

EERA: Learning about educational change from innovative schools

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Contribution

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Prescriptive literature about both how innovation must be implemented at schools and the leadership needed to this aim is perhaps the most abundant one in the educational field. However, quite less attention has been paid to the knowledge gained by schools in the course of their innovative practices (Gather Thurler, 1998). To describe the organizational knowledge embedded in the practice of innovation of ten schools (five primary, three secondary and one special education school) recognized as innovative by their communities was the main purpose of a funded research project in two Spanish regions. This paper will provide an overview of the findings and will discuss some theoretical and practical implications about the texture of organizational knowledge and learning (Gherardi, 2006) during innovative processes. The conceptual framework of the project is rooted both in the field of practice-based studies about organisations (Gherardi, 2000, 2001; Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow, 2003) and the literature about innovation at schools (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Hopkins, 2001). Sustainability has been proposed in the last years as the key concept of educational innovation (Hargreaves, 2002; Hargreaves and Fink, 2004, 2006). Sustainability implies that local, organizational conditions are not only influencing ones but the decisive basis over which the changes are built when they happen. Furthermore, one of the most important insights about this is that such organisational conditions are not mainly referred to structural but informal issues as organizational culture, power and leadership distribution or communication networks. Therefore, organisational knowledge is not conceived here as a mental or informational entity but as a specific configuration of culture-power-communication patterns and practices (Spender, 1996a, 1996b; Araujo, 1998; Cook and Yanow 1999; Gherardi, Nicolini and Odella 1998; Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999; Tsoukas, 2002; Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes, 2005). In sum, the purpose of the study was to know more about the components and the outcomes at the same time of innovation as a social constructed praxis: shared meanings and beliefs, patterns of influence and

EERA: Learning about educational change from innovative schools

relationship, discourses and strategies deployed, organizational dynamics, etc. The whole conclusions of the study will show innovation as a complex system of practices, a system which knowledge is embedded in networks of symbols, cultural artefacts, influence and relationship patterns.

Method

The innovative schools of our study were identified by the advisers of three Teacher's Centers (TC provide both advising and in-service education to the schools included in a district) as schools in which innovation had been sustained over time to the point in which it was perceived as part of its own identity. The last phase of both data collection and analysis is being developed now through qualitative methodologies such as in-deep interview, participant observation, photography, story-telling and informal records. The main conclusions of the study are being co-constructed with the participants throughout three ethnographic reports. Some of the knowledge brought to light of our study reveals the complex and paradoxical nature of educational/organizational innovation, to the point that some of the common places of the literature of innovation and leadership can be discussed:

Expected Outcomes

- Although evidences show that principals were decisive to promote sustainable changes, their leadership was less 'visionary' than literature suggests leadership have to be performed and much more distributed. - Although the majority of the school practices related with innovation were developed under formal projects, those projects worked as a call for innovative ideas and practices to be developed, more than as a rigid structure to be accomplished. Innovation appeared to be a more emergent, uncertain, trial-error, deliberative activity than could be presumed reading innovative projects. - The innovative schools of our study seemed to commit the continuity of innovation to the workplace climate much more than a careful planning. - The innovative orientation of the schools studied included resistance to some initiatives and changes proposed from the environment. Those schools developed an invisible system of protection from adventures that could put in peril the staff commitment about innovation.

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EERA: Learning about educational change from innovative schools

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