DISTRIBUTED LEADER DEVELOPMENT AND THE MORAL IMPERATIVE FOR COMMUNAL ACTION REFLECTION LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

School leaders, like all people, continually change as a fact of life, as a result of their personal and professional experiences. The purpose of this research was to explore the process of workplace school leader learning through professional development, its pre-requisites, and what continues to drive school leaders to want to learn. The ultimate aim was to develop and implement a sustained effective strategy for workplace leader development. A qualitative phenomenographic approach was used to illicit personal workplace experiences of growth as a leader from 15 school leader informants. The results of the study showed that leaders and followers in leadership relationships change when they; 1) visualise their learning and the learning of others within their relationships; 2) discern variations in multiple aspects of experiences; 3) connect existing knowledge with new knowledge; 4) accept and share responsibility for behaviour as a group; and 5) become communally committed to improvement as a group moral imperative. Learning theories such as action reflection learning approaches, variation theory and complex theory were enhanced by understanding leadership as a group phenomenon and so taking a community of practice perspective whereby the motivation for being a leader emerges from the community as a moral imperative to create benefits for all. This conceptualisation forced the researcher to reconceptualise the process as interactive reflective learning focused directly on expanding distributed leadership throughout organisations functioning as learning communities.

Keywords*: distributive leader development, professional learning communities, variation theory, action reflection learning*

INTRODUCTION

Like everything else existing in the ecosystem school leaders and schools are also bound to change through their personal and professional experiences and learning. When the school leaders evolve, change in the organisation also becomes inevitable. Every single factor in the school is bound to evolve. To enhance these changes school members need to work together as a learning community whereby each and every

factor benefits from each other. Kelly and Papaefthimiou(1998) state that the inter-relationships of elements within systems cause multiple chains of dependencies and this causes change. The authors say that though these changes are not very obvious at the beginning, slowly, such changes become significant as stakeholders begin to see newlyemerging patterns. This is because at the beginning, the changes are simultaneously taking place at micro-organisational levels and eventually reach thresholds where they break through to become observable macro-organisational dynamics within the evolutionary process of leader development and community change.

Leadership learning at all levels can be improved and the learners will gain more benefits from what they learn if there is a better understanding of the concept, how people learn through reflection and interaction. Hence, the study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of workplace school leader learning through a particular hybrid on-campus/online/in workplace action reflection learning professional development programme. More specifically, the intention is to find the effective pre-requisites of professional development for school leaders and the on-going factors that influence school leader participants in such programmes to want to learn more. By drawing conclusions about these pre-requisites and on-going factors, the ultimate focus is to develop an effective career-long lifelong strategy for school leaders to continue to develop and change through sustaining the residual effects of their professional development programme in theirschool workplaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential Learning in Continuing Professional Development

Learning is an individual and group process (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 1999) whereby each and every individual deploys their own learning strategies to achieve desired learning goals. Logically, individuals' personal learning strategies need to be considered in professional development programmes to maximise effectiveness(Tulbure, 2011). Though the importance of learner-centred teaching is now valued and discussed widely, still latest professional development practices do notinclude the opportunity for learner participants to choose learning techniques which they think would fit their learning best. In many instances, learners are still expected to listen and learn what they are taught. However, more professional development programmes are strongly encouraging participants to reach full potential and sustaineffective productive outcomes.

Wright (2009) states that when programmes are developed based on content, more concern is given to improve the content. As a result, programme developers lose the opportunity to improve the learner's learning process (ibid). The researcher highlights the importance for professional development programme designers and facilitators of taking cognizance of the ultimate aim of professional development programmes which is to transform the participant, not necessarily the content of the programme.

