

East Renfrewshire Education Department

Leadership Strategy Thinkpiece



Effective leadership within education has never been more important with policy agendas continually citing it as a driver for improved learner outcomes¹. In the National Discussion on the Future of Scottish Education (2023, p85)² Harris and Campbell explain that:

“To be a true learning system means that every part of the system must be collectively responsible for innovation and improvement and accountable for every child. A learning system in Scotland will require all parts of the system to be actively engaged, committed, and included in deciding upon, designing, and implementing a future pathway of reforms for educational improvement. To be a learning system requires an openness, a transparency, and the skill of engaging all people involved in moving genuine improvement forward.”

Fullan and Quinn (2016, p1)³, speak of ‘coherence’ i.e. “the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work and how it impacts the results desired for student achievement” and experiences. There is no establishment improvement without practitioner improvement, therefore it is vitally important that our strategy looks to develop senior leaders who can mobilise and inspire their staff and communities to make a positive difference in the lives of all learners. This renewed strategy for leadership development will therefore encompass a drive for long term, sustained, professional engagement that leads to improvement in learner outcomes and a true coherence in the system in ERC.

The review of the Aims of the original Leadership Strategy 2019, has indicated a possible tension between the creation of a hierarchical structure in education which supports the career of an individual practitioner, and the most effective structural design which provides appropriate and meaningful leadership opportunities, whilst ensuring the priority is excellent experiences for all learners. In order to relieve this tension, our renewed strategy proposes that we shift our focus

from creating individual leaders to a focus on developing capacity for leadership and supporting a practitioner’s leadership journey. The Secondary middle leader inquiry group reported a desire for next steps to enable middle leaders who develop and channel ‘a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present’ (Davies, 2006, p.13)⁴ to be supported to transfer this into an innovative and strategic plan for improvement within an establishment’s overarching vision. In addition, this group reported that while their research revealed that middle leaders feel they have increased opportunities to take risks, there was evidence to suggest that this is an emerging practice as relational trust continues to be established following a period of extensive change in establishment leadership teams. As Fullan & Kirtman (2019, p20)⁵ argue, ‘overcoming fear of risk taking is critical to challenging the status quo. To help leaders and teachers take risks, it is important to plan out strategies for change, take small steps first, and develop skills to effective risk taking.’

Participants in all inquiry groups suggested that building leadership capacity across establishments and not just with a ‘select few’ could help to create the conditions for considered risk-taking to flourish. Indeed Pont et al. (2008, p84)¹ identified that the ‘boundaries of leadership’ should not be limited by formal role or position but defined by expertise and creativity. The positive impact of such leadership practices were highlighted by one Secondary Head Teacher who after employing the aforementioned strategies with their staff confirmed:

‘All staff had opportunities to lead across the school to engage in critical and creative thinking and to take risks to plan their strategic change using the skills they developed through our Research Hub. Staff were supported and challenged to build confidence and reflect on their learning. As a result, staff are committed to an enquiring stance that is manageable and is linked with their professional learning and leadership journey and which has had positive outcomes for young people.’

This will require our senior leaders to embrace the notion of system leadership, working collegiately for the greater good by supporting the Department in building trust, facilitating the redesign of some of our traditional roles and remits and creating a learning culture within ERC where excellent experiences for all are key (John West-Burnham, 2004)⁶. As we have discussed, the pressures of the external climate, internal demands and expected pace of educational change indicate that the paradigm of the hero leader is no-longer viable particularly where quality learning and teaching and innovation in the classroom is paramount (Buk, A. 2016)⁷. The unrelenting expectations on school leaders are too great for one person.

Numerous academics argue that the optimal conditions for effective leadership actually exist in a context in which there is a balance between building collective responsibility amongst all staff and by senior leaders providing strategic direction whilst maintaining a degree of openness and idea sharing underpinned by mutual trust. Findings from the Secondary middle leader research inquiry group reported that almost all senior leaders highlighted the need for the greater autonomy both for and within establishments. Built on foundations of trust and accountability, Atwal (2019)⁸ highlights the need for authentic responsibility, suggesting that senior leaders must give staff the capacity to be innovative and make decisions linked to their area of responsibility, without constant monitoring but with the appropriate accountability.

