Developing Practice in a School for Children with Special Educational Needs

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This article focuses on teacher leadership in a school for children with profound disabilities and learning difficulties. The narratives of development work led by three teachers are drawn upon to explore how the teacher-led development work methodology as it is deployed in the context of a master programme can be used to support change in a variety of educational institutions. The article also draws on the perspective of one of the authors, Sarah, who leads the masters programme and acted as academic supervisor to the three teachers. The account also contains interesting insights in to educational provision for children with special educational needs in the UK.

Keywords: Special educational needs, teacher-led development work, master's programme, advocacy

Introduction

In 2015, three teachers, Lisa Dillon, Natasha Freeman and Ellen May Shipp from Amwell View School in Hertfordshire joined the HertsCam Network's MEd programme in Leading Teaching and Learning. The programme is led by Sarah Lightfoot an experienced teacher and senior leader in primary schools, who also acted as academic supervisor: the member of the teaching team assigned to Ellen May, Lisa and Natasha to provide individual advice and support. This article is a collaborative effort, drawing upon critical narrative accounts of development projects, submitted as Lisa, Natasha and Ellen May's final assignment for their master's programme.

We begin with an overview of the work of the HertsCam Network in the UK. The concept of 'development work' is explained along with the aims and the principles of the MEd programme. The significance of the particular school context in which the teachers' development work took place is discussed before reflecting on particular episodes from the three teachers' stories which illustrate the impact of empowering teachers as leaders of change.

The HertsCam Network

The HertsCam Network is a UK-based, independent, not-for-profit, registered charity committed to educational transformation through support for teacher leadership. What makes HertsCam distinctive is that its programmes – the MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning, the Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) programme and the Network events programme are led, managed and taught by teachers themselves. These teachers could be characterised as activists; they are committed to the continuous improvement of their own practice and the provision of leadership to build collaborative innovation; they take on roles as facilitators within HertsCam programmes and engage in advocacy on an international scale (Frost, 2018).

The HertsCam MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning is a part-time, two-year master's programme for teachers and education professionals (Frost, Ball, Hill & Lightfoot, 2018). It is facilitated by a team of practicing teachers, all of whom are graduates of the programme. The MEd attracts participants from all sectors of the education system. Some are very experienced teachers whilst others are at the beginning of their careers. Not all participants have qualified teacher status. Some have designated leadership roles, others do not. What programme participants have in common is a keen sense of 'moral purpose,' a real desire and commitment to making a difference in the lives of children and young people through their educational experiences (Fullan, 2001).

The HertsCam MEd is concerned with enabling teachers to lead development projects designed to improve the learning, development and wellbeing of children and young people. As with all HertsCam programmes, it has been designed to support teacher leadership regardless of any formal position or role of special responsibility – non-positional teacher leadership (Frost, 2018). Participants in the HertsCam Network's programmes are enabled to lead development projects through the 'teacher-led development work' (TLDW) approach in which it is assumed that school-based change and improvement can be achieved through well-planned, time-bounded development projects (Frost, 2012). The term 'project' here is not construed as research; the projects subsequently designed and led by the participants constitute *development work* which, within the HertsCam Network, is defined as:

> strategic, focused and deliberate action intended to bring about improvements in professional practice. It takes the form of collaborative processes featuring activities such as consultation, negotiation, reflection, self-evaluation and deliberation which take place in planned sequence. (Frost, Ball, Hill & Lightfoot, 2018, p. 10)

Participants are enabled to lead development work in their professional settings and provided with opportunities to discuss their projects with other programme participants and a wider range of colleagues at Network events. Through taught sessions, the MEd teaching team scaffold and enrich this discussion with relevant conceptual frameworks, literature, and knowledge domains. The approach to teaching and learning on the HertsCam MEd supports the growth of an enhanced professionality, one where the focus is collegial and each is a member of a learning community, where the orientation is towards innovation and agential activity, and where the drivers are teachers' principles and moral purposes (Lightfoot, 2017).

