Cover page

Dr Joan Smith (Corresponding author)
University of Leicester School of Education
21 University Rd
LEICESTER
LE1 7RF
(0116) 252 3696
jms32@le.ac.uk

Professor David Pedder
University of Leicester School of Education
21 University Rd
LEICESTER
LE1 7RF
(0116) 229 7505
dp243@le.ac.uk

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Title page

Early career teachers' perceptions and experiences of leadership development: balancing structure and agency in contrasting school contexts

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Abstract

Drawing on the findings of a three-year, longitudinal study investigating early career teachers' (ECTs) experiences and perceptions of leadership development in English secondary schools, this paper highlights, from the perspectives of ECTs, some of the factors that support and facilitate leadership development during the first few years of the teaching career. ECTs' leadership dispositions and aspirations seemed to be formed within and in response to what they perceived to be the nature of their particular school contexts. They appeared to position themselves in relation to the perceived school leadership ethos at a range of points along what might be conceptualized as a continuum from resistance and alienation to amenability and identification with the perceived ethos. Amenability and identification with the school leadership ethos seemed to be associated with high levels of personal agency, such that ECTs gathered important developmental experience as leaders and were developing leadership skills, dispositions and aspirations. In a minority of contexts, ECTs experienced feelings of alienation, and positioned themselves as resistant to school leadership in contexts they perceived to be characterised by high-accountability, blame and coercion. This resistance and alienation was associated with reduced agency, and restricted development as leaders.

Keywords

Early career teachers, leadership development, school context, school leadership, agency

Introduction

We report in this paper on a longitudinal study investigating early career teachers' (ECTs) experiences and perceptions of leadership development in the context of secondary schools in the English Midlands. By 'leadership development' in this context we mean opportunities for teachers to act, initiate, innovate and influence, and so to develop leadership skills. In-depth, contextualized accounts of the teachers' experiences of leadership practice and development were gathered over three years (2012-2015), affording insights into how ECTs' experiences influenced their aspirations, dispositions and sense of self as actual and potential leaders. For the purposes of this paper, we define 'aspirations' as an ambition to achieve within a professional context, 'dispositions' as personal qualities and skills requisite for leadership, and 'sense of self' as the ability to envisage oneself as enacting leadership, formally or informally, at present or in the future.

An understanding of ECTs' professional aspirations, and possible shifts in these in response to contextualized experiences, can shed light on the ways in which the relationship between the individual teacher and her working context intersect to frame career possibilities and leadership development. This is important if we are to understand more about the reasons why some teachers aspire to and apply for the most senior posts in schools, whilst others do not. For example, Smith (2011b) found that 28 of the 30 women teachers she interviewed in her study would not consider headship as a career option. It transpired that many of the women who rejected headship perceived that the senior leadership

behaviour they had experienced was underpinned by values counterpoised to their own, and so they opted instead for a classroom-based career. This suggests that potentially very capable leaders are disengaging from any aspiration to senior leadership.

A subsequent study focusing on the aspirations of a cohort of student teachers (Smith 2015) found that men were far more likely than women to aspire to headship. Even before embarking upon their teaching careers the majority of the women in the study (and some of the men) did not consider headship to be a career option for them. This raises questions about what schools and teacher educators might need to do to engage novice teachers in thinking about the full range of career options open to them, from the start of their careers. The school contexts in which ECTs find themselves in the early stages of their careers may play a key role in helping ECTs to identify themselves as capable of leadership, and in helping them build up a repertoire of skills through engagement in meaningful leadership activities on an appropriate level and scale. This might lead eventually to a larger pool of applicants to the most senior posts. If schools are to communicate effectively messages about equity, inclusion and diversity to our young people, there is a need to ensure a broader representation of different groups in the upper echelons – it is a concern that women and ethnic minorities, for instance, continue to be under-represented at headship level.

We wanted in this study to identify, from the perspectives of ECTs, some of the factors that support and facilitate leadership development during the first few years of the teaching career. Insights gained might usefully inform strategies and opportunities schools put in place to nurture and support development of new leaders, from an early stage of their careers, input on Initial Teacher Education programmes and policy on leadership development

Background and rationale for the study

There is a general shortage in the teaching profession, in the UK and in other parts of Europe, of aspirants to senior school leadership positions, especially headship (NCTL 2015; Commission Staff Working Document 2012). In certain socio-economically disadvantaged regions of the UK, headteacher shortages are particularly acute, and government-funded programmes such as ‘Talented Leaders’ (NCTL 2015) have been established by the National College for Teaching and Leadership in an effort to address this (the ‘Talented Leaders’ initiative seeks experienced headteachers willing to apply for hard-to-fill vacancies). Whilst re-deploying experienced headteachers may plug some gaps, there is increasing awareness of the need to be strategic in growing new leaders (e.g., Rhodes and Brundrett 2012). This is particularly important for schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, like those that the ‘Talented Leaders’ programme targets, which often employ high proportions of novice teachers (Allen, Burgess, and Mayo 2012), and which need to find ways to develop ECTs, harnessing their energies and potential, and providing them with opportunities that will enable them to develop leadership skills, dispositions and expertise (Muijs et al. 2013).

In complex organisations like schools, leadership cannot be entirely vested in the headteacher. In any school there are 'multiple sources of influence' (Harris 2013, 545), and senior leaders need to be proactive in ensuring structures and cultures facilitate the distribution of leadership throughout the organization (Day et al. 2011). This needs to be strategic: as Muijs and Harris (2007) argue, 'teacher leadership can only flourish where both school culture and associated structures allow it to develop' (p. 131), through 'a carefully orchestrated and deliberate process' (p. 129), providing teachers with the space and opportunities to develop as leaders. It also needs to be inclusive, the aim being to create what Gu and Day (2013) term 'learning communities' (p. 40), within which novice teachers can thrive, and develop not only pedagogical expertise but leadership skills and knowledge that will benefit the school as well as facilitate their career development.

The literature on this topic indicates that a complex range of factors frames and influences ECTs' development as they make the transition from Initial Teacher Education to professional life as teachers, and begin to enact their roles in post as teachers and leaders (Carver and Meier, 2013). Whilst it might be argued that agency, efficacy and resilience are characteristics of the self that new teachers need to bring with them to the profession, a number of writers draw attention to the importance of the institutional context (Burn et al, 2010; Carver and Meier, 2013) and the quality, availability and stability of school-based support (Knight and Moore, 2012; Muijs et al, 2013; Roness, 2011) in enabling ECTs to be inducted as teachers and to begin to develop as leaders. This support might take a variety of forms, for example, facilitating the involvement of ECTs in peer support (Keogh et al, 2012), communities of practice (Lambson, 2010; Newman, 2010), collaborative decision-making (Nolan and Palazzolo, 2011) or professional mentoring (Knight and Moore, 2012). Structured induction programmes, formal support at key developmental stages and 'day-to-day peer support' (Hulme and Menter 2014, 677) all matter.

. ECTs in Gu and Day's (2013) extensive study perceived that 'the support of strong school leadership, and the collaborative school cultures which good leaders create, shape and transform' (p. 30) were beneficial. Principals play a central and determining role in influencing ECTs' 'professional wellbeing' (Peters and Pearce 2011, 251), and can take steps to 'ensure that beginning teachers experience the positive benefits of affirming relationships' (ibid). Positive relationships with colleagues in school help to sustain motivation and foster resilience (Gu and Day 2013). Conversely, when teachers are deprived of positive attention from school leaders, and their voices are unheard in decision-making processes, demotivation and disengagement result (Ashfar Soodmand and Doosti 2015) and their resilience may be eroded (Peters and Pearce 2011).

All teachers bring to the workplace their own prior experience, knowledge and expectations, which 'intersect with the specific school context to create unique experiences, needs, and career decisions' (Ado 2013, 149). Timely institutional responsiveness to individuals' particular needs is important: ECTs in Hulme and Menter's (2014) study, for example, reported that they valued 'school-level *in situ* support that addressed emergent needs' (p. 677). Professional relationships

based on trust (Gardiner 2012) provide the foundation on which can be built structured approaches to developing ECTs' professional learning, for example, through mentoring, 'aligned with new teachers' needs and context' (Gardiner 2012, 195), and scaffolded in ways that 'respond to immediate needs... and work towards long-term instructional goals' (ibid). Emotional support alone is not enough to ensure ECTs' leadership development, although it can be 'an aspect of, and not in conflict with, educative coaching' (Gardiner 2012, 212). In Gardiner's (2012) study of new teachers' experiences of mentoring, an important factor in establishing trust was that mentors maintained a supportive, non-evaluative stance (p. 204), and acted as 'partners', engaging in 'co-analysis and co-reflection' (p. 207).

If 'structured opportunities for interaction' (Ado 2013, 149) are provided, collaboration between experienced and inexperienced staff can be facilitated, allowing teachers to learn from each other. This offers increased scope to meet individual teachers' professional learning needs, as teachers at all levels of the organisation can develop leadership skills, knowledge and dispositions, and enact leadership, in the sense of leadership as mutual influence.

