

Building a school culture through scholarship: a long-term strategy

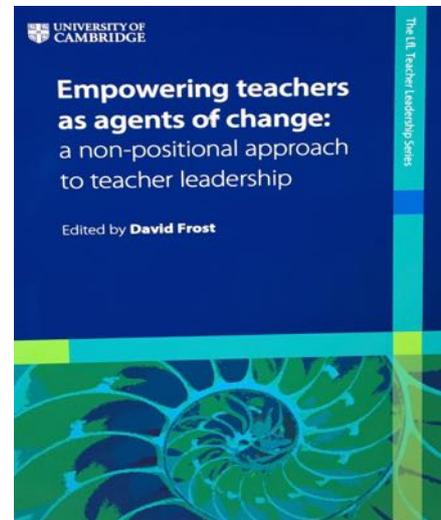
Jo Mylles

This text is Chapter 16 of 'Empowering Teachers as Agents of Change: a non-positional approach to teacher Leadership', a book edited by David Frost and published by LfL Cambridge in May 2017.

Editor's introduction

Jo Mylles is Deputy Headteacher at Sir John Lawes School. She has been a key player in the development of the HertsCam Network. She graduated in 2005 from what was the forerunner of the HertsCam MEd and is currently a Module Leader on the new teacher-led HertsCam MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning (see Chapter 11). Jo was responsible for kick-starting the Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) programme when she invited me to her school to talk about the book 'Teacher Led School Improvement' (Frost, Durrant, Head and Holden, 2000). At the time, she was part-time Assistant Headteacher with responsibility for continuing professional development.

Jo is the consummate scholar practitioner. This is not just a matter of teaching on a masters programme in her spare time. It is more a matter of her scholarship being an integral dimension of her practice as a senior leader. She has always drawn upon the literature to inform discussion in senior leadership team meetings at Sir John Lawes and to challenge her own and her colleagues' thinking about professional practice and its relationship to their moral purpose as educators. In designing and teaching the module on the masters programme 'Analysing the institutional contexts for development work', Jo is able not only to draw upon her command of the literature on such topics as educational leadership and organisational culture but also bring to bear her rich experience of successful school leadership. However, remarkable as she is as an individual, Jo would be the first to recognise that her ability to do this has been nurtured within a professional environment where there is the space and the encouragement that enables the flourishing of intellect, as she articulates in this chapter. In this sense, Jo could be said to be the embodiment of collective professional wisdom.



Jo's story

When our school was awarded Training School Status in 2004, I became responsible for coordinating the activities under this new designation (DfEE, 1998). Prior to that, the school had been for a long time poorly regarded in the local community and had been threatened with closure in the 1980s. However, by the late 1990's the school's reputation within the local community was on the rise as was level of attainment and progress of students. The impetus to further develop the school was provided by a successful Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspection in 2003. The inspection highlighted the excellent leadership provided by the headteacher, praised the quality of teaching and learning and described the school's programme of leadership and professional development as excellent. The school's culture or, as Deal and Kennedy put it 'the way we do things around here' (1983), was visible and shared across the school. The school had strong social and intellectual capital (Hargreaves, 2001) and a way of working amongst staff that was collegiate and collaborative, characterised by open classroom doors, mutual observation, much laughter amongst the staff and weekly rituals in staff briefings to share pedagogical knowledge (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992).

Reading about more distributed forms of leadership to increase a school's capacity to innovate had been very persuasive (Bennett *et al.*, 2003; Harris, 2004). Articles by Hargreaves (1999) offered a vision of what a knowledge creating school could be like. I found his proposition that the potential, wisdom and impetus for change are rooted in schools rather than something which can be orchestrated or taught from outside, an inspiring and democratic way of considering school development. His argument that innovative schools need to engage in knowledge creation in order to enable teachers to make their 'tacit' knowledge visible and clearly articulated for others to build on in their own practice, was both a challenge and a spur to the leadership's teams strategic thinking and subsequent actions (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

It was, therefore, against this backdrop, and at this moment of great potential for the school in the summer of 2004, that we decided to launch the very first Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) group at our school. The process aims to encourage the development of teacher leadership by supporting the 'agency' of teachers to act strategically, 'we need school improvement strategies that are powerful in supporting individuals in such a way that they can increasingly exert their agency and make more of a difference' (Frost, Durrant, Head and Holden, 2000:11). This group was, and continues to be, 14 years later, part of our broader efforts to bring about school improvement.

Our association with HertsCam has enabled us to articulate more clearly our approach to capacity building and school improvement. We now understand, through our TLDW work and wider work with HertsCam, that 'authorship' rather than 'ownership' is important (Fielding, 1999). That is to say a more democratic approach to development in schools is essential if teachers are to make a

difference. If teachers can decide on their development priorities, within an understanding and framework of the school's overall development priorities and shared values, rather than 'implementing' the senior leadership team's ideas, then innovations in practice are more likely to stick and become embedded in the fabric of the school. We have developed a better understanding of the processes involved in supporting teacher and school development. Dialogue and collaboration have to be at the heart of knowledge creation and sharing.

This provides a challenge for senior leadership teams as it directly challenges the more traditional view of leadership being centred in those people with titles, offices and who have the wisdom and experience to bring about change (Southworth, 2002). Supporting 'authorship' requires three things: firstly, a high level of trust – trust in teachers and support staff to decide what in their practice needs to be developed and refined. Secondly, humility on the part of senior school leaders which stems from their understanding of the need to provide support for programmes such as TLDW and to create a culture within which teachers and support staff can flourish. Thirdly, power wielded by senior leaders and their capacity for influence and leverage, has to be used in working alongside members of staff on their behalf and in support of their work in schools. All of the above constitutes a more productive alternative to the all so familiar pressing down on colleagues through the hierarchical structures with direct instructions and micro-management.

