Preparing for Headship: the impact of professional study on professional knowledge and leadership practices

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Background and Context

In Scotland, as in many other countries, there has been an increasing interest in leadership as a key driver to improve schools and learning outcomes. The policy paper, *Excellent, Ambitious Schools: our agenda for action*, expressed the view of the Scottish Executive that the "consensus view among educationalists in the UK and beyond that effective leadership makes for an effective school" (SEED 2004: 12). This notion has been refined to focus specific attention on leadership as a means of improving learning and teaching, a theme reflected even in the title of the HMIE paper of 2007, *Leadership for learning: the challenges of leading in a time of change*. That document defined leadership for learning as being "about initiating changes that improve the chances of all learners to achieve well" and maintained that "the quality of leadership in any establishment is the key to providing excellent learning" (HMIE,2007: 11).

Of course, leadership in a school is far from being the sole province of the head teacher, as is also recognised in policy documents (HMIE 2007,EIS 2008, GTCS 2009), which emphasise the importance of developing leadership qualities in all teachers and of leaders empowering their staff through the practices of distributed leadership and collegiality.

In common with many other countries, Scotland has faced a shortage of people willing to take on the ultimate responsibility of school headship at a time when the age profile of existing head teachers suggests that there is an urgent need to prepare people able and willing to succeed them. In 1998, both to encourage teachers to consider such career progression and to support them in preparation for it, the Scottish Government published the Standard for Headship (SfH) (revised in 2005) and introduced the Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH) which enabled candidates through a process of study and professional work based learning to meet the competences within the Standard for Headship. This was followed in 2007 by the introduction of the Flexible Route to Headship (FRH). Both routes are programmes of learning and development to enable candidates to demonstrate that they meet the Standard for Headship, which is part of the framework of the Scottish Professional Standards that define competence at various stages in teacher professional development. Both programmes are delivered in partnership with the local authorities and for the SQH this partnership is led by three consortia each of which include university providers and are accredited by the GTCS.

The SQH is a programme of study leading to a Diploma or Masters in Educational Leadership and Management, but with a strong emphasis on critical self evaluation and the application of learning in the workplace. A key feature of the FRH is the provision of a coach to support the candidates in their reflection and evaluation against the Standard for Headship. Both programmes aim to develop teachers to meet the Standard for Headship which articulates five Professional Actions:

- Leading and managing learning and teaching,
- Leading and developing people,
- Leading change and improvement,
- Using resources effectively,
- Building community.

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These areas of professional action are underpinned by the essential elements of strategic vision, values and aims, knowledge and understanding and personal qualities and interpersonal skills (SE, 2005b).

Research Design and Methodology

This research project seeks to explore which strategies the candidates considered to have impacted on their learning and development, as well as the extent to which the professional learning and development gained through participating in either of these programmes influences and enhances the professional identities of the participants and their understanding of the nature of leadership.

The research explores the impact of this learning and development on the candidates" professional practice and leadership skills in their schools and the wider community. We are aware of the complexities involved in such a study and view this project as a first step which could inform further and more substantial research in this area of professional learning and impact. This project is informed by the previous evaluation studies from Menter et al (2003) and Gronn et al (2008) whose studies provided substantial information, analysis and insights about the candidates" learning experiences and how these had made a difference to their understanding and practice of leadership in schools. However as Forde (2011) points out the key question that remains is whether the purpose of Headship preparation is simply about the personal development of the individual or whether it is about the development of people who can lead organizational change both within the school and the wider community.

The design of the project was informed by current literature in educational leadership, relating to leadership development, policy and practice within the UK and International contexts. The dominant themes shaping this discourse are distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002), transformational leadership (Fullan, 2006), sustainable leadership (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006) and leadership for learning (Forde 2011). These concepts, along with Forde"s (2011) key question permeated the construction of the scripts used to guide the discussions in the focus groups and interviews.

This research comprised a small scale qualitative research data collection. The research is exploratory by nature with the researchers gathering and collating the data and then analysing for emergent themes and issues. Glaser and Strauss"s (1967) „grounded theory" approach is the most apt to describe the rationale and process for this enquiry. Here the researchers are not proving or disproving a particular hypothesis but rather the theory comes from the data collection once the research is in progress. There are some general broadly stated areas for researching but the actual themes and areas for analysis will emerge from and be grounded in the data. The task then for the researchers is to look for themes, links and relationships within that data, (Burton and Bartlett 2005) to inform the final analysis in the report. Yates (2004:138) cites that this type of qualitative research can assist us to explore how individuals or group members give meaning to and express their understandings of themselves and their experiences. In this research project this relates to the impact of professional study on the candidates" professional knowledge and leadership practices.