Literature focusing on professional learning communities (PLCs) (for example, Bolam et al 2005; Fullan 2001) offers helpful insights into ways in which schools can support ECTs not just in developing pedagogical skills, which is understandably a key focus in the early years, but also in their longer-term development as leaders. ECTs, like other teachers, are unlikely to flourish in isolation: as Stoll et al (2006, 221-222) argue, 'learning can no longer be left to individuals...whole school communities need to work and learn together to take charge of change, finding the best ways to enhance young people's learning'. This requires a positive institutional acknowledgement of the ways in which professional learning happens (McIntyre and Hobson 2015), which include 'through making mistakes and critically reflecting on these', and through 'opportunities for risk-taking and innovation' (*ibid.* p. 19). This resonates with Schön's (1983) concept of the 'reflective practitioner', emphasizing the importance of risk-taking and reflection, and applying this more widely within a collaborative learning community. Stoll et al (2006, 226-7) identify five characteristics of effective PLCs:

- Shared values and vision
- Collective responsibility
- Reflective practitioner inquiry, which includes reflective dialogue and mutual observation and evaluation
- Collaboration
- Group, as well as individual, learning is promoted
- Mutual trust, support and respect among staff members
- Inclusive membership
- Openness, networks and partnerships beyond the school.

The teachers' own actions (Baecher 2012) are of course fundamental to their development as teachers and leaders, and to their self-determination (Keogh et al 2012), in which agency, efficacy and resilience are fused. Schools can be proactive in creating spaces within which ECTs can use their initiative and enact leadership, within a PLC, in which ECTs' scope to act and initiate is balanced with meaningful critical support, through 'collegial collaboration and discussions' (Aspfors and Bondas 2013, 250), in an atmosphere of trust (Muijs and Harris 2007). ECTs benefit from working with colleagues, who can provide them with a 'sounding board' (Aspfors and Bondas, 2013, 250). By involving ECTs in decision-making and joint planning (Aspfors and Bondas 2013), a sense of shared responsibility (Muijs and Harris 2007) can also be encouraged. School leaders therefore need to foster, within and beyond school, networks of support so that ECTs can be engaged in reflective dialogue with trusted mentors or colleagues, in order to evaluate and build their leadership experience, skills, knowledge and dispositions. Given that rates of attrition are high, with around 40% of ECTs leaving the profession within a year after qualifying, in the UK as elsewhere (Ado 2013; McMillen 2013; Wiggins 2015), this might have the double advantage of nurturing new leaders and motivating and retaining ECTs.

This paper builds on research focusing on the professional development of ECTs by considering how the ECTs in this study perceived their own development as leaders and the leadership development opportunities they were afforded in their particular working contexts. This is important because it provides some insights into how contextualized experiences of leadership and leadership development opportunities can impact on ECTs' motivation, self-perceptions as actual and potential leaders and the likelihood of their aspiring to senior leadership positions. By the same token it can help inform how schools can be strategic in ensuring contexts in which ECTs operate are conducive to and supportive of their development as potential leaders.

Methodology

Aims of the study

We sought to investigate, from the perspectives of ECTs:

- the key features and value for their leadership development of leadership practices initiated by the ECTs themselves, leadership practices of others, and leadership structures, processes and systems of support in schools.
- whether and how different school contexts and established practices of leadership and leadership development in schools influence scope and opportunity for ECTs to enact leadership and develop leadership skills, dispositions and aspirations.

Participants and their school contexts

There were initially six participants in the study, all identified as early career teachers in their second or third year of teaching at the outset of the research. The participants included three male and three female teachers, of whom four

were White British and two British Asian. The sample included two English teachers, two Science teachers and two French teachers. One of the white male participants, a Science teacher, withdrew from the study. The data included in this paper are drawn from the narratives of the other five participants. All of the participants worked in secondary schools in the English Midlands, and all were ex-students of an initial teacher educator programme formerly led by [lead author]. They were in their second or third year of teaching when the first interview took place. Two participants (Megan and David), had moved to a second school at the start of their second year of teaching. The first round of interviews took place soon after their change of school, and so they were able to reflect on their experiences of both contexts.

Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to refer to participants and schools. Exact locations of participants' schools are not provided, in order to protect their anonymity as far as possible.

Brief details of participants and their schools can be found in table one.

{INSERT TABLE 1 HERE}

Overview of the research programme

During the first phase of the research (November 2012-April 2013), narrative-style interviews were conducted. The interviews were initially structured around a common core of questions in order to elicit in-depth accounts of ECTs' experiences. The flow and direction of the interviews were shaped by the unfolding narrative structures personal to each ECT and by their experience in different contexts, interpreted through quite different perspectives. By 'narrative' here we mean that the participants were storying their experiences and lives, narrating a life history and reflecting on their experiences in the past and present as well as imagining their future selves. All interviews were transcribed in full and returned to participants for checking. No-one chose to amend their transcript. From the transcripts, individual vignettes were developed which were also sent out to participants for their validation and, in addition, as a basis for capturing ECTs' change stories a year later in the second round of interviews (Kershner et al. 2013).

In the second phase (October–November 2013), participants were invited to take part in 'walk-and-talk' interviews. What Moles (2010) terms 'walking methodologies' (p. 1) can be particularly useful for research focusing on 'ideas of place and identity' (ibid). As we were interested in gaining insights into ECTs' contextualized experiences of leadership development, we asked participants to identify particular areas around their places of work which held significance for them in terms of leadership, their own or that of others. They were then asked to lead the researcher on a tour around the key places, providing a commentary on why the locations had meaning for them. The tour stops provided the basis for the articulation of stimulated narratives and a space for reflection, as participants considered their own contextualized experiences of leadership and

leadership development stories. By 'stimulated narratives' we mean that the tour stops provided points around which the participants structured their stories, as well as physical stimuli for reflection on their experiences. As Moles (2010) observes, 'the landscape also becomes active in the conversation' (p. 1). Just three of the six participants (Megan, Roy and David) were able to take part in these 'walk-and-talk' interviews. Time constraints and failure to obtain senior leaders' permission for researchers to visit were the reasons given for the other three teachers' non-participation.

In the third phase (September-October 2014), repeat narrative style interviews were undertaken. Participants were given the transcripts from their phase two interviews and asked to read them, in preparation for the interview, when they were asked to update researchers on their change stories. Three participants were available to take part in this round of interviews.

Access to and involvement of the participants has been challenging throughout the project. In the busy lives of the ECTs in this study it was difficult to schedule times for interviews. Appointments were not always kept, emails would often remain unanswered. Not all participants were able to participate in all research phases. The project very much depended on teachers' limited availability.

Table two provides a summary of individual participants' involvement in the different research stages.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Interview strategy

We construed our strategy at the outset in terms of a fairly conventional semi-structured interview approach and mindset. We aimed to support participants to develop accounts that were framed by the common set of broad questions we asked, without narrowing scope so much as to foreclose on what ECTs had to say that was personal and unique to them, or to prejudice in other ways the things that teachers might say. Participants were encouraged to talk about the personal meanings and interpretations which they brought to their experiences of leadership enactment and development.

To ensure space for unique story-telling we adopted, within the structure of our common questions, an open, probing approach to interviewing resonant with 'informant-style interviews' described by Powney and Watts (1987, 18). However, it became increasingly difficult to 'keep to' our common spine of questions. We realized that participants were articulating their personal meanings and interpretations within an overall personal narrative structure (e.g., Bruner 1991), centred on key personnel, and key events in specific contexts of time and place considered by each participant to have been influential on their particular storied experiences of leadership development and enactment in their different school contexts. Thus, a constructive tension we encountered in developing our interviewing strategy was between fidelity to the common structure of core questions on our interview schedules and to the developing

narrative structure of ECTs' accounts. Because of the different ways different ECTs were telling their stories, it was not always possible to replicate the same common questions for each informant, and so we increasingly felt that a strictly semi-structured approach was incompatible with the authentic portrayal in their own terms of the richly contextualized and personal stories ECTs were sharing with us. There was therefore a shift in how we construed our interview strategy: from semi-structured to narrative informant style: participants determined what they considered salient and worth developing in terms of the unfolding narrative structures of their stories, so that interviews might be better seen as 'unstructured from the interviewer's point of view' (Powney and Watts 1987, 18). To ensure relevance we worked from a number of headings to guide our questioning, as follows:

Phase 1:

Current work/changes since PGCE
Enactment of leadership
Influences/support
Future aspirations

Phase 2:

Changes since interview 1/leadership development stories
Meaning of spaces on walk and talk tour
Own actions to develop/support from others
School context
Future aspirations

Phase 3;

Changes since interview 2
School context
Leadership enactment
Conceptualisation of leadership
Sources of support
Self-perceptions as a leader

These provided an aide-mémoire for interviewers rather than a tightly controlled structure, but this did enable us to cover the ground we wanted to without stifling the voices of our participants.

