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Leading for Change: Building Capacity for Learning

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In a rapidly changing environment, leadership for change is a complex undertaking. Leading change in schools concerns decisions about the changes that leaders wish to lead and how best to do so. It involves leadership of those things they do not want to lead but must lead. Finally, it concerns finding ways to connect these decisions coherently in order to make them meaningful to relevant stakeholders as well as for themselves.

In this chapter, we look at the changing world of schools from the perspective of school leaders. First, we consider fundamental societal changes that are influencing schools. We argue that these changes require school leaders to promote ongoing and sustainable learning in order to deal with the challenges of rapid and continuous change.

Next we address political changes that have occurred, often in response to these change forces, that affect schools in particular. Here we argue that existing approaches to change do not sufficiently address the development of sustainable and ongoing learning. We suggest that it is the role of the leader as a “capacity builder” that is fundamental to developing learning in a complex, changing world. Our analysis of change identifies four aspects or dimensions of capacity-oriented leadership:

- ensuring learning at all levels;
- using evidence to promote inquiry-mindedness;
- building extended community;
- bridging community – dealing with the school-system interface.

Having proposed these dimensions, we highlight the implications for the human side of the role. Finally, we acknowledge unresolved issues and challenges for

future research. While the chapter aims to provide an summary of the issues from an international scope of reference, the illustrations are drawn from the contexts with which we are most familiar, and from our own varying experiences in the area of school leadership¹.

CHANGE FORCES AND THE NEED FOR LEARNING

Our societies, in many ways, are dramatically different from 100 years ago. There are almost as many descriptions of the change forces as changes themselves. Whether viewed as “revolutions” (Dalin & Rust, 1996), “megatrends” (Beare, 1996; Naisbett & Aburdene, 1990), or “change forces” (Fullan, 1993 & 1999), the implications for education are profound.

The world is increasingly viewed as a global village. Twenty-four hour, worldwide news enables immediate participation in conflict, trauma and flood devastation across the globe. Family structures are changing as more women work outside the home, parents separate and people live longer. Disparity between the “haves” and “have nots” continues, with more than a twelfth of the world’s population of over six billion living in absolute poverty, including 190 million malnourished children. Environmental deterioration continues, through local pollution, the threat of global warming, and loss of habitat. Climatic effects of the accumulating build-up of atmospheric carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels are already being experienced as we witness flooding in low-lying areas of many countries. A fresh water shortage is likely within 20 years.

Global mergers have created giant global companies, frequently with the influence of mid-size countries. While technological advances make the world smaller, there is evidence of increasing personal isolation, problems of ownership of information, a distinct loss of privacy, and inequality of access to the use and benefits of technology.

Technology also affects people’s type and location of work, with increasing opportunities to work from home or hotels around the world through online access. An increase in part-time jobs and ‘portfolio’ careers has implications for the expectation that people will have a job for life. Many people entering the work world can expect to change their occupation many times (Bayliss, 1998; Champy, 1997). All these trends have implications for adult and professional learning. In short, education faces enormous pressures for change from “out there”: “The drivers of educational change are not always found in governmental policy. Rather, it is rapid and continual change in the wider society that makes an impact on education” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 10).

Papert (1996) has suggested how three particular change forces exert influences on schools. First, the powerful industrial sector associated with the new technologies views education as a market place for their products. For example, the leisure and telecommunications industries use their expertise to develop new online learning technologies, connecting to schools, homes and other agencies.

Second, understandings about broader theories of intelligence and the socially constructed nature of learning lead to an awareness of the need for new approaches to learning. This, Papert has suggested, is accompanied by the realisation that in the long term the only genuinely marketable skill is that of learning itself. Learning and learning how to learn are essential future life skills. Furthermore, with knowledge readily available through technology in the home, libraries and other public places to which children and parents have access, school no longer controls “an accepted canon of knowledge”.

Third, Papert identifies child-power as the most powerful change force of all. In the developed world, children appear to have increasingly less regard for school education, as it lags behind the society it serves. Surveys in the UK, for example, find that approximately a quarter of all students are dissatisfied with their schooling (McCall et al., 2001). Some are wholly disaffected with schooling and others may have “disappeared” from the formal system (Barber, 1996).

These trends have also led to an erosion of respect for adults. This traditional societal norm, predicated on natural authority, no longer exists in many developed nations. “Secretlessness” also means that social and professional life is much more open than previously. Where naiveté used to protect children, today they are more aware of the world around them, but often lack the space to develop in a secure and safe environment.

All of these external change forces have massive implications for schools and their leaders. In short, they provide imperatives for educational change and, particularly, for learning. The change forces already described, however, are not the only imperatives faced by school leaders.

