Are School Visions Sustainable? Assessing the Relevance of Senge's Notion of Shared Visions

Leon Benade
New Zealand Tertiary College

Outline
- Introductions
- Justification for study
- Discussion of method
- Interactive boredom-breaker
- Findings
- Further investigation prospects

My recent background
- Research focus includes:
  - Policy effects, implementation (thesis focused on The New Zealand Curriculum)
  - Interest in the establishment of communities of critical professional enquiry
  - What is the role of leadership in these two areas of interest?
- As independent educational consultant, I worked closely with many N.Z. schools
  - Senior leader appraisals, BOT training, strategic planning and ERO reviews
  - Key focus implementation of The New Zealand Curriculum.
  - Long-term contracts with dozen schools
  - One of these was the case study school
- Now at NZTC, I coordinate a postgraduate programme that includes teaching a leadership paper

Why is this study important?
- A critical approach to policy implementation must be vision-led
  - Imagined futures
  - Evaluate the possible effects of these futures
  - Develop that future in consultation across a wide front
  - Aids development of a knowledge democracy (cf Pine)
  - A conscious and well-considered engagement with policy, rather than top-down or bolt-on approach

Visions
- Dictates
  - where an organisation wants to be
  - the kind of organisation it seeks to become
- Therefore a key element of the overall strategic statements of purpose that include mission and values
- Are these statements sustainable?
- Do all schools have the capacity to develop statements that will lead them to becoming communities?

The case study
- It is a new (establishment) RC school
  - It has strong statements of purpose
  - Does the construction and maintenance of these statements and sense of purpose have lessons for other schools?
- Does what Senge says about shared visions and their sustainability hold true for this case study school?
- I approached the school and gained ethical clearance from its BOT to conduct the small-scale study
- This is a pilot study that will inform on-going study into sustainability and self-review
Method

- "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).
- Frame of reference is critical, not quasi-experimental.
- Discourse analysis that acknowledges positioning of researcher and participants.
- "The language user is not a detached communicator... but is always located... struggling to take her or his own social and cultural positioning into account." (Taylor P 9, emph in original)
- Four semi-structured interviews:
  - Foundation principal
  - Senior leader closely involved with establishment process
  - Foundation teacher
  - New(ish) teacher
- Core interview questions based on Senge’s concept of shared visions.

Boredom breaker

- Work in groups of 2 or 3.
- Each group discuss and answer an assigned question.
- Apply the questions to what you know about the vision of the organisation in which you work.
- Time permitting, choose any other question to discuss.
- Speed feedback to whole group.

Questions

- Describe in general terms your relationship to the vision.
- How did the vision originate?
- What underpins the vision?
- How is the vision reinforced and what effect does this have?
- What kind of role do you see for interpersonal relationships in maintaining the vision?
- Is the vision always open for debate and/or is there room for divergent views?
- Is there a place for on-going inquiry in maintaining the vision?
- Does the vision help to correct organisational error?

Findings

- Did the leadership have the capacity to create a vision of a creative learning and caring community?
  - Tremendous drive and passion of EC.
  - Sought to place traditional RC and scholastic values in C21st context.
  - Principal is lead advocate of that vision.
  - However, sense of corporate responsibility and accountability for vision is strong.

Findings (cntd)

- Is there a commitment to creating and maintaining a shared vision?
  - Each participant emphasised Senge’s view that individuals must connect to the larger purpose of the organisation.
  - BUT: not enough for individuals in a school to just be people of vision—they have to have the capacity to share this vision.
  - Democratic commitment to school-wide collaboration critical.
  - Repeated attention to developing shared understanding across entire community.
  - Importance of on-going enquiry into vision not clear-cut.

Findings (cntd)

- What is the link between vision and values?
  - All participants unequivocal in view that RC and Marian values underpin the vision.
  - These values are more important than the vision.
  - The values are constantly reinforced and promoted (value of discourse).
Findings (last)

- Is the vision sustainable?
  - Critical to maintain the charism (how does this relate to a non-SC school?)
  - The role and person of the principal is critical to this maintenance (and promotion)
  - The role of the BOT and its individual members likely to be as important
  - Corporate self-governmentality suggests significant staff commitment
  - Appropriate recruitment policies and practices underpin these findings above

Where to next?

- What is the role of care in developing and maintaining vision?
- How can communities of critical professional enquiry be established that develop not only deprivatised practices but also the capacity for communal self-reflection?
- How do state schools develop as creative learning and caring communities, with sustainable visions and statements of purpose?

References


Popov, L. (2000). The virtues project: Simple ways to create a culture of character. Austin, TX: PRO-ED Inc.


Contact details:

Dr Leon Benade
New Zealand Tertiary College
Level 2
1 Marewa Rd
Greenlane
Auckland 1051
New Zealand
leon.benade@nztertiarycollege.ac.nz