School leadership and capacity for reform
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A paper for the first HertsCam-Wolfson Seminar Series, 7th November 2014

A recent report in connection with the work on educational reform that Cambridge does for Kazkahstan focuses on the extent to which conditions in the schools enable the process of reform to actually transform practice and the role of leadership in creating those conditions (Bridges, 2014). Although the idea of exporting ideas from a quite different culture is problematic, we are involved quite explicitly in a process of internationalisation in which the Kazakhstan government is looking to the Anglophone world for guidance. So what does research tell us about leadership and capacity building?

Leadership makes a difference

Research in America, Canada, Britain and Australia tells us unequivocally that successful school leadership is a key factor in school effectiveness (eg Hallinger & Heck, 1996, Leithwood *et al.,* 2004), but what is needed is insight into how school leadership can enable transformation rather than merely maintaining the status quo.

Until a few years ago, studies into leadership effects such as Hallinger & Heck (1996, 1998) did not distinguish between different types of leadership practice (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Since that time studies have been able to show an association between learning outcomes and particular forms of leadership practice including for example the enabling of distributed leadership (eg Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Sammons *et al.,* 2011).

Research also indicates that school improvement requires leadership practices that focus on creating the conditions for professional learning. Hallinger and Heck (2011) cite, in addition to their own research, a wide range of sources including Fullan (2001), Leithwood *et al.* (2010), Mulford & Edmunds (2009) and Wiley (2001) to support this claim. They talk about school improvement capacity in this way.

> In our research, we defined school improvement capacity as school conditions that support teaching and learning, enable the professional learning of the staff and provide a means for implementing strategic actions aimed at continuous school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2011: 471).

If we are interested in building the capacity for school improvement, we need to bear in mind that it is not sufficient to know that there is a correlation between organisational structures and measures of attainment. The complexity of schools, their histories, contexts and environments, demand leadership strategies that are sensitive to circumstance and are to some extent speculative. In other words, it is not a simple matter to determine the development path for a particular school even though research may indicate that certain conditions appear to be associated with high levels of attainment. The case of the top-down implementation of professional learning communities in Singapore illustrates how conclusions from research, can lead to developments that are out of step with the assumptions underlying the original innovation (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012). This case shows that the concept of professional learning community involves a shift in culture which is not necessarily achieved through the mandated implementation of an organisational structure.

Leadership for effectiveness or successful leadership?

In the light of the discussion above, the logic of school effectiveness has to be questioned. In relation to school leadership it is perhaps helpful to distinguish between the idea of leadership for effectiveness and leadership that can be said to be successful, especially in the context of educational reform. In a recent review of the literature, Day and Sammons (2013) discuss this distinction when they say that:

> creating the conditions that promote greater school effectiveness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for successful school leadership (Day & Sammons, 2013: 4).

This refers to the proposition that in order to maintain effectiveness, however that may be measured within a given educational system, school leaders need to engage directly with the quality of what happens in classrooms. In the USA this tends to be referred to as 'instructional leadership' (Blase & Blase, 1998) in which school principals, some of whom will not have been teachers, involve themselves with classroom practice to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning is improved. This, combined with strategies that focus on alignment with school policies and those which focus on consistency of professional standards, can certainly improve effectiveness, but they do not necessarily build capacity for continuous improvement.

Transformational leadership and capacity

In the Day and Sammons review, successful leadership is that which also includes transformational leadership, which they say is associated with:

- vision
- setting directions
- restructuring and realigning the organisation
- developing staff and curriculum
- involvement with the external community

(Day & Sammons, 2013: 10)

Transformational leadership is distinguished from transactional leadership (McGregor Burns, 1978). Transactional leadership is about exercising leverage over individuals and specific situations where as transformational leadership is about changing the overall organisational context. Explanations of the concept of transformational leadership were developed by Bernard Bass (1985) and have been summarised helpfully by Leithwood and Jantzi in the extract below.

> All transformational approaches to leadership emphasize emotions and values (Yukl, 1999) and share in common the fundamental aim of fostering capacity development and higher levels of personal commitment to organizational goals on the part of leaders' colleagues. Increased capacities and commitments are assumed to result in extra effort and greater productivity (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006: 204).

It is tempting to see leadership approaches as being items on a menu to be chosen on the basis of their appeal but it is helpful to think about the essence of leadership itself. Gary Yukl's classic text, now in its 8th edition is about leadership per se rather than school leadership in particular.

> Most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization.

(Yukl, 2010: 21)

This is echoed in an authoritative report for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) under the heading of 'What we know about successful school leadership'.

> At the core of most definitions of leadership are two functions: providing direction and exercising influence. Leaders mobilize and work with others to achieve shared goals.

(Leithwood & Rheil, 2003)

The question for practitioners must be how this mobilisation actually occurs and how to achieve sustainable mobilisation.