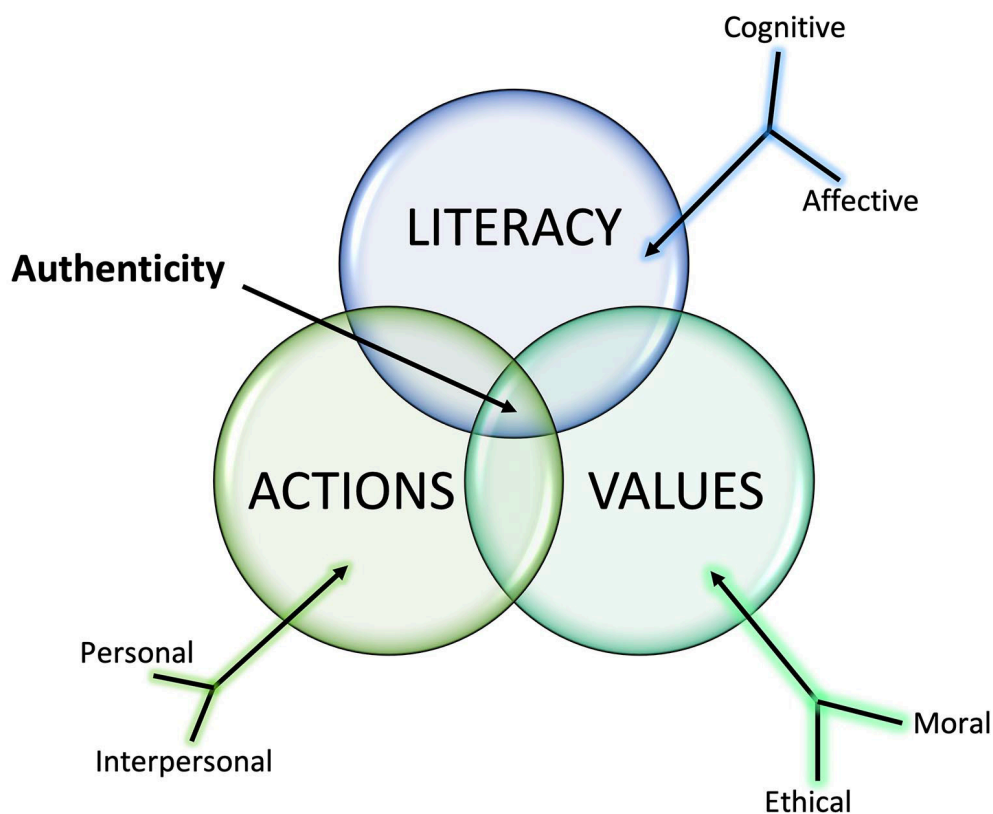
The overall review findings reveal there is an enthusiasm and desire for continuing to move towards a distributive model of leadership where meaningful opportunities for practitioners to positively influence learner outcomes and provide the impetus for career aspiration are provided. It is therefore imperative that in taking the next steps in building the capacity of our staff to be effective leaders, we ensure our understanding of the nature of the type of leadership we desire and how that leadership should be nurtured

and embedded in our culture. As set out in our introduction, as a Department we will look to foster and develop leadership which is both imperfect and authentic. Leadership development therefore will be focused upon supporting the process of becoming personally authentic and based on values that have the ambitions of our young people at the heart of everything we do.

Becoming authentic is not an event, it is a set of complex relationships and interactions – leadership learning will therefore be developed and facilitated within the concept of “*a recursive system*” (West- Burnham, 2004, p3)⁶. Our aim is that our leaders are equipped with the tools, skills and confidence to begin to explore their own authentic style of leadership which gives a clarity in terms of their personal capacity for growth, for action and for understanding personal strengths and limitations. Guignon (2004, p162)⁹ describes this as, ‘*centring in on your own inner self, getting in touch with your feelings, desires and beliefs, and expressing those feelings, desires and beliefs in all you do....defining and realising your own identity as a person.*’

West-Burnham (2004, p5)¹⁰ provides a model of “*Understanding Personal Authenticity*” with regards to leadership development where he cites the connectedness and interdependence of three main components in the journey to authentic leadership;

- Literacy: the development of a personal vocabulary which allows for a full expression of one’s own knowledge, intent and emotions;
- Values: a meaningful set of personal moral constructs which inform our language and our actions;
- Action: the ability to communicate based on values in a way which influences the choices we make and the engagement we have with others.



Our renewed strategy proposes that we look at leadership development as the process of becoming personally authentic through conscious self-development which is fostered and nurtured over time by being constantly reflected upon and revisited. It is leadership where individuals live their values and in turn create a self-sustaining culture of doing the right thing. As Brene Brown (2018, p186)¹¹ states:

“Living our values means more than we just profess our values, we practice them. We walk our talk – we are clear about what we believe and hold important, and we take care that our intentions, words, thoughts and behaviours align with those beliefs. Our values should be so crystallized in our minds, so precise and clear and unassailable, that they don’t feel like a choice – they are simply a definition of who we are in our lives.”

To enable this type of leadership journey at all levels we need to support our Head Teachers and senior leaders to facilitate capacity building in the system. The implementation of distributive leadership should be characterised and underpinned by the values we hold true, it should

demonstrate high levels of trust, collaboration, reciprocal accountability (empowerment) and shared purpose i.e. excellent experiences for all (Leithwood et al 2009)¹². In order to achieve this, our leaders will need to continue to develop a deep sense of self-awareness. This self-awareness will allow leaders ‘to bring the best of themselves {to any given situation} and mitigate for the worst of themselves’ (Munby & Bretherton, 2022 p7)¹³

As senior leaders we also need to provide the space, safety and trust to allow the development of authentic leaders in our staff to enable them to make a difference where it matters most, in the playroom and classroom.

Our strategy proposes that we continue to provide the opportunity for senior leaders to shape departmental policy and practice and act as critical friends to challenge the system and facilitate robust self-evaluation through Collaborative Improvement Visits (CIVs); thematic reviews, moderation exercises etc. As senior leaders we need to begin to be comfortable with having the hard conversations and accepting both support and challenge from all levels in the system. Above all, we must all act with integrity to ensure we develop trust in the system

to drive the transformation in our culture and the corresponding improvements in the life chances of our learners. This is a courageous ask of our leaders as:

“Integrity is choosing courage over comfort; it’s choosing what’s right over what’s fun, fast or easy; and it’s practicing your values, not just professing them.” (Brown, B., 2018 p227)¹¹.

