

SCEL Fellowship Programme
Area of Enquiry

From In-School Leadership to System Leadership: My Learning through the SCEL Fellowship Programme

Gerry Lyons
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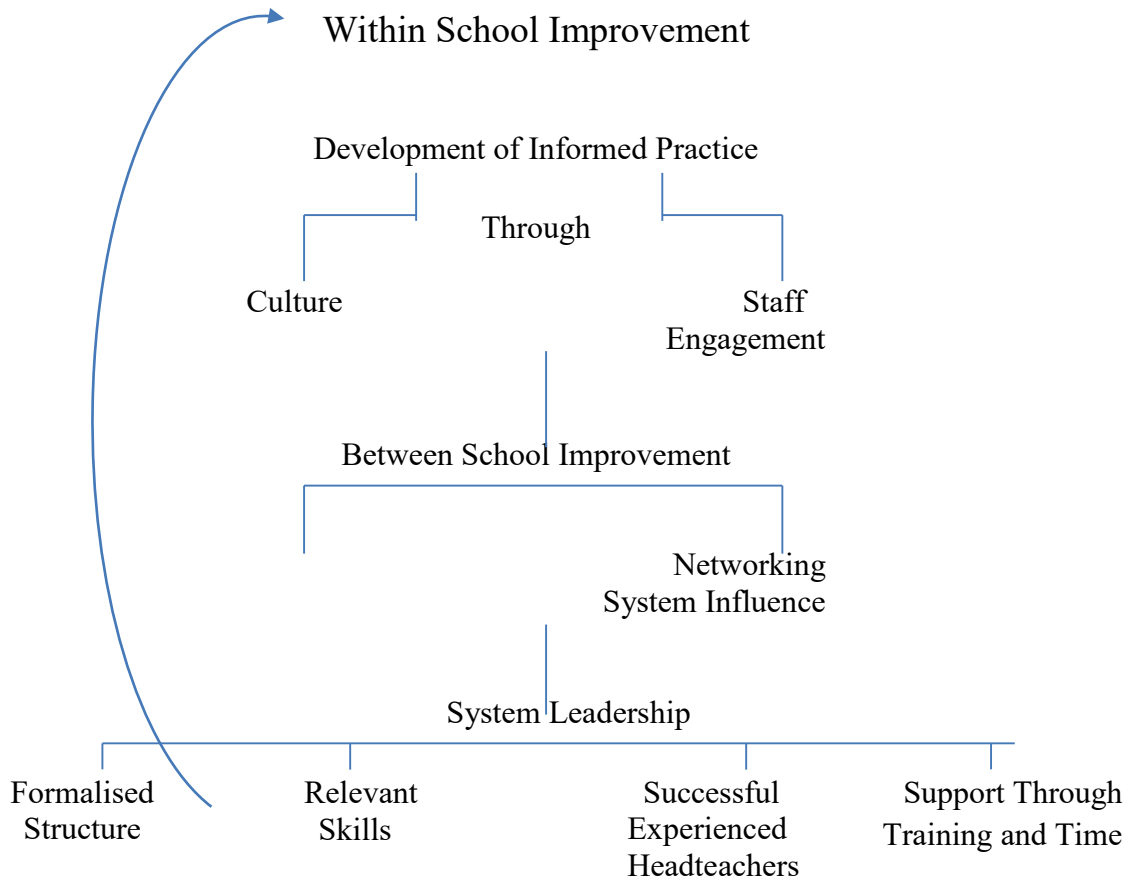
From In-School Leadership to System Leadership: My Learning through the SCEL Fellowship Programme

My Learning through the SCEL Fellowship Programme has spanned the full range of the programme rationale, as I have learned more about leading more effectively within my own school, with a view to having a greater impact on “demonstrable outcomes for children and young people.” (SCEL Fellowship Participant Briefing). More significantly, I have greatly increased my understanding of system level leadership and what is required to lead effectively at system level, as well as developing a view on what is required for system level leadership to be a reality within the Scottish Education system.

