A coterminous collaborative learning model: interconnectivity of leadership and learning

Ilana Margolin, *Levinsky College of Education, Tel Aviv, Israel*

ABSTRACT. This qualitative ethnographic study examines a collaborative leadership model focused on learning and socially just practices within a change context of a wide educational partnership. The study analyzes a range of perspectives of novice teachers, mentor teachers, teacher educators and district superintendents on leadership and learning. The findings reveal the emergence of a coalition of leaders crossing borders at all levels of the educational system: local school level, district level and teacher education level who were involved in coterminous collaborative learning. Four categories of learning were identified as critical to leading a change in the educational system: learning in professional communities, learning from practice, learning through theory and research and learning from and with leaders. The implications of the study for policy makers as well as for practitioners are to adopt a holistic approach to the educational environment and plan a collaborative learning continuum from initial pre-service programs through professional development learning at all levels.

KEYWORDS: *Collaborative learning, Distributed leadership, Community of practice, Educational system, Qualitative study*

Introduction

In contrast to these systemic traditional structures and mechanisms that reinforce the status quo and educate for obedience and conformity, there are educators and researchers who encourage and demand profound shifts in understanding, thinking, talking, and practicing education and, in some cases, even implement them (Mitchell, Sackney, 2009). A model that might further the goal of change is one of collaborative inquiry, focused on change and socially just practices. Such a model promises to build rich, exciting learning environments and develop passionate, engaged learners at

all levels who value and enjoy deep continuous learning. However, developing a model whose goal is to rail against the lack of authentic change in schools, identify the disturbances and decide collectively to build something different in spite of the wider system is a great challenge (Stoll, Louis, 2007).

The objective of this paper is to examine a collaborative leadership model, focused on learning and socially just practices within a change context of a wide educational partnership. We[1] believe that learning is the central purpose of educational organizations and that leadership is about the learning that leads to constructive change (Lambert, 2009; Mitchell, Sackney, 2009). Socio-cultural theory and the notion that learning and leadership occur in a community (Wenger, 1998) form the foundations and shape the perspective of our study; we applied distributed perspective as a lens for considering the coordination and interdependence of leaders' learning and actions (Spillane et al., 2001).The quality of learning, which should be the center of schooling, has been sharply criticized by researchers (Cho et al., 2009; Howard, Taber, 2010; Mitchell, Sackney, 2009) as well as by practitioners at every stage of the educational system, starting with pupils' learning and continuing through to the learning and teaching of teachers, teacher educators and administrators. The systemic level has also been criticized for producing unsustainable mechanisms of rules, procedures, outcomes, and results that inhibit learning (Fullan, 2006). Thus, our research question is how can an educational system develop and sustain intra- and inter-organizational leadership that promotes multi-level learning in a variety of change contexts?

The context of the study

During the years 2002 – 2006, our teacher education college initiated an experimental program aiming to be integrative, coherent, and responsive to the changing needs of the educational system and to the requirements of the Israeli National Council for Higher Education. While the principal aim of the experiment was to construct a four-year alternative and innovative school-based teacher education program, a major by-product was the emergence of distributed leadership of teacher-educators and practitioners in the field (Margolin, 2007). As it was clear from the very beginning of the experiment that innovative teacher education cannot be confined to the college but must be taken

1. Data were collected by many colleagues and ideas were shared with them; that is why I use the first person plural (e.g. "we", "our") throughout the paper

to the field, one of its main principles was building partnerships with schools and with the Israeli Ministry of Education. Thus, during the years 2006 – 2010 the experimental program was superseded by a total college teacher education program according to the new guidelines of the Israeli Council for Higher Education. The core leadership of the new program was comprised of many of the teacher educators who had participated in the 2002-2006 experiment. Moreover, because creating partnerships with schools and with district superintendents was one of the main principles of the 2002-2010 programs, the college continued these relationships and deepened them. The distributed leadership initiative that had begun with the experiment and involved student teachers, mentor teachers and teacher educators continued and was joined by a group of district superintendents that learned and inquired into their practice as a professional community. Thus, the leadership of the original experiment was now comprised of school principals, mentor-teachers, teacher educators, superintendents and other practitioners.

Theoretical review

The first part of this section reviews the central role of learning and leadership in educational settings and the interconnections between them. The second part deals with the significance of inter-organizational connections and building networks of communities of practice.

Leadership and Learning

As the challenges of improving the educational system and changing the status quo are too great for any one leader, school, district, or even nation to tackle alone, meeting these challenges requires a new kind of leadership (Spillane, Diamond, 2007; Stoll, Jackson, 2009). Researchers claim that a coalition of proactive leaders crossing borders at all levels of the educational system - local school level, teacher education level and district level - would have the power to change the existing system (Fullan, 2005). Hallinger (2011) sums up 40 years of research about "leadership for learning" that provides a guide for practice in schools. He concludes that the term "leadership for learning" subsumes features of instructional,

