Community Participation Through Teacher Leadership

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the potential impact of the participation of families in education through teacher leadership. The account draws on data largely in the form of teachers' voices articulated in interviews, group discussions and through more informal interaction during field trips. The concepts underpinning the research are based on the experience of the HertsCam network that supports teachers as agents of change together with the INCLUD-ED project, which identified successful educational actions that contribute to school improvement and social cohesion. The idea of 'non-positional teacher leadership' (Frost, 2014) and the different types of family and community participation in schools (Flecha, 2015) are at the core of this work. The methodology used in the research process can be characterised as participatory and dialogic, involving researchers, teachers and activists within the International Teacher Leadership initiative. From a bottom-up approach, the research themes and key questions to be addressed with teachers were defined in a process of building knowledge together, allowing emerging new understandings in the field of teacher leadership and family participation.

Keywords: dialogue, teacher leadership, community, change

Families and communities play crucial roles in educational success and the improvement of social cohesion (Diez, Gatt & Racionero, 2011; Elboj & Niemelä, 2010). In the educational leadership literature, the subject of the role of families and communities is also discussed (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Stone-Johnson, 2014) and more specifically, there has been some work focused on teachers exercising leadership to enable the participation of families and communities in the school (Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Vranjesevic & Celebicic, 2014). The aim of this paper is to report on an exploratory study of the participation of families in the life of schools where it has been facilitated by teachers who have been supported by programmes based on the idea of non-positional teacher leadership.

The study draws on the experience of the HertsCam Network, which supports teachers as agents of change around the world, and the INCLUD-ED project, which identified successful actions transferable across contexts. As a result of both contributions, the European Commission funded the TEACH-IN project (2014-2016) which aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of teacher leadership and ways in which it can be implemented to promote school improvement and social transformation. The project is based at the Faculty of Education (University of Cambridge) with the support of David Frost from the Leadership for Learning group. It focuses on the relationship between teachers, schools and communities and the role of teacher leadership initiatives which promote networking and improve the conditions that favour social participation. It includes the analysis of contexts in which teacher leadership practices are being developed and identifies the synergies between what is going on in the school and the surrounding areas and communities.

This exploratory study is linked to the previous development of the International Teacher Leadership initiative (ITL) which itself grew out of the work of the HertsCam Network. ITL supports processes of transformation based on the concept of non-positional teacher leadership (Frost, 2014). The objective is to enable teachers to improve the quality of education by leading processes of change. Since the launch of ITL in 2008, the UK based HertsCam Network has continued to grow. Its membership changes as teachers join and complete one of its programmes, but many members remain active, taking on responsibilities such as being tutors on the Teacher Led Development Work programme (Hill, 2014) or organising Network Events. Through a programme of events organised and hosted by teachers at their schools, network members share accounts of the development work they are leading and together they build knowledge about practice and about how to develop practice in diverse school contexts.

The process of leadership is supported by the network, within which professional knowledge is developed.

Teachers' stories of change and transformation arising from their involvement in HertsCam / ITL together with the scholarship of network members have helped to develop what is known about teacher leadership (Frost, 2014). This is made possible because of teacher's voices: their views, experiences, backgrounds and needs are at the core of this work. This innovative approach has been pioneered in the UK and has been extended abroad through the International Teacher Leadership (ITL) initiative. The initiative launched in 2008 at the University of Cambridge, led to a network in 15 countries, around 90 schools of which 35 are secondary and the involvement of approximately 1,000 teachers (Frost, 2012).

This paper has four sections. The first features discussion of theoretical perspectives that inform the study. The second concerns the methodology used and the process through which the main questions were defined. Third, is the analysis of teacher leadership practices with regards to the participation of families in schools. In the final discussion, conclusions are drawn.

Teacher leadership and the role of parents and the community

Underpinning this study are two main theoretical perspectives: one focuses on teacher leadership and the other on the role of families and the community in education.

