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Strategic Management as Key to Improve the Quality of Education

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Abstract

During the last decade education systems have been undergoing a long process of restructuring from a model of educational management that was deeply rooted in the past to a strategic management model that is focused on the future. The present study aims to make a contribution in this direction. Firstly, we review the current scenario of change, and explore sustainable improvement in education as priority objective in educational management, making it clear that the most significant changes are those that are focused on improvement and on the educational establishment itself. Secondly, after finding that at both national and international level there is a growing consensus in the research about the existence of certain key elements that are necessary in order to achieve this improvement – these being strategic educational management and effective educational leadership – we describe the distinctive characteristics and the main components of this type of management in education. The paper ends with several implications for improving educational practice. In particular, some basic competences for the professionalization of educational management are outlined.

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1. Introduction

Throughout history it has been repeatedly demonstrated that those changes and innovations that are driven by government bodies with responsibility for education rarely succeed. Perhaps one of the key reasons for this is that the needs and interests of each individual learning institution – be it school, college or university – have not been taken into account, nor those of teaching staff. More recently, in view of this lack of success, there has been something of a change in the way in which innovation is approached. The need for dialogue between the educational institution and society is now starting to be recognized, taking into account the particular context for innovation within each institution and acknowledging that they need to act democratically, with participation and collaboration from society. There is thus a move away from innovation being tied to sweeping institutional reform, and a move towards a relationship between innovation, the professional development of teaching staff, and the learning processes of students.

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In other words, the focus is shifting towards the particular characteristics and needs of the educational establishment. According to Bolívar and Domingo (2007), any innovation that does not impact positively on the quality of students’ learning can hardly be deemed to be a success.

In this respect there is growing consensus, both in Spain and also internationally, regarding one particular key factor in achieving sustainable improvement in education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), namely the strategic management of learning, together with effective educational leadership (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). The present work seeks to analyze these issues.

2. Sustainable improvement as a key aim of educational management

The processes associated with teaching and classroom learning should be at the heart of any call for change or innovation, as ultimately it is what the teaching staff deliver in the classroom that makes the difference in the learning outcomes of students. As outlined by Riley, Heneveld and Harris (2002), research has shown that attempts to achieve educational improvement need to be based on the institution’s teaching and learning processes as these two factors are central to both generating and also to sustaining improvements.

The combined efforts of all those working in the educational institution should be focused on supporting these two aspects. It makes little sense to place the emphasis on organizational or curricular change processes if these are not going to make a positive impact on classroom teaching practices. According to Elmore (2002), the central aim of these processes has to be the achievement of significant improvement in learning for all students.

In light of the above, and assuming that educational quality is the key determinant of educational outcomes, we outline in the diagram below some of the key ingredients that, according to Brophy (2007), contribute to making lasting improvements – in other words, that improve the effectiveness of classroom teaching.

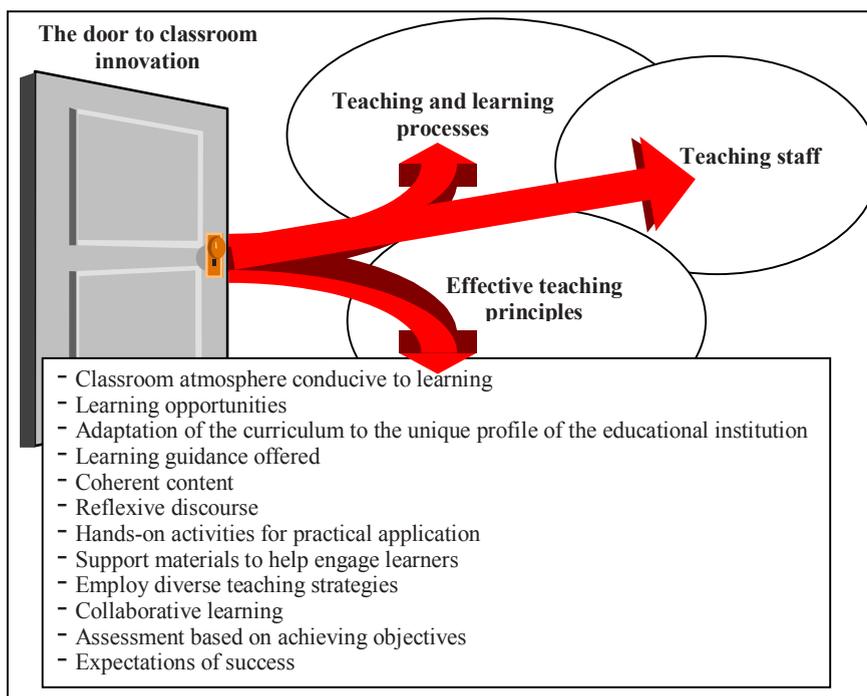


Figure 1. The door to classroom innovation: effective teaching principles

In addition to the above factors, research into educational improvement – which considers the educational establishment itself as the locus for change (Escudero, 1991) – affirms that educational improvement rests on the capacity of the institution and its teaching staff to manage, make decisions and generate innovations that respond to the challenges of their educational practices. Hence the strategic management model is so important.

3. Strategic management: Characterizing features and key components

Research into change in the context of educational improvement has clarified the nature and reach of an *effective management model* for achieving the desired improvements in an educational setting. In this approach, fresh *management thinking and practices* form the basis of that improvement. These issues remain at the centre of a far-reaching debate, with opinions appearing to veer towards a strategic management model with pedagogical leadership (Bolívar & Moreno, 2006).

