Teacher leadership as a key element for enhancing teacher professional development

La leadership dei docenti come elemento-chiave per il miglioramento del loro sviluppo professionale

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a 3-year research project aimed at examining teachers' views of teacher leadership and the conditions to enhance it. A mixed-method research design was devised. Data were collected in three phases: i) phase I consisted of a national survey in which 2,702 teachers participated; ii) phase II included semi-structured interviews with the 11 head teachers and focus group with pupils (n=108) and with teachers (n=99); iii) phase III involved a professional development programme in 5 schools located in northern Portugal, in which 66 teachers participated. Findings point to three main themes: i) a pluralistic view of leadership; ii) teachers as leaders of learning; iii) developing school-based projects as an opportunity for professional development. Implications for developing conditions for teacher leadership and professional development are discussed.

Keywords: teacher leadership; teacher professional development; teacher learning.

Abstract

Il presente contributo si propone di illustrare i risultati di una ricerca durata tre anni, con la finalità di indagare la leadership dei docenti, i loro rispettivi punti di vista e le condizioni per potenziarla. Il disegno di ricerca utilizzato ha carattere misto. I dati sono stati raccolti in tre distinte fasi: i) indagine nazionale che ha visto il coinvolgimento di 2,702 docenti (fase I); ii) interviste semi-strutturate con undici dirigenti scolastici ed un focus group con studenti (n=108) e con docenti (n=99) (fase II); iii) programma di sviluppo professionale realizzato in cinque scuole del Portogallo settentrionale, con il coinvolgimento di 66 docenti (fase III). I risultati di ricerca hanno messo in rilievo tre approcci importanti: i) una dimensione pluralistica della leadership; ii) la concezione del docente come leader di apprendimento; iii) lo sviluppo di progetti educativi a dimensione scolastica come opportunità di sviluppo professionale. Nel contributo sono infine discusse le condizioni per lo sviluppo della leadership dei docenti e per il loro sviluppo professionale.

Parole chiave: leadership dei docenti; sviluppo professionale dei docenti; apprendimento dei docenti.

1. Introduction

The realities of teachers' work and lives have been affected in different ways in many European countries and elsewhere, and, of course, also in Portugal. Quality has become the keyword and the need to raise the standards of education a priority for all governments. Concerns about student achievement in national and international assessments and the need to raise the standards of teaching and to improve the quality of pupil learning have led governments to pursue a number of reforms. These have focused in many cases on standard-based models and on increased accountability, amongst which is teacher performance management and appraisal (Flores, 2009; 2012).

Intensification and bureaucratisation, increased forms of managerialism, and greater accountability and public scrutiny are but a few examples of the changes in the teaching profession identified in the literature (Day, 1999; Day, Flores & Viana, 2007; Helsby, 2000). These changes have affected the ways in which teachers experience their daily work at school as well as the public image of teachers and teaching.

In addition, there has been increasing attention worldwide over the last decade or so in regard to teacher leadership as a key element in efforts to improve education. Existing literature points to different perspectives and understandings (Davis & Leon, 2009; Alexandrou & Swaffield, 2012). Within the view of schools as learning communities, teachers are encouraged to exercise leadership and to engage themselves in improvement and change in the settings in which they work.

The extent to which teachers are able to engage in strategic action for change depends on the way their professionalism is perceived by themselves and by their colleagues and on the conditions for them to exercise leadership, to lead innovations in schools and to transform their educational practice (Frost, 2017). In this context, Poekert (2012) highlights the importance of this definition as it draws attention to the centrality of leadership that is built "on influence and interaction, rather than power and authority" (p. 171).

Thus, a broader view of teacher leadership has been advocated, one which includes not only a formal but also an informal perspective. The literature has emphasised the informal kind of leadership in which teachers engage in order to enhance their professionalism and to make a difference in the schools in which they work (Frost, 2004; Frost & Durrant, 2003; Spillane, 2006). Frost (2012) argues for an approach that "does not assume leadership is automatically linked with positions in the organisational hierarchy of the school. Instead it recognises the potential of all teachers to exercise leadership as part of their role as a teacher" (p. 210).

