

## Developing a teacher leadership programme

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### **Abstract**

Caroline Creaby was Head of Business Studies and an Advanced Skills Teacher at a secondary school when she introduced a teacher leadership programme for colleagues in her school.

### **Introduction**

In 2009, I introduced a teacher leadership programme at my school and, over a three year period developed it. I took up the challenge of being the 'tutor' of a school-based Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) group, and in the first two years of its operation, had the benefit of support from a colleague from another school who had some prior experience of the programme. Our practice in the first year was somewhat tentative but, having managed the first run quite successfully, I decided to undertake a review and identify how the programme might be improved. Having reflected on the limitations of the programme in its first year, it became clear that the impact of the programme could be enhanced. I was also concerned that the programme relied too much on my own energy and commitment. I wanted to re-think the organisation of the programme so that it might be more sustainable and less dependent on one person's leadership. In this article I discuss the key interventions that I put in place in the second year of the programme to address these concerns.

### **Context**

The TLDW programme has been developed within the HertsCam network, a partnership originally formed between the University of Cambridge and the Hertfordshire local authority, instituted to support the development of classroom practice and leadership amongst Hertfordshire teachers. Within a TLDW group, participants lead a project which involves developing a specific area of their professional practice and potentially spreading this practice to other classrooms in the school. This leadership of classroom innovation is supported through in-school twilight sessions and one-to-one tutorials. Participants are also expected to collaborate with other

teachers both within their own school and in other schools in the HertsCam network to help them develop improved strategies and to share their learning. This collaboration is supported by regular network events. Participants document evidence of their development work in a portfolio which is the basis for the award of a post-graduate certificate from the University of Cambridge.

The impact of the first cohort of teachers to go through the TLDW programme was significant. All participants developed aspects of their classroom practice and grew in confidence. Most shared their work within their departments, and in some, this practice became embedded. A few projects reached further into the school, shaping practice in several departments. A good example of these early projects is accounted for earlier in this issue (Claire Simmons' project, page 8). Most importantly for my headteacher, teachers' projects served to get people talking about teaching and learning, a factor he believed fundamental in improving not only classroom practice but also the professional culture in our school.

Despite such positive outcomes, it was clear that the effectiveness of the programme could be improved in a number of ways. First, I wanted to develop participants' identities as leaders of change. Despite some excellent projects that resulted in real change in our school, my research revealed that participants in the first cohort did not describe themselves as exercising leadership. This troubled me. They had acted to varying degrees as leaders and I wondered what their projects might have become had they considered themselves as leaders, rather than just a teacher 'doing' a one-off project. Second, I wanted to enable participants to extend the scope of their collaboration. In most cases, collaboration was what I would term informative, or one-way, whereby participants simply told other members of staff about the development work being carried out. Alternatively, in a few cases, collaboration was more 'reciprocal' (Hobby, Jerome and Gent, 2005: 10) where the participant built up a two-way relationship with another member of staff in order to develop their projects. The Hay Group called for a 'new model of influence' (Hobby, Jerome, and Gent, 2005: iii) for teachers and suggested one that rests upon their ability to connect effectively with other staff rather than on traditional assumptions about authority and line management responsibilities. In leading the next cohort, I aimed to develop further the capacity of participants to collaborate in a more reciprocal way.

In addition, I wanted to establish the TLDW programme so that it became a recognised feature of teacher development and knowledge creation within the school. I therefore worked to organise the programme so that it would utilise school mechanisms and systems more effectively. In the following section I outline the key interventions that aimed to address my concerns and embed the programme more effectively within my school.

### **Building identity by steering the dialogue**

As identified above, one of my concerns centred upon participants' identities as leaders of teaching and learning. Teachers' perceptions of the scope of their professional role affects their confidence and ability to lead (Frost and Harris, 2003; Gronn, 1999). At the school, colleagues were generally very professional regarding their conduct and 'willingly choose to go the extra mile' (OFSTED, 2009). However, despite members of staff regularly extending their efforts, they were not necessarily 'extended professionals' (Hoyle, 1972, 2008) possessing a school-wide perspective and seeking to innovate and lead change. Rather, their professional identities seemed to be generally confined to carrying out their designated role well. The practice of teacher-led development work, described in Figure 1 below, posed a challenge to this identity.

*Figure 1: TLDW description*

#### **Teacher-led development work**

Teachers, with or without positions of responsibility:

- taking the initiative to improve practice
- acting strategically with colleagues to embed change
- gathering and using evidence in collaborative processes
- contributing to the creation and dissemination of professional knowledge

(Frost and Durrant, 2003)

The practice of teacher-led development work relied on participants taking the initiative, acting strategically, collaborating and building professional knowledge. These were behaviours that could challenge participants' identities. Looking back, I had rather naively thought that joining this programme and leading on an area of classroom

practice would automatically lead to participants' incorporating such aspects of leadership into their professional identities. Scheffelin and Ochs' (1986) paper was helpful in this respect since it reminded me that the process of socialisation to a new culture, which the notion of teacher-led development work entails, is not an automatic one. Therefore, throughout the programme it was crucial that I offered participants opportunities to reflect more explicitly on their projects and the extent to which they were demonstrating leadership.

