

Developing a Programme of Support for Teacher Leadership in Egypt

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In this article the author presents an account of the development of support for teacher leadership in Egypt based on the non-positional approach promoted by the HertsCam Network in the UK. The article is informed by a doctoral study recently undertaken by the author, Amina Eltemamy, in which she used an action-based methodology to amplify the voices from her collaborators – teachers from private schools in Egypt. The discussion examines the highly socially stratified context for development, one which requires transformational educational reform. The article explicates a programme which is contributing to this reform. Key issues such as the role of senior leadership teams in creating conditions that enable teacher leadership to flourish are addressed. Current plans to develop the programme's international links and to extend the approach to state schools are also explored.

Keywords: teacher leadership, education reform, innovation, transformation

Introduction

Education is the cornerstone of any nation's development (Brende, 2015). In Egypt, the school educational system has been suffering a deterioration in quality over the last few decades. According to the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014, Egypt is rated as the lowest country for the quality of primary education (Schwab, 2013) which has been a barrier towards economic, political, and social reform in the country (Badrawy, 2011).

My research was shaped by my background as an Egyptian teacher and the belief that teachers are the cornerstone of reform in the educational process (Badrawy, 2011) yet I have witnessed how teachers lack confidence in their ability to lead innovation. Many teachers in Egypt face serious challenges; they are not supported financially (Sobhy, 2012), professionally (AHDR, 2003; MENA-OECD, 2010) or psychologically (Badrawy, 2011; Eltemamy, 2012). The teaching profession has been experiencing a decline in status and the teaching force as a whole is not respected or trusted by Egyptian society.

In this article I draw on my doctoral study (Eltemamy, 2017) to portray the programme of support for teacher leadership I first introduced in Cairo in 2014 and revived more recently under the banner of the CairoCam Network. I was attracted to the HertsCam Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) programme that seemed to be very successful in England, but mindful of the warnings in the literature that what works in one country does not necessarily work in another (Simkins, 2005). The educational system in Egypt has been referred to in the past as 'a product of inappropriate adopted foreign transfer' (Ibrahim, 2010). In the light of this, I analysed the Egyptian context carefully to consider how a programme such as TLDW might contribute to reform but also how it might need to be adapted to fit within this quite different culture.

The Context of Egypt

Teachers in Egypt face challenges that have resulted in low levels of self-efficacy. Among these is the low salary which forces many teachers to work as private tutors (AHDR, 2003; MENA-OECD, 2010) to supplement their income. This undermines the quality of teaching due to exhaustion and leads to teachers being seen as wage-seeking workers rather than professionals dedicated to a more meaningful purpose (Eltemamy, 2012). Other challenges include poor teacher preparation and fragmented professional development initiatives with no clear vision (Badrawy, 2011). Many teachers are unqualified and lack sufficient commitment and professionalism, which undermines the reputation and morale of the whole teaching force (Elbaradei & Elbaradei, 2004). As a consequence, there seems to be a lack of trust in the profession on the part of the Ministry of Education which in turn leads to a lack freedom for teachers to exercise professional judgement (Ibrahim, 2010; Loveluck, 2012). Following the establishing of a new government in 2014 some teachers hoped that the situation would change. Reforms were desperately needed but my view was that teachers have to take the lead to rescue their own profession (Eltemamy, 2012).

There have been various attempts at reform led by the Ministry of Education in Egypt but success has been limited since they have been undertaken without teacher involvement or adequate monitoring (Badrawy, 2011; MENA-OECD, 2010). The global discourse on educational reform promotes the top-down standards-based approach to school improvement (Brewster, 2014; Mehta, 2015) but casting teachers as mere technicians rather than professionals and intellectuals is not a sound basis for sustainable development. In a culture of accountability and standards teachers are not likely to be proactive or open to innovation and change for fear of failure (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Hokka & Vahasantanen, 2014).

