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The Role of Subject Associations in Leadership

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Abstract

There is little research regarding subject associations though they have existed and contributed to education since Victorian times. Many jurisdictions report having many subject associations that share characteristic activities of conferences, workshops, publishing, and curriculum supports. These often foster grassroots leadership development that can, but do not have to, interact with formal school board defined leadership hierarchies. This article considers how subject associations fit with different theories of leadership including hierarchal and instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership. Difficulties with existing models of leadership are clarified and suggest issues suited to systematic research.

Keywords: subject associations, leadership development, influence processes, new professionalism

In education, *subject associations* are groups of teachers with a shared interest related to a particular subject. There is a scarcity of research about these organizations and the role they play within education. This editorial argues that they facilitate grassroots leadership experiences that provide professional learning for educators.

Within Ontario, teaching is a profession where the professional body describes subject associations as:

Subject associations play a vital role in education. They offer conferences, workshops, newsletters, and an array of learning resources. The associations publish journals, attend ministry meetings and provide teachers with news and information about the curriculum related to their subject areas. (OCT, n.d., p. 1)

The defining features of subject associations carry common international themes. They provide a network of expertise working toward the “advancement of knowledge and teaching in the subject” (Amadioha, 2008, p. 113). The Council for Subject Associations (CfSA) in the United Kingdom describes them as “independent of Government, often charities and their mission is to further teaching and learning in a specific subject in schools, colleges and ITE [(Initial Teacher Education)] in universities” (CfSA, n.d.). The charitable status may vary, but Padwad (2016) points to “soft promotion” (p. 164) that tends to be word of mouth rather than systemic. They may also engage in advocacy (Keogh, 2019; Stewart & Miyahara, 2016; White et al., 2015) and “small innovative projects” (Padwad, 2016; Younie et al., 2018).

The number of subject associations differs by jurisdiction, with 30 organizations in the United Kingdom (CfSA, n.d.), New Zealand has 40 (PPTA, 2021), and Japan has more than 50 (Stewart & Miyahara, 2016). There are currently 42 in Ontario (OSSTF, 2021), Canada, where education has provincial governance. The Ontario subject associations meet at the Ontario Teachers’ Federation Curriculum Forum that has occurred since 1981 (I. Pettigrew, personal communication, Oct. 26, 2021). The number of associations is relatively stable, with 44 reported in 1998 (Habs, 1998). It seems likely that the number is approximately 50, with varying communication with organizations that report lists of associations. It is also notable that mergers (Fredette, 1999; Anonymous, 1973) of organizations periodically alter the numbers and that historically subject associations go back to Victorian times (Pope, 2012).

Subject associations often have longevity within the membership (Habs, 1998; Padwad, 2016) that provides a strong memory that serves as supporting expertise. The subject orientation aligns the associations parallel to curriculum structures that are also defined by the subject (Knight, 1996). However, the associations are not responsible for curriculum development, and while they

may be consulted for their expertise, the relationship is demonstrative of associations providing networking and mobilizing knowledge without a central defining mandate.

Common events with subject associations include conferences, workshops (Habs, 1998; Padwad, 2016; Paran, 2016; Stewart & Miyahara, 2016), and “delivery of curriculum” (Knight, 1996, p. 272). There is typically a system of publishing, whether newsletters or formal publications (Habs, 1998; Knight, 1996; Padwad, 2016; Stewart & Miyahara, 2016), which provide a variety of professional supports, such as news, book reviews, and curriculum support.

Leadership Development

Subject associations are involved in educational leadership (OCT, 2016) as independent organizations. However, education theories of leadership are typically oriented to school and school board settings (Spillane et al., 2004) with a power structure defined by workplace roles. The theories facilitate discussion of leadership dimensions in subject associations but have to be interpreted beyond the school setting.

The leadership role of subject associations is considered in three distinct ways: their internal leadership, their external distributed leadership, and the overall role in broad educational leadership. I will draw on personal experience with the Ontario Association for Mathematics Education (OAME) where I have been involved for over a decade and held a variety of roles, including the president, vice-president, director, and editor. The OAME was formed in 1973 as the merger of two organizations with histories going back to the 1800s. It is a fully developed organization that has all the features mentioned in the literature and is representative of the capacity of subject associations in a leadership role.

Internal Leadership

The internal leadership of the OAME is unicameral governance with a hierarchal structure defined by a constitution, by-laws, and terms of reference. The hierarchy has members in 14 geographically defined chapters and one purposefully defined chapter for independent schools. The chapters belong to the provincial organization that has a board of directors that includes elected and appointed provincial leaders and representation from each chapter. The provincial leadership includes an executive committee and executive directors. This form of hierarchal leadership, albeit democratic, parallels the concept of instructional leadership (Daniels et al., 2019). Specially, it includes defining the organizational mission, managing the activities of the leadership within the organization, and developing the organizational learning climate.

The interpretation also includes managerial aspects of the organization. A characterization of the internal operation of subject associations is “the absence of a clear distinction between leadership (associated with vision and goals, policy-making, strategic planning, etc.) and management (associated with administration, executing plans, monitoring, etc.)” (Padwad, 2016, p. 166). So, whereas instructional leadership is centered around the principal (Daniels et al., 2019), subject associations have lean management akin to management aspects of a principal.

