A story of change: growing leadership for learning

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Abstract This article examines the process of change in 22 schools which participated in a three year study of leadership spanning seven countries. Quantitative and qualitative measures were used to establish a baseline in each of the schools, providing a basis for discussion at follow up workshops, and offering agendas for schools to work on and to refer to in face-to-face and virtual networking. Finding a common language and common instruments for purposes of comparison proved to be a strength rather than an impediment, as it challenged assumptions and taken-for-granted conventions from the outset and began at an early stage to sow the seeds of change. Over the three years, research teams in the respective country sites monitored the process of change and, through a dialogue among the participating schools, developed a set of leadership for learning principles, together with tools through which to realise those principles in practice. By the end of the three years participating teachers, principals and board members professed to profound changes in their thinking and practice, ascribed to the reframing that occurred by being exposed to differing practices across cultural boundaries.

Introduction

‘Leadership’ and ‘learning’ are two key policy priorities in ‘developed’ countries, yet the link between them remains still contested, as researchers continue to explore correlations and puzzle over intervening variables (see for example Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Mulford & Silins, 2003). A group of researchers at the 15th International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, sought to explore the links between these two areas of policy and to frame a project which would focus on leadership for learning. The group saw this as not only helping conceptual clarification but also making...
the connections meaningful within and among differing cultural traditions, linguistic conventions and school practices.

**Design and methodology**

The result of these initial conversations was an international research project in Leadership for Learning, involving university researchers in eight sites—Brisbane, Australia; Innsbruck, Austria; Copenhagen, Denmark; Oslo, Norway; Athens, Greece; London, England; Trenton (New Jersey) and Seattle (Washington) in the United States, with the University of Cambridge\(^1\) acting as overall project co-coordinator. This selection represented a coalition of interests in the research topic and a commitment to securing local financial support. All countries were undergoing significant policy changes and political upheaval was common to most of them. Elections in Austria, Denmark and Norway had all seen a swing to the political Right. In the UK and the US, the project was set within the growing Bush-Blair alliance, the advent of the ‘‘No Child Left Behind’’ legislation in the States and the creation of a National College of School Leadership in England. Australia saw the re-election of a conservative Howard government, while in Greece the election of a centre-left coalition was greeted by school staff with a sigh of relief.

The Leadership for Learning Project, (known as the Carpe Vitam after its Swedish commissioning body), was funded for three years (2002–2005) by the Wallenberg Foundation in Sweden, with further financial support from participating countries. In each of the eight sites, researchers issued invitations to schools which would be interested in undertaking a collaborative journey into deeper understanding and reframing of practice in leadership for learning. Each university research team then chose three schools, each of which would then send three representatives (principal, teacher and board member or parent) to a launching conference in Cambridge in May, 2002. For schools, and for research teams working with them, the purpose was to create a climate of opportunity for reflection, critique and reframing of these essential constructs.

While the methodology of the project might be described as action research, we came to characterise it as ‘emergent and eclectic’ (Frost & Swaffield, 2004), in acknowledgment of the differing research traditions which each university site brought to their work with schools. In New Jersey, the research team characterised it as appreciative inquiry. In Seattle, the emphasis was on co-construction. In Oslo, work with schools was characterised as ‘action learning’ while in Denmark, researchers framed their activity in terms of ‘collaborative inquiry’. While presenting a challenge from a meta-analysis viewpoint, creating a fusion among different but cognate approaches proved to be a strength of the project, opening up a methodological discourse and informing the collective process of instrument design, data gathering, data sharing, and interpretive work.

The project design included the ongoing support and consultancy of a critical friend, one of the University team with the remit of helping to carry the momentum of the study, acting as a bridge between the research and development processes. Drawing on the experience of other similar projects (MacBeath & Mortimore, 2001; Swaffield, 2004), the intention was to build a relationship of trust such that teachers would feel supported in

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