



LEADERSHIP AND TEAMWORK IN THE EARLY YEARS

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A Critical Analyse of a Practical Group Performance

In the last thirty years great emphasis has been placed upon the importance of education, with Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 recognising a child's right to the highest level of education. A worldwide effort has been made to improve educational outcomes for children (OED, 2013) with greater emphasis being placed on those who in a position of leadership. Much debate surrounds leadership in education with leaders being increasingly viewed as pivotal for the highest standard of provision (Bush, 2008). However, although Marcoulides et al. (1995) stress that leadership alone is insufficient for the improvement of learners' educational outcomes, the development of leaders to improve school standards and performance is now a global concern (Lumby et al., 2008). International research to date has revealed that the style of leadership, its associated behaviour and practices can positively, and negatively, effect the organisation, culture and conditions within an educational setting so impacting upon the standard of teaching, children's learning and achievement (Bush, 2008; Day et al. 2016).

In 2011, Wales recognised education as a national priority dedicated to providing high quality education for all. It has developed a new curriculum and in 2018 established the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL) whose aim is to support and develop leaders and their practices so practitioners can develop and educational outcomes for children can be improved. With educational leadership being recognised as second only in importance to classroom teaching (NAEL, 2018) it is vital that an understanding is gained of just what constitutes a high-quality leader so that every child's educational right can be realised.

The first part of the assignment for the Leadership and Team Work in the Early Years module was to participate in a practical group performance. Having developed a good collective working relationship with two fellow students in a previous practical group task, a decision was taken to work together once more in the participation, preparation and performance of the monthly staff meeting presentation.

We chose a school as our setting and so to demonstrate our knowledge and understanding of the learning outcomes we considered the possible matters for discussion before agreeing upon five. With our personal knowledge, strengths and weaknesses in mind we decided upon our roles and the matters that we would each assume responsibility for. At this point we all agreed that it would be sensible for the one member of our team who had a sound first-hand knowledge and experience of teaching within a school to undertake the role of headteacher, the educational leader. This was mutually approved, as she felt that she was able to share her expertise to guide and support the other team members who recognised their inexperience in a school environment. So, to demonstrate their areas of expertise the two other team members assumed roles as co-ordinators in representative areas of the curriculum.

Once decided upon, I formatted the agenda along with an accompanying school logo of an oak tree and school motto "Working together to nurture and nourish everyone's potential greatness". The opening point of our agenda was the upcoming ESTYN inspection where reference was made regarding staff familiarising themselves with the school's development and self-evaluation plan. Further requests and explanations in line with the new inspection arrangements were made to all teachers and deadlines issued accordingly.

The meeting progressed to cover the implementation of the Digital Competency Framework of the new Successful Futures curriculum including information surrounding the forthcoming Safer Internet Day. The next item agenda was that of an imminent arrival of a new pupil with additional learning needs. With related training and legislative changes in this area also being discussed. With the pending severe weather, leading to a review of the severe weather policy, also being introduced to staff so to bring them up to date and make them aware of their roles and responsibilities considering the changes.

What is Leadership?

In the past the concept and practice of leadership has been more widely recognised within the field of business (Fullan, 2001). Whilst the concept of educational leadership is still evolving, due to its relatively recent introduction to both our team and those in the field of education, there is a growing body of research documenting its effects, what it is, what it should be and how it should be carried out (Woods and Roberts, 2018).

Due to its complex nature and the multi-faceted environment in which it functions it is difficult to provide a definitive definition of leadership. At its most simplistic Leithwood and Riehl (2003:2) propose that leadership has 'two functions: providing direction and exercising influence'. Purinton (2013: 279) proposes that it is a 'bureaucratic mechanism, tied to organisational functionality'. However, Bush and Glover (2014) offer that leadership is an influential journey, where a leader develops a beneficial vision for the educational outcome of their learning institution founded upon their professional and personal values. This vision is clearly communicated at every opportunity to all those involved within the learning institution, such as staff, pupils, governors and parents, and its wider outside community. The philosophy, structure and function of the institution are then organised so to actualise this shared vision.

