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Teacher Leaders and Reflective Practitioners:

Building the capacity of a school
to improve by promoting research
and reflection

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Introduction

Just as a correctly set amplifier will create perfect sound, so too certain conditions prevailing in a school will allow for maximum improvement. My view is that a climate in which all individuals are empowered to contribute to, as well as lead on, particular learning-focused strategies is the best method to harness strengths and to combine talents.

Whilst trying to achieve dramatic improvements in a school, in this research we have aimed to identify the characteristics of 'teacher leaders: reflective practitioners who act'. Our findings have a practical application, relevant to aspiring leaders and also to those interested in building the capacity of a school to improve. In empowering all staff to become and be recognised as leaders, schools will improve. Leaders must feel confident to empower others.

What follows are elements of a case study of a secondary school, which moved from the category of 'specific weakness' (Ofsted 2000) to 'a good school' (Ofsted 2003) by using action research to create a greater awareness of self and situation, and enhance career development and opportunity. As a result a self-reflective and evaluative culture was created: in sum, a learning community aspiring towards the highest standards.

Context

When I was appointed headteacher of The Lord Grey School, I knew that many challenges lay ahead. Ofsted confirmed my views within two weeks of the appointment, placing the school into 'specific weakness'. I believed that the effective way to promote school improvement immediately was to encourage staff to review their professional practice, through some form of active reflection. Motivated individuals would form the basis of strong teams. I therefore approached the Centre for Educational Policy and Management at the Open University to discuss opportunities for teachers and researchers to work in collaboration. Using their theoretical expertise and our practical know-how, I explicitly strove to improve the capacity of the school; firstly by focusing the institution on its core purpose — learning — and, secondly, by creating reflective practitioners.

In partnership with the Open University, we hoped to record organisational change. As we set out to change the ethos of the school and to improve its overall efficiency, we wanted to monitor developments in teaching and learning.

In establishing links with the Open University, I was conscious of four potential strengths:

- The links with the Open University were local, accessible and relevant to school and staff development.
- The individual projects established, as part of the collaborative action research, would have practical applications.
- The Open University contacts would provide the necessary experience and guidance for perhaps hesitant staff to engage on reflective pedagogy and academic learning.
- A more flexible and open-minded working culture would develop, as teachers gained the opportunity to reflect on learning.

A number of important school factors had to be considered:

1. **Standards** of student performance and achievement had to rise. Low expectations had led to poor student performance. Reflective, resourceful practitioners within the teaching and support staff, would raise expectations.
2. **Staffing** was a priority. In July 2000, the school had 20 teaching vacancies and the national recruitment crisis was emerging. The recruitment and retention of staff would inevitably become more problematic as the situation worsened. For teachers to enhance their professional performance and personal development, they need opportunities to continue their own learning and to be developed as learners. Staff were encouraged to increase their self-awareness, to share ideas and to become more reflective and self-critical. As staff responded, the ethos of the school embraced learning.
3. **Students' learning opportunities** would be maximised by the creation of an enthusiastic staff wishing to reflect on best practice.
4. **Increasing the capacity for school improvement was crucial.** Creating an open and transparent collegiate working environment would mean there was huge potential to effect rapid improvement. The foundations would also be secure for the long-term future of the school.

A new mission statement was developed to incorporate the above and thereby to define explicitly the future direction of the school:

To create an enjoyable, open, inclusive learning partnership, built on the small steps of life-long education with high standards of teaching and learning, delivered in a safe environment. in which motivation is managed effectively and in which citizenship is promoted.

The new school motto reflected the challenge: "Excellence: Dare to Succeed".

Our initial research

Individual members of staff worked with researchers in partnership to think about best practice. The staff analysed and discussed how to change students' perceptions and thus a culture of improvement emerged. The focus of the research projects centred on "Promoting Organisational Learning" through collaborative action research and the subsequent findings were presented at the British Educational Research Association conference in September 2001.

Three years on from the original contact, the link with the Open University remains strong with additional staff contributing further to new research projects. The school is now part of the Milton Keynes Secondary Network Learning Community. The benefit of encouraging action research is that learning is given the highest profile in the school.

Kemmis and McTaggart's (1981) Action Research Spiral was used not only to test our research findings, but also to form the basis of our self-evaluative culture and our quest for constant school improvement.

Our thinking was to:

test our research findings

promote a self-evaluative culture

improve a school

Our current research

The opportunity given by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has allowed individuals within our school to focus their research efforts in two main phases:

Phase one: visits to other schools

Releasing staff to visit peers in similar roles in other schools in the UK to enable them to carry out a simple benchmarking exercise.