transformational, and shared leadership and suggests a "mutual influence" model that emphasizes the significance of leadership and learning and the profound impact of the school context on both of them. Thus, a critical consideration and highly important function of leaders is reshaping organizations from within by dismantling the artificial structural and cultural boundaries that restrict organizational learning (Harris, 2008). Leaders have to construct a social context and inter-relationships that maximize opportunities for developing collaborative learning and leadership potential. These multi-level formal and informal leaders are change agents who interact beyond their own positions, looking at their organizations in a holistic way - participating in the bigger picture and creating links with other parts of the system (Pascal, 2009; Spillane et al., 2001). Such a culture is a dramatic departure from previous frameworks and confronts established beliefs, mindsets and patterns (Eyal, Kark, 2004; Harris, 2009; Spillane et al., 2006). Moreover, in educational settings, leading should mean engaging in interrelated new learning through the process of constructive change (Fink, 2009; Lambert, 2009). Socio-cultural perspectivists argue that learning occurs in a community; thus, communities of practice have individual and organizational influences that impact schools, curriculum reform and teacher and student learning. Including all participants in a professional community enables a reciprocal learning process in which each member is a teacher and a learner simultaneously (Howard, Taber, 2010; Paredes Scribner, Bradley-Levine, 2010; Wenger, 1998). Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice, in which people are active participants in the activities of social communities, is similar to the idea of distributive leadership. The approach of distributive leadership stresses a social distribution in which the practice of leadership is shared and realized within extended formal top-down and informal bottom-up groupings and networks. Distributed leadership is about pro-activity and change of the structure and meaning of the context as well as about influence - the many rather than the few to lead (Harris, 2007; Spillane et al., 2001).

For a meaningful and effective change to occur in the culture of educational settings there is a need to create an open, safe and protected organizational culture, free of favoritism and internal dissent, a culture of cohesion, integrity, mutual respect, trust and interpersonal accountability (Mitchell, Sackney, 2009). As such, a

collaborative and supportive culture has an enormous influence on how people make sense of the meaning of learning, and leaders in all levels have to establish conditions that give rise to increased learning. However, as every element in the system is a part of a large relational picture, leaders are required to engage in all sets of practices at the same time. They are expected to provide opportunities for capacity development and compelling vision, establish structures and platforms which foster collaborative learning and stay abreast of change (Fullan, 2009; Hallett, 2007; Leithwood, Jantzi 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Sparks, 2009).

Multi-level Collaborative Learning

It is clear today that continuous learning, as a part of the development of student teachers, school teachers, both novice and veteran, teacher educators and district superintendents is critical in the educational system in order to meet the challenges of transforming the teaching profession and improving schools. However, while pre-service and in-service programs have frameworks for teacher learning and development, at least formally, teacher educators and superintendents usually do not. Though they play a crucial role in teachers', principals' and students' development and are supposed to be key agents in the transformation of the teaching profession, there are usually no formal programs for preparing them for their roles (Howard, Taber, 2010; Margolin, 2011; Murray, 2008). Moreover, in order to provide students, teachers and principals with rich learning opportunities, and enhance their learning about teaching, teacher educators and superintendents, should serve as models of learners and as change agents and engage in an ongoing exploration of their practice (Clandinin, 2008; Loughran et al., 2008; Sparks, 2009).

Recently teacher educators have become aware of their crucial role in facilitating their learners' growth, supporting their learning, challenging them to take risks, incorporate new perspectives, and broaden their horizons. To achieve this goal, the teacher educators have begun to establish frameworks and spaces in which they explore their own practice collaboratively and reflect on them. Moreover, they have redefined their roles, extending their responsiveness to learner and societal needs and responding to the need for updated programs. These empowering processes have contributed to their professional development, the improvement of their practice and

caused a shift from an instructional paradigm to one of learning (Howard, Taber, 2010; Margolin, 2011; Tagg, 2008).

However, the intra-organizational learning is of utmost importance but not enough; a systemic change requires broadening the inter-organizational connections and building networks of communities of practice. It is a major responsibility of district leaders to manage the instructional program of the district from a holistic point of view by establishing structures and cultures which foster collaborative work (Leithwood, Jantzi, 2008). The policies and practical involvement of superintendents of school-districts should be balanced by the critical theoretical lens of teacher educators in order to balance practice with theory. Partnerships among schools, teacher educators and superintendents would facilitate both the breadth and depth of learning through interconnections of all participants and programs. All programs influence each other and should focus on preparing new teachers and encouraging veteran teachers as well as teacher educators and policy makers to change the system. This requires reframing traditional hierarchies among participants, creating common language, multi-directional communication, coherent messages and shared ownership and commitment at all levels (Cho et al., 2009; Møller, 2007).

Methods

This section presents the participants of the study, the research design, data collection and data analysis and validation.

Participants

The participants were 4 groups of leaders who were involved in a longitudinal change process in educational organizations. The study examined their perceptions of their roles of leadership and learning during the change process. The participants of the present study were nearly 50 representatives of four populations most of whom had taken part in the experimental program of 2002-2006: 8 graduates (GR) of the experimental program who today are novice teachers; 8 mentor-teachers (MT) and their principal from one of the college's cooperating schools. This principal is an exemplary leader and the school is one of the leading cooperating schools; 12 teacher-educators (TE); 20 superintendents (SU) who comprise the

leadership of the largest district in the Ministry of Education and the Head of the District with whom the college collaborates. Some of the superintendents had participated in the experimental program as individuals and others joined the professional community two years later. The researcher was the leader of the experimental program (2002-2006) and until 2009 was the coordinator of the college-school partnerships. Today, she co-leads with the Head of the District a professional community of superintendents who inquire into their practice.

