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Teacher leadership in action

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Abstract

The paper outlines the concept of teacher leadership as it is used and understood within a large network of over 600 teachers known as HertsCam and coordinated by David Frost. The paper goes on to describe the network within which teachers pursue award-bearing programmes and engage in knowledge building strategies on behalf of the professional community in Hertfordshire. It discusses an approach to school improvement and teacher development known as ‘teacher-led development work’ which has its roots in action research. The paper draws on a number of teachers’ development projects to illustrate and exemplify the way teacher leadership drives change and improvement through teachers’ leadership of processes of collaboration, inquiry and influence.

Please download the full paper as a pdf file from the list of
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www.teacherleadership.org.uk

Note: This paper is presented alongside another paper ‘The International Teacher Leadership project’ and includes some of the same text.

In the HertsCam network we have been using the slogan “Awakening the sleeping giant of teacher leadership!”¹ to capture the idea that there is an enormous, largely untapped potential for teachers to contribute to educational reform and transformation. We believe that within the HertsCam network we have been able to mobilise this energy and creativity by promoting teacher leadership and by developing particular strategies for scaffolding and supporting it.

What is teacher leadership?

Teacher leadership can be seen as a means to strengthen and extend teachers’ professionalism by enabling them to exercise leadership as part of their work. This demands a particular view of what it is to be a professional educator and poses the question: what mode of professionalism do we really need to be able to sustain educational improvement? Is it purely individualistic and classroom focused where we try to develop a particular set of competences defined by externally determined standards? Or do we take a more collectivist view in which teachers see themselves as part of learning communities in which practice is driven by principles to be tested through inquiry-based innovation. In this mode of professionalism, knowledge is created by teachers rather than merely received. We might call this: ‘extended professionalism’ – a term used many years ago (Hoyle, 1975). It implies that teachers are driven by moral purpose and that they exercise leadership to influence their colleagues and their surroundings.

The view of school improvement assumed here is not one that involves mere organizational restructuring (Fullan, 1993) or a focus on shallow measures of student attainment. Rather, the focus is on ‘capacity building’ as the key defining characteristic of the improving school (MacBeath *et al.*, 2007; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Gray *et al.*, 1999). Capacity building is about developing a professional culture in which self-evaluation, innovation and improvement are valued and operationalised such that the school has the capacity to change and improve itself (Lambert, 1998). Capacity building entails the mobilisation and enhancement of both intellectual and social capital (Hargreaves, 2001, 2003) to create a powerful engine for transformation.

¹ Borrowed from the title of the milestone publication by Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996)

It has been claimed that leadership is the key to capacity building (eg Sammons, Hill and Mortimore, 1995). However, a narrow conception of school leadership, limited to the idea of the single executive figure drawing their authority from their position in the organisation, does not best serve school improvement because it fails to build capacity for improvement and reform (Hopkins, 2001; Silins & Mulford, 2003; Gronn, 2002; Raelin, 2005; Spillane, 2006; Storey, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). An alternative conception of school leadership rests on the idea of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004; Spillane, 2006) which recognises that leadership involves collaborative and interactive behaviour through which organisations are maintained, problems are solved and practice is developed. This corresponds with concepts such as ‘high leadership density’ (Sergiovanni, 1992) which refers to the extent to which members of a learning community take responsibility for quality and effectiveness.

The idea of teacher leadership has been promoted in many forms in the USA and the UK where it is increasingly seen as crucial to educational reform. In the 1980s, major reports such as *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and ‘*A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the twenty first century*’ (Carnegie Corporation, 1986) called for a reinvigoration of the teaching profession in the USA. Teacher leadership was seen to be the key lever for this reinvigoration. The idea of teacher leadership was part of the developing discourse of professionalisation in the USA in the 1980s and 90s (eg Little, 1988; Lieberman, 1992). Katzenmeyer and Moller’s ‘*Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders*’ referred to earlier, was published in 1996. In Australia the ‘*Teachers as Leaders Research project*’ (Crowther *et al.*, 2002) was another significant contribution. In the UK, the National College for School Leadership sponsored useful work on distributed leadership (Bennett *et al.*, 2003; MacBeath *et al.*, 2004), but NCSL training courses focussed on building the capacity of heads of departments and other team leaders (Naylor, Gkolia & Brundrett, 2006). This reliance on the idea of creating special roles of responsibility is problematic in a number of ways: it requires additional funding to enhance salaries and it places a limit on the development of leadership capacity of teachers in general. In HertsCam we are committed to the idea that leadership is a fundamental aspect of what it is to be human and a reflection of human agency. It follows therefore that all teachers can develop the capacity to exercise leadership. Some would go further and argue that the exercise of leadership is a right or entitlement in a democratic society.

