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Developing a Coherent Strategy to Build Leadership Capacity in Scottish Education

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Developing a Coherent Strategy to Build Leadership Capacity in Scottish Education

Abstract

Leadership is central to policy ambitions for improvement in Scottish education: 'Highly effective leadership is key to ensuring the highest possible standards and expectations are shared across a school to achieve excellence and equity for all' (Scottish Government, 2016a: 4). To foster teacher engagement in and leadership of change and to prepare enough teachers for headship, building leadership capacity is crucial. The question we explore is how do you design a career-long leadership development strategy to secure this capacity necessary to fulfil these policy intentions while, at the same time, foster the autonomy of teachers in professional learning. We examine firstly, leadership development in the reform agenda and secondly, the task of balancing system and individual needs in career-long leadership development. We then detail the approaches used to build a cohesive leadership system and its ongoing development.

Introduction

Increasingly educational improvement is measured by system-level performance against international benchmarks, notably the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) (OECD, 2015). There is a significant political drive to build leadership across an educational system to achieve improvements in outcomes. Leadership development is a theme of the annual *International Symposium on the Teaching Profession*, (ISTP) attended by ministers of education and teaching unions where a continuing topic has been the leadership role of teachers in school and system improvements. However, a transition is necessary from a construct of leadership based on the separation of teaching and management to 'the emerging concept of teacher leadership' (Asia Society, 2016: 20). These discussions record that teacher leadership 'has no settled meaning' across different systems but essentially is about teachers working together 'to strengthen the pedagogy of the school' (Asia Society, 2015: 11). Teacher leadership complements other forms of leadership including policy leadership, school leadership and 'horizontal leadership' which promotes collaboration across schools (Asia Society, 2015: 11). Fostering complementary forms of leadership necessitates a coherent approach to development.

A major review of Scottish teacher education, *Teaching Scotland's Future*, (Donaldson, 2011) called for teachers who are 'agents of change, not passive or reluctant receivers of externally-imposed prescription' (p.18) signaling the need to expand leadership capacity in schools. Donaldson (2011) looked to teachers who are taking 'responsibility for their own development and who are developing their capacity both to use and contribute to the collective understanding of the teaching and learning process'. (Donaldson, 2011: 15). There are, however, some significant issues in building leadership capacity side by side with enhancing teacher agency. Teachers' willingness to engage in leadership activities is a significant concern for succession planning (Forde and Lowden, 2016). Further, the question of teachers leading curriculum and assessment reforms challenges what seems to be an enduring binary of teaching and management in parts of the teaching profession (Priestley and Minty, 2013). To build a national strategy for Scotland there is a need to balance the system need for leadership capacity with scope for individual practitioners to shape their own professional learning pathways that reflect their role, career patterns and aspirations.

The article discusses the designing of a leadership development strategy in Scotland that secures the widening of leadership capacity required by a national education system to fulfil its policy aspirations and at the same time, foster the autonomy of teachers in career-long professional learning. We begin by considering coherence in leadership systems against which we appraise the approaches to leadership development used previously in Scottish education. Then we explore the question of fostering teacher agency in professional learning balanced against a coherent national strategy. From this we outline elements in the ongoing evolution of a national strategy for leadership development and highlight some of the issues that have emerged.

Cohesive Leadership Systems

Huber and West (2002) in their survey of school leadership development across ten countries (in Australasia, Asia, Europe and USA) compared the degree of centralisation. While in more centralised systems school leadership development was 'standardised, closely monitored, mostly mandatory and national or federal governments maintain close involvement in quality assurance' (Huber and West, 2002: 1091), in decentralised systems, there was school autonomy and considerable variety of provision in leadership development. A third group was identified where significant school autonomy sat alongside a centralised approach to school leadership development This third group illustrates:

how two major preoccupations of politicians can be accommodated: on the one hand school level decision-making and strong local involvement in the direction of schools, on the other, some guarantees that the government is ensuring a supply of trained and suitable experienced candidates will be available to manage the stock of schools (Huber and West, 2002: 1092).

While Huber and West examined formal leadership roles, the policy focus now is on building leadership capability on a much broader level.

