

# Leadership and equity in Scottish Schools

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SCEL Fellowship Enquiry 2018

## **Leadership and Equity in Scottish Schools**

As a participant in Cohort Four of the SCEL Fellowship programme, I have been fortunate to engage with headteacher colleagues from across the country focusing on professional learning around the themes of educational improvement at system level. Within the programme, I have identified an area of enquiry that I am not only interested in but believe to be of significant importance at both local and national level.

### **Aims of Enquiry**

This enquiry aims to explore how leadership development and Scotland's attainment challenge are interconnected; exemplify local authority system leadership development and begin to assess both leadership at all levels and the impact that it can have on closing the poverty-related attainment gap for pupils. Two focus questions within this would be:

- *How can system leadership look to develop leadership opportunities in order to maximise leadership at all levels?*
- *How can the development of leadership contribute towards impact on local and national agendas for improving equity for Scotland's children?*

### **Background to the Enquiry**

At the beginning of 2017, the Scottish government unveiled their planned strategy to close the poverty-related attainment gap. The £750 million Attainment Scotland Fund plans detailed how 95% of schools across the country would benefit from an initial £120m of Pupil Equity Funding (PEF), allocated directly to schools (Scottish Government, 2017). The criteria for allocation was based around eligibility for free school meals from P1-S3. The funding, to be spent at the discretion of headteachers working in partnership with each other and their local authority, will be invested over the current Parliamentary term to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap (Scottish Government, 2017)

The Scottish Government's *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Scottish Government, 2010: 101) made the recommendation that "[a] virtual college of school leadership should be developed to improve leadership capacity at all levels within Scottish education". In light of this, the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) was established in April 2014 with the aim to provide innovative, high quality leadership programmes and services to help ensure teachers and early years practitioners are provided with learning and development opportunities to make a real difference to the outcomes for children and young people.<sup>1</sup> The recommendation from the Donaldson Report and the subsequent establishment of SCEL highlights the importance placed upon the development of leadership qualities in all staff, as well identifying and supporting those who will become Scotland's future headteachers.

SCEL is committed to developing a Framework for Educational Leadership which offers professional learning in leadership for teachers at all stages of their leadership journey: probationer to system leader. Equally, the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) provides its own suite of standards for professional recognition. Following a period of redesign from August 2016 to May 2017 with the assistance of an advisory group, of which I was a part, the revamped SCEL framework and the promotion of it across the country provides an opportunity to promote contextualised leadership at all levels.

*Empowering Schools: A consultation on the provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill* (Scottish Government, 2017) details significant implications for how local authorities devolve

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<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.scelscotland.org.uk/who-we-are/>).

responsibility and empower schools. Research would suggest that ensuring sustainable success and impact throughout such a period of change would need to embrace and embed models of system leadership that can forge constructive, collaborative relationships between and beyond schools (Dimmock, 2016) as well as building a sustainable culture where schools move from collaboration and co-responsibility, to a position of shared professional accountability (Munby and Fullan, 2016). The *Empowering Schools' Bill* (Scottish Government 2017) and the emerging implications for how schools govern is of significant importance in shaping leadership and the impact that it can have on outcomes and as such, headteachers have an important role in how they respond to it.

Within my own local authority context, West Lothian is now in its fourth year of its *Moving Forward in Learning* agenda (West Lothian Council 2016). This places the development of collaboration and leadership at the heart of its guiding principles. All school leadership teams in West Lothian schools play leading roles across the authority's working groups and this professional enquiry will provide an opportunity to explore the impact of this agenda. As schools are using PEF allocations to raise attainment, it is of interest to reflect on how schools — particularly in collaborative partnerships use resources, implement interventions and develop leadership to ensure sustainable improvements.