One crucial mechanism to support the development of participants' identities was dialogue. Penlington (2008) argues persuasively that dialogue that fosters reflection better enables mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) making self-perceptions 'vulnerable to change' (Penlington, 2008: 1314). Therefore, the opportunity to talk, explain and share ideas with other participants, couched in terms of leadership, proved helpful to participants' understanding and practice; they were able to make meaning of leadership for themselves and start to describe their own practice in those terms.

As the group's tutor, my role was to facilitate the programme of workshops but also to provide one-to-one tutorials. An insight emerged about my influence as the group's tutor on the growth of the identities of participants. The concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) had become particularly influential in my thinking and planning. Self-efficacy refers to 'judgements of personal capability' (Bandura, 1997: 11) and measures one's view of what one thinks they can *do* and can be highly predictive of behaviour (Pajares and Miller, 1994). Importantly for me as the group's tutor, self-efficacy is to a certain degree 'malleable' (Henson, 2001: 831). Although the main mechanism by which self-efficacy can be shaped is personal experience, 'verbal persuasion' can also prove influential, particularly if it is from 'significant' others (Bandura, 1997: 101). Upon first reading of this, I immediately questioned whether I would be of any 'significance' such as to influence participants' views of themselves. Casting humility aside, I accepted that I was the group's tutor and began to act as though I was significant. Indeed, I began to see each interaction with participants as an opportunity to encourage and support their leadership.

Reflecting on my role during the first year of the programme, I realised that my language had not necessarily helped participants to see themselves as teachers who exercise leadership. Analysing my records of one-to-one tutorials from the first cohort using Wordle, a



Activities were designed to support the notion of leadership and to support participants to engage in collaboration more effectively. I did not expect any single activity to lead to a dramatically different outcome for participants and their projects, but I recognised that these more targeted activities provided a range of opportunities to reinforce the language and norms of teacher-led development work.

### **Knowledge building in the school**

The aims of the TLDW programme go beyond changing the identities and practices of those directly participating. An overarching goal is to build professional knowledge within the school and beyond (Frost, 2012).

A key strategy was to harness the expertise of the previous cohort of TLDW participants. Whilst developing a TLDW group within her own school, my colleague Hill (2011) observed the role the first cohort played as models for the subsequent cohorts. This informed me of the potentially powerful influence that members of the first cohort could have in my school. I firstly asked them to speak at a HertsCam Network Event to share accounts of their projects. I then asked them to act as informal mentors to the current participants, support their projects and offer advice. This began with them attending a twilight session in which they shared their projects. This offered new participants ‘vicarious’ experience (Bandura, 1997) of teacher-led development work. After this activity, some of the members of the previous cohort met with those in the new cohort and offered advice about their projects. Although this was used to varying degrees, teachers’ portfolios reflected heightened collaboration and recognition of the support from the previous year’s cohort.

A factor that has since proved important was the instituting of opportunities for TLDW participants to speak at school meetings. For example, every week, my school scheduled meetings for members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) at which matters of school leadership were discussed. I negotiated for TLDW participants to attend these meetings each half term to describe their projects and to seek feedback. Similarly, at other scheduled meetings such as those for Heads of Department, I was able to negotiate such opportunities. In the first instance, this provided TLDW participants with access to those beyond their existing social network (Buchanan, 2002; Scott, 1991), such as the school’s SLT, which enabled them to collaborate more widely across the school.

Crucially, they have continued to feature as regular items on school meeting agendas, ensuring that participants in the programme continue to benefit from such collaborative opportunities with other school leaders.

### **Addressing the issue of sustainability**

As outlined already, one of my concerns was to ensure the future sustainability of the programme; I wanted it to continue in the future without reliance on my personal energy. I was at the time considering applying for posts in other schools, so sustainability of the TLDW programme was increasingly an important concern.

Another practical issue regarding sustainability I was facing at the time was the struggle to identify a potential successor to lead the programme in my own school. In order to establish new TLDW groups, the HertsCam network relies upon building capacity from within participating schools rather than relying exclusively on the expertise of the university. A school local to my own was keen to set up a TLDW group and I was encouraged to offer support. I developed a relationship with the representative from that school, Nancy Simpson, who wanted to set up a TLDW group, having built up knowledge of the programme whilst completing her masters degree within the HertsCam network some years previously. As our relationship developed we decided that, in the following year, we would lead one group which would serve participants from both our schools. Nancy was grateful of the support I could provide her in the co-leadership of the group and shared my concern for future sustainability in her own school. Co-leading a group together would build both our expertise and yet reduce the reliance on either one of us for the programme's future continuation.

### **Outcomes and achievements**

At the end of the second year of facilitating teacher leadership in my school, it was evident that the TLDW programme had made a significant contribution to building a collaborative culture. The evidence also told me that this form of support can build participants' self-efficacy as leaders of change.

