

Fostering teachers' understanding of leadership through a programme of professional learning

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Abstract

This article examines the implementation of a programme of professional learning, designed to support understanding of school leadership in a school that sought to effect change through teachers' professional learning. Working with a university-based tutor who adopted a responsive approach, participants shaped the programme over a seven-month period. The evidence is presented from teachers' reflections on leadership, observations of the sessions, and post-programme interviews. The evidence is presented under six themes, which emerged through an iterative process of content analysis, as follows: the individual versus community; relationships; culture; reflection; emotions; and impact/action. Participants indicated their understanding of leadership had evolved over the course of the programme. This led to a more collegiate and collaborative approach being welcomed, where leadership at all levels was valued. They considered that this was achieved largely through having opportunities to engage in professional dialogue with peers, which was normally seen as difficult given day-to-day priorities.

Keywords: leadership; professional learning; teachers' professional development

An expansive concept of leadership (Mowat & McMahon 2019) is seen as a key dimension of teacher professionalism in current educational discourse where the prevailing policy

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agenda is one in which educational change and school improvement are seen as priorities (Clark & Hollingsworth 2002, Kennedy & Beck 2018). It is widely accepted that teachers change through engaging in professional activity. In other words, teachers are themselves, in an important sense, learners. Supporting professional learning in the area of leadership therefore becomes an important challenge. If teachers have freedom to explore their understanding of leadership in their specific contexts it will facilitate communication, vision, action and policy enactment. The policy context for the present study is one in which school improvement is seen as a stimulus for professional learning.

Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) criticise policy implementation when a top-down model is adopted, arguing that a policy written by government and handed to schools to be translated and implemented is far too simplistic, especially considering the complex contexts, cultures, relationships and internal politics of schools. Instead, they propose that policy is ‘enacted’, a more complex notion. This goes beyond the implementation of the written word, the performance of policy directives. Rather, they are concerned with how sense is made of policy at the local level. Trowler (2003), in common with Ball *et al.* (2012), argues that language such as ‘policy implementation’ is too simplistic as it supposes a defined process whereby teachers uncritically follow the policy directive. In practice, the act of policy interpretation is a compromise. Through this process, policy is often changed when practitioners engage with policy in autonomously, leading to positive change in their attitudes. Engagement with the likes of academic literature and programmes designed to support teachers’ learning and practice may facilitate the move towards a notion of ‘collective’ leadership within a particular institution or organisation, as opposed to one performed by the individual (Mowat & McMahon 2019). Ultimately, it is anticipated that such an approach which facilitates teachers’ autonomy will impact upon practice and the culture of the educational settings in which practitioners work. The present study, although

situated in Scotland, offers some considerations for those developing leadership programmes for teachers with a range of experience and expertise.

The Scottish leadership context

As McMahon (2018) notes, Scotland has undergone two decades of educational reform resulting in major shifts in policy and practice with significant implications for teachers and schools. One of the drivers of this reform was the major review of teacher education in Scotland resulting in the publication of *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Donaldson 2011). This report led to a raft of changes and challenges in the re-conceptualisation of the teaching profession in Scotland. In addition to recommending a new suite of teaching standards to support teachers' career-long professional learning (CLPL) (General Teaching Council for Scotland 2012), Donaldson's final recommendation gives some indication of the positioning of leadership in the Scottish teaching profession, with a reference to developing leadership 'at all levels' (Donaldson 2011: 101). Emerging from the extensive implementation discussions following the publication of *Teaching Scotland's Future*, there was a clear vision of the expectations placed on teachers in terms of leadership; these being, the ability not only to lead the learning of their pupils, but also to lead other colleagues in school improvement and development processes, all of which are conceived as an intrinsic component of the overarching National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education (Scottish Government, 2019). It is worth noting that in Scotland the emphasis is on leadership at all levels as opposed to more hierarchical models of school management. Indeed, there is a strong view in Scottish education that children and young people themselves should be leaders of their own learning (Children in Scotland, 2014). Collaborative processes are also encouraged in the Scottish policy context and prevailing educational culture, including, for example, the strong tradition of school self-evaluation and a culture of self-improvement as opposed to external inspection and accountability (Education Scotland, 2015)

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The Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) was established with Scottish Government funding (as a virtual college) to implement this vision by supporting teachers' and early years practitioners' professional learning in leadership. The mission statement of SCEL states clearly that every teacher has a leadership role to play (SCEL 2019). More recent policy influences come from the publication of the school inspection framework, *How Good Is Our School 4?* (Education Scotland 2015). The framework's quality indicators provide expectations that schools demonstrate collaborative leadership across all levels of the organisation. Subsequently, the delivery plans for the National Improvement Framework (Scottish Government 2016) reiterate that leadership roles do not need to be formal appointments, but that leadership responsibility is an expectation of all teachers (Scottish Government 2019). The importance of teacher leadership is embedded in the professional standards for the teaching profession in Scotland. The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) (2012) defines leadership as the ability to:

develop a vision for change, which leads to improvements in outcomes for learners and is based on shared values and robust evaluation of evidence of current practice and outcomes; and

mobilise, enable and support others to develop and follow through on strategies for achieving that change.

