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Collaborative professional development for distributed teacher leadership towards school change

Professional development that aims to build school change capacity requires spaces for collaborative action and reflection. These spaces should promote learning and foster skills for distributed leadership in managing school change. The present study analyses the case of the Seminar for Critical Citizenship (SCC) established by teachers of infant, primary, secondary and higher education to experiment with and share innovative practices. A focus group was formed firstly to identify which factors SCC participants perceived as influencing the development of this leadership for change, and secondly, to verify whether the SCC offers a space where the development of distributed leadership is promoted. We find that while it enables a network for collaboration, egalitarian dialogue and empowerment, certain tensions persist between theory and practice, and in attitudes towards innovation and school culture.

Keywords: professional development; distributed leadership; action research.

Introduction

The present study focuses on the analysis of a collaborative space for professional development and how this space can develop competences for a distributed teacher leadership for school change.

In many cases the success of educational changes is shaped by teachers' critical capacity, professional self-esteem and degree of autonomy to innovate and be creative (Gale and Densmore 2003; Skrtic 1995). However, teacher education and professional development still continues to be grounded on deficit theory, which justifies the implementation of compensatory educational programmes (Brodin and Lindstrand 2007; Lloyd 2008) and segregation measures in schools (Escudero, González, and Martínez 2009; Sleeter 2009). In order to change schools, trying to make sense of the relationship between the external imperatives and the processes of change in schools, professional development has to promote the a reflective sense about the way that things

are done in each school. Teachers need a collaborative space to negociate their practices meanings and share a context learning as a community of practice (Aincow, Booth, and Dyson 2006, 301).

Teachers' leadership is a key factor in school improvement and can be encouraged through teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond 2006). There is plenty of evidence that the development of capacity for change in schools demands new and sophisticated ways of understanding and exercising leadership in our increasingly complex society (Hallinger and Heck 1996; Harris and Lambert 2003; Mulford 2003; Harris and Muijs 2005; Thomson and Blackmore 2006; Freidman 2007).

Education reform that attempts to ensure access and achievement of all children in schools is possible when leadership is shared widely among members of a school community (Ainscow 2005; Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004; Rayner 2008). Ryan (2006) argued that successful implementation of education reform in regular schools requires three leadership practices. First, it should create fair opportunity for all members in a school community to influence decisions, practices and policies. Second, it needs to be a cooperative process that ensures many individuals work together in diverse ways to make things happen. Third, it should aim to achieve inclusion in all areas of school and beyond and follows the process which is itself inclusive. These three leadership practices are consistent with the distributed perspective on leadership (Mullick, Sharma, and Deppeler 2013).

The term distributed leadership admits some confusion: its conceptual elasticity is considerable. And this very lack of conceptual clarity does not allow for a clear operationalisation of the concept in empirical research (Hartley 2007; Storey 2004).

We understand distributed leadership as Harris and Spillane (2008, 31) do: multiple leaders, formally recognized or not, engage in a wide range of leadership and management activities, where "*leadership and managenment play out in tandem in practice*" (Spillane and Diamond 2007, 152-153).

In this sense, distributed leadership is a democratic and participative leadership because shifts influence away from the top of the organisational hierarchy towards the work teams and teachers themselves. The dynamics of open inquiry play a major role, in which the pursuit of shared aims generates a nodal cooperative process in which each of its parts is an equally important element of the whole (Trujillo et al. 2011). Interpersonal and group dynamics are vital to this process: listening respectfully, concern to know and understand others, efficient communication, teamwork, involvement in continuous dialogue, creation of forums in which everyone has a voice, etc. These values are realised through actions that enable teachers to lead innovation and contribute to the development of professional knowledge (Frost 2008).

The idea of 'distributed leadership' has triggered some considerable discussion within the discourse about school leadership. Much of the analysis has remained at the conceptual level and there is a clear need for much more exploration of practice and consequence within schools (Storey 2004). A distributed perspective is seen as a desirable way for staff in schools to work together, constituting workforce reform. However, such objectives do not necessarily reflect the realities of teachers' professional aspirations, identities and practices (Torrance 2013).