Phase two: personal reflection

Looking at the thoughts and opinions of the research team in order to provide a context for our findings.

The research itself focused on four main areas:

1. Leadership

The research team adopted a two-phase approach to this research, examining their own leadership styles and practice, and comparing themselves with staff in similar roles in other schools. The objective was to identify and test the main characteristics of educational leaders, focusing on both teachers and support staff. We believed that there was a link between leadership styles and the ability to build the capacity of a school to improve. Staff were also asked to consider how their leadership qualities have helped to improve our school.

2. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)

During the course of our leadership research, we came across the work of the SEDL. Based in Texas, USA, the SEDL is a research and development organisation, with a remit to identify ways and means of improving educational practice. As part of their research into successful educational leadership, the SEDL has identified six main characteristics displayed by successful leaders. In summary, they:

- have vision

- believe that schools are for learning
- value human resources
- are effective communicators and listeners
- act proactively
- take risks

We sought to test the validity of these assertions and examine the extent to which educational leaders display these characteristics. We therefore developed a questionnaire that was then completed by a number of educational leaders in schools throughout the UK visited by our research team.

3. How the research has helped to improve the school

Throughout the research, our team has been keen to ensure that there is a practical, successful and appropriate application of our findings. It was therefore important that we were able to compare any shifts in perception of school improvements at the start (January 2002) and current stage (November 2003) of the research. Our aim was to try to correlate our findings with school improvements.

4. How the research has impacted on the individual

In the final stage of our research, we felt that it was important to examine the ways in which the process of research, along with the subsequent findings, has impacted on the professional lives of the research team. We therefore constructed a second questionnaire, aiming to help the team to focus their thoughts.

Overall, it has been our aim to reflect on the link between leadership and building the capacity of a school. Collectively, we have come to the view that schools improve by harnessing the leadership qualities of all individuals. Our research has allowed us to define these qualities and to appreciate how the actual process of the research has helped to promote learning both for the individuals concerned and the organisation itself. In short, we have formulated the view that the way to build the capacity of a school to improve is by creating leaders at all levels, and in different roles: reflective practitioners who act.

Hypothesis

The first step in our research was to consider the application of leadership styles in educational contexts. We hoped to identify the situational variables and/or leadership traits necessary for creating the capacity for change and improvement in an educational context. From our preliminary work on promoting reflective practitioners, we formed our belief that creating leaders at all levels encourages schools to build capacity and allow change.

Of particular interest is the combination of characteristics, evident in the working practices of established and aspiring leaders, in an institution that is setting out to undergo change rapidly. As a consequence of what we could see happening in our school, and also from what we had read, we believed that schools intent on swift change must develop what we call teacher leaders and resource leaders (leaders who are members of the support and administrative staff).

The fundamental tenet of our research is that leaders of educational change at all levels within a school structure share leadership characteristics. Many qualities have been identified but the differing work contexts make defining them complex. However, it seemed to our group that six characteristics, identified by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), deserved further testing.

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)

The SEDL is an educational research and development facility, based in Austin, Texas, USA that aims to create and provide research-based products and services to improve teaching and learning. Their work includes field-based research, research and development and, more importantly, the dissemination of findings. Our review of leadership literature led us to the SEDL's work, which explores the leadership characteristics that facilitate school change. The SEDL has identified six characteristics of leaders of educational change:

The six characteristics, of leaders of educational change, identified by the SEDL, are:

- having vision
- believing that schools are for learning
- valuing human resources
- being an effective communicator and listener
- acting proactively
- taking risks

Consensus exists on the critical role that leaders play, but what types of individuals are these leaders who initiate and maintain successful educational changes? Do leaders of educational change share similar characteristics? When do these characteristics develop? Are certain characteristics unique to specific roles?

NCSL filming

We were aware that an analysis of the opinions and thoughts of the Lord Grey staff would provide an interesting context to the overall research project. We wanted to know, in addition to our exploration of leadership characteristics, whether the research had had an impact on their professional lives. Five out of the six staff had been involved in being filmed for NCSL in January 2002 and their comments were transcribed at the time. This provided a useful source of information and a valuable context to school improvements. The transcripts were obviously helpful since the participants did not have to rely solely on their memory of that time.

During the filming, staff were asked to describe any problems faced by Lord Grey, past and present, and any positive developments that had taken place. Problems discussed included weak staff recruitment and retention, complicated procedures and IT systems, poor line management, lack of staff appraisals and poor staff and student morale.

Staff morale is better when we know where we stand, who's responsible for what and when we see things happening... that goes for everybody.

[There are] improved systems in the school in terms of support for staff, clearer responsibilities and accountability... administrative resources are functioning clearly and IT systems are much more integrated than they were previously... so that makes life easier, clearer and more coherent.