Strategies for optimizing quality of accounts

We adopted a probing strategy to support teachers in developing accounts characterized by contextual detail, exemplification and clarification of general or vague points, and congruence, that is, further explanation to enable us to understand points that appeared to contradict what had been said earlier or in another interview. We could have more confidence in the authenticity, credibility and trustworthiness of accounts that had these characteristics, and therefore we centred our probing strategy on these features of participants' developing narratives.

Researcher stance and fieldwork relations

How technical processes of data collection and social processes of engagement with key informants connect is, as Ball (1993) argues, an important part of ensuring technical rigour and optimizing the quality of data. We wanted to develop relations with participants in ways that supported and encouraged them in the difficult task of reconstructing richly detailed, exemplified and congruent narratives of experience, thought and meaning.

It was important that the non-partisan nature of this study was clearly explained to teachers at the outset. We wanted to elicit authentic and contextualized accounts of how ECTs aspire to, develop and enact leadership in the contexts of their professional lives in schools and classrooms as opposed to mere espousals of their decontextualized theories and political beliefs. It was also important that in all our meetings with teachers we adopted a non-critical stance. We stressed that we were open-minded about what may or may not be effective forms of leadership practice and development and that, in any case, we simply did not know enough from research evidence about what constitutes effective early career leadership development practice and support in different school contexts. We also avoided expressing value judgments in relation to school contexts they described, focusing attention instead on the importance or otherwise that ECTs placed on different facets of school culture for influencing their aspirations, enactment and development of leadership. We made a point of explaining that the research was not concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of their leadership practice or of the kinds of opportunities for leadership development with reference to a set of arbitrary and externally-prescribed criteria, or indeed, to any criteria at all. This was an important step in helping participants quickly overcome hostility or defensiveness that teachers sometimes feel when an outsider's attention is intensively focused upon their professional practice and thinking. This contributed to development of trust, a necessary precursor to the elicitation of rich, authentic accounts.

In our initial meetings, we emphasized our roles as learners in attempting to reach detailed understandings of what ECTs had to say to us. In our interviews we consciously sought to apply the Rogerian principles of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence (as used for example by Brown and McIntyre 1993, and Cooper and McIntyre 1996) as a basis for interacting with teachers. We expected that this, together with our roles as learners, would encourage teachers to be open and forthcoming in their accounts, especially with regard to the amount of concrete detail they were willing to disclose in their narratives.

Organisation and analysis of interview data

In light of the way our interview strategy developed it became clear that our primary purpose was not to generate common themes, but to give careful consideration to each individual narrative, in order to gain deep insights into individuals' experiences and perceptions, which the size of the sample allowed

us to do. We were careful not to allow a cross-sample search for common themes to obscure threads that ran through individuals' stories.

Our approach to analysis was informed and inspired by the work of Smith et al. (2009), on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In order to undertake an in-depth, IPA analysis, it is crucial to know the data very well. We first read and re-read each interview transcript several times, and then began making exploratory comments on individual narratives, in an iterative process described by Smith et al. (2009) as 'close to being a free textual analysis' (p. 83). The comments related to content and conceptualisation as well as language use. By engaging in a process of adding multiple comments relating to these foci, we were able to compile a richly detailed set of notes on the data. This allowed us to undertake what Smith et al (2009) term 'a close analysis' (ibid.) of the narratives and to ensure we remained open to the possibility and surprise of the unexpected in ECTs' developing stories. If we were to harness emergent and unanticipated themes, we needed to become familiar with the individual narratives, maintaining a sharp focus on the phenomenological, so that the analysis could 'stay close to the participant's explicit meanings... describe the things which matter to them...and the meanings of those things for the participant' (p. 83). These 'things that matter' (ibid.), are likely to include 'relationships, processes, places, events, values and principles' (ibid.), and their meanings are likely to relate to 'what those relationships, processes, places, etc. are *like* for the participant' (ibid.). Our approach allowed us to investigate how participants felt, and the sense they made of their experiences in their own terms.

Whilst the interview transcripts remained the central data source, the annotations and comments made on the transcripts formed, in a sense, a part of the data set, as we co-constructed the meanings emerging from the narratives. Our task was then to reduce the volume of detail, whilst still harnessing the complexity of the narratives, by engaging in a process of 'abstraction' (Smith et al, 2009: 96). This involved identifying patterns between emergent (or 'subordinate') themes, still working at the level of the individual narrative, to develop 'superordinate' themes (Smith et al, 2009: 96). Under each superordinate theme we clustered groups of subordinate themes from the individual narratives. (For a summary of the superordinate themes, see table three). Finally, having looked in depth at each participant's narrative, we then compared themes across the sample to ascertain whether and where we were able to identify commonality. In the next section, we discuss the findings developed from the five participants' narratives.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

Findings

Whilst the primary purpose of IPA is to seek insights into individuals' perceptions, experiences and the sense they make of these, certain key themes were identifiable across all cases in the sample or sections of the sample:

The first was that the importance of trust was identified by all participants as crucial to their development. The notion of trust seemed to comprise a number of dimensions: being allowed the space to act, take the initiative, innovate and take risks; the availability of support as needed; an institutional responsiveness to individual professional development needs; and recognition and affirmation. Where trust was absent, and an atmosphere of suspicion and surveillance prevailed, development was constrained and ECTs demotivated and demoralized, potentially leading to disengagement with career development and leadership aspirations.

The second was that leadership structures, interactions and strategies informed and underpinned by an ethic of care found expression in collaborative, professional learning communities within which ECTs felt supported and enabled, enjoyed a sense of belonging and felt valued. In contexts founded on suspicion, surveillance, metricity and blame, ECTs were more likely to disengage, feel alienated, pressured, undermined and demotivated, potentially hindering or halting their development as leaders and re-directing their aspirations away from leadership.

The third was that within the contexts in which ECTS felt empowered and enabled to enact leadership, personal agency was fostered and they were able to take control of their own development as leaders. In one case, as the school context shifted from stability and support to precarity, the ECT adopted a pragmatic stance embracing the urgency of the need to meet Ofsted priorities without losing sight of her own principles. The potential to exert agency was conversely constrained in contexts in which ECTS felt pressured, unsupported and blamed.

Four of the participants (Tina, David, Naina and Megan) positioned themselves in their narratives as agentic in their own development as leaders, seeking out and embracing opportunities to enact leadership. There were similarities and differences in the ways they enacted their agency, in response to their different school contexts and the extent to which the ECTs identified positively with the school ethos. Whereas Tina, David and Naina expressed a strong and positive sense of identification with the values and ethos of the school, Rob felt alienated and was resistant to the strongly data-driven priorities he perceived to inform school leadership behaviour. Megan found herself in a context in which the school was transitioning from what she had perceived initially to be a liberal, relaxed and supportive leadership approach towards a more directive style of senior leadership. Whilst she felt conflicted, she was pragmatic in accepting the leadership priorities and enacted her agency in trying to address these. In light of these similarities and differences, we present the findings from the five narratives under these headings:

- Agentic leadership and strong identification with enabling school contexts - Tina, David and Naina's stories
- Pragmatic agency and conflict in a school context of performance-oriented change: Megan's story
- Reduced agency and alienation in a toxic, data-driven school context: Rob's story

Agentic leadership and strong identification with enabling school contexts - Tina, David and Naina's stories

Tina and David

Tina and David were both appointed to Hillside School on qualifying, she to a permanent post and he to a one-year position. From the outset, they were engaged in leading. When they took up their posts, they found out that the head of department would be on maternity leave for most of the year. They thus found themselves co-leading the department day-to-day during their first year. They worked in close collaboration together to develop teaching and learning, which they both thoroughly enjoyed.

At the end of the year, David was appointed to a post at Granville College. Having derived self-confidence and self-belief as a leader from his first year's experiences, he felt equipped to take on a leadership role from the start in his second post. He was not overawed by the prospect of having to work largely alone in his new job to re-build the modern languages department, and appreciated the affordances this offered him. He considered it important for his development as a leader that he had the freedom to make his own decisions in the subject department.

David was aware from the start of his time at Granville that opportunities to undertake leadership responsibilities were likely to occur. He embraced such possibilities wholeheartedly, wanting to keep moving forward and taking on new challenges. During the Phase 1 Interview, he expressed a clear aspiration to be a head of department in the next two to five years. He was appointed head of department just six months later. His short- to medium-term aspirations were expressed in terms of what he wanted to achieve in his department rather than in terms of hierarchical career progression. He aspired to senior leadership, eventually, but felt he would only want to take on such responsibilities when he felt ready. He saw headship as a possibility later on, encouraged by the scope he perceived the post offered to make a difference on a wider scale:

'I have worked under several different heads now, in four different schools, including my PGCE schools [The Postgraduate Certificate of Education is the key qualification needed to teach in England], and you can see the influence that a head has in the school or college ... You can see how much of everything that's good in a school stems from the top ... and I think if you want to make the biggest impact possible in teaching it is in leadership, and it is in headship' (David, Phase 1 Interview).

