How Do Trainees and Alumni of the Teach First Cymru Leadership Development Programme Understand their Contribution to Educational Equity in Wales?

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the role of strong leadership in eradicating educational inequality. It presents case-study data from the Teach First Cymru leadership development programme, which explores how their trainees and alumni develop the elements of strong leadership necessary to effect change in schools. Drawing on insights from educational literature, it concludes that impact is achieved through the interplay of three elements of strong leadership: vision and values; identifying as a leader; and support from a wider network (in this case the Teach First partnership). As such, the article emphasises the need for strong leadership at all levels within a school and highlights the need to recruit and train teachers in light of the priority of closing the achievement gap in Wales.

Key words: educational inequality, closing the gap, initial teacher education, leadership, vision, attainment, socio-economic background.

Introduction

The achievement gap between pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds represents a major challenge for the Welsh education community.

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In practical terms this means that, for every year that the gap continues to exist, there are a proportion of young people whose life chances are diminished by their lower socio-economic status (Estyn, 2017; Crawford, 2014). Teach First Cymru recruits and trains new teachers with the specific aim of building a community of leaders who will contribute to eradicating educational inequality. For a minimum of two years, trainees undertake a leadership development programme, working exclusively in schools serving low-income communities. This article will draw on relevant literature to identify the key components of strong leadership that effects change. It will then consider the findings of four case studies that explore how the Teach First Cymru leadership development programme embodies these elements and equips its trainees and alumni to maximise their impact in schools.

I have operated as an insider-researcher throughout the research process, bringing to bear a deep understanding of Teach First Cymru gained through my current role as Leadership Development Officer for the programme. Through this role I have been closely involved with Teach First Cymru since 2014 and have worked with trainees from all cohorts since the programme began in Wales. I am also an alumnus of the England Teach First programme, having completed my own PGCE and leadership development programme in London. I have employed this positioning to enquire deeply into the Teach First programme, seeking to gain an authentic and unguarded insight into trainee perceptions of their experiences and contributions to educational equity in Wales. This builds on related research undertaken for my Master's thesis, which benefitted greatly from an insider approach.

Educational inequality in Wales

Despite concerted efforts to reverse the trend, low socio-economic status consistently impacts negatively on educational attainment throughout the UK (Strand, 2014). In Wales, poorer pupils are less likely to achieve level 2 qualifications, more likely to be permanently excluded and less likely to attend university compared to their wealthier peers (Estyn, 2017; Crawford, 2014; Chowdry et al., 2013). As well as being only half as likely to win a university place compared to their peers, poorer pupils are also more likely to drop out when they get there (Crawford, 2014; Chowdry et al., 2013). This trend is greatest in the most selective universities, and the UK's most

prestigious establishments typically accept the lowest proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Boliver et al., 2017). In this way, a child's socio-economic status at birth is currently likely to determine their achievement through school and into adulthood.

The uncomfortable idea that education is more likely to reproduce existing social hierarchies than to challenge them is not a new one (Raffo et al., 2007; Bourdieu, 1966). Indeed, Bourdieusian scholars have long pointed to the unacknowledged interests of powerful actors within the social order, suggesting that only when these are laid bare will it be possible to begin to level the playing field (Swartz, 1997). Parsons summarised this socially critical perspective in his exploration of how the odds are stacked against the poor, asking, 'Why there is not rage at this is the big question' (2013: 268).

Yet in this respect Wales is distinct, boasting a proud record of governmental commitment to the principles of social justice including the appointment of the UK's first-ever poverty minister (Butler, 2013). Indeed, the cause of social justice – defined in this context as, 'the need to tackle educational disadvantage in general and child poverty in particular' (Egan, 2007: 5) – has been prominent in Welsh education policy since devolution in 1999. In its 2001 document, *The Learning Country*, the National Assembly for Wales made a strong commitment to transforming the life chances of people in Wales, stating that: 'Inequalities in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged areas, groups, and individuals must be narrowed in the interests of all. Children facing special disadvantage and poverty of opportunity must be better provided for' (NAfW, 2001: 10). Given the centrality of education as a vital link between an individual's socio-economic background and their socio-economic status in adulthood (Blanden and Macmillan, 2014), it is fitting that the National Assembly made a special commitment to building 'highways for access' from schools all the way through to universities (NaFW, 2001: 2).

