



University of Minho
Institute of Education

Teachers Leading Innovation in Challenging Times: A Case Study in Portugal

Maria Assunção Flores
aflores@ie.uminho.pt

Ermelinda Correia
University of Minho, Portugal

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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.

Key assumptions

The project seeks to develop teachers' professionalism.

Within this research project, teacher leadership involves not only teachers leading learning in their classrooms, but also leadership of innovation and the building of professional knowledge within and beyond their classrooms and schools.

This also includes the analysis of the political and cultural contexts of the development of teacher leadership and the ways in which cultural factors shape the strategies that can support it.

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.

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.)

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.

A case study

Collaborative action research (CAR) project developed in 2009/2010 in a secondary school in northern Portugal

The goals of the project were:

- to stimulate teachers' reflection upon their role as teachers and their sense of professionalism;
- to analyse issues related to school and professional cultures;
- to reflect and improve teachers' practice in classrooms.

A case study

10 teachers participated in the project:
five were male and five female,
aged between 35 and 45 years,
with years of experience ranged from 5 to 16 years
with years of service in the present school ranging from 1 to 10 years.
Overall, 10 sessions were developed in which 10 ICT teachers engaged in reflection, collaboration, learning and action according to the basic principles of action research.

The tutor of the group was herself an ICT teacher in the same school. A combination of methods was used for data collection such as individual interviews, reflective written texts, focus group, debates, field notes, etc.

A case study

Findings suggest a positive view, despite some challenges and constraints related to their professional lives at school namely in result of recent policies from the Ministry of Education, particularly in regard to teacher performance appraisal and school governance.

Expectations:

Positive expectations about the CAR project for its novelty , especially regarding the benefits they could get from it in terms of learning, understanding and collaboration. The non-existence of bureaucratic devices was seen as a potential for the CAR project.

A case study

They stated that they were used to have meetings together as they belong to the same department/subject group (ICT teachers), but they do recognise that issues such as student behaviour, student learning, amongst others, were discussed in a non-systematic way.

“Maybe in this more informal atmosphere, where we can get rid of bureaucracy, we can get a better understanding about how to solve problems we have to deal with at school...” (P1)

“I think that we may help one another in sorting out our problems... without fear...” (P4)

“...just the fact that we don't need to fill in loads of forms and to listen to information is important. We can talk about our work and focus on it. Nobody will sort our problems out. We have to try and do something about it” (P8)

A case study

Other teachers suggested motivation and innovation in regard to the nature of the CAR project itself . They found it interesting and with potential for their professional development and growth as a group.

As far professional relationships amongst teachers are concerned, the participants do not show a clear view. Some of them think that teachers mistrust each other and have very poor relationships with each other which may be associated with recent policy changes in education, namely teacher performance appraisal as it has introduced a summative and bureaucratic model which has led to conflict and competitiveness amongst teachers due to the existence of a quota system.

“I think that teachers’ relationship could be better in our school” (P5)

“Teachers tend to work individually and this does not facilitate trust amongst teachers” (P10)

A case study

However, other teachers believe that teachers are part of the “same family” and they support each other.

“Teachers share materials and experiences.” (P2)

“I think that teachers are not together because they have timetables that do not facilitate it” (P4)

A case study

When asked about the ways in which teachers work, a minority points to individualism in the classroom, whereas others state that teachers do collaborate in teaching, in planning, in professional learning and internal evaluation of the school:

“In general there is isolation and individualism, even though some teachers do collaborative work” (P1)

“By and large, teachers work in isolation, they only collaborate when they are asked to do so.” (P5)

The participants recognise that collaboration or individualism and isolation are dependent upon various factors such as teachers themselves, the kinds of subject matter they teach and the dynamics of the group/ department in which they work.

A case study

As for the existence of a shared vision about the school, the majority of the teachers (7 out of 10) do not agree nor disagree.

“There are different points of views. The majority of the teachers support the headteacher and have a similar view of the priorities. If we talk about parents and students, there are, of course, different perspectives...” (P1)

“I think that some teachers have a common vision of the school” (P10)

Other teachers claim that there is no shared vision at the school due to recent change in the governance of the school, namely in regard to the existence of the headteacher (appointed role) instead of the collegial body who used to run the school and that was elected amongst teachers.

“I think that teachers do not share a common vision due to recent changes in the school management.” (P5)

A case study

In general, teachers value the benefits of collaborative work at various levels, in terms of sharing, support, exchange information, and so on. They emphasise planning as a team activity in order to get the best results.

When asked about teachers' leadership and about their influence in school, again ambivalence and ambiguity characterise their view. If they think that teachers are capable of doing teaching, they are not so sure about how to influence their colleagues and making a difference at school.

"I think that teachers know how to teach, but they do not know how to exercise leadership" (P7)

Final thoughts

Despite existing culture in which ambiguity and ambivalence prevailed, the participants tend to value the process and outcomes of the CAR project:

- non-existence of paperwork;
- informal context and open atmosphere;
- focus on their real problems (mainly related to classroom, e.g. student motivation and behaviour)
- support from the group

But...

- difficulties in regard school culture as a whole;
- limited influence on colleagues;
- professional relationships and quota system (TPA)
- school leadership (shared vision, mobilisation, teacher participation), etc.

Final thoughts

These and other issues will be explored further within the project.

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) need 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)