Everyone has the potential and the right to work as a leader. Leading is skilled and complicated work that every member of the school community can learn. Democracy clearly defines the rights of individuals to actively participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

(Lambert, 1998 in Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001: 1)

The concepts of leadership and participation are clearly intertwined.

Promoting teacher leadership

Within the HertsCam programme it is assumed that teacher leadership will not flourish without deliberate action to promote and support it. Our approach rests on the following argument:

- appropriate methodologies for teacher leadership
- partnerships with external agencies
- deliberate cultivation within schools
- appropriate contexts for knowledge building.

Appropriate methodologies - The teacher-led development work (Frost and Durrant, 2002, 2003a) approach includes a step-by-step approach in which particular materials and techniques are used to model and guide a process of values clarification, reflection on development needs, consultation with colleagues about development priorities, negotiation of strategic action plans and the leadership of development work. This approach is being constantly refined and developed.

Partnerships with external agencies - Support from external agencies is important whether this be the local authority, professional associations or national agencies for school improvement or quality assurance. Arguably, university departments of education have a special role to play because of their independence, access to literature and skills for guiding reflection, but any external support has to be mediated through genuine partnership arrangements so that external agencies do not simply replicate their normal habits of thought and operation.

Deliberate cultivation within school - Teachers are unlikely to sustain their capacity for

leadership or successfully undertake a development project unless they have active support from their colleagues and in particular from the senior leadership team. There is a growing body of evidence that illuminates the role of senior leaders in facilitating teacher leadership (eg Andrews and Lewis, 2004, Mylles and Frost, 2006). There are very specific things that head teachers / school principals do such as making additional time available or helping to facilitate opportunities for collaboration, but the more fundamental task is concerned with culture building or creating the conditions in which teacher leadership can flourish (Frost, 2004).

Appropriate contexts for knowledge building - The nature of professional knowledge and the means by which it is generated are crucial in shaping professionalism. If teacher leadership is agential – if it is about the role of the teacher being extended such that all teachers can contribute to the development of professional practice - then it has to have a knowledge creation dimension. Support for this can be provided through networks and communities which exist to enable teachers' accounts of their leadership of development work to be articulated and broadcast. The HertsCam Network provides a context within which teachers can share their practice, engage in dialogue and publish authoritative accounts (Frost, 2008).

The HertsCam Network

The HertsCam Network has evolved over a 10 year period. The programme rests on a partnership between the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, Hertfordshire's Children, Schools and Families Service (CSF) and participating schools in Hertfordshire. It now has a membership of around 650 which includes 130 teachers who are currently participating in the school-based 'Teacher Led Development Work' groups, 45 teachers and LA advisers currently pursuing the MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning, 30 teachers who facilitate TLDW groups or teach on the masters programme, 8 who are members of a 'Leadership Research Group' and many others who have been awarded their masters or certificates and simply want to continue to engage with the network. At the time of writing there are 14 Teacher Led Development Work groups which are sponsored by schools and which hold most of their meetings on school sites. A key characteristic is the way the activities are led and supported largely by members of the network. For example the team of tutors who are associates of the University consists in the main of teachers who are graduates of the masters programme.

The collaboration between the Local Authority and the University began with a masters programme designed to disseminate research based knowledge and, although it included a requirement that students engage in a research project, there was no explicit attempt to support teachers as agents of change. The question of the impact of this course was raised within the first year or two by officers of the local authority who had to decide whether to continue to allocate funding to the programme. With a teaching population of 7-8,000 in Hertfordshire, a cohort of 20 teachers with enhanced personal capacity would have relatively little impact on the professional community as a whole. In order to justify the cost and effort of mounting this programme, it was necessary to transform it into a professional learning community that could have a significant impact on teachers and schools right across the county. This was addressed in two major ways: a) by developing the school based Teacher Led Development Work programme which would be award-bearing but at certificate level and b) by developing a knowledge building network within which teachers on both the masters and the certificate level programmes could share their knowledge, collaborate to critique and accumulate professional knowledge together and disseminate this knowledge throughout Hertfordshire and beyond. This involves network events, a journal, a newsletter and community building strategies designed to engender a sense of belonging and mutual support.