In this way, Welsh education policy reflects a sincere determination to tackle educational inequality. However there remains a significant gap between the educational outcomes (and therefore the life chances) of children and young people from different socio-economic backgrounds in Wales. Speaking at a recent policy forum, Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams stated that, 'it is a fundamental injustice that your future would be determined by the size of your parents' pay cheque' (Williams, 2018) and it is precisely this reality that the education community must confront if we are to ensure a level playing field for all.

Teach First Cymru

The Teach First movement is driven by the vision that, 'no child's educational success is limited by their socio-economic background' (Wigdortz, 2012). Since its launch in 2002, Teach First has recruited over 12,000 trainee teachers who have successfully completed a minimum of two years' leadership development training in schools serving low-income communities across the UK. These trainees have supported over a million young people to achieve better educational outcomes and move successfully into the world of work (Teach First, 2017).

Teach First Cymru began its work in Wales in 2013 and has since recruited and trained over 150 teachers to work in sixty schools across ten local authorities (Evans, 2018), including both English- and Welsh-medium contexts. In 2017 the educational charity launched its new leadership development programme, designed for Wales in partnership with the Central South Consortium, Cardiff Metropolitan University and two base schools. The programme is prestigious and attracts high numbers of applicants, both recent graduates and career changers. The applicants are recruited through a rigorous assessment process, where they must evidence strong subject knowledge and demonstrate their potential across a range of tasks and interviews, as well as teaching a short lesson in their chosen subject area. Furthermore, applicants must show a strong alignment to the Teach First vision and have a personal commitment to working for social justice. If successful, applicants are made an offer to join the leadership development programme, which requires a two-year commitment to a school serving a low-income community while completing the postgraduate diploma in education and developing against core teaching, leadership and movement standards set out in the Teach First Participant Development Framework.

In 2016, this triple training focus on building teachers, leaders and members of a movement to eradicate educational inequality enabled 73 per cent of new teachers to receive the top rating of 'Excellent' in their Qualified Teacher Status (the remaining 27 per cent were considered 'Good') and to secure 94 per cent retention. The programme has attracted high praise from partner schools, as seen in this comment from a headteacher who describes Teach First trainees as:

> Inspirational, committed teachers who understand education's big picture. They are instinctive leaders, who understand the difference education can make to pupils' lives. These are the people Teach First has introduced to our school

> community, and this is why we are so keen to continue to work in partnership with the charity. Teach First participants are not satisfied with 'good enough'. Nothing but the best will do – and only the best is good enough for our pupils. (Head teacher, Teach First Partner School, Rhondda Cynon Taf)

Indeed, the Teach First movement is characterised by its combination of a strong social justice motivation and emphasis on leadership development, born out of the conviction that strong leadership is required at all levels in the education system if we are to close the achievement gap and ensure educational equity for all.

The transformative power of strong leadership

There is a large body of educational literature that explores the role of strong leadership in effecting change. Speaking to the degree of change needed to secure vital improvements, Murphy (2014: 5) suggests that:

> In the process of improvement, it is almost inevitable that significant barriers will arise. Ninety-five percent of us arrive at these seemingly insurmountable difficulties, acknowledge the impossibility of further movement, and turn back. Great leaders learn to dig trenches under barriers and find ladders to use to climb over them.

The identification of great leaders as those who find ways to overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers is apt given the challenge posed by educational disadvantage. Indeed, the theme of great leadership consistently emerges as the foundational catalyst for significant and lasting change in this area (Fullan, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2008), though it has little to do with the traditional great leader theory (Carlyle, 1841) that the phrasing may initially call to mind. Instead, much research has been conducted into the questions of who should lead, how they should lead and to what end their leadership should be directed.

Their conclusions can broadly be summarised as follows. Strong leadership that effects change depends on:

1. setting a clear and compelling vision for the future and securing follower buy-in and willingness to act (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Hammerness, 2006);
2. viewing leadership as everyone's responsibility and enabling leadership at all levels within the school (Crowther, 2011; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001);

3. concentrating activity on high-impact practices, informed by current research and shared best practice (Furlong, 2015; Education Endowment Foundation, 2018; Willingham, 2009).

This section will examine the application of these elements in high-poverty school contexts, focusing on the interplay between them and giving particular attention to challenges arising.

