



Receptive Accountability: Guiding the growth of teacher professionalism in an international school.

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This Article describes a case study and presents findings on teacher's changing perceptions of their professional identity in an international school. The purpose of the research was to identify whether planned spaces for teacher learning contributed to a change in the school's dysfunctional teacher work conditions. Analysis and findings demonstrate that there is an association between providing planned, sequenced and organised teacher professional learning spaces and a perceived growth in teacher professionalism. Our understanding of how receptive accountability when used to guide the design and implementation of learning spaces for teachers provides the working conditions that can enable the teacher to actively participate in strengthening their professional identity and the implications this has for school leadership are considered.



Introduction

When schools are required to adhere to external accountability forms, the building of enabling work conditions is essential for the development of teacher professionalism (Leithwood, 2006) and the subsequent growth of professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This is because the prevailing external accountability forms that have steered and prejudiced the decision-making in and about schools (O'Neill 2002) can provoke working conditions that can lead to the de-professionalization of teaching (Levitt, Janta, & Wegrich, 2008). Moreover, they generally do not specify how a school can improve nor identify the 'factors determining progress'. This renders external accountability forms obsolete as an instrument for school leaders to use if they intend to include teachers in a school transformation process (Elmore 2004).

While teacher-working conditions are influenced by external factors such as policies, practices and initiatives they are also influenced by internal factors that the teachers themselves control. Leithwood (2006) points out that: "What teachers actually do in their schools and classrooms depends on how teachers perceive and respond to their working conditions (pp.8)." According to teachers it is the quality of "collegiality and stimulating professional interactions; opportunities to learn and improve; support for professional risk-taking and experimentation; ability to influence school decisions; and congruence between individual and organizational goals (Bascia and Rottmann, 2011, p. 789)" that make a difference to their working conditions.

Internal accountability forms are where the actors from within the organisation account for their performance related to their individual and the school's collective imperatives (Poole, 2011). Internal accountability forms are more likely to support effective school transformation providing, as Elmore (2006) says, they 'engage the knowledge, skill, and commitment of people who work in schools'. Cohen (2012) adds a layer to Elmore's point about teacher engagement by identifying when teachers are learners who interact locally they have a greater capacity to create their professional identity. She goes on to iterate what Beijaard et al., (2000) found by suggesting that the teachers' professional identity experiences are intimately connected to their willingness to implement innovations in teaching and grow within a changing professional environment.

Notwithstanding the debates about the impact of accountability on teacher professionalism or what constitutes a professional teacher (Finnigan & Gross 2007) the idea that teacher learning as a catalyst for building teacher professionalism has gained momentum. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) posit that in a school environment where 'lively learning communities' exist then growth in teacher professionalism is a likely outcome. These learning communities are characterised by dynamic and passionate discussions; data to inform rather than drive



change and teachers learning ‘to let go’ to reshape their theory and practice. In turn, the growth of the teacher professionalism increases a school’s collective capacity (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012) to respond and adjust to the changing world of children (Hargreaves, 2001). Furthermore, to grow teacher professionalism school leaders need to consider the state of the teachers’ working conditions.

In the context of this study an analysis of a teacher survey showed the school had dysfunctional working conditions that were characterised by a “lack of trust, ineffectual leadership, poor communications, devotion to pointless or purposeless tasks unrelated to mission, ...” with the professional teacher either leaving or very much wanting to leave the organisation (Green & O’Sullivan 2009 pp.1). There were concerns about trust; communication; the purpose and goals of the school; the school’s governance leadership; staff sick leave; teacher turnover; the school’s future and teacher confidence in their professional standing in the school community (Sell, Grimstad & William 2013).

As a result the teachers professional acumen, in some quarters was seen as less advanced than the layperson. When teachers are perceived as unprofessional they need to change how they perceive, acquire, refine and articulate their expertise (Goodwin 1994) to the local school community (Cohen 2012). For a teacher, expertise includes but is not limited to possessing a high level capacity to anticipate, plan, improvise and make wise decisions (Hattie, 2003).

One way to enhance the teacher’s capacity to articulate expertise and subsequently cultivate a professional identity is to become an action researcher. When a teacher becomes a researcher their capacity to effectively participate in transforming their working conditions (Sell 2013) and increase their capability to adjust to unfamiliar contexts is realised (Stephenson 1999). The capacity to participate in a transformation process and adjust to a changing context is further enhanced when teachers reflect as part of the research process. According to Hopkins (2008) reflection leads teachers gaining more control over one’s professional life. This means teachers as researchers can develop greater autonomy and capacity to make wiser decisions about their work conditions.