The Context for Development Work

Amwell View School provides education for 140 children and young people aged 3-19 years with lifelong conditions and diagnoses which cause severe learning difficulties (SLD). It is one of only six such schools in Hertfordshire in the UK. Every pupil has an Education, Health and Care Plan, a legal entitlement which sets out their particular educational needs and outlines any additional help and support that is needed for them to make progress in their learning.

Children at Amwell View School operate at very early stages of physical, emotional, linguistic and cognitive development. Many of the pupils have a recognised medical diagnosis or congenital condition, such as Down's syndrome or other specific diagnoses, whilst others have a non-specific diagnosis of global developmental delay. There is a growing population of pupils with a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder. There are also many children who have sensory impairments. A number of children have reduced mobility and are dependent on wheelchairs or other mobility aids to move around the school. Others are not able to speak, read or write and therefore rely heavily on alternative methods of communication. Many of the children use visual timetables, real life pictures, symbols, tactile cues and specialist communication aids instead of words.

In England the number of children identified with complex special educational needs is rising. In part this may be due to medical advancements and early interventions which mean that children are surviving longer with more complicated and significant conditions and reaching adulthood. Consequently, many more children are now entering the school with significant and complicated medical needs alongside their educational needs and experiencing greater difficulty in accessing learning. The complexity and range of needs requires all members of the teaching and support team to provide specialist and flexible responses for the children and young people to make progress in their learning. The English inspection and regulation service, the Office for Standards and Education (Ofsted), recognises that the school provides 'outstanding education' for its pupils.

Amwell View School has a long-standing association with HertsCam which began with its Deputy Headteacher, Neil Ward, completing his MEd in 2012. Neil's development work brought significant change to the culture of the school and sowed the seeds of a long-term shift towards shared leadership. The school now has a thriving commitment to the one year, school-based TLDW programme (Hill, 2014) with many members of the staff participating. It also hosts HertsCam Network events which are a way of strengthening the school's links with mainstream schools and breaking down the perceived barriers between them and special schools; colleagues from all professional contexts value sharing and learning from each other at these events. It was as a result of this association that Ellen May, Lisa and Natasha began their MEd with the wholehearted support of their school.

Leading Teaching and Learning through Development Work

This section relates episodes from the three teachers' stories of leading change in their school. A seven-step approach to the process of teacher-led development work is employed in the HertsCam Network (Hill, 2014). Although this is not a strictly sequential process, all steps are essential for development work to be successful. The steps are now used as a framework to highlight significant aspects of the teachers' development work.

Step 1: Clarifying values and concerns. Step 1 participants clarify their own values and explore what is important for them in their work as teachers. The premise here is that these reflections are the starting point for the process of recognising their constructions of professionality and considering how to extend the scope of these (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015). Ellen May and Natasha were in agreement with Lisa that alongside the legal requirement to meet the needs of all those children and young people in their care, there is, for them, an overwhelming ethical and moral compunction to act in every pupil's best interests. All vocalised their strong sense of commitment and passion about their work, revealing a highly attuned moral dimension to their professional identities. Natasha, in particular, drew on MacFarlane's (2010) virtue approach to explain the values she brought to the process of planning and initiating change in her school context. It was important for her that fairness, openness in the sharing of growing knowledge, conscientiousness and a flexible approach were strong aspects of her work with her colleagues. Ellen May similarly noted the need for consistency between her values and her approach to leading meaningful change. It has been argued that 'true leadership emerges from those whose prime motivation is to help others' (Marquardt, 2000: 3). This drive, termed 'passionate care' by Moyles (2001) coupled with the belief that they could make improvements to practice, provided the catalyst for further clarifying their prospective development work.