Arguably, educational reform is more effective when teachers are empowered as agents of change. This entails a shift in the way leadership is construed – away from the heroic/individualistic form of leadership that limits leadership to the person at the top of the organisation towards a view of leadership as distributed (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, 2006). The concept of distributed leadership is open to various interpretations. To some it is about organizational structures based on hierarchy, but my reading suggested that such delegation can lead to increased bureaucracy and simplistic understanding of how professional collaboration actually works (Simkins, 2005). I was more interested in shared leadership (MacBeath et al., 2018) which builds the capacity essential for continuous school development and improvement (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). This pointed clearly to teacher leadership and more specifically to the idea of non-positional teacher leadership (Frost, 2014) which I learned about when I observed the work of the HertsCam Network. This organisation began some years ago out of a partnership between the University of Cambridge and local education authority and became an independent, registered charity governed and managed by teachers and schools and dedicated to support for teacher leadership. I attended events and observed activities such as workshops to support teachers on the TLDW programme, network events hosted by schools and the network's annual conference.

Research for Social Justice

I felt compelled to develop an approach that would be transformative in addressing issues of social justice. I needed a methodology that would allow the voices of teachers to be heard in the process of educational reform. I planned to research *with* teachers and not *on* them (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982) through a dialogic process (Freire, 1970). I therefore designed an intervention which could be developed and improved through action research cycles in which periodic reviews of progress would help me and my collaborators to refine a programme of support for non-positional teacher leadership. Periodic reviews require systematic monitoring and evaluation which meant that analysis of data was a continuous process. In regular meetings with collaborators and stakeholders we were able to identify problems and devise solutions.

After facilitating a programme for one academic year, I was able to construct a critical narrative which accounted for events and activities in all their complexity (Eltemamy, 2017). The writing of the critical narrative constitutes a layer of post-hoc analysis and reflection through which I could make issues visible and scrutinize them. I now draw on my critical narrative to outline the way my intervention unfolded.

I wanted to work with state run schools on this initiative but access was difficult following the mass protests of June 2013 so I began with privately owned schools with the hope that once I had demonstrated its value and practicality, I would be able to extend the programme to the public sector. The schools I visited welcomed the proposal perhaps because it was linked to a highly prestigious UK university – Cambridge – and because I could offer the programme at no cost to the schools. I was seeking four schools to work with. In initial discussions with schools, I was advised to run separate sessions for English speaking and non-English speaking teachers.

And for sure if you want to involve teachers who do not know English then you will have to do separate sessions for English speakers and non-English speakers...

(School Leader, December 2014)

It seemed that this was the norm, so I agreed to it. However, in discussion with my doctoral supervisor in Cambridge it became problematic. I had not previously thought about what he referred to as ‘the colonial mentality’ although I could see that the issue was indicative of social class stratification in Egypt with English being seen as the language of the educated elite (Mikhail, 2008). The suggestion that I should conduct the programme in two separate streams contradicted the fundamental values we shared with HertsCam; democracy and equality had to be defended.

In each school I identified at least one collaborator, essential for building capacity within schools. They would help me to adapt materials, facilitate workshops and provide one-to-one support to participants. The team of collaborators was a diverse group of experienced teachers with master’s degrees in Education. We travelled to Cambridge to meet David Frost and colleagues from HertsCam as well as teachers participating in the TLDW programme and school principals. We had planning meetings and consulted experienced facilitators. Adapting the programme developed in the UK was liberating and we became more confident that we could tailor it according to our needs. We returned to Cairo empowered and with strengthened moral purpose.

Mode of Support — the TLDW Approach

Back in Cairo, I presented the programme to all members of the school staff in each of the participating schools. Interested participants applied and a group of 8-15 teachers were selected from each school. Participants included teachers of all ages, some with formal leadership positions, some being speakers of English as well as Arabic. Voluntary application allowed us to work with teachers who were eager to develop themselves and develop the conditions around them. Teachers were supported through seven school-based sessions, two one-to-one tutorials and two network events/conferences. As a team of collaborators, we would hold regular meetings to review progress and adapt the sessions in the light of experience.

Having adapted the tools that HertsCam shared with us we arranged a series of workshops in which we could use them to enable dialogue, reflection and collaborative learning. Adopting a project-based approach enabled teachers to focus and plan, while the ten-month timescale and the prospect of the award of a certificate helped to provide momentum. The programme took participants on a journey that started by enabling them to realise their professional values in practice. Through the first sessions, teachers were given the space to reflect in depth on what they value as professionals and ask themselves fundamental questions. Providing teachers with the opportunity to think and reflect on the purpose of education, their aims as professionals, why they became teachers and their role in achieving their aims was a paradigm shift for some. Participants' learning orientations started to change (Watkins, 2010) and effective teaching was reframed in ways that go beyond test scores (Mehta, 2015).

