

How Have New Secondary Headteachers in Scotland Formed and Enacted Role Conceptions of Headship in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic?

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Abstract

For new headteachers appointed around the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the newly-required duties associated with school leadership were likely to be incompatible with their pre-appointment role conceptions of headship. This paper draws on the findings of a study which sought to: consider if - and, if so, in which way(s) - role conceptions of secondary headship in Scotland have changed due to the pandemic; and identify, describe and understand any supportive factors which allowed inexperienced headteachers to effectively enact these modified role conceptions, and thereby navigate associated flux and uncertainty. The paper explores potential future risks and challenges which may arise as headteachers lead school communities through an uncertain post-pandemic landscape of proposed transformative change. Recommendations which may mitigate these risks and challenges are made at the conclusion. The study - the findings of which form the basis of this paper - utilised a case-study design, involving collection and analysis of qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with three secondary headteachers appointed to roles within the same local authority area around the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, underpins the study.

Keywords: new headteachers, role conceptions of headship, Covid-19 pandemic, post-pandemic landscape, navigating flux and uncertainty

Introduction

Background

The Pandemic's Impact and Consequent Work Intensification for Scottish Headteachers

The Covid-19 pandemic wrought change to headship in Scotland, as school leaders strove to maintain learning, wellbeing and inclusion provisions during an intense crisis period (Scottish Government, 2023a; Scottish Parliament, 2023). Work intensification followed, as the navigation of an erratic policy context necessitated effective communication, collaboration, and change (Fotheringham et al., 2022) across multiple areas. Headteachers led delivery of remote and blended learning, amidst logistical challenges obstructing equitable access to digital technologies (Kafa, 2023; Wharton-Beck et al., 2024), and developed capacity-building cultures in digital learning (Huber, 2021; Kafa, 2023; Thornton, 2021). They maintained connectedness within school communities without recourse to typical communication methods (Beauchamp et al., 2021), and liaised with partner agencies and families to safeguard vulnerable stakeholders' wellbeing (Wharton-Beck et al., 2024).

As relative normality returned, challenges remained. Staff and pupil absence (McKay et al., 2023; Wharton-Beck et al., 2024) affected continuity of learning (TES, 2024a; Scotsman 2024), and challenging behaviour emerged, as pupils' emotional regulation capacities were affected by social isolation (Scottish Government, 2023b). The inequitable impact of "lost learning" widened attainment gaps (Elliot Major et al., 2021).

Headteachers felt "de-skilled" in this unfamiliar environment (Fullan, 2020), a contrast to pre-pandemic leadership confidence developed through stable role conceptions (Striepe et al., 2023). Headteachers' perceived vulnerability to professional exposure in assuming responsibility for others' wellbeing (Hulme et al., 2023); in a role already heavily-burdened with emotional labour (Purdie, 2014), they became more susceptible to anxiety and stress than other teachers (Nuffield Foundation, 2022) and their deputies/assistants, their emotional resilience dented by decreased energy and agency (Jopling & Harness, 2022). With limited headship experience to inform professional and organisational socialisation (Crow, 2016), and aware that professional learning for headship preparation had not readied them for crisis leadership, newly-appointed headteachers were less likely to have developed secure role conceptions and professional identities; this may have left them ill-prepared (Grissom & Condon, 2021).

The Post-Pandemic Landscape: Proposed Transformative Change

In 2020, Scottish Government commissioned *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CFE): Into the Future* (OECD, 2021). Its recommendations, accepted by Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2021), proposed re-assessment of CFE's "aspirational vision against emerging trends in education" (p. 13), and Senior Phase adaptations reflecting alignment with curriculum, qualifications, and CFE's overarching vision. In 2021, *Upper Secondary Education Student Assessment in Scotland: A Comparative Perspective* (Stobart, 2021), contrasted Scotland's approaches to Senior Phase assessment and qualifications with international models. In 2022, *Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education* (Scottish Government, 2022) explored how reform of SQA and Education Scotland, as advocated by OECD (2021), could be achieved. In 2023, *All Learners in Scotland Matter* (Scottish Government, 2023a) was published, the final report on the National Discussion on the future of Scottish Education. In June 2023, *It's Our Future - Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment* (Scottish Government, 2023c), the final report of a review group chaired by Professor Louise Hayward, conveyed proposals for equitable, future-oriented approaches to assessment and qualifications.