Supporting teachers to make a difference: the role of the leadership team

For as long as I have been teaching in schools the organisational architecture in schools has changed very little. In some ways the introduction of multi-academy trusts, with their related Trust boards and committees, has reinforced and strengthened the hierarchical nature of school structures (DfE, 2016). It could be argued that decision making and policy direction is more removed in some academy trusts than ever before from teachers in the classroom. The literature on teacher leadership within schools is disappointingly thin on how senior leaders in schools could and do support teachers' agency and leadership. Most of the literature (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2001; Gronn, 2000) seems to focus in an abstract way on how to describe agency and teacher leadership and although context is acknowledged as significant, few case studies and rich descriptions exist to exemplify to others how teachers can be supported. My experience of developing a TLDW programme at my school and working within HertsCam suggests to me that it is a complex task and somewhat paradoxical.

The role of headteacher and senior leadership teams become reconfigured and redirected in a culture where they are focused on developing teacher agency. My work within HertsCam has enabled us at Sir John Lawes School to see that two broad areas of work are needed within senior leadership teams to support teachers' agency: namely, culture building and practical structures of support. Over the years, our senior leadership team meetings and conferences have featured the reading of some of the key literature referred to in this chapter. We have debated its significance

for our school and our work. For example, Barth (1990) discusses the role of the headteacher in creating the conditions within which teachers feel confident and able to exercise leadership to develop teaching and learning. He considers that headteachers have the power to change the structures and conditions in their schools to allow teacher leadership to flourish and to enable teachers 'to tamper with the ecology of teaching' (1990: 59). Barth's arguments are reflected in our practice. The headteacher in my school releases resources to support a yearly conference for the whole staff to focus on teaching and learning. She also opens up our senior leadership team meetings to give colleagues a platform to talk about their development work and encourages them to work outside the school with other teachers. Our senior leadership team often work alongside teachers with their projects as team members rather than leading the projects themselves. When teachers come to the leadership team we ask: how can we help? what resources do you need? rather than directing them towards a particular outcome. This requires a certain confidence and humility. It demands that we use the power that goes with our job titles on behalf of teachers rather than using it to achieve certain objectives. We have adopted this approach consciously and deliberately. Our approach has been influenced by the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Hunter, 2004) which suggests that leaders in organisations can be leaders and followers and that leadership needs to emphasise service to others, should promote a sense of community and adopt more democratic processes in decision making. We were not naïve about this and acutely aware of how these approaches can rub up against the individual accountability agenda in schools, but by acknowledging these competing priorities we are able to navigate them.

Processes to support the emergence of agency and teacher leadership

At the heart of TLDW work is a collaborative process to build knowledge about teaching and learning and share this. To enable the programme to be successful we have thought about how we enable dialogue and collaboration. I have come to understand that collaboration across the school and between teachers will not emerge consistently and become part of the school's way of working without deliberate action on the part of members of the leadership team and others. Hopkins (2001) draws on earlier work by Rosenholtz (1989) in characterising schools where teachers can collaborate as 'moving, high consensus schools' where teacher learning is abundant and where collaboration is evident. At Sir John Lawes School we have developed processes for colleagues to do this that are woven into the fabric of the school. We have rituals during staff briefing every Friday to enable members of staff to talk about teaching and learning. A recent theme was 'Foiling Flamel' where each week on a rotation basis a subject-based team would heroically save teaching and learning strategies from the villain Flamel and submit them to one of the Assistant Headteachers who would keep them safe. These rituals enable colleagues to share their knowledge with others who can then adapt and use in their own practice. The briefings are often filled with laughter and jokes when strategies are shared which helps us all to reaffirm our shared purpose and values. Processes like this help to develop trust and openness and collaboration focused on learning which Stoll *et al.* (2006) suggest are characteristics of

professional learning communities. These occasions and structures also cement ‘social capital’, essential to the development of ‘intellectual and organisational capital’ which are the powerhouse of any school (Hargreaves, 2001).

At the annual staff conference, the workshops and plenary presentations are led by members of staff. We rarely have outside speakers. Every member of staff is assigned to a ‘learning group’ based on professional concerns expressed by the teacher or teaching assistant. They meet regularly to take forward their work through collaboration and then the learning groups share their learning through a ‘market place’ activity. This scaffolded approach helps all members of the school community grapple with the mysteries of learning in a way which is both reflective and active which, it is argued, are essential for a professional learning community to emerge and flourish (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). All of these processes enable dialogue between colleagues, which is fundamental to the process of knowledge creation and transfer and underpins the ‘socialisation, externalisation, internalisation and combination’ processes outlined by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995).

At the graduation event in 2006 for my National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), Geoff Southworth, the deputy Director of the National College of School Leadership, gave a short address to the senior leaders who had recently completed the course. The question he posed for the audience was: what is the purpose of leadership? He suggested that it is quite simply ‘the liberation of talent’. Across the years since my school set up the first school-based TLDW programme and our subsequent involvement in HertsCam, I have often returned to this thought. The processes and structures to ‘liberate’ the leadership of teachers are complex and need strategic intent on behalf of leadership teams but it seems to me that this simple maxim cuts through all that is written about leadership in schools and points to the moral purpose of school leadership. All our endeavours at Sir John Lawes School have been to enable teachers to do what they instinctively want to do which is to improve their practice so that the students in their care can benefit and flourish. HertsCam has given us a framework, both moral and practical, which is our reference point and guide.

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