However, the rewards will be transformational.

Hargreaves et al (2010)¹⁴, undertook an international study *The Performance Beyond Expectations Study (PBE)* which looked at leadership practices with exceptional performance. The study found that high performing leaders invested heavily in building strong relationships, sharing leadership opportunities across their school, developing collaborative teams and generating high levels of intra-organisational trust. The study concluded that PBE organisations have cultures of creativity and risk taking and provide conditions similar to organisations such as Google, which provide staff with dedicated time to think, time to create, time to innovate and a culture of trust which allows these things to happen organically (Harris, 2014)¹⁵.

This line of thought on leadership development was echoed in the conclusions of The National

College for Teaching and Leadership in England (2015)¹⁶ which stated that effective leadership development needed five things (Munby and Bretherton 2022 p162):¹³

- **Learning on the job;**
- **Exposure to outstanding practice in other contexts/ collaborative practices;**
- **Access to high quality research;**
- **Focused feedback from credible peers, mentors or coaches;**
- **Time for reflection.**

In the refreshed strategy our next steps for leadership will focus on enhancing our delivery of the above elements with a renewed focus on ensuring true distributive leadership is woven as the golden thread throughout, providing leadership opportunities which make a positive measurable contribution to improved experiences and outcomes for our learners, and which facilitate the development of authentic leaders who lead with their values at the heart of everything they do. To be most effective in developing the leaders of the future, distributive leadership has to be carefully planned supported and aligned (Leithwood et al (2009a)¹². In short it has to be facilitated so that the best possible outcomes and results follow.



Learning on the Job

The rise in the commercialisation of education with various consultants proffering their expertise has exacerbated the desire for ‘ready-made’ solutions for developing our leaders of the future. As a result learning on the job and from practice, whether an individuals’ own or others, has been overshadowed by the need to purchase the ‘next best thing in education’. This practice has led to many schools and EY settings doubting their own abilities and expertise within and for their own context. Harris (2014, p21)¹⁵ argues that, ‘*learning from practice, learning from direct professional experience, is far more powerful and influential than any external influence or advice.*’

Our understanding of leadership development is often expressed in terms of the information and skills needed to be an effective and credible leader. Such approaches have resulted in our leaders describing themselves in terms of various leadership ‘styles’ defined through a range of behaviours which look to develop a type of individual leader often with traits capable of being measured and assessed. As the world of education becomes more complex this dominant form of leadership development needs to evolve into a much deeper form of learning: one that is rooted in personal growth: that develops slowly through learning on the job, reflecting on critical incidents and complex interactions with others; and that develops an individual’s own authentic style of leadership. We need to develop the capacity of and for leadership in individuals. Fullan and Kirtman (2019, p9)¹⁵ explain that:

“Leaders of the future will need to become learners first, co-learners always and learn to work inter-actively to forge the future through joint determination with those they lead.”

In order to develop this change in culture, staff at all levels need to be provided with real opportunities to lead, whether as part of a team taking forward an establishment improvement priority; informally leading an initiative in their classroom or in a formal promoted leadership role. Evidence from each of the research inquiry groups highlighted that since the launch of the Leadership Strategy in 2019, a variety of formal leadership opportunities

have been provided in our establishments demonstrating an increased focus on distributive leadership. However, participants in the research were only able to showcase what they were doing in their establishment, there was limited evidence of staff being able to discuss in detail the ‘why’ or any features of impact of this distributive leadership practice and how their actions have led to improvements for learners. There was also a clear indication in the research results that most participants equated leadership with formal, paid responsibilities and undertaking specific tasks.

We therefore need to develop an understanding and a recognition by staff that leadership opportunities may not always come with a remunerated post. Some of the most effective learning experiences occur when practitioners lead an aspect of improvement in their establishment which resonates with them personally and with their values. Equally, senior leaders need to be mindful of ensuring that leadership opportunities are appropriately distributed, supported and reviewed to ensure real learning is being provided and undertaken, thereby helping to generate trust in the system. As human beings we learn best by doing, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing, and this includes learning to be leaders. Munby (2019, p91)¹⁸ describes how ‘*Aspirant leaders need authentic experiences to come to terms with leadership.*’ This type of leadership development relies on personal and team experiences to allow individuals to grow through reflection as well as an intrinsic motivation which pushes individuals to continue on their personal learning journey.

Enabling staff to lead the learning in their own playrooms, classrooms, departments or establishments is not just a matter of capability, competence or confidence. It is a matter of building regular opportunities within the system for practitioners to routinely and naturally engage in activities that improve their practice while learning from colleagues within and outwith their establishment and making a positive contribution to the improvement agenda. Progress has been made with initiatives such as Improving our Classroom (IOC) and Improving our Department (IOD) enabling

participants to learn to be leaders of learning in their own context while making sustainable improvements to learner experiences.