It would be my hope to achieve an insight into how emerging system leadership and the development of leaders at all levels in schools is beginning to make an impact within the West Lothian as well as wider contexts across Scotland. To achieve this I will reflect on relevant literature and reflect on a range of data collected from headteachers and emerging teacher leaders in my local authority. It is my hope therefore, to provide exemplification of my own understanding of system leadership and an analytical summary of my findings.

## **Key concepts of the enquiry**

### **Defining and contextualising system leadership**

System leadership is a developing concept and practice increasingly seen as a tool for school improvement (Dimmock, 2016). It can be described as a form of leadership that extends beyond a single school, where headteachers work for the success of students in institutions other than their own (Fullan, 2005). System leaders are those headteachers who are willing to shoulder system-wide roles in order to support the improvement of other schools as well as their own (Hopkins and Higham, 2007). For education systems intent on transforming performance, school leadership, and an investment in the development and preparation of school leaders has become a central priority (Harris and Jones, 2017).

There is a recognised necessity for 21<sup>st</sup> century school leaders to ensure that collaboration is at the heart of improvement. Kellerman (2016) stresses the importance of collective leadership responsibility describing a need to reimagine leadership learning by shedding our obsession with single individuals and adopting instead a more inclusive, systemic perspective. In order to make a difference for learners, schools should be involved in focused, productive networks within which leaders, teachers and students challenge, support, innovate and learn from one another in ways that measurably improve outcomes (Munby and Fullan, 2016). In nurturing and developing effective collaborative cultures in schools, high performing leadership as defined by Dimmock (2012) brings social influence guided by moral purpose to build capacity in successfully achieving shared and desired goals beyond expectations, in a sustained way.

The most effective leaders ensure that any interventions or innovations are responsive to context and culture (Harris and Jones, 2017). Warner (2015) describes becoming a great leader as becoming a student of your context and to understand your organisation's social system.

While much leadership knowledge and skills is generic, it is the application of such knowledge and skills to specific contexts that decides their efficacy (Dimmock, 2012).

### Teacher learning communities as a model for promoting instructional leadership

The concept of the headteacher in a school as a *conductor*, creating a contextualised culture where learning-centred (instructional) leadership grows is complex. Hallinger and Murphy (1985, cited by Hallinger 2003) define an instructional leadership construct as three dimensions: defining the schools mission, managing the instructional programme and promoting a positive school-learning culture. Leithwood et al. (2004) whilst supporting Hallinger's construct, points to the fact that the basics of successful leadership fundamentally lie in three sets of practices: setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organisation.

High performing leaders can improve capability of other leaders (Fullan, 2005). Dimmock (2017) makes the strong claim that high performing leaders possess key personal characteristics, dispositions and attributes – firmly guided by a strong set of values and appreciate and accept their responsibility to share and improve leadership and learning within, between and beyond their own schools (Dimmock 2017). In the same presentation, Dimmock also makes the strong claim that high performing leaders transform their schools into professional learning communities that are increasingly networked. These professional or teacher learning communities (TLCs) are defined by Day (1997, cited by Chow, 2016) as a form of professional learning community (PLCs) that helps teachers to extend their commitment as change agents. In the same article, Chow goes on to describe the most effective TLCs as being those that emphasise collaboration, collective empowerment and mutual independence for the advancement of professional autonomy and the betterment of student learning. TLCs are dependent on the active support of leadership at all levels and the nature and quality of senior staff has a significant influence on creating learning culture (Stoll et al., 2006). Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999, cited by Stoll et al., 2006) see the success in TLCs lying in the creation of conditions for growth in teachers' professional knowledge and that this is best accomplished by embedding professional learning in practical activities. It is these contextualized, meaningful opportunities that are increasingly being seen as vital if TLCs are to remain relevant and make significant impact on school improvement. Further into this enquiry, I will evaluate how my current school has engaged with the Tapestry Partnership model as a TLC vehicle for such improvement.

Hopkins and Higham (2007) suggests that successful system leaders demonstrate striking characteristics that help to create cultures where staff are committed to the improvement of teaching and learning, recognise their role in developing schools as a learning communities and value the importance of building relationships across and beyond schools to provide professional learning opportunities.