As David progressed through his first couple of years at Granville, his leadership extended beyond the college. By the Phase 3 Interview he was playing a leading role in an initiative to develop primary school teachers' language teaching skills, as well as developing the practice of a range of other staff in his own growing department. His approach to the development of other teachers was to support and empower rather than direct. He was aware that he had been enabled to

develop in his own way, so he tried as a leader to allow others that space, whilst being available to support them. He sought too to foster collaboration among colleagues.

David's friend and former colleague Tina stayed at Hillside in her second year. Hillside opened up scope for her to take on new leadership roles, within and beyond the department. These included mentoring a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) and introducing Spanish. She was able to reflect with some pride on her experiences over the previous couple of years, describing how hard she had worked to make a success of the substantial initiatives she had led. Tina's sense of efficacy and job satisfaction were enhanced through the many successes she had enjoyed in her professional work, such as improvements in pupils' achievements and greater numbers of students opting for her subject. She confidently attributed much of her success and development to her own actions, personal qualities and disposition. Describing herself as a 'perfectionist', Tina recognized her own excellent time management, planning and organizational skills. Her proud descriptions of her achievements and attributes reflected very high personal and professional standards, and perhaps helped her cope in a pressured environment. She was proactive in embracing multiple opportunities to enact leadership and so was developing as a confident and capable leader. She was clear of her own active responsibility in her own leadership development, commenting tellingly, 'it's up to you'.

Change and uncertainty had become prominent features of Tina's narrative by the time of the Phase 3 Interview, as Hillside had gone through academisation and subsequently become part of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT), which placed some constraints on the school's autonomy. Despite this uncertainty, Tina perceived that becoming part of a MAT might offer her further opportunities to develop. Her capacity to see the affordances within a context of change enabled her to maintain a forward-looking optimism when considering her future career possibilities. The optimism with which Tina viewed her professional work was evident throughout her narrative, in the language she used and in her reflections on the past, present and future. Tina linked this capacity for positivity to her upbringing and personality, commenting, 'that's just me and how I've been raised!' (Phase 3 Interview). She envisaged her own future and that of the school with hope. Typically, Tina was alert to opportunities that arose and alive to the prospect of those that might arise, all the time linking these to her personal values, goals and preferences. She was proactive too in embracing opportunities. She explained that whilst she looked to the future with optimism, she would also make contingency plans, describing herself memorably as 'an optimist that always packs a raincoat' (Phase 3 Interview).

Whilst personal qualities, optimism and willingness to act were important factors in David and Tina's leadership development, their positive, developing identities as capable leaders were also a function of the enabling school contexts that created space in which they could develop, and supported them as needed. Tina described an empowering school, in which collaboration was fostered and innovation encouraged. She perceived that it had been important for her development that the school context supported risk-taking. She felt trusted by

middle and senior leaders, who allowed her the space to use her initiative. She felt empowered to act. She appreciated that her line managers had adopted a light-touch approach, making sure she knew they would support her if she needed help. This, for Tina, was the perfect balance of autonomy and support. She drew confidence from the positive support she received from middle and senior leaders commenting 'having three people on your side isn't too bad!' (Phase 1 Interview).

David, too, commented that the freedom his school gave him allowed him the scope to prioritise, and to make autonomous, strategic decisions about what to develop, when and how, so that he was able to lead curriculum development in the department in accordance with his values. He was appreciative of the importance of being allowed space at Granville Community College to find his own way forward and make his own decisions. Positive recognition and encouragement from school leaders had been important, as had practical support and provision of resources. Considerate and strategic delegation by middle and senior leaders had been a helpful feature, enabling him to take on leadership work at a pace commensurate with his stage of development. He reflected, 'I was given time to learn...They dropped things on me little bit by little bit...deliberately...I would say... It was phased'. That David gained such considerate support from school leaders was very affirming for him, enhancing his sense of potential as a capable leader. It also influenced his developing leadership practice, as he sought consciously to enact the kind of leadership that he had appreciated in leaders with whom he had worked, and with whom he strongly identified. His view of leadership as empowerment was rooted in his own experiences of being well supported by his current headteacher and other leaders:

'I'd say there's been at least two heads that I've worked under, who I thought 'I'm really happy working for you. ... You understand where I'm coming from as well as what I want to do. And you're making it possible for it to happen...trying to remove as many obstacles as possible' (David, Phase 1 Interview).

The type of leader he hoped to be and to become, he said, would be 'nurturing...able to listen ... able to deliver solutions, and a good role model for the other members of staff that I work with'.

Tina, like David, appeared to be developing a strong identity as a leader, perceiving herself as capable of leadership and showing her understanding of the complexity of school leadership in the fast-changing context of education. Tina drew on her experiences of other leaders as well as her own developing practice to construct a multi-faceted leadership model based on a commitment to care, collaboration, responsibility and accountability, combined with the business acumen necessary to lead an academy. She was confident in her ability to 'get it done', and willing to be proactive in seeking out and taking on new challenges. This influenced her future aspirations, as she was able to envisage herself in more senior roles. She commented that she knew she could do the job of head of department, having run the department in her first year and having worked with

her current head of department on student tracking and curriculum development. Her aspirations also included senior leadership:

'I think I could [become a head] because I am hyper-organised with everything...I'd like to think I had a good working relationship with staff and students as well. And my degree is in Language and International Business, so I've got the business side as well' (Tina, Phase 1 Interview)

Both Tina and David expressed a sense of belonging and strong, positive identification with the schools in which they worked. This influenced their self-esteem, their sense of potential as leaders, their ideals with regard to the types of leader they wanted to be and to become, and their leadership aspirations.

We turn next to Naina's narrative, which also reflects high levels of personal agency, and a willingness to embrace opportunities to lead within a supportive and enabling context.

Naina

Naina's story was idiosyncratic in that she was older than the other participants and planning a family, which she saw as an inevitable influence on her career. She was though, like Tina and David, agentic in seeking out and embracing opportunities to enact leadership in a context she considered supportive and enabling. The wealth of experience and expertise in the Science Faculty seemed to be particularly important to her in securing support, advice and encouragement. Like David and Tina, she not only worked in a context in which she was empowered to act, she could 'see' the leadership development opportunities that arose and had the confidence and skill to take them.

Naina entered teaching relatively late, as a career changer. She was 35 and in her third year of teaching at the time of the Phase 1 Interview. Previously a researcher in Genetics, Naina had been appointed to Fielding Academy after completing her PGCE, and had worked there ever since. She had gradually accumulated experience of enacting leadership in a range of ways. She had volunteered to be PGCE co-tutor for student teachers undertaking their teaching practice placement in her school and Faculty. She had also taken the lead in organizing extra-curricular activities and outreach work, building on her earlier experience in Higher Education.

Naina spoke very positively during her first interview about the collaborative, supportive and highly experienced Faculty within which she worked. She particularly admired her Head of Department and her Head of Faculty, commenting 'in terms of good leadership I think they've got it sorted'. She was impressed by how they worked together to ensure the Faculty was characterized by teamwork, with a strong focus on supporting students. The two leaders were also proactive in providing her with support and opportunities to develop as a leader.

A clear feature of Naina's first interview was her aspiration to become a Head of Department or Faculty. The following year, during her fourth year of teaching, she found herself enacting, informally and unpaid, the role of Subject Leader for Biology. This transpired as a result of more senior colleagues assuming additional responsibilities, leaving no-one to lead the subject, so Naina stepped in. She was then formally appointed to the post at the start of her fifth year. Naina reflected back on how the now former Head of Department had taken her 'under her wing' and been strategic in preparing her to become the next Head of Department:

'She made a point of making sure that I knew the systems and who to contact and exams administration and all that kind of stuff. She ... made sure that I was aware of the higher middle leadership ideas, of what was going on' (Naina, Phase 3 Interview).

Naina had valued the experience at the time, unaware then that she was going to be taking on the role formally, as the former Head of Department was to leave and take up promotion elsewhere. In the event, adjusting to her new responsibilities had been easier than she expected. She explained that she had been eased into the subject leadership role by her ex-head of department, and that she very much appreciated the ongoing support of her more experienced colleagues in the Faculty:

'There's three other Head of Departments [and] the Head of Faculty...So it's fine... I do still enjoy all the colleagues and the department I'm in, and that's great. ... In terms of managing the department it's OK. It's fine. It's going and it feels good' (Naina, Phase 3 Interview).

Reflecting back during the Phase 3 Interview, she was aware that she had developed considerably as a leader over the previous 12-18 months. She was now leading a sizeable department, with large numbers of 16+ students taking Biology, and a team of colleagues who were senior to her, and more experienced than she was. She was comfortable with this, largely because she knew the team well, and she recognised that there were benefits for her in drawing on their experience. She valued the culture of collaboration, describing her colleagues as 'a big support network'.

Naina's future aspirations were framed by her understanding that her age and motherhood might constrain her career progression. She said she knew her plans to start a family were going to be 'a spanner in the works'. The need to maintain a sensible life-work balance was particularly in her thoughts as she considered combining motherhood and teaching.