Activities in the group sessions enabled participants to initiate projects based on their professional values and concerns. Some have argued that a multiplicity of initiatives can lead to chaos (Hargreaves, 2003) and priorities should be set by senior leaders but in the TLDW approach teachers exercise their professional judgment and autonomy and then consult with their colleagues to ensure support, collaboration and practicality (Pilbeam & Martino, 2017). Being able to decide for themselves how to improve their practice and evaluate their own performance was as much of a paradigm shift for the participants, as it was for us as facilitators. Choosing the focus of their projects demanded courage from the participants and some were initially reluctant to reflect on their own capacity to lead; it was easier to blame factors such as the school as an organisation. Enabling them to develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) instead required a safe environment in which they did not feel judged.

The aim of the educational system in Egypt should be centered on 'develop(ing) rounded citizens who can work together to develop a cohesive society' (OECD, 2013, p. 13). Participants in our programme became accustomed to consulting their colleagues, offering and receiving constructive feedback and developing deep level collaboration even with colleagues from rival schools. We overcame initial reluctance by introducing the concept of critical friendship (Costa & Kallick, 1993) and discussing with participants ways of giving each other constructive feedback. They were encouraged to consult colleagues through a tool used in the session and were asked to provide evidence of consulting others beyond that in their portfolios. They began to realise that asking others for help did not mean that they were incapable but actually led to better professional practice.

The development project created a platform for teachers to start building a professional dialogue with colleagues. This was a step towards building collaborations. In the TLDW approach, teachers were reminded throughout the sessions to develop collaborations at an early stage in the process. This requires teachers to accept the input of other teachers into the development process. TLDW is designed as a collaborative process because collaboration leads to improved practice being embedded within the school as an organisation and increases the impact (Frost, 2013).

In network events/conferences, we tried to establish conditions for professional dialogue to run smoothly by choosing a suitable venue, unifying the language of discussion and controlling the content presented through selecting projects that were transferable. Teachers were encouraged to share the knowledge and documentation was a key element in marking the creation of professional knowledge and the acknowledgement of it. The concept of referencing and acknowledging the work of others was a new practice. The HertsCam Network also opened up opportunities for teachers to publish their work, providing further ways of building professional esteem.

Protecting Time for Reflection, Planning and Dialogue

Time is also an important factor to consider. The programme secured participants' time to plan, reflect and engage in a professional dialogue. Moreover, having the specific time scale of an academic year and a certificate to work towards helped to provide momentum. Facilitators with leadership positions found that the time they spent on this programme helped them fulfil their own aims as senior leaders, which is why they were so willing to give this programme extensive time. However, this still comes at a high cost and calls into question the sustainability of the programme where teachers are pressed by time pressure, especially when other priorities persist.

Evaluating the Programme

My research left a clear legacy. The adapted programme, translated tools, related materials and the collaborative relationships with schools and the co-facilitators allowed us to relaunch the programme in 2018 under the umbrella of a new entity – CairoCam. At the end of the first iteration of the programme we were able to reflect on what we had achieved and what we had learned. We used the 'impact framework' devised by Frost and Durrant (2002) as a tool for review. A detailed account of this is beyond the scope of this article but the evidence allowed us to draw some broad conclusions (Eltemamy, 2017). First, most of the participants were able to make modest improvements to their own practice and in some cases were able to influence their colleagues and effect changes in their practice. Examples of projects included one that aimed to cultivate a sense of belonging throughout the school by involving students in tasks such as staffing the reception desk. Another project aimed to encourage reflection and independent learning for very young children. An account of one project, published in the book *Empowering teachers as agents of change* was led by Amal Elfouly who developed the use of information technology in her own classroom and subsequently throughout the school (Elfouly & Eltemamy, 2017). Such projects had a positive impact on students' learning capacity and dispositions towards their schooling. In all cases participants expressed optimism about the resulting improvements in measured attainment.

In some cases, it was evident that participants' projects had had a residual effect on the way the schools operate as organisations including their structures, procedures, and other elements. However, the most significant impact observed was on the participating teachers themselves: their professionalism, self-confidence and self-efficacy which underpinned growth in their skills and pedagogic repertoires.

