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Leadership for Learning

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'*Leadership for Learning: the Cambridge Network*'

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Abstract

This paper sets out the rationale behind the establishment of a new organisation: "Leadership for Learning: the Cambridge Network". It explains the vision for the network and the values that underpin our emerging view of leadership.

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Leadership – a concept so invested with differential meaning that it is an immediate obstacle to communication. In some languages, for example in the Ghanian dialect 'Muti' it means the exercise of power and authority as applied to the male head of the household. In German the word 'der Führer' is so imbued with association that Germans tend to be wary of using the term. In the U.K. its embrace by the business world and its eager endorsement by the New Labour Government as the panacea for troubled schools have rendered it a term to be approached with caution. In other words, our understanding of 'leadership' is highly context dependent.

A perusal of leadership on the Internet leads to a massive literature, much of it concerned with corporate giants who successfully turned corporations around. There are heroic individuals possessed of exceptional qualities and with a singular and personal vision. This has generated an extensive literature on competencies and competences of leaders, some banal, some impenetrable, some challenging, but all presupposing a core of qualities which reside within exceptional individuals and which, most significantly, may be transposed into school contexts. Howard Gardner's (1996) list inferred from outstanding world leaders does indeed appear to have a useful application to a school context:

- A readiness to confront authority
- Risk taking
- Resilience in the face of failure
- Confidence in one's own ability and intuition
- The ability to keep in mind the big picture
- Being driven by a moral commitment
- A sense of timing

- Allowing one to stand back, reflect and learn from experience

There are also many lists, and lists of lists, drawn from educational research and from within the school effectiveness and improvement field. As with the business literature these tend to seek common features which travel across contexts and cultures. The work of Hay-McBer has been particularly influential on policy development and, in the U.K. has laid much of the groundwork for management programmes in which headteachers attend centre-based management and leadership development (for example The National Programme for Qualification for Headship - NPQH).

It is hard to contest the notion that qualities of leadership can be observed, analysed, and learned but there are deeper questions of purpose, context and process.

- Leadership for what?
- Leadership when and where?
- Leadership with and for whom?

The establishment of The Cambridge Network rests on some common shared answers to these questions. It rests on the belief that the single most important distinguishing feature of a school, as opposed to commercial enterprise, is its commitment to the learning and growth of all its children, without prejudice, without profit motive or vested interest, without competitive advantage. It rests on a belief that education is a subversive activity and is required by first principle to confront injustice and to promote democracy through the practice of democracy. In common with effective organisations in the private sector (and something we have perhaps been slow to learn from them) we believe that organisations learn too and that the best teachers are also the best learners. In summary we hold to the view that:

- Leadership, teaching and learning are integrally connected

- Learning is a shared enterprise and held in common, as well as individually, among its members

- Leadership is 'distributed'

- Good schools rely on collaborative modes of working and must be committed to building and strengthening teamwork

- Relationships are characterised by trust, honesty and openness

Leadership for Learning (LfL): The Cambridge Network aspires to be:

- Independent of mind, inter-dependent, critical and informed

- Persistent in its questioning of received wisdom

- Demonstrating through its actions a persistent commitment to equality

The decision to name LfL a 'Network' rather than a Centre was in order to emphasise that the creative locus of thinking and practice lies not within the University but is distributed within local and national networks and internationally across countries and cultures. The recruitment of a group of highly experienced critical friends from around the U.K. serves further to decentralise the activity while the evaluation of the critical friend role (Swaffield, in this symposium) helps us to understand the role of the external change agent. Borderless thinking, a global community of practice, partnership 'sans frontières'.

Teacher leadership

The individualistic conception of leadership is one part of the story. If there is a correlation between headteacher competences and pupil outcomes it is at best an indirect one. The most persistent finding from effectiveness studies is that the teacher effect is far more significant than the school or individual leader effect. Teachers make the

difference. And as Frost, Durrant, Holden and Head (2000) illustrate in their work on teacher-led school improvement, teachers are the gatekeepers of change, and if improvement initiatives are to bear fruit they must start first and foremost with the individual and collective capacity of teachers to learn and through learning to meet and initiate change.

Hong Kong's Education Commission Report (2000) proposed three key changes in the roles of the classroom teacher:

- from someone who transmits knowledge to someone who inspires students to construct knowledge;

- from someone who implements the curriculum to someone who participates in the development of school-based curriculum;

- from someone who executes policies to someone who leads and contributes to the reform.

The Education Commission recognised that this cannot occur, however without "a professional learning community which adopts knowledge-based practices based on continuous self-evaluation in the pursuit of excellence". Unfortunately, as Judith Little (1990) observes, 'serious collaboration, by which teachers engage in the rigorous mutual examination of teaching and learning, turns out to be rare' (p187). Why should this be so? Perhaps because school structures have tended to 'privatise' teaching and learning, to seal teachers and pupils in separate boxes, behind closed doors. Moving beyond this means taking stock, examining the structural conditions that inhibit sharing and learning, identifying the social forces that can so frequently constrain creative dialogue among teachers about their practice. Leadership for learning requires a 'deprivatisation' of practice. It presupposes that teachers see meaning in their actions and priorities, reflect critically on their practice and, as David Frost suggests, experience a sense of agency :

We argue that teachers' sense of agency has been frustrated by the prevailing climate of performativity leading to a lowering of self-esteem and morale. Further, we argue that these problems cannot be solved through counselling, stress therapy, career restructuring and incentives. Rather we need to address the more fundamental issue of teachers' capacity to make more of a difference and to experience the self-actualisation that follows from this

(Frost, 2000).

