

Allan Walker & Geoff Riordan (2010) Leading collective capacity in culturally diverse schools, *School Leadership & Management: Formerly School Organisation*, 30:1, 51-63

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While recognising that the issues discussed will vary in shape and emphasis depending on different contexts we target the cultural background of staff for a number of reasons.

1. First, an increasing number of schools across different contexts draw staff from different cultural and/or national groups
2. Second, although considerable research has been done into the influence of culture on how students learn, and some on how leaders and teachers can structure and support this in schools, very little work has investigated leading staff from different cultures.
3. Third, given the potential of leadership and collective work to improve student learning it seems important that we understand more about how groups in school, regardless of the values they hold, can work together effectively.

The purpose of the article is to encourage some pragmatic discussion of what leadership may entail in schools with culturally diverse staff. Our argument is built around a survey of some relevant literature and tracks the following assumptions.

1. First, leadership makes a difference, even if we are unsure exactly how. International literature confirms the centrality of school leadership to school improvement and student outcomes, and that it most effectively influences school outcomes indirectly through multiple variables
2. Second, school leadership is neither just positionally- defined nor limited to a single person. Although there is no doubting the important role played by the principal, leadership exercised by the many, when aligned, appears most successful. Leadership then is about building the capacity of the collective to make a difference.
3. Third, how leaders make a difference is contingent upon, but not dictated by, the context within which they lead. In other words, what leaders do is mediated and moderated by both their personal internal states as well as the organisational and external setting of the school
4. Fourth, therefore, given that school leadership is centrally concerned with the interpretation and enactment of values within a specific social and human context, leadership is essentially relational. Regardless of staff composition, leaders attempt to understand people as individuals and as members of collectives

Positioning:

Structuring:

Expectations:

Expression:

Profiling:

Conclusion

The preceding discussion suggests that, to build the collective capacity of staff from different cultural backgrounds, leaders need to first understand their own and the school community's cultures. Productive inter-cultural communication in schools can only develop within an understanding of the cultures which comprise the staff and the school. Given that these are in continuous flux, this is an ongoing process.

Second, leaders design, articulate and nurture formal structures that aim to promote inter-cultural relationship building in order to ultimately benefit and improve student learning and lives. The structural design of teachers' work is

something that should involve the teachers themselves and take account of their insights into how they are most likely to work effectively as a collective.

Third, when designing these structures leaders are aware of and take practical account of how cultural values can influence expectations of and communication within professional relationships and what happens in the school. Different cultural groups bring different perspectives to issues of participatory leadership, decision making, performance review, team work and collaboration. Presumptions and values attributed to certain cultures inevitably produce different understandings and behaviours in other cultures.

Fourth, and somewhat paradoxically, leaders who nurture collective capacity across cultural staff groups know that it is a mistake only to take account of culture as people and relationships are complex and there are many factors that influence how teachers work together with colleagues and in classrooms. They also know that recognising both the cultural diversity of staff and the diversity of personal and professional experiences that have shaped the ways in which teachers work is not the end. It is the important means by which shared, professional values that support collective practices can be developed in inter-cultural schools.

The lot of leaders in building collective capacity calls for a form of global intelligence (Spariosu 2004). This is about acquiring an understanding of the intricacies, influence and place of culture in organisational and community life. It is defined as 'the ability to understand, respond to and work toward what is in the best interest of and what will benefit all human beings' (38). Spariosu holds that this can only emerge from 'continuing inter-cultural research, dialogue, negotiation and mutual cooperation' (39). In inter-cultural organisational terms this indicates that interactive, broad-based learning becomes part of school life and that this by necessity considers global as well as local notions of cultural difference and identity.