For our senior leaders we will continue to support a move to a Systems Leadership model. Our senior leaders and Head Teachers have facilitated the delivery of meaningful and robust CLPL to staff in a number of areas of expertise, working within the principle of ceding power to the collective good. Our renewed leadership strategy proposes that this concept can equally extend to the sharing of resource in that, to gain essential leadership experience some practitioners may move around the system within and between establishments and clusters. This approach needs to be focused on culture and ethos rather than solely on specific skills and should be learner rather than system needs driven. The Scottish Government review (2019, p9)¹⁹ of teachers' career pathways, specifically recommended that *“new and developing career pathways for Headteachers within and beyond Headship should be recognised including new opportunities in system leadership”*. The review panel supported future initiatives to build the capacity and capability of experienced and established Head Teachers, recommending that:

“Opportunities should be created for placements or, where possible, exchanges with other key stakeholders This would strengthen the connections between and enable greater shared learning among the key partners within Scottish Education and contribute to the empowered schools system while allowing experienced educationalists to build their career in new ways.”

This is an ambitious vision which forms part of a national improvement agenda focusing on empowering schools and their communities. Senior Leadership CLPL needs to be responsive to this, educating new Head Teachers to critique and enact policy in the context of their establishment communities. The utilisation of established Head Teachers to impart their knowledge is one approach to realising this, ensuring leadership learning at this level is relevant and current to the needs of new leaders while providing a means for established Head Teachers to develop professionally and contribute to holistic improvement in the system (MacMahon, M. & Purdie, J., 2019)²⁰.

The recommendation in Donaldson's *Teaching Scotland's Future* which proposes greater fluidity of opportunity for early career teachers could equally apply to all practitioners with regard to leadership preparation (Donaldson 2011, p93)²¹. Schön (1987)²², in particular, makes the case for those embarking on a profession in teaching to learn alongside a master practitioner. Earley (2009, p307)²³ indicates that school leaders cite working alongside Head Teachers as the *‘single most powerful learning opportunity in their development’*.

In order to bring about effective and sustained improvement the next steps in our strategy must be uncomplicated and flexible with an ability to respond to local context and ultimately result in a reflective, empowered and accountable school system where our leaders have a clarity of purpose and a sense of agency to bring about change and improvement across the system.



Collaborating Effectively

“Humans are born to collaborate but then socialisation occurs, whereby they may become isolated, get locked in with a given group, or flourish in cooperative endeavours with others. Out of this comes the power of the group, for better or worse. A key intervening variable is trust.” (Fullan, M. 2007)²⁴

Research shows that when collaboration is both disciplined and focused it can make a positive difference to establishment improvement and learner outcomes. Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018)²⁵ studied seven networks of professional learning from around the world. Their research revealed three consistent factors which contributed towards an improved learning system; collaboration embedded in the culture and life of the establishment; educators supporting each other as they tackled challenging work and collaborative work that is inclusive of the culture of the establishment community. Our own review has provided examples of successful collaboration leading to positive outcomes for our learners, from small scale professional inquiry, to CIV reviews and moderation activities. The Secondary middle leadership inquiry group specifically made note of the collaborative practice which emerged as a result of the Alternative Certification Model. They highlighted how this practice has been both sustained and built upon across all secondary establishments, thus reaping the benefits as highlighted by Fullan (2010, p72)²⁶ who explains

how ‘the power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things-for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still - working together generates commitment’.

In the academic session 2022-23 the Department established Collaborative Learning Networks (CLN) to focus on progression within and across Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) levels and to support collaborative planning of learning, teaching and assessment, and multi-layer moderation activity throughout the academic session. Seven hundred and sixty practitioners across early years, primary and special sectors worked collaboratively and engaged in focused professional learning to support their understanding of key national and local policy on assessment and moderation. When surveyed 99% of participants indicated that they felt equipped to engage in a collaborative learning network and 98% valued the opportunity to meet with colleagues beyond their own establishment.

In some instances however, collaborative working has become another activity ‘*de rigueur*’ across the education system. Within and across many establishments, too many unfocused professional gatherings, partnerships or networks are passing for professional collaboration. Whilst such networks



have a variety of uses including knowledge and information sharing, the ability for such groups to develop individual leadership in staff and ultimately improve learner outcomes, is debatable. While there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence about the benefits of networks and networking activity, in reality it is hard to substantiate on a local level any positive or lasting impact, particularly on learner engagement and achievement (Hadfield and Chapman 2009)²⁷. In Johnson's study (2010)²⁸, the evidence highlights that good ideas mostly come from inside departments, establishments and local authorities. These ideas emanate from change leaders working collaboratively to solve local problems. It was interesting to note that, in our research inquiries, involvement in subject groups, working groups and even collaborative professional inquiry were rarely recognised by staff as leadership opportunities and results from the Secondary middle leaders research revealed that whilst almost all participants in their study agreed that activities such as CIVs build their leadership capacity, professional knowledge and expertise, there is scope for a more coherent and structured approach to sharing practice for example via subject groups and other forums.

As a Department we need to embed the understanding of professional collaboration in our schools and EY establishments so that there is a measurable expectation of an improvement in teaching and learning, and that such collaborative activities are formally recognised as developing leadership capacity. As Hattie stated in the Global Dialogue to the think piece *"Inside out and Downside Up"* (Munby & Fullan, 2016, p5)²⁹:

"Networks are means to an end. That end is to create new forces that strengthen the leadership and collective efficacy of teachers to make a difference in the learning of all students."