Its theoretical construction has been fundamentally artificial, to large extent serving a political rather than educational purpose. It has become yet another *'slogan or banality'*, a universally accepted truth not requiring explanation or justification (Ozga

and Jones 2006, 6), providing legitimization for workforce reform, presenting policy in a pill palatable for the profession to swallow, inciting little confrontation.

Parallel to this emerging body of research has been a small, yet significant articulation of a range of typologies of distributed leadership and how these should shape further research of school leadership practice; it is as though some pieces of a jigsaw are evident without knowing the full picture (Youngs 2009).

Taking into account the limitations of the concept of distributed leadership in its pedagogical perspective, we consider that the way to develop this concept of distributed leadership in teachers professional development related to intercultural and inclusive schools, could be throughout action research processes. Its participatory nature, based on a long-term commitment to working together, takes teachers out of their traditional isolation towards a new, collaborative school culture orientated to change (Dooner, Mandzuk, and Clifton 2008; Zwart, Wubbles, Bergen, and Bolhuis 2007; Author 2011). It can favour empowerment of teachers and the school community (Kailin 2002; Magos, 2007). It's a channel for developing the capacity of school communities to expose and challenge deeply entrenched deficit views of 'difference', which define certain types of students as 'lacking something' (Ainscow 2005; Trent, Artiles, and Englert 1998). Angelides' research (2010) shows how small internal collaborative networks can contribute to school improvement.

As teacher trainers and external school assessors, we believe that it is essential to create, through action research processes, spaces for horizontal, cooperative participation among teachers where they feel that change is possible (Leeman 2003). In this line, we have worked with others to create a space for professional development, the Seminar for Critical Citizenship (SCC), in which a group of teachers meets every month to analyse their classroom practices to improve them (Ainscow 2002; Armstrong

and Moore 2004). Our aim in this paper is to learn whether this space for professional development provides the tools to encourage distributed leadership that drives school change. The case study that we present tries to enlight what are the needs of teachers participants to change their teaching and school culture. The analysis of a focus group points out how they perceive that SCC can help them to improve their competences to become educational leaders to promote the school change.

Case study

Context

The Seminar for Critical Citizenship (SCC) on the intercultural inclusive school, an initiative of our university, is a group of 15 teachers from various infant, primary, secondary and higher education institutions. This collaborative working structure emerged in 2005 after its participants had attended various teacher training courses on inclusive practices and intercultural education. The basic working methodology followed in the Seminar is action research (Elliott 1991; Elliott and Norris 2011), with a perspective of reflection on practice for social reconstruction. Our participation in the SCC can be seen as an opportunity for professional development and leadership, since it is based on three basic procedural principles: to start from our own professional experience, to compare our professional practices with the theory, and to consider the SCC as a peer training experience. The SCC's activities take four general forms: a) presentation of practical cases to problematise and analyse possible courses of action, using as framework for the analysis the items of Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow 2002); b) planning and implementation of collaborative practices (jigsaw by Aronson, peer tutoring, collaborative teaching) among SCC members; c) discussion and reflection on current issues related to inclusive intercultural education (shared readings);

and d) dissemination of experiences analysed in educational forums and meetings.

SCC members meet monthly and every session is coordinated and facilitated by one volunteer member who share a problematic case or an innovative practice that is experiencing in his/her classroom. The initial questions come from problematic classroom situations that teachers identify in their everyday practices. We explore them using dimensions and items of Index for Inclusion and then we start an action research process: problem definition, evidences research, action proposals, implementation and reflection for a new action (shared at SCC).

Methodology

A focus group was formed at the beginning of the 2010-11 academic year, which together with participant observation of the sessions over the five years of the SCC's history, enabled us to respond to the following research questions: Why do teachers need a space like SCC? What key factors are needed to became an educational (distributed) leader? Is the SCC a space where learning for distributed leadership takes place?

