

SCEL Fellowship Programme
Area of Enquiry

Developing Collaborative Networks in a Local Authority

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SCEL

Scottish College for
Educational Leadership

My application to join SCEL as a participant was underpinned by a request from my local authority to explore some of the issues such as; succession planning, preparing for leadership, joint working between schools, building capacity and developing headteachers' levels of expertise and sharing resources. The Authority was dealing with these issues to develop the rationale for a new approach to collaborative networks enabling headteachers and teachers to share good practice and work together for the benefit of their pupils.

The Authority Context

A previous authority initiative called 'Succeeding Together' (2003), had proposed the use of professional networks as a means of advancing the quality of education throughout West Lothian. It was hoped that by bringing staff from similar schools together on a network basis built into the professional learning calendar, recognised good practice built up in individual schools, could be shared and extended into other schools. It was the view then that professional development 'should move away from a request for course-based training and be based in self and collaborative learning through research and enquiry.' (Sloman, 2003)

The asymmetric week in West Lothian council already offered an opportunity for schools to work in collaboration on the agreed non-class contact afternoon sessions set aside for joint development work and these had met with varying degrees of success. How successful they were had depended on the focus, the level and style of leadership exercised and the commitment of the participants to engage in discussion relative to their enquiry. This was evidenced by the production of a number of policy statements and advisory papers produced collectively by some of the participants offered to the local authority community. It was often seen as good practice to bring cluster or 'similar' schools - based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, (2012) - together to discuss 'stage' related issues.

More recently, West Lothian Education Services published a policy document called 'Moving Forward in Learning,' (2014), which it claimed, '...centres on collaboration and networking to achieve effective school improvement and raise attainment, supporting the principle of improvement as a shared responsibility.' It also stressed that, '... leadership which seeks to bring about transformational change must be collaborative.' This local authority policy document strengthened the value placed on existing joint working and was regarded as the backdrop for building new collaborations and partnerships.

Two practical tasks for development were connected to this policy,

1. *Establishing an agreed common in-service calendar which comprised professional learning opportunities, and promoted professional working.*
2. *Ensuring opportunities for meetings to take place and propose appropriate logistics to facilitate this.*

Perceived as a 'credible' and 'high performing' headteacher, as validated through the admission criteria to SCEL Fellowship participation, I was already involved in several 'collegiate' and collaborative network structures. The challenge to improve the provision of education through the participation in the SCEL fellowship programme enabled me to work with some leading current educationalists. Through seminars and round table discussions, I was able to unpack some of the guiding research promoting collaborative approaches and 'system leadership.'

Previous Experience

My previous experience of network approaches stemmed from my personal involvement in a number of collaborative roles. Further to my substantive role as a headteacher in a successful community based primary school, I was a regular contributor at cluster level meetings, working with colleagues in 10 other primary schools along with the attached secondary. As a group we had produced joint policy, established group practice and shared additional allocated resources in a number of time constrained and authority regulated initiatives. Some of these ventures offered a degree of success, but agreements sometimes floundered, joint decisions were altered when taken back to individual schools and responses to similar approaches in methodology and curriculum were varied in terms of success, implementation or noted improvement, evidenced when positively or otherwise commented upon by Education Scotland external assessors or Local Authority validation teams.

As the current chairperson of the local authority headteacher Executive Committee for the primary sector, I was fortunate to coordinate, lead or help develop a number of strategic interventions in the primary sector which were inspired by successive government documentation or recognised good practice which was felt by the senior managers should be disseminated throughout the authority schools. Many of these directives were led by, or gathered around, our Education Officers and accountable to the senior management through hierarchical accountability. Again, results and responses varied for a number of reasons, such as the continual change of personnel involved, shift of policy direction, breakdown of organised meetings for project development and most often – new priorities emerging on the ever-

cluttered landscape which claimed immediate attention. The diminishing number of link officers was also a major factor working against pursuing these initiatives.

At a National level, I also play a role as the President of the Catholic Primary Headteacher Association, an important and recognised forum for denominational sector primary schools, working closely with the Church through the Bishops' Conference of Scotland and its operational arm, the Scottish Catholic Education Service. This work entails discussing matters of national interest and concern, working on, contributing to and supporting various policy and programmes for the denominational sector, as well as organising a major professional development opportunity through a well-attended and 'high quality' – as evidenced in our evaluations - National Annual Conference. Our partners and stakeholders encompass our colleagues in the Catholic secondary sector, Glasgow University School of Education, the diocesan representatives and wider academic/educational bodies and institutions. As an experienced headteacher immersed in what I assumed was a collaborative and collegiate culture, by virtue of my stated involvement, I had thought I would have had a clear insight into 'system leadership', and the 'transformational change' it may offer. However, my experiences with SCEL whilst participating on the programme, changed my perception greatly.