In their 2018 report *The Attainment Gap*, the Education Endowment Foundation presents key lessons learned from six years' funding work to generate evidence of 'what works' to improve teaching and learning for young people facing disadvantage. They conclude that, 'what happens in the classroom makes the biggest difference' (2018: 16) and go on to extol a focus on improving teacher quality and providing teachers with access to high-quality training and the opportunity to become increasingly evidence-based practitioners. They also suggest that this is underpinned by 'sharing effective practice between schools and building capacity and effective mechanisms for doing so' (2018: 17). In this way, classroom teachers are identified as influential leaders with the power to support young people to overcome barriers. However, their impact is only truly realised when schools have the broader leadership mechanisms in place to enable high-quality teacher development and nurture research-based practice. In this way, while each element of leadership can be present in isolation, all three are needed in order to achieve and sustain meaningful change.

This illustration is helpful in recognising the interplay between the three key elements of strong leadership; however, it also implies a hierarchy, suggesting that whole-school leadership must already be effective in order to enable teacher leadership. This only serves to divide schools further, as those with a higher proportion of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds are typically more likely to experience difficulties recruiting and retaining staff, including those with formal leadership roles. As such, effective whole-school leadership is not necessarily present as a foundation on which to build. Fortunately, the literature does present alternative routes to change, suggesting that the conditions for strong leadership can begin at individual teacher level, even where the wider school community is not yet demonstrating effective leadership.

The link between individual teacher quality and pupil outcomes is well established (Rockoff, 2004), including in schools that are otherwise underperforming. An individual teacher's sense of agency has been shown to mediate the detrimental impact of poverty on pupil achievement

(Dell'Angelo, 2014). Teachers who use their sense of agency to bring about change are considered as teacher leaders, explained by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001: 5) as those who: 'lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice'. In this way, it is possible for strong leadership to originate from the classroom teacher and radiate out to the broader school community. Indeed, many have confirmed the role of teacher leadership in driving and sustaining school improvement (Crowther et al., 2002; Harris, 2008; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006; Murphy, 2005).

Yet it is true that when operating in schools in challenging contexts teachers face greater-than-average barriers to developing as teacher leaders, with evidence that the pressures of daily 'firefighting' can divert attention away from teaching and learning, and can lead to 'lowered expectations of themselves as teachers as well as of the pupils' (Raffo et al., 2007: 19). Given that teacher expectations of themselves and of their pupils are often self-fulfilling (Friedrich et al., 2015), negative individual teacher beliefs about their pupils pose a significant threat to the level of expectation that will be set and to the ensuing actions that will be taken.

As such, it is essential that leaders at all levels are challenged to buy into an ambitious vision for pupil outcomes, especially against the backdrop of a school facing high levels of disadvantage. Jensen (2009) argues that this starts with teachers deepening their understanding of the many factors associated with poverty that will play a role in pupils' performance and behaviour in the classroom. He notes that: 'Teachers don't need to come from their students' cultures to be able to teach them, but empathy and cultural knowledge are essential' (2009: 11). Empathy is distinct from sympathy here, replacing easy pity with a drive to set high expectations that will push young people to achieve the success that they deserve. Indeed teacher hope, defined as, 'the perceived capacity to develop workable goals, find routes to those goals and become motivated to use those pathways' (Snyder, 2000: 8) is positively correlated with pupil achievement (Stanley, 2011). High-hope teachers advocate the use of *higher-than-average expectations for pupils in poverty*, in recognition of the additional obstacles that they have to overcome and suggest that, 'the worst thing a teacher could do to a child in poverty is lower their expectations and accept less from them' (2011: 146).

As such, it seems that a teacher's vision of and vision for their pupils is a powerful force in facilitating strong educational outcomes for poorer

pupils. Hammerness defines vision as a kind of 'reach' or ideal of classroom practice, suggesting that, 'Like a mirror, teachers compare daily practice to their vision and recognize successes as well as identifying areas for improvement' (2006: 3). In this way, enacting a vision encompasses both a teacher's intention and their journey towards achieving the desired impact. Vision becomes the bridge by which teachers can embark on the journey from current reality to ideal future, providing a clear moral purpose and tangible pathway that serve to mitigate and overwhelm disillusionment (Burch, 2015). A strong vision for social justice is therefore a key component of the kind of teacher leadership and practice that can secure strong, equitable educational outcomes for all pupils. It also predicts those who will choose to lead and carve out the pathways to success that are so essential for the most disadvantaged pupils in Wales.

