

Middle leadership and communities practice: Emerging lessons from a case study

Liderazgo intermedio y desarrollo de comunidades de práctica profesional: Lecciones emergentes de un estudio de caso

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Background

Educational inclusion and success for all and among all require both professional learning communities and leadership that favor social justice. The issue is complex. It requires an entire community to come together, along with a successful shared and co-responsible style of leadership. The formation of extended communities of professional practice also requires 1) support from middle leadership (by distributing and sharing leadership and professional commitment); 2) support from critical colleagues (internal or external) who have collaborative advisory roles; and 3) integration into professional leadership and support networks. In this regard, a well-structured local system of leadership networks, along with the involvement of competent middle leaders, could provide a good solution. The school system has support services that can assume the role of critical colleagues and middle and connective leaders.

Aims

The study aimed to analyze the actions of a regional advisor as a middle leader for the development of professional practice communities within their area. The purpose of the case study was to determine the general view of this action model from the perspective of their interlocutors (teachers, school leaders, families and supervisor) and to draw comprehensive lessons from this knowledge.

Method & Procedure

This article presents the evidence gathered from a case study followed over the course of four academic years. The study focused on the professionals who work as middle leaders and hinges of the education system (support services). We analyzed the middle leadership role played by these professionals in the development of professional practice communities in their area. An (auto)biographical and dialogic perspective was chosen to understand and put into context the analyzed experiences.

We intentionally selected a regional advisor who acts professionally in the role of critical colleague and middle leader. This informant is highly valued by the education administration and teachers in his or her area due to the fact that they provide constructive and collaborative advice to schools and teachers. The work context was particularly challenging, since it is in an area classified by the education administration as being one "of preferential educational action". In spite of this, their schools were showing significant improvements. The study took place over four academic years. Discussion groups were used (4) along with 24 in-depth interviews about their professional experience. Evidence was collected on how the support process went, as well as the leadership actions that evolved or were put in place during this process. It was of interest to monitor the content, process, methodology, and impact of the professional work carried out by the advisor. To this end, the case was analyzed on the basis of the opinion of the interlocutors with whom the advisor was working.

Categorization was emergent and used in combination with reflective deepening processes, followed by validation of the dialect between the researcher and informants. The Nvivo software was used to assist in the management of qualitative data.

Results & Discussion

The selected advisor, in spite of their uniqueness and specificity, possesses elements and characteristics that make them worthy of consideration by the professional and scientific community.

The results show a professional practice of middle leadership from a "collaborative" perspective guided by a clear pedagogical aim. This leadership is based on a professional identity that is collaborative, processual, and constructivist, advising and working with teachers, principals, and schools during their improvement processes.

Thematic analysis of all of the material analyzed led to the emergence of a set of action principles that are firmly consolidated in their practice and professional identity. To select the option of shared and intermediate leadership:

- a) It is necessary to develop a professional identity of support, involvement, and closeness. This type of pedagogical leadership is indirect, negotiable, and shared with school directors and other school leaders.
- b) The key is to foster closeness, dialogue and professional performance as a critical colleague, "travelling companion" and connector of schools and teachers. It is not enough to simply be visible and available for what they need, but rather to make oneself useful for their needs and to generate transformation.
- c) It is important to involve the entire educational community by promoting shared and intermediate leadership among and with others.
- d) Success should belong to everyone, and equally. Coordination and co-responsibility are required. To achieve this, it is important that the improvement objectives and the consequences of working together are tangible.
- e) Actions should be prioritized, limiting those duties that are not strictly pedagogical.

Conclusion

Under certain circumstances, educational support professionals may exercise middle leadership functions in their area. The strategic location of these professionals, as hinges of the system, gives them an opportunity to play a relevant role, influencing and sharing responsibilities in the educational improvement processes of the schools in their area. Professional performance as a middle leader is enhanced and made more sustainable when collaborative, dialogic, and commitment perspectives are adopted.

Keywords: school middle leadership; professional learning communities; pedagogical support; advice; support services

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