

TUAC's presentation at the OECD international conference on School Leadership Development Strategies, Dublin November 7th 2007

In this short presentation I will try to clarify what we at TUAC think should be the main focus of discussion when the issue is how to improve school leadership. But first, I think I should try to put right what might have emerged as a misunderstanding of teacher unions' leadership policies. It is concerning management. There must be no doubt that TUAC supports the development of high quality management of schools. What we should discuss however, is how the concept of management should be understood and limited when it is used about leadership activities and leadership competences in schools.

My point of departure is that school leaders have an important indirect impact on student learning. This means that school leaders influence intermediate variables such as teachers, organisational climate, and school structures, which in turn influence student learning.

In my mind this result should bring us to draw some pretty clear consequential conclusions:

- school leadership's most important aspects are those that have the greatest impact on student learning
- we must study further how school leaders should work to be able to enhance most effectively the quality of the teachers' work in the classroom

To me this means that the leadership figurehead, the principal, must act as the strategic leader of the school's learning activities. He or she must keep close contact with the teachers and the pupils and the classroom activities. The principal must be able to feel the educational climate and pulse of the school. Why do I insist that this must be the principal? Why cannot this task be delegated to another member or members of the leadership group? The reason is that the competence, tasks and preoccupations of the principal, no matter what, will strongly influence the leadership priorities and the leadership profile that will be visible both inside and outside the school.

What are the main conditions for a school leader to be able to influence the practice within the classrooms? First of all, that school leader must know the teaching trade. In my opinion it is only school leaders who can act as good examples, both at teaching and in the professional discourse about teaching that will gain enough status and support to influence the attitudes and practice of the teachers.

Secondly, the school principal must be the leader who organise and give priority to a good system for in service training. We think it is important that the training is systematic, repetitive and closely linked to every day practise with a good mix of theory and exercises to be conducted within the teachers' own classroom. It is also a good idea to organise the teaching activities so that teachers can learn from each other in their own school and by visiting other schools. This is also an indirect answer to the question how school leaders should be developed and trained.

Third, the principal must be able to inspire teachers to involve themselves in the systemic aspects of teaching organisation and in the evaluation of results. Although school leaders have to respect the individual teachers needs for a private professional space, we think there is a great potential for improvement of learning outcomes if the school leadership is able to create possibilities and incentives for collective professional development work.

If these are some of the right answers, the next question would be whether leadership policies of central and local governments have focused on these aspects. I have not yet had the time to read all the national reports produced through the ISL activity, but my impression is that they have done so to a fairly limited extent.

Instead many focused more on the managerial aspects of school leadership and on different systems for accountability. Both these aspects of school leadership policies are important, but they are not the *most* important if learning outcomes is the main issue and goal. I would also like to say that some of the high stake accountability systems that have been developed are probably directly counterproductive to better learning in schools. In some countries lots of creativity and energy is now used to beat the accountancy system. In addition the costs are astronomical. It is also a concern that different aspects of the governments' school leadership policies are not pulling in the same direction. Instead, they prescribe actions and policies that incompatible.

Learning is a very, very complicated process. Therefore the stimulating and fostering of learning is also a very complicated business. Our goals for learning are wide. Schools are trusted with the stimulating and very important task of fostering new generations. When the results of this task are broken down into simple numbers on a scale, we must be very careful so that these numbers can be used mainly as inspirations for improvements both for students and teachers. We must always keep in mind that they can only tell us fractions about the outcomes of learning which schools can and should take both the credit and responsibility for.

However difficult, school leaders must stay focused on and give priority to tasks that can contribute to better teaching and learning. Managerial tasks should, whenever possible, be delegated from the principal to other leaders or to office staff. It is our view that this will enhance the school leaders' chances to influence teaching and learning in a positive way.