Nowadays it is widely accepted that the fundamental task underlying the redesign of educational institutions is to resolve the dissociation that exists between the strictly pedagogical and the more generically organizational. According to Pozner (2000), this involves acknowledging that successful educational transformation stems from integrated strategic management. Only deep-seated change in educational working practices will bring the education system up to the optimum level for progress towards the strategic objectives that currently prove so challenging, these being: quality; equality; fitness-for-purpose of the curriculum; and greater professionalism in teaching.

Strategic educational management embraces numerous aspects of the education system. Rendón (2009) distinguishes several of its components as an aide to understanding, together with a series of factors and fundamental competencies that underpin it.

With this in mind, it is helpful to examine the basic characteristics and components of this strategic management model. With regard to its characterizing features, the specialist literature reflects the following:

- a. *The core nature of pedagogy.* The educational institution itself is the organizational cornerstone of the education system, and, as such, it is within the institution that pedagogical issues need to be addressed.
- b. *Skills for dealing with complexity.* The capacity of all of the institution's personnel to work effectively with external teams and networks in order to generate shared projects is key.
- c. *Teamwork.* Collaboration becomes the expression of a culture that is geared to providing a shared vision of where the institution wants to get to and of the educational principles that are being pursued. It also provides teaching staff with tools that contribute to their teaching practice and help keep motivation high. Collaborative working in the educational context is based on processes that facilitate shared understanding, and promote joint planning, action and reflection regarding what needs doing and how it needs to be done.
- d. *Openness to learning and innovation.* The mission of educational management is to build an 'intelligent' organisation that is open to learning from all of its stakeholders and that has the capacity to experiment and innovate in the pursuit of its objectives. This involves breaking down underlying barriers such as fear and inertia and fostering clarity of goals whilst highlighting the need for change and improvement.
- e. *Advice and guidance.* Support for teaching staff, to enable them to address issues and identify specific solutions to challenges that arise in the teaching process, is vital.
- f. *An organizational culture bound together by a clear vision for the future.* The aim here is to look to the future and the challenges it may bring by clarifying objectives, generating consensus, and identifying goals, with a view to achieving not only coherence but also a spirit of entrepreneurship and creativity. It is essential that the entire educational community re-engages with its thirst for learning, given the current climate of change in the sector.
- g. *Strategic systemic interventions.* Strategic planning refers to the combined processes of design, development and ongoing maintenance and monitoring of an action or set of actions, that links the institution's aims and competences with demands and opportunities. This action or intervention can be considered to be systemic if it embraces the organisation in its entirety, its inter-relationships, and its aims and objectives, as well as linking with the organization's many different contexts.

As regards the components of strategic educational management, there appear to be three key ingredients: systemic strategic thinking, organizational learning and pedagogical leadership. As many different studies have affirmed in recent decades, the creation of effective educational establishments requires pedagogical leaders who maintain a focus on teaching and training processes and who act as change agents to drive continuous improvement in their respective organizations (Bolívar & Moreno, 2006; Gairín & Muñoz, 2008; Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991). The role and reach of effective educational leadership is recognized as being indispensable and a decisive factor in educational improvement. Evidence-based research on this question clearly identifies the positive role played by this type of leadership in harnessing the efforts of all those involved in educational improvement at every level.

4. Implications for improving educational practice

There is no longer any debate regarding the fate of any attempt to make improvements in education: its success or failure will be decided within the institution itself and the teaching therein, and this, in turn, depends on the quality of pedagogical leadership and the performance of those in leadership roles. The Head of the institution and its senior management team are regarded as having an increasingly important role to play in the management of that institution and its results. Responding to the current need for effective management demands of these professionals that they commit to broadening their competences in order to devise new interventions and innovations in the pursuit of greater educational quality. The core competences in the professionalization of education management are:

- *The ability to relate well to others and to foster effective co-working in the educational setting*, based on building cooperative, productive relationships that support the improvement of educational services.
- *Competencies geared towards achieving high-quality results*, such as continuing development for teaching staff. This ensures that the capacity of the institution in matters of curricular management and pedagogy is adequately developed.
- *Institutional and strategic competencies* that enable leadership capacity to be developed. This, in turn, generates a strategic vision of the educational institution, and ensures that new projects are effectively launched and managed.

These competences can be considered as fundamental to the training of senior managers in educational institutions (Concha, 2007). They may also be regarded as institutional indicators of improvement in education management and quality (Valenzuela, Ramírez, & Alfaro, 2009).

5. Conclusions

Educational institutions need management systems in place that are capable of controlling the outcomes of their strategies effectively and efficiently. Just as in the business realm, the education sector must apply structured methods for providing strategic support.

In order to fulfill the organization's mission, the current educational management model in many countries needs to undergo a series of changes, to reflect more closely the competencies and characteristics outlined above. A new management model is required, based on: significant decision-making capacity; leadership that is not solely focused on one single leader but rather is shared across the organisation; teamwork; and strategic planning – all driving forward the innovation agenda in education.

If this transformation could be brought about, it would enable – in the medium term – improvements to be made in the quality of education, and would bring different institutions into line with each other in terms of quality and competence. This would also, in turn, help enhance society's appreciation of the value and relevance of the education system overall.

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