



InForm 16

Reflections on developing as an educational leader and manager

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InForm's purpose is to capture significant ideas that enhance our understanding of leadership, learning and their interrelationship. This paper offers a personal reflection on some of my recent writing, mirroring the narrative and reflective approach advocated. It invites you to consider the emerging issues for you personally, and any implications for your own, and your colleagues' practices in leading the learning of students, teachers and other significant people in terms of both schools and communities. Most of my recent research activity has sought to bring out the personal and organisational side of leadership, and how the two interrelate. Bringing back the personal aspects of leadership in relation to organisational theory enables us to make sense of some of the stresses and strains of leading within high accountability frameworks and should be relevant to many people within the Leadership for Learning network.



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Many issues have been exercising me and made me keen to develop them into a book ('Developing as an Educational Leader and Manager' Sage, September 2014). Both as an experienced school governor and an academic, I am strongly of the belief that for leadership and learning to be effective, they need to be set within a framework of good relationships between staff and students; staff and parents; school and community. An effective framework for good relationships within our diverse, multi-cultural society can be both challenging and exciting. Leaders have to be clear about their own personal stance on many key issues. For me, it is key that leaders understand their own personal narrative of leadership. Any leadership narrative is based on a unique set of experiences in particular contexts.

The narrative of how I have moved from working in schools to working in universities relates to how I have come to understand the relationship between theory in practice and educational leadership. Over a period of 20 years I have had the privilege of being involved, as a governor, in five different schools in England, with age ranges from 4 to 18. A unique part of my leadership narrative is that I was involved in starting three new schools from the very beginning (Crawford 2007). Within the university sector, I have been privileged to teach leaders and potential leaders from around the world, and have learnt a great deal from those Master's and Doctoral students, not only about context in leadership, but also about their personal commitment to reflective practice (Schon 1983) and the future of young people in those countries. My own narrative has some key threads concerning people, values and a love of teaching. There are, of course, many more narratives, some of which may conflict with your own understandings, or may change how you view your own narrative. Reflecting on your career as a narrative, allows you to own difficult periods and reflect on critical events. My personal journey has caused me to reflect on the interface between research and practice in education, and particularly in educational leadership. My book promotes the view that leadership and the organisation are woven together. A key assumption I make is that one of the roles of leaders is to see that the people that make up the organisation are valued and recognised. Valuing people could mean helping an individual towards promotion, or, in a more difficult sense, helping them move with dignity out of their role if leadership is not for them.

My personal view is that the very best educational leaders are dynamic and adaptable and are most effective when they draw upon understandings developed from theory. Most importantly, I believe that there are leaders at all levels in education, who need to allow themselves space to think more clearly about their role as a leader and manager. By thinking of your life as a story, you can begin to examine more closely your own leadership style and your relationships with others. Over time you become more aware of your strengths through this kind of narrative. Developing such self reflection is crucial to enriching your own leadership. It may seem strange to think of storytelling as something that can help with both personal development and organisational analysis, but storytelling is very powerful.

Many (accounts)... are highly charged narratives, not merely recounting 'events', but interpreting them, enriching them, enhancing them, and infusing them with meaning... such accounts can be seen as an attempt to re-create reality poetically. (Gabriel 2000 p. 31)

Engaging with the personal meaning of your story, and, importantly, the stories of others, can be very useful in understanding more about how and why leaders make meaning for their organisations.

A view of leadership

As a way to begin to understand your own narrative, you can try telling your own story, in writing in this way:

Briefly sketch out your educational journey, starting with your own schooling. Then, look back over your career so far, and note down significant people, places, and events. Note the nature of their significance to your leadership journey. Were they significant because they moved your ideas and career on positively, or were they difficult and/or traumatic and made you change your own thinking about leadership. Try to identify one event of each kind, and what it taught you about yourself, as a person and professionally.