Step 2: Identifying an agenda for change. Step 2, participants identify for themselves a possible focus for development, whilst Step 3 involves them negotiating with their colleagues in their settings to explore and consider that focus. These early steps were crucial in helping the three colleagues from Amwell View School put their moral purpose into action. The MEd provides the scaffolding to help programme participants hone their thinking and negotiate with colleagues.

The three teachers employed various tools and opportunities for dialogue which enabled them to examine and think deeply about current teaching practice and provision for learning in their school. For example, MEd participants are asked to collate artifacts and photographs which represent teaching and learning in their schools, for example a photograph of children working in a classroom, or an example of written feedback for a student or a teaching resource. In pairs they examine these objects, noting their importance and teasing out how they represent the pedagogical approaches employed in their schools. Participants note what they find problematic or challenging. Structured reflections like these helped Lisa, Natasha and Ellen-May identify particular agendas for their development projects. Although their observations focused on the type and range of opportunities for pupil learning, each found that her professional concern involved enabling and developing colleagues' skills, knowledge and understanding to facilitate pupil learning.

Lisa's analysis of the school context emphasised the importance of the adult role in a school such as Amwell View. Typically developing children, between birth and 7 years old, learn at a pace never to be replicated in their lives. Children with severe learning difficulties are far more dependent on adults to stimulate and scaffold their learning, and reach beyond their limits (NCCA, 2009). Lisa's concern related to the practice of the teaching assistants in the school where she was keen to help her colleagues understand the complexities of pupils' needs and develop their pedagogy accordingly. Ellen May wanted to improve the ways in which she and her colleagues' formative assessment of learning was used to inform planning and teaching and develop pupil progression. Natasha's concern about pupils' communication skills focused on the problem of classrooms being artificial environments not designed to foster intimate, two-

way reciprocal and contingent interactions. She sought to develop strategies to develop a more authentic context for meaningful communication to take place.

Step 3: Consultation and analysis of the context. During Step 3, support is given to maximise the strength of the individual's understanding of and commitment to their professional concern and consider strategies to consult colleagues about the concern. Ellen May, Lisa and Natasha's reports of their development work demonstrate the importance of making connections throughout the process. Although each individual was invited to reflect on her values and identify what is of concern, key to the concept of extended professionality is the development of a collegial focus. Participants on the MEd programme consider strategies and activities to develop reciprocal relationships between themselves and their colleagues, thus increasing the sustainability of the development work.

The three colleagues took slightly different approaches to consulting their colleagues, but all noted the importance of talking face-to-face rather than sending emails or expecting questionnaires to be completed. They were also keen not to be seen to be coercing colleagues to take part in this consultation, in part due to the ethical approaches mentioned earlier. Each teacher recognised the value of feedback from those with a genuine interest in the focus for development. Ellen May sparked interest in her proposed work by creating a display in the staffroom which identified the focus of the project and explained the rationale for developing formative assessment strategies. A simple sign-up sheet was left for colleagues to indicate their interest in her proposals. Six colleagues agreed to meet with Ellen May to discuss the issue. Consulting colleagues helped to establish the scope and direction of the project and created the conditions for further collaboration during the process of development.

Step 4: Designing a project. Step 4 of the TLDW approach is concerned with the design and production of an action plan for the proposed project. As explained earlier, the project is conceptualised as a process during which strategic, focused and deliberate action takes place. Each plan is designed to have maximum impact because of the emphasis that is placed on programme participants developing collaborative processes such as consultation, negotiation, reflection, self-evaluation and deliberation. Impact can too easily be interpreted as indicating a causal effect of a discrete activity on test results. In the HertsCam Network we are more interested in evaluating the gradually transformative effect of the leadership process on pupils' learning, the teacher and their colleagues, the school as an organisation, and the wider community. The conceptual framework from Frost and Durrant (2002) highlights, for example, the possible impact of teacher-led development work on schools' culture and capacity which may involve the following:

- increase in the use of evidence
- improved collegial relationships
- improvements in the quality of professional discourse
- high level of consistency in practice
- greater level of coherence in beliefs and values