When considering the professional development of school leaders it also must be kept in mind that they are adult learners with years of experience and learning. Though they may not have been using their learning experiences to get the maximum benefit from past experiences, they still value previously gained knowledge, and hence want to apply their previous experiences to the new learning. Knowles (1980) and Corley (2008) believe that they reject much of the new knowledge delivered to them via passive lectures because they are not afforded the opportunity to clarify these new variations to their mind-sets.
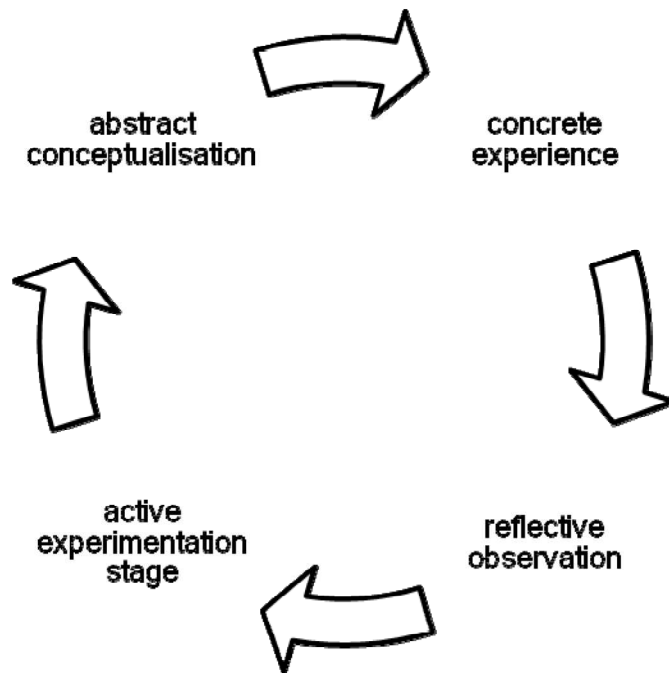

Figure 3: The four stage cycle experiential learning
Source: (Kolb, 1984, p.41)

In many cases, it is important for the learners to use the experiences they have collected over the years to compare and discern variations in the presented conceptualisations and so learn. When learners combine their existing knowledge and experience with new knowledge they begin to understand variations and continua within their conceptual frameworks. Kolb (1984, p. 41) defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience." Experiential learning is a four staged cycle which involves; 1) concrete experience; 2) reflective observation; 3) abstract conceptualisation and 4) transforming experience (ibid). According to this theory, concrete experience is related more to kinetic and emotional attributes of the learners rather than cognition.

In professional development programmes, it is more related to what the learners do such as workshops, reading, online learning and also learning experiences from workplace. Reflective observation is when the learners begin to combine cognition with their physical and emotional experiences to analyse and make judgements about the things happening around them. In abstract conceptualisation, the learners focus on the experience cognitively to create comparisons between specific and general and previous and new concepts about that experience. The learners are then able to build conclusions based on the theories they have created. In the stage of active experimentation, the learners apply what they learned and further test the validity and reliability of their abstract conceptualisations. It is these decisions about the effectiveness of the application of their conceptualisations that enables the learners to make resolutions about further mind-sets and behaviours and so change as people.

School leaders work in volatile environments. Each and every day they confront new situations which require solving to the satisfaction of many stakeholders. Professional development programmes whose purpose is to enable school leaders to deal with such expectations effectively, need to focus on teaching them to transform these confrontational problem solving situations into learning situations. School leaders need to understand that maximum learning occurs in the workplace when organisational members can convert all situations into learning situations (McNair, 1994).

This added dimension of learning transforms experiences from reactive to proactive and creates pathways for innovative reform and improvement of situations and people, including the school leader as instigator of change. In workplace learning, school leaders and their communities learn from each other and every situation. Such dynamics enable a learning community to emerge around the organisational members.

As stated by Kayes, Kayes, & Kolb (2005) some people learn by carefully watching other people and reflecting on their actions while others want to experience situations themselves. Whatever method the learners prefer to use, they must be given opportunities to learn using experience. Cercone (2008) says that teaching adults should be very much based on their experiences to help them connect to their previous experiences. This will allow them to base further actions on the new knowledge. Experiential learning has 3 major categories; 1) knowledge of concepts, facts, information and experience; 2) prior knowledge applied to current, on-going events; and 3) reflection with thoughtful analysis (Cercone, 2008).