The focus group met on 14 September 2010; the meeting was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Eight members of the SCC participated in the focus group session. The participants sample was selected from the 15 members of SCC in order to ensure the presence of teachers from different backgrounds and educational levels:

Table I. Focus Group Participants

The focus group questions related to research questions were some of the following ones: Why are you a member of SCC? What are you learning in SCC? What do you expect from SCC? How SCC can help you to change your school?

It is not our intention to generalize or overestimate/overvalue the results of this study. Our main aim is to use the particularities of SCC to gather evidence which helps improve the professional development of teachers. The sample size and the qualitative analysis of Focus Group in the context of SCC, determine the possibilities to generalize the findings.

Regarding to data analysis, the categorisation process was mixed. Content units were first separated according to thematic and deductive criteria, based on central questions developed in the Focus group. These *a priori* categories were used to perform a subsequent inductive process of open coding by reading and examining the material to be analysed (Strauss 1987). The content analysis was performed using the MaxQDA software program. The results were validated by triangulation using persistent observation of the research team members who regularly participate in the SCC sessions, peer comments from members of the research team do not participate in the SCC and the participants' review of categories (Bogdan and Biklen 1982). All those involved were aware of the aim of the study and showed a positive, collaborative attitude to participating in the session, and in their subsequent commentaries on the content analysis.

Results

The results of the focus group are presented below. They reflect the perceptions that the teachers from the Seminar have of their, of key factors for, and of the role of the SCC in fostering distributed leadership.

Starting point for SCC

The Seminar for Critical Citizenship was formed as a result of interest from a group of teachers who wished to continue training together on different methodological and

organizational aspects of their teaching practices.. Consequently, all the members of this group are professionals who feel the need to change their practices due to dissatisfaction with the way their classes are working.

Several participants mentioned that this dissatisfaction motivated them to make changes, and that they wanted to take a different approach because they felt their current practices were not working.

> "Every course, because you've been teaching for many years and you always have the feeling that you have to improve, you have to change, that you're not happy with what you're doing, so I think this dissatisfaction is what makes you come here. And it's what stops you from doing certain things and the insecurity that you're not doing it well drives you on and spurs you to keep on changing." (SS1)

Some teachers in the group saw themselves as intrepid, and identified with a professional model that aims to leave behind routine and tradition.

> "I am a bit intrepid and rash, very rash, and I often start doing things in class without knowing how they will turn out, and sometimes they turn out well, and sometimes they don't." (SS3)

This process is an endless circle, in which one is never completely satisfied with the solution that has been tried out, but experimentation itself provides the motivation to continue. Another essential factor is the search for meaning in one's everyday activities. Continuous search and the courage to innovate do not come from simple improvisation or "doing for its own sake", but from the imperative one feels to improve one's practice. These improvements are made in situations that are considered unfavourable, that have no pre-set solution, and each person has to take them on in their own way. It involves experimenting, trying things out, changing, perhaps, on occasions, without much reflection or connection between the implicit theories and practice; it involves sounding out bold initiatives with others to see whether they make sense, since they are not taken into account or encouraged in the school culture.

The participants also typically felt lonely. In some cases they feel like outsiders who did not fit in with the methodological and educational lines of their institutions.. Faced with this loneliness, the participants look for a type of training that keeps them motivated and enables them to improve their strategies for innovation, by joining together with others and sharing doubts about their attempts to find solutions.

> "After doing the course, we said: <Right, so now we've got this. Let's try it ourselves, let's give it a go>; and then we've used feedback, I mean we have said that this has worked or that hasn't worked and … it's been a great way of working."(SS1)

It could be said that dissatisfaction and intrepidity is what motivates change, whereas loneliness is what drives the search for other types of professional development in collaborative spaces like the SCC. It could be said that these teachers make good candidates for motivating and encouraging other teachers in their schools to innovate. They could even become drivers and catalysts of change as pedagogical leaders in their schools. However, the changes they are developing in their classes do not easily become established and spread through the rest of the school.

