

Crossing age boundaries: A route to leadership.

School leaders play an integral role in teacher development and growing future leaders as they facilitate teachers crossing student age boundaries. However the role of the school leader has changed as result of neo-liberal policies that promote performativity and the commercialisation of schools, which has led to a culture of mistrust (Codd, 2005). It has been important that despite the loss of a democratic vision, the potential for teacher growth has not been lost and leaders continue to demonstrate what Dewey proposed as “the capacity to cultivate growth” (Blake, Smeyers, Smith, & Standish, 2003, p. 28).

Fundamental to this is our belief that in order for teachers to continue to develop and grow into future leaders, having a wide experience of teaching different age groups is critical. In New Zealand primary schools crossing student age boundaries refers to teaching students ranging from age five to thirteen years. There are significant benefits for teachers from crossing these boundaries (Carlyon, 2011), however more importantly research indicates that school leaders play an integral role in facilitating and supporting teachers to do so (Carlyon & Fisher, 2012). This role is seen as part of the ever increasing role of school leaders to be actively involved in fostering on-going teacher development and growing future leaders, while also ensuring the schools resources (teaching staff) are used in the most effective manner to maximise the learning outcomes of students. This additional role has required school leaders to adopt new skills as coaches and mentors to place them in the position of being able to support teachers to cross boundaries within a setting of supported risk taking. These responsibilities serve to emphasise, like many aspects of leadership, that crossing boundaries is a multi-faceted process and requires school leaders to have specific skills and strategies to make decisions that are “knowledge-based, values informed, and skilfully executed” (Begley, 2006, p. 570).

Fostering teacher development

School leaders have a responsibility to foster on-going teacher development (Leithwood, 1992). This development can be fostered by school leaders providing opportunities for teachers to cross boundaries such as teaching students from different age groups. When teachers have new experiences such as these they “reflect on their practice, further develop their expertise as classroom teachers, increase their professional knowledge and experience personal growth” (Carlyon, 2011, p. 53). As teachers cross boundaries they take with them many teaching and managing strategies they have already successfully implemented and transfer these to use as scaffolding to help them adapt in their new settings. This kind of development Engestrom (1996) proposes consists of the transformation or creation of new relationships between individuals and social activities. These new relationships are part of schools informal networks which as identified by Cross and Parker (2004) serve as important levers for improving performance. These informal groupings or social networks provide opportunities for enhanced dialogue to support teachers as they cross boundaries to become more empowered to take risks with their teaching (Carlyon & Fisher, 2012).

Growing future leaders

Fullan (2003) asserts that the role of a leader is to help people see new possibilities and crossing student age boundaries is one way of nurturing and growing future leaders. The changing role of leadership necessitates the need for leaders to have experience of teaching students from different age groups. This provides them with a greater understanding of educational pedagogy and leadership within different contexts. Having a broad range of teaching experiences with students from different age groups is a way to enhance teachers

careers as it enables them to 'see the whole picture' and gives them 'credibility' (Carlyon & Fisher, 2012). The role of the school leader to facilitate teachers crossing student age boundaries enables them to be a key catalyst for teacher development and growing leaders.

Conclusion

It is vital that teachers are able to successfully cross boundaries within schools as this provides a range of opportunities for teachers to experience development and grow as leaders, however they cannot do this alone. In order to foster teachers on-going development and grow as future leaders, it is important that school leaders acknowledge that students from different age groups present very diverse contexts (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). It is also important to provide teachers with time, advice, support and encouragement when they are learning to change (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001). Therefore, in order for teachers to successfully cross boundaries, leaders must work with tact and care (Fennell, 2005) and cultivate a culture of trust by listening and valuing individual teachers (Brien, 1998). It has been suggested by Carlyon and Fisher (2012) that "those schools that share a common vision or philosophy are well positioned to encourage teachers to take a risk" (p. 78).

In an ever changing educational environment crossing age boundaries is a pedagogical imperative for teacher development and growing leaders. The integral role of the school leader as a coach and mentor provides the mechanism to facilitate and support teachers to cross these boundaries. Therefore it is important that this role is acknowledged and understood, otherwise the crossing of boundaries will be fraught with dangers for leaders, teachers and students.

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