Whilst she rejected headship as a career option, she did aspire to senior positions such as Vice Principal. One of her Science colleagues, a Vice Principal who was a mother, had been an important influence and role model for Naina, giving her hope that she could eventually become a Vice Principal too. She saw that the role offered certain affordances for combining family and professional lives, commenting, 'Our Vice Principal has said, her days are manic and [she]

doesn't stop and she has less lessons to teach...But when she goes home, she's finished'.

Considerations relating to work-life balance were already an issue for Naina, and as she contemplated how motherhood and profession might interplay, she seemed more certain that starting a family would entail a break of at least some duration from teaching. Thus for Naina, considerations about life-work balance and managing family responsibilities figured in her thinking about her short- to medium-term life and career plans. She was conscious that she needed a strategy to strike a balance that allowed her to develop her career as well as raise a family.

We consider next the experiences of Megan, within a context in which the school was transitioning towards a performance orientation.

Pragmatic agency and conflict in a school context of performance-oriented change: Megan's story

Megan was 23 and in her second year of teaching at the time of the Phase 1 Interviews. She had spent her first year at Western Academy, then moved to Northbridge Academy for her second year. She had found Western Academy to be negative and unwelcoming from the start, perceiving it to be characterized by an uncaring, blame culture. She had chosen to move on after a year, as she had felt unsupported by the school and her department:

"The pressure was unbelievable, but strangely the support wasn't there to back it up...I was always told that I was "satisfactory" or that I "needed improvement", but was never really given any support. It was more blame and "Why aren't you good and outstanding?" It was very, very demeaning... It was very strange...lots of blame...I saw staff day on day crying, and just feeling very worthless (Megan, Phase 1 Interview).

Megan experienced Western Academy as a pressured and unstable environment, with a high turnover of staff and a long hours culture. Having moved to Northbridge Academy, she was, at the time of the Phase 1 Interview, very happy to be working in what she perceived to be a much more caring school, with a stable staff, a fine reputation and a context conducive to development as a teacher and a leader. She commented 'It was a good move... Now I'm somewhere that seems like paradise... Oh my goodness, it's unbelievable' (Phase 1 Interview).

In contrast with Western Academy she had felt wanted and welcomed at Northbridge. She perceived that an institutional ethic of care characterized her new school, and that a genuine concern for staff wellbeing and life-work balance underpinned the approach of the school leaders. Megan found the school leadership encouraging and the environment conducive to professional development. She saw that a key difference between Northbridge Academy and

Western Academy was that the emphasis at Northbridge was on recognition and affirmation rather than blame and criticism.

Megan considered that her development as a leader began when she took up her new post at Northbridge Academy at the start of her second year of teaching. She described the school as 'a very encouraging environment' with 'absolutely brilliant' leaders, who encouraged her to take on leadership roles. She had initially taken on responsibility for what she described as 'minor things' within the department, including literacy development and developing resources to engage boys. Within two months of taking up her post Megan was formally promoted to a post within the Teaching and Learning team. Her new responsibility involved running professional development workshops with teachers. Although Megan had initially felt quite nervous about the role, being selected from 54 applicants for the post had been very affirming for her. She recognized her youth and relative inexperience, but also knew that she had strengths to bring to the role. She commented that she had 'the most relevant, recent training', as well as enthusiasm and passion. By the time of the second phase of interviews, she had grown into the role, reporting that she was 'much more comfortable in it now'.

Whilst she relished the challenge, by the Phase 2 Interview she had to report that the job had become more challenging than perhaps she had initially anticipated. The school had undergone an Ofsted inspection, with disappointing results, which, Megan remarked, 'significantly affected staff morale'. In light of the Ofsted outcome, the focus and the purpose of training and support offered by the Teaching and Learning team became more sharply Ofsted-focused, and the headteacher made attendance at the workshops compulsory. Megan understood and accepted this imperative, commenting 'We're in a category. We need to do certain things to get out of it'. Her view was that other staff also needed to accept this:

'I feel like I've taken it from a different perspective now that I'm on the leadership side...I think some people just need to embrace it a bit more...That's what Ofsted have said, that's what we need to focus on' (Megan, Phase 2 Interview).

However, trying to persuade her colleagues of the need to be proactive in addressing the Ofsted agenda had not always been smooth sailing:

'It can sometimes be a case of feeling like you are defending what you are doing a lot of the time...defending the fact that this is something we have to work on. And a lot of staff do not necessarily agree ... that they should be working on certain things...[The Ofsted outcome] was inadequate... [and] the Teaching and Learning team felt that...it was our responsibility. We were frustrated that we hadn't done enough. People hadn't listened to us, or taken on board certain things. So sometimes it can feel like a big battle' (Megan, Phase 2 Interview).

She was fully aware of how demoralizing the outcome of the Ofsted inspection had been for the staff. She understood too that certain post-Ofsted decisions taken by the senior leadership team had antagonized and embittered staff. The resultant tensions did little to foster a climate conducive to staff development, making her work and the work of the Teaching and Learning team rather more challenging. She found herself conflicted, caught between the staff and the school senior leadership, for example:

‘It’s been really difficult...[Senior leaders] have said that staff that ‘Require Improvement’ aren’t allowed on the UPS (Upper Pay Scale). ...SLT (Senior Leadership Team) have said that they are exempt from the [salary cap], but *they* were given a ‘Requires Improvement’ at Ofsted!... So there’s a real dichotomy between feeling supported and actually being a little bit bitter about it. And that affects an awful lot of people’s opinions and they resent you for wanting to help ... and do what SLT say. And I can understand that to a point’ (Megan, Phase 2 Interview).

A strategy adopted by senior leaders post-Ofsted, and in which Megan in her Teaching and Learning role was involved, was a process of multiple scrutinies. These included checks on marking and homework as well as ‘learning walk cycles’, during which middle and senior leaders carried out ‘mini-inspections’ of several classes. The purpose of the mini-inspections was to check that teachers had built into their lessons a set of ‘non-negotiables’. These included a seating plan, rationale, clear differentiation, learning objectives phrased in the required language, clear learning outcomes and a range of pupil activities. Whilst Megan maintained a stance of pragmatic acceptance of the need to meet the Ofsted agenda, there were some indications of her discomfort with the school’s newly devised systems for monitoring teachers:

‘It did feel very mixed. ... We were told that the first round of learning walks would be just based on checking [the non-negotiables] were in place, but then SLT came in, and we were given Ofsted gradings! ...Everyone felt really uneasy...and some people felt it was a bit underhanded. ...It can be a little bit concerning. ... Learning walks aren’t meant to be put on your records. ... And people are having inadequate lessons put on their records’ (Megan, Phase 2 Interview).

Megan was thus developing as a leader in a context of change, conflict, pressure and staff demoralization. She maintained her commitment to developing teaching and learning, and tried to enact her leadership in ways that emphasized support rather than blame, whilst maintaining a pragmatic compliance with the Ofsted agenda. She had developed growing confidence in her own resilience as a leader, and was clear about the sort of leader she wanted to be and the sort of leadership she wanted to enact. She saw her approach to leadership as a contrast with her earlier, less encouraging experiences at her first school, where she experienced what she perceived to be a strongly coercive, bullying leadership culture:

'I hope that the job I'm doing is supporting rather than berating...That's the whole reason why I wanted to do it and we do try and generate that kind of ethos. It's not a blame culture that we're trying to generate' (Megan, Phase 2 Interview).

Despite her best intentions, there was a critical incident in Megan's developing identity as a leader, when she realized that she was being negatively perceived by at least some of her colleagues as 'the management':

'I was doing a ...written feedback workshop... Consistency of marking has been a big problem across the Academy ... So the Teaching and Learning team ... tried to make a policy for marking that was suitable and effective and actually allowed people to have a work-life balance... We were running a workshop on it, and a member of the Maths department said ... "You know it's all very well for SLT. You maybe teach, what, 4 or 5 hours a fortnight...When you've got this amount of classes it's just not possible to keep on top of it"; ...and he said that he was really...unsure of whether he could say it to me or [my colleague] ... [We said] "You could say whatever you like to us. We're not here to tell on you..." "But you are like working for SLT aren't you? You are going to" "No! We feel exactly the same as you!" And that was the first time that...I was being viewed as a leader in a more intimidating way and I hated it. Absolutely hated it and I had to say, "That's not what we're here for!" (Megan, Phase 2 Interview).

This experience shocked Megan and, to an extent, changed how she viewed herself and how she worked as a leader:

'I've tried to get it. Because I think that's where you can fall prey to the dark side...It was just a shock moment where I thought...because people don't know [me], I've not been here long and all people know me as [is] part of the Teaching and Learning team. They might not know me on a personal level. They might not know that I'm not going to tell on them' (Megan, Phase 2 Interview).