Leadership preparation

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008) report, *Improving School Leadership*, explores the content and impact of leadership preparation courses across twenty-two education systems. According to the OECD study, there is no definitive leadership curriculum; content of courses should be developed with the context and needs of the aspirant leader in mind. The World Innovation Summit for Education concludes

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its report on leadership preparation courses with the guidance that they must be ‘embedded’, ‘personal’, and ‘continuous’ (Breakspear, Peterson, Alfadala, Khair 2017: 79), an approach that resonates well with Scottish policy. Indeed, the Scottish model for teachers’ professional development has moved from the traditional continuing professional development to one of ‘professional learning’ (Kennedy & Beck 2018: 847). Bush (2009) agrees with this focus on the individual rather than the need for a prescriptive curriculum, suggesting that mentoring and coaching are key aspects to any successful leadership preparation and development. This is echoed by the likes of Reyes-Guerra (2016) and Orr and Orphanos (2011) who suggest that a form of internship offers the best impact in terms of the development of the individual as a leader. That said, teachers do not work in isolation, and if the notion of leadership ‘at all levels’ is to be successful, then programmes to support this goal must be carefully crafted to respond to individual needs while addressing the goals of a particular institution or wider context.

Indeed, Forde, McMahon and Dickson (2011) recognise that there are challenges in leadership programmes designed in terms of balancing individuals’ needs against those of the organisation or wider policy imperative. This requires a range of opportunities, positioning leaders as learners, to allow engagement on a personal and collaborative basis, thereby ensuring reflection supports practice (Aas 2017). Of course, as Aas makes clear there is a balance to be struck between achieving the aims of a particular school or individual and driving policy and practice change when determining a programme of professional development for leaders. The GTCS model of professional learning is one that aims to encourage teachers to ‘consider how they might develop their professional values and dispositions, their knowledge, skills and understanding through on-going critical self-evaluation and professional learning’ (GTCS, <https://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-update/professional-learning/professional-learning.aspx>). This model encourages critical self-

reflection, but it also aims to promote collaboration amongst teachers (Kennedy & Beck 2018).

Working together allows teachers to develop shared goals to create useful knowledge by reflecting upon prior knowledge and practice. Engeström and Sannino (2010) describe this type of learning as ‘expansion’, with questioning playing a central role in the activity.

Creating a culture for collaborative dialogue around questions and ideas is important in designing a leadership programme (Dogan *et al.* 2019). In their work, Dogan *et al.* focus on setting agendas to ensure purposeful meetings with collaborative dialogue at their heart.

They discuss establishing professional learning communities to bring practitioners together to reflect upon key ideas, values and practices. The notion of community is an important one, as seen in the likes of Wenger’s (1998) *Communities of Practice* or *Communities of Educational Enquiry* (Cassidy *et al.* 2008). ‘Community’ suggests an interdependence, a way of working that requires collaboration and shared goals. Although teachers may work within the same school and be expected to implement the same policies while working with the same colleagues and pupils, they may not come into contact regularly with one another on an intellectual or emotional level. Community recognises this shared element. In fact, Cassidy *et al.*’s work, acknowledges that community reaches beyond the school to create connections and relationships between practitioners, policy makers and academics.

With this in mind, the present article focuses on the impact of a collaborative leadership programme on a group of teachers’ understanding of leadership. The teachers undertaking the programme came from one school and aspired to lead in order to effect change. The actual impact of the programme on practice is still under review. It is anticipated that responses to the programme will help others developing leadership learning and development programmes. To that end, the question driving the study was: How does a responsive programme of professional learning shape the way in which teachers view leadership?

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Methods

This study was located in an urban secondary school in Scotland in a relatively economically deprived area, as indicated by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (<https://simd.scot/#/simd2020/BTTTTFTT/9/-4.0000/55.9000/>). Its roll is slightly above the national average of 783 (Smith, 2018). Approximately 90% of the school's pupils live in Scotland's most deprived quintile. The leadership programme described in this study was part of a whole school initiative to lead for effective change. It was developed collaboratively between the project leader and participating teachers. During the initial planning stages, teachers identified a need for additional support with leadership development, but expressed disappointment with traditional, 'top-down' forms of continuing professional development (CPD). Therefore, the programme and the individual sessions were tailored to the teachers' interests and priorities, taking into consideration the unique environment in which they work and acknowledging the shift in Scotland from this traditional CPD model to career-long professional learning (CLPL).