The pandemic's impact has driven this transformational change agenda (Scottish Government, 2022a, 2023a, 2023c; Stobart, 2021). *Putting Learners at the Centre* (Scottish Government, 2022) argues that Scottish Education has experienced regular change, supported by thematically-congruent, equity-promoting policy. However, the report views policy to be mis-aligned and over-abundant, directing headteachers' attention from leadership of learning towards bureaucracy; he speculates that the pandemic has exacerbated this. The National Discussion followed the pandemic, and its report (Scottish Government, 2023b) moots the likelihood that "continuing impacts on health, wellbeing, equity and learning" (p. 4) stirred stakeholders' concerns for Scottish Education's "present and future realities" (p. 4). Similarly, both *It's Our Future* (Scottish Government, 2023c) and Stobart's (2021) review reference post-pandemic flux, and its highlighting of injustices within our qualifications system as stimuli for reflection and change.

Aims

The paper seeks to explore headship's significance in navigating uncertainty, and elicit reflection on how school leadership could evolve to meet shifting demands of future societies and crises. By focusing upon new headteachers' formative leadership experiences during and since the pandemic, the author seeks to comprehend how role conception is shaped by often-unanticipated contextual

and situational influences, acknowledge enduring effects of continuously-evolving role conceptions, and identify, describe and understand supportive influences allowing headteachers to effectively enact modified role conceptions.

Literature Review

Ethical Leadership of School Communities

The pandemic initiated reflection upon schools' purposes. Schools provided stability and routine (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022), normality and care (Lien et al., 2023), opportunities for community service and socialisation (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020), and a "point of connection" alleviating trauma and isolation (Fogg, 2023). Headteachers became community "anchors" amidst the turmoil (Longmuir, 2023).

Schools' focus was the core purpose of *care* (Beckmann & Klein, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Longmuir, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Striepe et al., 2023). Care facilitated community and connection (Longmuir, 2023), particularly for vulnerable families (Striepe et al., 2023), and allowed schools to function in subsequent delivery of learning (Longmuir, 2023). Organisations, operating within an uncertain climate, built trusting and resilient cultures (Ahlstrom et al., 2020); Weiner (2021) posits that cultivating "psychological safety" ensured staff, within a compassionate ethos, still felt supported to learn and change.

Headteachers' community leadership required varied leadership approaches. Care, community and values (Forde et al., 2022) underpinned a compassionate, self-aware *people-oriented leadership* (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021). Headteachers fostered the collective good through *emotional leadership* (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2023) and marshalled support within their communities through *entrepreneurial leadership* (Kafa, 2023). *Community leadership* involved working with partner agencies to safeguard the wellbeing of vulnerable families during lockdowns (Hulme et al., 2023), reconfiguring pedagogy and environment to acknowledge pupils' trauma (Whittaker & Kniffin, 2020), and taking a "genuine interest in [stakeholders'] inner world[s]" (Schechter et al., 2022, p. 3) to better meet their social and emotional needs (Mutch, 2015; Schechter et al. 2022, adapted from Goswick et al., 2018).

Crisis Management

Headteachers had no preparatory crisis management training (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021) and no prior experience (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Varela & Fedynich, 2020), but were expected to be expert and to improvise (Lien et al., 2023), managing risk under time constraints and with few resources (Argyropoulou, 2021). Crises challenged hitherto accepted conditions for effective school leadership, particularly a reliance on "organisational stability, hierarchy and standardised practice" (Torrance et al., 2023, p. 11).

Headteacher crisis management requires specific attributes (Beckmann & Klein, 2022), such as responsiveness, instinctiveness and virtuousness (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022), tenacity (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021), perseverance (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021); moral courage (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021), and optimism (Longmuir, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Headship in crisis involves calmness and stability (Longmuir, 2023), leadership presence (Argyropoulou, 2021) and visibility (Mutch, 2020), and empathy towards others' emotional responses (Koehn, 2020). Shared values precipitate collaborative sense-making (Macleod & Dulsky, 2021) and a collective community identity, which facilitates a coherent, unified vision of desired outcomes (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2023).

