

Leading Development Work to Build Learners' Resilience in a Primary School

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This article focuses on a development project led by the lead author in her primary school. Samantha's story provides insight related to the pedagogical focus of the project but importantly highlights the challenges and triumphs involved in the process of improving and changing practice in the school workplace. Two vital conditions of support for teacher leadership are highlighted throughout the article. Samantha's increased capacity for leadership was enabled by her participation in a teacher-led masters programme dedicated to supporting teacher leadership and by the transformational form of leadership offered by the headteacher at her school, one of the co-authors.

Keywords: Masters programme, teacher leadership, independent learning, role of the headteacher, professional development, moral purpose, school-university partnerships

Central to this article is teacher Samantha's recently completed development work project focusing on improving young learners' resilience and independence. Samantha carried out this work whilst participating in the HertsCam MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning, a particular programme of support for teacher professional development, supported by facilitation from her school's headteacher, Clare. Samantha's story makes visible and illuminates how both an external programme, and a school's internal conditions, might enable the development of teachers' leadership capacity. The article begins by introducing Samantha and Clare and goes on to describe their school context. The nature of the HertsCam MEd is then explained. In this article, Samantha's reflections on the process and her own learning highlight the challenges and triumphs encountered by teachers who seek to exercise leadership when carrying out development work. The article concludes by relating Samantha's thoughts about what she has learned about teacher leadership

The Context for the Development Work

This section introduces Samantha and Clare and explains the key features of the primary school in which they teach in order to clarify the context. Peartree Primary School is situated in an area of high deprivation and ethnic diversity in the UK. Twenty different languages are spoken in the school community, levels of attainment have always been well below age-related expectations and school attendance rates have also been low. Staff turnover was high and the school population similarly fluctuated from month to month.

Prior to starting her masters study and her appointment at Peartree Primary School, Samantha was already an experienced senior leader. Members of the senior leadership teams in schools in the UK work directly with the headteacher in order to make a major contribution to a school's long-term, strategic plan and priorities for improvement. Samantha's role involved, for example, observing colleagues teaching and providing critical feedback to help them improve their practice. Samantha looked forward to widening her leadership expertise and skills in her new position at Peartree Primary School.

Clare had been recently appointed as head teacher at Peartree Primary School. In the first few months of her new post she engaged Samantha and a number of others to complete a newly reconstructed teaching team at the school. As a headteacher, Clare's moral purpose, whilst completely focused on the children and families served by her school, also embraced the crucial role a stable teaching team would take in helping her achieve her ambitious vision for improvement. She recalled that appointing Samantha to a senior leader role was a significant breakthrough in helping her accomplish this. It was Clare who subsequently introduced Samantha to the HertsCam network and the MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning.

The HertsCam Network

The HertsCam Network is an independent, not-for-profit organisation committed to educational transformation through support for teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is often assumed to be simply what 'teacher leaders' do, but in HertsCam the term is used in a more inclusive manner. Underpinning HertsCam's programmes and work with schools is the belief that any education practitioner – whether they be a headteacher, a holder of a middle leadership position, a teacher with no formal position, a classroom assistant or an auxiliary member of the team such as the school librarian – can be empowered and enabled to exercise leadership.

HertsCam is governed and run by teachers who could be characterised as activists (Frost, 2018); 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. Clare was a graduate and also a member of the teaching team of a masters programme for teachers – the HertsCam MEd in Teaching and Learning – which is entirely taught by experienced teachers. She took on this responsibility because she believes that systematic reflection on practice, supported by scholarship and intensive professional dialogue, not only helps teachers to improve their practice but it also enables them to maintain and enhance their professionalism and remain committed to the teaching profession (Frost, Ball, Hill & Lightfoot, 2018). Clare was keen for Samantha to experience the programme for herself.

The MEd Programme

The MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning is one of the programmes provided by HertsCam. It is a 2 year part-time masters degree programme for serving teachers and other education practitioners. The programme is comparable with other programmes in that it meets European-wide quality standards (ENQA, 2009; QAA, 2015); it is assessed through the submission of written assignments linked to a structure of Level 7 credits in harmony with regional agreements (SEEC, 2010). The course has been validated as an external programme by the University of Hertfordshire and so leads to the award of a masters degree by that university.

