From Effective to Versatile School:
The Role of Leadership in Shaping Change

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Abstract

All current school reform efforts aim to improve teaching and learning. There are big differences in how this is done. Approaches depend on motivations and capacities of leadership. Leadership concerns itself with organizational improvement. In more precise terms, leadership concentrates on establishing widely agreed, valued and worthwhile directions (both strategic and tactical) for organization and implementation of what is required to stimulate, motivate, guide and support people to move in those directions. A generic definition of impactful and effective leadership concerns direction and influence. If stability is the goal of what is called "management", improvement is the goal of leadership. Any reform creating innovative schools to meet 21st century challenges is difficult unless leaders share its aims and are prepared to make it work. Successful leadership plays a significant role in improving school reform and learning. Social change requires leadership that encapsulates vision as well as achievable practice. Leadership can effectively be investigated at intermediate levels, as it is conceptualized and developed within key frameworks: (1) Networks of educational centres, (2) Administrative coordination networks, (3) Professional bodies and associations, (4) Policy bodies. We explore such leadership, how it is productively distributed across the school system and what stimulates and sustains its development. There is strong focus on the forms of leadership most likely to foster learning and how such successful forms of leadership contribute to school reform and innovation. We describe those successful leadership practices, as well as their relationship to the school organization and to enhanced learning outcomes. Comparative analysis looks at examples in Catalonia and the United States. The research focus is on the need for new models of school organization to provide students with life skills required in the emerging knowledge society. The importance of understanding the critical role of leadership in this change process links directly to the key factors of developing networks, new structures and distributed leadership models central to the knowledge and information society.

Keywords: *Educational Leadership; Transformation; Change; Knowledge Society; Networks.*

1. Introduction

Recent research emphasizes that leadership in education is a subject that deserves to be analyzed because of its impact on design and implementation of policy but also on the functioning of schools and academic results of students (TALIS report, 2013). Moreover, in today's context, analysis of leadership relates to the need for school organizations to develop into more flexible and dynamic organizations where all stakeholders (teachers, directors, students) are able to adapt to the changes and challenges of education in an interconnected world.

This context requires a framework which sees a gradual transition from traditional organization to a new model of "versatile school", an educational institution without definitive or permanent organizational structures, organized with flexibility, providing opportunities for change and reorganization of part or all of the educational programs on offer. This new learning model needs to be based on social structures that are sensitive to individual needs and respond adequately to requirements of a society experiencing fundamental change and deep challenges posed by the knowledge society and transformative learning paradigms (Martin-Moreno, 2007).

The challenges for school leaders include the pace of change, an abundance (or overload) of information and initiatives, new and sometimes controversial legislation, safeguarding and protection, student and parent demands, legal compliance, administrative requirements, people management, technology and the use of ICT in teaching. It also addresses work, greater autonomy (but greater accountability) and the emphasis on outcome and evaluation, not just teaching as an input. A further challenge is an ageing population of current school leaders in many countries – and the issue of

ensuring that a job with the challenges cited above is seen as attractive for the next generation of school leaders.

The operating context for schools is also rapidly changing. As set out in McKinsey's 2010 report entitled *Capturing the Leadership Premium*, the growing consensus is that:

"System policies and practices make a difference to leadership capacity. Leaders are grown through experience and support; actively cultivating them can increase the leadership capacity of the system. Leaders learn best in context and from a diverse range of sources (including peers, superiors, online resources, and formal training). Maximizing leadership capacity means regarding the selection and development of leaders as integral parts of the work of schools and the system, rather than discrete processes within it"

The concept of "effective school" as we have known it, should be reconsidered (Instance, 2012). Leadership forms and models that served the "effective school" may not be sufficient to meet needs of new learning organizations and schools. Different organizations need to create new educational environments adapted to current needs and, in the process, achieve significantly improved learning. The continuation of public education as we know it today is not guaranteed. The actions of school leaders will determine the fate of schools in the 21st century. The status quo is not an option. While all educators must play key roles in changing our schools, the burden is even greater for those in leadership positions. Leaders must take school staff on challenging journeys that the staff often would not take on their own.