Technical skills in the immediate “crisis phase” (Thornton, 2021) include developing organisational capacity for anticipation and understanding (Vakilzadeh & Haase, 2021) of crises’ implications through “signal detection” (Wooten & James, 2008), and sense-making amidst uncertainty (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021), incorporating varied perspectives (Boin & Renaud, 2013; Thornton, 2021).

Communication focuses on synthesising, interpreting and conveying (Longmuir, 2023) information to stakeholders, facilitating meaning-making and understanding (Brown et al., 2023; MacLeod & Dulsky, 2021), and building trust (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022); Headteachers seek to reduce “ambiguities or uncertainties” (Longmuir, 2023) and “unpredictability” (Lien et al., 2023), and offer hope (Argyropoulou, 2021) through positive visualisations of the future (Thornton, 2021).

Headteachers promote organisational resilience, by adapting existing processes (Barton et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2023) for coping with urgent issues (Beckmann & Klein, 2022). In the “opportunity phase” (Thornton 2021), reflection, learning and subsequent adaptation take place (Beckmann & Klein, 2022; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Headteachers’ contextual awareness supports interpretation of how crises affect their context (Mutch, 2015), and accurate identification of accessible resources for crisis management (Argyropoulou, 2021).

Adaptive, Collaborative and Distributive Modes of Leadership

Adaptive leadership necessitates sense-making (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023), and contingent adoption of diverse leadership styles (Beauchamp et al., 2021). In flux, where organisations must balance stability and flexibility to withstand or adjust to external pressures, leaders restructured the organisation (Ahlstrom et al., 2020), identifying urgently-required change, and broader adaptations required within the new environment (Bagwell, 2020; Northouse, 2019; Torrance et al., 2023).

Distributed and collaborative leaderships were operationally expedient due to the overwhelming volume of change (Brown et al., 2023, Harris & Jones, 2020a; Torrance et al., 2023) and the need to utilise available capacity to respond (Beckmann & Klein, 2022). They were vital in establishing shared commitment amongst stakeholders to schools’ responses to emergent issues (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Mowat & Beck, 2023), delivering change and improvement (Forde et al., 2022), and in bolstering the headteacher’s resilience (Beauchamp et al., 2021). The pandemic precipitated collaborative strategies including bridging (building networks with other leaders and partner agencies), brokering (fostering shared understandings and language with partner agencies) and buffering (cultivating alliances with those who may support in addressing challenges) to facilitate more purposeful collegiality (Hulme et al., 2023 adapted from Asada et al., 2020).

The Pandemic as a Stimulus for Leveraging or Leading Change

Headteachers may be expected to “[build] back better” (Chapman & Bell, 2020) to support greater equity within post-pandemic societies, requiring: critical reflection on systemic features which inhibit fairness, equity and equality (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021), particularly, from an ethical perspective, for those typically marginalised (Ahlstrom et al., 2020); a more comprehensive reconceptualization of education’s purposes (Chapman & Bell, 2020); and understanding how, in pursuing equity, schools fit into wider society (Sahlberg, 2021).

However, barriers to sustaining equitable change remain; historical inequalities have been worsened by the pandemic’s impact (World Bank, 2020) and new inequalities have emerged (Argyropoulou, 2021); governments’ post-pandemic austerity policies may preclude transformative change (Sahlberg, 2021); school leaders - focusing on protecting organisational stability during pandemic crises - may now find it difficult to engage in the disruption to existing systems required by strategic change (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

Method and Methodology

The study underpinning this paper was undertaken to support the dissertation element of a Masters of Education (Educational Leadership) programme. The following research questions gave focus to the study:

1. During the pandemic, how was role conception of headship shaped for those in early headship?
2. Since the pandemic, how is the role conception of headship being shaped for newly-appointed headteachers, and what similarities or differences are perceived in comparison with role conceptions developed during the pandemic?
3. Which factors were perceived to support newly-appointed headteachers in managing unanticipated or challenging responsibilities associated with revised role conceptions, developed during and since the pandemic?