The collaborative CLPL model can encompass various approaches, from informal learning amongst colleagues to more formal, structured 'communities of enquiry' or 'learning communities' (Kennedy 2011). Collaborative CLPL interventions encourage shared learning between teachers on a sustained basis. Research on teacher CPD/CLPL indicates that the collaborative approach leads to better outcomes than traditional, 'bureaucratic' approaches as it acknowledges the importance of teacher agency and encourages active participation in the design and delivery of development programmes (Fraser *et al.* 2007).

Twelve teachers enrolled in the leadership programme. All had volunteered for the programme or been nominated by a colleague to attend. Participating teachers came from different career stages. This included teachers relatively new to the profession and teachers

with many years of experience. Six of the twelve carried formal roles of responsibility within the school at Principal Teacher/Head of Department level. All had an interest in improving their leadership skills, either to develop in their current roles or to prepare for future leadership roles. All participants volunteered for the programme, though the headteacher invited some individuals with designated leadership roles to take up the opportunity to participate.

The sessions

The leadership programme consisted of seven sessions over a seven-month period. Sessions were held in the school, with each session lasting between an hour and a half and two hours at the end of the school day. The session topics included distributed leadership, motivation, school improvement, and emotional intelligence. The topics were chosen by the participants, in collaboration with the programme leader, who prepared a presentation and selected readings in the form of academic journal articles for each session. Participants were expected to complete the readings in advance of each session to participate in discussion on the session topic each week.

Data collection

At the first session, all teachers completed a series of individual written activities that asked them:

1. To provide a third-person pen portrait of themselves as a teacher.
2. To explain why they had chosen to attend the programme.
3. To list up to ten features of an effective leader, then rank the features in order of importance.

4. To say to what extent they considered themselves to be effective leaders, citing examples.
5. To rank themselves on a scale 1-10 on the extent to which they considered themselves effective leaders.

This functioned as an initial questionnaire of the participating teachers' understanding of leadership.

Field observations

The project research assistant attended each of the seven sessions and recorded field notes based on the discussions among participants and between the participants and the tutor. These field notes were used to identify a list of themes emerging from the sessions, which were then used to inform the final interview schedule. The research assistant did not participate in the discussions, but sat removed from the group where she could observe and record the key details of each session.

Concluding questionnaire

The participants were provided with an opportunity to answer the same questions as in the initial questionnaire activities on completion of the programme. The concluding questionnaire was designed to determine how teachers' views had changed through their participation in the programme, with the necessary amendment to Question 2 (What have you accomplished from this programme?).

Final interview

Four teachers participated in a semi-structured final interview. The interview schedule comprised thirteen questions, which can be divided into three broad categories. The first category included questions designed to encourage the teachers to reflect on their views about

leadership and how (if at all) the programme had affected these views. The second category focused on what the teachers had learned during the programme and how it was reflected in their practice. The third category asked the teachers to reflect on what they had found most and least beneficial about the programme, and gave them the opportunity to ask questions of their own.

The participants for the final interviews were representative of the varying leadership and experience levels of the cohort. Three of the interviewees were experienced teachers working in departmental and/or school-wide leadership roles, including the head of pastoral care and head of two groups of subjects across the school. One teacher was recently qualified and in her third year of teaching. She had been working in a school-wide role leading literacy developments for one year.

Each of the four interviews took approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and manually transcribed to aid in data analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify themes arising from the participants' initial and final questionnaires, which included the teachers' pen portraits, discussions during all seven of the sessions, and the final interviews (Braun & Clarke 2006). First, questionnaire responses and the field notes were coded independently by three of the authors before coming together to generate a list of emerging themes. This process was iterative in nature and uncovered nine emerging themes based on teacher discussions during the leadership sessions: culture; development/support; motivation; trust; community; relationships; emotions; time; and data literacy.

After the final questionnaire and interviews had been completed and transcribed, these nine initial themes were refined and consolidated into six broad themes by repeating the initial process of coding and analysis. The revised themes were as follows: individual versus community; relationships; culture; reflection; emotions; and impact/action. These themes provide a framework for describing how the teachers thought of themselves as leaders and of their practice, both before and after participating in the leadership programme.

Results

The results draw on the participants' questionnaire responses, the field notes and the final interviews. Six main themes emerge from the data relating to how the teachers in the study understand leadership and what they think is important in relation to leadership development. While six broad themes are identified, it should be noted that there is some overlap between these, meaning they should be understood as inter-connected. In the following sections, the themes are illustrated by direct quotations from the participants.