Learning via the understanding of the variations and continua of reflected previous experiences and current new experiences and that is strengthened and sustained through decision making about future action in the face of similar experiences enables learners to develop and change personally and professionally. Jordi, (2011) says that to embody experiential learning, learners need to see learning as a process. To learn through experience learners do not have to be always in the

workplace because they can use past experiences or simulated situations. According to Larson (2004), many researchers believe that real life can be simulated in formal classes through various instruments, unstructured group dynamics, instrumented group dynamics, video feedback and computer segmented feedback. The researcher says that for maximum learning to occur naturally the learning situations have to be made as authentic as possible.

Learning as discernment of a change in the way we perceive some aspect of our world

Learning is defined by many researchers as change. Changes, both personal and professional occur through learning. Learning is a permanent change in the intellect and behaviour of a person which can be either observable or not to themselves and others(Burns, 1995). Schunk(2012) explains learning as change in behaviour and explains it using three factors, which are; 1) learning involves change; 2) learning endures over time; 3) learning occurs through experiences. He says that people are considered to be learning when they are capable of doing something in a different manner and this change in the behaviour must be sustainable. Further, he says that environment plays a vital role in learning and this is the reason why experience plays a major role in the individual learning process.

Learning is usually focused on learning about a particular concept or an object and related concepts or objects and if learning occurs, there will be a change in the perception of that concept or object based on the new knowledge gained through learning(Marton & Booth, 1997). The more learners get to discuss and talk about the new knowledge based on their existing experiences the stronger the learning outcomes become. Ling &Marton(2012) point out that one of the basic concepts of variation as a learning theory is that learning is always targeted to something (phenomenon, object, skill or certain aspect of reality) and the learners must go through a change in the way they see that "something". Marton and Pang (2006) describe variation theory as a process of discrimination and discernment. While learning about a particular object the learners need to focus on a particular feature of an object or a situation and discern that particular feature. In this way, the learner experiences a difference between certain aspects of the object or the situation.

The researchers (Marton and Pang, 2006), further explain this learning situation with the example of a short sited girl. They say that in order to separate what she sees and her short sightedness she has to wear a glass. When she sees words with her glasses and without glasses she becomes aware of the degree of her short sightedness. Through this learning process, she learns that wearing glasses is an improvement. To conclude this theory about learning the researchers say that 4 conditions are necessary for perceptual learning; 1) contrast – cannot discern one aspect without simultaneous experience of a mutually exclusive aspect; (2) separation – a dimension of variation cannot be discerned without other dimensions varying at a different rate, (3) generalisation – for the aspects of one dimension to be discerned from the other dimension, certain aspects of dimension one must stay invariant while aspects of the

other dimension vary, and (4) fusion – the two dimensions also must vary simultaneously in order to experience the simultaneity of the two dimensions.

Learning is the mastering of knowledge about a topic or an object and so developing a deeper and new perception of that topic or object and aligning future behaviours according to their understanding of the new aspects. People need to go through a hierarchy of levels before they are able to master knowledge. According to Bloom's taxonomy learning takes place in 6 levels**Error! Reference source not found.** as in figure 2 described by Athanassiou, McNett, & Harvey (2003)
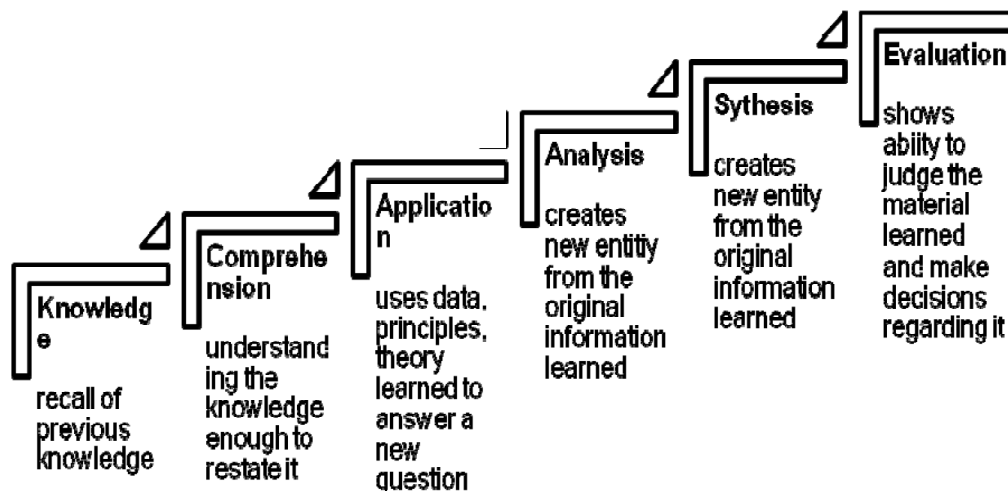

