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Teachers Exercising Leadership (TEL): Challenges and Opportunities

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Teacher Leadership

Key element in improvement efforts in Education:

Within the view of schools as learning communities,
teachers are encouraged to exercise leadership and to
engage themselves in improvement and change in the
settings in which they work.

Teacher Leadership

Rather than focusing only on given roles, responsibilities and structures, teacher leadership is about the ways in which teachers make a difference in their contexts through agency and participation in innovative initiatives at school.

Teacher Leadership and professionalism

The extent to which teachers are able to engage in strategic action for change depends on the way their professionalism is perceived by themselves and their colleagues and on the conditions for them to exercise leadership, to lead innovations in schools and to transform their educational practice (Lieberman & Miler, 2004; Frost & Durrant, 2002; Frost & Durrant, 2003; Durrant, 2004).

Teacher Leadership and professionalism

While in many contexts terms such as distributed leadership have been used widely in the literature, they also have tended to focus rather on capacity building of heads of departments and other management teams at school (Naylor, Gkolia, & Brundrett, 2006).

Teacher Leadership and professionalism

Others tend to emphasise the informal kind of leadership in which teachers engage in order to enhance their professionalism and to make a difference in their work and in the schools in which they work.

Teacher Leadership and professionalism

Research on teacher leadership would need therefore to account for the ways in which teacher professionalism is constructed within policy and institutional settings.

The aim of the project is to understand the realities of teachers and schools and to develop practical work through teacher leadership initiatives in a context of profound changes in Education.

Teacher Leadership and professionalism

Frost asks: has the potential of teachers to exercise leadership in pursuit of educational transformation been fully realised?

In this context, we also might ask: what are the challenges, the threats and the opportunities for teachers to exercise leadership in the settings in which they work?

The Portuguese context

Time of challenging circumstances in Portugal at the economic, financial and political level with impact upon Education in general and teachers' work in particular (school governance, educational policy, teacher career, teacher education, etc.)

The Portuguese context

In 2007, a new Teacher Career Statute (Decree-Law number 15/2007, 19th January) was issued stipulating the existence of two categories of teachers and the principles of differentiation and hierarchy in the teaching career along with teacher appraisal mechanisms:

- Senior teachers
- Classroom teachers

The Portuguese context

The situation before 2007: teacher career and teacher appraisal

Teacher Career Statute (1990) was based upon the principle of a “single career”.

All teachers would follow the same path in order to progress to the top of their career.

In general, progression was understood as a “matter of time” in so far as it was dependent upon years of experience, a number of credits obtained for attending In-Service education courses (1 credit per year corresponding to 25 hours of training) and the writing up of a critical reflection on one’s own practice.

The Portuguese context

The Teacher Career Statute (2007) and its main features

The new Teacher Career Statute was issued in 2007 and was justified by the government with the need to “promote the cooperation amongst teachers” and to “reinforce coordination roles” at school which require a new structure for the teaching career based upon the principles of differentiation.

It was also related to the need to introduce a “more demanding system for teacher performance appraisal with effects on the development of teachers’ career” making it possible to “identify, promote and reward the merit and to value the teaching activity” .

The Portuguese context

The Teacher Career Statute (2007) and its main features

Introduction of an “exam” on “knowledge and competencies” is now required for all those entering the teaching profession in order to “demonstrate the mastery of knowledge and competencies required to teach”.

A “probationary year” (in order to verify the abilities of the new teacher) was also introduced during which the new entrant is accompanied by a senior teacher with specialised training in educational organisation and curriculum development, pedagogical supervision and teacher training.

The Portuguese context

Four main dimensions to assess teacher performance:

- i) professional, social and ethical dimension;
- ii) development of teaching and learning;
- iii) participation in school activities and relationship with the community;
- iv) training and professional development within a lifelong perspective.

The Portuguese context

Critical issues:

- Lack of recognition of assessors
- The quota system
- Bureaucracy and the summative dimension of evaluation
- Heavy workload
- Tensions and competitiveness amongst teachers
- Low morale
- ...

Research Goals

- i) to understand the wider social, cultural and political setting and the policy environment in which teachers' work is framed, especially in terms of challenges and opportunities;
- ii) to analyse the professional and organisational culture and structures of the schools in which teachers work;
- iii) to understand the ways in which teachers construct their professionalism;
- iv) to develop strategies in order to enhance teacher leadership in schools.

Activities

- literature review,
- survey on teacher professionalism and wider policy context of teaching in a sample of schools nationwide;
- interviews to key informants about professional culture and organisational features of the schools (e.g. headteachers, leadership team; heads of departments),
- portraiture to examine school culture (with teachers and students);
- focus group with teachers to explore further issues of teacher professionalism and teacher leadership (challenges and opportunities);
- development and evaluation of strategies to involve teachers exercising leadership in their schools (to be selected according to findings from previous data collection);
- evaluation of the impact of leadership initiatives in the participating schools.

Outcomes

This project also seeks to contribute to inform policy and practice in improvement efforts and educational reform and to serve as a basis for further research.

It also aims to foster teachers' voices by supporting them in leading change in their schools through the exercise of leadership and a deeper understanding of their professionalism (from within).

Outcomes

Apart from the political, cultural, social contexts in which it is framed, the vision and ways in which teachers look at themselves as professionals (and their sense of identity) needs to be considered to be able to understand and (re)define the nature and scope of teacher professionalism:

For at the end of the day, teacher professionalism is what teachers and others experience it as being, not what policy makers and others assert it should become. The experience of professionalism and of its denial are to be found by studying the everyday work of teaching (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996, pp. 22-23)