Teacher leadership
Teacher leadership can be conceptualised in different ways (Leithwood *et al.*, 2009). One dominant way is to conceptualise it as being what somebody within a particular position as teacher leader does (Taylor, Goeke, Klein & Onore, 2011; Mangin, 2007). In this view, it is assumed that effectiveness can be secured when teachers occupy different roles in the organisation of the school (Howey, 1988; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Frost, 2012; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014). Linked to this are studies that focus on principals' support for teacher leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Blase & Blase, 2004). In such studies teacher leaders are seen as having followers (Kellerman, 1999; Gardner, 1990). Leadership activity is constituted by the interaction of leaders, followers and their situation in the development of leadership tasks (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). In relation to this, there is a growing literature,

particularly in the US on teacher leaders (Spillane & Min Kim, 2012; Foster, 1986; Reitzug, 1994; Neumerski, 2012) and this shapes common understandings of teacher leadership. As a result, there is a trend to identify teacher leadership with professional development programmes (Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster & Cobb, 1995; Youngs & King, 2002) addressed to particular individuals who are seen to have leadership capacity. In the light of this, the aptitudes and particular dispositions of certain people with the potential to lead , are at the core of this teacher leadership conceptualisation (Borko, Wolf, Simone & Uchiyama, 2003; Newmann, King & Youngs, 2000).

The discussion of authority and power is a key dimension of conceptualisations of teacher leadership. Sources of authority for leadership (Sergiovanni, 2003), the hierarchical power structure of schools (Hatcher, 2005) and the power dynamic between teachers and other agents (Datnow & Castellano, 2001) are some of the topics addressed. The creation of positions of special responsibility within organisations is a key issue in conventional conceptualisations that locate leadership within the principal's domain. This view of organisations focuses more on structural aspects than on human agency (Frost & Durrant, 2003). The distributed leadership model implies the sharing of power and authority within the organisation (Mujis & Harris, 2006).

As already stated, the above conceptualisation is prevalent, but it is important to discuss alternative understandings of what teacher leadership is and could be. Within the HertsCam / ITL networks it is proposed that all teachers have some leadership capacity which can be enhanced and operationalised with the right kind of support. There is a growing body of evidence to show that teachers can take the lead in transformations beyond the constraints of any formal leadership positions (Frost, 2014). For this reason, the idea of 'non-positional teacher leadership' is at the core of this paper. In this conceptualisation, leadership practice relies on collaboration among teachers in a common effort to develop practice. The teachers participating in this study have diverse profiles and come from different backgrounds, school realities and places, but they share a commitment for leading projects that improve teaching and learning.

Family and community involvement

There is evidence from around the world that the involvement of family and community contributes to the school improvement and to the learning outcomes of children (Epstein, 1991; Sanders & Lewis, 2005; Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Ice & Whitaker, 2009). Good schools

open their doors to neighbourhoods and to different social agents, including families, and they do this in very different ways, for example giving support to parents in relation to students' homework (Patall, Cooper & Robinson, 2008) or promoting parent volunteering in the school (Lewis, Kim & Bey, 2011). There have been attempts to create models for family involvement by taking into account parents' motivational beliefs (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). Some research studies focus on the role of parents into the motivation of children (Butler, 2015), their behaviours (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2000) or the learning processes in particular subjects (Leslie & Allen, 1999). The belief that learning is related to what happens not only in the school but also at home and the neighbourhood influences these contributions.

A typology of approaches to family and community participation in schools has been identified in a recent study (Flecha et al., 2015) which was highlighted by the European Commission (2011) as a high-impact project. The study identified five types of family and community participation: informative, consultative, decisive, evaluative and educative which are outlined in the table below.