Figure 4: The levels and their relationships of Bloom's Taxonomy
Adapted from Athanassiou, McNett and Harvey (2003, p.536)

Saljo(1979) has described 6 hierarchically related conceptions of learning that are related to Bloom's 6 taxonomy levels. They are: (1) the development of one's knowledge, (2) the ability to memorize and produce it again, (3) the ability to apply and utilize during practice, (4) understanding the meaning of what is learned, (5) understanding the reality and changing the previous concepts of it, and (6) changing as a person. According to Lin (2011) who has explained these level of learning, the first 3 levels increases one's knowledge and are related to the quantitative views of learning as during these 3 stages the emphasis is more given on what is learned rather than aspects of learning as these level are more based on memorising and copying accurate information. The researcher explains these first three stages as the reproductive conceptions. The next three conceptions are more towards the qualitative perspectives of learning where the learners are more concerned about the ways of learning the information. During these 3 stages the learner becomes more actively involved in learning and tries to find meaning and this leads the learner to transform his or her views about the knowledge leading to the last 3 stages which influence all aspects of a person and so induces change as a person(Lin, 2011).

Learning through Action Reflection Learning

Everyone reflects and so uses reflective learning as a learning strategy to a certain extent in their daily life. However, to use the strategy to achieve its maximum benefit, one needs to know how to use it effectively. Reflection can be used to understand ourselves and others and this is one reason why reflective learning isan important part of a school leader's role.

Dewey (1933) defined self-reflective learning as "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief" (p.9). According to Boyd and Fales(1983), reflective learning is "the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective" (p.100).

Self-reflective learning is a process through which learners take the responsibility of their own learning. Through self-reflection learners are able to understand their own learning better and so to cater to their learning needs. This way learning becomes more meaningful and useful to the learners. Self-reflection that is used to understand one's own learning strategies embodies what is conceived as "learning about learning" or meta-learning. Such learning is a higher order of learning as it is continually developing the potential to learn more effectively and so learn more. Reflective learning is an important factor needed to create deeper learning (Hedberg2009).

Self-reflection is actually a part of all learning processes which help learners help themselves. Reflection is a key factor needed for educational programmes to ensure the effective influence on the learners' skills, values, attitudes and behaviours (Branch Jr, 2010), through which they are able to compare their new learning with these factors and hence bring necessary changes. During the learning process, learners reflect on their learning in order to understand what is required of them to complete a certain task, to determine the type and level of learning required, and to evaluate whether or not their learning strategies are successful (Shin, 1998)

For people to learn new concepts it is very important for them to understand the concepts already in their mind. Such existing concepts may be well defined or simply a mass of vaguely related fragments of a number of concept. Jordi (2011) says that reflective learning can help the learners to connect these fragmented aspects of their experiences and so create an integrated understanding of their concepts and practices. Action reflection learninghelp individuals learn to; work together, handle conflicts or crises and face challenges(Rimanoczy& Turner, 2008).

Action learning integrates a learner's previously held conceptualisations with new experiences to form new understanding and to enable the learner to apply that new understanding in the new preferred way (Plack, Driscoll, Marquez, & Greenberg

2010). "The action-reflection-learning process supports leaders to continually develop new mind-sets, attitudes and behaviours and enables them to face new challenges. It is a dynamic learning methodology that learners can adopt to align with their developing abilities to discern new insights" (Sullivan, 2011).