Effective Leadership

For leaders to be effective and have successful outcomes for their schools Jones and Pound (2008) suggest that they are required to possess certain qualities, characteristics and skills. Much discussion has taken place about how these can be successfully utilised with many leadership models having been developed (Bush and Glover, 2014).

Instructional leadership

Focuses upon clearly defined educational goals, curriculum planning, teaching and assessment of teaching. The primary responsibility of the leader is that of achieving

attainment levels for pupils, focusing upon improving the quality of teaching and stressing its importance alongside learning (Robinson et al.,2009).

Managerial leadership

Bush and Glover (2014) provide that the leaders focus should be on behaviours, functions and the successful completion of tasks and if this occurs then the other members of the team will be enabled to function. This is based upon the ideal that all members of the team behave rationally.

Distributed leadership

Is where leadership is shared so that other team members accept lead responsibility in other areas so adopting a leadership role and distributing leadership behaviour (Lindon and Lindon, 2011). This model has become increasingly popular because it recognises expertise at no matter what level the team member holds (Bush and Glover, 2014).

Transformational leadership

Perhaps the model that best demonstrates our team's ethos is that of transformational leadership. The concept of transformational leadership was described by Leithwood (1994) as having six dimensions: 'building school vision and goals; providing intellectual stimulation; offering individualised support; symbolising professional practices and values; demonstrating high performance expectations and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions'. Although, Day and Sammons (2014) claim that with the advent of further research this can now be characterised by four core sets of leadership practices:

- **building vision and setting directions** – where leaders motivate their team, creating a shared vision and organisational goals so that shared purpose is a catalyst for everyone's work.
- **understanding and developing people** – here those practices that stimulate motivation are important, such as modelling appropriate values and behaviours, providing all with support and consideration whilst nurturing individual academic growth. Attaining organisational goals is of the utmost significance and for this

to be achieved it is important that team skills and knowledge are developed alongside the inherent qualities of dedication, competence and resilience. In doing so team members can confidently apply their knowledge and skills.

- **redesigning the organisation** – primarily concerned with the provision of conducive working environment, that is to enable team members to capitalise on their roles and responsibilities, innovative ideas and capabilities (Moolenaar et al., 2010). Successful relationships with parents and those in the community are seen as a pivotal practice alongside that of collaboration in times of reorganisation such as integrating a new curriculum (Bush, 2008).
- **managing the teaching and learning programme** – comparable to the last set of practices. The desired focus is to establish a productive working environment by focusing upon enhancing and stabilising the school's organisation.

Building Vision and Setting Directions

The early stages of our task were complex. There were many factors that our group had to take into consideration – legislation, statutory guidance, the changing nature of the curriculum, policies and practice. This provided us with a representative insight into the complex multi-faceted school environment. The creation of roles, an agenda with a school logo and motto provided us with a shared sense of purpose and direction upon which our monthly staff meeting would be delivered. By discussing and stressing the importance of the school development and self-evaluation plan we demonstrated that we understood the importance of having a vision which was documented, clearly visible and communicable to all as purported in the definition of leadership offered by Bush and Glover (2014). By engaging in a direction setting practice we were able to reduce our stress, increase our sense of effectiveness and commit positively to the task. Day and Sammon (2014) indicate that this behaviour serves to provide a shared sense of purpose, assisting staff development and enhancing their work. These factors are important for staff contentment and are contributory to staff retention (Carlson, 2013).