Having explored the way in which strong leadership can be enacted at individual teacher level, it is important to note that the aim is always for leadership to extend outwards to encompass whole-school communities thus securing positive outcomes for all. Against this backdrop, Crowther et al. (2009: 53) propose the concept of 'parallel leadership', whereby 'teacher leaders and their principals engage in collaborative action to build school capacity'. Crowther (2011: 179) explains that:

> It must be emphasised that the defined functions of teacher leaders in parallel leadership relationships are focused on schoolwide pedagogical enhancement for improved student outcomes. Simultaneously, the functions of the principal are conceptualised as metastrategic in support of whole-school improvement: envisioning inspiring futures; aligning key institutional elements; enabling teacher leadership; building synergistic alliances; and culture building and identity generation.

As such, the functions of leaders at different levels are distinct yet symbiotic. Day et al. (2009) support this position, suggesting that school leaders improve teaching and learning most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, teaching practices and through developing teachers' capacities for leadership. By working together in this way, whole schools can gain access to the vision, shared leadership and focus on high-impact practices necessary to achieve equitable educational outcomes for all.

Leo and Wickenberg (2013: 406) assert that bringing about lasting change in schools requires, 'enthusiasts, movers or change agents who challenge old norms, who want to stake out new paths and establish new

norms'. It is clear that these change agents can originate from any level of school leadership, provided that they possess the necessary vision and knowledge of effective practices required to improve outcomes; these leaders also have a greater capacity for impact when working together in parallel structures towards a shared end goal.

In this way, a picture emerges of the way in which the three key elements of strong leadership come together to effect change. This is well summarised by Lyman and Villani (2004: 3) who state that: 'We believe that leadership from the heart of a moral commitment is required to educate every student at a high level and to change deeply ingrained beliefs and attitudes about poverty, including belief in the inevitability of low achievement in high-poverty schools.' This leadership is then used throughout the school community to enact high-impact, evidence-based practices that secure strong educational outcomes for all.

Implications for Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

It follows that these insights into tackling educational disadvantage have particular relevance for the recruitment and retention of new teachers into the profession. Seeking out new teachers with the prerequisite commitment to social justice and supporting them to develop the leadership skills and knowledge base to realise their ambitions for their pupils is an important contributing factor to long-term change.

It has been suggested that graduates who pursue teaching are more idealistically motivated than their peers (Farkas, Johnson and Foleno, 2000), viewing teaching as, 'a worthy profession, around which one can harness more personal aspirations, such as feelings of social worth and professional purpose' (Brown and McNamara, 2005: 27). Yet on entering the classroom many new teachers experience a conflict between their preconceptions and the reality of teaching. The challenges of managing and overcoming this are well documented (Bell and Gilbert, 1994; Feiman-Nemser, 2008; Brock and Grady, 2006) and, broadly speaking, the extent to which new practitioners are supported to reconcile the two seems to predict teacher retention (Brewster and Railsback, 2001).

While teacher retention in Wales is generally steadier than in England, recruitment is proving more of a challenge with 30 per cent of postgraduate secondary places on university-based ITE programmes left unfilled in each of the last two years (Education Workforce Council, 2017). The

effects of this are felt especially in the most disadvantaged communities, where it is more difficult to appoint staff and to retain teachers, particularly in 'high-pressure' departments such as English and mathematics (Egan, 2017: 7). In this case it seems that many teachers are put off working in schools with higher levels of poverty, influenced by their perceived underperformance and bad local press (Raffo et al., 2007: 19). Put simply, the level of demand intimidates more than it attracts.

However, for some new teachers it is precisely the high challenge and potential rewards of supporting pupils to succeed against the odds that entice them into the profession in the first place. This can be seen most prominently in the example of Teach First Cymru, who place high-quality recent graduates and career changers exclusively into Welsh schools facing higher than average levels of poverty, while providing them with access to sector-leading training and enrolment onto the Teach First leadership development programme.

