

0711

Portraits of Teachers in Landscapes of Schools: investigating the role of teachers in school change

Judy Durrant

Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, United Kingdom

Background

This paper reports on research in progress which focuses on exploring teachers' experiences and perceptions of professionalism in relation to school change. Teachers have been considered as 'activists' (Sachs, 2003) and many authors have discussed the importance of their role as leaders in school improvement processes (see Durrant and Holden, 2006). With continuing emphasis on systemic reform, however, there is a danger that teachers may see themselves as at the mercy of change, rather than at its leading edge (Bascia and Hargreaves, 2000), as implementers rather than drivers. Using a methodology based on portraiture, this small-scale study examines teachers' individual stories of change over a period of one year, within the contexts of their changing schools. This paper explores methodological processes and issues and offers a preliminary analysis of key themes emerging from the data.

Research Questions

The research investigates the role of teachers in changing schools, including both teachers' responses to change and their contributions to change. The aims of the study are to investigate the following research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive their roles and professional identities in relation to school change?
2. How do teachers contribute to, and respond to, school change?
3. What organisational conditions, structures and processes support and hinder teachers' individual agency and their contribution to school improvement?

This is approached through the gathering of a series of individual stories of change in relation to their changing organisational contexts.

Methods

The research involves participation of twelve teachers, three from each of four schools: a primary school, a well established non-selective secondary school, a newly formed Academy and a special school. 'Moving' schools were selected according to Stoll and Fink's (1996) typology; schools that were improving according to recognised criteria including Ofsted reports and also headteachers' and others' accounts. Teachers were identified by their headteachers to ensure a range of experience, different roles and at least one male and one female from each school. Each teacher met with the researcher three times during one school year in order to investigate perceptions and experiences. Contextual information about each changing school was gathered from a range of sources including headteacher interviews.

A portraiture approach as expounded by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) is being used to interpret the teachers' narratives in order to build pictures of each person's role and professional identity in relation to school change over the period of study. By engaging teachers and headteachers in dialogue over time, the aim was to enable an element of co-construction with all participants as well as the researcher being 'actors' within the research process. To this end, a variety of methods were used within the encounters between researcher and teachers, including various tools to prompt reflection and 'self-portraiture'. In the final stage of the study, generalised themes, patterns and meanings derived from the portraits within their changing school landscapes are reported back to teachers and headteachers to stimulate further dialogue. This includes working with

participants to identify organisational cultures that support teachers in making a positive contribution to school improvement.

Frame

This study concerns notions of 'extended professionalism' (Hoyle, 1995) and shared leadership as fundamental to organisational improvement. The leadership discourse shows increasing emphasis on distributed or shared leadership which contributes to a shared vision for improvement through 'conjoint agency' (Gronn, 2003). The concept of individual human agency illuminates change processes and provides a fresh lens through which to examine teacher professionalism in relation to cultures and processes for organisational improvement. Angus (1993) suggests that those in administrative positions may contribute most powerfully to school reform by facilitating teachers' agency. This involves building self-efficacy to increase the extent to which people can influence their situations, control events that affect their lives and determine their own actions. This study explores the extent to which the teacher participants feel a sense of self-efficacy and consider themselves as agents of change in school improvement.

Research findings

The research questions are concerned with the interactions and relationships between the teachers and their organisational context, focusing particularly on their personal perceptions of their roles and professionalism. The first part of the paper discusses the value and validity of the portraiture approach for a small scale study in making meaning of individual and organisational narratives in relation to the research questions. The second part of the paper concerns preliminary analysis about teachers' perceptions of their role in school change, considering whether this is a reflection of the organisational context, the socio-political environment, a matter of personal disposition or a combination of these. Initial analysis shows signs of 'discontinuity' between perceptions of imposed change, from within and without, and teachers' convictions about what they are doing to improve children's learning, education and wellbeing. Also considered is the extent to which there are particular cultural conditions that support the development of teacher agency and an active role in school improvement and if so, whether these have a focus within or beyond each school. The research provides rich and fascinating insights into the lives of teachers within their world of continual change.

References

- Angus, L (1993) 'New Leadership and the Possibility of Educational Reform' in Smyth, J (ed.) *A Socially Critical View of the Self-managing School*. London: Falmer Press. pp.63-92.
- Bascia, N and Hargreaves, A (eds) (2000) *The Sharp Edge of Educational Change: Teaching, Leading and the Realities of Reform*. London: RoutledgeFalmer
- Durrant, J and Holden, G (2006) *Teachers Leading Change; Doing Research for School Improvement*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing
- Gronn, P (2003) *The New Work of Educational Leaders: changing leadership practice in an era of school reform*. London: Sage
- Hoyle, E (1995) 'Changing Conceptions of a Profession', in Busher, H. and Saran, R. (eds) *Managing Teachers as Professionals in Schools*, London: Kogan Page, pp.59-70
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S and Hoffman Davis, J (1997) *The Art and Science of Portraiture*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Sachs, J (2003) *The Activist Teaching Profession*. Buckingham, Open University Press

Stoll, L. and Fink, D. (1996) *Changing Our Schools: Linking School effectiveness and School Improvement*. Buckingham: Open University