

Leadership for teacher learning

Sylvia Robertson

Research from around the world supports the involvement of school leaders in teacher learning (Dinham, 2008; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). In New Zealand, Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) found ‘promoting and participating in teacher learning and development’ (p. 95) a highly significant dimension of leadership for improved student learning outcomes. My experience in schools across New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom led me to question why some schools have rich professional learning communities while in others, teachers are isolated in the “egg-crate architectural structures” so aptly described by Blenkin, Edwards, and Kelly (1997, p. 220). The difference seemed to come down to school leadership.

My Masters dissertation investigated leadership factors perceived to influence change in teacher practice and beliefs. I designed a case study that took place in a New Zealand Intermediate School. Although it is difficult to generalise from the findings of a single case study, the themes that emerged from the data may provide some insight into the types of leadership practices that contribute to teacher learning. The themes were:

Influence of the Leadership Team

The leadership team anticipated change, set expectations, and provided feedback about behaviour management and curriculum planning. The principal saw his role as providing support and giving staff confidence to make decisions and sound judgements. He insisted on “walking the talk” and modelling the values he wanted portrayed in the school. Through these actions, he maintained visibility.

Impact of Resource Management

The principal identified the staff as the most important school resource. Management of time, allocation of the professional development budget, recognition and utilisation of strengths within the staff, and the development of structures to allow people to share skills were identified as important aspects of resource management.

Influence of Attitudes and Beliefs

The leadership team modelled an open and comfortable attitude to change and the principal promoted freedom and flexibility to try new ideas. In this way, risk taking was encouraged. Action research projects, modelling new ideas, trialling concept classes, and pedagogical discussions were used to question current practice and create readiness for change. Teacher participants believed in the importance of a strong work ethic, teamwork, working for the greater good, and as one said, “keeping the school’s best interest at heart.” Collaborative planning united staff in a common purpose and helped to counteract resistance to curriculum change. Respect and honesty were valued in all these practices.

Promotion of Teacher Development and Change

The leadership team believed that teacher learning must be purposeful and related to current context. Passion or interest was found to be necessary to engage teachers and to sustain motivation for learning. Personal ownership was important.

Curriculum changes were successfully implemented because staff felt they had input through the collaborative development of ideas. The findings suggest staff felt more committed to the teaching and learning program because they shared ownership of it. The leadership team believed that teacher learning was successful when tailored to individual needs and learning styles. The teacher participants recommended immediate practice to consolidate new knowledge. If the practice was successful then new learning was likely to be sustained.

Types of Professional Development

Preferred professional development was teacher-driven and student-oriented. Teacher participants valued action research, teacher reading, and easy or quick practical applications relevant to their immediate context. Before adding something new, they felt it was important to consider what to replace so as to prevent overload. The school used a mixture of internal and external expertise although the participants noted that to be effective, external trainers should have recent classroom experience and, in the words of one participant, “knowledge of how we work”.

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Strategies to Improve Professional Practice

The participants related capacity for life-long learning directly to effective teaching. The study found the participants used a number of strategies to inform practice. They questioned personal practice constantly, and most decisions to change practice were based on critical self-reflection. The interviewees described how they analysed aspects of practice, worked collaboratively to solve problems, and drew on past experience and study. Evidence of these practices was noted in the case study observations. The principal described how he modelled reflective practice in his conversations with staff. The leadership team shared examples of monitoring, modelling best practice, structured observations, collaborative planning, and use of a shared language of pedagogy to demonstrate in-house strategies for improvement of professional practice.

Power of Pedagogical Dialogue

The principal and the leadership team engaged staff in pedagogical dialogue by initiating and participating in professional development, drawing attention to new research and theory, making time for discussion, and sharing in the action research projects. Teacher participants talked for a variety of reasons. Examples of pedagogical dialogue drawn from the study illustrate the basic thinking skills of memory, understanding and application but also higher order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation and creation as expressed in Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The findings suggest that pedagogical dialogue may develop teachers as they learn new skills, solve problems, and create applications

for student learning. The high level of collaboration provided evidence that interpersonal skills contribute to the success of pedagogical dialogue, as the participants increased knowledge, took risks and applied higher order thinking skills in supportive, nonjudgmental environments.

In short, the case study findings suggest that leadership does influence teacher learning. School leaders can influence teacher practice and beliefs. For this school, leadership promotion and participation in pedagogical dialogue made a significant contribution to the development of the school's professional learning community.

However, the study leaves us with some questions to ponder. A participant described pedagogical dialogue as "one of the most valuable professional tools there is" but in today's busy schools is the time given to face-to-face conversations being eroded by administrative tasks? How often do we send an email instead of popping our heads around a colleague's door? How often do our teachers get to share an experience from the classroom? Although Hattie (2009) suggests teacher time is perhaps better spent discussing student-based evidence, it is possible that sharing "war stories" or indeed good news stories from the classroom may influence teacher development. Retelling or sharing experience makes tacit knowledge explicit and opens the mind to new learning (Marzano et al., 2005). For those developing professional learning programmes it may be time to rediscover the power of teacher talk. For those leading school improvement, the study suggests that when pedagogical dialogue combines interpersonal skills with higher order thinking it becomes a key factor in the development of rich professional learning communities. This dialogue is especially powerful when school leaders get involved.

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About the Author



Sylvia Robertson

Sylvia Robertson is a doctoral student in educational leadership at the University of Otago. She is a highly experienced primary practitioner and deputy principal with a research interest in teacher development and school leadership. Sylvia has held teaching and school leadership roles in New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom in both state and independent schools. She returned to New Zealand in 2011 and recently completed a Masters in Education.