

Combining forces. Distributed Leadership and a professional learning community in primary and secondary education

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Title: Combining forces. Distributed Leadership and a professional learning community in primary and secondary education.

Authors: Hulsbos, F. A., Van Langevelde, W. S., & Evers, A. T.

Abstract

This report describes an in depth case study of two good practice schools where a *professional learning community* and *distributed leadership* are highly developed. The goal of this study was to learn what conditions in the school support a professional learning community and distributed leadership. We gave specific attention to the supporting role of the school leader. The importance of continuous school improvement is self-evident and is achieved when teachers and school leaders collaboratively address educational issues, also known as a professional learning community (PLC). Within a PLC, school leaders and teachers alike must have the opportunity to take influence. Leadership is therefore not only exercised by the school leader, but is based on expertise, talents and qualities that are necessary for the issues at hand. This is known as distributed leadership (DL). A PLC and DL are combining forces, the sum of both drives the process of school improvement. However, as a previous study shows, teachers and school leaders still often struggle to collaborate and to make use of each other's expertise. After an elaborate selection process - through an online survey and group interviews - two schools in The Netherlands were identified as good practices of a PLC and DL. The selected good practices are: primary school 'Willibrordus' and secondary school 'Vathorst College'. We visited these schools and spoke with and observed teachers and school leaders. In the good practice schools, school leaders combine an informal role to support DL and a PLC and formal tools to necessitate and enable it. Most strikingly is that at Willibrordus and Vathorst the daily work- and educational practices are organised to enable and entice teachers to work together on school improvement and innovation. It seems that these collaborative practices - that are absent in most schools - are what lay the base for DL and a PLC. However, these practices are not sufficient. Additionally, within such a practice teachers and school leaders alike must show or develop the ability to professionally communicate with each other. At Vathorst College and Willibrordus this professional conversation entails giving constructive feedback, communicating openly and approaching the other respectfully. Other highlights from these descriptions are the following. Willibrordus and Vathorst College show a culture that is characterised by a large amount of teacher autonomy, creativity and cooperation between teachers. Both schools lay a strong emphasis on professional development (formally organised and informally supported) that helps teachers to gain new ideas and take influence from their acquired expertise. Finally, in both schools school leaders and teachers hold clear professional expectations of each other. In addition to the insight in the practice of two schools, this study concludes with the following recommendations for school leaders and teachers to stimulate a PLC and DL in their school:

- Create practices that make collaboration inevitable.
- Communicate through a professional dialogue.
- Make radical decisions about the educational practice in line with the school's vision.
- Discuss what it means to be a professional at your school.

Full reference:

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