struggle with the issue of legitimacy (Cullen, 2003).

It may be argued that this category ought properly to be labelled ‘informal leadership’.

Teachers exercise informal leadership .. by sharing their expertise, volunteering for new projects and bringing new ideas to the school.by helping their colleagues to carry out their classroom duties, and by assisting in the improvement of classroom practice through the engagement of their colleagues in experimentation and the examination of more powerful instructional techniques. Teachers attribute leadership qualities, as well, to colleagues who accept responsibility for their own professional growth, promote the school’s mission, and work for the improvement of the school or school system.

(Leithwood *et al.*, 1999: 117)

The use of the term *informal* in this context could be taken to mean simply the absence of a formal position, but it is important to preserve the distinction between activity that might be described by others as leadership and that which is planned and exercised deliberately by teachers who have chosen to act strategically to realise their values through school improvement activity (Frost and Durrant, 2002a).

In contrast to activity driven by national initiatives, we might construct teacher leadership as an activity that moves us beyond the limitations of the more traditional hierarchical model of organisation by focussing on the exercise of leadership on the part of those who do not necessarily hold power or authority by virtue of their formal position such as Head of Department. It is evident that leadership can be exercised beyond the boundaries arising from hierarchical models of organisation and traditional views of teachers’ roles; it is not just a matter of delegation, direction or distribution of responsibility, but rather a matter of teachers’ agency and choice in initiating and sustaining change whatever their status.

It is tempting when considering the de-professionalising effects of the national reforms of the past 10 years to think of re-professionalisation through teacher leadership in terms of resistance to reform, the defence of teachers’ interests or the reassertion of teacher autonomy. This would be a mistake; when talking about teacher leadership we need to

emphasise the collegial dimension which implies responsibility, mutual accountability and collaboration. What follows is a brief consideration of arguments for ‘teachers’ leadership’ which explores its place in the debate about schools as learning communities.

Arguments for teacher leadership

There are perhaps four arguments for teacher leadership:

- * the school effectiveness argument,
- * the school improvement argument,
- * the teacher morale and retention argument,
- * the democratic values argument.

The school effectiveness argument: research suggests that effective schools are ones which have achieved a high level of consistency in practice and coherence in values (Sammons *et al.*, 1995), but this cannot be achieved by the imposition of a single vision from the leadership team within a hierarchical organisation. Rather, coherence is a product of critical discourse in which teachers articulate their ideas and perceptions and move to a deeper shared understanding.

The school improvement argument: long term, sustainable improvements in the quality of learning depend on the action taken by teachers, whether the impetus for change arises from national reforms, school development priorities, or a teacher’s belief that something could be better. Improvements in teaching and learning involve so much more than the distribution of a new package of materials and teaching strategies; they involve questions of values, beliefs and understanding (Fullan, 1993). Without the engagement of teachers’ hearts and minds we have mere ‘implementation’.

The teacher morale and retention argument: this rejects the assumption that the problem of low morale in the teaching profession can be addressed through financial incentives or therapeutic interventions such as counselling help-lines. Rather, the problem is that the national reforms of the past decade or so have undermined teacher professionalism which has to be addressed by supporting teachers' *agency* (Frost, 2000; Frost and Durrant, 2002b).

The democratic and educational values argument: the way schools are organised and the way they operate as communities can model the democratic way of life. We therefore need to develop schools as communities in which all members have a voice and are allowed the space to fulfil their human potential and exercise leadership.

Teacher leadership as learning-centred leadership

As I have argued, my preferred view of teacher leadership is an inclusive one in which all teachers are encouraged to be 'change agents' (Fullan, 1993) whether or not they have a formal role. This involves teachers' leadership of *development work* which has an explicit focus on teaching and learning. There is widespread support for this (Harris and Muijs, 2002), but this is not to say that teachers should be expected to restrict or limit the focus of their attention to their own classroom practice leaving the wider strategic issues to those who occupy formal leadership roles; rather, teacher leadership can have a wide range of impacts including for example improvements to the organisational structures of the school. This is discussed in more detail later in this paper.