### Leadership for promoting equity

High performing leaders possess strong values orientated towards closing attainment gaps; system leaders shoulder responsibility for creating school cultures that prize equity and social justice (Dimmock, 2016). The moral purpose of ensuring excellence and equity for every pupil in our country as defined by the Scottish Government (2017) finds its foundation over one hundred years previously in what was seen as the aspirational creation of a society permeated by mutual regard of all citizens for all other citizens (Dewey, 1916/2001). In his 1970 article *Education Cannot Compensate for Society*, Bernstein states that the power relationships created outside school penetrate the organization, distribution and evaluation of knowledge through the social context. If system leaders are to effectively promote equity and tackle poverty they must lead work for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture, and employ educational resources to help give communities a greater sense of aspiration and empowerment (Hopkins

and Higham, 2007). This, highlights the most important thing that effective system leaders do, namely build capacity to achieve school improvement in order to raise achievement levels, and secure more equitable student learning outcomes (Dimmock, 2016).

## Enquiry Methodology

In order to provide an evidence-based data set for my enquiry I created two distinct questionnaires for the sets of practitioners that I wished to engage with: senior school leaders (most notably headteachers) and teacher leaders. It was my desire to gather information from these sets that would provide me with insights into the following focus areas:

Senior school leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Developing leadership capacity within your school</i></li> <li>• <i>Leadership development opportunities directly linked to Pupil Equity Funding</i></li> <li>• <i>Expectations with regards to outcome for pupils</i></li> <li>• <i>Expectations with regards to leadership capacity</i></li> </ul>
Teacher leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Understanding and experiences of leadership and learning</i></li> </ul>

These questionnaires were distributed electronically to participants via email using online *Google* and *GLOW* form tools (see Appendices one and two). These online questionnaires featured a small number of multiple choice questions to provide necessary numeric data and opportunity for qualitative comments if respondents wished to elaborate. Both of these questionnaires were distributed in term one of the school session. Given the limitations of this small-scale enquiry, I believe that these methods were appropriate in providing an insight into leadership development and initial evaluations of what impact could be seen.

For clarification, the teacher leaders who provided responses were about to engage on collaborative professional learning within the Tapestry programme, specifically through allocated PEF. These practitioners had either put themselves forward or had been nominated by senior leaders to undertake leadership roles within their schools.

### Senior school leaders

Forty-three school leaders responded to the questionnaire, this equating to 64% of primary headteachers. Within this group, 100% stated that they were developing leadership capacity within their school this session. These could broadly be categorised across a number of themed areas: developing curriculum, taking responsibility for ensuring quality learning and teaching in class and coaching and mentoring.

In providing details, some examples were as follows:

- *Creating distributive leadership culture through promoting teacher leadership and pupil leadership*
- *School champions / lead learner development roles with specific curricular focus particularly literacy and numeracy*
- *Variety of accredited learning supporting leadership taking place Tapestry, Masters level studies at HEI, authority programmes, SCEL programmes*
- *Bespoke non-accredited leadership training*
- *In-school opportunities through shadowing staff, acting posts, SIP-related posts, PEF-related posts, leading Working Groups*
- *Opportunities to participate in professional inquiry within cluster*
- *Coaching and mentoring opportunities supporting new entrants to profession, probationers and staff aspiring to leadership posts*

- *Professional Learning Groups across cluster each with facilitator*

Almost all headteachers drew direct links between leadership and school improvement planning, some also highlighting the opportunity to address National Improvement Framework priorities such as the Developing Young Workforce agenda (Scottish Government, 2018).