The programme's aim is to enable teachers to broaden their mode of professionalism (Hoyle, 2008; Frost, 2018) so that it includes a commitment to being influential within their schools, throughout the network and in the wider system. An individual's values and sense of moral purpose is central to this mode of professionalism. For HertsCam, 'enhanced professionalism' is the key to the transformation and capacity building that are necessary for school improvement and education reform, but how to cultivate this? It is often assumed that support can come from outside the school, perhaps in the form of training programmes provided by local government organisations, perhaps linked to periodic re-licensing. However, our assumption in HertsCam is that the support has to come from within the profession.

The following pedagogic principles underpin the MEd programme. These reflect the Network's shared professional values which guide the evaluation and development of the programme (Frost et al., 2018).

Principle 1: the cultivation of moral purpose as a dimension of extended professionalism

We teach the course on the basis of a shared understanding that improving the life chances of the young people in our schools is our central purpose. Enhanced moral purpose is a key dimension of the type of professionalism the course promotes.

Principle 2: Enabling the development of professional practice through the design and leadership of development projects

The concept of development work is introduced and revisited throughout the programme. The term refers to the process through which practice is improved. It is the antithesis of the concept of implementation in that it assumes that such processes unfold over time and that they involve strategic planning in order to enable professional reorientation to take place. Typical features include collaborative discussion, review, consultation, trialling, evaluation and joint planning.

Principle 3: Scaffolding the development of the learning community in which enhanced social capital allows critical friendship to flourish

The development of the MEd group as a learning community involves building sufficient trust and interpersonal ease to allow for robust discussion in which each member of the group is able to offer challenge and critique. This facility depends on the rapid growth of familiarity and mutual acceptance.

Principle 4: enabling reflection on experience and ideas through participation in dialogic activities

The HertsCam MEd is concerned with the development of professional knowledge in which the participants are knowledge creators. Their experience of practice is interrogated through reflection, comparison and analysis, which are scaffolded by the tools applied in the programme sessions and online. Conceptual frameworks and accounts of research derived from the literature are brought into the discussion in order to enhance participants' understanding.

Principle 5: building the capacity for critical reflection and narrative writing in which scholarship illuminates problem solving in professional contexts

In the HertsCam MEd the study of relevant literatures is used in the context of academic writing that is rigorous and critical, but the writing is purposeful in relation to professional problems arising from the individual participants' concerns and strategic action. Each participant's writing begins with reflections on their own professional identity and situation and develops along with an account of their unfolding strategic action.

Principle 6: Facilitation and support through the use of discursive and conceptual tools that deepen understanding of themes relevant to the development of educational practice

HertsCam MEd taught sessions typically feature reflection and discussion activities in which structure and focus are introduced through the use of tools devised for the specific purposes. Such tools may be in the form, for example, of a list of categories or perhaps a set of procedural steps.

Principle 7: Building professional knowledge and fostering mutual inspiration through the organisation of networking and opportunities for international engagement

Building professional knowledge through networking involves participants having opportunities to share narrative accounts of their development projects. Knowledge is built when narratives are subject to discussion, which leads to an enriched understanding of particular aspects of practice and the process of change. Alongside the development of technical know-how and insight is the building of collective self-efficacy and enhanced moral purpose.

Each of these principles is illustrated and exemplified in Samantha's story of her teacher-led development work process which follows. Her story is reported in 5 parts: joining the programme, identifying a professional concern, planning a development project, leading the process of development, and, a breakthrough. The article concludes with Samantha's reflections on what she has learned about teacher leadership.

Joining the Programme

Having applied to join the programme, Samantha was interviewed by two members of the teaching team; she was asked if she was prepared to commit to the values and purposes of the programme. It was expressly stated that the purpose of the MEd is to enable participants to take action that would benefit the children in their schools rather than merely provide support for participants' professional learning (Frost, Ball, Hill & Lightfoot, 2018). Samantha readily agreed to this and also committed herself to full participation in the programme. Over an academic year this consisted of 12 school-based workshop sessions which were held in a local school from 4.30pm – 7.30pm and three residential conferences in which all participants spend two days together in convivial surroundings. Participants on the programme are allocated an academic supervisor when they begin the programme. Sheila Ball, a member of the teaching team and a teacher at the Meridian School, a secondary school in Hertfordshire, was assigned as Samantha's academic supervisor. She and Samantha met regularly over the 2 years as explained later in the story.

