LEARNING TO SHARE, SHARING TO LEARN: A CASE STUDY OF THE ENACTMENT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN AN AUSTRALIAN SPECIALIST SCHOOL

Sheridan Kerr

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Abstract

This thesis presents a case study of school improvement in *Correa Park School*, an Australian specialist school for students with disability. The study sought an in-depth understanding regarding the processes of school improvement from July 2011 to December 2012, as the school *learned to share* and *shared to learn*.

The aims of the study were threefold. First, it sought to describe the distinctive context of a specialist (as opposed to mainstream) school through identifying the affordances and constraints that affected school improvement. The second aim was to examine the learning trajectories of school staff and how they interrelated with accountability and staff culture. Finally, this study sought to clarify school improvement processes in Correa Park, thus developing a conceptualisation of a differentiated approach to school improvement in a non-mainstream context.

The study adopted a situative perspective which views learning is an integral aspect of activity and conceptualises learning as changes in participation in activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situativity emphasises that context is intrinsic to learning, and that the goal of learning is increased participation in a community of learners (Greeno, 1997).

A case study was chosen for the current investigation as it is well-suited to examining the context of contemporary human phenomena with a wide range of variables (Gillham, 2000). There were multiple data sources utilised within the current research. Staff interviews and professional learning evaluations were the primary data sources, and school documents were used as secondary data sources. Data analysis was conducted with NVivo 10 software (QSR International) in an iterative process using segmenting and metadata activities.

The findings showed that school improvement in Correa Park relied on the development of collaborative staff culture and collective accountability. The establishment of shared practices, shared discourse and shared artefacts were a vital step within school improvement processes, overcoming the pervasive constraint of individualisation. The study identified that many school improvement resources had to be adapted from mainstream contexts before they could suit the contextual demands in Correa Park School. This finding suggests that specialist schools may require either extra resourcing to enact school improvement, or need to be

adequately linked with similar specialist schools in order to share both the pedagogical and human resources required for school improvement.

This research is significant because it contributes to the limited base of theoretical and empirical data relating to the enacting of school improvement in a specialist school. It explores the distinctive context of a specialist school, and provides a differentiated model of school improvement based on accountability and staff culture. The development of strong internal accountability may assist specialist schools (whose students may not be well suited to national standardised testing) to address certain difficulties in demonstrating strong external accountability. The insights of the current research are facilitated by a situated perspective of school improvement that allows multiple simultaneous perspectives on staff learning and their context. Finally, the study offers an explanatory model of school improvement in a specialist school which gives a cumulative overview of the processes which underlie the observed changes. The model may be used by Correa Park staff to reflect and prepare for future endeavours, or for policymakers, school executive teams and school staff within other specialist school contexts who are interested in understanding the enactment of school improvement in their own contexts.

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Dedication

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Abbreviations

AAC	Alternative and Augmentative Communication
CCN	Complex Communication Needs
CVB	Core Vocabulary Board (used in the school's AAC system)
FVB	Fringe Vocabulary Booklet (used in the school's AAC system)
ILPs	Individual Learning Plans (also known as Individual Education Plans)
LSA	Learning Support Assistant (also known as teacher's aide)
NSWDET	New South Wales Department of Education and Training
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge
PL	Professional Learning
PLC	Professional Learning Community
QT	Quality Teaching
SET	School Executive Team
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time based
TLC	Teaching and Learning Cycle