The idea of "effective schools" is based on schools which enjoy greater potential for improvement and professional development. This potential depends largely on the type of leadership exercised, thus giving the director or leading team a decisive role in the organization of quality schools (Sammons et al., 1988; Rutter et al., 1979). But the concept of "effective school" now requires a radical reinterpretation. This is partly because of fundamental changes in the external socio-economic environment but also because schools have the potential to facilitate the development of advanced learning environments to prepare new generations to meet challenges and opportunities of a transformed world where learners need to obtain new skills demanded by the emerging knowledge society.

To the extent that the leadership and management may be intrinsically linked, we need new strategies to develop leadership in schools and articulated in new management structures (Ainscow et al., 2001). School principals can be seen as "directors of cultural change". This requires a conscious process that connects to visionary, large-scale and strategic thinking and practice. Therefore, the "director of cultural change" operates like a sophisticated conceptual thinker who transforms the organization through people and equipment (Fullan, 2001).

2. Identifying themes

All current school reform efforts aim to improve teaching and learning. All approaches depend on the motivations and capacities of leadership. Leadership is all about organizational improvement. In more precise terms, leadership concentrates on establishing widely agreed, valued and worthwhile directions (both strategic and tactical) for the organization and implementation of what is required to stimulate, motivate, guide and support people to move in those directions. A generic definition of leadership – especially impactful and effective leadership – is quite elementary: it is about direction and influence. Any reform creating innovative schools to meet 21st century challenges is difficult unless leaders share its aims. So "effective" or "successful" leadership is critical to school reform. Social change requires leadership that encapsulates vision as well as achievable practice. This means leadership needs to be investigated at intermediate levels, as it is conceptualized and developed within the following frameworks:

- Networks of educational centres
- Administrative coordination networks
- Professional bodies and associations
- Policy bodies.

One key issue in what we know about successful school leadership is that much of the educational leadership literature does not focus on actual *leadership practices* but rather on the leaders' values, beliefs, skills or knowledge felt necessary to act in an effective manner, inferred from observation of leaders at work. Accumulated empirical evidence has a great deal to say about effective leadership practices, but this must be developed. This can be looked at from twin perspectives. On one hand, there is the need for a new model of school organization that can provide students with life skills required in our emerging knowledge society. On the other hand, there is the importance of understanding the critical nature and role of leadership in this change process.

The development of schools in a way that facilitates the kind of learning needed in the new knowledge society means configuring forms of versatile organization to accompany this transformation. Flexible organizational structures facilitate possibilities for change and refocusing of these organizational structures (Martín-Moreno, 2007). Students of the 21st century must learn continuously to develop self-directed basic skills to achieve their full potential as citizens. The challenge is that schools need to develop and extend new forms of leadership essential to organizing centers capable of promoting educational environments based on the *Principles of Learning* (Dumont et al., 2010). We must also consider educational policy. A study of 14 OECD countries and their school leadership practices and policies yielded four levers for improvement:

• Redefining school leadership responsibilities
• Distribution of leadership within and between schools
• Awareness of the importance of leadership development and effective initial leadership training
• Making school leadership an attractive profession and providing options for career development.

Leadership in the field of education is one of the key factors of this change. The OECD report, *Innovative Learning Environments*, added three new learning principles to the seven pre-existing ones, with leadership being one of these (ILE, 2013). Thus, leadership in education is one of the basic principles of learning as established by the provisions of the OECD (Instance, 2015). Leadership is critical to improve practice and to implement new educational policies that facilitate schools to provide young learners with environments and learning experiences geared to the current demand for "rethinking education" (UNESCO, 2015). This is also a demand of large international organizations in seeking to ensure a proper and relevant education for society and the knowledge economy (Martinez et al., 2013).