At the first residential conference, Samantha joined a cohort that included teachers from the secondary, primary and special school sectors of the public education system. Some were very experienced and had senior leadership posts and others were new members of the profession, which gave the advantage of a wide range of different perspectives. Samantha and her fellow participants were provided with a compendium of documents which clarified the content of the programme – leadership for learning – and the pedagogical principles, referred to earlier, that guide HertsCam’s work. These principles served to remind everyone about the primacy of moral purpose, reflection on experience, dialogue and community in the exercise of leadership (Poekert, Alexandrou & Shannon, 2016). They also foreground the importance of scholarship and in particular the use of critical narrative writing as the means to make sense of experience and subject it to rigorous scrutiny (Brighton, 2009).

Later in that first residential conference, Samantha was asked to join a critical friendship group to which the participants in the second year of the programme would present their well-advanced project plans. These were inspiring for the new participants and helped them to imagine their own development projects. Values clarification and dialogue both within the new participant group and with those in the second year helped Samantha and her peers explore their own professional concerns and begin to explore how they might be addressed. One of the precepts of the teacher-led development work methodology that underpins the masters programme is that it is important to take time to consider what we are concerned about and then to undertake wide consultation within our schools in order to transform what might have begun as rather vague feelings of unease into viable agendas for change (Frost, 2012).

Identifying a Professional Concern

At an early stage in the MEd programme, Samantha and her peers on the MEd programme were asked to conduct an analysis of their institutional contexts. Leading change has to take account of the particularities of the context (Carver, Margolis and Williams, 2013). This dovetailed well with her role since, as part of the new senior leadership team at Peartree, Samantha was involved with the development of culture-building strategies (Hargreaves, 1999a; Schein, 2010). Their goal was to create a truly learning-centred environment in which values and norms such as co-operation, respect, friendship, honesty, ambition and perseverance would predominate.

A starting point for Samantha’s analysis was that the school was by that time on a trajectory of rapid improvement, following the appointment of Clare as headteacher. Through consistent and sustained provision of support for professional development, the quality of teaching and learning had improved across the school such that government inspectors rated it as ‘good’. However, Samantha and Clare agreed that there was still a great deal of work to be done.

Despite teachers’ best efforts, parental engagement remained low, suggesting disaffection with education and a perceived lack of relevance. Many parents had their own struggles with literacy and numeracy and felt school was an alien environment. The level of pupil attendance was still below government targets. The new curriculum was focused heavily on mathematics and English, which had resulted in an uninspiring, narrow learning opportunities, reflecting the performativity culture that continues to dominate our education system (Ball, 2003). Samantha observed that children were often not working at what is commonly referred to as ‘age-related expectations.’ They rarely spoke in full sentences, used Standard English or asked pertinent

questions. They were still in the early stages of developing the sort of positive learning attitudes described by Claxton (1999).

Samantha was increasingly concerned that pupils in her school lacked the skills necessary to realise their academic potential. She wanted to motivate pupils so that they enjoyed learning and could tackle challenges. Although the school had improved significantly, many pupils lacked resilience and perceived themselves to be ‘stuck’ without strategies to move forward (Claxton & Lucas, 2005). In discussion with teachers in her school, Samantha noted that children who demonstrated a lack of resilience often also exhibited challenging behaviour. Some children preferred to demonstrate poor behaviour and receive sanctions rather than concentrate on puzzling through their work. Children at Samantha’s school often exhibited signs of low self-esteem, both in their work and when dealing with social situations. Although some children appeared to lack resilience from a young age, Samantha and her colleagues discussed the extent to which the curriculum might be a contributing factor.