Table 1. Types of family and community participation

1. Informative	- Parents are informed about school activities, school operations, and decisions that have been made. - Parents do not participate in making these decisions. A common form of informative participation is a general parents' meeting.
2. Consultative	- Parents have a limited impact on decision making. - Their participation is based on consultation. - They participate through the school's statutory bodies.
3. Decisive	- Community members participate in decision-making processes by becoming representatives in decision-making bodies. - Family and community members monitor the school's accountability in terms of its educational results.
4. Evaluative	- Family and community members participate in pupils' learning processes by helping evaluate the children's school progress. - Family and community members participate in the assessment of school programs and the curriculum.
5. Educative	- Family and community members participate in pupils' learning activities, both during regular school hours and after school. - Family and community members participate in educational programs that respond to their needs.

Source: Flecha, R. (ed.) (2015)

A cross-case analysis of six case studies indicated that the 'decisive', 'evaluative' and 'educative' types of participation contribute to school success and social cohesion. The analysis considered the formal and non-formal school dimensions that may influence children's learning.

Methodology

This exploratory study was based on a series of research visits to sites where partners in the International Teacher Leadership initiative were still operating programmes of support for teacher leadership. The overall aim of the visits was to explore the extent and nature of activity related to the ITL initiative since 2011. We were particularly interested in sustainability, capacity building and how further developments could be facilitated. For the sake of the TEACH-IN project, specific attention was paid to questions about parents and community involvement.

Themes to be addressed in this investigation arose from the report of the first phase of ITL (Frost, 2011) and were shaped through subsequent dialogues with collaborators in a number of countries. The process was opened to discussion in order to allow more comments and suggestions. As a result, the themes for inquiry included the following:

- the nature of the teacher leadership programme
- the scope and focus of development projects lead by teachers
- the impact of teachers' projects
- challenges and hopes for the future.

Although a larger number of visits were planned, this paper reports only on those which had taken place at the time of writing (September 2015) – Macedonia and Bulgaria. Each research visit involved several interviews with teachers, facilitators and members of organisations responsible for the teacher leadership programmes in the countries concerned. This paper includes the results of six interviews and two-group discussions, all conducted with teachers belonging to three different schools. The interviews had a narrative orientation guided by some pre-planned questions that were modified and added to in the course of the dialogue. In four of the interviews and one group discussion it was extremely helpful to have the insights and contributions of a teacher from the HertsCam Network as a co-researcher. This brought a

more authentic dialogical dimension to the data collection. Also, it is important to highlight that in two of the interviews and one of the group discussions, the contributions of an ITL collaborator with wide knowledge about the non-positional approach and experience in the ITL initiative were particularly significant.

The interviews and group discussions were conducted in English although the native languages of the teachers were Macedonian and Bulgarian. During the interviews and supplementary informal conversations, there was translation into native languages. In one case, this support was not necessary as the person being interviewed was an English teacher. All the respondents were promised anonymity and in this paper fictional names are used. These are Angela, Milena, Isidora, Valentin, Aneta, Katerina and Silvana for the teachers interviewed in Macedonia and Penka, Elena, Daniela and Violeta for the teachers in Bulgaria.

Before the interviews and the group discussions, we explained the framework of the study and the purpose of the visit, highlighting the relevance of the participation of teachers in the process and thanking them for their time. We outlined the usual protocols such as the expected duration of the interviews and group discussions, the voluntary basis of their participation and anonymity, respecting the codes of ethics of both the European Commission and the British Educational Research Association.

Teacher leadership in Macedonia and Bulgaria

The research visit revealed that teacher leadership in Macedonia and Bulgaria is not only still in existence but it is growing both in scope and in its effect. In both countries, the partners in the ITL initiative have involved a greater number of teachers and groups since they started the programme in 2011. For example, in the case of Macedonia there were 8 schools involved in the programme at the beginning of the initiative and now there are more than 60 schools taking part in the programme. This reflects an encouraging trend. In Bulgaria, they regularly organise what they refer to as 'Festivals' of the 'ITL Clubs' to celebrate what has been achieved following the principles of non-positional teacher leadership. The range of the type of projects led by teachers and the opportunities to share knowledge have expanded throughout both countries visited.