Collaborative action reflection learning within the leadership relationship

Whether, through purposeful learning or not everything in the environment is bound to change with time. Anything in the environment, including individual people and organisations as a whole develop in the course of time, maintain or brings changes itself according the situations faces due to the conditions in the environment (Laszlo and Krippner(1998). Complexity theory revels that people are always in a dynamic reaction with their environment and are part of the process which creates the environment through the interaction with the factors in it (Keene, 2000). Interaction between both the separate domains in a system and the community related to the system create changes in each other as changes in one domain is bound to change the other (Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1998). In an educational organisation these domains could be parents, employers, social service agencies, religious organisation. Changes in one of these domains or stakeholders also result in changing the system as a whole. Due this reason it is always beneficial to work as a group or a community, so that all can learn and develop together.

Collaborative learning influences the performance of the learners (Yazici, 2005), as it involves the sharing of individual action reflection learning experiences and hence provides the opportunity for the learners to help each other. When professional educators from different disciplines work together, collaborative learning can enable a wider holistic perspective of various workplace experiences and routines to emerge. This concept of collaborative learning can be applied to both professional learning programmes and workplace learning. As school leaders work together as a group there is so much to learn from each other. If leaders can create a learning community in the school it helps people to use one another's resources and strengths as a learning resource for each other. This makes learning more meaningful for everyone and creates opportunities for educational specialists to understand the full spectrum of their workplace. Everyone learns totake responsibility, both in their own professional development and the development of the organisation as a whole.

In a community of practice, teaching and learning moves more towards interactive reflective learning where people learn throughgroup interactions. Through discussion singular incidents can be learning experiences for other members. Winch & Ingram (2004) point out that when learners do not use their experiences then they "are attempting to function in a complex, ambiguous, uncertain and unpredictable real world work, doubting in their own experience thoughts and perspectives, looking for the expert to solve their unique challenge rather than realising that the resources and development they need can only be found in the midst of the experience itself" (p. 232).

When interactive activities such as discussions among the learning community allow learners to learn from each other's experiences, each individual will not have to wait to experience the same situations others faced in order to learn about similar situations.These interactions create a bond of support within thelearning community and hence buildtrust between members. This mode of learning both in professional development programmes and workplace learning creates life-long learners. Tafuri(1999) suggests that in the process of teaching and learning, promoting co-operation, solidarity and mutual help between students, and learning through research are very important.

When school leaders learn through collaborative interactive reflective learning the leadership dynamics tend to become distributed. Distributed leadership occurs when the actual leadership dynamics are delegated and adopted by other community members. Harris (2008) states that distributed leadership does not mean that everybody in the organisation will be leading the place simultaneously but it is more about the way potential leadership qualities in others are facilitated, orchestrated and supported. School leaders distribute their leadership dynamics as they developthe school as a related system and this occurs duringcollaborative interactive learning in both professional development programmes and workplace learning.

Though collaborative interactive reflective learning is essential and beneficial to school leaders to develop, there are difficulties they face to practice these strategies in the schools. Harris(2008) says that there are three major barriers to ensure distributed leadership and building and sustaining learning communities in schools. They are: 1) distance: the physical space and distance becomes an issue for the people to meet and solve problems; 2) culture: moving away from cultural method of "top down" leadership becomes a problem; and 3) structure: finding ways to remove organisational structures that restrict organisational learning become a challenge.

RESEARCH METHOD

Informants for the study were selected through purposeful sampling as the research needed participants who have had the experience related to the phenomenon to be studied. A total of 15 informants were selected for the purpose of the study. They are 15 candidates from Masters of Educational leadership and School Improvement at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Six of them finished the course in the year 2011 and the other 9 finished in the year 2012. The data for the study were collected through open ended discussions and document analysis. The length of discussions varied between 1 to 2 hours.