Capacity, culture and capital

In a milestone empirical study by John Gray and colleagues, the idea of capacity building was brought into sharp focus when it was found that short term tactical approaches to school improvement were the least effective in achieving continuous improvement. For example, a tactic might be to enter more students for examinations in subjects that they would find less challenging than other subjects; another might be to identify students whose performance is on the border of the D-C grades and provide additional exam preparation lessons. More effective than the tactical were strategic approaches such as devising a developmental programme focused on building learning dispositions involving classroom observations, staff training sessions and the production of bespoke materials. However, the schools that were demonstrably more able to sustain improvement were those that engaged in capacity building (Gray *et al.,* 1999). These approaches concentrated on changing the professional culture

The term capacity suggests that schools are more or less able to improve themselves and this long been identified by Ofsted as being crucial to improvability. If a school is to be 'taken out of special measures' there must be indications that the capacity for self-improvement exists (Ofsted, 1997). It has been suggested that capacity building needs to take place within and between three interconnected areas, or spheres: the personal, inter-personal and organisational (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). In this model, the categories are mutually influential and interdependent. The concept of capacity has been discussed also by many writers including Stoll (2011), Fullan (2010) and Hargreaves and Fink (2006).

It is tempting to think that the capacity for continuous improvement can be built by providing training programmes to ensure that teachers are updated, but this fails to address the other two dimensions mentioned above. In order to build inter-personal and organisational capacity school leaders need to develop the organisation of their schools in terms of roles of responsibility, structures of accountability, patterns of collaboration, evaluation procedures and the activities that support professional development.

In addition to developing the school as an organisation, it is argued that school principals need to take action to change the professional culture in their schools. When Leithwood *et al.* (2006) listed what they saw as 'Core leadership practices' the category of 'Redesigning the organisation' included 'Building a collaborative culture'. It has long been argued that 'culture building' is the most important part of any chief executive's job (Schein, 1985) and proposals for strategies to develop the professional culture in the school have to start from an analysis and description of the dominant values, assumptions and beliefs within the organisation. These are expressed in language and rituals and can be observed as being enacted in the norms of behaviour. It is this culture which in turn shapes the practice of those who inhabit the particular organisational environment. A much quoted expression for this is: 'the way we do things

around here' (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). Clearly a judgment has to be made by senior leaders about the shortcomings of the professional culture in their school and strategies need to be devised to address these.

An alternative or at least complementary way to conceptualise capacity is the idea of capital. The idea of human capital is well established in labour economics, but it can also be applied in the context of schools as organisations (Becker, 1994). In 2001 David Hargreaves offered a view of school effectiveness as pivoting on the extent and quality of a school's capital which he argued could be analysed in three dimensions: intellectual, social and organisational as indicated in the diagram below.

A capital theory of school effectiveness and improvement
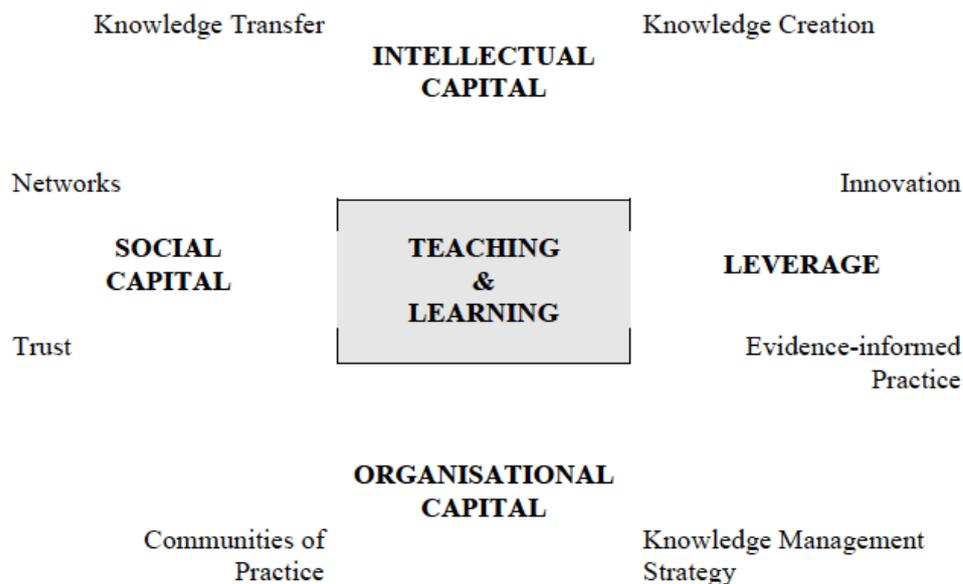
Intellectual capital consists of the knowledge, skills, values and expertise of individuals within the school community. This should be the focus of any organisation's knowledge management strategy (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). It is relatively straightforward to audit intellectual capital (Collison & Parcell, 2004) – that is to identify the knowledge skills and expertise of members of the organisation – but the challenge for capacity building is to enable individuals to turn this into organisational capital. This requires that attention be paid to *social capital* – trust, respect, collaboration and networks.

The concept of social capital has a long pedigree with important contributions from Bourdieu (1983), but it reached a high degree of prominence when Robert Putnam published his

'Bowling Alone' thesis (1995; 2000). An audit of the social capital an organisation possesses would identify not only the quality and extent of the internal networking arrangements – who talks to who, how, when where and about what? – and the level of trust that enables people to feel able to engage with each other and share their knowledge and expertise (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

The link to leadership for learning

It is perhaps clear from the above discussion that building the capacity for continuous improvement is the job of leadership and, if this is to be truly transformative, it must not just focus on learning but must be inextricably linked to it. Leadership for learning as developed in Cambridge has focused on this linkage, demonstrating how leadership can be understood as taking responsibility and taking action to ensure that learning is taking place for all members of the learning community and at the levels of students, teachers, the school and the education system.

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