The process of values clarification, consultation with colleagues and analysis of the context enabled Samantha to settle on a focus for her development work (Frost, Ball, Hill & Lightfoot, 2018). Samantha’s vision was for pupils at her school to become more independent, to demonstrate greater self-efficacy, belief in their innate ability to solve problems (Bandura, 1997), to take ownership of their learning and to become more resilient. The intended outcome was that more pupils would try new learning activities, challenge themselves and, in time, actively participate in their learning. This would enable teachers gradually to reduce scaffolding and behaviour management would become easier. She envisaged a project that would learning have an impact on children’s attainment and long-term attitudes to learning.

Planning a Development Project

The MEd programme supports the exercising of teacher leadership by means of enabling participants to plan, develop and carry out a process of development work. This 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)

Samantha wanted to plan a development project that would have sustained impact on a wide range of factors, but especially on pupils’ learning dispositions and outcomes (Frost & Durrant, 2002) as discussed in MEd workshops. She also planned to leave a legacy in the form of enhanced professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) characterised by a change in the culture and a wealth of practical knowledge about how to build learning capacity in the school. These aims were welcomed by Clare, the headteacher, whose doctoral study had been focused on the development of professional capital (Herbert, 2018).

Samantha was assisted in designing a carefully formulated project plan in order to give time for consultation, collaboration and inclusion of her colleagues, thus ensuring the development work’s sustainability. She and the participants on the MEd programme were introduced to various methodologies, strategies, tools and techniques illuminated by the literatures concerned with project design, the leadership and the management of change, knowledge management, practice development, professional development and organisational development. Presentations and discussion activities facilitated by the MEd teaching team

focussed on the practicalities and ethical dimension of the leadership and management of change and development. A range of strategies, tools and techniques that can be used to maximise success in the leadership of a process of development were introduced.

In order to develop her ideas, she also drew upon the knowledge and experience of colleagues within the HertsCam Network. The MEd programme is nested within a networking programme which includes five Network Events each year and an Annual Conference. These provided Samantha with opportunities to lead workshops and poster sessions in order to get the benefit of critical friendship (Costa & Kallick, 1993) from a wider professional community. Such networking is not about triumphalist presentations or about superficial passing on of ‘tips for teachers’; it is about collective, critical reflection by outlining problems and facilitating activities through which others in the network can pose questions, challenge assumptions and engage in debate.

As a participant in the MEd, Samantha also had the benefit of an academic supervisor who is herself a practicing teacher. Sheila Ball’s experience and expertise includes not only extensive classroom teaching in different types of schools, but also a number of senior leadership posts and experience as a local authority (district) advisor on teaching and learning. She was instrumental in challenging Samantha’s thinking and helping her to craft a manageable project designed for maximum impact. The role of the supervisor on the HertsCam MEd is essentially facilitative rather than being led by someone with greater experience and expertise. The distinction between directive coaching and facilitative coaching (Schartz & Davidson, 2009) has informed discussions within the MEd teaching team about the role of supervisor.

Leading the Process of Development

In addition to her role as Deputy Headteacher, Samantha continued to have a substantial teaching commitment. It seemed obvious to start the project in her own class. In order to include the children in the process of consultation, she trialled a number of activities, eliciting feedback from pupils. One such was the adoption of a class book which celebrates acts of resilience. Children were awarded a ‘resilience hero’ badge; successes were recorded in a superhero journal and a ‘fail wall’ was a noticeboard to celebrate the power of reflecting on our mistakes. These activities were popular with the children and they soon learnt to verbalise challenges in their learning and talk to each other about building resilience. Given the success of this initial stage of the project, Samantha assumed that it would be straight forward to replicate these activities across the school as a whole and that resilience would flourish as a result. She presented an account of her initial classroom innovations at one of the HertsCam Network Events and received encouraging feedback which gave her the confidence to take the project to the next level.

The next step in the development process was for Samantha to present her vision and outline her aims to a number of colleagues who showed interest in the idea and had agreed that resilience was a suitable focus for development. However, colleagues seemed reluctant to commit to a starting point for the project and needed some encouragement to agree on a schedule of activities. Samantha was puzzled by the apparent contrast between the enthusiastic reaction from people at the Network Event and the relatively lukewarm reception from colleagues at school. Could it be that in HertsCam, there is a shared sense of excitement in innovation and change because of a shared professionalism and vision of education. Did network members share the same sense of moral purpose in a way that had not yet been achieved at school? This left Samantha feeling confused, disappointed and deflated. She found herself facing the possibility

that the project might fail. She shared these apprehensions with her supervisor, Sheila, who encouraged her to persevere.