Research design

Drawing on a naturalistic paradigm, we conducted an ethnographic study (Corbin, Strauss, 2008) in which we tried to capture a range of perspectives on leadership and learning of novice teachers, mentor teachers, teacher educators and district superintendents. The ethnographic methodology seemed suitable for examining the particular culture each group represented and the challenge of integrating the various voices into a multi-cultural model of leadership. The methods employed in this study emanated from the efforts to inquire deeply into the real life daily norms, actions and routines that foster learning. Thus, we analyzed the discourse and practices of the four groups focusing on the learning processes.

Data collection

Data were collected from various sources: (1) transcripts of 20 superintendents' professional community group discussions during an academic year; (2) transcripts of discussions of four focus groups: superintendents, teacher educators, mentor teachers and graduates; (3) transcripts of interviews the researcher conducted with 8 of the participants (2 from each group) to ascertain their views relating to learning and leadership. The interviews were open ended and lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. The opening questions were: What kind of leader are you and what helped you to develop as a leader?

Data analysis and validation

All transcripts were analyzed qualitatively using open coding (Corbin, Strauss, 2008). The coding involved four processes:

- Searching discretely within each group's discourse for

participants' descriptions of leadership and learning and categorizing them into units.
- Sorting the units and categorizing them into themes concerning learning and leadership that converge among all groups.
- Choosing the theme of collaborative learning, and through a dialectical process between the data and theory dividing it into 4 sub-categories.
- Looking for similarities and differences within the groups and between them.

Validation of the findings involved triangulation of all sources by means of:

- a dialectic between data and theory dealing with the process of developing leadership for learning.
- review of the results and feedback from 3 teacher educators who served as critical friends.
- a discussion of the significance of the findings with the groups of superintendents and teacher educators.
- an evaluative review from an outsider researcher.

Findings

Through analysis of the data, we identified four categories of the theme of continuous collaborative learning that leaders in all groups perceived as critical to leading a change in the educational system:

- Learning in professional communities
- Learning from practice
- Learning through theory and collaborative research
- Learning from and with leaders - mentoring

All members in the four groups experienced diverse learning opportunities in various frameworks of professional learning communities. All participants, without exception, mention this ongoing learning and emphasize four main aspects of it.

Learning in professional communities

Graduates of the program, who have in the meantime become teachers, reported developing the practice of continuous learning in a community during four years of their studies. Moreover, they report trying to build professional learning communities in their new teaching positions such as those they had experienced. Sara (GR), a teacher of special education, describes how she is building a professional learning community with the staff connected to her class:

> "I connect to them [her colleagues] through learning ... Build trust, build a group that is learning... It started from college, believing in the discussion... Through feedback with clinical supervisors, colleagues and the mentor-teacher I could examine my behavior, to improve my capacities, to cope with new problems and situations, overcome difficulties and give personal meaning to my experience" (Graduates' focus group, July, 2010).

The quote indicates that the teacher is relying on her past experience of learning in a learning community where she received feedback from faculty members on her lessons, and on her capacity to cope with difficulties. The kind of leadership she is implementing following this experience is of a leader who believes in learning and is conscious of the need for building such a community where there is trust among participants.

In the cooperating school, learning in professional communities has become a way of life. Alona (MT) describes her learning community which includes veteran and novice teachers and student teachers:

> "If we can learn together with students, without ego, we are all equal wanting to improve and learn. Once this ego disappears, and we understand that we constantly have to learn with someone who can help in this area or another area... When we go out for tutoring, we come with what we have, but slowly, bringing it to the teachers ... (Teachers' focus group, June, 2010).

Sara (GR) talked about her leading the team working in her class, and Alona (MT) is talking about a wider circle of shared learning.

This school created simultaneous distributed, ego-free leadership learning and teaching. The student teachers are full partners in this community and the mentors understand that they also benefit from this collaborative learning. When they are required to explain their practice and thinking to student teachers who ask naïve questions, the mentor teachers themselves benefit from rethinking their conceptions and prior assumptions. After several years, some of the mentors have become tutors and then, as Alona (MT) says, they apply the training model which they experienced.

In the college, ongoing learning in a professional community became an integral part of the academic work of teacher educators. Sharon (TE) the head of the elementary school program emphasizes the importance of learning in the community:

> "It's not enough that it is in us, people who stay only with themselves do not reach greatness. We have to be open to all kinds of ideas… Hearing the different voices, understanding the complexity… My learning was created in the meetings in the college, in learning sessions each week… Formal learning as well gives a sense of security, professionalism. I'm ready to take the responsibility… Matter of sharing is important, but not only. The merger of learning and practice, I know more, understand more, doing things in a more informed way helped me understand many things and I try to implement them" (Interview, November, 2010).

Sharon (TE) mentioned the opportunity given to her for formal learning in the experimental program. From her words it is seen that she is now a leader who listens, is attentive to the different voices and takes responsibility more readily.

The most dramatic change relating to social learning in a professional community came from the group of the superintendents, who for many years had been engaged in intensive administrative work and rarely found time for collaborative learning. Opportunity for peer learning and collaboration in a professional learning community that was founded in cooperation with the Head of the District and the College has created a change in both perceptions of leadership and practice of superintendents, as Maidy (SU) notes:

> "The group created a committed learning community. There was a safe space for learning and for bringing up issues from the field without worry. The connection to theoretical literature served as an anchor that created a common language. The Head of the District established a culture of learning that allowed us to explore our work in a professional manner. Our professional community established a reputation and became an inspiration for the entire district" (Superintendents' focus group, October, 2010).

