A tapestry of views on school leadership: making sense of leadership on the SQH.

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Abstract
This paper examines the perceptions of school leadership amongst a group of aspiring head teachers, engaged on the Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH) programme. This programme encourages aspiring head teachers to critique the notion that leadership is centred around headship utilising learning drawn from their experience, focused readings and the discussions that they undertake during the course.

In moving towards headship as a ‘privileged’ site of leadership this paper examines how the sample of aspiring head teachers become aware, and are making sense, of the complexities and ambiguities of leadership in the ‘middle space’.

Introduction
The Standard for Headship in Scotland (SEED, 2002) specifies the key purpose of headship and the professional values, management functions and professional abilities that describe competence in headship. In order to meet the criteria for the Standard a considerable numbers of prospective head teachers undertake study towards the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership and Management (Scottish Qualification for Headship). This programme is structured to enable candidates to develop their practice through:

- leading and managing whole-school improvement projects in their school;
- reflecting upon, analysing and evaluating their experience and their own leadership and management practice, and applying what they have learned; and
- drawing on the ideas and experience of others through professional dialogue with their peers, mentors and their tutors, reading and accessing other sources of information.

The four Units that lead to the award of the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership and Management (SQH) are:

Unit 1: Educational Leadership
Unit 2: Developing Capability for Improvement
Unit 3: Leading and Managing to Improve Learning: Part 1
Unit 4: Leading and Managing to Improve Learning: Part 2

The introductory unit engages the participants in examining the role of school leaders within the context of debates and policy decisions about the nature and purpose of education. The participants are encouraged to consider current and possible future policy paradigms and contexts in Scotland and the UK.

Method
This study was carried out amongst a group of aspiring head teachers who had just completed Unit 1 of the Scottish Qualification for Headship programme. The participants’ views of school leadership were sought by circulating, via e-mail, a questionnaire containing a small number of open-ended questions. The questions were derived from the work of...
Simkin’s (2005) study of ‘Leadership in Education’, and Hammersley-Fletcher and Brundrett’s (2005) study of ‘Leaders on Leadership’. These questions provide the participants with the opportunity to outline their personal views on the following:

- the impact of policy upon school leadership; and
- their emerging understanding of leadership in the ‘middle space’.

Nine participants who responded to the questionnaire, drawn from a cohort of twenty-seven, are represented in this paper. The group of participants comprises two Senior Deputies, two Depute Head Teachers (DHT) and three Principal Teachers (PT) drawn from the secondary (S) school sector. One Depute and one Principal Teacher represent the primary (P) school sector. The account that follows is not meant to suggest that there is a total consensus amongst the participants instead this is a construction based on the totality of their responses; the responses are those of the respondents whilst the construction is my attempt to make sense of those responses.

**Impact of policy upon school leadership**

The participants were asked to outline the impact of policy development on their role as an educational leader. In addition they were asked to indicate how such policy change was helping and/or hindering the agenda for improvement in their schools. The participants indicate that in order to be at the forefront of change, a great deal of work is necessary in developing and implementing strategies based on National and Regional Priorities (PT/S 05).

These National and Regional Priorities are seen as driving school improvement plans, and generating demands on staff, with little room for manoeuvre at school level leading to compromised school agendas and developments (DHT/S 09):

> there is little time for our school to be creative or individual in a way that we would like to be. We draw up our improvement plan according to authority priorities and fit everything else around this.

(PT/P 02)

School ‘leaders’ find themselves driven by a need to implement the various authority priorities with little real sense that they have any control over the nature of the changes being suggested (DHT/S 01). The concern is that the values and vision that determine the direction of schools is now, to a great extent, located outside the school and is not subject to debate or alteration. Furthermore the increased pressures from the local authority to include priorities from their agenda for improvement, in conjunction with those identified by the school, has the potential to make development plans unmanageable (DHT/P 07). New initiatives are seen as having a major impact on the participants’ role creating a tension between achieving centrally imposed short-term targets and developing the capability of the school community.