Response to dysfunctional working conditions

In the absence of an internal accountability form, the school’s board collaborated with the incoming principal to respond to the dysfunctional teacher working conditions. In response ‘receptive accountability’ (Sell, Grimstad & Williams, 2013) as an innovative internal accountability form was conceived and designed by the school’s principal guide how teachers organise and account for their work (Roberts & Owens 2012). Thus ‘receptive accountability’ with its focus on individual teacher accountability, shared collective responsibility and anticipatory teacher responsiveness, was implemented (Sell, et. el 2013, Sell and Williams 2013).



Professional Capital and Receptive Accountability

Elmore's (2006) research indicates that accountability forms will not transform school performance without a significant focus on and investment in the school's human capital. However, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) add that the focus on the individual human capital alone will not work. They argue a school needs to cultivate professional capital. This is done by synchronously building three interrelated capitals; human, social and decisional. Human capital relates to an individual's capability, competency and expertise; social capital relates to collective capacity and decisional capital relates to the decision-making acumen.

Receptive accountability is designed to support the growth of professional capital in a school by providing three interrelated concepts aligned with the professional capitals. 'Receptive accountability' provides a referential framework for making knowledgeable contextualized judgments (Sell & William 2013)' about the quality of a teacher's contribution towards building professional capital in a school. The receptive accountability is made up of three interrelated concepts: individual accountability, shared responsibility and anticipatory responsiveness.

Individual accountability in a school is increased when a teacher accounts for their behaviour related to their 'level of understanding and subsequent actions in relation to such things as legislative and curriculum requirements, classroom practice and peer interactions. Criteria relating to the teacher's credentials and experience provide a reference point for judging the level of human capital (Sell & Williams 2013 p.p.156)'.

Shared responsibility in a school is increased when a teacher accounts for their behaviour related their level of 'participation in building collective capacity and their ability to share responsibility for the outcomes. ... Criteria relating to the collective human activity as seen through the level of teamwork and collaboration, peer to peer learning and responsibility for outcomes and achievements provide the reference points for judging the level of social capital (Sell & Williams 2013 pp 157).

Anticipatory responsiveness 'relates to the teacher's ability to use discretionary judgement and adopt a future's orientated approach to decision making. Teachers, operating with a high level of anticipatory responsiveness, are able to effectively anticipate and respond to the future needs of students and the school and thus have confidence in discretionary decision making. Criteria relating to the level of autonomy, analytical and reasoning skills, creativity and imagination and the adoption of evidence informed approaches to decision making provides the reference points for judging the level of decisional capital (sell 2013 pp.157). Table 1 below shows how the relationship between the concepts of receptive accountability and the three capitals within professional capital.

Table 1: Receptive Accountability and Professional Capital Matrix



ACTION		OUTCOME
<i>Individual accountability</i>	←→	<i>Human capital</i>
<i>Shared responsibility</i>	←→	<i>Social capital</i>
<i>Anticipatory responsiveness</i>	←→	<i>Decisional capital</i>

The Research Problem

The research problem focuses on whether planned spaces for teacher learning, guided by the receptive accountability, contribute to a change in the school's dysfunctional teacher work conditions and a perceived growth of teacher professionalism.

The Research Question

What are the outcomes for teachers where receptive accountability was used to guide the planning, organizing and implementation of social teacher learning spaces?

Research Methodology and Methods

The Methodology

The case study methodology provides this research with a structure to evaluate a specific phenomenon within a single organisation that involved a few people and limited events (Yin, 2003). It also allows for an analysis of the association between receptive accountability and the development of teacher professionalism within the school's specific contextual features (Merriam, 1998).

Method

A mixed-methods interpretative, inquiry approach utilising qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis (Bartlett Bartlett, 1995., Bevir & Rhodes 2002., Denzin 2002., Zhou, & Creswell 2012) was used to examine the interactions of the teachers in a given social context (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman 2007). The interpretative inquiry approach aimed to provide rich information to better understand the complex perspectives and experiences of participants.

This evaluation data was collected over 3 and a half years and consisted of qualitative in-depth active teacher interviews (Kvale, 1996, Holstein & Gubrium 1997) and quantitative surveys. These data enabled reporting on the participants' experiences and perceptions over a period of time. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed for trends.

The quantitative data allowed for some measurement of growth over time. For example some questions were repeated over time with responses recorded using a likert scale. Surveys have been analysed for consistency and congruence.