Pupils' learning dispositions might be positively impacted in the following ways:

- the development of more positive attitudes to school and particular subjects
- increased motivation to learn
- increased confidence and self-esteem
- improvement in the quality of relationships

This framework underpins a guided, practical activity designed to help each MEd participant to envisage her project as a time-bound process that foregrounds their leadership, collaboration, and innovation. The plan focuses on the process required to work out a solution and to improve practice which will result in these types of impacts. The journey between the start and envisaged end point on the timeline is clarified. Various aspects are incorporated into the timeline, including a sequence of key activities and tasks, materials, resources and financial implications, opportunities to consult further with colleagues to discuss the viability, progress, and gradual impact of the project on all those involved.

Natasha drew attention to the challenges involved in this process of designing such a plan. It was important for her project that her collaborators were able to contribute their own observations and ideas about potential strategies to improve pupils' communication. She wanted to share ownership of the development work but also to defend her vision of its aims and objectives. She resolved this tension by keeping her plan flexible, and allowing it to grow and shift throughout the process. After amending and annotating her planning during the academic year, Ellen May was able to similarly appreciate how all these elements contributed to her project's success. She conceptualised it as a series of gear-wheels including discussion, observation, reflection, tools, evidence collaboration, impact, and legacy. Ellen May reflected that that the 'cogs' involved in the process of development were all activated by the driving force of her professional concern. Furthermore, she recognised the extent to which she enacted leaderful behaviour in the many ways in which she cultivated enthusiasm and collaborated with her colleagues as they gathered and interpreted evidence to underpin their reflections, evaluation and deliberations. Ellen May understood that this was not a project that could have been explored singularly. She acknowledged she required the support from like-minded colleagues who shared the same concern.

Step 5: Developing a project plan through consultation. In Step 5, MEd participants continue to consult colleagues both in school and in the wider HertsCam Network. The networking programme is largely self-supporting with events being hosted at schools where TLDW programmes are held. This ensures that costs are minimal and promotes the Network members' investment in and ownership of the process. Those participating in the Network's programmes lead workshops or display posters about their development work as a means of prompting focused discussion with their peers.

Over the course of two years Lisa facilitated three workshops at various Network events and also presented a poster outlining her project design at the HertsCam Annual Conference. Her motive was to obtain constructive feedback from peers working in diverse settings across the educational sector. Accounts from the HertsCam Network demonstrate that teachers gain a great deal from discussing issues with like-minded colleagues in this way (Anderson et al., 2014).

Although they may not have met before, realising that a common endeavour is shared, provides tremendous encouragement for all involved.

Lisa's experiences differed somewhat. Although she was encouraged by her peers' interest and enthusiasm for her project, she felt the feedback given lacked criticality and challenge. Lisa reasoned that this may have been due in part to her specific school context. Staffing levels at Amwell View School are much higher than in mainstream contexts. Lisa thought many teachers, unused to team work, did not appreciate the necessity of her proposed development work. However, this raised awareness encouraged Lisa to take even more care to explain her context and be explicit about the complexities of working in such a setting. She found that her increased efforts in clarifying her values and moral purpose enabled her self-efficacy to flourish. Engaging in dialogue and reflection helped her to find useful solutions to problems and frame her action. At Network events the emotional dimension of the experience is significant. A respectful environment creates the conditions for open discussion, exchange of ideas, tolerance of difference, empathy and reflection (Lightfoot, 2019). Teachers need to engage in conversations with their peers where problems are shared, reflected back, heard afresh, and relived in new and different ways (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Step 6: Leading the development work. Step 6 of the process relates to the leadership of a project that draws colleagues, pupils and families into collaborative processes. Development work is the key vehicle for supporting the growth and enactment of extended professionality, but its success depends on participants' ability to engage their colleagues' involvement and commitment (Middlewood, Parker & Beere, 2005). These leadership endeavours necessarily involve consultation and collaboration with colleagues; by developing leadership in others, the project can lead to sustainable improvements in practice.