Northbridge Academy had afforded Megan both opportunities and support for her development as a leader, which she had found encouraging and affirming. However, following the disappointing Ofsted inspection, she experienced something of a shift in the leadership stance and the ways in which she and others had to work, which created some conflict for her in her leadership work. She experienced a sense of contradiction, intrinsic to efforts to support staff growth in an atmosphere of disappointment, demoralization and resentment. She had herself felt conflicted, but was pragmatic in accepting that addressing the Ofsted-driven agenda was an inevitable part of teaching and leading in school.

Megan maintained her will to support rather than berate, and her strong interest in working with other teachers to develop teaching and learning. These priorities informed her leadership aspirations. She hoped to take on more senior, whole-school responsibilities, in which she would focus on developing

classroom practice. She preferred this to other senior leadership roles, which she considered to entail 'burdens' that would take her out of the classroom (Phase 1 Interview). She was consciously seeking to develop as a leader, commenting 'I really want to focus on my career ..., that's the most important thing to me at the moment...my career, and solidifying my role as a potential leader' (Phase 1 Interview).

Throughout Megan's narrative, personal considerations were woven into her thinking about her career. She had undergone some swift and significant changes in her personal life over the past two or three years, ending a long term, unhappy relationship about the same time as she chose to leave her first post:

'I didn't feel understood at school and I didn't feel understood at home. There was a big conflict surrounding work, which was one of the things that inspired me to want to leave [Western Academy] and find somewhere more positive. I have had to become very independent and very strong in a very short amount of time...And I've realized ... [that] I've become a stronger person' (Megan, Phase 1 Interview).

She talked about the changes she had made both in her personal and professional life in terms of 'breaking free', commenting that her personal and professional life were intrinsically linked. Becoming single and independent at the same time that she had changed school meant that her priorities had altered and she could become more career-focused. She was developing independence, resilience and a strong sense of herself as a current and future leader. She was learning to balance her personal values and priorities with a pragmatic acceptance of the need to embrace the inevitable Ofsted-driven agenda in her leadership work.

We turn finally to Rob's story.

Reduced agency and alienation in a toxic, data-driven school context: Rob's story Rob had worked at Fielding Academy since qualifying as a teacher, and was in his second year of teaching when he was interviewed. He described the school as 'highly pressured', describing a context in which performance data were strongly prioritized. Even in the short time he had been at Fielding, he perceived that there had been significant changes in the school:

'I think the culture of the school has changed massively since I've been there...A new head [was appointed]... and you know, when you talk to the old guard, it's much like "It wasn't like this when [former head] was here". There wasn't the same focus. And it does feel very, very data-led. Very results-focused' (Rob, Phase 1 Interview).

At the time of the Phase 1 Interview he was feeling very anxious about a forthcoming meeting with the Vice Principal to discuss student performance data:

'It's...very much [about] pouring over data [and] results in our groups...What worries me is that it's seen as quite reflective on my teaching, if the students don't achieve what the school deems to be effective progress...I find that quite worrying. The data side of things [worries me], I think it's because I'm not as experienced with it...[and my anxiety] might be because my Vice Principal is quite a scary lady at times. I haven't actually had a one-to-one meeting with her before' (Rob, Phase 1 Interview).

Rob talked about how his more experienced colleague regularly lost sleep the night before meetings with the same 'scary' Vice Principal, and explained that there was little tolerance in the school for inadequate knowledge of pupils' performance data. His anxiety about the meeting was therefore acute. He explained that he had been 'forewarned' by the Head of Faculty to be 'prepared' for the meeting:

'I guess the assumption is that [the Vice Principal] won't take kindly to people who don't know [the pupil data]... going over...spreadsheets and stuff...I don't always...off the top of my head, have it to hand and...I teach three year eleven groups...So that's in the region of 80 students, 85 students...I'm in my second year. I feel it's rather a lot of pressure' (Phase 1 Interview).

Rob's account indicated that the sense of pressure in his school communicated itself from senior leadership to middle managers. The coercive tactics of the senior leader cited above were echoed in assignation of blame by a middle leader. As an NQT the previous year, Rob's confidence had been undermined by the head of department publicly attributing the department's failure to meet their performance targets to the large numbers of NQTs in the department. A number of NQTs had been appointed to the English Faculty all together at the same time as Rob, and were, he felt, being 'blamed' for departmental underperformance. He commented, 'I found that quite insulting. I felt really undermined. And also I feel it's quite irresponsible...they can't appoint four or six NQTs in the same year and then blame us, and say, "that's down to you"'.

Experiences of blame had undermined Rob's confidence in himself as a teacher. He also felt that he needed to conceal his anxiety and put on a performance to suggest he was coping in the pressured environment of the school, when at times he was not. He was careful not to show weakness to certain colleagues, commenting that he was aware that there was a need to be 'quite savvy' about whom he could talk to in the department about his feelings of inadequacy, stress and not coping. He felt he could not take the risk of revealing that he was struggling, as this would be seen as weakness:

'I kind of give the impression that I'm coping, when actually I might not be...I think a lot of the time [my first year] was about putting a professional face on things...A brave face...presenting an impression ...And I think a lot of the time I was coping, but... a lot of the time... I...felt stressed... I tried to put on a very professional image, but actually I would

go home and feel very concerned about the next day...What frightens me, what I am cautious of and aware of, is that people won't think that I'm coping and therefore treat me like I need extra help. Whereas that's not what I want. What I need, what I value, is people treating me professionally' (Rob, Phase 1 Interview).

For the most part, though, he painted a positive picture of the collaborative department within which he worked, which largely compensated for the data-driven focus of the wider school. He described it as a 'friendly department' and a 'nice place to work'. However, his experience of the senior leadership at Fielding impacted on how he saw his future career. His reflections on his career aspirations were characterized by conflicts and contradictions. He was interested in progressing his career, although he placed a lot more emphasis on the importance of finding the right role rather than promotion per se. Longer term, Rob aspired to senior leadership, including headship. There was, though, a sense in which he felt alienated by the results-driven nature of his school, which caused him to question his suitability for headship:

'There seems to be such a focus on results and progress and maybe it is just a necessity. I suppose that's what school leadership is now. School management, Academies and the whole vocabulary around schools [is]... changing much more into a business model and I don't think I could be a managing director. I haven't got an MBA and that seems to be what you need to have now' (Rob, Phase 1 Interview).

He was clear that he did not aspire to lead a school like the one in which he currently worked:

'I don't think I want to be a headteacher of a school like [Fielding]...I do aspire to leadership and I think in terms of vocation, I do feel very much called to education...If I was principal of the school...I would hope that the school that I lead wouldn't be so focused on results – and maybe that's why I might not be a headteacher' (Rob, Phase 1 Interview).

His reflections on the leadership enacted by some of the leaders he had known at Fielding had also helped him to clarify how he would not wish to operate as a leader. For example, with reference to the Vice Principal he found 'scary', he reflected:

'I wouldn't want to be that way... I can't imagine whether...this is her, or whether this is a personality that she's developed...whether she's out to scare people, because she thinks that's effective in getting results...I think it's the work face... I think it's maybe something she sees as [necessary]' (Rob, Phase 1 Interview).

Rob described himself as 'really pushing against the tide', so far adrift were his values and ideals of leadership from what he perceived to be those underpinning educational leadership as he had experienced it at Fielding. As Rob articulated his leadership aspirations and his conflicting thoughts about his future

possibilities, he was clear that his motivation was not to gain power and status but to enact ethical leadership and remain true to his values, which he thought may not be possible unless a cultural shift in education occurred.

He talked throughout his narrative about his ideals of leadership. For him, effective leadership involved recognition of others' strengths and investment in others' development. He saw that leadership should be empowering, caring, fair and able to ensure a happy workplace, within which people were encouraged to do their best and to take risks. A key underpinning principle was a focus on the holistic development of the child. He explained, 'I'd like to have a school which values the overall student ... that didn't see 5 A-Cs as something the students had to get, but ... allowed them to become rounded'.

There had been some key role models in his life before and beyond school, who had influenced the ways in which he construed leadership and the type of leader he would want to be. The main role model had been his father:

'My father's a headteacher of a primary school, and his ethos, his motto in the school...is "Learn to Live". ...[The aim] is to create a really good culture...I think he probably has inspired me more than anyone in terms of leadership... [His is] a great model of leadership...I think he really focuses on having a happy workplace and making sure people are looked after. I think he's a very fair head' (Rob, Phase 1 Interview).

This appreciation of his father's leadership had an enduring impact on how Rob saw himself as a teacher and potential leader, his values, sense of vocation and his leadership aspirations, and served as a contrast to the values he saw to be implicit in the coercive behaviour of the senior leadership at Fielding.

Discussion

It is apparent from the narratives that all five participants had their own clear and nuanced views of what effective leadership was, and was not. Transcripts were peppered throughout with references to ECTs' constructions of the multifaceted complexity of leadership. There were several references to positive leader role models, in most cases colleagues in the participants' departments, faculties and schools, including middle and senior leaders. Resonating with the findings of Aspfors and Bondas (2013), caring, enabling leadership was highly prized and participants sought to emulate this in their own leadership enactment. There were also clear indications of the types of leadership behaviour they abhorred, some drawn from experience outside school, and others, disappointingly, from their school experience. One participant, Rob, spoke about the importance of his father, a headteacher, as a role model for the sort of leader he would himself want to become, in contrast with some of the approaches of the senior leaders he had encountered in school.