Teach First Cymru was established at a time of considerable change for ITE in Wales, beginning its work shortly before the publication of the Tabberer review (2013) and reports by Estyn (2013) and the OECD (2014), all of which identified a clear need for reform. Following on from this and in light of Donaldson's review of curriculum and assessment arrangements (2015), Professor John Furlong published his recommendations for the future of ITE in Wales (Furlong, 2015), which formed the basis of an innovative agenda for transformation. Since its inception, Teach First Cymru has been closely aligned with Furlong's emphasis on attracting the highest quality candidates into teaching, creating strong school partnerships, encouraging leadership development and requiring research-based practice. In 2017 Teach First Cymru extended this further, rooting its new leadership development programme firmly in Furlong's vision. Key additions present in the new model include a greater emphasis on co-design and co-delivery through partnerships across the education community, as well as an increased research requirement through the two-year Postgraduate Diploma of Education. Combined with its mission to operate exclusively in schools serving low-income communities, these elements situate Teach First Cymru's work clearly within the national mission for education, pursuing the 'equity and excellence' imperative to achieving the cabinet secretary for education's vision (Welsh Government, 2017: 2).

This paper will now explore how Teach First Cymru develops new teachers into leaders, with a view to understanding how this is contributing to tackling educational inequality in Wales.

Teach First Cymru case studies

A case-study design was selected in order to explore how trainees develop as leaders through the Teach First Cymru leadership development programme. The ultimate goal was to understand how this enables them to contribute to eradicating educational inequality in Wales. The research prioritised achieving a depth of understanding through a small number of case studies, believing that this would offer, 'a greater opportunity to delve into things in more detail and discover things that might not have been apparent through more superficial research' (Denscombe, 2007: 36).

To this end four Teach First Cymru trainees/alumni were selected, drawn from different stages of their leadership development in order to gain some insight into the impact of the Teach First leadership development programme over time. They are referred to throughout the research as P1–P4: P1 is a trainee in his first year of the programme; P2 is an NQT in his second year of the programme and is also second in department for science; P3 is an alumnus of the programme in her third year of teaching at the school in which she was originally placed and holds responsibility for literacy, reading and communication provision across the school. P1–P3 are trainees or alumni of the Teach First Cymru leadership development programme and continue to work in Wales. P4 completed the Teach First programme in London in 2007 but has been an active alumnus in Wales since 2013: he currently holds a deputy headship in a partner school. Data from all four participants in the study was collected in the same way, using a semi-structured interview. For ease of reference, trainees and alumni will be referred to collectively as participants going forward.

The initial interview questions focused on participants' motivations for joining the programme, their leadership development over time, their experiences of effecting change in schools and their ambitions for the future. The main research questions pursued were:

1. What motivated you to join Teach First?
2. What is your current understanding of leadership and to what extent has this changed over time?
3. How do you effect change in your classroom/school?
4. What are your ambitions for the future?

The semi-structured nature of the interview left space for data to emerge organically, as well as affording the opportunity to probe responses further

where deeper understanding was required. Responses were then analysed thematically, with a view to establishing 'threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated' (van Manen, 1990: 91) by distinguishing the 'essential' from the 'incidental' and understanding what makes the phenomenon, 'what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is' (1990: 107).

While this methodology made it possible to delve into the detail of participants' perspectives, it also came with certain limitations. The first of these was the scope of the study, as time and resource restrictions made it necessary to limit the research to a small number of participants. Combined with the epistemological assumptions of a qualitative approach, this made the issue of generalisability an inherent limitation of the research design. The second important area to address is the limitation posed by my insider-researcher positioning. To mitigate for the challenges of researcher bias, I held this tension at the forefront of my mind throughout the process. While interviewing participants I used the non-directive and non-judgemental coaching style with which they were already familiar through their work on the programme. During the analysis phase, I continually challenged myself as to whether my findings offered a true reflection of the experiences that participants had shared with me, asking at each stage: 'Is this what he or she really meant? Would he or she feel comfortable with the way I am presenting these perspectives and the conclusions I am drawing?' While this did not negate the challenges associated with being an insider-researcher, I believe that it mitigated for them sufficiently to conclude that the insights that could be gained from this positioning outweighed the associated risks.

Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings from the case studies into how participants of the Teach First Cymru leadership development programme understand their contribution to educational equity in Wales. The findings are presented under the three themes that emerged as common threads between the experiences of trainees and alumni at different stages of their leadership development. The themes identified as essential to their leadership development, and therefore to their capacity to tackle educational disadvantage, were:

1. vision and values
2. identifying as a leader
3. support from the Teach First partnership

These themes will be presented and discussed, with reference to the elements of strong leadership identified in the literature review where relevant. This will be followed by an overview of the impact that the participants have had in addressing educational inequality in their own contexts, enabled by the areas identified above.