To guide the discussions a list of possible themes related to the study were formed. The researcher did not aim to restrict the discussions by any means though strategies such as the use of various gestures and the prompting of ideas were used to make the discussions more rich and productive. To ensure a rich source of data, various documents from the informants during the learning programme were

analysed. These included project papers, critical writings or the diary notes they made during various parts of the programme.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

When school leaders join a professional development programme, whether short term or long term, they join with lots of expectations influenced by external and internal factors. The study shows that internal factors which influence the learners are; desire to overcome the short comings in their knowledge and behaviour as a school leader and so close the gap of their feelings of a lack of confidence as a leader. When people start working in their professional field they face various situation. During the process of solving these situations they feel that they do not have enough knowledge related to the field. Also these feelings of lack of knowledge in themselves and not being able to deal with the situations positively makes them feel less confident. These factors push the learners towards joining professional development programmes to improve themselves to be better people.

According to the study external factors include the desire to live up to the expectations of other people within their leadership relationships. These expectations include parents wanting their children to reach a certain level of education and hence they force their children to go for higher education. Also when people start working in a particular job, example like principal, people start having high expectations from them and expect them to be perfect in all ways. To reach this perfection people are forced to join learning programmes.

The study also shows that creating a learning community (learning group) in the work place or among the participants of the learning programme and its facilitators helps the learners to learn new knowledge. This paves way for the learners to collaborate in constructive discussions with both their colleagues and the facilitators of the programme. When discussions take place in the learning community the learners are able to get various perspectives of one concept they learn. This helps the learners to see learning in multiple perspectives which helps them to discern variations and so understand the concepts better. When they see the learning concepts in multiple perspectives they change personally and professionally.

The results suggest that it is essential to implement 5 strategies in a workplace professional development programme to ensure change in the learners. These participant learner strategies include; 1) visualising their learning and the learning of others within their relationships; 2) discerning variations in multiple aspects of experiences; 3) defragmenting knowledge; 4) accepting and sharing responsibility for behaviour as a group; and 5) becoming communally committed to improvement as a group moral imperative. These results are most closely related to the study of Marton& Booth, (1997) and Robertson & Lesley, (2006).

The results also suggests that, for the participants to understand their needs and goals and to develop strategies for achieving their goals, communal action reflection

learning is an important aspect to be included in learning programmes. The results suggest that action reflection learning can be further extended through communal action reflection learning to a concept of interactive reflective learning which occurs when learners have the opportunity to create a learning community among their colleagues.

Collaborative interactive reflective learning in leadership relationships becomes an effective, high potential learning strategy and culture in learning programmes and workplace learning. In a learning community, the learners learn as a group and share their experiences and knowledge as group.

Visualise their learning and the learning of others within their relationships

School leaders as professionals with years of experience in the field do not learn without being actively confronted by new experiences which actively challenge their previously held beliefs. In such learning situations, they need to go through a process of deep learning in order to re-align new and old experiences.

Becoming aware of different points of view and so visualising experiences differently is more easily achieved when school leaders have the opportunity to discuss what they learn in their learning community. The results of the study show that there are 3 learning strategies to be included in professional development programmes to allow the learners to visualise and re-align their learning with others; 1) experience, 2) discussion and 3) reflection.

Multiple aspects of learning

Natural learning occurs when learners learn through authentic learning situations Larson (2004). For significant learning to occur, people need experience multiple aspects of the learning object. For the learners to change personally and professionally they need to see different aspects of the knowledge they learn. Learning occurs when a phenomenon occurs in a new way or in different ways (Ling &Marton, 2012; Marton and Pang, 2006; Booth, 2008). The results of the study suggest that 1) intervention; 2) relaxed mind when learning; 3) iteration and creativity; and 4) communication and discussion; need to be included in learning programmes to enhance the learners to see various aspects of what they learn.

Defragmentation of knowledge

Many school leaders have a holistic conceptualisation of what it means to be a school leader that has been developed through years of experience, but it has been accumulated as fragments of knowledge gained from a range of sources. Most of these concepts cannot be effectively used by the leaders as they are often referring to specific experiences rather than connected through a continuum of ongoing and evolving events. This study shows that in order to use this knowledge the leaders

need to defragment it and connect the scattered concepts in an alignment with the changing flow of their personal and professional experiences.