Lisa, Natasha and Ellen May's development work projects enabled the trialling of new practices, and collaborative relationships flourished. Their confidence was high as they relished acting as change agents and developing potential in others. They put their action plans to work and were meticulous in adapting them during the flow of the process. All three colleagues documented and reflected on the growing impact of their work.

Lisa's programme of support for professional development for teaching assistants was tailor-made to suit her colleagues' needs. She realised that she did not need support from external experts as the professional knowledge was there amongst them all. She provided information and extended their understanding of pupils' conditions and particular needs, but she also managed to tap into the enthusiasm of one or two people, which helped trigger all group members participating freely in discussion, posing questions, and seeking solutions. Lisa credits this safe environment as the means by which all involved demonstrated a willingness to trial new strategies and approaches.

Yet leading this work was not without its difficulties. Each of the project leaders became aware that having a commitment to an end or goal, or even a shared moral purpose, did not mean that obstacles would not be encountered (Bezzina, 2007). Natasha encountered some disappointment at an early stage. In her report she was honest about the reasons for this, which took a certain degree of confidence, something that is borne from genuine commitment and self-belief (McDowall-Clark, 2012). Keen for school-wide impact, she invited a diverse group of colleagues to participate in her development work. Several colleagues were unwilling to commit to this, most citing lack of time as a factor in their decision. Initially Natasha was worried about the implications of their unwillingness to participate, particularly since she had viewed these

colleagues as key levers for the project's success. However, she tried to understand their decisions. She wondered whether these colleagues were anxious about change and facing the unknown (Fullan, 2016). She thought it might have been the case that the focus of the work did not reflect their own values or concerns. Working in the same setting did not automatically mean they would share the same concerns (Little, 1998). Natasha understood the need to respect colleagues' choice not to be involved and realised that willing participants would be supportive of the process and could help to build a change culture (Fullan, 2001). A challenge was to maintain colleagues' enthusiasm and commitment to the project in the face of the many demands of their time so she organised a series of regular breakfast meetings. Eating and drinking together before the start of the working day gave the group opportunities to discuss their work with each other. This became a key strategy for keeping momentum for the project and also fostered the social cohesion of the group (Mylles, 2005).

Ellen May realised that her initial attempts at establishing collaboration could have been more successful. On reflection, she understood that influence rather than an 'instructional' approach would engage her colleagues. Using the facilitation approaches she had experienced in the MEd programme was a turning point for her. She decisively focussed her attention on the relational dimension of leadership. The genuine opportunities for dialogue Ellen May later created enabled her to share ownership of the development. She recognised that in order to be effective, and to make the necessary changes, everyone's contributions are crucial. By doing so she developed her knowledge of how to develop collaborative working arrangements that would lead to real agency and leadership amongst the group and improved educational experiences for children.

Ellen May, Lisa, and Natasha came to accept disequilibrium as an inevitable component of the development work process (Fleet & Patterson, 2009) but they also understood that reflecting on these situations and putting strategies in place to overcome them was all part of the work of leadership.

Step 7: Building professional knowledge. Enacting extended professionality in the ways in which Ellen May, Lisa, and Natasha have demonstrated involves creating and building professional knowledge (Sachs, 2003; Frost, 2012) which is the focus of Step 7. MEd participants contribute to knowledge building in their schools, networks and wider educational systems (Frost et al., 2018).

Because development projects are necessarily collaborative, they tend to have a transformative effect on the school's organisational structures and professional culture. This results in improvements in aspects of professional practice and thus better learning outcomes for children in schools. The leadership of development projects in schools enhances participants' moral purpose and leadership capacity (Mylles, 2005; Frost, 2012) in tandem with the development of professional practice and colleagues' sense of agency (Fullan, 2016), which has an impact on children's learning.