A study conducted in the USA indicates that teacher leaders' role varies and it includes multiple leadership activities (Gordon, Jacobs & Solis, 2013). The same study identified three main dispositions associated with teacher leaders, namely flexibility, lifelong learning and a positive attitude and optimism about the future. In a similar vein, Frost, and Harris (2003) identify a set of factors that shape teacher leadership:

- constructions of the professional role of teachers (teachers' beliefs and expectations and societal constructions);
- the organisational environment (organisational structures, organisational culture and social capital);
- personal capacity (authority, knowledge-pedagogical, organisational, community, situational understanding and interpersonal skills).

Effective support for teacher leadership was also identified such as mutual support through membership of a group/network; building professional cultures that give sanction and support to teacher leadership; opportunities for open discussion (e.g. about values, strategies, etc.); tools to scaffold personal reflection and planning; and guidance on leadership strategies (Frost, 2012).

However, barriers for teachers to exercise their leadership have also been discussed in literature such as isolation and individualism, role ambiguity, inadequate time for collaboration, lack of incentives (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), external accountability, teachers' capacity to undertake "extra work" and the role of senior managers (Muijs & Harris, 2006), and lack of administrative support, lack of time, dealing with teachers who are resistant to change, too many duties and lack of professional development opportunities (Gordon, Jacobs & Solis, 2013).

More recently, Huang (2016) argued that "the relationship between teacher leadership and teacher education tends to be overlooked" and that there is a need to foster the link between the two because "*professional development is highly situated* and *teacher agency has gradually come to be regarded as a significant feature of teacher change*" (original emphasis) (pp. 222-223). A number of conditions for teacher leadership to be successful has also been identified: a culture of trust and support, structures that support teacher leadership, clear and transparent, strong leadership head and engagement in innovative forms of professional development (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Also, according to Durrant (2004), it is important that "teachers' vision and values are articulated and then that they are involved both in setting the agenda for change and in exercising leadership to make it happen" (p. 27). In this paper, I present data from a 3-year research project aimed at understanding teacher leadership from the point of view of teachers and head teachers.

2. Methods

This paper draws on data from a wider 3-year project (January 2011-June 2014) funded by *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia* (National Foundation for Science and Technology) (PTDC/CPE-CED/112164/2009)[1]. The project was developed at a critical time for the teaching profession within the context of austerity and economic crisis. Issues such as intensification, increase of the workload, bureaucracy, deterioration of teachers' working conditions including their social economic status are but a few examples. The economic and financial crisis has impacted upon teachers and the teaching profession, including salary cuts and higher taxes. Along with these there were also changes at a policy level amongst which there are new mechanisms for teacher evaluation; new protocols for school governance; reduction in the school curriculum; introduction of national exams from the primary school upward, etc. In general, more pressure is placed on schools and teachers to increase teaching standards and student achievement.

In this paper, the following questions are addressed:

1. how do teachers see teacher leadership?
2. what are the conditions for them to exercise leadership?
3. how can teacher leadership enhance professional development?

A mixed-method research design was devised. Data were collected in three phases. Phase I consisted of a national survey in which 2,702 teachers participated. In order to analyse further the main findings from the quantitative data, 11 schools located in different regions of the country participated in phase II which included semi-structured interviews with the 11 head teachers and focus group with pupils (n=108) and with teachers (n=99). The third phase involved a professional development programme in 5 schools located in northern Portugal, in which 66 teachers participated (phase III). In this paper data from phases I and II will be reported.