Limitations

There is a possibility that the findings and the implications of this evaluation may be restricted by the author's own perceptions, past experiences and firsthand personal knowledge of the teachers and the school's contextual features. As the primary developer of receptive accountability in the school the researcher brings his own perspective to the theory and practice embedded within the action taken during implementation. The study design included strategies to augment the reliability, validity and trustworthiness of the data and analysis by enlisting an external party to conduct the in depth interviews. It is possible for the reader to infer generalizations regarding the findings and then transfer new understandings to their context (Merriman 1998).

Professional growth: Teacher as Action Researcher

Prior to the implementation of planned and organised learning spaces the dominate teacher talk was based on a horizontal discourse of knowledge (Bernstein 1999). Horizontal knowledge primarily emerges from the teacher's applied experiences and although it is useful for sharing practical wisdom it falls short when trying to build coherent and shared professional understandings. In response to this circumstance the focus was on creating a vertical discourse to complement the horizontal discourse among teachers. A vertical discourse emerges when teachers collaboratively analyse, share and reflect on educational research and literature to create deep and collective understandings as reference points for actions. By its very nature action research encompasses the horizontal and vertical teacher discourse as the researcher concomitantly draws on their experience and theory to make sense their investigations.

Positioning the teachers to become action researchers requires leadership intent and commitment. Rismark and Sølvsberg (2011) found there are benefits for teachers when leaders conscientiously plan and organize spaces for learning where teachers can acquire, share and express their knowledge within the context of a socialization process. Creating a learning environment where thoughts are safely shared, humour is allowed, differing perspectives are valued and collaboration is the norm does not just happen by osmosis.

It's been argued that on a macro level when education systems have working conditions that limit professional growth the intervention strategies required to remedy the situation are necessarily prescriptive (Mourshed, M. Chijioko, C. Barber, M. et al. 2010). They found the education systems at the lower end of performance scale sustained continuous improvement by initially prescribing intervention strategies aimed at developing the collective knowledge, skills and dispositions required eventually achieve systemic professional autonomy.

In this school, the prescriptive intervention strategies were built on four assumptions.

1. Start with the teacher first to build empathetic and collaborative behaviours.
2. The places for teacher learning are also places for socialization.
3. All teachers should have the opportunity to engage in learning that leads towards professional autonomy.



4. Sustained and continuous professional enhancement is not something that just happens in a school, it requires thoughtful, coherent and sequenced interventions.

The purpose of planned and organised socialised teacher learning spaces aimed to:

- Foster the continuous development of teacher expertise as a reference point for accounting for the level of human capital.
- Increase the level of shared responsibility through collaboration and peer-to-peer learning as reference points for accounting for the level of social capital.
- Build teacher confidence relating to increase professional autonomy; the quality of analytical and reasoning skills, the use of creativity and imagination and the adoption of evidence informed approaches to decision making as reference points for accounting for the level of decisional capital.

Although in all meetings the notion of individual accountability, shared responsibility and anticipatory responsiveness were entwined each individual meeting type was underpinned by focus on in a specific area.

Table 2: Meeting Type and Receptive Accountability Focus Area

MEETING TYPE	RECEPTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY FOCUS AREA	
<i>Professional learning and Development Meetings</i>	Primary focus:	<i>Individual accountability Shared responsibility</i>
	Secondary focus:	<i>Anticipatory responsiveness</i>
<i>Collaborative Meetings</i>	Primary focus:	<i>Shared responsibility</i>
	Secondary focus:	<i>Individual accountability Anticipatory responsiveness</i>
<i>Staff Recognition Incentive Scheme Meetings</i>	Primary focus:	<i>Anticipatory responsiveness</i>
	Secondary focus:	<i>Individual accountability</i>
<i>Education Symposium</i>	Primary focus:	<i>Individual accountability</i>
	Secondary focus:	<i>Anticipatory responsiveness</i>

One Step at a time

Step 1: Start with the teacher first

Given the dysfunctional working environment, the school initially prescribed an intervention strategy aimed at increasing the level of individual responsibility for the outcome of personal and



professional behaviours. A 'group hug' and 'tough love' strategy was implemented to establish empathetic behaviours within the teacher group. This was done by explicitly using structure language that asks teachers to reflect on the impact their personal behaviours had on others. In addition to modeling empathy a high value was placed on hearing the diversity of voices within the teacher group and the importance of sharing responsibility for decision-making and the subsequent outcomes of those decisions. The 'group hug' and 'tough love strategy' was designed to engender respectful behaviours and set the platform for cultivating positive social climate in the school.