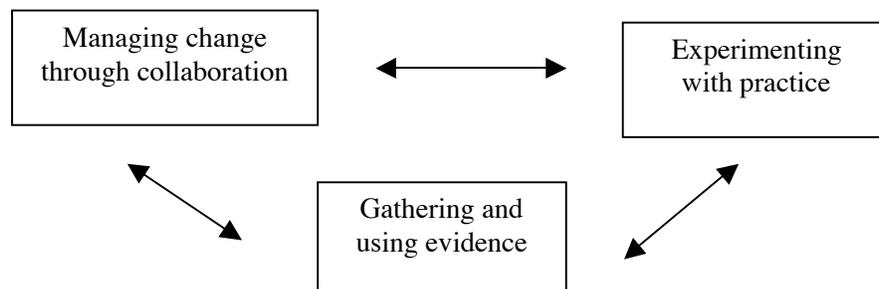
I suggest that teachers' leadership of learning-centered development work has three essentially inter-related dimensions as expressed in Figure 2 below. It is often the case that any one of these three activities can be seen to be flourishing in a school. Michael Huberman has captured vividly the way traditionally teachers have experimented with and developed their craft through 'tinkering':

Essentially teachers are artisans working primarily alone with a variety of new and cobbled together materials in a personally designed work environment. They gradually develop a repertoire of instructional skills and strategiesthrough a somewhat haphazard process of trial and error.....(they) spontaneously go about tinkering with their classrooms.

(Huberman, 1992)

This rings true as an account of a naturalistic process of reflective practice, but the process lacks the potential for the degree of transformation that contemporary circumstances.

Figure 2
The leadership of learning-centred development work



(Frost and Durrant, 2002a)

Similarly, we can find schools where professional learning is systematically addressed through focussed staff training and a well managed collaborative process involving for example mutual observation and coaching, but there is often a degree of scepticism based on doubts about the validity of the practices being promoted and their applicability to the particular school. We can also find schools where there is a well established tradition of evidence gathering perhaps in the form of teachers' action research or quite differently, perhaps in the form of bench marking using performance data. In the first case there may be weaknesses arising from the colonisation of the action research tradition by the university departments of education; where it is a requirement of the independent study element of a part-time masters degrees, action research tends to become rather

individualistic and ‘academic’. In the latter scenario, teachers can feel disempowered and in many cases deeply threatened by a process in which they are effectively judged against crude test data.

The way to avoid the pitfalls outlined above is to ensure the integration of collaboration, inquiry and experiment through a process of teacher-led, learning-centred development work.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that it is through the leadership of such development work that ordinary teachers can make a major difference to the personal and interpersonal capacities of themselves and their colleagues, to pupils’ learning, and to the organisational structures and cultures of their schools (Frost and Durrant, 2002b). In addition, they can make a significant contribution to wider professional discourse and professional knowledge creation and transfer. However, teachers are unlikely to be able to engage in such leadership without a framework of support and expectations, at least not in large numbers (Frost, 1999; Frost *et al.*, 2000; Holden, 2002a; Holden, 2002b) .

Support for teacher leadership

So what is required to support teachers’ leadership of development work? Principals / headteachers have to recognise and understand the potential for leadership in teachers and then develop their support for teacher leadership in two main ways. External support: Principals / headteachers have the power to enable the school to enter into and build partnerships with other agencies to provide appropriate support for teachers’ leadership of development work. Internal support: principals / headteachers have both the power and the strategic position to create the internal structures and conditions that are conducive to teacher leadership. I now deal with each of these dimensions in turn.

External support

In order for support to be coherent, consistent and complementary, schools need to work in partnership with each other and with external agencies. External agencies are useful because they can bring to bear a range of different expertise and value orientations. They are also relatively untrammelled by the particular history and micro-politics of the school and can offer impartial critical friendship. University departments of education are particularly well placed to play a part in such partnerships because of their expertise in research, but just as important is their experience in providing structures to support teachers' reflection and their presentation of accounts of practice.

Teacher-led development work benefits from engagement with the values of higher education - inquiry, evidence, scholarship and critical debate - but this is likely to be most effective when it takes place, in part at least, on the school site rather than solely on the university campus, whether or not it is award-bearing. When teachers attend courses designed by university staff and held at the university, it is difficult to sustain a strong sense of partnership. The partnership between schools and external agencies has to be a genuine one based on mutual respect for different values, missions, expertise and experience. It is important therefore that schools negotiate arrangements that fit their own agendas and make the best of local circumstances and the expertise and agendas of potential partners. This may require universities to review their customary practices leading for example to the adoption of different assessment criteria or a portfolio based approach to written assignments.