The research process included the following:

- semi-structured focus group discussions;
- individual interviews;
- a small literature review.

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The focus groups included five groups of participants from each of the two routes, with a total of six participants from each route. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following:

- a full time coach from the FRH;
- a Course Director for the SQH programme;
- two local authority officers responsible for the selection and recruitment of candidates for both routes.

The researchers invited candidates to participate in the focus group discussions on the recommendation of Course Directors or Coaches. As a result the research is largely based on self report by the candidates and we acknowledge the limitations of this. However, the evidence from the discussions and interviews still provides valuable insights into the candidates" experiences and perceptions of their learning and development journeys related to the Standard for Headship.

The areas of exploration and analysis for these discussions were focused on the learning experiences of the candidates in the following areas:

- the learning strategies used during the programmes
- the impact of these on self, understanding and practice of leadership
- the impact on colleagues and the wider school community?

The interviews with the coach and provider focused on the extent to which they perceived that participation in the programme has led to a transformative influence on participants and the ethos and performance of schools.

The interviews with local authority managers focused on why they chose to support candidates on the SQH/FRH Programmes and how they perceived the impact of this learning on the participants, schools and wider educational community.

Methods of Analysis

The individual researchers analysed the notes taken from the interviews and focus group discussions to identify broad themes. We then consulted with the wider advisory research team and provided them with our general findings. There was then further discussion and analysis by this group to identify key issues, themes and patterns that had emerged and any commonalities or differences that required to be mentioned in the final report. The process of noting key points and linkages is usually termed „codifying the data" and is done by the interviewers reading through the transcripts Denscombe (2002) This was then included in the final analysis.

Findings

Models of learning

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The focus groups and interviews with successful candidates revealed some commonalities in models of learning experienced on both routes. Candidates identified three elements that they found powerful in developing them professionally: self reflection, reading and social or collaborative learning.

One aspect of both routes that had profound effects on some candidates in terms of stimulating reflection was the personal insight offered by the 360 degree review or Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI) and the survey of their leadership styles. Some candidates reported that the feedback from these challenged their self image quite dramatically:

> *My results did not match my self image. This had a big impact on me and I had to look hard at the way I work collegially. I came out like Hitler!* (FG2)

> *The leadership styles survey was a lightbulb moment.* (FG1)

> *I had to reflect on my own practice because we did the 360 degree. That gave you a lot of cause for thought.* (FG3)

Some candidates reported that these had led them to change their style or, as one noted, to build up a bank of leadership styles.

Coaching as a means of leadership development has been growing for some years. Along with mentoring, work shadowing and role rotation, it was rated as a top developmental theme by all three survey groups (head teachers, middle leaders and class teachers) in a study funded by the National College for School Leadership in England (NCSL) (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009). Sir John Whitmore, leading a seminar for NCSL, saw coaching as a "means of helping people uncover and bring out the best in themselves, their people and the teams with whom they work" (Creasy and Paterson, 2005).

For several participants in our focus groups, interaction with their coaches on the Flexible Route or university tutor or course director on the Scottish Qualification for Headship promoted, even generated, the reflective process. The willingness of these external people to challenge the individual was important, especially because their focus was on developing the candidate through encouraging reflection and helping them to find their own solutions to issues. In words not unlike those of Whitmore, one candidate commented that "coaching helped to find the answer within me" (FG1).

Coaches and tutors were also crucial in guiding professional discussion among candidates, bringing together the elements of reading and collaborative learning. On both routes part of the delivery was through reading groups in which members were asked to undertake shared reading to inform discussion. One candidate (FG4) felt that this "first filter" to guide reading, chosen by the university tutor with specific needs in mind, was very important in giving a direction to reading. The use of reading groups served as a means of ensuring commitment, as sessions described as "conversations about education" required each person to have done the reading in order to contribute to the discussions, which were focused around the reading but which, crucially, candidates recognised as being relevant to practice.