Individual versus community

From the teachers' responses to the questionnaire during the first session, the individual versus the community was a clear tension. For most, the drive to join the programme was focused on themselves as individuals. For example, the teachers noted that they had enrolled on the programme because: 'I am stagnating'; 'to gain leadership skills'; 'to focus on my strengths and weaknesses'; 'to develop my understanding of leading and managing'; 'to develop my pedagogy'; or 'to give me direction in my leadership journey'. At the same time, they saw clear connections between their notions of leadership and their work with others such as when they recorded that they undertook the programme 'to motivate staff', 'to inspire others', 'to motivate staff', or 'to influence'.

At the beginning of the programme, relationships with other teachers were often described in managerial terms, for example: ‘to help me have challenging conversations with staff’; ‘to hold others to account’ or ‘to manage staff in difficult situations’. This suggests a somewhat hierarchical structure in the teachers’ understanding of leadership at the beginning of the programme. In identifying features of an effective leader, the teachers used particularly managerial language in their reference to managerial skills or in describing delegating or ‘getting things done’. The teachers used the language of ‘staff’ rather than colleagues when describing the other teachers with whom they work, a word that betrays some assumptions relating to leadership and how they position themselves against the others within their context, seeing themselves as apart from those with whom they work. Indeed, only one person mentioned parents and another, pedagogy; no-one specifically mentioned children at all in the earliest part of the programme, even when asked to note the features of an effective leader, children and their learning were conspicuously omitted.

This highly individualistic view the teachers had at the outset of the initiative changed somewhat over the course of the sessions. In several of the sessions, the teachers spoke about working in different communities and the needs and demands of such areas. This broader focus was not as common as the instances where the teachers refer to leadership and the school community in a way that suggests they had begun to see themselves as part of a whole rather than as an isolated or rather disconnected individual. They recognised the ‘need to adopt different styles in different contexts’ and ‘having to find a way of all working together for the same thing’. There was a growing awareness that they were part of the whole school, a community. Recognition that they may have individual remits within the school led to another theme, the one they highlighted as the most important: relationships.

Relationships

At the beginning of the leadership development programme, the teachers principally saw themselves as leaders separate from those with whom they work. The relationships they described initially make clear that a top-down, hierarchical relationship was the dominant experience, even for those who had senior management roles within the school. One teacher specifically said that leadership ‘comes from the top, a traditional view’. Positive relationships, at the beginning of the initiative, did not feature highly, or positively, in the teachers’ responses. This is perhaps to be expected when their understanding of leadership had been particularly hierarchical and managerial. Over the course of the sessions, the teachers’ spoke more readily about the kinds of relationships they thought were positive in developing leadership and in becoming the kind of leader they wanted to be.

It was in these class discussions, as recorded in field notes, that relationships with pupils became evident, more so than in any of the written responses or even in the interviews. The teachers highlighted the importance of face-to-face discussions with pupils to help establish positive relationships by ‘encouraging the thinking around participation and listening to young people’s voices’ or in ‘being honest and direct with pupils about new approaches’. This illustrates a more positive sense of community than previously when the teachers seemed to focus primarily on themselves and their roles.

In terms of their roles within the school, the teachers considered the place of relationships in leadership and how they might foster positive relationships, not only with pupils, but with their colleagues. Given that at the outset of the programme the teachers seemed to be more focused on a top-down model and on themselves rather than the community, it is not surprising that few of them mentioned relationships in a positive sense initially. However, when asked about their own leadership qualities in terms of the extent to which they considered themselves to be an effective leader, they saw the relationships they had more positively, though perhaps limited to their specific remit such as ‘within my subject area’, ‘as

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a class teacher', or 'manage teams'. Some recognised that their work reached a broader audience: 'influenced other schools' practice'; 'lead projects, staff training'; 'leading whole school initiatives'. Fewer teachers alluded to the actual relationships they have as a feature of their leadership, writing statements such as: 'motivating and inspiring young people'; 'supporting and mentoring younger members of staff'; or 'encouraging staff to put themselves forward'. It is not clear how the teachers enacted their collegiality or motivational behaviour in these instances. Personal traits were less visible in relation to describing themselves as leaders. There still seemed to be a perception that as leaders they were a step removed from the people with whom they worked. Indeed, in the sessions the teachers spoke about how isolating and lonely it can be as a headteacher or senior leader in a school, describing friends' experiences on social occasions and how 'when you're in senior management, sometimes you're no longer perceived as part of the team in your department'.