Through action reflection learning, the leader can focus on the connections and their evolving conceptualisations and so align and defragment their personal and professional view thus making a greater more holistic sense of what it means to be a leader. Professional development must give the learners opportunities to relate the existing knowledge to new knowledge and that this contributes to the learners' growth(Cercone, 2008). According to the results of the study; 1) integrating theory and practice; 2) refining the knowledge in mind and 3) creating opportunities for clarification (asking questions); need to be included in professional development programmes to enable a learner to connect different conceptual and experiential aspects into a holistic global viewpoint.

Accept and share responsibility for own behaviour

For people to change the way they have been doing things for years they need to understand and accept the short comings in their own behaviour. If they do not realise this, they will not believe that they have any need to change their actions and will most probably repeat the same mistakes over again. The results of the study suggest that for the leaders to take responsibility for their behaviour they need to relate their actions to professionally accepted theories that relate to their particular actions. If experience is not actively related to professionally acceptable best practice learning theories, the experience as a learning experience is overlooked and missed(Schunk, 2012). This study suggests that activities such as; 1) responsibility of own learning (self-reflection); 2) feedback; 3) understanding leadership roles; 4) interaction (among the members in the learning community; and 5) being conscious about one's context are effective strategies to be included in a learning programme in order to ensure that the learners are aware of alternative views and can transform their understanding and align their actions with new experiences and theories.

Become communally committed to improvement as a group moral imperative

To gain the maximum input from the learners of a professional development programme, they need to work as group. The results of the study suggest that when a learning group acts as a Learning Community they improve as a group and so that they learn and change together. When the learners are communally committed towards their improvement they create a strong bond of commitment between them and this allows them to reflect on each other's experience, talk about events around them, build their trust for each other and learn and grow together. The study suggests that 1) learning through a Learning Community and 2) giving learners opportunities to be conscious about their surroundings, ensures communal learning.

CONCLUSION

Factors which drive many school leaders towards further continuing professional development is mainly their desire to achieve academic and career excellence. This achievement of excellence may be envisaged as the need to learn better strategies for dealing with their personal and professional challenges in life such as overcoming self-weaknesses and building confidence. Other external factors include satisfying the need to escape the daily problems of their personal and professional lives and to meet the expectations of other personal and professionally significant people in their lives.

When people learn something new the way they see the world or aspects of the world changes. When school leaders learn in a learning community through interactive reflective learning, they become aware of an expanded understanding of what being a leader means to them. Leadership does not exist anymore as an authoritative relationship between leaders and subordinates, but more towards a collaborative relationship where everyone takes equal responsibility for the development of themselves and the system.

Continual collaborative interactive learning about leadership concepts in the school community tends to distribute the leadership dynamics across the community. Thoughdistributed leadership is often understood as organising and delegating work, if we look at distributed leadership from a learning point of view, then it can be described as an outcome of collaborative interactive reflective learning about the dynamics of leadership situations.

Leaning and adopting new and more effective ways of thinking and behaviour as it occurs in leadership situations eventually changes how people treat each other as leaders and followers by building relationships in which all members are interacting as leaders. When the relationship changes people feel obliged to help each other and so it helps in sustaining the learning community in a caring leadership way. This changes the school leaders and community members, both personally and professionally, because the very nature of the leader relationship has been altered. Through sharing learning and behaviour there are more leaders in the leader relationship.

Though the outcome of learning is supposed to be change, both personal and professional, it can happen only when the professional learning programme can provide the learner with enough differentiating opportunities to discern and learn new viewpoints and ways of acting in order to achieve desired personal and professional goals. Visualising one's learning and the learning of others within a personal and professional relationship; discerning variations in multiple aspects of experiences; connecting existing knowledge with new knowledge; accepting and sharing responsibility for behaviour as a group; and becoming communally committed to improvement as a group moral imperative are all aspects of a deep communal

interactive reflective learning dynamic that when focused on communal leadership dynamics, will influence a distributed leadership dynamic to permeate a school learning community.

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