Step 2: Redesign teacher meetings

By redesigning the purpose and timing of the meetings the school increased the opportunities for professional learning through socialisation. The new meetings were designed to provide a safe place to for the teacher to relax and share ideas and suggest innovations.

Of the five types meetings the traditional staff meeting was replaced by a briefing meeting. An informal and flexible action research mindset became the underlying assumption driving the teacher professional learning and development meeting, the collaborative meeting and the staff recognition incentive scheme meeting. The education symposium was a formal space for teachers to share their new knowledge and research with other teachers, academics and researchers.

Step 3: Teaching teachers to be action researchers through social learning spaces

Teaching teachers how to be action researchers requires a systematic and sequenced approach to develop substantiated collective professional knowledge as a basis for decisions and action. This strategy consisted of teaching two components:

1. The use of data and research to inform decision-making at all levels in the school.
2. The use of an inquiry cycle of learning, action and reflection as the assumed approach to using new knowledge meaningfully.

Typically when there was a problem to be solved or a decision to be made the teachers were asked to research to support the justification of the proposed solution or decision. The use of an inquiry cycle was designed to strengthen the collective understandings and capacity.

Typically the cycle included:

- identifying an area needing improvement
- introducing and analysing related data or research literature
- designing and/or selecting an new strategy for implementation
- implement and
- analyse and reflect on the strategy's effectiveness
- reporting findings to peers



Although collaborative planning existed the meetings appeared to be unproductive. Once the group hug and tough love strategies had run their course the teachers' capacity to collaborate in a professional setting remained limited by their communication skills and an initial lack of organizational leadership within the groups. A strategy to develop effective collaborative and professional communication skills, such as active listening and considerate questioning was applied to enhance the school's collective capacity and teacher's sense of shared responsibility.

A space for and sharing reflection

As teachers became more engaged in learning and individual research projects emerged the need to provide spaces for the sharing and reflection of new knowledge and understandings arose. Two forums were provided. First, regular meetings allowed for teachers to share and reflect on their learning with colleagues. In contrast to the meetings where more prescriptive learning strategies were applied these spaces became forums for autonomous teacher learning through professional reflection with peers (Sell and Williams 2013). Second, an annual education symposium, sponsored and organised by the school, and implemented in partnership with an Australian and a Norwegian University provide teachers, researchers and academics with an opportunity to share research, ideas and practices.

Findings

At the conclusion of the study, teacher survey data indicated that, over the three-year period, a positive trend towards increasing the level of human, social and decisional capital was evident with teachers indicating the greatest growth was in decisional capital. In addition, a noticeable positive transformation in teacher working conditions was detected over the period of the study.

The analysis of collected data indicates a number of benefits emerged from organizing and planning socialization spaces for teacher learning and it is reasonable to infer that these benefits, in some way, contributed to the transformation of the school. Apart from an increase in the number of stimulating professional interactions where teachers could acquire new knowledge, refine their understandings and articulate their expertise there was a change in how teachers perceive their work conditions and professional identity.

The growth in school related teacher lead professional learning projects increased the opportunities for learning and improving practice. Professional learning projects investigated topics such as: positive social interactions; pedagogical frameworks, critical literacy in the context of teaching Visual Art and English; effective English language strategies and practices for bilingual and multilingual students; managing student behaviours; school innovation in the context of leadership; and whole school critical literacy development. There was an increase in teachers articulating their expertise locally and internationally with a majority of teachers



presenting at the school sponsored Education Symposium and some teachers presenting at conferences in Hong Kong, Madrid, Netherlands, Australia and North America.

During the annual Education Symposium teachers and academics conducted shared ideas, research and practices related to the 21st century pedagogy and cognitive neuroscience; the economics of learning; critical literacies; digital technology and learning; teachers as researchers; the role of creativity in the Arts and Science, inquiry based mathematics teaching; systematic whole school learning programs; **teacher education and** cross cultural technology. The symposium demonstrated that the teachers were professional in their approach to teaching and learning and an advanced capacity to articulate what they been learnt in a coherent and professional manner.

The growth of professional learning projects was possible as a result of a change in the purpose of the meetings and how they were conducted. Coinciding with the meeting changes was change in teacher behaviours. One teacher summed it up this way:

Our meetings before, they were just a mess and ... then we started learning, we were responsible for continued education and for learning. In other words, we were accountable again and we began to think deeply and we began to examine ourselves and what we were going to improve.