The possibilities for learning and exploring her practice that Maidy (SU) was exposed to within the framework created in the district helped her build new capacities and expand the concept of leadership. Her comments add the element of theoretical learning to those of the other participants. This opportunity has made her a mediator leader that learns theory, interprets the practice through it and in parallel processes encourages principals and teachers in her domain to investigate and reflect on their work. This practice is not obvious among superintendents. Maidy also mentions the common language created in the superintendents' group which helps their shared leadership functions.

The Head of the District (SU), who never missed a community learning session, indicated the contribution of the social learning in the community:

> "Real learning is what we do around the table. Also I'm learning all the time. This meeting creates cognitive dissonance that allows me to think about the principles of the district budgets differently. We are here in a thinking group that helps me make professional decisions. Explicit and implicit feedback from people who are in the field is very important to me. It helps me decide what to emphasize and what to put aside" (Community session, December, 2009).

Hearing the different voices and feedback helps The Head of the District supervise the allocation of budgets, determining the priorities of the district. The Head of the District's leadership now also rests on what she learns from her colleagues.

All participants emphasized the fact that they were learning together all the time and the circles of learning were widening.

Learning from practice

The focus of learning in all the groups was practice. The main principle of putting practice at the center caused leaders in each of the organizations to create frequent learning opportunities in schools and classrooms: college faculty working in partnerships with schools; superintendents observing classes in conjunction with principals and giving feedback, and all of them using data collected in classrooms as raw material for learning in community meetings. Thus, leadership finds expression in leaders' daily activities with their partners.

Program graduates feel that during the years of their education at the college they have acquired experience in learning and teaching. Sara (GR) remembers the cocoon of learning and support she had while she was a student and emphasizes the confidence and faith that she was given by her past experience. This has made her a determined leader who is not discouraged by failure.

> "What gives me the confidence is that now I know that it's OK to fall, even if I fall and if I'm mistaken, I'll know to get up… From past experience, when I fell, I got up. I stood up alone, or with help; however I believed in myself. I experienced staying down a long time, it was also OK…" (Graduates' focus group, July 2010).

Superintendents also stress the importance of action as opposed to speech:

> "Today we are within action in the field; we do not talk about but do. I'm a manual laborer. I have rolled up my sleeves and started working in the pits; you need to get dirty. Although I perceived myself as a field worker, only now I actualized the field…" (Superintendents' focus group, October, 2010).

In the past these superintendents were soloists with a wide span of control over dozens of schools. Within the new program, they have experienced shared learning with their colleagues, team thinking, joint planning and observation of classes, namely rolling up their sleeves as Liany (SU), the superintendent of the counselors describes:

> "The main thing is the partnership in the field. That we got a full day in this school was the most significant learning. Via partnership with Kory [comprehensive superintendent] and Dana [mathematics tutor], we manage an ongoing dialogue through which I revive a different perspective and attain mutual learning. As we learn more, we improve the activity in school. The observations and feedback I learn here, I also transfer to the work with the counselors" (Community session, December, 2009).

Opportunity to learn from practice upgraded Liany's (SU) and the schools' practice. Liany is a leader who studies in collaboration with colleagues as a mutual learning experience in schools. Liany also sees it as her job to transfer this learning model to another forum of counselors for which she is responsible and enable them to learn in a same way. Like Liany, Ava (SU) also sees it as her job to build a learning model similar to that which she is experiencing:

> "I should identify learning potential in the field and elevate it for learning. I think my role is to bring opportunities to school, to create dialogue around teaching and learning, and create routines to encourage teachers to participate in decisions at school" (Community session, December, 2009).

Unlike the past, when superintendents perceived their role as leaders mainly in giving instructions and in assessment of achievements at schools, Ava (SU) adds to Liany's (SU) words the role of the leader to identify opportunities within the school, create routines that enable dialogue and build collaborative leadership.

Like the superintendents, the college faculty has also internalized the culture of social learning, and they see themselves as responsible for creating a "model of social learning through practice in schools" (Hana, TE). Hana, the mathematics methods supervisor adds that this has also been "a significant change in teaching mathematics for teachers at school, not just for students." In addition to transferring the model specified by the superintendents, the mathematics supervisor became a change agent in the schools where she tutors. She creates learning opportunities among teachers and students whom she guides in the field in order to lead change in the patterns of learning and teaching.

As seen through the examples presented in the data, the opportunities to experience concrete activities and the ability to identify them are critical to learning and leading. While doing this, new meanings are created, significant values are emphasized and a vision is built. Social learning is reflected in professional communities and in daily experience of practice and its analysis. Leadership capacities are learned while experiencing them.

Learning through theory and collaborative research

Some quotes from graduates and superintendents stressed the importance of data collection in classrooms and schools. The Head of the District (SU) constantly emphasized the importance of decision making and action based on data, and also ensured that all populations of educators, superintendents, principals and teachers in the district collected various types of data. However, a disparity is seen in this element between the groups. Sara (GR) notes the importance of data collection:

> "Research methods taught me the importance of data collection and analysis and improved my reflective capacity and my desire to grow and generate change. Many partners in research taught me teamwork, the inclusion of the opinions of others, critical thinking and learning from others. I consider myself a person who explores each area and its connection to my life" (Graduates' focus group, July, 2010).