The evident extension of this teacher leadership work in these two post-socialist countries surprised the visiting research team; when planning the visits they suspected that they would find that the teacher leadership work had lost momentum. The initial burst of activity in 2010 had been made possible by a modest grant from the Open Society Foundation for one year only. It was assumed therefore that, without this funding, the local organisers of teacher leadership programmes would be unable to sustain the activity. The discovery that the teacher leadership programmes in Macedonia and Bulgaria had in fact grown and become more effective was very significant because of what it tells us about sustainability. In 2009-11 there had been a programme of support in the form of a series of international team conferences funded by OSF, but since then the partner organisations in these two countries had found other ways to enable their local programmes of support to continue and expand. This can be attributed in part to the adaptability of the materials and tools shared by the HertsCam team in 2009. It was evident that these tools, having been translated into the required languages, were of practical value, amenable to continuous adaptation and use in new contexts. The positive response of teachers to the initiative is also a major factor in its continuing existence. However, perhaps the most significant factor in the longevity of the teacher leadership work is that it has been grafted on to other initiatives which have been funded from other sources. In Macedonia in particular, the ITL methodology had been used as a key element in the design of the Learning Communities initiative which is led by the NGO 'Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives' and funded by USAID.

Learning about how teachers have enabled the participation of families

Teachers around the world are concerned about how to overcome the barriers between the schools and families but part of the problem is that teachers hold particular beliefs about the lack of participation of families in the life of the school (Kim, 2009). However, teacher leadership plays an important role in addressing this challenge and we learnt about various ways in which teachers improved the participation of families in schools. The case of the ITL work is an exceptional example of this, as it enables teachers to identify this professional concern (or problem) and share ideas and the possibilities to do things about it. While being involved in the ITL network, teachers planned different types of activities to improve family participation.

A key insight in this investigation focuses on the way teachers' development work can inspire others to exercise leadership to promote families' participation in the school. This happens when teachers have critical discussions that support their innovations. The experience of Aneta, Katerina and Silvana in Macedonia and of Penka in Bulgaria are illustrative of what teachers are doing with students and parents. For instance, in the discussion group in Macedonia, teachers identified particular activities that had been successful in promoting family participation. They explained how they support each other by contributing different insights about what they have achieved. Their professional development was extended through the experience of leading change which enabled the participation of families.

Towards a more dialogic school-home relationship

Teachers and schools continuously face the challenge of improving the communication with families. The dialogue about children's progress in learning and their behaviour is affected by stereotypes held both families and teachers whose beliefs about their roles in education and schools are formed through their previous experiences. This is particularly challenging in multicultural contexts such as we found in Macedonia and Bulgaria where teachers reported that they deal with a diversity of languages, religions and values which influences the relationships between families and schools.

The nature of the communication channels between families and schools can help to overcome the lack of dialogue between them. In most cases, the schools send information letters to parents and they invite them to attend meetings arranged to keep them informed about their children's progress. Parents react differently to these strategies and their attendance and attitudes towards this kind of meetings will be influenced by their own experience of school. In the interviews and conversations with teachers in both countries, it was explained that, when students had low levels of academic achievement, families felt that teachers tend only to report negative results or behaviours. Moreover, in some cases, families may perceive pressure because of their supposed responsibility to support students' learning and behaviour.

The ITL work is having an impact on school-home relationships by promoting a more dialogical approach. This change implies a transformation of the way in which teachers communicate with families. Teacher-led development projects often involve transformative actions that help to overcome this problem. The role of dialogue becomes crucial as it enables the improvement of communication and the overcoming of stereotypes. As Angela from Macedonia commented, the preconceptions about the insufficient commitment of families

towards the school were ameliorated through dialogue. Because of the ITL initiative, she involved families in particular activities in the school and spoke about the importance of enabling families to participate. It was not about the number of people involved but about the impact it had on school-home relationship. Similarly, Joana from Bulgaria reflected on the importance of giving the families a role and how much she believed that they really wanted to get involved.