I introduced the idea of a personal leadership narrative (Crawford 2009), because of work I had carried out with school leaders. A very similar concept is the personal interpretative framework (Kelchtermans, Piot et al. 2011). Both of these similar concepts invoke the way leaders and their ideas develop over time: retrospective experiences, as well as the importance of the here and now in personal development. Your identity as a leader is formed partly through such narratives. Just like schools as organisations use narratives to manage meaning, communicate core values and to negotiate social order and identity (Armstrong 2011), so leaders use them to do similar things at the personal level. Narratives can help express emotions, and begin to understand the current organisational context or lived reality of schooling. At the same time, narratives help construct new realities not just for you but for those you work with.

Telling your story

Narrative is linked to leadership in many significant ways, through past events, through talk, through the personal sense of self, and in the culture of schools and schooling. For each person, this narrative will be different and personal. Roberts (2002) sums up this process of recalling events and putting them in a particular personal context:

In our own personal conceptions of our biographical time we are aware of our own mortality but not our actual end; we also remember the 'past' but cannot live it again except in the imagery of recollection. (p.171)

In particular, he suggests that an individual life is full of events never completed - interpretations that lie within the consciousness of the interpreter. Interpretation and consciousness together make up a key frame for the way leaders see their own narrative. This will inevitably be full of ambiguity about the past, present and future.

Sparrowe (2005) has a useful idea to think about, which relates to the activity above. He suggests

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that using the idea of a narrative crystallizes the fact that the self changes and moves through time and events. ‘The narrative self is not a constant self, identical through time, but the subject that experiences change, reversal, and surprise’ (p.426). Change, reversal and surprise are very important parts of the educational leadership narrative. Sparrowe also usefully outlines how a narrative works in practice. To make sense of our lives, we use different kinds of stories to tell others about events and to relate each event in our lives to the ones that have preceded it and will come after. He notes:

One way to do that is to recognize an event as the outcome of an intention— this happened because I intended it to. Another way is to construe the event as the effect of the intentions of some other individual, entity, or contextual factor. Put another way, when we think about ourselves in relation to our actions, we often do so in small plot segments (...) Plot is the organizing theme of a narrative. It weaves together a complex set of events into a single story.

Sparrowe suggests that self-awareness can be aided in many ways, and work, such as writing your own life story and keeping journals, can be seen as the most common form of accessing narrative. It also offers a space to reflect. Sparrowe suggests that writing your own obituary can help you see the plot of your life, but perhaps this should only be attempted when you are in the right frame of mind! Other activities build on the basic reflective activity of writing the story of your educational journey. One such is ‘The Reflective Best Self Portrait’ (Dutton, Spreitzer et al. 2006), where people get feedback on their unique strengths as individuals from significant others, not just by listing them, but by relating three stories of when they feel they were at their best. Sparrowe calls this ‘the narrative construction of an esteemed self’. He also advocates engaging leaders in understanding what Luthans and Avolio (2003) refer to as trigger events. In the activity above, consideration of these may have informed your understanding. These events, like a denouement in a soap opera, represent transitions in the plot of your narrative identity. He notes, ‘Enriching the variety of alternative but positive plot lines enables developing leaders to find in others new ways of being.’ For me, this is important. The leadership narrative should not be viewed in isolation, as others are very much engaged in the process, from students, to staff, to the wider community. Writing or telling a narrative is all about re-framing situations in order to understand them better.

Leadership as identity work

Narratives are all about managing meaning. Just as schools as organisations may use narratives to manage meaning, communicate core values and negotiate social order and identity, so leaders can utilise narratives to do similar things at the personal level. Narratives can focus on emotional events, as well as help you begin to understand the current organisational context or lived reality of schooling. As well as this, narratives help construct new ideas, not just for the leaders themselves, but for those they work with.

