How do teachers' articulate 'effective' with regard to leadership?

An exploration of how contextual factors function and shape leadership within a Primary School.

This paper explores how contextual factors function and shape leadership within a Primary School. The development of leaders and managers continues to be of interest to Human Resource Development (HRD) academics and practitioners. In recent years leadership has been viewed as a practice which can sustain growth. Within the field of education, government policies of school improvement use leadership and management to explain differing outcomes and measures of success. Since 1988 it has been regularly debated by both academics and policy-makers what the priorities of school leaders should be. Mainly over the last three decades owing to Educational reforms the role of headteachers and principals has changed dramatically. How a school is led and managed is regarded by both policy-makers and practitioners as a key factor in ensuring a school's success. According to a systematic review conducted by Bell et al (2003:1), "there is a widespread, strongly held belief that school leadership makes a difference and that headteachers should be supported and trained to raise educational standards." In addition, "the school as an organisational context for the work of leaders is complex" (Southworth 2004). Leaders in a school have to deal with multiple variables that change constantly in a variety of ways and as a result have to be conscious of the contextual factors impinging on their behaviour.

Context is not a simple phenomenon which is forever in a state of flux. It comes in many forms and the role of headteacher in primary schools is one that is developing rapidly to reflect an educational landscape that is changing at a national and local level, (NCLS 2009). School leaders and management need to think about their schools' performance levels; staff development needs; staff needs; the cultures and communities the school operates within and serves; the socioeconomic environment they find themselves in; the ever changing face of the school year; the changing needs and development of the children; the variable aspects of a teacher's own 'professional' stance, and the 'communities of practice' Lave and Wenger (1991) they operate within. In addition, schools' function within a devolved system but are steered by central government policies and funding streams and the continuous development of educational policy. Thus any exploration of context needs to acknowledge that the label covers many things and it is how these contextual matters interrelate and interact which makes each school different from the rest.

Despite context being recognised as important to leadership little attention has been paid to context within school leadership research. Previous research has been dominated by examining leaders as individuals and the roles they perform. This research focuses on what the leader does, in other words leader behaviour and the transformation in attitudes and motivations of followers; scant attention has been

paid to environmental and contextual factors. This research contributes to this perceived gap in the literature and explores how contextual factors combine to create specific leadership challenges and opportunities. The research focuses on primary schools because they are the largest and most varied group of schools in the English education system.

Social reality for the authors is meaningfully understood by perceiving individuals as social actors, actors who are not always fully aware of the impact of the social stage on their actions. The social stage consists of the often implicit expectations of 'communities of practice'. This research explores how individual actors' interpretations of their actions are situated in such communities and their understanding about processes at play in the leadership they are experiencing. Concept mapping was utilised used as an initial data gathering method to understand and represent the participant's 'mental representation' of 'effective leadership'. Concept mapping enabled participants to represent relationships between concepts by linking two or more concepts by words or pictures which formed a 'meaningful' statement. Follow up interviews were conducted enabling a conversation to explore the concept map. Interviewing enabled further exploration of specific experiences and to ascertain participants' reasoning and judgement in certain areas by focussing on events and situations and furthermore providing means for what Mason (2007) refers to as 'free association'. The aim was to cover a set of starting points for discussion in order to gain a perspective on the participants' meanings and understandings of what they consider to be an 'effective leader'.

The aim of this paper is to provide insight into how leaders, within the context of primary schools, make a difference. The paper explores how contextual factors function and shape leadership and illuminates how teachers' articulate 'effective' with regard to leadership. We conclude by considering the challenges for HRD and how contextual factors combine to create specific leadership challenges and opportunities.

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