It is imperative that as a next step in our renewed Leadership Strategy, *'disciplined collaboration with impact has to be a prerequisite, not an afterthought of improved professional practice'* (Harris 2014, p26)¹⁵. Disciplined collaboration is associated with a clear collaborative methodology that is consistently and rigorously applied so that there is a positive impact. The main point of disciplined collaboration

is *'to connect to learn'* so that better outcomes follow for learners, practitioners and the school above all it should have *coherence*. If collaborative working is to be truly impactful it also has to be focused on generating new ideas, understanding and knowledge that can be shared with others. This new knowledge does not need to be revolutionary but can simply represent a departure from existing practice or a small but significant change. Positive but unsubstantiated accounts of impact, as reported in our inquiry working group findings, such as *'the practitioners reported positive changes in the classroom/playroom'* or *'practitioners say they now communicate more and share material between schools'*, show little tangible evidence of the impact upon learners. If professional collaboration is to provide meaningful distributive leadership opportunities it has to be disciplined and consistently linked to improved outcomes.

Collaborative Improvement Visit (CIV) programmes – at secondary (curricular area), early years, primary and cluster level, have evoked an enthusiasm by those involved for open and honest self-evaluation and a genuine desire for further collaboration and sharing of evidence based best practice. However, this has not always translated into disciplined collaboration with impact as defined above. For example, in secondary CIV reports, a recurring recommendation is to *'further develop collaborative practice and sharing of expertise across the local authority through subject groups, practitioner forums and more informal networks'*. We need to ensure the aforementioned enthusiasm is captured and translated into action which is impacting positively on experiences and outcomes for learners. Effective professional networks also require a certain leadership approach. As Hadfield and Chapman conclude (2009, p153)²⁷ for collaboration between establishments to be most effective *'there needs to be a reconceptualization of education leadership in terms of transferring knowledge, trust and shared purposes'*. As such we need to evaluate our own thinking around distributive leadership to ensure it enshrines the values and attributes outlined by Harris (2014, p14)¹⁵ of *'high levels of trust, interdependence, reciprocal accountability and shared purpose'*.

We need to be bold and ambitious in our approach to collaboration and move beyond the sharing of best practice with an expectation that because an initiative worked for one set of learners it should work for all. Local context, whether community or learner specific, is key. Collaboration needs to have a focus on capacity building. Participants within these groups need to ensure they embrace evidence based approaches in their discussions which should be centred upon what actually improves learner outcomes. There should be collective responsibility, accountability and a commitment for improving the life chances for all. Such collaborative work will facilitate both *'inspirational teaching but also inspirational leadership'* (Munby 2019 p182)¹⁸.

As a note of caution, professional collaboration is important in seeking and securing improvements in learner outcomes but should not be confused with co-operation. Effective leaders understand that when practitioners collaborate with others on real issues rather than perceived or contrived issues i.e. problems or challenges that matter to them personally, in their classrooms, the potential for improvement and quality learning for practitioners and learners can be dramatic. We must ensure as

part of our next steps that professional learning and the development of practitioners becomes intrinsically aligned to securing positive change in the classroom. As well as the efforts from the Department, it is imperative that Head Teachers continue to utilise the Working Time Agreement to foster greater flexibility at establishment level, so that practitioners have the space to analyse their particular circumstances and, in conjunction with learners, determine priorities for their own classrooms within the context of the establishment improvement priorities. Senior leaders should also ensure that the Quality conversation and PRD process aligns with the priorities of the establishment, cluster and Department.

Fullan and Hargreaves (2016)³⁰, when commenting on the most recent developments in the Ontario school system, use the phrase *'collaborative professionalism'* to define an approach which calls for the whole system to unite in a single focus on collaborative approaches to systemic change aimed at improving the learning outcomes for all learners. It is proposed that we begin to embrace this concept and work towards a collaborative professionalism at all levels in ERC Education Department.



Access to High Quality Research

Leadership is not just about development of the more generic soft skills, practitioners need to know their craft. As educators we need to be leaders of learning first and foremost and thus practitioners must have a deep pedagogical knowledge. Establishments which provide excellent experiences for their learners are holistic learning environments in which the staff are just as committed to their own learning and continuous development as they are to the learning journey of their learners. If staff aren't committed to their own professional learning journey, they are not committed to improvement.

The Department has worked hard to extend the formal offering of CLPL with numerous high quality programmes being delivered by both the Quality Improvement Team and our senior leaders, to probationers through to Head Teachers and senior leaders. Evaluations held on CPD Manager reveal that most respondents (96%) felt that participation in CLPL had impacted positively on their learners. Our renewed Leadership Strategy proposes that to supplement this traditional CLPL offering much of the focus of professional learning should be evidence based either through establishment level professional inquiry or through academic reading and research. In line with Robertson (2020 p41)³¹ the strategy suggests *'that it is the professional responsibility of every teacher and school leader to engage with educational literature and research. Failure to do so is failure to commit to developing a robust understanding of what makes great teaching.'*

Munby & Bretherton (2022 p162)¹³ echo the importance of academic reading and research in an individual's progress along the leadership continuum, explaining that leaders who step up into more senior roles should ensure they are capable of extending a depth of expert knowledge and understanding of pedagogy in order to lead a school effectively.