CURRENT CHANGES FACING LEADERS

Increasingly, school leaders work in a political context in which “restructuring” changes have been initiated by national, state or local authorities. System restructuring is often presented as a means of raising standards of achievement in response to concerns about economic competition. At the local level, however, restructuring poses school leaders with a potent dilemma: how to manage the implementation of an onerous external change agenda while simultaneously promoting school-initiated improvements that enhance their schools as learning organisations.

The task of managing this dual change agenda is necessarily contingent not only on the situation in each school but also on specific national reforms. For example, in many countries, governments decentralised school management tasks to the local or, occasionally, school levels (e.g., in parts of Australia and the United States). In contrast, however, in England there was a different approach to restructuring education. Local authorities lost power, schools gained some control in specific areas, and many powers formerly under local authority were centralised to national level (Karstanje, 1999).

Some countries, like Hungary (Balazs, 1999) and England (Whitty et al., 1997), introduced forms of neo-liberal deregulation. These measures sought to increase competition between schools in the belief that quasi-market mechanisms would promote quality improvement. Where policymakers sought to use market forces in the education process, evidence suggests that there has often been increased polarisation in school intakes. This can lead to a depression of performance in schools with higher proportions of working class or ethnic minority students with lower prior achievement (Lauder & Hughes, 1999). Clearly, the changing political context of schooling creates particular challenges for school leaders.

In many countries, notably England and New Zealand, “new public management” (NPM) techniques have been integral to the restructuring process. NPM was adapted from the private sector (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Levacic, 1999) and applied across the public sector in health, social services and housing, as well as education. Table 1 summarises some of the principal features of NPM using Ferlie et al.’s (1996) distinction between four types of NPM.

Table 1. Four Models of New Public Management and their Core Themes (Ferlie et al., 1996)

Model 1: The Efficiency Drive

- increased financial control and audit – more for less;
- stresses provider responsiveness to consumers;
- deregulated labour market and increased pace of work;
- new forms of governance.

Model 2: Downsizing and Decentralisation

- more developed quasi-markets;
- management by contract;
- strategic core and operational periphery;
- emergence of separate purchase and provider organisations.

Model 3: In Search of Excellence

- emphasises importance of organisational culture;
- highlights values and culture in shaping behaviour at work;
- emphasises how organisations manage change.

Model 4: Public Service Orientation

- concern for service quality for users (not customers);
 - power shift from appointed to elected bodies;
 - sceptical about markets in public services;
 - distinctive public service tasks and values.
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Hood (1995) has stressed the importance of checking generalised models of NPM against the findings of empirical research. His stricture is supported by an analysis of NPM and school restructuring in England and Wales from 1988 to 2001, under both Conservative and Labour governments. Compared to most other developed countries, these restructuring reforms were notable for their sheer scale and scope, covering all 25,000 schools. The main features, which display many of the characteristics of NPM, included the introduction of:

- local management of schools (LMS) (i.e., site-based management) with school level control over delegated budgets, student recruitment, strategic policy and planning;
- control over the hiring and firing of staff, staff development and the management of buildings;
- a national curriculum and national testing related to four Key Stages (i.e., for students aged 7, 11, 14 and 16) together with regular external inspections by a “privatised” inspectorate;
- a quasi- or wholly-regulated market in which parents as customers/consumers exercise choice and schools as providers compete for customers (i.e., students);
- the introduction of mechanisms designed to extend and inform parental choice (e.g., open enrolment and new types of specialist schools, the publication of “raw” annual test results – presented as school “league tables” by the media – and of inspection reports;
- the imposition, more recently, in primary schools, and moving into secondary schools, of centrally determined literacy and numeracy schemes in which time, content and pedagogy are specified;
- the mandated requirement for both primary and secondary schools to produce their own test score targets, especially in English and mathematics, within the framework of the national curriculum.

It is important not to exaggerate the impact of these developments on the capacity of school leaders to initiate and manage change or the extent to which these developments were actually consistent with NPM. Their implementation was often partial and differentiated and particular components were modified over time. For example, most rural primary and secondary schools have not experienced any significant degree of marketization. The national curriculum and testing systems were modified in response to severe criticism from the teaching profession.

Nevertheless, the reforms have undoubtedly transformed the culture of schools in these nations. In doing so, they have also created a new context for school leaders in at least two important ways. First the new policies have introduced extensive and radical changes into the roles and responsibilities of school leaders. No less significant is the substantial increase in the work-loads of teachers, largely due to the engendered “proceduralism” that has resulted from NPM.

Research supports these observations. A unique, 10-year, longitudinal study (Weindling, 1999) offered insights into the cumulative impact of the reform process on a cohort of British secondary head teachers. In 1987, 80 per cent of the sample said their role was very different from when they had started the job in 1982. In 1993, 90 per cent said their role had continued to change significantly over the previous five years. The main area in which they perceived substantial change concerned the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS).

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