Barriers for a leadership that brings about school change

When we asked the SCC participants about the key factors to enhance change in schools, they identified a series of obstacles that prevented their innovations from being recognised, promoted and extended within their schools. One of the first obstacles they encountered was an attitude of resistance to innovation amongst their colleagues. They were reticent to share classes or to carry out activities that would provide support within the classroom. They identified a prevailing individualism that stands in the way of dialogue and collaboration. This makes it difficult to 'inspire' their colleagues; they seem unwilling to meet the challenge to transform their practices, and they settle into a culture of complaint, rather than providing a response to social changes.

> "The thing is I know that most of my colleagues, however much we revise the course, will continue doing just the same as they have always done, as they did the year before, and some of them who are even older than I am, continue doing the same as they did twenty-five years ago." (PS2)

Secondly, the SCC participants mention the lack of involvement and engagement of school management teams, which are essential if any school change is to be effective (King 2011). SCC members point out how these school management teams, as formal leaders, don't delegate authority and power among the school staff.

> "Involvement of the management team, maybe the most I can hope for is that the management team will be sensitive to initiatives that people want to take, that at least they don't put more … that they value you and say:<go on, if you want to do that .. you've got, there is no problem, we can give you..>" (SEN)

They seem to adopt a more generalist approach based on school regulations, but educational leadership, based on the teaching-learning process, appears to be absent. By becoming mere administrators of externally imposed regulations, with no contextual criteria or internal consensus, they lose much of their authority and seem to avoid conflict situations.

> "…And not only that, not only that, if you make a request and say: 'well, I'll take the bull by the horns and speak to the head', then the head says, 'I'll call the school inspector, and see if it's possible'" (SS3)

The management team's relinquishment of pedagogical leadership has severe consequences for promoting a collaborative culture among teachers and educational innovation. Perhaps that is why teachers settle for working on small projects involving two people that do not interfere with the overall running of the institution. For this reason they once again see themselves as "daring outsiders", exactly the opposite of a pedagogical leader working within a philosophy of inclusive or distributed leadership. They also identify other barriers to leading change such as employment bureaucracy; the size of the school, which makes productive meetings difficult, the lack of time for

reflection, and poor communication among teachers and with the families. These factors frequently remain invisible in the organisational fabric of the school or within its hidden agenda of power relations. When classroom teaching practices are analysed in the SCC, the culture generated in each school and the management styles that either encourage or hamper school innovation and change not always are identified and interlinked with each participant's own educational theories.

The resulting need for distributed leadership

SCC participants are aware of these attitudinal barriers and of the school culture; however, they also have clear ideas on some of the critical strategies and factors for developing a distributed leadership in their schools to pave the way for a gradual shift towards intercultural and inclusive approaches.

The participants consider it essential to set up teams that stimulate change, small groups that are committed and involved. Their task is to collect and analyse evidence, to find solutions to everyday problems, by listening to what the community has to say, and helping to prioritise and bring these views to the attention of the management team and the staff. This is a logical response to the attitude of management teams that prevent innovation initiatives from taking root in the school culture. They need a management team that consults and reaches consensus on projects, rather than imposing its will.

> "So, I would do a little training on team building. In the school there would be a team of people called the inclusive school team, or the cooperative learning team, that would be present and would keep interest alive." (SS1)

Teachers emphasise that these are working groups, with open participation and commitment from everyone; they are mixed, non-hierarchical committees, based on a formula of 'infection': showing and convincing through enthusiasm, by opening up classroom doors and sharing the experience.

> "I think there could be a simple answer to this; just say 'Look, let's have a small committee of seven or eight teachers who examine it'. But I don't think this would work because when something is slotted into a hierarchy, then the spirit of what we are pursuing is lost... and what's more, if other people do it on my behalf, then my job is over, they'll tell me what I have to do"

The participants frequently highlighted the importance of going slowly, one step at a time. Small experiences are consolidated and expanded, otherwise colleagues appear to lose motivation and give up.