The Teacher Led Development Work concept

A key strategy for creating a programme that would be regarded by the local authority and the schools as a powerful engine for change has been the development of the teacher-led development work concept. This is a way of thinking about the relationship between teacher development and school development, in other words, it embodies a theory about teacher leadership and generates a practical strategy in the form of the TLDW programme.

The essential principles of teacher-led development work have been set out in a number of publications most notably 'Teacher Led Development Work: Guidance and Support' (Frost and Durrant, 2003). TLDW is a particular way of fostering teacher leadership and can be described in a simple way as follows.

Teachers², with or without positions of responsibility:

- taking the initiative to improve practice
- acting strategically with colleagues to embed change
- gathering and using evidence in collaborative processes
- contributing to the creation and transfer of professional knowledge

It is often assumed that an approach fostered by a university must be about research, but this is a misconception. Rather TLDW does not promote the idea of the ‘teacher as researcher’ but instead casts the teacher as a ‘leader of development work’. This is deliberate attempt to guard against what has been called the ‘academic imperialism’ (Elliot, 1991) of universities in foisting upon the teaching profession a way of thinking that does not necessarily lead to improvements in educational practice - here and now. Development work is not a matter of measuring the effects of practices or discovering why certain things happen. Rather it is about leading and managing a process in which those involved – teachers, students, parents, the school as a whole - learn to improve their practice. Such a process may involve such obvious activities such as having discussions with colleagues, reading a report downloaded from the web, gathering pupils’ views about their experience, visiting other classrooms to observe or planning lessons with colleagues. In this context enquiry is a strategy for leading change and creating dialogue rather than an end in itself. These processes may be quite small in scale and scope, but they all contribute to improvement and to building a culture within which pedagogic discourse is increasingly normal.

The TLDW approach casts the teacher as a knowledge builder. This is most obviously about the creation of professional knowledge through enquiry-based development work and this raises questions about how we define knowledge. Our approach corresponds with the Mode 2 knowledge paradigm which is ‘socially distributed, application-oriented, trans-disciplinary, and subject to multiple accountabilities’ (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2003: 179). New professional knowledge is manifest as changed practice and know-how for individual teachers and as enhanced practice embedded in the life of their schools. More challenging perhaps is

² The word ‘teachers’ is intended to include teaching assistants and other educational workers

the question of how teachers can contribute to professional knowledge more widely in the education system. The concept of dissemination is flawed in that professional knowledge is notoriously ‘sticky’ (Hargreaves, 1999) but, in HertsCam we find that it is possible for teachers to contribute by sharing stories about the processes of development they have led which then inspire others to engage in development work themselves. Some of these stories are published in the Teacher Leadership journal and some in the network bulletins and newsletters, but most are told in the live context of a workshop at a network event or through informal networking. Knowledge building as we describe it here is not so much about final recipes for professional action but more a matter of dialogic enrichment whereby the knowledge that is weaved into the fabric of institutional life, systems and communities is enhanced.

Supporting teacher leadership

In HertsCam we try to support teacher-led development work by ensuring that teachers adopt a step-by-step approach to reflection, planning and consultation. The first step is to clarify values and concerns – what is important to the individual teacher, what their perceptions of the priorities are. The next step is to consult colleagues about an agenda for change. It is only after this soul searching and negotiating has been done that the initiative has a chance of being sustained in a given school setting. Once agreement is reached on the value of tackling this or that problem, the teacher can begin to develop a viable action plan – one which is practical and has been discussed with all those who might be affected by it. If this process of negotiation and consultation has been effective, the development work should flow, but it is vital that such development work is supported and orchestrated by senior leadership within the school. Their overview of the structure of the school and its development priorities and their advice and guidance are invaluable.

The second key strategy is to provide supportive contexts for discussion, reflection and planning. Within HertsCam we have two programmes within which this takes place. One is a 2 year masters course ‘The MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning’ which supports more than 40 teachers at any one time. The taught sessions take place in the local authority’s centre with a 2 day residential conference in Cambridge 3 times each year. The tutor team for the

masters consists of some members of the University Faculty of Education working with experienced teachers drawn from the network itself.