Throughout the programme and in the final interviews, developing positive relationships was seen as key. This was less of a formal mentoring or coaching (Bush 2009), but rather a desire for opportunities for informal professional dialogue. One teacher seemed to have understood the need to adopt a more collaborative approach when leading within the school, saying that she had 'become more confident in letting go' and that she had developed a 'broader notion of who is a leader'. It was clear that relationships require effort and that this may be undertaken 'through conversations and visiting classrooms' and by 'changing the format of chairing at Faculty meetings' so that this role is shared on a rotational basis. One teacher spoke in her interview about 'using different skills with different people', responding to their needs, saying that she had 'more confidence to build relationships differently', while another had become 'more aware of my demeanour and tone' and how that might influence relationships.

In all, the place of relationships was highlighted by the teachers throughout the programme. They came to recognise the importance they placed on relationships and how these could be worked on and developed to support effective leadership. There was something of a shift away from the managerial to a more collegiate approach where talking and effective communication took centre stage. This, in turn, led teachers to suggest that what may be required for effective leadership is a ‘culture shift’, as they described it.

Culture

The teachers very clearly had a sense that culture – the ways of working, the unspoken rules and practices – has a bearing on leadership and being led. They spoke in the sessions about school culture, departmental culture and local authority culture, and how these can be different. For instance, an example was shared about how working in a rural setting presented a very different culture to that found working in a city, with the rural school offering teachers ‘more autonomy’. Aligned with this, the teachers spoke on a few occasions about how some schools have a culture that feeds stress, where teachers feel under pressure. The teachers spoke about ‘the need to capture and collect data for evidence’ while being unclear about who or what the evidence was for and how this led to a ‘monitoring culture’ that did not match their experience of inspection visits from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIe). When HMIe were present, they ‘didn’t look closely at paperwork. Inspectors wanted to talk with pupils and teachers and do observations’. This may or may not have been an accurate representation of what the inspectors did while in the school, but the teachers’ perception was that the focus was different to the one they were used to.

The teachers recognised that schools should have a vision, but at the beginning of the initiative, as with other areas, they saw this as a top-down approach, leading to a culture where teachers often did not feel valued or did not give space to their colleagues to take

ownership of ideas. This, in part, exemplifies the narrow view of leadership often presented by the teachers. Much of the language used by the teachers was one of a culture that moves forward apace, and where everyone is not always taken along willingly, ‘driving forward’, usually in relation to curriculum change. They emphasised the need for trust within the culture, and that this can be missing in a hierarchical model.

The interviews revealed a more positive view of how effective leadership might support a positive culture and, similarly, how this more positive culture may engender effective leadership. The teachers noted in their interviews that they ‘liked the opportunity to come together’, with one teacher acknowledging that she was ‘realising how much of a difference a good leader can make’. The teachers spoke about engaging with their colleagues outwith the sessions about what they had been learning and that they liked having the ‘opportunity to come together’, with it becoming clear that they were describing the need for and development of a Community of Practice. This is reinforced by the teachers suggesting that it was ‘good that [the initiative] was facilitated by the University rather than the school [because] a wider perspective’ was offered. Seeing the culture as being broader than a department, faculty or an individual school was important in terms of how the teachers saw the culture of the school, as one that embraces the need to ‘learn from others’ experiences’, allowing them to ‘see what’s been done elsewhere’. It was proposed by one of the teachers that in order ‘to change culture, you need to have a strong evidence base’. This became evident as engagement with research was a major feature in the developing leadership sessions.

Reflection

The teachers were clear in their initial comments that they have many ‘pressures during the day [that] can affect effective leadership’. They said that they feel as though there is never

enough time, that workloads are high and they struggle to complete their work, thereby impinging upon a good work-life balance. The teachers, though, in attending the sessions, noted that having time for reflection had been crucial to support their thinking about leadership and how they might move forward.

All of the teachers reported enjoying reading research articles, particularly with discussions to support these. Previously, the teachers had only read material that was easily accessible or ‘something specific that I was involved in, if I had to’, or ‘reading what I liked to read, that supports what you think’ rather than engaging with material that may challenge views or practices. One person suggested that the way she had engaged with reading research in the past was ‘potentially a bit narrow-minded’. As the programme progressed, the teachers began to ‘recognise the need to read more widely’ and that ‘people respond positively if you’re able to provide research evidence’. One teacher described reading research as part of the programme as ‘a breath of fresh air’ while another identified it as ‘a bit of a luxury’. This latter point is important because time within their busy schedules had to be made for reading, but the teachers also found space to reflect on what they had read or what they had discussed in the sessions.