Group research was one of the five main principles of the experimental program. This experience gave Sara tools which she uses to this day as a teacher and as the leader of a team. The experimental program created an inquiry stance among its participants and encouraged the faculty to publish their studies and present them at conferences. Sharon (TE), the head of the elementary school program who was completing her doctorate during the experimental program, explains:

> "The pressure for documentation and research was an opportunity. In my position today there are things that came with from my learning then. A significant learning occurred, and documentation enabled me go back to it and understand it in retrospect... The driving force for inquiry is something

I would never have achieved by myself... "(Interview, November, 2010).

Among clinical supervisors, practice had been the focus throughout the years, but much of their field guidance was intuitive and the connection to theory was weak. Sharon admits that without the impetus and encouragement received from the leaders of the experiment she would not have submitted her doctoral dissertation. In retrospect, she understands the importance of reflective thinking the study encouraged her to achieve and the significance of research relating to her leadership pattern today, which is based on inquiring practice and data collection.

The novice teachers, the teacher educators and the supervisors all raised the issue of collecting data and researching their practice for learning and leadership. The school teachers did not raise this issue. Though working with student teachers and teacher educators who were inquiring into their practice, teacher leaders in this school focused on other elements.

The last sub-category mentioned by all the parties was learning in the company of significant leaders and being mentored by them.

Learning with and from Leaders

Participants in all groups noted the significance of working under the baton of a nurturing leader that gave them an opportunity to build leadership capacities, to be empowered and to shape their perceptions of leadership. The methods supervisor of mathematics, Hana (TE), is a leader who left a mark on many students and teachers with whom she worked. Vivi (MT), one of Hana's mentor teachers, remarked:

> "I went through a process of thinking with Hana [TE] which was really a great privilege, and I underwent a conceptual change in thinking of what really matters and where I should lead. I have faith in myself first as being able to lead any change, and belief in the colleagues I am supposed to mentor… I learned to see a change process which has a start and end point..." (Teachers' focus group, June 2010).

Vivi (MT) who was empowered by her supervisor, became a tutor of mathematics and has developed a different perception of herself

and of teaching mathematics. Furthermore, she has become a capable leader who believes in herself and her ability to lead change. The change led by Hana (TE) in the school was the construction of frameworks to learn from practice. These included observations in classes, demonstration of mathematical discourse with pupils, analysis and feedback - linking them all to theoretical learning in the professional community.

Like the mentor teachers, the school principal and superintendents all spoke about leaders that had empowered them, created opportunities for leadership for them and served as models by which they could develop their own leadership. Hava (MT), the school principal, says that the one who conceived the idea of partnership between the school and the college was Sonia (SU), the Head of the District: "She believed a leader must support the followers and not let them fall. She did it all the way… every time I need help I can apply to her". Hava (MT) sees in the Head of the District an initiator leader, bringing changes and supporting her followers, a model she adopts for herself. The superintendents share Hava's opinion concerning the Head of the District:

> "I was empowered by Sonia, the Head of the District. Her presence in the professional learning community was important, because through you [the researcher] and Sonia, I had a model; I went into the field feeling much safer. Our professional community gave me confidence in my image as a superintendent and also diffused to the field" (Superintendents' focus group, October 2010).

Kory (SU) noted the regular participation of the Head of the District in the learning sessions of the professional learning community of the superintendents, which broadcasted a clear message about the importance of this learning framework. She sees in the Head a supportive and empowering leader who herself is simultaneously a learner and a teacher. In this framework Kory (SU) has built her leadership capacities and become a superintendent who is confident in herself and conveys this in the field.

Teacher educators also point out the significant learning and experience through leaders that have helped them in formulating their own leadership; as Sharon (TE), the Head of the college elementary school program said in an interview held with the

researcher:

> "You [researcher] made a lot of people recognize opportunities. All the opportunities we talked about- you created them: the co-teaching, the learning of theory, it has a lot of repercussions now. You caused people to understand through experiencing the complexity of reality and leadership. Awareness of context made us understand that there are opportunities all the time, but you should see them, understand them and actualize them" (Interview, November 2010).

Sharon (TE) sees in the leader of the experimental program a model for leadership, especially in the sense of creating a variety of options that gave rise to learning and leadership. Sharon herself has formulated a model of leadership from what she learned from working with leaders and created numerous opportunities that enable other leaders to develop. She says: "From what I know and experienced: instead of talking about what to do, modeling is critical".
There is ample evidence that modeling by significant leaders was a key ingredient for constructing future sustainable leadership and continuous learning. The implicit mentoring by these leaders was an important scaffold for building their own perception and style of leadership.