Some of my learning about leading within my own school confirmed understandings which I already had, to a certain extent, but significantly extended these to ensure that I will be more effective in leading my school to the benefit of the young people. The first and most significant understanding which has emerged from the programme has come from my reading about developing learning and teaching but, more importantly, about “informed practice” (Dimmock 2000:21). This focus on the professionalism of teachers and the nature of teaching has refocused the professional discourse in my school about teaching and learning, and planning for improvement in teaching and learning to ensure that it fully exemplifies all the characteristics of “informed practice” (Dimmock 2000:133) and from these, most importantly, where “teaching focuses on student learning and understanding” and “a wide repertoire and range of teaching methods is practised” all based on relevant research findings. (Dimmock 2000:133). This was also emphasised by (MacBeath) in the OECD (2013:85) publication, “Leadership for 21st Century Learning”.

This learning about leadership practice in the school-based context has been developed across the programme’s model of professional learning : reflection on practice through coaching and the network meetings; cognitive development through professional reading and high quality presentations at network meetings and experiential learning through professional visits and dialogue, as well as discussions with fellow participants providing collaborative learning. While the contexts of learning have been wide, the key aspects of learning have been common across the whole leadership framework: the importance of culture and staff engagement. (See Figure 1)

(FIGURE 1) SCEL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME: LEARNING JOURNEY



Firstly, the importance of culture as a key underpinning factor in the development of excellence in the core business of schools: learning and teaching. This was emphasised by Dimmock (2000:58): “New configurations of teaching and learning are dependent on school leaders taking responsibility for building a culture which supports learning for all and a positive climate which values productive human relationships”. However, it was also clearly evident in the NHS Scottish Patient Safety Programme which recognised the importance of developing a culture “involving staff in decision making and innovation, providing staff with helpful feedback and making sure staff feel safe, supported, respected and valued at work” (Berwick 2013: 22). This has led to reflection on the culture of the excellent school and how my school fits with those definitions.

The key characteristic of culture which has been emphasised in all contexts has been staff engagement. This is a feature of excellent schools but it has been highlighted throughout the programme as central in all organisations, including by Andrew McLaughlin in his presentation about communication within RBS where he recognised: “you need engaged employees to engage with others to lead to improved core business and higher outcomes”. It has ensured that staff engagement is placed at the heart of the RBS profit service chain which is currently driving their communication strategy. This is also a feature of the Scottish Patient Safety Programme, which was founded on staff engagement developed through Learning Session events in which colleagues from all levels participated; viewed as vital to ensure that the changed practices were internalised into staff behaviour.

In education leadership, the engagement of staff in the change process has been widely recognised (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009:109; Fullan 2013: 36). It reflects my own experience where engaging staff in discussion about our shared vision and values had been a cornerstone of the success our school has had over the last 3 years. It is also the basis of the current stage of the school’s improvement strategy where, as a staff team, we are fully engaged in discussion about the next phase of our work towards realising the aspirations of our vision, to ensure a strategy to which everyone can commit.

Part of that strategy has been to ensure that our school is outward looking and there has been acceleration in networking for our school, as a direct result of my learning about the importance of networking throughout the Fellowship programme. This has

been a key theme throughout the programme starting from Professor Dimmock's presentation on 8 leadership characteristics, the first of which is that leaders "Transform their schools into professional learning communities and these are increasingly networked".

This message was strongly emphasised by Professor Chris Chapman who particularly challenged my thinking and led to reflection about how networking can help schools improve.

After reflection, I set out to develop networks for my school which can make an important contribution to improving learning and teaching. Chapman emphasises the need to "strengthen leadership and collaboration within, between and beyond schools." This was further extended by Sir Andrew Cubie stating "it is important to be coalition builders" and be "outward looking to the impact on society".

The outward looking message is further supplemented in Professor Chapman's paper "From within-to between-and beyond-school improvement: A case of rethinking roles and relationships" referencing Bell and Colleagues' (2005) systematic review of schools networks from 1995-2005. The conclusion that "networks can contribute to successful project outcomes" is extended in his commentary: "Richer rewards will be gained from building collective capacity between schools through school-to school collaboration". This is supported by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009 P.99) emphasising the powerful impact that networks can have on professional learning and school improvement: "In the end, the point of networks is to spread innovation, stimulate learning, increase professional motivation and reduce inequalities." "Experiential knowledge is circulated among respected practitioners, but these interactions are also invigorated and disturbed by the infusion of external ideas and expertise."

Undoubtedly, the increased realisation of the importance of school networking has been a very important aspect of my learning throughout the programme, but it has also been the focus of significant reflection on the extent to which this networking is system level leadership, and the challenges of that. However, as the programme has developed, it has become clear that system level leadership is much more structured and that it actually has to happen with an organisational construct which supports it,

such as “Consultant leadership” which was part of the London Challenge leadership strategy. (Earley et al., 2005).