We're aiming for motivated students, which motivates teachers.

One of the main changes [has been] that there's much more of an emphasis now in learning and what's actually going on in lessons.

We've become much more of a reflective institution... we share good practice.

It was nice that she [the head] made the decision that allowed it all to happen... [then] just sort of said, 'go and do it', and she did actually just leave us to go and do it.

When reading the transcripts, it is striking to note that staff acknowledge the importance of a self-reflective, empowered and professional environment in improving a school. The filming occurred before the research project commenced. Despite this, it is clear that ways in which a school's capacity to improve were already firmly in our collective conscience and the research offered a framework for developing our theories.

I recognised on the day of my interview that we had to put learning at the core of our thinking, and thinking at the core of our learning.

I would hope that in most of our classrooms you will see a style of teaching and learning that promotes a self-reflective environment.

[One of the essential things for me] was building my school leadership team around me because once you have a team around you, you have the strength.

Leadership research

While some staff continued working with the Open University on a collaborative action research team, other Lord Grey staff participated in the leadership research offered by NCSL. Events such as the return of Ofsted interrupted our work and some staff involved in the project left the school. Six Lord Grey staff have been involved in the NCSL project throughout:

Staff member	Position	In post from	Position of respondent(s)
Despina Pavlou (DP)	Headteacher	September 2000	Headteachers
Tracey Jones (TJ)	Deputy Headteacher	September 2001	Deputy Headteachers
Jason Falkner (JF)	Business Manager	November 2000	Finance & Services Manager
Jonathan Day (JD)	Head of Modern Foreign Languages Faculty	1987	Joint co-ordinator for MFL (plus own response)
Isabella Coles (IC)	Chartered Librarian	1990	Head of Careers, Education and Guidance
William Leahy (WL)	Head of Social Sciences Department	September 2002	School Librarians (plus own response)

Table 1: Participants in the research and the position of their respondents in school visits (see Research activity 1 below)

Though a small sample, participants cover people newly appointed to a leadership position and those more experienced. They also cover different roles within the school, at various stages of individual development.

The six people involved in the NCSL project considered the six characteristics of the SEDL in a wide ranging discussion, which included questions about the characteristics of leaders, models of leadership, leaders functioning in a culture of change, lessons to be learned from leadership failures and schools as self-evaluating and improving organisations.

We considered Peter White's "The Secondary School Sandwich Filling" (2002), which provided a good exploration of current theoretical issues. He concluded that worldwide education has seen significant changes in the relatively recent past. Devolution of authority within secondary schools in the form of dispersed leadership from headteachers to other stakeholders accompanied the massive changes. White recognised that empowered classroom teachers increase their motivation and commitment. We were aware that the opportunity to reflect on pedagogy and the benefits of the research would allow for reflection and dissemination of practice for 'teacher leaders and resource leaders'.

Research Activity 1: visits to other schools

As each member of staff visited somebody performing a similar role in a similar rank in other schools, they discussed leadership and its practical applications, and thereby reflected on their own individual practice. See Table 1 on the previous page for details of the roles of the respondents.

To focus discussions, a questionnaire was developed, using the six characteristics of leadership identified by the SEDL to structure the responses. A planning meeting was held to keep the focus of discussions on how a school's capacity for improvement is enhanced by creating leaders at all levels. Ad hoc meetings were arranged throughout the research, and a meeting was held at the conclusion of the research to confirm our views.

Research Activity 2: personal reflection

In order to gauge their feelings as school developments occurred and to record the individual perceptions of members of staff, we constructed a second (qualitative) questionnaire asking questions about personal perspectives.

Findings from Research Activity 1

A number of shared characteristics were apparent in the questionnaire responses.

The findings of our research confirm the integrity of the SEDL's six identified leadership characteristics that facilitate school change. They reveal some interesting traits specific to the various types of responding staff, but also indicate that there are characteristics linking each group: headteachers, deputy headteachers, heads of faculty/department and support staff. However, overall the evidence we collected suggests that the collective capacity of a school to change depends on the combined strength of the leadership within it. Other findings were:

- Staff with specific responsibility take questions asked and relate them to their own responsibilities. They naturally promote their own interests, sometimes prioritising beyond the global school agenda or vision.
- All the headteachers agreed that personnel – students, staff, and parents – are the school's most vital resource and also recognised the pivotal role of their own position. The headteachers confirmed that they derive job satisfaction from working in a team and achieving success.

We need a collaborative approach with clear leadership and vision.
Without leadership the organisation will not move forward.