System Leadership and the Scottish Context

'One of school leaders' new roles is increasingly to work with other schools and other school-leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust.

System leaders, as they are being called, 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.' OECD, (2008).

To 'change the larger system,' through system leadership presents the challenge of a major culture change to the existing competitive nature of schools. Policy from previous governments' stances created a competitive school system and culture where the belief was that good schools would prosper through parental choice and failing schools would either improve to match their competitors or disappear through declining rolls. Fullan's, (2004) exposition of the role he believes school leaders will need to play as 'system thinkers in action,' is also a game-changer in terms of interpreting the role of headteacher in a new way. System leadership now becomes a challenge for policy makers, who may have to reflect on how system leaders can work beyond their schools to get systems improvement in an environment

of competition and choice, where schools still 'compete' for 'business' through branding, image reputation management and positive publicity. To challenge this perception Hargreaves et al, (2014) explores different individuals/organisations success criteria for 'uplifting leadership' to offer the educational world and co-author Alma Harris further extends the notion of 'leadership at all levels.'

Donaldson, (2011) clearly expressed in two of its recommendations (Rec 49 & 50) the need to move forward in this direction. Forde et al, (2011), looking at post-Donaldson Leadership development, 'argue(d) for a broader shaping of next practice' and drew on further studies to point to the importance of continuity in system leadership across an educational system. They raised questions about effective leadership as an important factor in school success, discussed several possible sources leading to a framework for leadership and recognised a need for 'reflection and working with others beyond their school.' in experienced headteachers, matching up with Earley and Jones', (2010) stages on a continuum, leading towards at level 4, 'Advanced Leaders' and at level 5, 'Consultant headteachers and Leaders.'

The launch of the 'Scottish College for Educational Leadership,' (March 2014) as proposed in Donaldson (2011), has grown out of these and similarly pointed recommendations, and its 'Fellowship Programme' is designed to 'support the professional learning of a national cadre of experienced, highly credible headteachers with the ability and expertise to contribute to system leadership in Scotland.' SCEL, (2014) In essence this is offering a role to 'credible' headteachers who are prepared to contribute at system level to extend the 'making a difference' aspects of school leadership and to become wider and more consultant headteachers and leaders.

The notion that school leaders should be operating at a new level of collaboration and collegiality has also gained currency in contemporary sources such as Hargreaves and Fullan, (2012) and their advancing paradigm is based on the premise that collaboration is better for all children in all schools than a competitive culture which makes one school appear to be 'doing better' at the expense of others. The 'market forces' culture setting schools in direct competition with each other in a bid to drive improvement which embraced education models for so long, through successive governments, is now seriously challenged.

Tracking its evolution back to Donaldson (2011), the recently released HGIOS 4, (2015) Scotland's mandatory school self-evaluation tool-kit, now demands a measurement of 'collaborative approaches to self-evaluation,' requiring schools to assess their capacity for improvement with a strong focus on 'collaborative leadership at all levels' (HGIOS 4 2015: 24).

A directive from the Scottish Government through the National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education, (2016) stresses the need to 'close the gap' in attainment experienced by the children in our least prosperous and more deprived communities. This demand, to 'close the gap' in attainment, achievement and wellbeing for young people living in our most deprived areas requires; '... strong collaborative approaches within school, between schools... and with other partners locally and nationally.' (HGIOS 4 2015:5) To achieve this end Scottish Education requires both collaborative working and successful system leadership.

My professional growth and development through my involvement as a SCEL participant was influenced at an early opportunity on the first network day when Sir Andrew Cubie, (2015) stressed that for educators, '...it is important to be coalition builders,' and to be, '...outward looking to the impact on society.' (Cubie, 2015) This important message was also repeated by Professor Clive Dimmock speaking on systems leadership when he re-emphasised from his study that, '...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.' (Dimmock, 2000:58)

System Leadership – the bigger picture

Hargreaves and Fullan, (2012) also acknowledged some prerequisite demands for collaboration to survive and flourish which seem rooted in experience and common sense. Their appreciation of the need for climate setting and positive relationships built on trust and fairness is obvious in their discourse on professional capital.