However, there has been significant reflection on my current involvement in activities, which, I thought, were aspects of system level leadership. I am involved in supporting colleague heads through their visiting our school to learn from aspects of our practice; being invited to go to other schools and local authorities to present on key aspects of leadership such as: self evaluation; leading learning and teaching; curriculum development and assessment; I chair a national Sharing Practice Network for Headteachers which supports those on the group in our learning and also works to influence practice nationally through publications and running national conference on key aspects of Curriculum, and I am on both Local Authority and national groups developing tools to support Transformational Change in schools.

This wide range of involvement outwith my own school has been my understanding of being involved in system level leadership. As the programme has progressed, I now understand that, while this is significant work to influence the system in our country, it is no more than that (see Figure 1); most of this work is ad hoc and is not part of a sustainable strategy. It also is very demanding, as it is not supported either by structure or strategy, within which headteachers can take on a system leadership role. It means that this work takes me outwith my school for periods of time, leading to a dilemma about the impact of this on my own school.

However, as the Fellowship programme comes towards its conclusion, I now understand that, while this activity is a genuine commitment to helping to improve the Scottish Education system for all Scotland’s children, it is not system level leadership. I believe to have authentic system level leadership requires a much more formalised and structured system which enables and supports headteachers to lead beyond their school. This structured approach has been the centre of the school improvement strategies in Belgium, England, Finland and Australia which are the focus of the OECD Study Improving School Leadership Vol.2: Case Studies on System Leadership. This study defines System leaders as leaders who “care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. Crucially they are willing to shoulder system leadership roles because they believe that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way.”

I believe that I have the foundation and skills to be a system leader. I am both an experienced and successful headteacher, who has significant achievement behind me, including a report from Education Scotland Inspectors which is in the top 1% in Secondary schools in Scotland. My time as headteacher and my approach has allowed me to develop a significant level of “tacit knowledge” (Dimmock). I also have improved outcomes for young people in both schools in which I have been headteacher. It is a natural next step for me as I believe firmly in the OECD findings about system leaders above and have no ambition to work within local authority management. I also have operated informally at one level of System Leadership as I have always supported and mentored newly appointed headteachers.

However, there is currently no formal approach to system level leadership within the Education system in Scotland. It is a key role emerging for SCEL and for Headteacher Fellows to initiate a dialogue about the development of a formal approach to system level leadership in Scotland. The roles of both are particularly important as the OECD recommends that “Systemic leadership needs to come more from principals themselves and from agencies committed to working with them.” There has been examples of such approaches working in England through the programme developed by the “National College for School Leadership” and the Hackney Federation of schools (Harris, Boyle and Hargreaves 2014:18 and 84). This has now been extended within the English system where there has now been the development of a System Leadership Pathway: (Clive Dimmock Presentation Network Meeting 6)

Professional partner / mentor/ coach

Support to Colleagues on one to one basis.

Local leader of education (LLE)

In addition to leading own, school, the LLE has a coaching and mentoring role with a headteacher whose school is in challenging circumstances.

School improvement partner (SIP)

Developing and leading the SIP of several schools, with a specific area of focus.

National leader of education (NLE)

Headteachers of outstanding schools are eligible to be national leaders of education (NLE). NLEs and their staff support schools in challenging circumstances, in addition to leading their own school.

This is the kind of structure necessary for effective System level Leadership in Scotland. (See Figure 1) It gives headteachers the opportunity to lead the system at a level which is suited to their present stage of development and experience, but also to be supported in their system level leadership through identified time; targeted professional development; supported innovation which can impact on improving the whole system (OECD 2011). These features ensure that headteachers are enabled to lead at system level; there is shared understanding of the role across staff at all levels, minimising the concern that system leadership for a head could lead to damaging their own school, as there is scope to formally distribute leadership further within schools and staff understand the system role being carried out by the headteacher.

The system, I believe, has to be a national one, with a local focus, as our system does not require another fragmented system which would be the outcome of a solely local Authority approach.

Following this programme, I intend engaging with the agencies with which I currently work: both locally and nationally about the development of a formalised approach to system level leadership, which I believe will lead to improved outcomes for all Scotland's children and make a significant impact on closing the achievement gap in our country. The role of the SCEL Headteacher Fellow.

SCEL PROJECT REFERENCE LIST

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