Levin (2012: 11) argues that large-scale systems change needs 'multi-level engagement with strong leadership', a 'guiding coalition' and capacity building through professional learning individually and at an organisational level. Change is often defined in terms of structures and co-ordinated action but change is also about creating common understandings. Looney (2011) underlines the importance of generating and sharing knowledge across a system to build capacity but Seashore Louis (2013) notes problems in sustaining of headteacher networks used to generate, gather and disseminate knowledge to tackle problems facing schools. Stoll (2013), therefore, asks how learning could be shared across individuals, organisations and networks in a system to build coherence. Thus, Augustine et al. (2009) investigated 'cohesive leadership systems' in the USA designed 'to overcome the isolation of targeted reforms and to forge policy connections that could lead to more-cohesive and high-performing systems' (p.xv). They describe state systems where policies and initiatives are aligned to improve school leadership as having 'structural cohesion' (p.44). However, Williams (2004) characterises education systems as the complex political environments which are 'unpredictable, highly politicized, and immersed in complex social and economic dynamics' (p.36) with competing expectations and educational needs. Therefore, structural cohesion is always provisional. Even in a centralised system with aligned policies, positions re-configure over time. Augustine et al. note a second form of cohesion: 'process cohesion'. This form of cohesion is dynamic 'produced through continual interactions among a range of stakeholders in education' (p.44). Sense-making across different stakeholders is central in

process cohesion to generate shared meanings and aligned practices to achieve goals (Weick, 1995). Process cohesion is similar to Looney's (2011), 'social alignment' where interaction is intended to build interdependence as well as opportunities for learning and improving practice. At the heart of a national strategy for leadership development is a need to build both structural and process cohesion: to establish structures and systems and to generate the necessary interaction and interdependence for shared meanings.

Leadership Development in Scottish Education

Leadership development is a theme in Scottish education (Forde et al., 2011) endorsed by the largest teaching union's statement that every teacher has a leadership role (Educational Institute of Scotland, 2008). However, the debate has been about the merits of programmes rather than the development of a cohesive leadership system. Policy around 'a leadership agenda' (Scottish Executive, 2006) has looked to fostering forms of distributed leadership and designing different modes of leadership development. *Leadership for Learning* (HMIE 2007: 100), for example, listed a range of opportunities: '...Being involved in chairing a working group or project or committee; ...Coaching and mentoring experiences; ... Attendance at leadership seminars ...'. This approach can reduce a national strategy for leadership development to 'menus' of opportunities. There is a lack of coherence – both structural and process - in terms of building a national strategy to increase leadership capacity.

In *TSF* Donaldson (2011) positioned leadership as an element of career-long teacher education rather than a specialist management career path: 'Scottish education needs to develop leadership attributes in all staff as well as identifying and supporting systematically its future headteachers' (p.79). However, significant concerns were raised about existing leadership development: 'provision at present is not well coordinated, with a range of disparate sources of leadership support across a range of national and local providers' (p.81). Recommendations for leadership development included: 'a clear and progressive educational leadership pathway'; evaluation of headship preparation programmes; CPD for experienced headteachers; a national leader scheme for high-performing headteachers; and the establishment of a virtual college for educational leadership (p.100-101). An additional relevant recommendation was the revision professional standards by the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS). The alignment of these recommendations could create structural cohesion. Several strands associated with these recommendations were identified by the National Partnership Group (NPG) (2012) but there was a danger that each would become a single development task involving various stakeholders and a self-contained initiative. Therefore, there was a need to build both structural and social cohesion of a leadership system but this necessitates balancing a set of tensions between the needs of the individual practitioner and the needs of the education system. The four tensions set out in Table 1 relate to flexibility and access, coherence of provision, relevance and progression.

Table 1: Tensions in developing a coherent career-long leadership development strategy

Aspects	Individual Need	System Need
flexibility and access to different opportunities at different points in a career	to suit own circumstances and career stage	ensure viability in the provision of opportunities and a degree of alignment in learning approaches.
relevance of content, skills and outcomes	relates to immediate context and demands as well as aspirations	relates to the external policy aims and demands and system aspirations
coherence of provision where expertise is built cumulatively	learning fits together for individuals to ensure meaningful progressive development	matched to wider drivers, policy and ensures delivery
progression of teachers on a leadership pathway	career patterns individualized - no typical career pattern - wide range of opportunities	succession planning and some clear markers in the 'pipeline'

Flexible approaches to provide access to different opportunities that support teachers' learning are vital to meet the needs of teachers working in different contexts and at different career stages. While the availability of multiple opportunities is important, there is a danger of a proliferation of programmes and approaches which raises issues of viability and quality. Coherent pathways are vital to enable leaders to build progressively the knowledge and skills they need. Specified pathways can support a more coherent approach to leadership succession planning but this is often through prescriptive programmes which prepare teachers for specific roles. An overly prescriptive approach could reduce leadership development to a series of hurdles rather than meeting the different development needs of teachers. The relevance of specific leadership opportunities for an individual teacher may well differ from what is perceived as relevant in relation to policy and organisational developments. A strategy to balance cohesion and flexibility was necessary.