In total, 2,702 teachers from mainland Portugal participated in the national survey which was administered online. Out of the 2,702 participants, 78,5% were female; 42,8% were between 40-49 years old, 28,6% were between 50-59 years old and 25,5% were between 30-39 years old. Only 1,7 were between 20-29 years of age. As far as the teachers' qualifications are concerned, the majority of them held a *Licenciatura* degree (59,3%) and 21,4% held a master's degree (21,4%). The majority of the teachers had between 11 and 20 years of experience (37,6%) and between 21 and 30 years (34,9%). The vast majority of them had a permanent post at school (83,3%). In addition, the majority taught in urban schools (51,1%) and in all sectors of teaching (from pre-school to secondary school: 3 to 18 year-old pupils).

As far as the 99 teachers participating in the focus group (22 in total) are concerned, the majority of them were female teachers (76,8%). As for their age, 31,3% were between 51 and 60 years old and 27,3% between 41 and 50 years old. The participating teachers came from all sectors of teaching, from pre-school to secondary school, and taught various subjects. In regard to their experience as teachers, 36,4% had between 21 and 30 years of service, 26,3% between 31 and 40, and 22,2% between 11 and 20 years of experience.

Quantitative data were analysed statistically with the use of SPSS (version 20). The process of qualitative data analysis was undertaken according to two phases: an analysis of data gathered in each school through the voices of teachers, pupils and the head teachers. A second phase was then carried out according to a comparative or horizontal analysis (cross-case analysis) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this phase, it was possible to look for common patterns as well as differences. A semantic criterion was used to look for key themes arising from the qualitative data by the research team.

3. Key Findings

Findings will be presented according to three main themes:

- A pluralistic view of leadership;
- Teachers as leaders of learning;
- Developing school-based projects as an opportunity for professional development.

3.1. A pluralistic view of leadership

When asked about "Who are the leaders in your school?" the participants spoke of a diversity of leadership roles. In other words, leadership was described as a pluralistic

dynamic at school led by different people. However, the most recurrent view in teachers' accounts is associated with its formal dimension, particularly related to those who play a role in the school management structure as it is the case of the head teacher and senior management team:

- "The head teacher has a key role in this school in terms of leadership" (Secondary school teacher, 23 years of teaching);
- "The head teacher is the key person as far as leadership is concerned" (Elementary school teacher, 20 years of teaching);
- "In my view, the key leader is the head teacher. She has a key role in the school. Of course, there is a group of people that support her and help her… and they end up leading the school too" (Elementary school teacher, 18 years of teaching).

Other teachers stress the role of the head of departments and tutors as well as the coordinators of projects at school:

- "I think that leadership at school is sort of pre-defined. You have the coordinators of each department, they can bring some kind of dynamic to the school. There is discussion at the meetings, participation and communication…" (Elementary school teacher, 28 years of teaching);
- "Leadership at school is not only about the head teacher. You can also talk about leadership at the intermediate level, for instance the head of departments, the tutors, the coordinators of the tutors, etc. All of them are very important…" (Elementary school teacher, 34 years of teaching);
- "The coordinator of the teachers plays a key role. He/she tries to develop a certain dynamic at school, building teamwork, he/she is a facilitator of teachers' working together. Life in school is tough these days and the coordinator is the linking element in order to keep the pressure away from the teachers and to support them. The teachers need to feel that the coordinator is there for them and he/she is good at what he/she does and knows what do to" (Primary school teacher, 26 years of teaching).

The role of the teacher tutors in making the connection between the school and families is also highlighted in teachers' accounts. The participants spoke of their leading role in the ways in which they interact with pupils, parents and teachers. Similarly, the coordinators of projects at school are also seen as key players when it comes to teacher leadership at school:

- "The tutors play a key role at school… they are involved in linking the work of the school and the families, they work with the pupils, the teachers and the parents. They care for the kids and work beyond the classroom context. Their work is important in enhancing pupil behaviour and achievement…" (Elementary school teacher, 18 years of teaching).