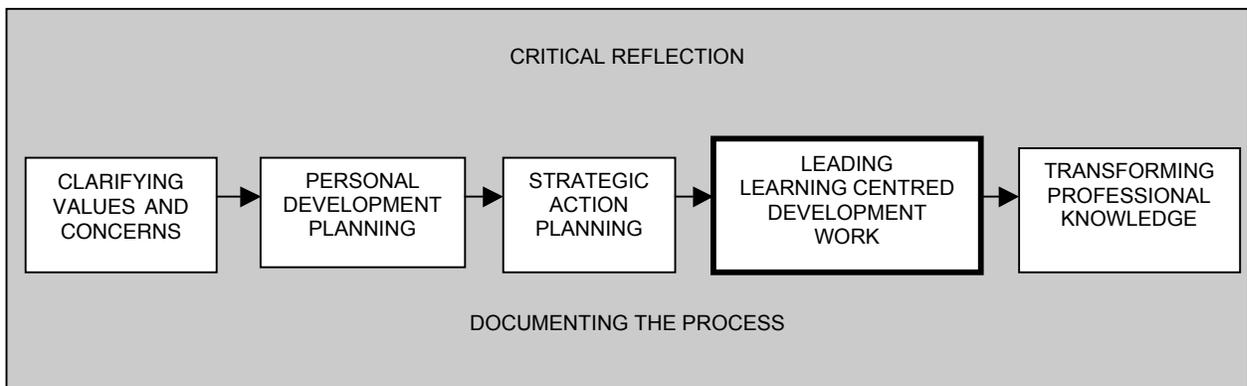
Once a partnership is established, it can provide a framework of support for teachers' leadership of development work. This can be done in the three major ways set out below.

- a) The provision of 'scaffolding' for a process of reflection, planning and strategic action.

- b) The fostering of critical discourse through the provision of a support group and critical friendship.
- c) The extension of critical discourse through the development of a network.

a) *Scaffolding for reflection, planning and strategic action.* Since the early 1990s my colleagues and I have been developing an explicit process of reflection, planning and strategic action through which teachers can exercise leadership in pursuit of development goals in which they have a stake (Frost, 1995). The process is represented as a series of elements or stages such as *clarifying values and concerns* and *personal development planning* each of which is explored through the use of workshops and scaffolding in the form of structures, formats, guidelines and examples.

Figure 3
A framework for teachers' leadership of learning-centred development



The ongoing *reflection* and *documentation* characteristics of the process as a whole facilitates the development of portfolios of evidence which can be assessed at masters level.

b) *Support for critical discourse.* The leadership of learning-centred development work as indicated by the diagrams above needs to be supported through participation in a discourse that is both *critical* and *authentic*. Discussion and debate within a cross-hierarchical school-

based support group enables teachers to examine the concerns central to their development work and to explore issues that arise from their leadership of that work. When such groups are cross-hierarchical and facilitated by external agencies, the discussion is freed up from the usual constraints and micro-political tensions (Hoyle, 1982 & 1986; Ball, 1987). Such discussions can provide mutual support and opportunities to reflect on roles and strategies.

The support can also work at the individual level through *critical friendship* - help in the form of a dialogue with a trusted person who asks challenging questions, and offers a different perspective and a constructive critique of the teacher's work (MacBeath, 1998). Although it may be possible for LEA staff to play this role, university staff may have some advantages because they are free from the constraints of accountability and have experience of academic tutoring.

c) Extending critical discourse through networking. A partnership can provide further support through establishing and maintaining a network. Contrast and collaboration are key tools for learning and so networking plays an important part in developing the critical perspective. Networks enable teachers to share accounts of practice, share a set of values and purposes; make contacts, evaluate practice through evidence-based discussion and inter-school collaborative inquiry. Such networks can enable teachers to reach out to the wider professional community and contribute to national debate, policy formation and the development of professional knowledge as a whole as indicated by the last box in the diagram.

The support groups, critical friendship and networking organised within partnerships and supported by practical strategies and materials referred to here, provide firm foundations for teacher-led development work. There is evidence that this approach can gradually and powerfully enhance individuals' agency and can be influential in building capacity within and between schools.

Internal support

In any externally supported development initiative, there is the danger of a lack of engagement on the part of the principal / headteacher and senior leadership team. The development of teacher leadership requires that principals / headteachers adopt a capacity building model of leadership - so-called 'transformational leadership' (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1990). It is clear that principals / headteachers have a great deal of power and that the building of organisational capacity rests on their ability and willingness to use their power to create the conditions that foster teacher leadership.