Discussion

Three main findings can be drawn from our data.
First, leadership and adult learning in educational organizations seem to be interconnected and reciprocally influence each other. The conditions and situations that affected and promoted continuous learning were the same as those that promoted leadership. One of the critical aspects was experiencing collaborative learning and leadership as part of the participants' daily work.
Second, change in organizational culture can be the result of collaborative learning and distributed leadership. It is interesting to note the congruency between current research on learning and distributed leadership (Harris, 2007; Lambert, 2009; Spillane et al.,

2001) and the perception of the leaders participating in this study. Most of them perceived learning as the central component of schooling and strove for a different kind of deep powerful learning for themselves and those they taught or supervised. This different kind of learning is enthusiastic and passionate and enables learners to make sense of new ideas, question assumptions, raise conflicts and difficulties and think slowly and deeply. All of them agreed that learning in professional communities is one of the more significant strategies for promoting collaboration and change in their setting (Mitchell, Sackney, 2009; Wenger, 1998). The change in the organizational culture was accomplished by challenging the existing system and changing the status quo. Participants learned to be leaders by leading collaboratively and to be learners by continuous daily learning while accomplishing their roles.

Finally, variations in the kinds of learning leaders adopted were characterized mainly by the different contexts and by the proportion of time and emphasis they devoted to each type of learning. The major difference among groups was in their learning from research and theory which did not appear in the group of school teachers. Because of their work in academy, teacher educators were engaged in research and inquired into their practice to a greater degree than the other groups. Although the cooperating school established learning communities, the school teachers did not yet consider inquiry as an integral part of their leadership and learning. Reasons for this issue may be lack of time due to other priorities and demands of the school, lack of knowledge of the research process or fear of taking risks and venturing out of their comfort zone. However, teacher educators perceive this issue as one of the weaknesses of the program and consider it an important role of their collaboration with schools to advance this significant area.

A coterminous collaborative learning model

One of the most important fruits of the leadership development described in this study was the establishment of a coalition of leaders crossing borders at all levels of the educational system: local school level, district level and teacher education level. These leaders were all involved in coterminous collaborative learning: their learning was continuous; it took place at defined regular intervals with defined groups as well as at every opportunity in between when members of the various groups at every level met and mixed. This collaborative

model involved the exchange of information and new learning of all stakeholders while critically examining the current educational system and changing it while doing. The continuous dialogue and exploration established a common language of practitioners and policy makers, multi-directional communication, coherent messages and deepened strategies. Their shared ownership and commitment at all levels created an innovative kind of leadership in which team effort of practical leading influenced policy level and reframed the educational environment at schools (Leithwood, Jantzi, 2008).

The leaders met the challenges and needs faced by the educational system today by re-defining their roles, transforming their conceptions and behavior as well as changing their educational environments. Each leader and organization played a significant intra- and inter-organizational role promoting the change process within the partnership. Their kinds of leadership, each in their own organization, reinforce the notion of a current need to focus on contextualizing the types of leadership strategies and practices (Hallinger, 2011). Members represented their specific organizational culture and interests and all of them together built a common identity and vision for the district.

Teacher educators played a crucial role not only in their own organization, but also in schools and in the entire district: they shared responsibility for engaging teachers and students in investigating and critiquing their practice and by leading a dialectical process between their practice and educational theories. They modeled innovative teaching by meeting their learners' needs and coping with the resistance these processes often entailed. They were involved in induction programs and assisted in professional development programs in schools and with superintendents by contributing their critical stance and theoretical knowledge. This involvement of faculty members in schools and the district blurred the borders between organizations, and transformed the traditional hierarchies into a more democratic culture. The superintendents also had a key role in orchestrating all parties and elements, leading the district's vision and enabling appropriate conditions for schools to change.

Conclusion: holistic approach

Coterminous collaborative learning in organizations is a necessary condition for generating change in the educational environment; however it is not sufficient for a significant systemic reform. For this to happen, a holistic approach to the educational environment should be adopted. Continuous self-examination in relation to all other groups involved in the district has to be carried out by teachers, teacher educators and superintendents. Interconnectedness between leadership and learning and among the different parties in the district is seen as obligatory. A significant change can be generated only if the systemic context, inside and outside of the organization, changes (Fullan, 2005). The internal transformation of leaders in approach, conceptions, beliefs and assumptions is interrelated with the external contextual change. Most of the leaders have to take on responsibility for sustaining continuous learning in their organizations in relation to other groups and to develop others as leaders.

Implications

In order to bridge the gap between theory and practice - schools and academy - and create new cultures, the educational system should establish a cross-sector model of collaboration through partnerships and networks with strong relationships between schools, teacher education programs and district offices. Instead of demanding that practitioners implement the "top-down" requirements of policy makers in the Ministry of Education, the recommendation is to build professional learning communities comprised of leaders from all levels of the system and create a common agenda that integrates "top-down" visions and "bottom up" agendas by a continuing dialogue among all the stakeholders. The different cultures of schools, policy makers and teacher education should be discussed and the tensions among them should be brought to the surface. A professional sustainable discourse in communities of practice and networks is an opportunity to foster collegiality and to increase involvement of researchers and policy makers in deepening learning and teaching in schools. Each group would contribute its ideas, strengths and points of view to coterminous collaborative professional learning and development.

The holistic approach, the different lenses of theory and practice, the opportunities for collaboration in a democratic environment – all have the potential to change the system and to focus on learning. Moreover, this holistic approach requires all partners to plan a learning continuum from initial pre-service programs, to induction programs, to professional development learning for veteran teachers and other practitioners, and to superintendents and administrators of the district. A long term collective agenda and holistic perspective in problems solving is likely to guarantee the radical change required for sustainable learning.

Further research is required that explores the conditions and constraints organizations meet in order to build an infrastructure for creating partnerships in which communities of practice thrive and afford a democratic discourse that represent the different points of view of all stakeholders.