Vision and values

The first theme that emerged from the data was that all participants had a shared vision and values in common. This stemmed from an ability to connect personally with the problem of educational inequality, thus generating a personal determination to work for social justice. This did not rely on personal experience of educational disadvantage, though statistically around a quarter of Teach First trainees who started the programme in 2017 were eligible for Educational Maintenance Allowance and/or Free School Meals and 40 per cent were the first in their families to go to university (Teach First, 2017). In the case studies, participants were equally as likely to identify the problem of educational inequality by reflecting on experiences of educational privilege as they were from direct experience of disadvantage. In both cases, participants were struck by the inequality of their experience compared to that of others, and therefore motivated to engage in finding a solution. This meant that participants were attracted by the Teach First vision, as it aligned closely with their desire to make a positive impact in this area. The following comments illustrate participants' motivations for applying to the programme:

> P1: Because the vision isn't selfish, it isn't so that you become a better leader, it's actually got an influence outside of you.
>
> P2: I'm really committed to social mobility.
>
> P3: The interest I had in ending social inequality, it met the purpose that I feel and still have … it's something I think about every day.
>
> P4: I wanted a challenge and I wanted to try and make a difference. It felt like this could be something where I'd look back on my life and feel like I'd made a difference.

While initially expressed as a broad desire to 'make a difference', participants' vision and values developed over time into practical expressions and aspirations for their pupils. These were best expressed in participants' insistence on holding relentlessly high expectations for all pupils, as articulated explicitly in the following comments:

> P2: I have the same expectations for every student – getting them there might take different strategies, but at the end of the day I'm expecting them to get to the same point as everyone else.

> P4: As a teacher having the biggest influence you can on kids, if every single time they come into the classroom you're really positive and have high expectations of them and you're really driving them, that way of being is a bigger part of leadership than some of the other things.

The effects of this commitment were also evident in P1's description of significantly improved outcomes in a lower-ability GCSE maths set, resulting in most pupils moving up one or two sets after a term in his class. P3 also identified having 'really high expectations' as a vital element of her practice. In this way, participants mobilised their vision and values in order to motivate themselves and their pupils to pursue the best possible outcomes.

In so doing, they can be seen as the high-hope teachers that Snyder describes, committed to, 'develop workable goals, find routes to those goals and become motivated to use those pathways' (Snyder, 2000: 8). Their approach also reflects the high-hope teacher practice of advocating the use of higher than average expectations for pupils in poverty, in recognition of the additional obstacles that they have to overcome (Stanley, 2011). In this way, the theme of Teach First participants' vision and values aligns closely with the first component of strong leadership identified in the literature review: setting a clear and compelling vision for the future and securing follower buy-in and willingness to act (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Hammerness, 2006).

Identifying as a leader

The second key theme to emerge from the case-study data was that all participants identified themselves as a leader, regardless of their level of experience or whether they held a formal leadership role or additional responsibility. This did not stem from a lack of humility or a desire to elevate themselves above others, but rather from rejecting the traditional

hierarchical view of leadership. P3 explained how she had shifted her perspective from seeing leadership as a hierarchical 'pyramid' to a more 'circular, collaborative system'. She explained that, 'I feel leaders are a part of all society at all levels; peers and pupils need to find their own purpose and voice to be leaders too.' Indeed participants viewed leadership as everyone's responsibility, in the service of ensuring ongoing progress towards improving outcomes at a whole-school level. As a senior leader, P4 described tension between wanting to empower others to lead while also ensuring a consistent quality of teaching and learning across the board. He reflected on how he had needed to use an autocratic leadership style to set high standards initially, but is now seeking to distribute leadership as the school improves and staff capacity grows.

This theme of using personal leadership to equip others to lead and achieve well was present in all four case studies, commonly expressed as a commitment to role-modelling and influencing beyond their direct area of responsibility. This commitment was expressed in different ways, but consistently reflected the idea that 'leadership is my responsibility':

> P1: Teach First really makes us think about the situation that we're in and think about how what we've learnt can be effective across the rest of the school.
>
> P2: Through the Master's and the assignments from last year I've shared quite a lot of ideas that I've found. They've been shared on a whole-school level, so I've done presentations to share teaching strategies and explained how I've used them and how others could use them in their subject areas.
>
> P3: We all have a responsibility to empower each other to effect change and build a more equal society. It's infectious when somebody is excited about something; it makes other people get involved.
>
> P4: You've got to be what you want everyone else to be, and by being like that all the time it can have a huge difference in school. That's it really. That sounds quite basic, but just being that influence for other people can be a big thing.