Some 81% of responding headteachers highlighted that leadership development opportunities were directly linked to planned PEF initiatives. In considering expectations for pupils that would arise from these, a high proportion of these focused on improving outcomes for pupils, specifically raising attainment in literacy and numeracy, other responses focused on aspects such as health, wellbeing and family learning. In considering expectations with regards to leadership and development of staff, almost all respondents highlighted the opportunity to develop confidence, collegiality, pedagogical knowledge and critical reflection. Several respondents, although not a majority, commented on striving to develop a strategic awareness of leadership at all levels in their schools and the significance this may have in ensuring sustainable models of improvement.

### Teacher leaders

The aim of this questionnaire issued to teacher leaders was to gather data and views about the respondents understanding and experiences of leadership and learning. For the purpose of this survey, leadership for learning was defined as 'principled influential interactions arising from and resulting in valued learning' (MacBeath and Dempster, 2008: p.49).

Fifty practitioners from the participating forty-eight primary and secondary schools completed the questionnaire. These comprised of twenty-nine class teachers, seventeen principal teachers, two depute headteachers and three practitioners who did not identify their role. From the responses, 76% of practitioners said they engaged in professional dialogue about the relationship between leadership and learning, 86% said they engaged in professional activities to improve leadership and learning. Highlighted comments noted that planned activities through school improvement agendas and '*devolved/distributive*' roles were providing increased opportunities for these.

Some 46% of the teacher leaders indicated that they did not have the opportunity to extend this learning out with their own school. Encouragingly, 82% of respondents said that they explored practice and pedagogy through enquiry or research models, with 74% commenting that teachers play a part in promoting leadership for learning. Respondents commented that the growing culture of TLCs, cluster improvement planning and a raised profile of practitioner enquiry models by school leaders were contributing towards this; however, a few comments highlighted that not all members of staff take opportunities to engage. Some 44% percent of respondents were aware of the SCEL framework for educational leadership and had engaged with it to some degree.

### Implications arising from the enquiry

My enquiry into the links between how leadership development and Scotland's attainment challenge are interconnected began in September 2017 through the distribution of questionnaires to school and teacher leaders across West Lothian's sixty seven primary schools. As of the date of submission (February 2018), the teacher leadership programmes focused on raising attainment through specific pupil equity funding are still ongoing. As such, I present my findings very much as a work in progress model, with the intention of monitoring and tracking the impact into and beyond the next academic year. However at this stage, there are implications arising.

Teacher leaders who responded from across the authority have described a growing emphasis on connecting leadership and learning through collaborative professional development and school collegiate activities. Whilst definitions such as distributive and devolved leadership were applied by respondents, there is recognition that teachers are being provided with more opportunities to adopt leadership roles, notably to develop learning and pedagogy. In this enquiry the *Tapestry* programme has been the vehicle to develop this; however, guidance such as the *National Improvement Framework*, and local authority agendas such as West Lothian's *Moving Forward in Learning* are facilitating and nurturing local, contextual opportunities for staff to assume increasing leadership roles at all levels. Leverett (2002, cited by NCSL, 2009) highlights the importance of this need to embrace collective effort, promote a shared sense of purpose and mission, engage many in collaboration across roles, and develop organisational cultures that set high expectations (p.17).

The promotion of leadership at all levels requires to prominently feature in improvement plans at school, cluster, authority and national level, detailing not only expected outcomes for leadership development, but expected outcomes and impact for the young people being planned for. *Empowering Schools: A consultation on the provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill (2017)* and the proposal for a Headteachers Charter provides an opportunity for school and system leaders to collaboratively reshape a culture across Scotland that facilitates, nurtures and celebrates leadership at all levels. Organisations such as Education Scotland and SCEL should be the necessary vehicles that model, frame and support the sustainable resilience and professional capacity of educational leadership.