References

All URLs checked December 2012

Cho Christine, Barrett Sarah Elizabeth, Solomon Patrick, Portelli John, Mujawamariya Donatille (2009), *Mentorship and induction: Negotiating a collaborative enterprise or apprenticing for status quo maintenance?*, "Brock Education", V. 18 n. 2, pp. 114-130

Corbin Juliet, Strauss Anselm (2008), *Basics of qualitative research*, Thousand Oaks, LA, CA, USA, Sage Publications

Clandinin Jean (2008), *Editorial. Creating learning spaces for teachers and teacher educators*, "Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice", V. 14 n. 5-6, pp. 385-389

Eyal Ori, Kark Ronit (2004), *How do transformational leaders transform organizations? A study of the relationship between leadership and entrepreneurship*, "Leadership and Policy in Schools", V. 3, n. 3, pp. 211–235

Fink Dean (2009), *Leadership for mortals: Developing and sustaining leaders of learning*, in Alan M. Blankstein, Paul D. Houston, Robert W. Cole, (Eds.), *Building sustainable leadership capacity*, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, Corwin Press, pp. 41-64

Fullan M. (2009), *The moral imperative revisited: Achieving large-scale reform* in Alan M. Blankstein, Paul D. Houston, Robert W. Cole, (Eds.), *Building sustainable leadership capacity*, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, Corwin Press, pp. 29-40

Fullan Michael (2006), *Turnaround leadership*, San Francisco, CA, USA, Jossey-Bass

Fullan Michael (2005), *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action*, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, Corwin

Hallett Timothy (2007), *The leadership struggle: The case of Costen Elementary School* in James P. Spillane, John D. Diamond (Eds.), *Distributed leadership in practice*, New York and London, NY, USA, Teachers College Press, pp. 85-105

Hallinger Philip (2011), Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research, "Journal of Educational Administration", V. 49, n. 2, pp. 125-142

Harris Alma (2009), *Creative leadership: Developing future leaders*, "Management and Administration Society", V. 23, n. 1, pp. 9-11

Harris Alma (2008), *Distributed leadership: The theory* in Alma Harris, (Ed.), *Distributed school leadership: Developing tomorrow's leaders*, London, UK, Routledge

Harris Alma (2007), *Distributed leadership: Conceptual confusion and empirical reticence*, "International Journal of Leadership in Education", V. 10, n. 3, pp. 315-325

Howard Lauri, Taber Nancy (2010), *Faculty development in community colleges*, "Brock Education", V. 20, n. 1, pp. 34-48

Lambert Linda (2009), *Reconceptualizing the road toward leadership capacity* in Alan M. Blankstein, Paul D. Houston, Robert W. Cole (Eds.), *Building sustainable leadership capacity*, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, Corwin Press, pp. 7-28

Leithwood Kenneth, Jantzi, Doris (2008), *Linking leadership to student learning: The contributions of leader efficacy*, "Educational Administration Quarterly", V. 44, n. 4, pp. 496-528

Leithwood Kenneth, Mascall Blair, Strauss Tiiu, Sacks Robin, Memon Nadeem, Yashkina Anna (2007), *Distributing leadership to make schools smarter: Taking the ego out of the system*, "Leadership and Policy in Schools", V. 6, pp. 37-67

Loughran John, Korthagen Fred, Russell Tom (2008), *Teacher education that makes a difference. Developing foundational principles of practice* in Cheryl Craig, Louise Deretchin (Eds.), *Imagining a renaissance in teacher education*, Lanham, MD, USA, Rowan & Littlefield Education, pp. 405-421

MacBeath John (2005), *Leadership as distributed. A matter of practice*, "School Leadership & Management", V. 25, n. 4, pp. 349-366

Margolin Ilana (2011), *Professional development of teacher educators through a 'transitional space': A surprising outcome of a teacher education program*, "Teacher Education Quarterly", V. 38, n. 2, pp. 7-25

Margolin Ilana (2007), *Creating a collaborative school-based teacher education program*, in Michal Zellermayer, Elaine Munthe (Eds.), *Teachers learning in communities*, Rotterdam/Taipei, The Netherlands, Sense Publishers, pp.113-125

Mitchell Coral, Sackney Larry (2009), *Sustainable improvement. Building learning communities that endure*, Rotterdam/Taipei, The Netherlands, Sense Publishers,

Møller Jorunn (2007), *Educational leadership and a new language of learning*, "International Journal of Leadership in Education", V. 10, n. 1, pp. 31-48

Murray John (2008), *Towards the re-articulation of the work of teacher educators in higher education institutions in England*, "European Journal of Teacher Education", V. 31, n. 1, pp. 17-34

Pascal Nancy Shin (2009), *Developing and sustaining leadership capacity*, in Alan M. Blankstein, Paul D. Houston, Robert W. Cole, (Eds.), *Building sustainable leadership capacity*, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, Corwin Press, pp.157-172

Paredes-Scribner Samantha M., Bradley-Levine Jill (2010), *The meaning(s) of teacher leadership in an urban high school reform*, "Educational Administration Quarterly", V. 46, pp. 491-522

Sparks Dennis (2009), *What I believe about leadership development*, in Alan M. Blankstein, Paul D. Houston, Robert W. Cole, (Eds.), *Building sustainable leadership capacity*, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, Corwin Press, pp. 1-6