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Using the idea of a narrative crystallizes the fact that the self changes and moves through time and events (Sparrowe, 2005). Change, reversal and surprise are very important parts of the educational leadership narrative. To make sense of our lives, we use different kinds of stories to tell others about events and to relate each event in our lives to the ones that have preceded it and will come after. I argue that recognising the plotline becomes easier as you become an experienced leader, partly because there are only so many plots, but also because your self-awareness will be more developed. The leadership narrative should not be viewed in isolation, as others are very much engaged in the process, from students, to staff, to the wider community. Given recent events in Birmingham concerning school governance, leaders may wish to look more closely at the role of the wider community in such engagement. To sum up, writing or telling a narrative is all about reframing situations in order to understand them better. The reframing process is ongoing in a career.

Values

Following on from thinking about engagement, you may already be thinking that leadership is concerned with values. Thinking about values concerns basic beliefs about education and how you, as a leader, relate to the organisational structures you find yourself in and the values of the people you work with. They are the ideals that you view as important and which influence not only how you think about leadership, but also how you act in the classroom, in the school and in the community.

The values of leaders matter to the organisation (Gill, 2011). He suggests key values for leaders are honesty, truthfulness, integrity, trust and trustworthiness, and argues that the best leaders have values that closely match those of the organisation they are leading. He also notes that ‘shared vision, purpose and values in an organisation or nation constitute a strong positive culture’ (p. 176). This again reminds us, if we had ever forgotten, of the importance of local and national contexts.

The educational leader is faced with huge challenges when s/he considers values. They underpin almost everything that is part of educational life, from government policy to the aspirations of parents and staff. Gill suggests the helpful idea of ‘transcendent’ values, which are able to accommodate the different wants and needs of these various groups. Shared work values in teaching and learning seem like a given but, of course, they are much more complex than that. Personal values underpin educational leaders’ actions. The task then is to understand more clearly where those values help build a great school. The role of the leader may be to identify ways in which teams and individuals can explore and share their experiences of working together, in order to build those transcendent values. At the same time, leadership is contextually based in a particular culture, whether that is local or national. Building on your knowledge of personal values and shared values means that you are more able to understand both the culture of the locality and the organisation.

The personal

My own research is concerned with life history and how personal experiences shape our own understandings of leadership and how to lead. Interpreting personal stories and seeking to understand the part they play in individuals' everyday lives in schools is worthwhile, if difficult. This narrative approach fits in with my overall approach to interviews in research, in that I believe objective truth does not necessarily exist in these sorts of encounters. More details about my research into headteachers' lives can be found in Crawford (2009), but much of my writing and research has been concerned with emotion and leadership. I find that exploring emotional processes in work settings (like schools) increases our knowledge and understanding of the transactions between the individual and the environment.

One aspect leaders I have worked with find very useful, is concerned with emotional understanding of oneself in the context of meeting leadership challenges and the idea of playing a role, drawn from Goffman (1959). The latter proposed that every kind of social interaction is like a game, in which we take on roles. We can become more or less strongly engaged in a role, with fulfilment more likely to occur when we are fully engaged in a role. As our leadership profile becomes more public, often as our career progresses, the management, or control of emotion, does become more important. The strain of 'performance' can have a negative effect on leadership, the joy of performance a positive one.

Emotions in organisations can be suppressed or acted upon, often depending on the person's history of similar events and how they have been coped with in the past. Emotions offer a rich and useful source of information about what is happening to a person and the culture of the organisation. Emotion in leadership has many aspects. Leaders will harness the communicative or performative side of emotion at different times. They may also need to draw upon personal emotional reserves, and enable their staff to express their own feelings and emotions most helpfully in times of stress or crisis. How leaders make a difference is also a messy process. Theories of leadership need to be proactive and insistent on maintaining that without emotion, there is no such thing as leadership. Such theories are drawn from one's own personality made up of a complex interaction between identity, memory, temperament and emotion, experience and training.

