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Authority and Modes of Control: Tracing Organisational Learning in School Partnerships

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Background

This paper presents a framework for critically examining the development of professional knowledge in school-to-school dyads. Worked examples that illustrate the use of the framework are drawn from a pilot study of one pair of schools.

A central paradox of contemporary reform in education is the tension between devolution and new forms of centralisation. One manifestation of this tension lies in an emphasis on the development of local practice through collective knowledge building in contrast with an emphasis on centralised standardisation of practice and accountability towards proscribed outcomes. School-to-school partnerships for bringing about change confront this contradiction directly through state-sponsorship of explicitly pedagogical relationships between schools. In these organisational dyads, a lead support school is designated to work with an underperforming supported school.

The framework advanced in the paper articulates ways that conditions within settings of change influence the possibilities for what can be learned and how it is learned. It does so by examining relationships amongst three inter-related attributes explained in the section on Theoretical Frame below: dynamics of authority, dimensions of professional knowledge-building and institutional modality.

Research Questions

The framework permits the exploration of the following questions in relation to developing professional knowledge within the lead school and within the supported school as well as in the interactions between the two schools.

- (1) What forms of authority are recognized in different modalities of institutional practice?
 - (a) How have forms of authority evolved?
 - (b) How are recognized forms of authority understood by participants?
 - (c) What are the contradictions that exist within and across different settings with respect to the recognition of different forms of authority?
- (2) How is authority realised in different modalities of institutional practice?
- (3) What role does the realisation of forms of authority have in professional learning in different modalities?

Methods

The framework is rooted in perspectives shared by scholars of educational reform who view the enactment of policy as an intertwined process of individual and organisational learning (Honig, 2008; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). Key elements of the framework elaborate this perspective. A fundamental articulation is the view of learning as a process of knowledge-building through movement between everyday and scientific concepts (Vygotskii & Kozulin, 1986). A further contribution is the notion that authority is integral to what is learned and how knowledge is built around professional practice (Author, 2006). Finally, patterns of authority can be linked to characteristic institutional conditions, or modes of control (Bernstein, 2000; Douglas, 2003). The following section explains each of these in turn-types of authority, dimensions of professional knowing, and institutional modes of control.

Worked examples that illustrate the framework are drawn from a nested case study of a pair of secondary schools in the west of England currently underway. The pair was selected on the basis of an initial identification of the approach to curriculum and approach to values in the lead school, as defined below.

Frame

Sociological discussions of authority have led to the elaboration of various typologies. A typology useful to discern dynamics of collective knowledge encompasses three types of authority—managerial, operative and epistemic (McLaughlin, 2007, pp. 72-73). Managerial authority is defined here as the right of certain people to issue directives and have those directives followed based on their position. Operative authority has come to the fore with increasing attention paid to collaborative working within and across schools. Cooperative groups, such as a senior leadership team, bestow this type of authority on certain members either directly or indirectly to carry forward matters on their behalf. Epistemic authority as used here refers to acknowledged disciplinary expertise. These three types of authority are present to varying degrees in all professional interactions.

Paavola and Haakareinen's (2005) three metaphors for learning allow the characterisation of ideal modes of learning associated with each type of authority. The first mode is that of acquisition, which views knowing as a direct transmission. This monologic form might be typified by command-and-control in an institution in which orders are received and carried forward, typified by a rigid and hierarchical managerial authority. The second characterization is that of participation, in which knowledge and knowing reside in social interaction. Participation corresponds with an emphasis on the collective and thus prioritizes dialogic forms of operative authority. A third characterization, knowledge-building, is a development of the dialogic form. Knowledge-building goes beyond participation to draw attention to the development of new knowledge through the interweaving of everyday and scientific concepts. This triologic form foregrounds epistemic authority.

The framework uses sociologist Basil Bernstein's theories of pedagogic discourse and modalities of control to relate dynamics of authority and forms of collective knowing to institutional form. Bernstein (2000) identifies two key dimensions through which the institution conditions patterns of authority and prospects for knowledge building. The first is the approach to curriculum and the degree to which curriculum categories are viewed as fixed by external mandate, on the one hand, or open to internal definition, on the other. The second is the approach to values, which can vary from an explicit and shared moral order to one in which the moral order is implicit and highly-personalized. Thus, the two dimensions of curriculum and values, varying separately, can be used to characterize different institutional modes of control.

Research findings

The framework aims to enable systematic understanding of how the settings of change shape possibilities of individual and organisational learning. Such an understanding is vital as the state-sponsored impetus for change focuses increasingly on the intensification of power through school-to-school networks. Preliminary analysis of case study data has shown the descriptive validity of the framework in portraying systematically varying relationships amongst patterns of authority, dimensions of knowledge-building and institutional modalities within schools. This theoretical lens also holds the promise of tracing of institutional hybridity-patterns of positive or negative cross-pollination that may or may not occur due to interactions between schools. Elaboration of the framework contributes to the development of knowledge around institutional change and learning, broadly, and learning in and through school-to-school support networks, in particular.

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