3. Comparative cases

The Education Law of Catalonia (LEC Law 12/2009) promotes a shift towards improving educational organizations. While the Law provides for the independent evolution of each center and the implementation of strategic plans for improving educational offers available to schools based on their uniqueness, it encourages development of advanced educational settings where leadership constitutes a decisive factor. The LEC provides a framework to promote a Catalan education system that can respond to the demands of the twenty-first century with flexibility. These steps include the power of systematic and structured pedagogical innovation, recognition of good educational practices, the promotion and support of educational leadership, teacher training, infrastructures for digital learning and the provision of centers for pedagogical excellence. Leadership for effective learning is an essential factor for improving the models of learning and sustainable academic success in Catalonia and internationally (Martinez et al., 2013).

In the United States, we have undertaken comparative research with schools in the Chicago area and, in particular, the Cristo Rey methodology pioneered in Pilsen. This articulates leadership through interconnected communications and direct engagement with employers so that holistic approaches to student development are prioritized. Associated issues in preparing for change are robust approaches to inclusion for specialized groups. Allied research on leadership in De Paul University looks at sustaining professional learning communities, as well as coaching and mentoring in developing school leadership

As we have seen, the OECD has stressed that development of learning environments need to go beyond the seven principles that underpin the nature of learning (OECD, 2010). We need to remember three complementary aspects to understand change, innovation and educational reform:

1. Research on learning
2. Practice, analysis and design of innovative practices
3. Implementation and system change through leadership, innovative strategies and expansion of change into widespread sustainable best practice (Instance, 2015).

4. Understanding Leadership

The conceptual image of the "system leader" envisages a figure concentrating not only on school progress, but also on improving other central dimensions of the social environment. Systematic nurturing and structured development of educational leaders is feasible because schools and their networks do not work in isolation but in collaboration. The OECD project, *Improving School Leadership* (2008), emphasized the importance of leadership as a key element in *systemic transformation* of the system to improve performance as well as socialization and competence of students (Hopkins, 2008). In this, leadership is a changing role as leaders of the educational environment transcend the environment of their own schools and begin to think and act on wider levels. Schools are not isolated from society, but form an intrinsic part of it (Fullan, 2006). Changing one part may have a certain impact, but not as much as if the transformation occurs in all parts simultaneously or in coordinated joint effort. Evidence demonstrates that leadership is the single meta-systemic strategy to ensure that every school can be a great school (Hopkins, 2008).

The distributed nature of leadership is seen as a culture of common endeavor, where all members have responsibilities based on their skills and personal competence. Leadership is consolidated by transforming and creating synergies that enhance the educational community (Bennett et al., 2003). Distributed leadership is conceived as a joint project (Longo, 2008) where members agree to exercise distinct and complementary parts of the shared task.

The design of an educational project based on *distributed leadership* identifies professionals with talent and the intention to improve through the coordinated nature of engagement and commitment to the goal. This involves creating a partnership based on trust and shared leadership throughout the process, weaving these relationships of trust into project objectives through the agency of its human leaders. This structure helps teachers formulate and transmit questions, concerns and ideas to directors, sharing responsibility and finding solutions together. For this reason, shared decision-making is central to organize and design the curriculum and deliver teaching to students. This conception of leadership is closely linked to the ability to create *Professional Learning Communities* (PLC).

This shared vision is also essential to move towards a concept of schools as *Learning Organizations* (Martinez et al., 2013), where a school has five salient features:

- Systemic and linked thinking
- Personal commitment
- Mental models
- Shared vision
- Team learning

In other words, it becomes a school that works as a learning organization (Senge, 2006). At the heart of many of these competing perspectives is the idea of organizational learning. Networks of influence within schools encourage the transmission of knowledge and new practices, some of which are research-based, and others of which are "locally grown" adaptations to a context. Beyond networks, , we need to consider organizational learning.