> "So the thing is to do things little by little, step by step. Training, action and then information." (PS2)

To spread this culture of collaboration for innovation, they therefore consider shared teaching to be essential, generating group cohesion based on trust, seeking consensus on criteria, identifying shared values and interests where they can converge. Seeking out informal spaces in which to meet and share is often more helpful than other more formal strategies. A climate of mutual care should be created that implies emotional engagement in a shared educational project, and provides the tools and opportunities for ashared global view of the situation in the school. They call for more pedagogical staff meetings, space and time for shared reflection on teaching practices, dissemination of their experiences among the educational community and society, by publicising their achievements and progress.

> "What is most important is what XXX said, that the group should be really cohesive, so it's a close-knit group and then when someone takes an initiative, she can trust the group" (SEN)

The SCC participants' contributions identify some highly relevant aspects for developing distributed leadership, taking into account the perceived tensions between innovative culture, power relations and the strategies of resistance to change.

What the SCC contributes to distributed leadership

Our five-year experience of participant observation in the SCC allows us to add to the participants' assessment of what the SCC contributes to distributed leadership.

Share and learn from other innovation experiences: the SCC has provided a space for the exchange of shared learning experiences, peer mediation, interactive groups, project work and cooperative learning. Sharing initiatives based on inclusive methodologies has fostered peer learning, mutual recognition, horizontal relationships and collaboration in a group where diversity is respected. For the SCC participants 'know-how' is essential, along with experimentation, learning from the experiences of colleagues and their circumstances, and trying out similar strategies in their own contexts.

> "Listening to your colleagues, what they say, the things they say, their contributions… you learn from that, and then sharing experiences also helps you. One person contributes something, then another adds something else and you think, 'Well, I hadn't thought of that, I'll try it, it sounds interesting!'" (SEN)

However, experimentation *per se* does not justify the learning space; what the SCC also contributes is shared reflection.

*A space for shared reflection on practice***:** It is important not only to demonstrate practice one-dimensionally, but to problematise it, to discover the most troublesome aspects and the factors that have helped make the experience a success. In fact, the practices count as attempts to respond to a problem that arises in the classroom, based on the evidence that is gradually gathered, by incorporating reflection on them, following the stages of action research.

> "it's a question of tackling problems and of talking about what has worked well, and what doesn't work". (PS1)

In reality, practices are described as tentative actions in response to a problem that arises in the classroom. Alternatives are suggested based on evidence gathered from

how the innovations have developed, and reflection on the action is incorporated. Comparing and contrasting in a small group is therefore essential, since each person accepts that his or her own practices will be subjected to pedagogical critic, thereby creating a kind of professional learning community as an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other to inquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches to enhance student learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas 2006).

Teachers consider theory important to learning (they are in an academic environment and can not totally reject it), but they regard practice as a more valuable way of actually learning to do, of being in touch with reality. Thus, they do not see a clear integration of theory and practice, but they do recognise the need to combine the two in order to provide feedback and continue learning. Although there is an agreement that relationships in the SCC are horizontal, and that learning takes place among colleagues, the conception of teacher training by experts still remains. Teachers in SCC ask for experts sessions, where to contrast theoretical models and strategies (cooperative learning for instance), with their own practices in classroom. According to the participants, these experts are conversant with the theory and need to be brought into meetings to provide a holistic vision of the practice. The theory explains what can we do in the classroom, but frequently fails to understand the context factors which is what the participants are most concerned about.

> "It's always good to have more theoretical training; some of the lectures and sessions we have shared here have helped you to see more things, but I'd like to look at practical experiences, because I think it's the best way to know what you can or can't do." (SS2).

Proposals for shared activities: In the last two years, the group has embarked on some initiatives for shared teaching or interactive groups among SCC members.

Having seen the success of the experience, participants have been emboldened to suggest cooperating with colleagues from their own schools and institutions. This shared activities proposal has opened the classroom doors and brought about a collaborative strategy beyond the SCC space, and has enabled it to spread among colleagues from their own schools who have joined the SCC to continue their inquiry..