Although a formal dimension of leadership is prevalent in teachers' accounts, it is also possible to identify a broader understanding of teacher leadership, even if this view is less recurrent. Teachers also spoke of the teachers who make a difference in their schools. This points to the informal and non-positional view of teacher leadership (Frost, 2012). They stressed the ideas of influence, mobilisation, motivation, innovation and action. This can be seen in expressions such as "true leadership", "ability to get people involved and to mobilise people", "being able to lead people and get them motivated and involved at school", "taking the initiative" and "making others believe that something is possible":

- "In my opinion, there are people at the school that, even if they do not play a formal role, are listened to and are respected by everybody. They are asked about issues, they are people who know what they are talking about… this is the true leadership" (Secondary school teacher, 25 years of experience);
- "In my group I know the people who are able to get other people motivated and are able to mobilise others. They lead others in projects and activities. (…) whenever I have a doubt or a difficulty I ask their opinion" (Secondary school teacher, 20 years of experience);
- "I am aware that it is not the formal role that makes the school work. It is the other two hundred and something teachers who do that…" (Secondary school teacher, 20 years of experience);
- "I feel like a leader sometimes when I think about a given idea. I want to develop it and I make a suggestion to my group and when I manage to involve them in a project I feel like a leader. I am able to get them involved in a project and to believe that it is possible to do something for the pupils and for the school" (Elementary school teacher, 25 years of experience).

In others words, teacher leadership is not only about performing formal roles at school. For some of the participants informal leaders do exist at school and they do make a difference in leading others due to their knowledge, expertise and wisdom. This is the case of teachers who influence their colleagues, who develop innovative projects at school and who are engaged in activities that make a difference in the contexts in which they work.

Some head teachers also stressed the idea of "distributed leadership" and what they define as "decentralised, responsible and distributed power" in their school. They recognise the strategic action and leadership of the teachers in diverse contexts and situations, including the classroom:

- "I think everybody can exercise leadership: the teachers in the classroom, the support staff, etc. Even the pupils can do that at school" (Head teacher, 21 years of service);
- "Leadership in school is exercised in a natural way by those who play a formal role within the school structures. But teachers also exercise leadership, especially those who are leaders of projects and do things at school" (Head teacher, 18 years of service).

Interestingly, data from the survey indicate that teachers reveal an ambivalent position in regard to the most important dimensions of their work. They identified collaborating with colleagues (63,4%); supporting students (58,7%); reflecting on one's own work (51,1%); planning teaching (49,1%) and continuous professional learning (45,1%) as the most important ones. The least valued dimensions were: performing administrative tasks (7,5%); involvement within the local community (14,5%); developing teamwork (18,7%), using ICT (19,7%) and participating in decision-making process (19,7%). Ambiguity emerged from the data when teachers talked about the encouragement they get to make decisions and to be involved in projects at school as well as to exercise leadership at the department level. Issues of structural and comfortable collaboration (in many cases drawn from top down initiatives) and authentic collaboration (initiated and fostered by teachers themselves at school) might explain some of the findings. Similarly, the association of leadership with designated roles and responsibilities within the structures existing at school might also explain the ambiguity and, in some way, contradictory views of the participating teachers.

3.2. Teachers as leaders of learning

The participants emphasise teachers' key role as leaders of learning, especially in the classroom context. They stressed the different ways in which teachers can make a difference in their school contexts when they are able to influence and mobilise others, by leading projects, by interacting with parents and the community, etc. Teachers are, therefore, seen as agents of change and leaders of pupils' learning and also of their own learning:

- "In the classroom I see myself as a leader" (Elementary school teacher, 27 years of teaching);
- "As a teacher you need to be a leader in the classroom context, right? Everyone is a leader in his/her own way…" (Primary school teacher, 26 years of teaching).