Consequently the way in which change is managed is vital to its chances of success (DHT/S 01). In negotiating this policy landscape the task of leadership becomes one of ‘subversion’ in order to minimise the impact of the negative elements identified in the external policy agenda by re-aligning them to accord with the educational vision determined at school level.
These improvement priorities are not necessarily negatively framed in that they have provided the impetus for improvement. Particular emphasis has been placed on audit and quality assurance documents based around the ‘How Good is our School’ (HGIOS) (HMie, 2002) measures leading to a level of accountability not seen before that, nevertheless, has helped to drive improvement forward (PT/S 06). Furthermore national policies are seen as giving rise to flexibility of learning approaches (DHT/S 08). Indeed the introduction of policies such as ‘Ambitious Excellent Schools’ (SEED, 2004a) and ‘A Curriculum for Excellence’ (SEED, 2004b), amongst others, are seen as beneficial in that they have served to re-focus leaders in terms of the core business of learning and teaching (PT/S 04) which has been re-positioned at the heart of the school (DHT/P 07). These policies have provided leaders with a language for discussion with respect to different approaches to learning and teaching as well as encouraging observation of practice with a view to sharing good practice with colleagues (DHT/S 03).

In addition some of the participants argue that, in terms of developing their own thinking with respect to the policy context, examining how the policies fit together helps to provide an overview of educational development beyond the school (DHT/S 08). The one note of caution raised concerns policies that are in ‘vogue’ (PT/S 06) which produce unhelpful ‘knee jerk’ responses (DHT/S 09) that stand outside the natural cycles of educational change. Another problem identified is that as one change is operationalised subsequent change often serves to undermine, and even reverse, that which came earlier (PT/S 04). The participants inevitably walk the tightrope of leadership in that externally imposed reform can, at times, appear seductive but nevertheless lead to compromised educational values and practice. Vigilance is required to ensure that leaders are not ensnared by the managerialist agenda acceding to the implementation of mandated policies that align with political rather than educational values and visions.

Whatever the initiative the complexity and increased pace of the change process is evident. Although curricular flexibility is seen as having a positive impact in schools it nevertheless presents a number of challenges to do with: developing and resourcing courses, timetabling, assessment procedures, progression and appropriateness of curricular provision, parental involvement, and liasing with associated primaries and educational providers (PT/S 05). Furthermore it is important to support the implementation of policy through the provision of staff development and the necessary resources (DHT/P 07):

Our staff is fed up having another initiative pushed their way without proper resources or funding to allow it to be successful. One initiative is superseded by another which, when it comes down to it, is very often something old with a new name and shorter time frame in which to implement it. (PT/P 02)
Consequently school staff feel overwhelmed with the amount of change which is ‘swamping’ schools, necessitating the need for a period of stability and rationalisation in order to consolidate the improvement agenda (DHT/S 08).

**Emerging understanding of leadership in the ‘middle space’:**

The participants were asked to describe a situation when there was a gap between the leadership that they desired compared to that they experienced. In addition they were asked to describe how their understanding of leadership had changed in the recent past. The participants have an emerging sense of an imbalance between leadership and management:

> I am now more aware of the need for the head teacher to be more proactive in actually leading people and not just managing a school. (PT/P 02)

There is a general consensus that the role of leader in recent years has moved towards more of a managerial model. The increasing amounts of administration creeping in demand more by way of organisational skills (PT/S 05) and absorb time which could be more productively deployed in developing the capability of the school to move forward; concerned more with ends, ‘doing things right’ rather than means, ‘doing the right things’. Leaders now face more accountability than ever before, both locally and nationally (DHT/P 07), as a result of the managerial agenda. This is seen as having implications for the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers:

> No matter how hard you try the nature of the relationship that you have with staff is different. (DHT/S 01)