This kind of reflection appeared in several interviews, some of them emphasising the multicultural diversity of the families. Teachers explained in several ways how they changed their views by starting conversations and having dialogues with the families. The key point was to start with something meaningful for the families, engaging them through a bottom-up approach. In this way, teachers are achieving impact in the diverse contexts of the schools. This was possible because of the teacher leadership work and the impressive ways in which they are building partnerships between families and schools.

Families participating in learning and classroom activities
Family members usually play the role of listeners in the school, being informed about what is going on and how their children are progressing. However, as identified in the literature review, it is important for school improvement to involve families in learning activities. We asked about the leadership practices that were enabling the inclusion of families in the school, particularly in relation to learning and classroom activities. We found that there had been several initiatives led by both experienced and non-experienced teachers aimed at promoting the participation of families in learning and classroom activities. Perhaps not surprisingly given the very diverse cultural realities of the Balkan countries, the question of language learning was raised by some teachers.

Teachers provided examples of family participation in their schools, giving details about learning and classroom activities in which families support teachers' leading change. The teachers talked about ways in which families play a role into students' activities both during regular school hours and after school. Families had supported of teachers' development projects work that responded to family needs. The ITL initiative had made this possible. As a result, families had contributed in different ways to school improvement, supporting teacher-led transformation and making the most of the dialogue underpinning the school-home relationship.

The ITL initiative had enabled a process by which teachers were empowered to include family voices and their participation in the school life. The process to build this partnership began by enabling the teachers to take action and lead this change and it had been there choice to share the projects and activities with families. This was the starting point to let the families know about the teacher leadership groups, particularly in Bulgaria where teachers had previous discussions about common concerns in relation to family participation. As a result, teachers from very diverse contexts developed insights about the importance of involving families in development work.

Penka is an English teacher in a secondary school in Bulgaria and her story illustrates the ways in which teachers are enabling family participation in learning and classroom activities. The school where she works is located in Varna, the largest city on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast with a population of around 335,000 habitants. She teaches students from 11 to 14 years old, English as a second or third language. The majority of her students are middle class and some of them are from minority background, a trend that has increased in recent years. This has had an impact on language learning, as there are more Russian speaking students than in previous years. In addition, teachers have the challenge of responding to students with special needs. Penka has been teaching since 1999 and was involved in the ITL initiative in 2010. During the interview, she highlighted the huge impact of their involvement in the programme. In her view teachers really want to make a difference by talking about common problems and collaborating to go beyond what has been considered to be a good teacher.

In Penka's school there are several teachers involved in the ITL programme. When asked about the impact of the programme on the role of parents, she talked about working with another teacher who shared her concern. They explained that they started by organising a quiz with parents and developed other activities under the banner of the 'Parents school' as a result of the conversations they had following the quiz. This exceptional effort and commitment from these teachers to involving parents led to contacts with parents from other schools. Working together, they planned activities with the students and shared knowledge about how to engage in different types of learning activities.

Another successful example of family participation is an activity organised by Aneta who teaches in a primary school in Ohrid, which is located in the south west of Macedonia and has a population of 42,000 habitants. In Aneta's school there were 9 teachers involved in the teacher leadership programme meeting regularly for 2 hour sessions to share knowledge and

celebrate their innovations. They keep the school's principal informed about their developments and they are happy to have her support. Moreover, there is a very good relation and communication with the rest of teachers in the school. Aneta expressed the view that the level of co-operation with the parents and the community is generally quite good. Most of the parents in this school have academic backgrounds, which sometimes creates pressure for teachers. Links between parents and school inspectors represents a challenge rather than a threat, but parents are generally co-operative and very interested in the their children's education.