Understanding and Developing People

Jones and Pound (2008) propose that another important part of leadership is to provide a learning environment for all, pupils and practitioners alike, so that everyone may have the opportunity to learn and develop by engaging in the process of reflection. As a team we recognised the importance of this as having taken part in a previously assessed group performance and reflected upon the feedback, we were keen to work together again so to put into practice what we had learnt in order to improve. Our team leader similarly welcomed the opportunity of sharing her existing knowledge and experience so enabling and motivating the other team members to learn and develop. In the view of Lindon and Lindon (2011) a primary significance of leadership is having the capacity to reflect, assess and react.

Choosing roles, such as Headteacher, Additional Learning Needs, Health and Safety, Literacy and Digital Competency Framework Co-ordinator, allowed us to discuss the matters that we clearly understood and so played to our strengths. We were then collectively able to work together to demonstrate that we could deliver our objectives and exercise influence within our roles as both leader and informal leaders. The sharing of our individual knowledge not only allowed us to learn from one another but also enabled us to accomplish our group goal and successfully deliver our monthly staff meeting.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) state that the sharing of leadership in this manner may assist other practitioners in implementing goals, strengthening their development and learning, and achieving an improved outcome by working together. Belbin (2015) acknowledges that it is acceptable for each role to have strengths and weaknesses so long as each person is aware of their assigned role within a team, or group, and is mindful of the roles of other members. By being aware and utilising the corresponding and combined strengths of all roles the full potential of the group can be actualised. Whilst Welsh Government (2018:1) states that for schools to become learning organisations, school leaders should 'model learning leadership, distribute leadership and help grow other leaders'.

However, harmonious team working is not always easy to achieve when a team is in its early stages. In 1965 Truckman prosed his 'forming-storming-norming-performing'

team development model. In it he detailed the necessary phases that a team must go through in order to develop, approach challenges, address issues, discover solutions, plan tasks and achieve results. It was during the storming stage that most disagreement and confrontation could occur. During this stage the presence of a strong leader was required so that swift resolution could take place and an unpleasant working environment could be avoided so to avoid disruption for the team (Bonebright, 2010).

Two of our team members indicated that they had participated in training and continued professional development session where by new skills had been obtained. The tone of the meeting was collegial where offers of support for completing tasks were offered by the headteacher and other co-ordinators. The sharing of knowledge with others was also offered in the form on an INSET day and new ideas were embraced with the head encouraging them to be shared with others so their approval could be sought. Day and Sammons (2014) indicate that this behaviour exhibited by headteachers, such as opportunities for professional development, increasing of knowledge and sharing of leadership across the school so leading by example and modelling values and practices that are considered to be acceptable. Carlson (2010), provides that this this environment is positive for staff and can aid with the development and retention of productive staff.

Redesigning the organisation and Managing the Teaching and Learning Programme

The team collectively embraced the new digital competency framework, responded positively to the changing nature of the curriculum whilst working alongside parents, governors and outside organisations to improve the outcomes for pupils. Day and Sammons (2014) afford that such behaviour leads to the development of a stronger collaborative organisational environment which reinforces the stability of the school.

Not all of the team's actions conformed to the transformational model. Indeed Hallinger (2010) would argue that the teams focus on pupil outcome is more typical to that of instructional leadership. By assuming responsibility as curriculum co-ordinators and acting as informal leaders, Bush (2008) would claim that this was typical of distributional leadership. However, Day et al. (2011) infers that no one model may be

suitable for every school given the complex nature and ever changing and challenging environment in which they find themselves functioning. Instead he provides that there are eight key dimensions of successful leadership where student learning, well being and achievement are the core focus (Figure 1). Whilst their application may differ between schools along with their implementation, their vision and values remain consistent.



Source: Day et al., 2011

It would appear from our team experience and the research conducted that the actions of leaders are highly influential for the outcome of their team, or school, and all those who work, and learn, in it pupils and staff alike. Just in the same way that a strong leader can positively influence outcomes, a poor leader can also negatively influence them. Having a strong head teacher is essential, they not only improve outcomes for all but assist greatly in the retention of staff by providing a structured and conducive educational environment where all can learn, develop and thrive.

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