Data Collection

Headteachers' *role conception* is a subjective, nuanced, context-dependent, and ethnographically and phenomenologically-influenced concept, and should be distinguished from *job description*, its more stable and codified counterpart. Role conception is shaped by individuals' interpretations and assumptions regarding duties, skills, knowledge, attitudes, norms, behaviours, values, and relationships they associate, formally and informally, with headship. School leaders' realities during and since the pandemic were experienced, interpreted and understood subjectively, and socially constructed by varied contextual and situational factors; these include schools' preparedness for change, headteachers' access to support networks, and the emotional milieu (affected by pandemic-related anxieties) inhabited by stakeholders. Thus, an Idealist worldview, recognising the primacy of individuals' socially-constructed realities, corresponds with an ontological focus on the subjective interpretations of participants' leadership experiences.

Interpretivist epistemology necessitates an understanding of not only *what* has happened, but *why*, a benefit offered by qualitative methodologies (Baumfield et al., 2012). A semi-structured interview with each participant (three secondary headteachers appointed around late 2019-mid-2021 – see Table 1) was undertaken, offering scope for the researcher to fully absorb participants' ethnographical biographies (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). A standardised open-ended interview structure (Patton, 1990), where uniformly-worded and sequenced questions were given to participants beforehand, limited deviation from literature review themes (see Figure 1) underpinning interview questions, and facilitated systematic data analysis.