Headteachers were abundantly clear in their response that developing leadership capacity within their schools remains a priority. The majority also see such leadership development as having a connected opportunities to closing gaps. If teacher leadership is to continue to develop and equally make an increasingly significant impact on providing equity, local authorities need to ensure there is a concerted focus on providing necessary frameworks that supports this. There is a strong case for schools and local authorities to continue to develop an outward-looking approach that takes teacher leadership beyond their own establishments, builds PLCs and ensures that improvements are increasingly evidence based, data driven and focused on improving outcomes through meaningful, purposeful collaboration. The evolution of PLCs require to use evidence thoughtfully in combination with other kinds of expertise, and engage teachers and their leadership as part of their everyday work, rather than being driven by administrators in episodic team meetings (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2017).

The newly created Regional Improvement Collaboratives provide an exciting opportunity to demonstrate, strengthen and support collaborative working, innovation and the sharing of best practice between schools and across our education system (Scottish Government, 2017). In order to ensure effectiveness and impact of these collaborative partnerships, uplifting and inspirational leadership will be required at school and system level. It is equally important that the professional learning of headteachers continues to evolve. In planning for this, local authorities can only benefit from structuring CLPL opportunities that are research-based, grounded in the latest and best educational theories and make the best links with key partners across academia such as universities and research centres. Again, I would consider this a key opportunity for collaboration and planning. Providing the highest quality of leadership development experience for headteachers should ensure provision for developing the next generation of system leaders through a culture of reciprocity and mutual respect.

I would strive to envisage a culture for our nation that always links leadership and learning. One that, through successful collaborative partnerships, maintains a clear focus on sustainably tackling equity gaps (attainment, societal and otherwise), that builds positive relationships and enables both risk taking and innovative ways of working. Munby and Fullan (2016) make the point that all effective change processes shape and reshape ideas as they build capacity and

shared ownership. In order to create effective change, it is necessary to recognise the time and structural investment that is required. Torrance and Forde (2017) describe the need to play for continuous gradual gains where there was much more certainty of successful outcomes even though inevitably it may take longer to bring about change. System leaders need to tackle the issue of whether current structures and cultures provide the necessary conditions for sustainable change. The necessity of restructuring of local authorities as part of financial constraints places an increased emphasis on empowered leadership at all levels. As such, it is of vital importance for system leaders to plan strategically for this leadership to grow and evolve effectively.

### **Leadership Learning Experience**

My engagement within the SCEL fellowship has provided me with the opportunity to develop my understanding of system leadership through rich, relevant, focused professional networked learning. I have been fortunate to engage with the programme at another challenging and exciting crossroads in Scottish education's ongoing narrative, where significant global macro issues such as economy, equity and social justice are requiring to be made sense of strategically at micro and meso level in order to ensure children and young people are being given, as defined by SCEL, the best chance to succeed and that our communities continue to flourish.

The structure of the Fellowship and the support of SCEL colleagues have provided a logical, richly researched, relevant framework that has enabled me to challenge my understanding of the necessary skills and attributes required for system leadership. The opportunities to analyse my influencing and leadership styles, for example, and critically reflect on how these can impact on others has been both insightful and hugely beneficial.

The past twelve months have enabled me to reflect on my own experience as a school leader. My knowledge and thinking has been challenged and changed through opportunities for professional reflection, dialogue and reading. I have begun to explore my practice and consider how my own strongly held values around building relationships, respect and trust can allow me to grow into, and indeed enhance, my role as a potential system leader.

In reflecting upon this year's professional learning, an indelible memory lingers from the first residential engagement - an exercise that focused upon considering the complexity of the world in 2017. Professional dialogue examined how we can make the millennial generations value education and the necessity of finding better means to engage everyone's intelligence in solving challenges as they arise (Wheatley 2005).

I have learned from the fellowship programme that transforming schools into professional learning communities and creating ownership to lead with as many people as possible can make a significant difference in providing a sustainable change model in our complex world. Education remains the single most important tool we have in shaping society. System leadership is driven by values and moral purpose, a responsibility to make things better for all, through a privileged position of influence and power. In moving forward, I consider my role as a system leader as one that can be exciting, challenging and hugely rewarding in equal measures.



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