Reflection helped the teachers to see ‘that the challenges are common to all, they’re not personal’, in effect, linking the individual leader to the broader community. The teachers took time to ‘stop and look at myself as a leader’ and to consider their ‘role and remit’ and how reflection allowed them ‘to identify good things in practice, not just the negative’.

Several teachers changed their behaviour as a consequence of having time to reflect. They thought more about how they engaged with pupils, ‘how I interact with colleagues’, with one person commenting that ‘I’m trying to be conscious of what I bring to staff’ and another saying she had become ‘a step more removed, more considered... and reflective’. This

reflective attitude allowed the teachers to be more flexible and to ‘open up conversations’.

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The teachers talked about how they regularly spoke with colleagues not on the programme about what they had been learning, therefore taking opportunities to reflect outwith the sessions and their private sphere to others within the school community, potentially to influence the wider school culture. One teacher in her interview explained that she had begun to keep a journal, making a record of her practice every day and taking time to reflect on this, saying:

I actually take time out and be like, right, you need to think this through. Because actually I find that's really helped. It sounds ridiculous, but I think a lot of people... replay the day in your head. I would do that all the time, but it wasn't actually fruitful... Whereas now, actually, I need to give those thoughts and those reflections the actual time they deserve, write it down, then, you know, improve next time... I feel like I'm much more aware of what I need to improve on in terms of leading.

She then went on to offer instances where this approach had influenced her practice. This, she said, had helped her to grow in confidence. Confidence as a result of the sessions, and other emotions generally featured heavily in the teachers' responses.

Emotions

Aside from stress due to workload, the teachers spoke about anxiety in relation to performance league tables being published. This linked with notions of morale and motivation, elements they considered to be important in relation to effective leadership. The emotional impact on being a leader that is not seen as part of the team was highlighted by some, but they all recognised the need for teachers to be supported emotionally and, therefore, requested a session be dedicated to what they described as emotional intelligence as part of the programme.

When initially asked to write a pen portrait of how pupils or colleagues might describe them, the teachers' responses all suggested a certain sensitivity to others in their use of words such as: 'caring'; 'calm'; 'listening'; 'easy to talk to'; 'supports us [pupils] to succeed'; and 'wants us [pupils] to do well'. More frequently, the suggestion of supporting success or achievement was in relation to the pupils rather than colleagues. Words to suggest effort, hard work and operational behaviour in relation to their leadership were more evident than emotional intelligence. This is echoed in their responses to why they had chosen to attend the programme, with reasons being, as described earlier, somewhat self-centred.

In responding to the task of noting the features of an effective leader, there was some mention of being 'calm and approachable' or that they may require 'integrity, honesty and trustworthiness'. Generally, the teachers focused on organisational skills and structures, with some mention of the need for effective communication. In the sessions, however, discussions revealed that the teachers valued 'soft' skills over 'hard' ones and that being emotionally sensitive was important in an effective leader. One teacher, in her interview, stated that 'a bad leader can do so much damage', recognising that how one engages with colleagues and pupils is important. Another spoke about how, as a consequence of participating in the programme, she had begun 'to speak to colleagues that I maybe wouldn't have spoken to otherwise', thus making new connections across the school, but taking into account the different attitudes, values and feelings of those in the wider school.

Emotional resilience was thought to be important for leaders. In the class discussions the teachers spoke about the challenge of being a middle leader who wanted to support and 'shelter your staff, but at the same time report to senior management'. They went on to talk about the difficulty of trying 'to keep everyone happy'. They spoke about the 'emotional labour' of the leadership role, that 'it can be emotionally demanding, draining'. Some said

that because they recognised the stress that some of their colleagues are under, they ‘take on more work to help them’, though they recognised that ‘then you can end up over-worked’.

Running alongside the need for emotional resilience as a leader, the teachers identified the need for ‘intelligence’ when working with colleagues. One person offered an example of a disagreement she had in a pastoral situation with a depute headteacher. They had shared their disagreements and he later returned to her saying ‘he had reconsidered the issue and agreed with her point of view’. Being able to see things from her point of view and returning to say he had reconsidered his position is what signified emotional intelligence, as the teacher saw it. The teachers were of the view that while emotional intelligence is integral to being an effective leader, it is not something that is, or can be, easily evidenced in job interviews.

Being listened to and taking on board others’ perspectives were consistently viewed as important in effective leadership, and this was a measure of emotional intelligence, which in turn ‘leads to high levels of trust’. Trust was seen to be important across all adults in the school and when working with pupils. When discussing emotional intelligence in relation to working with pupils, the focus seemed, again, to be on colleagues. The teachers considered ‘investing’ in children to be important, as is ‘the nurture work being done with pupils who have been targeted as in need of emotional support’, though they thought that primary schools perhaps focused more on emotional support. In the long term, the programme gave some participants ‘the reassurance that all the time I was spending was actually, in the long run, going to pay off’. Given the emphasis on performativity in schools generally, and the experiences the teachers shared from their careers, it is not surprising that impact was a theme to emerge from the data.