The process of leadership development as experienced by the ECTs appeared to entail a fluid and evolving leader identity, as ECTs worked out how, whether and in what contexts they were able to exert their influence and effect change. Giddens'

(1991; 1984; 1979) notions of reflexive agency and 'the reflexive project of the self' (1991, 9) are useful in understanding how ECTs negotiated their own possibilities and navigated their own development as leaders within their particular working contexts.

The ECTs' leadership dispositions and aspirations seemed to be formed within and in response to what they perceived to be the characteristics of the particular contexts of their schools. Participants appeared to position themselves in relation to the perceived school leadership ethos at a range of points along what might be conceptualised as a continuum from resistance and alienation to amenability and identification with the perceived ethos. In the first three cases (Tina, David and Naina), the ECTs identified strongly with the school leadership ethos. This identification was in all three cases combined with high levels of personal agency (Giddens 1991; 1984; 1979), suggesting that supportive, enabling contexts can effectively foster teacher agency. All three teachers perceived their schools to be caring, supportive, enabling institutions in which they enjoyed formal and informal opportunities to take on leadership responsibilities, and the space and flexibility to take the initiative and try out new ideas. Importantly, trust and support were features of such landscapes. All three had gathered significant developmental experience of leadership during the first few years of their teaching career, were developing positive leadership identities and had high aspirations in terms of career progression, all aiming to become middle and senior leaders eventually. This suggests that when ECTs are employed in contexts in which they are supported to exert their agency, to act, initiate, innovate and influence, they are enabled to develop leadership skills and aspirations.

This model of context and agency in leadership development echoes theories of distributed leadership which suggests that there are 'multiple sources of influence' (Harris 2013, 545) such that leadership can be enacted by teachers at all levels of the organisation. Bush (2013, 543) explains, 'an important starting point for understanding [distributed leadership] is to uncouple it from positional authority. Leadership may arise anywhere in the organization and is not confined to formal leaders'.

However, this does not happen by chance but needs to be strategically orchestrated by those in formal leadership positions. Harris (2013, 551) comments:

For formal leaders seeking improved organizational performance and better outcomes, the challenge is to create the conditions where professional knowledge and skills are enhanced, where effective leadership exists, at all levels, and where the entire organization is working interdependently in the collective pursuit of better outcomes.

It is clear from this study that in all contexts the values and priorities for the school emanated from the senior leadership, in positions of formal power. As Lumby (2013) argues, whilst distributed leadership theories suggest that more can be involved in leading, issues around distribution of power are not adequately addressed, and opportunities to contribute to leadership are not equal. Discourses of distributed and democratic leadership co-exist with

enduring hierarchical school structures, and. In a culture of accountability, managers and inspectors are arguably the most influential figures determining how teachers see themselves professionally (Czerniawski, 2011) and the actions they deem necessary. The fourth ECT, Megan, for example, realised that to advance her career she would have to accommodate the school's Ofsted-focussed agenda. Indeed, it would seem that the extent to which individual ECTs were able to accept and accommodate the priorities handed down from above determined the extent to which leadership development opportunities were open to them and the extent to which they felt able to embrace or reject them.

Megan had experienced feeling alienated from what she saw as the blame culture of her first school. She was resistant to this culture, and agentic in breaking free from the school, as well as from an unhappy relationship in which she was also alienated and 'not understood'. Her second school seemed to her to be much more supportive when she started, and her development as a leader was accelerated. She experienced something of a shift in the leadership stance in the aftermath of the Ofsted inspection, as the senior leaders became more directive, albeit within what she perceived overall to be an essentially supportive and developmental school context. Conflicted, Megan shifted her own stance to one of active pragmatism. She accepted the inevitability of having to address the Ofsted agenda, but maintained her commitment to supporting others to develop classroom practice. She was conscious of and commented on the need to avoid descent into the sort of blame culture she had experienced earlier, and from which, in retrospect, she knew she had drawn strength and understanding. She had become aware of how leadership should and should not be enacted. Thus, whilst conflicted, she was amenable to the shifting priorities communicated by the school leadership team and pragmatic in exerting her agency in ways that allowed her to address their agenda without compromising her own professional values and priorities. It might be argued, then, that amongst the first four cases presented, there were two types of agency being exerted, within contexts of support and change.

The fifth participant, Rob, related significantly different experiences and perspectives. There were overlaps in his narrative with Megan's experiences in her first school. Both Rob and Megan gave accounts of their negative experiences of working within what they perceived to be high-accountability, data-driven schools characterized by coercion and blame, which did little to nurture their leadership skills, dispositions and identities, although both articulated notions of the sort of leaders they would want, ideally, to be and to become. The discussion in this section will focus on some of the key commonalities emerging from the first three stories of their experiences in school contexts, followed by an analysis of the relationship between the agency Megan exerted and the context of change within which she was working. Finally we will consider how Rob's experiences, whilst not typical of the sample, nonetheless provide illuminating insights, which may be worthy of further research.

Enabling contexts and professional agency

Naina, Tina and David appeared to be developing as leaders within enabling school contexts. All three related experiences of gathering layers of leadership gradually and over time. All three had been agentic (Giddens 1991; 1984; 1979) in seeking and 'seeing' opportunities to take responsibility and enact leadership in a range of ways, on the apparent recognition that "'getting in" and "getting on" require self-conscious entrepreneurial action' (Hulme and Menter 2014, 683). All three perceived that they had been enabled to do this as their schools allowed them the space to act, use their initiative and take risks, whilst providing the safety net of light-touch support in response to emergent need. All three identified strongly and positively with their empowering schools.

It appears that the ECTs' development of leadership skills, dispositions and aspirations is a function of what Evetts (1994) terms the 'inter-relationship between structure and action' (p. 11), which Giddens (1991) argues is central to 'the nature of human empowerment' (p. 175). From this perspective, ECTs' leadership development results from actions undertaken by the individual agent within and in response to contextualized opportunities to act. ECTs define and re-define personal developmental goals in response to the ebb and flow of opportunities that are both available and apparent to them, so that their leadership development trajectories represent 'the working out of much shorter-term decisions, the taking up of opportunities presented and the negotiation of perceived constraints' (Evetts 1994, 10).

Tina, David and Naina perceived their school contexts as essentially caring. This encompassed a focus on teaching and learning at departmental, faculty and school-level, as well as collegial relationships founded on mutual trust. This sense of being trusted, and the recognition and affirmation they received from their leaders, were key factors in developing ECTs' confidence and positive self-perceptions as actual and potential leaders. In these contexts care, trust and support fostered in ECTs a sense of belonging, a sense of autonomy, and, as leaders, a sense of responsibility to and for others. Other research echoes the importance for teachers' self-efficacy and motivation of recognition, and being trusted and enabled to take on meaningful responsibility (for example, Muijs and Harris 2007; Day et al. 2011; Aspörs and Bondas 2013; Blömeke and Klein 2013; Muijs et al. 2013).

Middle and senior leaders were viewed as strategic in allowing ECTs spaces to act, such that ECTs were able to enjoy formal and informal opportunities to take on leadership responsibilities, and the space and flexibility to take the initiative and try out new ideas. This is consonant with the findings of Hulme and Menter (2014), who report that 'positive expressions of professional growth were associated with ... having the confidence and licence to experiment and "take risks"' (p. 681). This did not mean ECTs were left unsupported: leaders were available and supportive in response to ECTs' needs, but did not micro-manage them in ways that stifled their autonomy. The ECTs appreciated leaders who inducted them into leadership work by allowing them freedom to act, being available to support as needed, and allowing them manageable areas of responsibility in which they could experience a sense of success, which built their confidence.

Their schools, as depicted by these three ECTs, effectively fostered their sense of professional agency, a factor identified by Gu and Day (2013, 26) as a feature of teacher resilience. Extending this notion to the concept of developing resilient leaders, it seems that, by being inducted gradually into leadership roles, the ECTs felt prepared and confident to take on more responsibility and, eventually, formal leadership roles in some challenging and fast-changing contexts. The three ECTs' perceptions of affordances offered by their schools for their development as leaders framed their positioning in relation to the school context, with all three identifying positively with their school, their faculty within the school, or both. This appeared to impact positively on their leadership aspirations, as all three aspired to middle or senior leadership positions.

Shifting context and pragmatic agency

Megan's developing narrative unveiled a story of a school shifting to a performance orientation. In this context she seemed to exert a pragmatic agency as a developing leader. There was evidence of support from the school in Megan's account, but the Ofsted inspection outcome had strengthened the more directive stance adopted by the school senior leaders. Whilst Megan was no less agentic than Tina, David and Naina, her leadership enactment was shaped by a different school context. She had had to adapt her agency in the light of the changing priorities of the school senior leaders.