Aneta and other teachers in this school work in a collaborative way to develop projects focused on family participation. These include activities inside the classroom. They organise what they call 'bazards' in which families come to the school to help with decoration but they also volunteer to talk to groups of students about topics of interest. For instance, where a parent is a member of a profession, they might talk about this so that the students can consider this as a possible career path. This kind of initiative is having considerable impact on children's learning. One interesting case concerned a child whose parents were from South Korea. Initially this child had language difficulties but the father was able to come into the school to offer support in the classroom. By the end of the first year at the school the child was able to follow the activities properly.

The cases of Penka, Aneta and their collaboration with their colleagues are only some examples of how support for teacher leadership within the framework of the ITL initiative is enabling family participation in learning and classroom activities.

Conclusions

In the Balkan countries, as in many other parts of the world, families have statutory rights that guarantee access to education for their children, but this does not necessarily mean that they are fully able to realise these rights in practice. The complexity of social realities means that the democratic right to participate can be meaningless, especially for members of minority ethic groups who may have become accustomed to being marginalised. However, there is clear evidence to show that, with appropriate support, teachers can take successful action to enable families to participate and have a voice in the life of the school. The global debate about equity in education must address questions about the roles that both teachers and families

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may play in the creation of an environment in which equal access to education is fully realised. Ultimately, equity requires action on the part of teachers and we have evidence that suggests that it is indeed possible to enable teachers to develop their sense of moral purpose and the professional commitment which leads them to undertake such action.

The teachers involved in the ITL initiative in Macedonia and Bulgaria are exercising leadership to promote the participation of families in the schools. The support for this activity continues to be provided without the financial and institutional support initially put in place by Open Society Foundations in 2010-11 which demonstrates the sustainability of the ITL programme and its methodology. Through their leadership practices and developing their capacity to lead change, teachers show that it is possible to sustain transformations and improve their schools, keeping alive and re-invigorating the principles underlying the ITL approach. In our research visit it became abundantly evident that, having developed initiatives to promote family participation, teachers share knowledge arising from these achievements in their networks. As a result, there are inspiring stories of transformation that teachers, from their different positions, are leading.

The diversity of the contexts within which the ITL framework was used also demonstrates the sustainability of the programme. With the support of the teacher leadership programme teachers are able to design their projects in ways which respond to the particular circumstances they find in their schools and communities. Our investigation confirms that the sustainability of the programme depends on local adaptation; we have seen that teachers' development work is sensitive to the culture, traditions, language and values of the communities within which they work. Moreover, it is evident that leadership capacity is being expanded in quite different ways. In Macedonia, teachers are developing professional learning communities whereas, in Bulgaria, they organise ITL clubs. Both initiatives resonate with the HertsCam principles but teachers are opening new horizons to lead change by recreating them in their own culture.

The multicultural context in Macedonia and Bulgaria is still a challenge that needs to be addressed further. Families are increasingly diverse, having different academic backgrounds, languages, cultures and values. Teachers are responding to this reality locally by bringing families into schools and recognising and valuing such diversity. The dialogical approach is underpinning the way by which teachers are giving voice to families into school, involving them in learning and classroom activities and building a school-home relationship through dialogue.

This study shows that the participation of families in learning and classroom activities is one of the key aspects of many of the teacher-led development projects. This participation of families in learning is an important factor linked to school improvement, as we have outlined above. It is therefore important to highlight the impact achieved through teacher leadership but beyond the school walls. This impact has implications for the school as an organisation because it mobilises more agents which helps to cultivate an inclusive climate within the life of the school.

By moving from a consideration of the concepts of teacher leadership and family participation to the investigation of teachers' practices and voices, we can identify profound stories of transformation that are making a difference in very diverse schools around the world. In this study, we have focused on Macedonia and Bulgaria in which the ITL initiative is enabling the exercise of teacher leadership with real impact on the experience of teachers, their shared practices and the school organisation.

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