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Trust. A systemic pattern of school improvement

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Contribution

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The governance of the post-bureaucratic organizations characteristics of the knowledge society is increasingly linked to the literature concerning trust as a condition and an organizational property. This is because more and more people take part in such organizations in processes such as leadership and management. Thus, trust is crucial to lubricate (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) the dense network of communication where the distribution of power and responsibility is required (Kramer and Cook, 2004). In particular, a part of such literature has emphasized the beneficial effects of trust considered not as a personal trait but as a property of the organizational dynamics. For example, according to Louis et al. (2009) the level of trust among the members can affect the way they make sense of the change initiatives in order to facilitate or to make more difficult such initiatives.

Furthermore, trust provides the feeling of security required to analyze and criticize the old practices as well as to take the risk to promote new ones (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 1998) In sum, in an increasingly challenging environment for teachers, principals and schools, to build trust is the core issue needed to develop professional communities of practice in order to achieve sustainable processes of improvement over time..

This article points out that a fundamental pattern of the schools that develop innovation processes, specifically those that

achieve long term institutional improvement, is that they seem to be based on what we will herein call «logics of trust». Our goal is to unveil different ways that lead to these logics. With this purpose, we will refer to a multiple case study where ten schools of two Spanish regions that had been acknowledged as innovative took part. In this paper we will describe some of the most relevant results carried out by the above mentioned research along with the methodology used. We will also discuss them considering the literature about the following items: the link between trust and the shared perception of vulnerability (Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Samier, 2010); the unfolding of trust as a discursive and sense-making activity (Kezar and Eckel 2002; Stoll, et al, 2006; Brown, Gabriel and Gherardi, 2009; Louis et al, 2009); and the contribution of trust to the development of communities of practice (Strike, 2000; Day, Hadfield and Kellow, 2002; Swan, Scarbrough and Robertson, 2002; Furman, 2004). In sum, we will try to prove that trust is an appropriate construct to understand the scope and limitations of the innovation processes found in the schools of our research.

Method

The case-selection of the study proceeded by asking the advisers of three Teachers Centres to identify schools in their area in which innovation had been sustained over time, to the extent that it was perceived as part of its own identity. At the end of the process, five primary, four secondary and one special education school which were recognized as innovative were selected. Nine out of ten of these schools have in common that they attend a population with considerable social, cultural and economic disadvantages.

Research methodology was based on ethnographic strategies as in-depth interviews, participant observation, photography, story-telling from participants, biographical accounts and informal records. Data analysis was co-constructed with participants throughout three ethnographic reports. While Report #1 was descriptive in essence, Reports #2 and #3 were mainly interpretative, including a focus on organizational culture, power distribution, leadership practices and styles, and relationship patterns among internal and external educational agents.

Expected Outcomes

Trust development was facilitated by certain collective perception of vulnerability based upon the difficult circumstances faced by the vast majority of the cases of this inquiry. Trust appeared to be the core element that transformed a group of teachers in a community of practice, building the feeling of security that promoted open communication, constructive dialogue and risk-taking. However, a collateral effect of this logic was a certain feeling of accomplishment that produced resistance to true innovations in some members. Our conclusion is that some of these schools should seek some kind of external help (e.g. in terms of collaboration with advisers/other schools) in order to go further the job already done and to embrace new and perhaps more innovative initiatives.

The process of trust-building had both a discursive and a symbolic nature. It unfolds with the help of stories, legends and sagas that make sense of the new events according to a cluster of widely shared values, beliefs and assumptions. Most of the schools of this inquiry appeared skillful enough to transform the difficulties into levers to develop sense of community, cohesiveness and a strong feeling of belonging not only among the staff but among the whole school community.

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