Impact/action

Of all the responses during the first session, only three teachers noted they undertook the programme because they wanted to make a positive impact, with a further three comments noting that teachers wanted to develop their knowledge and understanding of educational literature. One teacher said that in the past she was ‘just trying to get through the day-to-day business’, which was a common experience for the teachers. However, they came to see the link between research and practice, with one teacher being very clear in saying that ‘The more effective you are as a leader and manager, there’s a knock-on. The bottom line is the effect on pupil achievement’. The teachers were all of the view that ultimately leadership involves action and should create positive impact on pupils’ learning, but also on colleagues’ work.

Allied with the notion of impact, several teachers saw having a vision as important. At the outset of the programme, however, this was generally seen as being a vision to be communicated rather than a shared vision, created collaboratively; another manifestation of the top-down model presented by the teachers. Indeed, oftentimes their responses suggest a reaction to the context in which they found themselves rather than having opportunities to shape it, such as using periods designated for planning time to ‘deal with issues’. In the sessions, the teachers spoke about motivation and how this had a bearing on their ability to have a positive impact.

A large part of what the teachers found to be motivational was being given autonomy. One teacher, in her interview, said that the programme had ‘boosted my confidence in a lot of ways, not just being a leader, but being a learner as well’. This teacher could see how the programme had impacted upon her, but she was also able to see that this positive experience would allow her to have positive impact when working with colleagues and pupils. Indeed, simply being supported to be ‘able to identify good things in my own practice, not just the negative’ is something that the teachers anticipated they would take forward in their

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leadership roles and tasks. ‘Think[ing] about how to manage differently and the impact of my actions’ was one aspect of learning for one of the teachers, which reflects many of the responses that focused on rethinking how to form and grow relationships, to develop a positive culture, and, in one instance, to support career progression: ‘I now want to be a deputy head’. There were several instances of action based on the teachers’ learning, such as ‘starting a reading group’ to engage with journal articles, or the importance of ‘tutor time in the morning at school and how important that time can be’ in creating a nurturing ethos.

Ethos links with culture, and in her interview, one teacher described the action she had taken, during the programme, in changing her leadership practice to develop the more open culture the teachers valued in order to make an impact. Being conscious of receiving no replies to the e-mails she sent colleagues ‘explaining her priorities and plans’, she expressed frustration and ‘blamed colleagues for not reading the communications’. After some time, however, she ‘realised that [her] priorities were not the same as others’ priorities’. Consequently,

I decided to walk around the school, get to know the other teachers... I realised that by talking with people, I could discuss things with them, answer their questions, and clarify points in a way that I could not with e-mails.

This was typical of the types of change the teachers described, bringing together many of the features of relationships, community, culture, reflection and action in one example.

Discussion and conclusion

In describing the balance required between individual, institutional and policy needs in professional development programmes for leaders, Aas (2017) is clear that the person with responsibility for leading the programme should engage as a learner in the process alongside the teachers. In the present study, the programme was created specifically to respond to the

teachers' interests, with the programme tutor being squarely situated as a learner. She was a learner in the sense that initially she knew little about the school and even less about the teachers themselves with whom she was working. She followed the teachers' lead in designing sessions, researching materials for use in the class and encountering new ideas in her work with the teachers. She engaged with new literature and worked collaboratively with the teachers, learning about her own views – and theirs – as the sessions progressed. This responsive approach, where teachers and tutor collaborated and learned together was important in growing a culture of respect, something that Mowat and McMahon (2019) see as vital in developing leadership. It also supports the notion that a 'top down' model should be avoided and that teachers' professional learning should be driven by the teacher(s) (Kennedy & Beck 2018).

Thinking and discussing ideas collectively is important in leadership education. Having time to think about ideas supports teachers to become more adept at reflecting on how these ideas might influence their practice (Aas 2017, Schaap *et al.* 2018). These discussions often revolve around, as we see above, the teachers' questions, the model Engeström and Sannino (2010) recommend. This takes us beyond the simple notion of acquiring pieces of information to allow for a rich engagement with others' ideas. The teachers in the present study relished the opportunity to explore ideas through literature they say they otherwise would not have sourced or have had time to read, let alone discuss. Finding time for reflection was evidently rare for these teachers, but it became obvious that offering them time and space to explore ideas and their practice was important and that if time had not been created through the sessions, it would not have occurred.