Components of a National Strategy

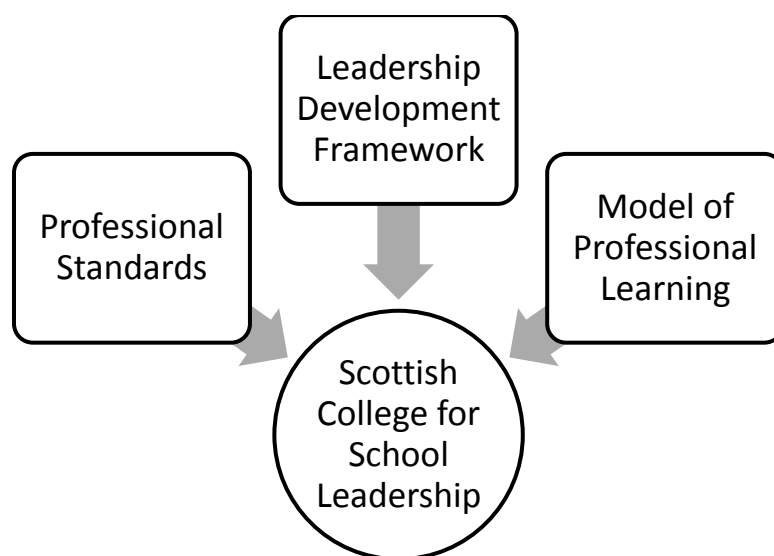
The Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) was established to provide direction to ensure a cohesive and comprehensive strategy for career-long leadership development. The establishment of leadership development centres as self-standing organisations, often government funded, is evident internationally: the Austrian Leadership Academy (Schratz and Petzold, 2007), The Institute of Education Leadership in Ontario (IEL, n.d.) and the New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA, 2016). Southworth (2004) discussing the National College for School Leadership in England, illustrates the purpose of such organisations: 'to lead and transform the school education system into the best in the world' (NCSL, 2001:2). Similarly, the NYCLA was established to address succession planning and support schools in difficulties. Southworth (2004) notes the importance of the NCSL working with a wide range

of key stakeholders. This idea of the catalytic effect of such organisations through building connections is evident in the IEL which:

brings together representatives from Ontario's principals' associations, supervisory officers' associations, councils of directors of education, the Council of Senior Business Officials, and the Ministry of Education to work in a collaborative partnership and model high-quality tri-level strategic leadership at the school, board, and provincial levels (IEL, n.d.)

SCEL was established to 'act as a focal point for leadership development for all parts of the education sector and the opportunities it provides should be accessible by a wide range of interests' (NPG, 2012: 20). A starting point has been to work with stakeholders to build a coherent approach to leadership development.

Figure 1: Components of a National Strategy for Career-Long Leadership Development



If we are to foster greater self-directedness in professional learning, which at the same time build system capacity, there is a need to provide a way for individual practitioners to shape their own leadership pathway within a coherent strategy. Three complementary frameworks, identified in Figure 1, provide system coherence and are also tools for practitioners. Further, each of these frameworks can be used by those managing professional learning in schools and local authorities.

- Professional standards can support rigorous self-evaluation and review to support teachers' planning of their professional learning across their career.
- A leadership development framework can enable teachers and managers of professional learning to plan pathways to enable teachers to increase their scope and responsibilities as a leader.
- A model of professional learning can support the development of valid and meaningful professional learning experiences and enable teachers to select relevant opportunities.

Leadership and the Professional Standards

The revision of the standards by the GTCS codified different levels of leadership in school and widened the scope of leadership (Forde et al., 2016). The *Standards for Leadership and*

Management (GTCS 2012a) recognised the importance of middle leadership and charted a progression towards more complex and nuanced forms of strategic leadership. Middle leadership is operational and contributory: ‘middle leaders will work and contribute to the school improvement agenda’ and headship is strategic: ‘working with others, establish, sustain and enhance a culture of learning and a positive ethos in collaboration with the whole school community to ensure that every learner achieves his/her potential’ (GTCS 2012a: 4). Leadership is also a permeating theme: ‘all teachers are leaders’ (GTCS 2012b: 5). In the *Standard for Registration* (GTCS, 2012b) and *Standard for Career Long Professional Learning* (GTCS, 2012c) leadership is exercised by teachers across the school through collaboration and professional development. The standards provide a broad framing for leadership development. However, standards are technical documents and so there is limited opportunity to explore ideas about leadership (Torrance and Forde, 2016). Therefore, the second element of the strategy was the construction of a leadership development framework.