What was particularly noticeable when analysing written reflections from each cohort was the difference in participants' self-efficacy with respect to leadership. The first cohort largely confined their personal reflections of the TLDW process to their classroom self-

efficacy; they felt they had developed better practice and as such had grown as teachers. In contrast, participants in the second cohort frequently reflected on their own leadership skills whilst describing their developments of their projects. For example, participants described themselves explicitly as leaders and outlined which this meant to them in the following ways.

*Because I am curious about how to change my own teaching and to work with colleagues in sharing good practice and to implement new approaches to our teaching.*

(Participant 1)

*I want to be involved in collaborative learning and sharing good practice.*

(Participant 2)

These are just two of many similar reflections and were significant because they reflected a reconceptualisation of their roles, moving beyond developing practice in their own classrooms to developing practice in conjunction with others. Furthermore, a theme of empowerment emerged strongly, evident in another participant's reflection:

*The conversations have highlighted that as teachers we can implement change in our schools towards a better learning experience for our students... I have become more adept at working with other members of staff and framing an idea so that it appeals to all. I have negotiated my way through sensitive committees and sown a seed of inspiration in a number of colleagues.*

(Participant 3)

The confidence with which participants articulated their own leadership was powerful evidence that the interventions had been effective. Being more considered and deliberate in the language used when engaging in dialogue, coupled with the changing focus of twilight activities, was leading to a more effective socialisation to a new way of being, as an 'extended professional' (Hoyle, 1972, 2008).

It was clear that all participants appreciated the value of collaboration but it was the participants from the second cohort who provided a more sophisticated explanation of why collaboration was so crucial to the success of their projects. One participant identified that her initial collaboration with staff shaped the direction of her

project and *helped me work out what I needed to do and how I should go about it* (Participant 5) which reflected enhanced ‘situational understanding’ (Frost and Harris, 2003: 491) and ‘micro-political literacy’ (Penny, 1999: 333). Two participants identified collaboration as an important part of driving their project forward successfully within other departments and that without it, their projects would have lacked the transferability that they went on to possess.

*The cross-curricular collaboration has shown that independent homework selection can work with a variety of age groups, subjects and ability.*

(Participant 3)

*I think really, in terms of driving the project forward, having other people do it and seeing that they found it beneficial and enjoyed it, saw the kids enjoying it, that was really the driving force.*

(Participant 6)

The professional culture in the school is said to be a key determinant of the extent to which teachers are able to lead change (Durrant and Holden, 2006). My co-tutor and I discussed the culture in my school at the time we introduced TLDW and were doubtful that it was sufficiently conducive to collaboration and teacher leadership. However, it was clear that the TLDW participants were contributing to the development of a more collaborative culture. In effect, the cultural psychology (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1998) of the school was changing and thus influencing the second year’s participants. In an interview with my headteacher, the TLDW administrators asked about the role the TLDW was having in the school and my headteacher also suggested that it was having an impact upon culture.

*It helps to generate talk about teaching and learning, trying to build professional culture so that this it is normal. We started the direction and this is a contributory factor, it is a significant factor.*

(Headteacher)

My headteacher saw the TLDW group as a significant factor in changing the culture. This resonated with Fullan’s assertion: ‘learning in context actually changes the very context itself. Contexts do improve’ (Fullan, 2006: 9).

## **The role of the tutor**

It is difficult to clearly identify the factors that contribute to the positive developments described above. However, it became clear to me that a key support for participants' projects and their leadership development were the one-to-one tutorials I provided. One function they served was to give participants' projects *validity*. One participant commented as follows.

*The quality of the feedback improved my confidence, both that my development work was valuable to me and the school as a whole and that there were people in the school that responded positively to what I was doing.*

(Participant 4)

Such personal confidence was vital to developing what Bandura (1997) termed 'mastery' – the secure knowledge that one is capable as a result of being personally successful. Such feelings were common amongst the participants and served to develop their projects yet further as illustrated by this comment.

*This gave me a great deal of motivation to develop the idea into something larger.*

(Participant 3)

This confirmed to me the importance of dialogue in the development of this relatively new way of working. Furthermore, despite me not being a member of the school's Senior Leadership Team, nor possessing a title or remuneration in line with the normal hierarchy of the school, my role nevertheless had a significant impact on the participants in the second year cohort; indeed I was perceived as a 'significant other' (Bandura, 1997: 101). It brought into focus for me how important it is for tutors to realise the impact they can have on participants new to a teacher leadership programme. I had not intended that my intervention would serve to enhance my own self-efficacy as a leader, but I am grateful that my project has offered me this obliquely (Kay, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Carrying out this project has made me realise that to be an effective leader of sustained good practice it is imperative to reflect in a systematic manner on one's own strategies and interventions. I received praise for the apparent success of my school's engagement with the TLDW programme in its first year. It would have been easy

to view this, as was conveyed explicitly by some influential leaders within my school, as following ‘naturally’ from my innate leadership. However in the second year the increased impact of the project did not arise necessarily from any leadership traits I may possess but rather because, after evaluation and reflection, I improved the support I provided for participants. This has led me to conclude that successful teacher leaders, if they are to sustain their self-efficacy over time and beyond their initial zones of interest and influence, must demonstrate the same commitment to learning from their own practice that they would expect from their most diligent students.

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