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The application of reading to practice ensured continued engagement. Reading and discussion led participants to reflect on their own practice and to recognise ways in which they needed to develop. Some reported that reading was the principal process which supported their development as leaders.

> *Reading had a massive impact, making me realise that leadership was about values and not operations.* (FG1)

In one local authority, candidates meet monthly as two reading groups who summarise what they have been reading and share this with the other group. Initially, the coach suggests material but then candidates progress to find their own sources. In another authority two candidates responded to this style of learning differently. One, who wanted academic challenge, felt that the summarising of texts for sharing watered down the academic element though she did enjoy the support of the group. The other, who described himself as "more of a loner", did not share in a study group organised informally by others in the cohort but sought out his own reading sources. In his view, the reading could be as academic as the individual wanted it to be. In other programmes reading was built into the course programme and formed a substantial part of the seminar discussions. Although initially candidates reported that they found the amount of reading daunting they found the discussions very useful.

For one candidate the academic depth offered by contact with a university gave significant added value, giving candidates credibility with other professionals through the application of the learning which offered a framework for development. The rigour provided by reading also gave candidates greater confidence, a gain reported by participants in both routes as an outcome of their experience, an issue that will return later.

Taking the concept of collaborative learning more broadly than simply through the reading groups, candidates on both routes were convinced of the benefits of joint professional reflection and discussion. These opened up and developed understandings that, although each person"s context was different, some leadership issues remain the same. As one participant observed, "it is different for each person, yet there is common ground" (FG1). Another noted that:

> *One school for my whole career gave me an insular experience. The picture suddenly became wider.* (FG1)

Similarly, another candidate found that:

> *My interaction with the cohort grew as we went through. There was increased bonding as we all shared and looked at each other's portfolios.* (FG2)

This bonding was also evident in one SQH cohort, who gained from talking through practice and offering necessary emotional support to the extent that the network of colleagues survived the programme.

Impact/…

Impact on the individual

Focus group discussions sought to discover ways in which participation had developed in candidates the skills of systematic self-evaluation and critical analysis and to explore the extent to which this had led to changes in their professional practice.

By far the most common response was that participation in the programmes had increased the confidence of the individual in her/his ability to undertake the role of head teacher. Growing from greater reflection, from deeper insight into the role of the head teacher and into the concept of leadership, candidates commented on their greater belief that they could actually to the job.

> *Self evaluation became a way of moving from place A to place B, moving you towards leadership* (FG3)

Another candidate from the SQH said that "the course enabled me to see that I could be a leader" (FG 4), while one who had followed the Flexible Route found that it had made leadership attractive by exposing candidates to what is involved. That process of self evaluation could affect people very deeply.

> *I found it a spiritual experience. The self evaluation, looking at myself as a human being and being encouraged to have integrity to do so, warts and all.* (FG2)

The impact of self-reflection was evident to other observers. One local authority officer described successful candidates as being more reflective in their thinking as revealed in their contribution to working parties. She commented, "It is as transformational as that. You begin to think it is a totally different mind set" (I3).

Greater insight into the role and demands of being a head teacher, which had led to these perceptions of growing confidence, also developed a greater willingness to change personal styles. In particular, candidates often referred to a growth in their understanding of the strategic element of leadership. They referred to a range of factors that influenced this growth in understanding:

- a "light bulb" moment about the difference between strategic and detailed operational activity(FG1);
- the realisation that strategic leadership is about direction, managing alliances, motivating and convincing people (FG3);
- recognition of the difference between strategic leadership and the role of a depute head teacher, who had so many tasks that "you could go through your career reacting to events" (FG2); and
- discovering that leadership is about developing and empowering others (FG2, 3).

This last theme was recurrent, creating a sense of candidates" relief when they realised that they did not have to solve every issue personally but that they, as leaders, ought to build the capacity for their colleagues to solve their own issues. This relates to the concept that modern school leadership has a different kind of control to that exercised by more traditional leaders (Fullan, 2004). One participant linked his awareness of this change directly with the theoretical reading, which had given him the confidence to let go and help staff to articulate issues and resolve them themselves (FG5). Another"s summary conveyed this sense of release.

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The other thing you come across is the belief among staff that you should know all the answers, which is a scary place to be. Leadership is more about empowering others – taking them to find the answer. (FG3)

There was an understanding that this process requires patience and the development of staff. The candidates indicated that the leader needs to understand their staff, to know what their priorities are and to respond to these. It was equally important to gain the ability to judge when to intervene or in what way to offer support. It was also vital to realise when to remain in the background –

You can get anything done if you don't mind who gets the credit. (FG4)

Another participant believed she had taken this a stage further.