They discussed a number of adaptations to the development process. For example, colleagues might need more time to consider; Samantha might try using different strategies to encourage them to get started; perhaps she could provide thinking tasks or advance organisers (Ausobel, 1978) in the run-up to meetings so that colleagues were more prepared; smaller conversations may build relationships and create the right conditions for collaboration. She was beginning to realise that in order to influence change, she needed to draw on what has been called ‘political savvy’ (Carver et al., 2013, p. 168). She decided to establish a small voluntary group of colleagues to work together as a way of increasing collaboration and helping the project grow. A key insight from the literature on knowledge management is that know-how has to be pooled through continuous sharing (Collison & Parcell, 2004, Hargreaves, 1999b) and in a working group, successes could be evaluated and possible adaptations set in motion. Samantha knew that such knowledge building would help the culture of the school to change and grow. The impact of the project would be enhanced in a very immediate way by drawing colleagues into these deliberations (Hill, 2014).

As the project unfolded, a further issue about leadership arose. This came to the fore at a whole-school assembly – a gathering of all the pupils where they listen to uplifting moral and spiritual life lessons. This one focused on the life and work of Martin Luther King Junior, highlighting his perseverance, passion and resilience. Samantha noted that the teacher who was leading the assembly said, in a supportive way: ‘this links very closely to Mrs Squires’ project’. It occurred to Samantha that colleagues were assuming that the project was ‘owned’ by Samantha and was only taking place in one classroom. She also wondered if her leadership title as Deputy Headteacher, the second in command in the school, stood in the way of colleagues seeing themselves as having a role in shaping the direction of the development work. She also wondered about how colleagues’ construct their own professionalism (Hoyle, 2008); did they consider themselves as lacking the authority to share in the ownership of the project? This critical incident (Flanagan, 1954) highlighted the need to enable colleagues to develop a sense of ownership of the project and to try to establish the idea of leadership as a shared activity. Such challenges caused Samantha to doubt her own capacity and she felt fortunate to be part of a network from which she could derive moral support and practical guidance which helped her to remain tenacious and calm through adversity. Within the MEd group to which she belonged, and in the wider network, Samantha experienced a sense of collective efficacy (Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2000).

A Breakthrough

Samantha attempted to reinvigorate her project by inviting her school colleagues to join a working party and began by clarifying the collaborative premise of the project. She was anxious given the earlier disappointment but was pleasantly surprised to find that all teachers were able to verbalise something they had tried and what they would do next. One colleague reported that, having modelled growth mindset language (Dweck, 2006; Gershon, 2016) with her class, she noted that children were saying *I can’t* much less frequently. Next, she planned to help children to accept challenge without becoming upset. In another class, the teacher had also been modelling the use of growth mindset language; they reported that children understood the meaning of resilience and could recognise when they were being resilient, accepting that mistakes were part of learning. This teacher’s next steps included recording resilience stories in

a book to further reinforce growth mindset. Another teacher talked about how, in her class, children had set their own learning targets and seemed more willing to attempt new experiences, becoming less upset when their learning went ‘wrong’. Colleagues agreed that they needed to challenge children and get them to reflect on what they could learn from their mistakes. All agreed that giving children a choice from a range of learning strategies, catering for different learning styles (Gardner, 1993), could support children’s resilience and independence. Teachers agreed that taking smaller steps in learning but ensuring deeper coverage was the key to building children’s confidence, as was the development of a learning vocabulary. These collaborative discussions demonstrated the power of teachers working together to deepen their recognition of the value of resilience, an example of collaboration helping lift the performance of the team (Senge, 1994).