- Each of the four deputies interviewed named teachers as the most important resource in a school, but no mention was made of other staff, students or parents, perhaps indicating an area in their collective leadership vision that needs to be developed.
- Change seemed to be a disrupting factor in some leadership groups, whether it was through the restructuring of a team and the introduction of new members, or due to the absence of an established member. The dynamic of the school leadership team was understood to be improved by stability.

We are a changing SLT – not a settled year because we have two new members of the team, so we need to gel.

- Of the responding support staff, there was an interesting mix in answer to the question: “What do you think is the greatest resource in the school?” The answers offer an interesting commentary on the sphere of influence exerted by the individual and how their view of the school is affected by how they view their role within it.
- There appeared to be an element of conservatism in relation to implementing changes which were considered risky.
- In considering the integrity of the SEDL qualities, important facets of leadership are also defined. The headteachers mention: having confidence in own abilities, the ability to motivate others, the determination to succeed, holding others accountable, helping others to achieve empowerment, integrity, clarity, openness and vision. However, others consider honesty, approachability, kindness, communication and understanding as most important. The words chosen, the descriptors, perhaps relate to the perception of self and others, and are relevant to the debate on leadership. In considering why some individuals choose not to take on leadership roles, factors include: choice, insufficient knowledge, a lack of confidence and a reactive rather than a proactive disposition.

Findings from Research Activity 2

Overall, the staff agreed that the research process had enhanced and helped develop their professional lives, facilitating a more reflective way of working. The process of research has also given the school a new language with which to articulate changes. There was agreement about the ways in which Lord Grey has improved during the course of the research. In particular, respondents highlighted a more open culture, increased stability within the organisation, greater clarity of vision and much better systems and processes.

All respondents stated that they perceive themselves as leaders of educational change. They believe that they have been, and continue to be, instrumental in changing the culture in aspects of their areas of professional responsibility. This may be through working towards improving the student perception of a “traditionally confrontational” curriculum area such as modern foreign languages, increasing the profile and use of the learning resources centre, or reducing the culture divide between teachers and support staff.

In considering how school improvements have come about, there was a variety of views as to how this has been achieved. The consensus was that the Whole School Development Plan, written in consultation with and published to the entire school community, has been instrumental in setting the course for improvement. This again demonstrates that a transparent culture and shared agenda facilitates improvement. Improved recruitment and retention strategies for new and existing staff, along with the continued hard work and commitment of a talented staff, have also contributed to success.

After visiting their peers in other schools, Lord Grey staff were better able to consider the position of their own leadership. Through conducting the research, some staff came to consider themselves as leaders and having leadership qualities:

Until recently, I never thought of myself as a leader.

Other findings were:

- It was conceded that it can be a struggle for everyone to subscribe to the same vision, particularly within a large organisation. Any conflicts in vision may impede the core responsibilities and success of staff. Sticking to core personal beliefs was deemed essential.

- All members of staff believe that they have a vision. However, only the deputy gave an unqualified response:

I have general principles that I believe in, which I would use to steer a school. I am a realist and pragmatist, but also have core values that I would try to hold fast to.

The others conceded that they face conflicts and challenges in their vision:

...the challenge is to get other people to understand and agree with you.

There are always conflicting and overlapping agendas.. which compromise the ability to be a teacher.

My style of leadership has been generic and that has often meant reviewing the ideas and narrowing the vision over time.

Self-confidence was seen as a crucial factor in being a successful leader and maintaining a clear and focused vision, prioritising as appropriate, and holding fast to core beliefs. Perhaps self-confidence is more apparent in established leaders and those further up the leadership gradient. However, career promotion and progression is a definite endorsement of ability and has a positive impact on self-confidence. Many operating on a strategic rather than a managerial level cite the assuming responsibility and seeing vision through to actuality as improving their self-esteem.

- Self-reflection was considered an essential quality if an aspiring leader is able to fulfil their potential and achieve success. If there is little room for self-doubt, it is still vital that self-reflection is maintained.
- There was a general consensus that human resources should be valued, with a premium attached to good, stable and committed staff. However, the definition of “human resources” varied in the answers, between meaning teachers, staff as a whole and humankind. It was pointed out that “the best way to create an environment receptive to new ideas and development” is by valuing staff.
- All believed that taking risks is necessary in a leadership role. However, these should be calculated and considered risks.

“Risks should be calculated ones that have been well discussed and thought through.”

“We don’t want to risk children’s results and futures on a whim.”