“School leaders with weak knowledge of school improvement and who don't know what a coherent curriculum or greater teaching and learning looks like are likely to be ineffective.”

Curriculum for Excellence was designed to provide autonomy and adaptability for teachers to respond to the learning needs of the individuals in their classrooms, as such, the ability to adapt, to innovate and to share practice should be integral to every teacher's skill set. Practitioners need to adapt their practice and exercise a continual process of improvement, becoming agents of change and leaders of learning. To do this practitioners need to be responsive to the needs of their learners. Equally senior leaders should not be bound by the resources or knowledge they possess. They should be empowered to deliver a curriculum within their school which is inspiring, motivating and responsive to priorities, and which ensures the best possible experiences and outcomes for all learners.

To achieve this all staff including senior leaders, need to be *'restless learners'* (Munby, 2019)¹⁸ and inquiring professionals. The GTCS Standards for Full Registration Section 2, Professional Knowledge and Understanding, require that all teachers:

2.1.2 Have a depth of knowledge and understanding of Research and Engagement in Practitioner Inquiry

Professional Actions: As a registered teacher you are required to demonstrate a depth of knowledge and understanding of:

- ***how to access and apply relevant findings from educational research;***
- ***research and engagement in professional/practitioner inquiry; and***
- ***how to have an inquiring stance in relation to your own practitioner inquiry, working ethically, individually and/or collectively, to challenge and inform professional practice.***

As a professional standard, engaging with academic research and professional inquiry to inform and improve practice must be demonstrated by staff at all levels whether through the GTCS or the SSSC (Scottish Social Services Council) i.e. it must be measurable.

We need to ensure we are clear that our measurables are impactful with improved learner outcomes and experiences as the goal. In his work, Elmore (2002)³² argues that professional learning through inquiry should directly contribute not only to individual improvement but also establishment improvement and thus learner outcomes.

In Singapore teachers are viewed as partners in reform. Practitioner inquiry groups are a consistent and dominant feature of professional learning and engage in ‘*active professional collaboration that has a direct impact on teaching and learning*’ (Jensen, 2012 p16)³³. In Hong Kong teachers are viewed as researchers who lead reform and implement new pedagogy. In Shanghai teacher’s professional learning emphasises high level research by practitioners and, to become an education leader, a practitioner has to have one of their published papers reviewed by an expert committee. These examples reinforce the recognition that to be an education professional requires expertise and knowledge about learning theory and effective instructional practice. It signals that teaching demands a high level of skill, knowledge and expertise.

Our leadership strategy proposes that we move to professional practitioner led inquiry as a stance rather than an action and be part of the authentic leadership journey. It will clarify an individual’s passions and interests within education and become a journey of self and conceptual discovery. Our strategy envisages the development of a continuum of inquiry from probation year right through to headship and beyond, with each inquiry forming a stepping stone in an individual practitioner’s leadership journey and in the improvement and attainment of excellent experiences for all. It is the deep engagement in academic reading and research that brings a critical edge to the learning process and that has the potential to challenge practitioners and senior leaders to go beyond the sharing of existing practices in order to invent new possibilities for engaging learners and inspiring them to reach and exceed their full potential. The positive impact of professional inquiry can be evidenced in the quality of play pedagogy that has developed in our EY settings as a result of CDOs who have engaged in inquiry and research as part of their BA or the Froebel Certificate.

Our Head Teachers and senior leaders should also engage in this inquiring practice. Without an understanding of the deep knowledge necessary for practitioners to teach well i.e. pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge, knowledge of learners and of the local community, leaders will be unable to perform essential improvement functions such as monitoring attainment and achievement, setting improvement priorities and supporting practitioner and leadership development.

In our present culture it takes courage for practitioners and leaders to accept that the quality of teaching in their classrooms and establishments could and should be improved. The pursuit of continuous improvement through specific professional inquiry will be of benefit to the practitioner, the learner, the school and if shared appropriately the wider community. As highlighted in our review, a number of Research Hubs have been set up across the authority with evidence that this investment needs to be better utilised by schools to ensure increased teacher professionalism, leadership capacity and a positive improvement in the quality of learning experiences. Our next steps will therefore be to incorporate the expansion of Research Hubs in the remaining three clusters and in line with pupil voice there will be an expectation that practitioner inquiry is taken to the next level by involving pupils themselves in the research undertaken. Such an initiative has already been piloted with great effect in one of our Secondary schools with the Head Teacher commenting that:

“Learners in the broad general education had the opportunity to participate in a learning experience with Strathclyde University. The cohort worked together throughout the session to identify an issue to investigate and share their findings with all stakeholders. Feedback confirmed that learners developed leadership and research skills and had the confidence to work with others to carry out an enquiry to drive forward change and improve outcomes.”