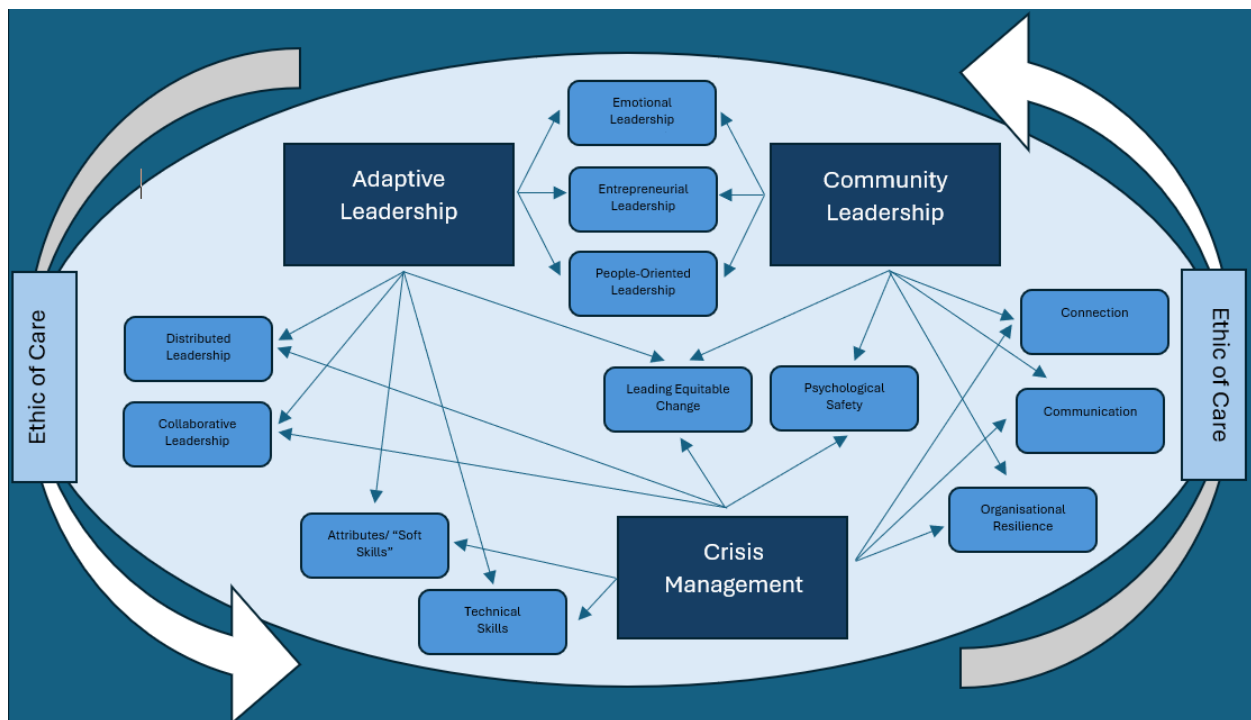
Table 1

Sampling and Participant Detail

	Known as	Sex/Gender	Type of School	Context	Appointed
Participant 1	P1	Female	Mainstream with co-located Additional Support Needs unit	Urban with high levels of socio-economic deprivation	Late 2019-mid 2021
Participant 2	P2	Female	Mainstream with co-located Additional Support Needs unit	Urban with very high levels of socio-economic deprivation	Late 2019-mid 2021
Participant 3	P3	Male	Mainstream	Urban with very high levels of socio-economic deprivation	Late 2019-mid 2021

Figure 1

Interconnections between Literature Review Key Themes and (Selected) Sub-themes



Headteachers appointed around late 2019 to mid-2021 (who led during the pandemic, but had formed pre-appointment role conception of headship prior to the pandemic) experienced particular challenges in establishing stable role conceptions and professional identities in their formative months of headship. Purposive sampling (Coleman, 2012) of criteria-meeting Headteachers, seeking balance between variety (Marshall, 1996) and homogeneity (Maxwell, 2009), was needed (taking into account age, gender, school context, etc.) if findings could be felt relevant to the sampled ethnographical community.

Data Analysis

Transcribed data was coded descriptively and deductively in a concept-driven way (Gibbs, 2008), using themes recurring within the literature review, “[finding] patterns” and “[rendering]” these into something communicable (Elliot, 2018, p. 2853 and p. 2851). Inductive coding of unexpected responses was permitted so as to allow for the consideration of alternative ideas or conclusions (Saldana, 2013). The high number of initial codes presented challenges for subsequent categorisation, so data was re-coded by subsuming sufficiently synonymic codes. Codes were then categorised, in order to “identify key relationships that tie the data together into a narrative” (Maxwell & Miller, 2008, p. 467) and highlight generalisable participant experiences.

Findings and Discussion

Role Conception in Early Headship During the Pandemic

Role conceptions were influenced by pandemic-related situational challenges. For all participants, leadership of change was focused on existing unique contextual needs or issues exacerbated by the pandemic, and, accordingly, the assumption of responsibilities relevant to the ethic of care (Beckmann & Klein, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Longmuir, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Striepe et al.,

2023) and community leadership. Participant 2's (P2's) school - in an area of socio-economic deprivation - saw greater health and wellbeing challenges (e.g. illness and bereavement), which then intensified learning and teaching challenges, such as pupil disengagement (e.g. erratic attendance); less contact with vulnerable pupils affected the capacity of P2's school to resolve wellbeing inequities by developing safe relationships with adults, a key contextual focus. Participant 1 (P1) perceived conflict within relationships, influenced by increased regularity of dysregulated pupil behaviour. Covid-19 restrictions made developing positive relationships more challenging, as ethos-building activities - engagement in sport or performing arts - were curtailed; in P1's view, "the joy was taken out of school".

All participants tackled learning and teaching challenges related to the pandemic's highlighting of attainment inequities. P2 saw causal links between lost trust and pupil disengagement.

I think that stakeholders lost a sense of trust in our assessment processes because of the botches during the pandemic but also because there was a spotlight put on how we do it, and actually suddenly families and children were saying, "no, actually that isn't fair" . . . Societally, I think, what happened was the trust in schools and the school system has diminished somewhat, and as a result you end up with a day a week absence.

Factors Supporting Enactment of Headship During the Pandemic

Mitigation of pandemic-related situational challenges, such as work intensification, required networks, particularly with peer headteachers, and in P1 and 3's cases, building relationships, in order to facilitate collaboration and communal sense-making. Deeper contextual understanding through ongoing organisational socialisation informed and supported contextually-responsive leadership.