The other programme is the Teacher Led Development Work programme which consists of a number of groups (usually about 15) located within schools and led by members of the 30 strong tutor team, one of whom would be an experienced or senior member of staff in the particular school. These groups meet in ‘twilight’ sessions on the school site and attend network events over the course of an academic year. They engage in workshops in which the tutors use tools such as facsimiles, proformas and guide sheets to structure sharing, reflection, planning and reviewing, all designed to help the group members to plan, initiate and sustain development projects. Evidence of participation in the group and evidence of the leadership of the development project is collected in the form of a portfolio which is submitted and assessed for the purposes of the award of a Postgraduate Certificate of Further Professional Studies.

The third key strategy is the support from the senior leadership of the schools who have to be seen as partners rather than clients in this endeavour. This requires a predisposition towards a distributed leadership approach which leads to the development of a professional culture in which innovation, risk-taking, collaboration and knowledge-building are valued and normal. Senior leaders also engage in practical strategies such as mentoring teachers engaged in TLDW projects and inviting teachers to share their experience at senior leadership team meetings. They have also organised events at which teachers mount displays about their projects which their colleagues are then invited to peruse and discuss. In some schools members of the TLDW group have led workshops for all of their colleagues as part of the statutory school-based, professional development programme that all schools in the UK are obliged to run. Accounts of these strategies are beginning to accumulate (see for example Mylles and Frost, 2006; Hill, 2009).

Teacher-led development work in action

How then do the principles of teacher-led development work manifest themselves in the development projects undertaken by teachers in the HertsCam Network? This is illustrated in brief below with reference to the development work of eight teachers from the HertsCam network.

The impetus for teacher-led development work comes from a process of teachers clarifying their values, reflecting on what it is they want to make a difference to and then searching for a way in which they can act strategically to make that change. Adrienne Bullen's work, for example, began with a concern that children in her school struggled to understand the language associated with mathematics. She felt that introducing more discussion into mathematics lessons would help children to overcome their difficulties. She therefore worked collaboratively with teachers to plan lessons which included more opportunities for such discussion, leading staff development sessions to help colleagues to develop their own skills in this area. The joint working which this initial planning prompted continued through Adrienne's project. Teachers came together to discuss what they were learning from the inclusion of more discussion in lessons, and to refine their planning.

Sophie Brace was concerned that boys in her school achieved poorly in Science in comparison with girls. In order to address this she needed to know more about the relationship between the boys' perceptions of themselves, staff expectations and the boys' subsequent achievement. Sophie explored how the boys saw themselves through a process of visualisation. The understanding she developed from this process led her to set up a mentoring programme for the boys. She also worked with colleagues to develop new strategies to engage boys and combat disaffection. Sophie's story is an interesting example of how teacher led development work can extend an individual teacher's capacity for leadership and allow them to extend their influence within their school.

Laura Cambell's development work began with a concern that students were increasingly intolerant of one another's views in class discussions. Laura consulted with her colleagues as to how she might begin to address this issue. She decided to work with one particular class and to talk openly with the students about their views and why they held them. This strategy worked well and allowed students both to reflect on their views and to questions their origin. Their understanding of their own feelings increased, as did their understanding of the nature of prejudice. Students developed an understanding of independent thinking and the importance of being well-informed before making a decision or adopting a particular standpoint. Although her

development work focused on one particular class and a tight focus, it nevertheless gave Laura the experience of leading change, of exercising agency.

This concept of human agency can be seen to be at the heart of many of the HertsCam teachers' projects. Tom Murphy, for example, was concerned at the lack of responsibility taken by some students for their own learning. This manifested itself through students' difficulty in coping with independent study, in regulating their own behaviour and in listening to others. Tom began to develop his own understanding of this by investigating the link between metacognition and independent learning. He then offered his Year 11 students the opportunity to plan and lead their own lessons. As his project developed, he began to discover the potential for his development work to contribute to wider, institutional change. Other colleagues tried similar ideas in their own lessons. Both teachers and students benefitted from this opportunity to take a leading role in the learning process. Acting collectively has meant that Tom and his colleagues have been able to build professional knowledge together which is based on their own practice and the arising discourse. This has been achieved through self-directed action, designed to influence their environment, that is, through the exercise of agency. A story about Tom's project appeared in the *Teacher Leadership* journal and has influenced many other teachers' work (Murphy, 2007).