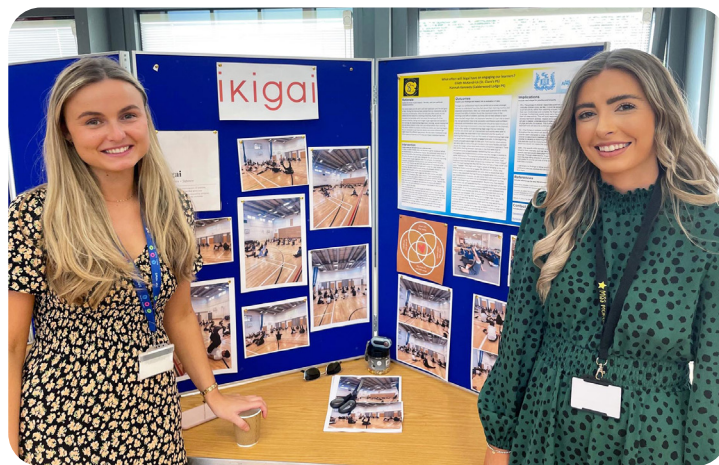
For more detail

<https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/education/blog/studentsasenquirersusingphotostoriestoEvidence/>

One such pupil inquiry was in relation to home learning. The school have reported that young people used their research and data to share ideas to improve home learning with 89% of young people now reporting that home learning was supporting their academic progress and understanding.

Professional inquiry is at the heart of effective professional learning and is a key driver in improving classroom practice (Harris & Jones 2010)³⁴. The expectation going forward is that our Department will become a self-sustaining community where professional learning will enable practitioners and leaders to engage in

collaborative inquiry and change within, and then beyond their own establishments. Such an environment of professional learning will also offer a means for supporting, enhancing and embedding distributive leadership practice. However, senior leaders need to be accountable for creating the internal conditions where meaningful professional collaboration can evolve. If adequately invested in, professional learning at this level can be a powerful vehicle for enhancing teaching and delivering quality learning experiences, however, this must be disciplined and focused on a sustainable, positive and transformative impact on learner outcomes.



Coaching

“Coaching is an enabling process to increase performance, development and fulfilment... A coach assumes that people have inherent capabilities, can learn quickly and when correctly focused and inspired, will give of their best, even, in many cases, out-perform what they and their manager thought was possible. An effective coach enables [their] coachee to discover [their] own way of moving forward.” (Alexander & Renshaw, 2005 p25)³⁵

In McKinsey’s *Capturing the Leadership Premium* (Barber, 2010)³⁶ 100% of respondent school leaders when asked to select the most important skill for leaders chose ‘*coaching and supporting the development of others*’, conversely only 39% chose ‘*performance management and evaluation*’. Since the effective performance of the first is dependent on the second, this demonstrates a possible disconnect between the expectation and reality in terms of the return on coaching alone as a means of building leadership capacity.

To ensure any professional or leadership development ensues from a coaching activity then a coach should have a clear educational focus and an expertise in the areas being developed by the coachee; where this is not the case then any coaching taking place becomes merely low level guidance and support. If unfocused and unstructured, a coaching conversation can be little more than enthusiastic sharing of information and ideas among colleagues, with limited improvement in classroom practice or leadership capacity (Harris 2014)³⁵.

To develop the skill of coaching in our senior leaders we need to be mindful of capturing our own experiences. We need to set an example by asking for help in order to learn from others during those critical incidents when we are in with the weeds and then use that wisdom and learning to

inform and shape our future leaders. Part of our vision is to develop a coaching culture within and across establishments where staff and pupils value one another’s strengths, exchange constructive feedback, have clear expectations of one another and achieve high performance. To achieve this we need to invest in our staff so that coaching becomes a skill inherent in our leaders which in turn embeds a culture of reciprocal trust. We need to develop our future leaders in a more meaningful and focused way which provides the invitation for appropriate challenge. Most leaders when given the space to reflect will usually have the solutions to any dilemma within their own skillset. Coaching provides an opportunity within a safe space, to gain insight, clarity and motivation, leading to personal and professional fulfilment and if disciplined and focused will make a positive impact on learner outcomes.

Our review highlighted the importance that our newly appointed Head Teachers and Heads of Establishment placed on the coaching conversations and also the benefits that established senior leaders took from their involvement in delivering coaching to peer colleagues and aspirant leaders. Our future leaders will learn from our mistakes if we are brave enough and honest enough to own up to them. The refreshed leadership strategy proposes that the experience of our existing senior leaders will be utilised to inform future leadership. Every leadership programme will provide specific coaching sessions to ensure coaching becomes an inherent skill in our leaders of the future. All coaching offered as part of a CLPL or leadership programmes will ensure it is a worthwhile, focused exercise with clearly defined aims and outcomes for both the individual coachee and their establishment. Our leaders will be provided with appropriate coaches who will provide wisdom and space for exploration of personal and leadership authenticity within the context of improvement.

Professional Reflection

Whilst the professional engagement with coaches and mentors is useful in personal leadership development, time spent alone professionally reflecting is an invaluable skill that all leaders need to develop. As we build a deeper understanding of who we are as people and as leaders this will allow us to be comfortable in recognising our own form of authentic leadership. In doing so we need to be comfortable in acknowledging and accepting both the desirable and undesirable aspects of our character with an unbiased objectivity. Building on the overwhelming responses within the 2019 review, our renewed leadership strategy emphasises the need to build trust in the system, as a collective we need to place a great value on honesty and openness in our professional relationships. This in turn will facilitate an open honesty with our peers and colleagues allowing us as leaders, the opportunity to professionally reflect and grow as individuals and as a team.