A support in leading change was collaboration with and involvement of staff, reflected in the modes of leadership used: P1's cultivation of a shared senior leadership team (SLT) vision, use of a staff working group to drive policy change, and willingness to resource innovative change suggested by staff, and P2's creation of Pupil Equity Fund¹ (PEF) middle leadership posts focused on delivering key school improvement outcomes. A compression of leadership structures and hierarchies (Brown et al., 2023) led to distributed practices; disrupting conservative hierarchies encouraged differing perspectives of leadership (with a greater emphasis on capacity building and relationships) to emerge (Mitchell et al., 2023). In contrast, and largely due to the urgency of operational necessities, P3 used a pace-setting leadership approach, prioritising a "clear statement of intent" over consultation. There is precedent for this decisiveness within existing research. (Mutch, 2020; Striepe et al., 2023).

Role Conception Since the Pandemic

Role conceptions continued to be shaped by contextual needs, which impacted upon foci in leadership of strategic change, and encouraged enactment of servant leadership. P1 attributed her "hands-on" approach to an intention to "model" the leadership of change she desired. Similarly, P2 felt that role conception and servant leadership were related to the headteachers' community context, which was only knowable post-appointment.

¹ Pupil Equity Funding, as part of Scottish Government's Scottish Attainment Challenge policy, is money distributed to schools to be used by headteachers to improve outcomes for young people affected by poverty.

You can't see yourself in a place until you're in a place, so you don't know how protective you are going to become and . . . You know, righteous anger about how communities like this get treated, and the distribution of wealth, and about what they lack and how that impacts them. (P2)

Both during and since the pandemic, community leadership was key in participants' headships; though this aspect "[takes] over life", P2 spoke of becoming "invested in" rather than "resentful" of this. P2 felt the breadth of community leadership responsibilities more pronounced than anticipated, as schools have a "resonating presence"; interpersonal capacities involved high visibility (being "on display"), approachability ("being present and listening"), ethical responsibility and selflessness ("having to care about everything" and "[putting yourself] second"), and the ethic of care:

It's got a kind of element of . . . being about guidance and support in a way that I think I hadn't maybe seen it. (P2)

Since the pandemic, however, participants had developed awareness of community leadership's challenges. Participant 3 (P3) saw that, as other services "struggled to function" in an austere climate, schools would do more, and would be "making more of the bigger decisions locally". Participants 1 and 3 saw challenges for headship amidst a growing expectation of schools' provision of a universal service; P1 saw school as the "last man standing" in a climate of austerity, and suggested that strategic changes delivered at school level were replacing provision previously offered by other agencies. This trend would, she felt, affect the breadth of the role in "what [headteachers are] expected to do."

Factors Supporting Enactment of Headship Since the Pandemic

All participants sought, in leading change, to build on successes achieved in tackling contextual challenges identified during the pandemic; this fostered momentum, relational trust, and coherent priorities. For P1, this meant meeting the needs of vulnerable learners, and making practical changes which had observable and measurable impact on relationships, behaviour management and attainment. Having established greater consistency in quality assurance (of classroom experiences and attainment), P3 detected a cultural shift, with colleagues more assured of capacity for collective efficacy ("what can be achieved when we work together"), and with greater shared confidence in their scope to "add value" to the experiences and outcomes of pupils; a "togetherness" and organisational resilience - in that previously-lacking systems were embedded - emerged.

Participants 1 and 2 led a deepening cultivation of relationships, collaboration, and distributed modes of leadership. P1 appointed a depute to her SLT, whilst P2 utilised partner agencies to tackle specific issues (for example, support for mental health) and utilised distributed leadership through her PEF team of principal teachers and a depute to address targeted issues (delivering an alternative curriculum and improved pastoral support for the vulnerable). A qualitative focus on stakeholder views was resonant in facilitating sense-making (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023) with trusted colleagues within the context (new SLT, for instance, for all participants) or with wider groups of stakeholders (such as working groups of staff or surveys for P1). This sense-making cultivated a richer and nuanced understanding of urgently significant contextual challenges, and encouraged "transition . . . away from simplification and towards complexity" (Aldrich & Rudman, 2015) and engagement with ". . . complications, tenuousness . . . irregularities, [and] contradictions . . ." (Clarke et al., 2007). Participants built trust through openness, and by granting influence to others (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), before building towards psychological safety (Weiner, 2021) which allowed support but also challenge to underpin discussions around future priorities.