The participants highlight that teachers are leaders of teaching and learning in the classroom when they suggest and develop pedagogical activities. This kind of leadership is also visible in the pedagogical interaction with the pupils which is associated with the capacity to mobilise others, to influence them and to make a difference in their lives:

- "As a teacher you may influence your colleagues and your pupils. You may also be led by your pupils. (…) You have to be a leader in the classroom…" (Secondary school teacher, 33 years of teaching);
- "I consider myself as a leader. I like to lead things in which I believe" (Secondary school teacher, 17 years of teaching).

3.3. Developing school-based projects as an opportunity for professional development

In phase III of the project it was possible to develop school-based projects by and for the teachers drawing upon a concrete or particular problem or issue related to their practice in the school. The participating teachers in phase III were able to develop leadership competencies and to work together and share experiences about their professional practice. When asked about their involvement in the one-year professional development programme (phase III), participants were very positive and enthusiastic. They spoke of the importance of reflection and collaborative work in a safe environment:

- "Being able to create opportunities to reflect and to share ideas with colleagues in a safe environment helps you change your practice";
- "I have learned how to reflect in a more systematic way and trying to change something in my practice";
- "I have improved my reflective skills with the activities that we have engaged in".

Participants in phase III of the project also admitted that they developed leadership skills. Some of them pointed to the opportunity to (re)discover the power of leadership in improving their work, pupils' learning and also the school:

- "I have learned that as a teacher I can take the lead and do something for myself, for my school and for the teaching profession";
- "My main learning has been the ability to work collaboratively in projects with other colleagues in my school. And this has enhanced my self-esteem";
- "I have learned that professional knowledge may be built in a collective way… As a teacher you can be a leader in your school…";

- "Getting feedback from peers in a more informal way and in a safe and supportive environment has helped me a lot to change my perspective as a teacher…".

Thus, issues of context and collaboration were key elements in teachers' accounts about developing leadership skills and promoting their professional development. They stressed opportunities to build professional knowledge, sharing experiences and ideas and enhancing professional motivation and morale through discussions about the teaching profession and the conditions in which they work. In addition, structural and cultural aspects namely the professional and school culture, the school leadership and the personal and professional values as teachers were seen as key mediating influences on their learning and professional development.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to present teachers' views on teacher leadership in the Portuguese context drawing upon a 3-year research project. Two main conclusions may be identified. First, the participants hold a pluralistic view of leadership, which includes both formal and informal dimensions. Although the formal element was more visible in teachers' accounts, the participating teachers also acknowledged the existence and relevance of informal teacher leadership. As Hanuscin, Rebello & Sinha (2012) state, "there are many informal ways in which teachers exert influence and make a positive difference in their schools" (p. 17). It is, therefore, important to explore further who the teacher leaders are and what they do. In this context, the concept of leadership within a non-positional view (Frost, 2012) needs to be highlighted in order to provide teachers with conditions and opportunities for them to exercise leadership and agency. In a recent book, Frost (2017) states that teachers' work has been shaped by policies and, therefore, teachers are asked not only to lead change but also to play their role in shaping those policies. Within this context, Frost (2017) argues that "empowering teachers as agents of change is an urgent necessity" (p. 174).

The second conclusion relates to the awareness of teachers' roles as change agents. This implies the recognition of the importance of teacher leadership in improving teaching and learning in schools and classrooms but also in teacher professional development. Developing leadership skills based on school-based projects might be seen as a key element in fostering teacher professional development in context. Huang (2016) discusses the self-empowerment approach to discuss the nature of informal leadership which is developed by those who do not hold a formal position in the school structures. In this regard, it is important to promote opportunities for teachers to discuss their beliefs about teaching and being a teacher as well as the conditions for them to exercise leadership in the contexts in which they work.

It is also important to do more research on teacher leaders, especially informal teacher leaders. Who are the teacher leaders in the school? What do they do? What are the outcomes of their actions? Issues such as teachers' professional culture and the micro politics of the workplace, especially in terms of leadership, may be important to better understand and to foster the development of teachers as agents of change.

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