As senior leaders we need to foster that open honesty and reciprocal trust in order that each leader can be supported in their assessment of their own leadership capacity and that of their team. Our peer colleagues should allow us the safe space to process our thoughts and feelings and challenge our biases towards ourselves. To do this we need to develop a non-judgemental culture where set back is not failure but a learning opportunity.

Developing and sustaining authenticity as a leader will require our leaders at all levels to undergo honest self-reflection, for leaders to own their imperfections whilst at the same time retaining a keen sense of their own self-worth. At times it will require leaders to be courageous and have an appetite for individual growth, growth which very often will come from personal disappointment and set back, however an imperfect leader will understand that through disappointment comes invaluable learning.

“Above all it requires honesty, humility and a keen sense of doing right by others and an understanding that everyone in education should be on a journey to be a better version of themselves.” (Munby & Bretherton 2022 p83)¹³

In this journey individuals will continue to find new levels of self-awareness. Being an imperfect and authentic leader isn't about knowing your failings but about recognising where there is room for personal learning and growth. Munby (2019)¹⁸ explains that authentic leaders recognise and take responsibility for the worst aspects of their character and work towards self-betterment and becoming the best version of themselves.

As we have continually stated this renewed Leadership Strategy requires leaders to be bold and courageous in their ambitions for themselves, their staff teams and the learners who have their futures in our hands. Senior leaders need to be prepared to model the values they stand by and the leadership expectations they have for others. Our leadership strategy requires our leaders to stand by what is right and challenge inequality and unfairness. This will require us to reflect on our culture in some areas. In changing the expectations of our aspirant leaders and staff we will need to ensure the correct support is available, including allowing individuals the safe space to reflect on those critical incidents and sometimes the consequences of misplaced actions, to help shape their personal authentic leadership journey.

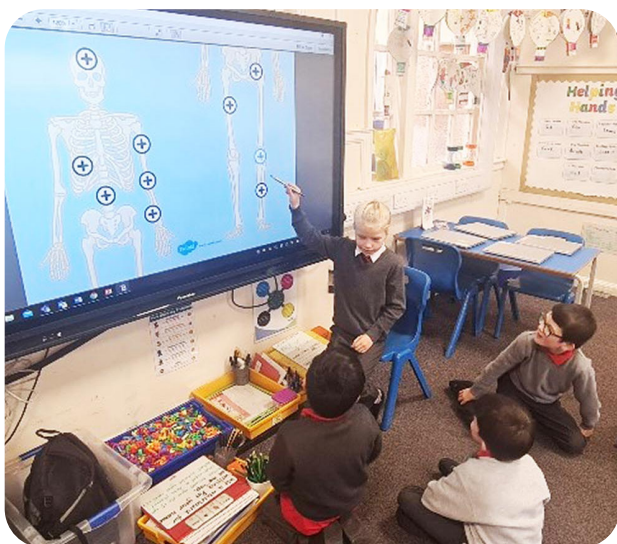
As senior leaders we need to recognise that leadership can equally be a negative influence that can cause individuals personal pain and damage. Each research inquiry group highlighted possible evidence where trust in the system has been lost through leadership which has been misguided and at times too concerned with their own ego or the immediate pressures rather than the greater good and long term implications of any action. Polka and Litchka (2008)³⁷ illuminate the factors that contribute most often to the de-motivation of staff and the undermining of professional confidence and expertise. They highlight the potential for the misuse of power by some leaders and illustrate how leadership can be a negative force when in the wrong hands. As we have highlighted in this think piece, senior leaders are the gatekeepers of change and they can be a help or hindrance in securing new ways of working and supporting effective distributive leadership, but they need to ensure

this is for all and not just themselves or a select few individuals. Munby & Bretherton (2022)¹³ talk about the creation of a healthy ego in leaders, it will be the expectation that all senior leaders look to a balance between confidence and humility. The best leaders actively seek opportunities to develop, grow and change their establishment for the better. The refreshed strategy proposes that senior leaders take time to reflect and seek feedback from colleagues both within and across establishments to help with their own imperfect leadership.

Our research revealed that there was a view amongst senior leaders that not all leadership opportunities for aspiring leaders prepared them for the accountability that comes with leadership. There is scope for leadership programmes to explore this area more fully with both senior leaders and aspiring leaders and to ensure that opportunities to lead come with opportunities to reflect and evaluate impact. However, being empowered does not mean that Head Teachers relinquish power or accountability themselves, rather, they would in turn be tasked with an expectation of increasing the power of everyone and thereby increase the capacity of the establishment for improvement.

“In an empowered school-led system, school leaders should be part of the collective leadership of the system, as well as leaders within their own organisation. The leadership skills required include: working across organisational boundaries; building shared values and trust; drawing on a wide range of perspectives and resources across systems to design local solutions; and reflecting local context, communities and aspirations. Effective school leaders support cultures that welcome and foster teacher agency, supporting and enabling collaborative professionalism, including teacher-led professional learning.”

An Empowered System (April 2023)³⁸



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