Participants 1 and 2, in identifying where collaborative approaches had been used fruitfully, highlighted areas where there was potential for challenge, or even conflict, controversy or dissonance (P1's efforts to address dysregulated pupil behaviour by focusing on the needs of the most disruptive, and P2's creation of PEF-funded middle leaders with responsibilities focused upon neglected aspects of depute remits); this evidences commitment to a collegiality circumventing common critiques of superficial and politically-expedient forms (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994) and instead welcomes difference as a prerequisite for coherent sense-making (Fullan, 2001).

Growing contextual awareness through continued organisational socialisation, commonly experienced as new headteachers engage with the knowledge, values and behaviours most required within this new context (Crow, 2007), ensured that P3 was focused, in leading change, on priorities most important to staff, such as pupil behaviour. He noted an occasion where he unsuccessfully attempted to pursue change, and attributed this to a "misjudgement" of the level of feeling (regarding the change's perceived focus) across the school and within professional associations. Organisational socialisation - reciprocally *fostered by* and *fostering* deeper engagement in relationships and collaboration with colleagues - enabled the enactment of role conception, specifically where this emphasised the need for contextual responsiveness.

Future Challenges: Unstable Role Conceptions

Participants expressed concern regarding headteachers' capacity to effectively lead school communities through a proposed national transformative change agenda. Speculating on how future role conception may evolve within an educational, social and political landscape still susceptible to flux, participants saw risk in the resourcing constraints currently experienced within public services.

Whilst P3 saw opportunity to begin national conversations about systemic inequity, he saw risk, specifically in the Personal Pathway element of the proposed Scottish Diploma of Achievement within *It's Our Future* (Scottish Government, 2023c); its intention to "shine a light" (p. 73) on historical and systemic societal inequity of access to cultural capital might reinforce unhelpful self-fulfilling narratives about poverty and social immobility.

. . . you're shining a light on, 'by the way, you're living in poverty. Do you realise that? Compared to other people, you're not doing as well.' (P3)

For Participants 1 and 3, leading school communities with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage where the impact of poverty-related attainment gaps are keenly felt, there was concern that the Personal Pathway element may, in fact, exacerbate inequity, specifically in its requirement for young people to access, with some degree of independence, "social, cultural, wellbeing or economic activities" (Scottish Government, 2023c, p. 73) to supplement classroom learning. Inequities in available cultural capital would mean that some pupils (in areas of relative socio-economic advantage) will have readier access to social, cultural, wellbeing or economic opportunities through family or community networks. For Participants 1 and 3, it will be schools' responsibilities to provide these opportunities, whilst resources required (particularly time and staffing) are finite and already-stretched. Servicing this entitlement, may, therefore, require resources to be re-directed, away from supporting other important aspects of provision.

. . . me having to do that does not sit in line with other schools who don't have to do that, so you've got workload issues with staff, you've got cost implications, and you've got timing implications around the inequity of time being given to all parts of those qualifications. (P2)

Implications and Recommendations

Across the post-pandemic Scottish education landscape, residual instability remains, and will occasion exigent issues with which Headteachers must contend. Development of the empowered systems which participants deem necessary for the agentic enactment of proposed transformative change within their own locales is, in participants' views, threatened by public sector resourcing crises. Empowered systems require:

- headteachers' extensive engagement with stakeholders and multi-agency partners (Education Scotland, 2019);
- leading capacity-building and leadership development (Education Scotland, 2018);
- flexibility and autonomy in decision-making related to staffing (Education Scotland, 2018).

It is difficult to envisage the development of such empowered systems whilst resourcing concerns remain.

Recommendation 1:

A responsive approach to the development of formal professional learning available to aspiring and new headteachers

A responsive development of headteachers' professional learning could mirror the evolution of role conceptions, particularly if, as per participants' views, headteachers' roles become broader due to potential crisis scenarios such as the pandemic, and local or national resourcing challenges.