The three MEd participants generated and refreshed professional knowledge in their own practice and in the practice embedded in their school, and contributed to knowledge building in the wider Network. The knowledge they created occurred within a specific context and on a relatively small scale; however, how they went about achieving this adds to the professional knowledge base and a way of being that opens up future learning and cultural change. Such knowledge is highly relatable throughout the education system. Teachers and education professionals working with students of all ages and in all types of settings might recognise and

learn from Ellen May, Natasha, and Lisa's experiences of leading change. Indeed, they have inspired many teachers within and beyond the local Network to collaborate with their own colleagues in order to make a difference to children's learning and educational experiences.

Natasha's project has helped to develop teachers' practice and ensured meaningful and authentic opportunities for communicating became part of children's everyday experiences. Over time Natasha's leadership secured profound changes to the professional culture in her school. In all three cases, the acute sense of moral purpose was evident and they learned to appreciate the importance of taking small, incremental steps to expedite gradual improvements in practice (Whalley, 2008). Natasha learned that making small adjustments to current practice can lead to transformation in teaching and learning. Instead of promoting a model of transformation based on a sudden overhaul of strategies, she led a project which supported more gradual change. In doing so she was able to avoid a shallow approach to school improvement, which tends to be short-term and related to performance outcomes (Learmonth, 1999). Her development work supported deeper level improvement which is long-term and concerned with complex issues. Natasha found that involving teachers in the processes of gathering and interpreting evidence was an essential step towards developing their practice. Enabling others to reflect more deeply on their practice appeared to spur them on to envision and instigate further change (Toole & Seashore Louis, 2002). Instead of the 'top-down' approach where knowledge and skills are imported and externally transmitted to teachers, Natasha reported that knowledge was being generated at a local level.

Ellen May's reflections in her report demonstrate that the support of senior leaders is key to enabling teachers to work in this way and create knowledge for themselves. She drew on Hargreaves' (2001) work about organisational capital to develop her understanding of this vital relationship. Having considered the role senior leaders might play in guiding the direction of her project, Ellen May decided to cultivate the critical friendship they were keen to offer. She began to appreciate their role in developing and sustaining a culture of professional learning in schools (Senge, 2006). Senior leaders' understanding of the programme's aims and explicit support for those participating in the MEd programme is a key variable and in Ellen May's case her continued ability to extend her professionality depended on how well the TLDW process was understood by senior leaders and the position it had within the cultural context of the school.

Advocating for Teacher Leadership

Lisa had an opportunity to engage with teachers in Morocco as part of the HertsCam International Teacher Leadership (ITL) initiative, a development of teacher leadership which is bringing democracy and empowerment to teachers in many countries (Frost, 2011). There, she was able to share her reflections on her project and demonstrate the positive changes to practice and new ways of working a teacher can bring about when her moral purpose is validated by the culture of the school. She was able to discern that this is true of teachers working in very different contexts to her own. She recognised the 'fundamental humanity' of her international colleagues (Fleet & Patterson, 2009) as well as their need for professional development opportunities, such as HertsCam Network programmes, that promote the growth of dispositions such as creativity, risk-taking, persistence, and experimentation.

Some might question the ability of small-scale development projects such as these to make a discernible difference in a school but that is to underestimate the power of the combination of moral purpose and agency in shifting a learning culture (Fullan, 2001). Sustainable change is not achieved through the imposition of generalised policy; the answer resides in cultural change and the expansion of teacher innovation (Lambert, 1998; Hargreaves, 1994; Fullan, 2001) and the HertsCam model shows that this is achievable when there is a clear understanding of the conditions required to foster it.   This chimes with the view of Watkins (2005) when he suggests that successful schools focus on learning, are not compliant to imposed trends, are collaborative, and focus on connections. He identifies the hallmarks of a learning community as agency, belonging, cohesion, and diversity, all there in abundance in the development work of the three MEd participants featured in this article.

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