Mathematics Leaders as Agents of Project Sustainability

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Many schools participate in projects which are facilitated and supported by university mathematics educators and education department staff. Little is known, however, about what happens when project participation comes to an end. It is also unclear how mathematics leaders, as middle leaders in schools, influence project sustainability. The following research question was posed in response to this situation: *How do mathematics leaders contribute to project sustainability through their post-project leadership activity as middle leaders in schools?*

Using a research design informed by cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), data were generated with three primary school mathematics leaders who participated in a large-scale mathematics project in Melbourne in 2011 and 2012. Data generation from 2014 to 2018 included interviews, observations, and artefact collection. Analysis focused on understanding the leaders' actions, including adapted and adopted use of resources and rules, and how labour processes were distributed as the mathematics leaders sustained project-initiated reforms.

Six leadership actions were identified and explained through the lens of the specialised form of the CHAT-aligned activity called *resourceful practice* (Edwards, 2010). These were:

- *Committing to sustaining project-initiated reforms:* Leaders committed to reforms by focusing on "what mattered" which was improving student learning by maintaining enactment of project-initiated teaching practices and routines, and project resource use.
- *Influencing principals to maintain mathematics planning meetings:* Leaders persuaded principals to maintain facilitated planning meetings as an enduring school routine, recognising that those meetings with teachers were essential for sustaining project-driven changes, allowing the leaders to focus on "what mattered".
- *Co-opting facilitated planning meetings as professional learning opportunities:* Leaders repurposed facilitated planning meetings, using them as the main mode of teacher professional learning (PL) in response to reduced PL opportunities.
- *Repurposing project resources as sustainability tools:* Leaders attributed new meaning to project resources (e.g., mathematics tasks), extending upon their use to not only support planning and teaching but also to sustain project-initiated reforms.
- *Using student assessment data as a convincing tool:* Leaders repurposed student data, using it not only to inform planning, but also to persuade teachers to continue using teaching practices and resources learnt during project participation.
- *Seeking support from external mathematics educators*: Leaders sought assistance from mathematics educators outside their schools, proactively building supportive relationships to compensate for diminished district and principal support.

This paper contributes new knowledge about project sustainability and how mathematics leaders acted as *agents of project sustainability*. It also highlights how mathematics leadership acted as a key element of school leadership, previously focused mostly on principal leadership.

References

Edwards. A. (2010). *Being an expert professional practitioner: The relational turn in expertise.* Springer.