Teachers' beliefs and values underpin what they do. Their sense of agency pushes for or pushes against changing practice. Their preparedness to learn relies on seeing a good reason for doing so. As Michael Howe argues:

I have a strong feeling that motivational factors are crucial whenever a person achieves anything of significance as a result of learning or thought, and I cannot think of exceptions to this statement. That is not to claim that a high level of motivation can ever be a sufficient condition for human achievements, but it is undoubtedly a necessary one. And, conversely, negative motivational influences such as fear of failure, feelings of helplessness, lack of confidence, and having experience that one's fate is largely controlled by external factors rather than by oneself, almost certainly have effects that restrict a person's learned achievements.

(Howe, 1987, p 142)

Leadership for learning is about conditions and contexts - conditions which promote a learning school and contexts which are rich in opportunities for all members of the community to take initiative, to risk, to fail resiliently and to persist successfully. Leadership for learning means:

- starting from where people are, their current practice, the belief systems that hold them in place, the practices that explain 'the way we do things round here'

- grasping how people explain things to themselves, *their* understanding *their* construction of events and ideas

- having an acute sensitivity to the context in which people work, the environment which makes things possible or prevents movement and the flow of ideas

- working together to create contexts and opportunities for teachers to challenge their beliefs and practices in way that empowers rather than threatens, that allows them to arrive for themselves at a new position, and new stage in their thinking

Distributed learning and performance

A fundamental conceptual flaw in effectiveness methodology is the need to isolate all the variables in order to measure them. So pupil characteristics and attainments are separated out and occupy separate cells in the database. Teacher competences are measured on an individual basis. Headteachers qualities are categorised and we seek to identify inter-correlations. But, we may argue, that if we actually succeed in measuring individual teacher, or headteacher, effects there must be something amiss in the organisation. Because what we are only now beginning to understand is that the strength, resilience and capability of a school lies in the its distributed intelligence, its shared leadership, its communal learning. This is what James Coleman described as 'social capital', residing in connections and in networks.

Organisations with high social capital are characterised by horizontal links, many but weak. Low social capital is marked by vertical links, strong and few. Imagine a class of thirty pupils. Within that class there are small groups of pupils strongly inter-connected but there are also numerous isolated individuals. There is high reliance on the teacher, the class's vertical link to learning. Imagine another class in which everyone enjoys some linkage to someone else. The thirty pupils offer a resource for one another but their alliances are temporary and mainly task driven. Over time the class group has built an infrastructure of shared resource and collaborative learning. They are much less reliant on their vertical link with the teacher for acquiring, or creating, knowledge. Social

capital theorists (Putnam, 1999; Szreter, 2001) describe the first scenario as 'social bonding', the second as 'social bridging'- powerful concepts because they describe an essential difference between the inward looking exclusive group and the outward looking inclusive group.

Applying these concepts to the school as an organisation we can appreciate the extent to which many, weak and horizontal links may generate and sustain social capital. Collaborative activity shares and creates knowledge and so the sum is greater than the parts and the parts defy easy measurement because the effect lies not in what teachers do individually but what they do collectively.

> Social capital flows from the endowment of mutually respecting and trusting relationships which enable a group to purse its shared goals more effectively than would otherwise be possible...It can never be reduced to the mere possession or attribute of an individual. It results from the communicative capacity of a group.

> (Szreter, 2000)

As researchers we are all too familiar with the 'et al' syndrome - when the fruits of our labours are published and all our labours are summarised in the anonymous 'et al'. This is because research reports and books are typically a joint product in which no single hand is discernible. Individual contributions cannot be identified in the seamless whole. So it may be with thinking, planning, producing, managing and teaching. The truly effective school confounds the reductionist approach of effectiveness and individual competences research.

And so to the leadership effect. Instead of seeing leadership as residing in one individual we should be talking, says David Green (2001) from New American Schools, about 'leaderful communities'. The measure we should apply is not whether the head is 'strong', 'charismatic', 'visionary' or 'purposeful' - all potentially disempowering qualities - but whether there is a density of leadership across the school.

The question is 'How many people, how many groups have or assume leadership roles?' What are the contexts for pupils and teachers to exercise leadership? Extra-curricular activities, Easter and summer schools, study support, residential experiences and field trips? All of these offer opportunities for hidden talents to emerge and take a lead. As our research into out-of-school learning clearly demonstrates (MacBeath *et al.*, 2001) what happens outside mainstream school life challenges what happens within. With a little imagination these 'leaderful' experiences can be transfused into the daily practice of learning and teaching. Building social and learning capital, that is the challenge for twenty-first century school leadership.

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