In evaluating the ways in which Lord Grey has changed as a result of the emphasis on research and self-reflection, the respondents mentioned the following:

Teaching and learning	Structures for student learning are more established and accepted.
Standards	There is a greater focus on the link between student achievement and behaviour.
Retention and recruitment	There was a mixed response to this question, possibly due to the position of the respondents. The more senior staff, who are perhaps better placed to see the whole school strategy, stated that they felt retention and recruitment was improving, although they conceded that it is still a struggle. The middle managers, with possibly a more restricted perspective, were not able to differentiate to the same extent.
Career development	On the whole, the responses were very positive.
Responsibilities and accountability	There is greater clarity in the responsibilities and accountabilities of staff.
Processes and systems	There is increased clarity and efficiency, although more support is still needed.
Premises	Improving, but still in need of enhancement.
Whole-school culture	There is a sense of community and the general ethos is understood.
Resources and equipment	Tight finances, but good resources.
Finances	Tight but intended to be transparent to staff.

Impact of research on our school

In our research, the following factors were cited in common as essential for developing the capacity of a school to improve:

- strong and positive leadership
- clear vision and direction
- empowering staff
- having high expectations
- high quality teaching and learning
- suitable resources and safety

In discussing the process of research, the group agreed that it has made a positive impact on their professional lives. It was agreed that the principles of research, such as reflection, rigorous methodology and discussion, should feature in any leader's day-to-day professional life. It was also noted that this research had provided the opportunity for reflection and discussion, when it is not always possible to find time for such activities in the course of a typical, busy day. In theory, it is hoped that the experience of the research, along with the findings, will have a practical application:

The advantage of this research has been the opportunity to discuss professional issues.

We regularly develop new practice, implement and reflect upon its effectiveness.

The principles of research should be part of any leaders day-to-day work and therefore should be continually impacting on my professional life.

Such research is positive as it forces one to reflect on educational issue. Often, in a busy work schedule, this is an element of the job that is missing.

Our research suggests that appointing aspiring leaders increases the capacity of the school to improve; that leadership teams should incorporate the SEDL's six characteristics into their strategic recruitment planning; that a school should aim to encourage individuals with leadership potential at all levels, thereby building the capacity of a school to grow.

The research also suggests that school leadership teams must consider whether the professional culture of the school recognises the existence, and potential, of teacher leaders and resources leaders. In order to facilitate an increase in the capacity of a school to improve, there must be leadership space within the structure, to allow professional development and reflection.

It seems to us that the following questions are crucial in considering school improvement:

1. Do schools recognise the presence and importance of leaders at all levels - reflective practitioners who act?
2. Are personnel in school given sufficient time and guidance to reflect on their practice, and to learn from the experiences of others?
3. Are interviewing panels sufficiently aware of the characteristics they should be looking for in applicants aspiring to attain leadership positions in all ranks within the organisation?
4. What is the optimal environment for leadership to flourish and be cultivated?

This research has created a deeper understanding of how people are managing leadership within our school, which will ultimately improve the standard of learning for all, students and staff. Harnessing the qualities of potential leaders has had a significant effect on developing the capacity of our school for improvement.

In this research we set out to identify the situational variables and/or leadership traits necessary for creating the capacity for change and improvement in an educational context. The success of our research and our endeavours can be measured in the development of our school. In addition to receiving the School Achievement Award and being invited to join the Most Improved Schools in England Club, Ofsted re-designated our category, stating that "Lord Grey is a good school with a good sixth form." In their Inspection report, published in March 2003, Ofsted stated that "Lord Grey has made rapid and significant progress since its last Ofsted inspection. The strength of the school lies in its leadership and management and its committed and enthusiastic staff, who work successfully in teams focused on learning. Most categories by which the inspectors make their judgements are graded as "good" or "very good". The inspectors concluded: "very good leadership has resulted in a strong focus on learning and a significant improvement in standards".

This year, at its first attempt, The Lord Grey School has also been recognised as an Investor in People. The report found that, "it is noticeable that amongst all staff there is a tremendous energy and enthusiasm. New ideas are being tried out, and there is a culture of support and respect." The Assessment considered a variety of aspects of Lord Grey, and found that priority is given to the development of a professional, qualified and dedicated staff. Among their comments, IIP stated that "people interviewed cited the friendly, mutually supportive culture of the organisation as its main strengths...Governors are seen to be extremely supportive ... There is a raft of evidence of individual and organisation improvements as a result of training and development...Those interviewed confirmed that they feel valued...there is a strong culture of respect across all groups of staff... It is noticeable that amongst all staff there is a tremendous energy and enthusiasm."

As the headteacher, I am pleased that this research opportunity, provided by the NCSL, has helped to create an environment where teacher leaders and resources leaders can thrive, and where we have built the capacity of a school to improve by promoting research and reflection.

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Website

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