Your responsibility for your own development as a leader

You are the one who has responsibility for your own development as a leader. Support in the form of a critical friend can help (Swaffield 2004). Swaffield notes that trust is a vital component of such work as is the ability to question, critique and provide feedback (p. 276), all of which can be developed through specific training. These sorts of critiques can easily be lost to school leaders if they are not able to keep their own focus on professional learning for leaders. This could be done through some formal or semi-formal way within the organisation, or outside of it, that helps the new leader focus on learning and developing. The development of Teaching Schools may be a way of extending this process, as well as informal 'ground up' CPD such as TeachMeets.

Critical thinking is another vital attribute. It can be perceived in many ways, and there are certainly many debates in the literature about exactly what such thinking might involve. On a module that I once used to run on a Master's course, I used Brookfield (1987) who looked at critical thinking as a learning conversation. Such conversations have specific qualities, and the following is an abridged version of those discussions.

Good conversations are reciprocal and involving. When you are engaged in a very stimulating conversation there are many facets to it. All of the participants in the conversation are really involved in the process of making conversation by either talking or listening. When people talk, there is a variety of ways that are used to keep the conversation involving and reciprocal. For example, people may respond to a previous comment, answer questions, add to earlier arguments they have made, give examples and bring in new ideas to the conversation. Listening is also an important part of a good conversation. If you can, it is helpful to watch a conversation to understand more fully the importance of listening for understanding meaning. Effective listeners listen for meaning and at the same time mentally process the meaning in terms of their own knowledge, while also working on their next verbal phrase in the conversation.

The course of good conversations cannot be anticipated. Many leaders go into discussions expecting an outcome. In a good conversation, you may know the destination in general, but if you are listening and participating fully, the final outcome may be even better than the anticipated one. Brookfield encourages learning conversations to be stimulating and not knowing the exact course is one possibility.

Good conversations entail diversity and disagreement. This is the part that many students on my course found tricky. Brookfield argues that any conversation where everyone agrees is not really a conversation. (Brookfield 1987 p. 238-41)

Brookfield also noted:

The development of critical thinking inevitably entails diversity of opinion, disagreement over correct interpretations of an idea, rule or behaviour, and challenges to existing ways of thinking and acting [...] Unless we can accept that others have views very different from ours, and that a multiplicity of interpretations of practically every idea or action is possible, we will be unable to contemplate alternatives in our own thoughts and actions. (1987: 241)

A non-judgemental attitude or just being open-minded comes to some people naturally; others have to work at it. Both are useful skills to develop as a leader and you may want to ask a critical friend how non-judgemental or tolerant you are. It might also be interesting to ask yourself whether you think these are suitable attributes in most or all situations. This takes the discussion back to what we value.

Self-trust is another important quality to cultivate. In many contexts, leadership in education is

intensely unpredictable. Some may work in high trust environments, some in low trust. These can also be high or low accountability environments. In countries where high accountability is paired with low trust in teachers or the leadership of schools, it can be even more difficult to remain firm to your beliefs. Research into educational leadership is particularly firm about the centrality of moral purpose for leaders (Fullan 2003). If you think these are important qualities to cultivate, then it may be useful to explore further the relationships between such qualities and capable leadership. Making sustained critical thinking and reflective reading part of your professional learning as a developing leader, can allow other benefits such as the ability to make time for your own needs, as well as those with whom you work.

I believe that developing leaders should be able to work in a professional system which values, challenges and develops them. Being a member of the LfL network suggests that you do want to extend your knowledge and capacity. An overarching reminder to yourself that learning is life-long may help when challenges seem about to swamp you. Make time for yourself and look for outlets that refresh you. These could be intellectual, social or spiritual. And as you develop, you may become a 'resilient realist', (Lilley 2014). Paraphrasing Lilley, I believe that excellent leaders don't do great things; they clear time and space to let others develop leadership. To develop yourself, you will need to continue being firm and purposeful in your intent to increase your capacity as a leader, drawing on appropriate support.

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