What I have learned ... is to pass it on to others ... I have built capacity for leaving things to colleagues and to build opportunities for staff to engage with the concept and practice of school leadership. (FG1)

People with different personalities found that the experience changed them in different ways. Some reported that they became more democratic, others less so. One, who had not always seen things through indicated that he had "become a finisher"; another, who had had a reputation for "getting the job done" felt now that she was able to delegate to others.

I discovered the importance of conversations in corridors instead of locking myself away in a cupboard and doing it alone. (FG3)

Thus participants" conceptions of themselves related closely to the notion of "leaders as agents of change through supporting others, instead of by delivering demanding changes imposed by others" (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:99).

The kinds of personal and professional development reported by candidates were observed by other interviewees. The coach in the FRH said that successful candidates think more strategically and collaboratively (I1). One local authority wanted to see their staff members gain confidence in decision making, become more able to take calculated risks "and know what, how and, importantly, why they are doing things"(I2). Such leaders are those characterised by Fullan (2005) as "new theoreticians", whom he described as practitioners whose "ideas are woven into daily interactions that make a difference".

The same local authority officer believed that the programme has met these aspirations as candidates display enhanced interpersonal skills, the confidence to take on a challenge and the ability to work with people to bring about change.

They are not afraid to lead, to challenge and to work with people. They have more adaptable leadership skills and situational leadership skills. (I2)

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The same interviewee reported that head teachers in that authority also say that they witness evidence of personal growth in their colleagues who have taken the programme. In one authority, the officer interviewed would like every head teacher to undertake one of the programmes. This would enable them to reach the same level of understanding as those who have already reached the Standard for Headship, which "gives the political awareness and ability to have difficult public conversations" (I3), that knowledge of wider issues which is essential in preparation for headship (Forde, 2011).

Both local authority officers (I2, I3) saw evidence of this growth in the high proportion of successful candidates who go on to gain appointment to headships or other senior posts. One (I2) reported that at interview "we are seeing depth in their thinking, logic and approach", with candidates revealing "a deeper knowledge of the skills needed to do the job".

Impact on school and community

If these programmes are to be successful, they need to transform individuals from being operational managers to become effective strategic leaders. Such a leader has to have a vision of what the school needs to become and to be able to bring their colleagues with them to shape the reality of that vision (Davies, Ellison and Bowring-Carr, 2005). The extent to which participation in these programmes has led to system change is an important measure of their success in developing leaders of change.

Participants reported a variety of ways in which their participation had impacted on their schools and, in some cases, on community partners. At school level, several participants identified a direct impact on learning and teaching. One (FG3) believed that the programme had enhanced her own teaching practice, but more commonly participants referred to the influence of their participation on colleagues.

Sometimes the impact of involvement in the programme was a consequence of the focus of someone"s project. One teacher reported that the project had "completely transformed the curriculum for S1 and S2" in a secondary school, with more cross-curricular learning and changes to Mathematics teaching to include project base work (FG5). This teacher said that one outcome of the curricular changes had been to increase pupil reading scores in S1 and S2. The cross-curricular learning was also noted by a teacher in a different local authority (FG1) who also believed there had been an increase in awareness and attainment in health and well-being.

More broadly, participants believed that their work on the programme had influenced their colleagues and the culture of their schools. One observed greater collegiality which encouraged consistency in learning and teaching through the use of class observations (FG4). Another noted that her project "encouraged staff to evaluate each other looking for good practice", with peer learning and an open door process leading to "a more democratic classroom" with an impact on pupils (FG3). As developing leaders, some participants felt more confident to challenge colleagues as well as to seek to empower them. For example, one, who was "now more questioning and more critical" said that when a colleague proposed a change.

> I'd/…

> *I'd be discussing with the member of staff what difference it would make. That conversation would make a difference to its success. (FG1)*

Similarly, another questioned a member of staff about the content and reasons for a final project in her Chartered Teacher programme, but felt that prior to the programme she would not have had the confidence to do that (FG3). The university tutor (I4) said that this willingness to challenge extended to the culture of the school.