It is illuminating to focus on the strategies Megan consciously adopted in this context in order to enact leadership and ultimately further her career. Megan made choices and exerted agency in ways that she determined, taking control of her work and her development within a wider, institutional context she did not control.

In Megan's case, it was apparent that she was navigating a changing landscape, in which there were conflicts for her. She consciously engaged with the school leaders' angle on the imperative to take targeted action to meet the Ofsted requirements. At the same time, she empathized with the demoralized and alienated staff. The stance she adopted was one of pragmatic agency: she sought to address the Ofsted imperatives whilst staying true to her own priorities and values. Thus in Megan's case, a gradual shift to amenability characterized her positioning; whilst she could not fully identify with all of the school senior leaders' actions and decisions, she saw that their purpose was to protect the school, and thus embraced their agenda as an inevitable responsibility of leadership. Indeed, she even commented that she saw it from 'the leadership side'.

In Evetts' (1994) terms, the telling of the stories of our five ECTs avoids portrayal of 'actors as passive, and evades the necessity of regarding social institutions and structures as the ultimate determinants of all outcomes' (p. 51). By positioning the individual as agent, the narratives of our ECTs recognize in their different ways 'both the presence of structural constraints and the active

responses of social actors to these' (p. 11). Decisions individuals make about their own leadership and career development are not seen as 'completely determined by social forces' (*ibid.*): context frames, but need not determine, individual actions. Whilst recognizing that there are constraints, 'responses to them vary' (*ibid.*). Our data suggests that ECTs' development as leaders is a continual process of negotiation and perception within a particular set of personal and organizational constraints and affordances.

People are, Giddens (1991) holds, always, in different modes of consciousness, *knowledgeable* about what they are doing, even if they are not entirely free to choose their own actions. The implication of this is that the ECTs in this study are rational agents, able, to at least some extent, to reflect on and negotiate their professional worlds and decide on a course of action, albeit within particular, contextual sets of constraints and expectations. Megan's choice to act was conscious and free, even if she had to work within the constraints of an Ofsted-driven culture. She became an advocate for ensuring the school did everything required to move up the Ofsted ratings. She realized too that she would need to embrace this agenda if she were to advance her career, which she was clear she was planning to do. She came to realize that '[w]hat matters is what is measured' (Stevenson and Wood 2013, 55), even though this awareness was mediated by her personal commitment to supporting others. Megan's story points to what could be seen as the inevitability of adopting this pragmatic stance and becoming amenable to the shifting values and priorities of the school leadership in the post-Ofsted context, if she is to continue to develop as a leader, and to advance her career in the institutional hierarchy.

Coercion and alienation

Both Rob and Megan had experienced a sense of alienation from the schools within which they had worked. Megan's experiences in her first school, which she described as characterized by a 'blame culture', resonated to an extent with Rob's perceptions of the context in which he was working. Rob's narrative indicates his rejection of and resistance to the values that he perceived to underpin the data-driven focus of his school, and what he saw as the intimidatory tactics adopted by the middle and senior leaders he encountered. His experiences, like those of Megan in her first school, resonate with Stevenson and Wood's (2013) observation that 'a much more coercive and aggressive approach to management is evident in many schools' (p. 52), albeit he was in a minority in this study.

Rob aspired to lead a school characterized by the personal values he espoused, inspired by the ways in which his father operated as a headteacher, and driven by a commitment to education as empowerment. Rob expressed his desire to teach, and to lead, as a 'vocation'. Conflict and contradiction clouded his reflections on his future career trajectory. The conflicts were rooted in a mismatch between his concept of the sort of leader he would want to become, and the school leadership values, behaviour and priorities he saw to dominate at Fielding. He was resistant to these, and clear that he would not want to lead a results-driven school, which caused him to think he may never be able to be a

headteacher. In some ways, his perspective aligns with the women teachers in Smith's (2011) study, who were strongly resistant to what they perceived to be the abhorrent characteristics of leadership, and made conscious decisions to choose classroom teaching instead.

What Ball (2003) terms 'the struggle over the teacher's soul' (p. 217) is at the root of the conflicts Rob experienced. Rob's response to the conflicts he was experiencing was to disassociate himself, vowing that he would not be leading the data-driven school. He maintained the values and perspectives he had drawn from observing how his father worked. Rob's account affords interesting insights into how high-stakes accountability and performativity (Ball 2003) might impact on early career teachers' aspirations and self-perceptions as potential leaders. Whilst it might be argued that Rob exerted his agency in a sense in terms of making a stand against the values he could not accept, there is a much weaker sense of personal agency in his account than in the other four. Whilst he appreciated the positive aspects of the Faculty in which he worked, he was alienated from and resistant to the wider culture and ways of working of the school leadership, which was causing him to limit the extent to which he would act in a leadership capacity. This disengagement also caused him to question his aspiration to headship. It is worth noting that Naina worked in the same school as Rob, yet her perspective differed to his. It may be that the highly experienced Science Faculty effectively cocooned her from the broader senior leadership team, which Rob's inexperienced English Faculty were less well-placed to do. Another key difference appeared to be that Rob was in direct contact with members of the senior leadership in having to account for his results, whereas Naina talked only about discussions with her colleagues in the Faculty. It may be that the culture within the Faculty is more important than the whole school leadership culture in determining the quality of leadership development experiences ECTs are able to enjoy.

Implications and concluding comments

The ECTs in our study were not only still mastering the considerable demands of developing expertise as classroom teachers in a constantly shifting and demanding policy context, but were also developing sophisticated leadership expertise beyond that required to fulfill their direct classroom teaching duties. They were building strategies to engage constructively with helpful and unhelpful school contexts. The cases of Tina, David, Megan and Naina in particular suggest that teachers in the early stages of their teaching careers, are not only able to develop expertise as classroom teachers but can, at the same time, build leadership practices and identities into their broader, growing professional repertoires.

This might suggest, first, that leadership can be embedded into the early career professional development of teachers without jeopardising growth of classroom teaching expertise; second, that schools should deliberately and carefully expand space for the leadership development of ECTs by providing opportunities for the direct enactment of leadership tasks by ECTs linked to the pedagogic and/or pastoral interests ECTs are developing in their routine professional work and

development; and third, schools should, on the basis of a developing leadership development case history, (a) avoid overestimation of the leadership potential and expertise of ECTs by inappropriately confronting them with leadership challenges beyond their capacity, and conversely (b) avoid underestimation of their potential and expertise by inappropriately withholding leadership challenges and opportunities from them.

The findings suggest that even ECTs can exert influence and enact leadership, if they are allowed the space to do so and supported in their development as leaders. This is important in helping us to understand how to ensure that schools are effective in growing new leaders. Experienced teachers responsible for the induction and development of ECTs need to gauge the balance of support and autonomy necessary to enable them to find their own way forward whilst having access to support, reassurance and guidance. This is likely to vary from one individual to another, and dialogue is therefore an important aspect of this process. In-school mentoring is a common feature during the Initial Teacher Education year as well as during the first year of teaching. We are suggesting that semi-formal mentoring beyond that period might better prepare novice teachers to take on appropriate leadership roles and use their ideas, skills and developing expertise to effect positive change as well as develop themselves as leaders. Moreover, ECTs might be better prepared to make the most of the opportunities available to them were leadership preparation to be woven into pre-service training, helping novice teachers to 'find their voice' and understand the language of leadership (Judd Pucella, 2014: 16).

Policy makers might usefully consider how national training and professional development opportunities could target teachers in the early stages of their career, in order to both retain teachers who might otherwise exit the profession and to begin to develop future leaders of our schools. This might be through formal taught programmes or through guidelines for practice in schools, with regard to mentoring structures and opportunities to work alongside more experienced teacher leaders in innovative practices. Experienced teachers supporting and mentoring ECTs in schools need a good understanding of *how* to support them, balancing guidance and direction with autonomy and freedom to act. They need to be skillful in assessing which contextualized opportunities can usefully be offered to novice teachers to allow them to exert their personal agency and develop their professional self-efficacy. In this regard Keogh et al (2012: 69) caution that it cannot be assumed that 'all teachers will be effective mentors', implying that there is a need for mentor preparation if the development of ECTs as leaders is to be effective.

We acknowledge that the cases presented here may not be typical. This study is based on a very small sample and whilst the approach we took afforded rich and detailed insights into individual experiences over a three-year period, considerably more research is needed to understand how ECTs experience the first few years of their careers. There are stories here too that are worthy of more consideration, including, for example, the tendency for two of the women in the sample, Megan and Naina, to weave the personal and the professional into

their narrative, in that considerations relating to their personal relationships and plans for family were, from their perspective, interlinked with decisions about work and career development. Limited space does not allow for a consideration here of all of the strands making up the rich tapestries of the ECTs' lives, and so we have concentrated on their experiences and perceptions of their inter-relationship with the workplace context. More research is needed to understand how schools might better support the development of ECTs.

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