'Collaborative cultures not only can be informal but they must also always be informal because without investment in underlying relationships, collaboration will be stilted, forced, and even damaging. These underlying relationships include caring for staff as individuals and making allowances for personal circumstances such as bereavements, other family crises, or just bad days. Collaborative cultures are not pressure cookers of guilt and perfectionism but slow-boiling pots that allow vulnerabilities to be voiced and doubts to be articulated. To sum up, collaborative cultures build social capital and therefore professional capital in a school's community.' Hargreaves and Fullan, (2012)

Very human, pastoral and social qualities are implied here as a necessary framework for the 'how to' questions which need to be addressed when implementing any form of collaborative working. This was a view re-iterated by Dimmock who supported these ideals and re-inforced the identification of leadership qualities and focused on the concept of leadership itself and its

'moral imperative' (2015). He emphasised the first of eight leadership characteristics, which was that leaders, '...transform their schools into professional learning communities and these are increasingly networked.' (Dimmock, 2015). He also emphasised the need to 'strengthen leadership and collaboration within, between and beyond schools.' (Dimmock, 2015)

The Scottish Educational leadership landscape has been influenced by this philosophy and other perspectives. Although a recognisable approach to system leadership has been proposed in SCEL's Fellowship Programme, more work has to be done to develop a formal approach to system level leadership in Scotland. There is an implication that more has to be driven by headteachers themselves and the agencies committed to working with them. SCEL's recent response to a new government driven 'National Framework for Improvement', (2015) consultation noted;

'...there is an increasing awareness across Scotland of the importance of system leadership, working across and beyond schools to achieve our aspirations – this message is not communicated sufficiently well.'

A structured approach to system leadership has been the centre of the school improvement strategies in Belgium, England, Finland and Australia which are the focus of the 2008 OECD Study. 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.'* (OECD, 2008:9)

In England, headteachers already subscribe to a framework offering development opportunities working towards system leadership. This framework is accessed at different levels, commensurate with the level of need, and makes use of successful heads in a recognised role of support. At an initial level the 'professional partner/mentor/coach' approach offers support from experienced professionals to lesser experienced colleagues on a one to one basis. (This may happen frequently in Scottish education but not in a systemic or formal manner.) Following on from this a 'Local Leader of Education (LLE), in addition to running their own school, can take up a coaching and mentoring role with a headteacher colleague whose school is facing acknowledged challenges.

Another approach is through the use of a 'School Improvement Partner (SIP)', as a vehicle for driving, developing and leading the focused school improvement plan of several schools. Also in English schools, headteachers of outstanding schools are eligible to be 'National Leaders of Education (NLE), where they and their staff can support schools in addition to their own, in challenging circumstances.

This developed system leadership pathway offers a framework to develop for the Scottish context, underpinned by a national approach which would not be open to the vagaries of local authority interpretation. (Dimmock: SCEL Presentation Network Meeting 2015)

Concerned with the power relations in some of these scenarios, however, Muijs et al, (2010), expressed a view that sharing good practice from a 'good' school to a 'weak' school can result in resentment and lack of cooperation among staff. Staff in the perceived weak school could feel undervalued and that 'they were being colonised by the stronger partner.' Muijs et al, (2010:17)

Drawing from a further study, Muijs et al, (2011) in identifying four main theoretical positions took the view that constructivist organisational theory, social capital theory, new social movement theory and Durkheimian network theory all suggested that collaborative approaches and networking offered benefits and opportunities for schools to drive school improvement, provide full multi-agency services, save materials resources and staff costs and apply in joint bids for additional funding. There is great and broad theoretical support for the benefits collaboration and networks offer and this should underpin the approach taken in the Authority task undertaken.

Similarly, in looking at moving beyond what happens with individual schools, Ainscow, (2015) suggests that collaboration between differently performing schools can reduce polarisation within education systems, to the particular benefit of learners who are performing relatively poorly. Lessons learned from the recent 'Challenge' initiatives in London, Manchester and Wales, suggest that school to school partnerships can now be a powerful means of fostering improvements. A significant finding of Ainscow's research was that 'collaborative arrangements can have a positive impact on the learning of all pupils in all of the participating schools.' Ainscow, (2015)

Taking this further, Hatcher, (2014), cited the Birmingham example where local headteacher scepticism regarding 'a lack of confidence' in the local authority, resulted in a '...vision for the Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP), (where) headteachers, from all types of schools, take on collective leadership of education in our city.' (Hatcher, 2014:363)

This scenario is a leap away from the relationship currently between local authority and headteachers in our own national context, and questions very much the status quo in existing relationships.