Greater transparency in pre-appointment professional socialisation

Such transparency could grant aspirant headteachers a clearer understanding of headship's contemporary scope, particularly in its community leadership strand, and the range of roles that must be enacted – "human resources, counsellor, or social worker" (P2). Deeper reflection on the full breadth and implications of the Standard for Headship (GTCS, 2021) could form part of this professional learning.

Fuller acknowledgement of the significance of post-appointment organisational socialisation

Professional learning could better recognise the importance of post-appointment organisational socialisation in developing role conception; unless appointed internally, new headteachers only begin this process as they take up post. Currently, in the Into Headship programme, participants rehearse leadership of change through a strategic change initiative led within their own schools, where they are already aware of attendant contextual challenges and available resources; formalised opportunities for senior leader networks ("critical friendships" with other aspirant headteachers or mentoring opportunities) could allow aspirant headteachers to develop awareness of the challenges inherent to varied contexts, and approaches subsequently used by headteachers to deliver contextually-responsive improvement.

Developing new systems for headteacher networks

The withdrawal of levers such as Masters-level learning and Regional Improvement Collaboratives is detrimental to new and aspirant teachers, as these encouraged formation of supportive headteacher networks. It may, in lieu of these now-withdrawn structures, be helpful to create more formal and networked systems (at local and national level) for headteacher support and collaboration.

Recommendation 2:

The more systematic engagement of school leaders in planning for the delivery of transformative change at national level

Thematic alignment in the proposed transformative change agenda is undermined if potential risks and implementation challenges have been inadequately understood. The review *Putting Learners at the Centre*, chaired by Professor Ken Muir (Scottish Government, 2022) responsibly questions appetite for change within a workforce exhausted by maintaining educational provision during and since the pandemic, and accepts the impact this may have on engagement with change. Stobart (2021) offers a sobering reminder of impediments to transformational change in other jurisdictions, highlighting how change must be supported by teachers; already, concerns regarding a top-down approach in Scotland are emerging (TES, 2024b). Campbell and Harris (Scottish Government, 2023b) endorse stakeholder views of “urgent need” of “significant, bold and ambitious reform” (p. 19); one may question how potentially-overwhelming this reform (in its scope, urgency and volume) becomes when juxtaposed with concessions that “the education system and the professionals working in it are stretched with current demands and resource constraints” (p. 24). Not unreasonably, *It’s Our Future* (Scottish Government, 2023c) conflates dissatisfaction with current assessment and accreditation approaches with appetite for change, following the significant dissatisfaction caused by certification models used during 2020’s lockdown (Scottish Government, 2020) and, to a lesser extent, 2021’s Alternative Certification Model (Stobart, 2021, adapted from Deerin, 2021). *It’s Our Future*, however, may less wisely conflate appetite for aspirational change of a still-abstract nature, with enthusiasm for specific practical proposals made within the report.

Headteacher consultation regarding national policy direction and discourse

At national level, more coherence and certainty could be communicated in policy direction and subsequent discourse, and this could be underpinned by regular and formal consultation with Headteachers, especially those serving potentially-marginalised contexts and communities. Such consultation could grant opportunity for the impact of inequities to be mitigated through more socially-just alternatives.

Headteacher consultation regarding development of empowered systems required to lead change

There could be regular and formal opportunities for the broadest possible range of school leaders to engage with a solution-focused discourse - at local and national level - on the development of the empowered systems required to lead transformative change; any timeline to manage the pace of change could prioritise the resolution of resourcing issues impeding both the delivery of the status quo, and the development of the empowered systems required for purposeful engagement with national change at school level.

Conclusion

Whilst the proposed transformative change required to alleviate pandemic-related inequalities may plot an appropriate course, the journey towards change will be taken by school leaders still

navigating tempestuously unstable role conceptions of headship. To lead such change effectively, role conceptions in transition to headship must be anchored in high-quality and responsive professional learning, specifically by pre- and post-appointment professional and organisational socialisation, and by suitably supportive networks in early headship. If the desired destination is to be reached, the route towards transformative change should be mapped out by a more coherent national policy discourse, and helmed by school leaders working within well-resourced and empowered systems.

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