This impact brought changes in teachers' professional thinking and identity - their professionalism. This was observed through enhanced collegiality and in their agential rather than compliant orientations. One teacher said this during a recorded one-to-one consultation.

Joining the programme changed the way I look at problems that face me. Now I think about the ways that I can strategically plan to solve these problems, rather than just complaining. I regret that I did not do the same before.

(Participant G)

It was also evident as they became more motivated by moral purpose and educational principles rather than by standards and external judgement. Teachers felt valued as professionals and acted accordingly. They felt that they belonged to a respected profession that has a wide role in the development of the country. This comment is an example of the views of participants.

TLDW can make teachers have a different status in society, especially if the impact of the project expands to others beyond the school.

(Participant D)

For many, the programme changed their mindset from being the most victimised parties in the educational process, to feeling capable of changing the learning experiences of their students. This was reflected greatly in their enhanced self-confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Teachers developed a greater sense of ownership towards educational reform. One teacher made this comment:

I have always offered to do in the school anything I could. However, I have never thought about having long lasting impact, sustainability, and being part of knowledge creation.

(Participant R)

The programme had also exposed participants to different ways of learning, which greatly shaped their pedagogy. They were able to experiment with practice, collaborate, reflect, innovate and take ownership of their own learning rather than being directly instructed. One participant made this comment:

We never thought that we would work and collaborate so closely, it is a beautiful spirit.

(Participant X)

During the programme we were able to put on the first two teacher-led conferences in Egypt where teachers were the experts discussing their innovations. This made teachers feel highly appreciated and acknowledged for attempting to improve their practice and the practice of their colleagues. In a previous study, Egyptian teachers complained that they were not appreciated within the system for their extra effort or their attempts to innovate, which

discouraged them from adding to the system (Eltemamy, 2012). Through TLDW, their efforts were acknowledged through the sharing of the professional knowledge that they created.

The colonial mentality referred to above and the highly stratified society (Decena, 2014; Salama, 2012) can constrain professional dialogue between teachers from different schools. However, through the programme, we were able to address these issues and challenge the established social norms. For example, it was expected that professional educational events should be led in English, but we led them in Arabic. We challenged the assumption that teachers from different backgrounds should be grouped separately and we enabled them to engage in a professional dialogue. A common perception was that Arabic-only speaking teachers relied on the transmission mode in leading their classrooms but through TLDW they were able to innovate and create knowledge that other teachers were eager to learn from. The programme clearly changed the role of Arabic-only speaking teachers in schools and supported them in overcoming discrimination. With the colonial mentality, international affiliations become significant. The irony is that through our international affiliation with HertsCam in the UK, we learned to value our language, and have confidence in our ability to decide for ourselves how to lead our educational system. The programme also opened the door for collaboration among private schools in an otherwise highly competitive market.

Key Insights and Recommendations

Among the questions that we as a team reflected on throughout our journey was whether TLDW was suitable for all teachers and all schools. Generalisability and replicability of this study is a contentious issue. We agreed that there were a set of conditions that were required for this programme to have an impact. These included the role of the coordinator, capacity building from within the school, the role of senior leaders and continuous monitoring and review.

The role of the coordinator. Among the major factors that influenced the success of this programme was that I was able to undertake a coordinating role. It is really important for the programme to be led by someone who is committed and enthusiastic but also in tune with the values of the programme. I had the advantage of my relationship with the thriving HertsCam network and the supportive framework of a doctoral study. I also had some modest funding.

Capacity building. Another vital factor was having collaborators from within the schools to support the development of the programme. It is a vital feature in the programme that it is facilitated by expert teachers/headteachers from within the schools. The skills and preparedness of the facilitators was a key factor. Facilitation requires a range of skills, a good deal of confidence, thorough understanding of techniques of the programme and values which are in tune with it. Skills include creating a safe and non-judgmental environment, moderating discussion, selecting and adapting tools and materials. One of the most important skills is enabling participants to see the value of what they are doing, the impact it is having and the ways they are exercising leadership. Skills and orientations such as these are not innate; they can be acquired.