Creating a Leadership Development Framework

A leadership development framework for Scottish education underlines the importance of career-long leadership development with a leadership continuum from early career to senior experienced leadership. However, such frameworks could become simply career ladders or lead to teachers having to complete sets of prescribed activities not necessarily matching the career aspirations of individual teachers. Therefore, the integrity of each layer of leadership must be maintained. There are a range of examples of leadership development frameworks (Huber 2004) which distinguish between different phases of headship: preparation, induction and experienced headship. The Scottish leadership framework privileges a wider construct of leadership and so defined four ‘layers’:

- teacher leadership
- middle leadership
- school leadership
- system leadership.

As part of ensuring cohesion, the complementarity of roles indicated in the professional standards also needed to be evident, for example, the task of school leaders is to provide opportunities for teachers to exercise leadership related to teaching and learning alongside a readiness on the part of teachers to take on such leadership roles.

There is a danger that early leadership development is constructed largely in terms of the development of technical skills and more complex forms of leadership are confined to senior roles. Within each level there are aspirant, newly appointed and highly experienced leaders. Therefore, account needs to be taken of the increasing skill, understanding and confidence of practitioners and the ability to develop more subtle and strategic approaches to leading. The broad ‘layers’ in continuum helped identify key areas of content – knowledge and skills (McMahon, 2016) but did not identify the approaches to professional learning. The model of professional learning was the third element intended to support the design of leadership development opportunities that build and improve practice.

A Model of Professional Learning

The area of leadership development is a crowded space with activities ranging from short awareness-raising courses, skills workshops to postgraduate study. Much of policy on

leadership development in Scotland has focused previously on establishing and evaluating different programmes (Davidson et al., 2008). Timperley et al. (2007), however points to the importance of sustained and multidimensional learning experiences that built knowledge and practice through enquiry to bring about substantive change. Rather than reliance on a single type of experience or a collection of disconnected experiences, change requires the formulation of sustained and coherent approaches to development that include opportunities to try out strategies in authentic settings. Therefore, the leadership development continuum needed to be aligned with a model of professional learning.

The model of professional learning adopted was generated originally from work on the *Scottish Qualification for Headship* (Reeves et al., 2002) and highlights the relationship between learning and practice in school. The model has four interdependent and interconnected elements and Reeves et al. (2002) argue that each one of these processes is insufficient on its own to bring about a transformation of practice:

- *reflection*: the importance of opportunities for sustained exploration of experiences and the 'theorising' that comes from this
- *cognitive development*: the importance of conceptual ideas and drawing on bodies of knowledge to plan and review practice
- *experiential learning*: the importance of structured and sustained opportunities to plan, trial and reflect on coherent leadership strategies
- *social learning processes*: the importance of engaging with the school community to enact improvement strategies and the intensely political nature of this process (Reeves et al. 2002).

Changing practice involves not just learning new skills but potentially 'unlearning' established practices. Such a change is complex; it involves a teacher's values, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and understanding, skills in the changing of behaviour. Bringing together three elements of standards, a development continuum and a model of professional learning has enabled SCEL to develop a national strategy to build leadership capacity.

Next Steps

Augustine et al. (2009) identify three aspects of a cohesive leadership system that potentially build improvement. Two aspects have been core to the work of SCEL. The first aspect is that of 'standards', which broadly relates to the need for clarity about what headteachers (and other leaders) need to know and do to enhance learning. Here combining the professional standards with a leadership development continuum has helped crystalized different forms of leadership in a school. The second aspect relates to training which aligns with standards and the context of the school. Here the adoption of a model of professional development in which practice-based learning as a core component helps to foster links between personal and organisational development as well as between theory and practice. The third aspect relates to the 'conditions' which support or hinder a headteacher in achieving improvements such as accurate data to support decision-making in school, the level of school autonomy, and teacher professional development and accountability systems. This third dimension highlights the importance of a national strategy for career-long leadership development being set within a wider framework of support to schools and school leaders.

Over the last three years, SCEL has created a national strategy for career-long leadership development by creating both process and structural cohesion, by firstly 'acting as a focal point' (NPG, 2012:20) and engaging with stakeholders across the system and secondly, creating frameworks to build common understandings across different stakeholders. With the announcement of the merging of SCEL with the national agency for curriculum and quality assurance, Education Scotland, (Scottish Government, 2017) there is now the challenge of firstly, sustaining this strategy for leadership development established by a small, agile and responsive organization and secondly, building both structural and process cohesion in wider policy and practice. Part of the task in building this wider cohesion would be to investigate and foster forms of leadership, which, prior to this work, had limited traction in Scottish education, particularly teacher leadership where there are contested meanings (Wenner and Campbell, 2017) and questions about the legitimacy of this role (McMahon, 2016). Similarly, the meaning and practice of system leadership needs further investigation (Dimmock, 2016). Another key element would be to evaluate career-long leadership development opportunities in terms of the impact on leaders and the fostering of forms of leadership that contribute to the promotion of professional learning culture across the profession.

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