Dissemination of the experiences: In the last three years, SCC participants have been encouraged to present their practices and reflections at conferences, congresses and educational meetings as papers or even workshops. This has allowed the knowledge generated within the SCC to be systematised and disseminated, lending value and recognition to the experiences carried out. The diffusion of these reflective practices was organized among the participants in SCC sessions and supported by research member group, but there were no involvement from management teams in each school.

Discussion and conclusions

It could be said that the Seminar for Critical Citizenship provides a series of learning experiences that because of their methodology and content, can encourage distributed leadership: it empowers its members to continue innovating, it gives them confidence through collaboration and it creates a network of professional support. Collaboration and shared reflection are capacities they learn and give them feedback to continue experimenting.

The results portray a group of teachers with an interest in innovation, who are concerned and recognise the need to innovate as a result of their dissatisfaction with the way their practices do not turn out as they wish, and who are motivated to constantly improve their practices. The five-year period of the SCC has provided a space for a

series of learning experiences, defined by the participants, and which we consider essential to raising their awareness as agents of change in the classroom.

The search for meaning in response to their dissatisfaction and loneliness is the starting point for change and collaborative professional development. Training for professional development focused on school and social transformation should provide the framework and tools to empower teachers as agents of change.“ ‘Leader as teacher’ is not about ‘teaching’ people how to achieve their vision. It is about fostering learning for everyone” (Senge 1990, 356).

In school communities in which leadership is distributed throughout the system, school improvement begins with a teacher’s internal search for meaning, relevance and connection (Mitchell and Sackney 2000). Fullan (2007) advocated the need to close the knowing-doing gap, and to do so by learning in context and developing one’s skills by doing. Teacher learning therefore demands capacity building with a focus on results and a disposition towards action.

Much of the literature on peer coaching, as a process in which some professional colleagues work together for a specific, predetermined purpose in order that teaching performance can be improved, suggests that teachers’ professional development can be enhanced by experimentation, observation, reflection, the exchange of professional ideas, and shared problem-solving (Bergen, Engelen, and Derksen 2006; Zwart et al. 2007). Muijs and Harris (2006) found that activities related to teacher leadership such as teacher collaboration, partnership or professional networking had a positive effect on teachers’ morale and their sense of self-efficacy.

However, our study finds out a certain tension between innovation culture and school culture in the teacher’s discourse that problematizes the capability of SCC as a professional space where teachers can break down barriers between innovative practices

implemented in their classrooms and traditional school culture (Torrance, 2013). The individualism and bureaucratisation of teachers' work accentuate attitudes of resistance in situations where clear pedagogical leadership and a shared educational model are absent. Similarly, there is tension between theory, educational models and teaching practices. Lack of time and space for shared reflection in school prevent a true collaborative culture from emerging in the school. Innovation is an isolated activity, subject to the disposition of those teachers who – on their own and in a minority – decide to initiate changes in their classrooms and seek out allies among their colleagues. Also the team management support is essential in a hieralchical institution, so principals have to support teachers by empowering them to create collaborative learning cultures and professional learning communities (King, 2011).

In this vein, networking can offer a way to overcome the tensions between the need for professional change and resistance to change in the school culture, and already has sufficient theoretical grounding to demonstrate its benefits in generating pedagogical knowledge and encouraging improvements (Muijs, West and Ainscow 2010; Katz and Earl 2010).

The SCC is a suitable space to develop these skills, based on action research; however, more emphasis should be placed on the relationship between classroom practices and organisational aspects of the school in a era of major globalized changes, to lend its innovations a more structural and sustainable meaning. The analysis and reflection on practices should include not only the methodological change in classroom but also community participation strategies for democratizing school structure. The issue of how to develop more effective forms of education for all is arguably the biggest challenge facing school systems throughout the world (Ainscow and Sandill 2010).

In line with these conclusions, this is the challenge for SCC in the coming years.

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