A Dutch study, (Moolenaar et al, 2015) seemed to suggest that principals (headteachers) who occupy a central position in their school's advice network are also more likely to occupy a central position in their districts collaborative leadership network. The concept of 'Transformational Leadership' was also found to be a factor affecting the extent to which these principals (headteachers) were central in both networks. The study views the work of school leaders being increasingly done 'through' social relationships and proposes that, '... a 21st century school leader may complement... more traditional leadership behaviours with a focus on social relationships to be a networked leader.' Moolenaar, (2015:29) Townsend, (2015) adopts a construct of 'hybrid leadership' as a sophisticated approach leading school networks on an even more complex approach, with different blends of activity.

Key points and recommendations

The consequence of all of these emerging models is that schools will have to face their wider responsibilities for all children and develop patterns of organisation to give them flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with those beyond the school gate. The task of leadership then becomes the successful creation of the supportive climate and networks to support these developments.

Measuring my own learning against the SCEL programme rationale, I am aware of the considerable personal growth in my understanding of what system leadership looks like, its complexity and what is required to lead effectively at this level. In Scottish Education the challenge is to act 'beyond authority' (Middleton, 2014, Cubie, 2015), within a transformatively changed culture. A sincere attempt at improving the national system of education in Scotland has to be pursued by the 'informed' and 'credible' system leaders beyond the success of their own establishment and looking to the good of all children in all schools. I am aware of the professional learning on this programme through reflection on my understanding of the area of study and my own professional practice. Through the high quality coaching and network days, I can further appreciate my cognitive development and engagement with professional reading as well as the high level messages available through the presentations by recognised experts in their various fields. I am aware also of the experiential learning through the professional visits and round-table discussions and dialogue, as well as the professional dialogue with colleague participants.

In response to the task set by the authority at the start of this study, my original perception has been altered significantly by the course of professional development which I have accessed through the participation in the SCEL Fellowship Programme. Adding the knowledge gained through course involvement, I have gathered a more informed personal response through this learning, and trying to view it through a lens of the original authority task, I would see the following as more important issues regarding system leadership to be fully explored than the calendars and logistics originally requested;

- Collaborative cultures must be established and maintained by 'authentic and credible' – *(with clear criteria for that claim – i.e. SCEL Fellowship, Masters Degree, Doctorate, Specialist Expertise etc.)* - players where a voluntary approach from 'leaders' is necessary and that the commitment must be obvious and sustainable.
- Agency must come from the headteacher practitioners and not necessarily from the 'centre.'(Local Authority)
- It must operate on social lines, being aware of human interactions and demonstrating an awareness of personality and social networks.
- It must be open to bigger picture scenarios, yet answer local needs.
- It must be aware of power relations, seek a non-hierarchical approach yet recognise experience and wisdom.
- It must be formally structured and supported.

For realistic collaborative networking to take place and for genuine system leadership to emerge there can be no place for place for 'contrived collegiality' Datnow, (2011:149), and relationships must be appropriate and valued.

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Developing Collaborative Networking In a Local Authority

Aim:

To undertake a development opportunity offered through participation in the Scottish College of Educational Leadership Fellowship Programme with a view to future development of the use of effective collaborative networks within and beyond West Lothian Council Education Services.

Objectives

- To develop capacity within the Authority to advance effective collaboration between and beyond schools.
- To explore system leadership approaches within the context of a local authority
- To work in partnership with the Scottish College of Educational Leadership
- To professionally develop participants in the Fellowship Programme
- To work towards continuous improvement of the Education Service
- To meet the expectations detailed in the authority policy document. 'Moving Forward In Learning.'

Specific Tasks

- Full participation and engagement in the SCEL Fellowship Programme
- Collaborate with representatives of West Lothian Education Services Senior Management team to agree on direction and actions and to report progress on this programme.
- Maintain a visible profile and raise awareness of the Fellowship Programme and share good practice gathered from the experience with colleagues and professional partners.
- Work with Headteacher colleagues and Link Officers to promote, extend and enhance the role of effective collaborative networks. To advance and support those already in existence and those planned for future development.
- To advise on and support system leadership activities.