The responsibility for balancing both internal and external support lies mainly with the principal headteacher who must ensure that the school gains maximum benefit from partnerships and other external arrangements. The Impact Project research suggests that the impact of teacher-led development work can be radically transformed when senior colleagues work with teachers to ensure that the initial planning of such work addresses a wide range of possible outcomes including the development of teachers' personal capacity, the school's organisational capacity and pupils' learning (Frost and Durrant, 2002b). Principals / headteachers have a crucial role to play in seeing that such planning is followed through with effective monitoring and evaluation. One of the key outcomes of the Impact Project was a conceptual framework (summarised in Figure 4 below) which can be used as a foundation for such planning, monitoring and evaluation.

A number of tools derived from this framework are presented in 'Teacher-Led Development Work' (Frost and Durrant, 2002a).

Another key outcome of the Impact Project was a number of powerful messages for principals and headteachers (Frost and Durrant, 2003b).

One powerful message is that principals / headteachers must ensure 'maximum leverage'. Some starting points for development are more productive than others and research can be used to identify the strands of development which have the highest effect size, for example,

‘formative assessment’. Principals / headteachers need to assess the energy input against the potential effect size and ensure that teachers do not wear themselves out for little reward (see Hargreaves, 2001 for a discussion about leverage).

Figure 4
The impact of teacher-led development work:
a conceptual framework (summary)

- A. Factors which can affect the impact of development work
 - a) The focus of the development work
 - b) The context of the development work
 - c) The process of the development work
- B. Impact on teachers
 - a) Classroom practice
 - b) Personal capacity
 - c) Interpersonal capacity
- C. Impact on the school as an organisation
 - a) Structures and processes
 - b) Culture and capacity
- D. Impact beyond the school
 - a) Critique and debate
 - b) Creation and transfer of professional knowledge
 - c) Improvements in social capital in the community
- E. Impact on pupils’ learning
 - a) Attainment
 - b) Disposition
 - c) Metacognition
- F. Evidence of impact
 - a) Evaluation and monitoring
 - b) Building capacity

Another powerful message was that multiple initiatives divide teachers’ energy and fragment their attention. It is up to the principal / headteacher therefore, who has better knowledge of various plans and priorities, both internal and external, to protect their staff from conflicts over multiple initiatives. Principals / headteachers can help their colleagues to reconcile personal priorities with school priorities; they can interpret and channel external pressures and ensure that once a teacher-led development project has been agreed, it has the same weight as other initiatives or is at least able to work alongside them without conflict.

Principals / headteachers and other senior managers have a crucial role to play as mentors of teachers who are prepared to exercise leadership. The book 'Teacher-led Development Work' offers further scaffolding for the dialogue that teacher leaders need to have with their senior colleagues (Frost and Durrant, 2002a). It is suggested for example that, in negotiating with teachers about their strategic plans, principals / headteachers could discuss obstacles and opportunities under the following headings: the micro-political terrain, the leadership conditions, the provision of external support, the organisational structures and processes and the prevailing organisational culture.

Internal support for teachers' leadership then is a key aspect of capacity building.

Conclusion

This is not an argument for a return to a mythical golden age of teacher autonomy and the celebration of individualism; rather it is about the sharing of responsibility for school development through teachers' leadership of learning centred development work. Where this is effectively supported and managed both externally and internally, schools can build their capacity for sustained improvement and responsiveness to the demands of a changing world.

Clearly, further and more substantial research is urgently needed. So far, research in this area is slender in the UK context. In the UK, the NCSL's Networked Learning Communities initiative – a 3 year experiment – has just begun and it is hoped that this will be systematically evaluated. My own work with Judy Durrant and other colleagues has been illuminative, but as yet small scale. The evaluation of the Schools Facing Extremely Challenging Circumstances project (Cullen, 2003) will contribute something to the field in that it includes a focus on the work of teachers within SIGs (School Improvement Groups). Additionally, a review of the literature on teacher leadership was commissioned by the GTC (General Teaching Council) (Harris and Muijs, 2002); this makes it clear that there is

a great deal to be learned from looking at the American experience, but there is also significant work in Australia (see for example Crowther *et al.*, 2002). The fact that the GTC has now commissioned a series of case studies (www.gtc.research.org.uk) is encouraging. At the time of writing it is anticipated that a proposal for a collaborative research project in this area involving John MacBeath, Jane Cullen and myself at the University of Cambridge, Alma Harris at the University of Warwick and Judy Durrant at Canterbury Christ Church University College will be presented to the major funding body in the UK in the very near future.

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