Samantha realised her previous judgement that there had been little enthusiasm and action was inaccurate which could be explained by her lack of confidence in her own leadership capacity. She resolved to engage more regularly with her colleagues and establish better communication to avoid needless worry about future impact. In conversations with Clare, the Headteacher, Samantha reflected on her tendency towards pessimism and subsequently read about rational-emotive therapy (Ellis & Dryden, 1987) which helps people to consider their self-defeating thoughts and challenge the rationality of them. Samantha learnt to analyse her own emotional response to the challenges that leadership involves and was able to ameliorate her reactions in the future.

Meanwhile, Samantha continued to develop the resilience of children in her own class. A small class size meant she was able to focus on individual needs and targets. Samantha focused on the emotional development of several children, developing their confidence and resilience rather than concentrating on specific writing or mathematics competences. Several parents commented on their children’s happiness at school:

It’s a shame she’s in her final year because I feel that she’s finally settled, she’s happy and has friends and now she’s about to leave don’t believe it when he tells you he doesn’t like school, he loves it.

He was very upset to be off sick today and told me he must be better for tomorrow!

Parents also described their children as more willing and motivated to engage in learning outside of the school context. Such comments were encouraging; the project seemed to be having a positive impact and colleagues also reported that children seemed to be proud of being able to work alone and motivate themselves even outside of the classroom. It remained to be seen if the project’s legacy was intact and that strategies for building resilience would continue beyond the academic year at the end of which, Samantha submitted her project report as the final assignment for her MEd.

Samantha’s final project report indicated that there was evidence of tangible improvements in pupils’ dispositions for learning and their emotional responses to the challenge of learning. A key component of that report is a record of a final meeting with the chair of the school’s governing body and a colleague who is responsible for the Early Years section of the school. It was noted that Samantha’s project had impacted not only on pupils’ learning but had contributed to a noticeable shift in the culture of the school. It was noted that another member of the staff team would be taking up leadership of the resilience project in the forthcoming

academic year. This was a satisfactory conclusion to Samantha's project but her final report, submitted at the end of the MEd programme, also included some interesting reflections on the development of her own leadership capacity.

Learning about Leadership

In the final pages of her report, Samantha reflected on her own development as a leader. She looked back to two years previously when she had embarked on the MEd programme:

I believed I knew quite a lot about leadership. I was already a successful and experienced senior leader, I had experience of appraising others and through examples of poor leadership I have seen in the past, I felt sure I could learn from others' mistakes how to be a good leader.... I believed I would learn very little about leadership.... This judgement was naïve and arrogant. Some of what I have learnt about leadership has come from the literature in which I have drowned myself.... However, much more significant has been what I have learnt through carrying out development work. (Extract from Samantha's final project report)

This is interesting in the light of the description, at the beginning of this article, of the agreement about moral purpose in Samantha's interview to support her application to join the MEd. That agreement prioritised the benefit to children's learning over the developmental needs of those participating in the programme. There is no doubt that Samantha dedicated her efforts to improve pupils' learning capacity and build a more positive pedagogic culture and she was very successful in that. However, as Samantha's own reflections quoted above indicate, this endeavor also entailed profound professional development through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). She says that she learned a great deal about leadership by leading this development work but it is important to note the other factors that nourished this learning.

The enhancement of Samantha's leadership capacity was a result of her own efforts in leading change in her school but the context of her participation in a masters programme designed and taught by teachers played an important role in this. For example, being part of the MEd community and the wider network provided support from colleagues who share a common moral purpose. In addition, what is underplayed in Kolb's experiential model is the role of scholarship in the context of professional dialogue; consulting the literature, critical narrative writing and the continuous testing out of ideas by engaging with other scholar practitioners brought enrichment and clarity to the developmental process. The institutional context is also significant (Hunzicker, 2012). Clare recognises the crucial role teacher leadership plays in developing a culture where professional learning is celebrated and prioritised. Samantha's story illustrates well Clare's observation.

If teachers are trusted and nurtured, they will take risks, use their initiative, support one another and develop a collective determination to improve practice. (Herbert, 2018, p. 251)

A high degree of relational trust meant that Samantha could dare to voice her concerns and fears and address them. Therefore, Samantha could tap into her colleagues' shared professional concerns and moral purpose. In these ways Samantha's leadership became 'indelible' (Fullan, 2016).

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