The counterpoint to such challenges was the contribution of candidates to capacity building and leadership ability among their colleagues. This was part of the purpose of the increased willingness to delegate or hand on responsibility expressed by some candidates in the previous section. Participants also saw it as an outcome of encouraging colleagues to take responsibility for their own continuing professional development (FG4). One participant reported that

> *Distributed leadership meant it became a school with many leaders, not just the SMT [Senior Management Team] and some are now undertaking SQH or other development opportunities. (FG4)*

This aspect was visible to the coach who observed that in one primary school four members of the senior management team were now on the programme and that this was having a huge impact on the school, which he described as "buzzing" (I1).

A candidate"s project could have an impact beyond its internal influence on school practice and culture. This was the perception of teachers from two schools in one local authority, both of whom had undertaken projects related to transition between primary and secondary schools. One described a project on literacy work as impacting on cluster working "through a proper dialogue between primary and secondary colleagues" resulting in "a much richer discussion of learning processes" (FG2). Primary-secondary transition had developed in that cluster from pastoral links and fun days to a major event with the aim of enabling pupils to see their learning in primary and in secondary as connected.

The other teacher"s work with primary colleagues had, she said, led to significant changes in practice across the cluster.

> *We have now visited each other's schools, are teaching in each other's schools and this has led to greater buoyancy across the cluster. (FG2)*

Both of these contributors believed that their participation in the programme had impacted on their broader communities as well. The transition project referred to by the first teacher had grown to involve the Community Learning and Development service, the health service and police, the process of such involvement requiring partners to overcome tensions arising from different agendas and funding streams. However, he believed that the process had been of benefit to the community, clarifying the expectations of partners. He thought this had been a result of participating in the programme, stating that "before, we would not have had these difficult conversations" (FG2). A teacher from a different local authority also observed a greater outreach to the local community as well as improved parental involvement (FG4). This/…

This kind of community impact was also reported by the coach from the FRH, who said that the project makes participants more aware of community partners and at the same time raises their profile within the community (I1). He cited instances of candidates building partnerships with organisations as diverse as local supermarkets and a horticultural society. One of the local authority officers interviewed endorsed this view, stating that she had seen examples of far greater community and inter-agency working "as the programme opens your eyes to the possibility and value of these" (I3).

Conclusions

By comparison with the evaluations of the two routes to attaining the Standard for Headship (Menter et al 2003, Gronn et al 2008), the scale of this study is very limited. Nevertheless, the work has been very useful in revealing some common patterns in the experience of candidates on the two routes as well as in identifying issues which would merit further investigation.

Regarding the learning strategies that assisted learning for candidates, focus group participants and interviewees agreed that their exposure to academic reading influenced their understanding of the nature of leadership and enhanced their own confidence to take a leadership role. The fact that on both programmes this reading was often undertaken as part of collaborative learning activities was also significant, as it contributed to the reflection that was a central part of learning about themselves as individuals as well as about the context in which they operate. Self reflection challenged the self image of some participants, leading them to reconsider the ways in which they worked.

Participants believed, and were supported in this by the local authority officers, that they had become more confident leaders, with a greater awareness of the strategic function of the head teacher, with a greater political awareness both within the school and in dealing with external partners. As a result, they felt enabled to build capacity among their colleagues and to give them more space to take issues forward through more distributed leadership.

In some cases, the outcomes of these developments were seen as having had significant impacts on the schools in which these teachers worked, often through a major project undertaken as part of the programme. They reported having influenced the structure of the curriculum, learning and teaching practice, pupil attainment and the organisation of transition from primary to secondary school. Through enhanced political awareness, they also identified an enhanced partnership with communities beyond the school, a change also noted as positive by local authority officers.

Such changes, inevitably, lead to further questions, which we hope to investigate in a second phase of the study:

- If academic study is as influential as participants, coach and tutor believe, why does this reading make such a difference?
- If self-reflection is so transformative, what does reflective practice look like in action?

- What/…

- What forms of collegiate or collaborative working have the greatest impact in developing leadership skills and in influencing the way in which a school works?
- What types of inter-professional working are most effective in building relationships between the school and the community in which it is situated, and to what extent are these dependent on the vision of the head teacher?
- How do Head Teachers sustain their professional learning and reflective practice after appointment?
- To what extent do practising Head Teachers have to deal with tension between educational leadership and the spread of corporate culture?

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