Indeed, the real value of being able to reflect on a personal level is seen in the example of the teacher who built time into each day to create a written reflection in the form of a diary to support her own learning and development. Others were similarly influenced to make career

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decisions such as a move towards promotion or to recognise traits such as narrow-mindedness or being more conscious of their interactions with others in the school. As Aas (2017) would suggest, a dynamic approach to leadership learning is important, one that moves with the teachers. This was the model adopted in the present study, and one that reveals the importance of reflection as part of the learning process for leaders at all levels, since the participants were, indeed, at all levels in their careers generally, and specifically, in relation to their leadership experience. Indeed, in her recommendations, Aas notes that research-based knowledge should be aligned with reflections on practice. Šarič and Šteh (2017) urge that teachers are supported to reflect, and that it is ‘unrealistic’ (p.70) to think that they will be able to find time to do this amidst their busy schedules unless supported. The study, through the sharing of academic reading, discussion and opportunities for reflection, created the necessary support and space advocated by Šarič and Šteh. These three things aligned, as can be seen above, for the teachers, resulting in them recognising ways in which the programme had changed them and the way they viewed and might enact leadership.

The importance of this shared aspect of the teachers’ experience of the programme is evidenced in their recognition of the place of community over the individual. Certainly, they saw relevance in reflecting on their own practice, but community emerges as a key theme within the study, one in which they develop a shared language and vision (Cassidy *et al.* 2008). The shared vision was less about the way forward for the school in terms of specific change targets, but with respect to the ways in which they interact and engage with one another. This element of community cannot be ignored, with the teachers emphasising the importance of building and sustaining positive relationships in their practice, a feature Cassidy *et al.* (2008) highlight as vital in their seven factors for creating a community of educational enquiry. Throughout the programme, fostering positive relationships emerged

repeatedly, with the teachers drawing attention to the opportunity they had to work with colleagues they had perhaps not worked with previously.

As Dogan *et al.* (2019) note, learning as a community is important, and a vital element of that community is the opportunity for dialogue. Dialogue is necessary, but it is not sufficient if professional learning is to take place; the dialogue must be reflective. It is clear from the teachers in the present study that having opportunities to reflect individually and collectively was hugely important, and that in order for it to have impact, dialogue between and across individuals and groups within the school community would be important in leading to effect change. It requires what Hogan *et al.* (2019) would see as honest, candid reflection that raises questions not only about one's practice but about one's attitudes or beliefs. The potential for change, they say, must be embraced.

The teachers, here, as they became more reflective, or had increased opportunities to reflect with others, were open about their understanding of leadership prior to and after the programme. Without this dialogic reflection in the context of the community established through the sessions, leadership may have continued to be seen in a top-down, hierarchical way that allowed only those in management positions to see themselves as leaders, thereby going against the ambition of leadership 'at all levels'. Unlike Fairman and Mackenzie's (2012) study, the teachers latterly saw leadership as something that was part of their role regardless of their prior experience of teaching or leadership, as viewed traditionally. The understanding of leadership the teachers developed over the programme in providing scope for dialogue and reflection may go some way towards shifting power dynamics within a school or wider policy context, where teachers have autonomy to work collaboratively and without the pressures of accountability driving change. Working collectively and individually with the desire of leading change in school is important, not least in terms of the relationships that are fostered, something Fairman and Mackenzie (2012) note when

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highlighting the need for teachers to lead on a formal and informal basis, while being both critical and caring peers.

What this study can tell us is that teachers, though oftentimes hard-pressed, are keen to lead change. This resonates with the tensions identified by Schaap *et al.* (2018) in their explorations of the tensions teachers experienced in professional learning communities. In the present study, by engaging in a course with colleagues in their own school, the teachers came to recognise the important nature of working collectively and that leadership at all levels is possible, though it needs reflection and dialogue to support an understanding of leadership that works for people on an individual level and as a school. This requires an acknowledgement of teachers' emotional investment and that they need opportunities to develop relationships that will engender a culture that is conducive to different views and enabling all teachers to lead. The programme related to this study was responsive to the teachers' requirements and interests. Affording them the opportunity to direct the learning allowed the teachers to see what they thought was important in leadership across all levels and that would support them in leading for change. Six features emerged as significant for these teachers and that may be worth considering in designing or engaging teachers in future leadership development programmes: the role of the individual and that of the community; relationships; culture; reflection; emotions; and impact/action.

One element that was conspicuously missing in the teachers' responses to questions of leadership were the pupils and learning. Of course, there was some mention, as can be seen above, of pupils, but given the purpose of the programme was to support leaders to effect change in school, this omission is striking. It would be worth taking account of this in any future project that aims to develop leadership across all levels, since without children and young people in school, there is little need for teachers as leaders at all.

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