The relationship between agency and leadership can be explored through an analysis of many of the projects undertaken by members of the HertsCam Network. Mona Chiriac's story, for example, demonstrates how teachers often begin to take action by drawing on the tradition of enquiry to address their professional concerns but move beyond this to lead a process of change. Mona was concerned that in a busy teaching day, teachers deal mainly with the academically successful or behaviourally challenging students who demand our attention in a visible way. She believed that students who are predominantly silent in lessons tend to be left alone and are not acknowledged for who they really are. To begin to address this issue she worked with her colleagues to identify 'silent' students and designed a diary to raise awareness of this group. Following a mid-project evaluation, Mona introduced after-school Encouraging Talk sessions, led by her colleagues. She also involved parents in the initiative. Mona's work has been further developed in many ways including collaboration with local primary schools, and the local education authority and other

government agencies to enhance the transition from primary to secondary school. Her story is a powerful demonstration not only of her own development in terms of the skills and dispositions of leadership but also the power of partnership with colleagues, parents and external agencies.

The power of collaborative working is further evidenced through Cindy Impey's development work, where it is proposed as key to school transformation. Cindy was concerned about the poor language and writing skills across her school. In Key Stage 2, in particular, children struggled to write with imagination and there was a noticeable reluctance to write generally. Feeling that a more interactive approach to writing was needed, Cindy experimented with a dialogic teaching approach. This supported interactive teaching and most importantly emphasised that 'exploration' of ideas was needed before the physical act of writing could be carried out. Cindy shared her progress on her development work with her colleagues who embraced the new way of working and were willing to try different ways of exploring initial ideas before asking pupils to write. Teachers found that the quality of writing improved significantly, especially with the less able children who were well informed before they began to write. This story is an interesting example of how a teacher can act strategically to manage change, drawing colleagues into the process.

The step-by-step approach to reflection, planning and consultation which characterises teacher-led development work is exemplified in Clare Herbert's project. Clare wanted to develop questioning to stimulate the creative thinking of more able writers in her primary school. She understood from the outset the need to involve colleagues in her work if this impact was to be secured. She therefore involved teachers in her school in a variety of ways including formal and informal conversations and staff development activities. Despite this level of planning and strategic action, Clare continued to wrestle with the need to develop ways to ensure that colleagues worked with her rather than for her, to support them in developing as change agents. This dedication to supporting colleagues in developing as extended professionals (Hoyle, 1975) has resulted in Clare emerging from her project with a secure commitment to capacity building and collegiality which will help her in her new role as a Deputy Headteacher.

The success of Caroline Montgomery's development work similarly rested on her adoption of appropriate methodologies to support whole-school change. Caroline wanted to enhance parental engagement with their child's education. Many parents in Caroline's school adopt the role of passive observers rather than partners in the educational process. Events for parents were often designed on a transmission model, rather than being seen as an opportunity to develop meaningful home/school partnerships. Reflecting on students' ability to get otherwise hard-to-reach parents to engage with school, Caroline developed a new approach to transition events. Parents of students about to join the school in Year 7 were invited to attend an evening event with their child at which they met the form tutor and learned together about the school. As a result, parents, teachers and students all came to a new understanding of ways in which they could work in partnership to support children's learning. Caroline's development work thus clearly exemplified the multi-level learning (MacBeath *et al.*, 2006) which is at the heart of teacher leadership.

Conclusion

The description of the work of or network is unashamedly celebratory and we might be accused of being self-congratulatory. There is no doubt that we write with a degree of pride and a sense of achievement. However, we are not complacent and continue to construct what we do as a work in progress. Many of those who join the HertsCam programme stay on as members of the network, taking on the role of TLDW tutor and engaging in evaluation tasks and further research aimed at the development of the network itself. A number of studies at masters level have focused on an evaluation of aspects of the work of the network (eg Mylles, 2005; Hill, 2008) and a Leadership Research Group within HertsCam has led a number of studies designed to subject our work to critical scrutiny. In 2008, a small group within the tutor team launched the International Teacher Leadership project which is also reported within the CARN conference. This project brings together colleagues with similar values and interests from 15 countries in order to engage in a substantial research and development project aimed at testing out current ideas and developing new ideas about how to help teachers develop and enhance their mode of professionalism.

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