Other comments from teachers illustrated how the new meetings supported a behavioural shift towards the teacher taking and sharing responsibility for their learning with one teacher saying the:

staff meeting was about sharing our strengths and having different workshops and teachers taking responsibility for their learning and reflecting on their learning' and that teachers now use their 'time in meetings on professional development or sharing research.

Another teacher reinforced the depth of professional learning and sharing in staff meetings when she/he generalised the observations made by visiting student teachers:

What student teachers from here and around the world were always impressed by were the level of knowledge and the sharing of that knowledge. One student teacher said they learnt more in one staff meeting than they did in 4 years at University.

But not all teachers shared the same enthusiasm for the change in the model of professional learning. With a very small minority feeling they did not receive applicable professional development opportunities in order to meet their professional needs.

More commonly comments such as *'I have learnt a lot about teaching and teaching theories and I have learnt professionally during the weekly meetings'* capture a general perception professional learning among the majority of teachers interviewed. Another teacher summed up the change this way:

I have grown tremendously in these last years compared to before when I felt I was just coming to work and doing my job. I really don't need to go to a conference because I was learning here.



Although the majority of teachers recognized an increase in teacher professionalism within the school, one teacher it did not come without hard work:

... had to really work on professionalism in the beginning because it wasn't a professional community... because there was no trust, someone would say something at one end of the hall and it would be like wildfire down to the other end. So we had to learn to build up some trusting bonds ... and we had to be more professional with each other in the way we spoke to each other.

Because teachers '*learnt professionally during the weekly meetings*' it is not surprising that the majority '*feel treated a lot more as a professional*' Interestingly, the increase in professionalism for one teacher '*helped erase a lot of unspoken hierarchy in teaching*' in the school. They went on to say:‘

It doesn't matter where you are in it (the hierarchy) but you are a professional in that area and you have just as much of an ability and right to engage in ... professional research or development or presenting papers.

For another teacher the growth in professionalism meant:

we (the teachers) can anticipate and we are more confident in answering questions about what we do. The tone set in the school is about professionalism, the work we are doing and our roles are really well defined.

One teacher also noted a shift to the vertical discourse among teachers. In summary they suggested that professional learning:

was all about increasing the teacher's professional ability so that the conversations in the hallways weren't about rumour and gossip they were about hopefully talking about our teaching, what to do with certain student or just the general talk about teachers helping teachers.

However one teacher indicated the teacher learning was not always a smooth and harmonious process.

I'm a leader in my classroom and I've done research in my classroom and I really enjoy what I am doing. I think it (learning in meetings) has been a supportive process even though not everything has been OK, but we all have disagreements, but for me I've had flexibility and trust.

Although a very small minority of teachers found it difficult to speak up when in disagreement this was countered by the majority of teachers perceiving the behaviours within the meeting spaces differently. One put it this way:

The focus is on professional understanding and professional skills where the focus is on becoming better teachers with better understanding of a good school community.

Finally one teacher best sums up the how the tone of the school has changed and why when they noted:

I think it's all changed for the better. It is more systematic, its aligned to research, ... aligned to professional judgement.



Conclusion

Receptive accountability, when used to guide the design and implementation of social learning places for teacher learning is not only has capacity to support the transformation of dysfunctional teacher working conditions but also the building professional capital.

Supporting teachers to actively participate in their own professional development is a challenge for school leaders. It seems that by focusing on providing organised and planned meeting spaces where teachers feel safe to acquire, reflect and profess their expertise and shared understandings the growth in professional confidence becomes possible. This confidence translates into teachers taking risks and innovating practice within a changing professional environment. The idea of providing social learning spaces in schools is to generate stimulating professional interactions between teachers where the process sharing learning and professing new knowledge seems to play a role in the teachers changing their perceptions about their working conditions.

For school leaders, when teachers are able to validate their practices (individual accountability); empathise with colleagues and account for collective outcomes (shared responsibility); and anticipate, improvise and make wise decisions (anticipatory responsiveness) the conditions for the growth of professional capital are enhanced. When teachers are able to learn through action research and coherently articulate their understandings beyond the classroom walls their professional identity strengthens.

For school leaders, charged with the responsibility of addressing dysfunctional work conditions, looking to design and implement an internal accountability form aimed at guiding growth in teacher professionalism and professional capital could be useful. I can only hope this study is useful in some way for school leaders embarking on a journey of school transformation.

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