At one level the participants are still coming to terms with the notion of the ‘head teacher’ as a construct that involves them, as a leader, placing distance between them and followers; becoming ‘other’. However, the main concern is with the critical duality of head teachers as managers and head teachers as leaders. Leaders are seen as distinctive in that they are actively involved in the school community taking time to talk to pupils, staff and parents as well as acknowledging their achievements. Leaders are also able to make ‘the difficult call’ when required in response to a situation (DHT/S 03). It is necessary for leaders to be more visionary and direction-orientated in order to see the ‘big picture’ whilst placing less emphasis on management and administrative tasks (DHT/S 08). Thus leaders are concerned with setting the direction for the organisation, determining strategic plans and inspiring followers whilst managers ensure that the route is followed, plans are operationalised and that followers engage in productive work. Indeed one of the participants indicated that this change in perspective only became apparent when they stepped up from being a Principal Teacher to join the SMT. They suggest making it compulsory for all Principal Teachers, aspiring to headship, to serve as co-opted members of their SMT teams, as part of their CPD (DHT/S 09), in order that they become aware of the shift in outlook that is necessary; forcing aspiring head teachers ‘out of their comfort zones’.
The participants recognise that there are difficulties with respect to ‘leadership in the ‘middle space’:

At the moment, I am finding it difficult to compromise some of my principles regarding management in order to comply with a Senior Management expectation of my role. I am trying to support disillusioned staff through meeting their CPD needs, openness and honesty, and trying to represent their fears and worries to SMT. By doing this, I hope that they will regard me as fair and recognise my support. I hope, in turn, that they will feel part of a team and feel valued …sometimes I feel I am caught in the middle. (PT/S 05)

Principal Teachers, as leaders, find themselves in this ‘middle space’ whereby they must mediate the values of the internal policy context constructed by senior management with that of their colleagues’ values and beliefs. However, this tension between values and purposes is evident notwithstanding the participant’s role in the school’s hierarchical structure:

While my head teacher was on HMIe ten-week secondment, I was acting-head teacher and had the responsibility of taking the school forward for that time. For the first time I fully understood the conflicting demands of this post and the accountability it brings. The summer term was a particularly busy one, and I felt the weight of responsibility and the need to prove myself to staff. The result was that I found myself taking even the slightest criticism personally and was not comfortable with ‘pulling rank’ when required. (DHT/P 07)

In moving towards headship as the ‘centre’ of leadership activity the participants become aware that leadership activity in nested in several interacting policy arenas. Consequently the ‘middle space’ expands requiring them to achieve new understandings by interpreting the deepening ambiguities and cope effectively with the increasing complexity of the policy environment they find themselves in, whilst at the same time supporting followers in arriving at the same understanding; this dynamic relationship between leaders and followers in the formulation of policy becomes a central task of leadership. Thus the policy environment is a rich source of conflict potentiality requiring leaders to get inside and merge ‘assumptive worlds’ in order to reduce the risk of disagreement (DHT/S 01). However, the participants indicate that it is often difficult to predict the outcomes to the process of consultation in the formation of policy. These difficulties often arise when consultation takes place without a clear vision and sense of direction of where it is hoped to position the school in its environment:

all parties were involved and consulted. Views were listened to, compromises sought and possibilities discussed. What I would change about it if I could was the fact that out of all these discussions, no decision was ever reached. (PT/S 04)

Worse still is when there is a lack of consultation, a lack of insight and awareness, by those at the very top (DHT/S 09), of the difficulties and complexity involved in being ‘piggy in the middle’ within the ‘middle space’.
Concluding remarks

Amidst the tapestry of views on school leadership it is evident that they are grappling with the complexity, ambiguity and context-specific educational landscapes they inhabit. The formulation of policy requires that leaders:

- embrace complexity and ambiguity in order to operate effectively in several interacting policy arenas;
- take a proactive role in aligning National and Local Authority policy contexts with beliefs and values determined at school level;
- cultivate a dynamic relationship with followers that acknowledges the ‘political’ dimensions of enacting change;
- be sensitive to the symbiotic relationship between leadership and management processes.

Bibliography


Scottish Executive Education Department (2004a) Ambitious Excellent Schools, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