Spillane James, Diamond, John D. (2007), *Taking a distributed perspective*, in James P. Spillane, John D. Diamond (Eds.), *Distributed leadership in practice*, New York and London, NY, USA, Teachers College Press, pp. 1- 15

Spillane James, Camburn Eric, Lewis Geoff, Stitziel-Pareja Amber (2006), *Taking a distributed perspective in studying school leadership and management: Epistemological and methodological trade-offs*, Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, USA

Spillane James, Halverson Richard, Diamond John (2001), *Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective*, Institute for Policy Research Working Article, Northwestern University, Chicago, IL, USA

Stoll Louise, Jackson David (2009), *Liberating leadership potential: Designing for leadership growth*, in Alan M. Blankstein, Paul D. Houston, Robert W. Cole, (Eds), *Building sustainable leadership capacity*, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, Corwin Press, pp. 65-84

Stoll Louise, Louis Karen Seashore (2007), *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas*, Maidenhead, UK, Open University Press

Tagg John (2008), *Changing minds in higher education: Students change, so why can't colleges?*, "Planning for Higher Education", V. 37, n. 1, pp. 15-22

Wenger Etienne (1998), *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*, New York, NY, USA, Cambridge University Press

Sintesi

La ricerca qualitativa condotta presso il Levinsky College of Education sviluppa un modello di apprendimento collaborativo in grado di promuovere efficacemente l'obiettivo del cambiamento all'interno dei sistemi educativi, grazie alla piena valorizzazione delle interrelazioni reciproche fra leadership e apprendimento.
Essa elabora, più precisamente, un tipo di leadership collaborativa imperniato sull'apprendimento e su pratiche rispettose della società, in contesti educativi volti esplicitamente al cambiamento, i quali adottano una logica plurale ed inclusiva di partenariato diffuso.
L'indagine etnografica passa in rassegna una ricca gamma di punti di vista che, a proposito dei due nodi essenziali, la leadership e l'apprendimento, esprimono rispettivamente gli insegnanti principianti, gli insegnanti mentori, gli insegnanti degli insegnanti, i sovrintendenti distrettuali. E, grazie all'analisi teorica preliminare, disegna un apprendimento collaborativo multi-livello.
*È infatti ormai universalmente acquisita la necessità dell'**apprendimento permanente** quale parte integrante della professione docente, in tutte le fasi del suo sviluppo e in tutte le sue declinazioni, come pure dell'**apprendimento intraorganizzativo**.*

*Un vero cambiamento sistemico, finalizzato alla sostenibilità dell'apprendimento nel lungo periodo, esige tuttavia un **apprendimento collaborativo interorganizzativo**, ibrido e trasversale, con vaste aree sovrapposte ed intersecantisi, capace di estendere e consolidare le connessioni fra le organizzazioni e di stimolare la costruzione di reti di comunità di pratica.*

Il modello collaborativo proposto da Ilana Margolin interessa i leader a tutti i livelli del sistema educativo, che vengono così spinti ad oltrepassare fruttuosamente i confini delle proprie sfere di competenza: il livello scolastico locale, il livello distrettuale e quello della preparazione dei docenti.

Il dialogo continuo e il metodo esplorativo hanno permesso di mettere a punto un linguaggio comune, condiviso sia dai decisori politici che dai professionisti del settore, una comunicazione multidirezionale, messaggi coerenti e strategie accuratamente ponderate, risultato di approfondimenti successivi; e hanno condotto ad un tipo innovativo di leadership distribuita.

Sono state quindi individuate quattro categorie di apprendimento, ritenute determinanti per rinnovare stabilmente lo scenario educativo: l'apprendimento nell'ambito delle comunità professionali; l'apprendimento frutto della pratica; l'apprendimento frutto della ricerca teorica; l'apprendimento ottenuto da e con i leader.

Lo studio israeliano conclude che per il successo di un cambiamento sistemico, radicale, dell'ambiente educativo è cruciale l'adozione di una prospettiva olistica. Essa garantisce una mescolanza armoniosa e ben equilibrata delle componenti più distanti ed eterogenee, di teoria e prassi: in tal modo, la lente critica e speculativa degli insegnanti degli insegnanti bilancia l'ottica pratica e decisionale dei sovrintendenti distrettuali; e, dato che tutti i programmi s'influenzano vicendevolmente, le partnership fra le scuole e le sovrintendenze contribuiscono sia all'ampiezza di respiro che alla profondità dell'apprendimento.

Questo nuovo modello olistico di collaborazione intersettoriale richiede, da un lato, l'istituzione di comunità professionali di apprendimento composte di leader provenienti da tutti i livelli del sistema educativo; dall'altro, la creazione di un'agenda collettiva di lungo termine, che integri, nella risoluzione dei problemi, le visioni top-down e bottom-up, grazie al confronto ininterrotto fra tutti gli stakeholder.

Risulta infine indispensabile, da parte di tutti i partner, la pianificazione di un unico progetto globale di apprendimento collaborativo destinato a tutte le professionalità coinvolte nell'insegnamento, dai docenti veri e propri fino ai sovrintendenti e agli amministratori distrettuali, a cominciare dai programmi precedenti l'entrata in servizio per tutta la durata della loro carriera.