The role of senior leaders. School principals and their senior leadership colleagues also play a vital role. The context of the school, its leadership, and professional culture is a key variable and I was able to work closely with the senior school leaders who are the conduits for organisational transformation (Day & Sammons, 2013). Senior leaders need the confidence and humility to be able to use their power on behalf of teachers rather than using it to achieve their

own objectives (Mylles, 2017). Teachers felt more confident because they knew that the senior leadership team approved of what they were doing. Given the exceedingly hierarchical and authoritarian culture that persists in Egyptian society (Kabasakal et al., 2012), the changes in teachers' attitudes towards leadership was a significant achievement.

Continuous monitoring and review. Throughout the study we engaged in continuous monitoring and review of the programme which is vital for the development of any reform strategy. As a team we held periodic review meetings through which we were able to focus on the process, develop our own confidence as facilitators and learn to adapt the tools to meet the needs of the participants. Sustaining an effective intervention requires a reflective team that is capable of learning from the views of others through maintaining a dialogue where new insights are developed.

Key Message for Policymakers

My message to policymakers is that we need to develop the conditions which enable teachers to share in the initiation of development in their schools. Jo Mylles, an experienced facilitator in HertsCam and now a headteacher put it this way: 'The potential wisdom and impetus for change are rooted in schools, rather than something which can be orchestrated or taught from the outside' (Mylles, 2017:106). Governments should make use of the untapped potential that Egyptian teachers have because the potential for transformation lies in the teaching profession itself. There should be a platform for teachers with a strong sense of moral purpose to empower others and innovate. This study showed that there are committed teachers in Egypt who possess the knowledge and skills to initiate reform. One of the greatest benefits of this intervention is that it put me in contact with those teachers who are the country's main asset for reform. Programmes such as TLDW act as an attracting force for those teachers, where they feel that they are trusted as professionals and that their voice is heard in educational reform. Policy should be directed towards benefitting from the existing expertise of teachers, rather than copying policies across borders.

Re-Launching CairoCam in 2018

Once I had submitted my doctoral thesis, I turned my attention to re-launching the programme. CairoCam had been established as an organization which has a strong partnership with HertsCam. Since 2014, the TLDW tools have been developed and improved and CairoCam has a license to use them. We also have an agreement for joint certification so that participating teachers will be awarded the HertsCam Certificate in Teacher Leadership. The next tranche of facilitators attended an induction course held in Cairo using resources adapted in collaboration with HertsCam. We have also now developed an online platform for participating teachers to share accounts of their development work.

Members of the HertsCam network visited Cairo for the first time in February 2019 to observe the programme in action. This involved attending a conference, visiting the schools, meeting the facilitators and having discussions with current participants. This visit made us all feel we belong to an international network and have a shared common language of teacher leadership. Teachers felt supported, inspired and acknowledged, especially as the HertsCam team expressed such appreciation of their leadership of their development work.

Hopes for the Future

In the future we hope to extend the programme to other schools, however we are aware that such a process takes time in order to build the values base and the understanding required to expand. Mehta (2013b) considers this as a weakness in bottom-up strategies of reform and claims they are not capable of creating massive change because the pace is slow. It is a matter of choosing between scaling-up and high-quality implementation (Burns, 2014).

Having conducted the programme, it is clear to us that it is indeed possible to run such programmes successfully in schools in Egypt, although there would be additional challenges working with schools beyond the circle of private schools that participated in the initial experiment. Even though we were unable to run the programme in state schools, our experience with an Arabic school in an underprivileged area in the second year of running the programme allowed us to come closer to the challenges that pertain in schools that serve the majority of the population. Teachers from the Arabic school were active participants in the network and enthusiastically shared in the network events. Their participation in the network events inspired colleagues and school managers who valued their commitment to reform given their challenging conditions. Developing partnerships and twinning private and government schools was one recommendation by participants in the network and this actually happened in an informal way where private schools supported teachers from the Arabic schools. Support could be in the form of sharing knowledge and expertise, where teachers act as coaches and mentors to their colleagues in other schools, as well as collaborating on developments. However, for such partnerships to have a sound impact, support should be reciprocal. Teachers from government schools should similarly be supported in developing and sharing professional knowledge that teachers in private schools could benefit from. This is one of our future plans for expanding the network.

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