21st century leadership skills for learning networks at school

Although many studies point towards the potential of transformational and distributed leadership, fewer have focused upon the learning histories of school leaders who endeavor to develop their learning-on-the-job (Harris & Deflaminis, 2016).

In a three-year project, 4 researchers, 13 elementary school principals and 2 board chairmen are investigating how learning networks of teachers can be supported by 21st century leadership skills (strand: leadership capacity for change). The focus is to increase understanding of what it takes to change routines of both teaching and leadership towards 21st century skills, i.e. communication skills, social and cultural skills, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, media wisdom, self-regulation, collaboration (Voogt & Roblin, 2012). The overall design is based on theories of network learning (Büchel & Raub, 2002, De Laat, 2012), distributed (Kessels, 2012; Hulsbos, Van Langevelde, & Evers, 2016, Hallinger & Heck, 2010) and transformational leadership (Geijsel, Meijers, & Wardekker, 2007), and 21st century skills. The methodology combines principals’ individual case studies, collaborative learning sessions of all participants, and emerging theory development.

Halfway the process semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals individually to determine their progress and goals for the rest of the project and to bridge theoretical perspectives and practical experiences. The research question was: How do principals conceptualize and frame their experiences in learning 21st century skills and in developing practices with learning networks? The interviews were about
- wishes/future perspectives regarding 21st century skills/education
- leadership
- network learning
- support in developing leadership.

The transcripts were analyzed to investigate how principals conceptualized the theoretical perspectives in their developing practices. New perspectives, emerging in discussions between researchers who tried to understand the principals’ issues, were added to the coding list:
- complexity/emergent learning
- dialogue: internal/external/individual/collective
- strategic/tactic decision making
- single/double/triple loop learning
- learning/managerial/well-being terms.

All codes were used as sensitizing concepts.

Analysis showed that four principals were in general more outspoken than their colleagues. They had in common more statements about internal collective dialogue, 21st century learning, and well-being, but also differed in a meaningful way:

1. Two framed their school as a collective, mentioned single loop learning most often, and used more managerial terms.
2. Two framed their teachers as individuals, mentioned double and triple loop learning most often, and used more learning terms.
Also, most principals said they desired support in how to 1) communicate about learning with their teachers and 2) ask questions that provoke critical thinking, in-depth learning and an inquiring attitude.

Two questions need to be addressed in the remainder of the project. First, might the capacity to find words and create language about collective learning processes and progress be an essential part of 21st century leadership skills? Second, might principals’ shown willingness for in-depth and joint learning also be part of the clue of how to develop 21st century education? For the future design of the project, enough data are now available to enrich the collaboration with tentative patterns, exemplary statements and learning opportunities.

References