A second form of leadership evident in subject associations is transformational leadership (Daniels et al., 2019). It arises through the engagement and empowerment of members in the leadership of events and the organization. This offers a range of opportunities, whether running a workshop, presenting at a conference, publishing classroom informed pedagogy, or involvement in organizing events—and it is not uncommon for first leadership experiences to be attributed to

subject associations. With ongoing engagement, members can grow into organizational decision-making because subject association fosters leadership capacity-building.

External Leadership

The academic literature says subject associations are often consulted because of their subject expertise (Amadioha, 2008; Habs, 1998). This may include curriculum consultations as well as other subject-related matters. However, little is said about the connectivity of subject associations with teachers more generally. The organizations foster transformational leadership, but it is not an exclusive relationship; members often use their developing skills beyond the scope of the subject association.

While there is “no agreed definition of distributed leadership” (Daniels et al., 2019, p. 115), it is a model that fits in this case. Members of subject associations are not restricted by their formal leadership role in the association and are free to interact beyond the subject association in a leadership capacity (“informal leadership,” Spillane et al., 2004, p. 16). For example, a member who learns a particular teaching technique through the association might well use it in their classroom and subsequently present it based on their experience within their school board setting. This highlights the concepts of task distribution and influence processes (Daniels et al., 2019) that can also be described as mobilizing professional knowledge from a network of subject expertise to the school board context. Consistent with defining features of distributed leadership, this is a bottom-up approach that entails professional collaboration and multiple leaders. It highlights distributed cognition through the association in combination with activity theory through the variety of events provided, which are foundational to distributed leadership (Spillane, 2004). The infusion of subject-specific expertise into the workplace is also distributed in the sense

that it extends beyond the knowledge and skill set of the principal in the subject area (DeMatthews, 2014).

Overall Leadership

Keay and Lloyd (2009) describe subject associations as having *new professionalism*. This is characterized by being inclusive, having a public set of standards, being collaborative and collegial, self-regulatory, policy actions, and oriented toward building knowledge. They call this democratic in contrast to managerial. This seems to be broadly true, but in some international cases the distinction is blurred. In Russia, for example, the formation of associations is aided by school administration but is viewed as voluntary and suited to “middle leaders” (Merenkov, 2019, p. 70).

Engagement in subject associations provides professional development through discourse. The practice of discussing, debating, clarifying, etc., that occurs while engaging in association activities is the training necessary for leadership. In a practitioner setting, it provides the capacity for leadership without obligation, and some individuals invariably use that capacity within their school or school board. Unlike formal leadership with defined positions, the autonomy inherent in subject associations is important during leadership development when teachers are balancing their work with other aspects of their lives.

There are differences between what is considered by subject associations and academics (Smith & Kuchah, 2016). This is often portrayed as an academic and practitioner divide where the former is seen as oriented to academic research and the latter toward applied resolution of instructional issues. However, “academics who identify with [teacher associations] can provide useful expertise for research work within them” (Smith & Kuchah, 2016, p. 214).

Subject associations provide a means to gain different types of leadership skills. Often this begins with distributed leadership, which may become transformational leadership, and, for

some members, instructional leadership. The skills, however, migrate from the subject association to the member's teaching or board role.

Leadership Challenges

A theoretical issue arises with the concept of situational leadership when an individual is engaged in leadership in an educational setting and a subject association. Where theories focus on school settings, they do not include both aspects of the individual's leadership situation. In this respect, the theory may have difficulties through omission. This is further challenged by the problem of recognizing the emergence of grassroots leadership capacity when it is considered to be "informal leadership" (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 16).

Distributed leadership has conceptual difficulties around power dynamics (Corrigan, 2013), which seems to neglect considerations that power may yield benefits in multiple ways. Teachers engage in subject associations because of their empowerment. Within their classrooms, this yields personal benefits of instructional expertise. While expertise provides an opportunity for grassroots leadership, the associated personal power is not the same as hierarchal power defined through administrative roles within a school board. Thus the notion of power appears to be confounded within the theoretical concept of distributed leadership.

There are issues around the acceptance of subject associations in terms of normative leadership practices. Firstly, engagement in a subject association does not ensure leadership qualities because some members of associations wish to be "informed without informing" (Knight, 1996, p. 274). This unfortunately aligns with schools and school boards not necessarily having leadership opportunities that will reveal emerging leaders. For example, many professional development events that I experienced as a teacher were organized centrally. Teachers had no opportunities to propose leading a workshop (albeit I had presented through the OAME). A similar,

though distinct, issue arises where engagement in grassroots leadership does not necessarily lead to administrative opportunities in schools (Merenkov et al., 2019).

Second, there is a challenge, perhaps unique to Canada, where education is controlled provincially, which is awkward for academics where a condition for promotion is engagement on a national level. This disincentive is reciprocated when “learned societies” that are typically national “have an education committee, [who do] not concern themselves with the teaching of the subject in school” (Pope, 2012, p. 14).

Finally, subject associations are not necessarily representative of the teacher population (Paran, 2016). They are voluntary and may only attract teachers with a particular sense of professionalism. Alternatively, it may be that they can only engage a relatively small number of teachers in their activities, and that constrains their overall numbers.

Conclusion

Subject associations contribute to grassroots leadership development within education. However, the existing theories of leadership require interpretation to clarify their role. While I have offered an interpretation, other interpretations might be available. This speaks to a larger issue that there is little research regarding subject associations (Smith & Kuchah, 2016). Perhaps, however, the position taken highlights some of the issues that might be addressed using systematic research methods.

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