Their experiences encapsulate the concept of teacher leadership previously discussed (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001) and mirror the second component of strong leadership identified in the literature review: viewing leadership as everyone's responsibility and enabling leadership at all levels within the school (Crowther, 2011; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001).

However, the participants' comments are not limited to this area of strong leadership; in fact, they begin to paint a picture of how the different elements of strong leadership are in dynamic relationship with one another. For example, P2 identifies his own access to current research as an essential

element of his ability to influence and explains elsewhere in his interview that, 'the main contribution I make is working as a research-based practitioner'. Yet he is not doing this work in isolation, as his vision for social justice and ambition for change lead him to share his learning with those around him. Likewise, P4 starts by identifying one element of strong leadership as the foundational element of his practice, explaining that:

> I think the key is having a very very strong vision. The way I've effected change, and there have been so many changes, was by coming up with very clear, simple ways of solving things, trying to get as many people on board as possible and then going on about it relentlessly. You've got to get as many people as possible to buy into your vision and then you've got to keep on checking that they're doing it. And I've basically used that model again and again.

Yet the effects of all three elements of strong leadership are implicit in his description of change, as he relies on an up-to-date knowledge of high-impact practices ('coming up with very clear, simple ways of solving things') and is working towards building an engaged community of leaders ('trying to get as many people on board as possible'). In practice, the elements of strong leadership are mutually supporting and all three are essential to the day-to-day work of enacting change. This will be discussed further in the Impact section.

Support from the Teach First partnership

The third theme that emerged from the case studies was that all participants identified support from the Teach First partnership as a key component of their development as leaders and agents of change. References to the partnership's support encompassed direct Teach First Cymru and university provision, as well as their school context and the broader Teach First network of trainees and alumni. Participants identified Teach First Cymru's explicit moral purpose and work-based training approach as essential to their decision to go into teaching, with all four stating that they would not have entered the profession via a different route. The case studies also identified the importance of the school's commitment to tackling educational disadvantage, with a school's willingness to improve deemed more important than its current categorisation. Indeed, participants all shared experiences of being encouraged by their school to enact their vision of educational equality. Sometimes this took the form of being offered additional responsibility and promotion early on in their careers (P2–P4), but

could equally be seen in a school's willingness to 'listen to our ideas and implement anything that we think may be useful' (P1). P3 summarised the role that the partnership's support currently plays for her as follows:

> I am able to do what I do for the pupils because of the support that I have had in my placement school. They are so supportive of any ideas I have in developing pupils and Teach First has given me the ability to raise my confidence that I can do things … I still have a Teach First coach and this gave me the confidence to be resilient and to have high expectations.

These sentiments were echoed by other participants, though the nature of support cited varied depending on experience levels.

The importance of high-quality training and cultivating an ongoing link between leadership and learning was consistently present in the data. As a trainee in his first year, P1 spoke of the impact of putting the focus on leadership and working towards leadership standards as part of the Participant Development Framework. He commented that:

> I think for a first year it's not so much leading from the front as it is bringing the current research, the new ideas, the injection of freshness into school and making people aware of it and always bringing it back to the agenda that it is to improve our learners' retention of knowledge and progress in your classroom.

P4 also identified the centrality of his teacher formation, concluding that, 'I think Teach First had an enormous role because initially I got I think as good a training as you can get to be a teacher.' He linked this to the confidence that he developed through being supported to teach 'in a school where it was immensely challenging straightaway' and the way that this opened up his ongoing engagement with the Teach First vision as he realised that, 'if I can do it here I can do it anywhere'. Eleven years later, P4 is the deputy head of a Teach First partner school that recently became the first ever school to move from red to yellow in the school categorisation system in the space of a year.

The final significant element of support from the Teach First partnership was identified as the importance of networks. There was a formal aspect to this, as participants cited specific opportunities available through the Teach First network such as: ongoing leadership development support; access to a Teach First coach; career-progression training; involvement in the innovation project; frequent opportunities to share best practice with peers and involvement in passing on learning to future cohorts. However, there was also a more general sense of belonging to a community of like-minded individuals pursuing a common goal, expressed by P3 as her feeling that,

'I'm not just a teacher – I'm part of a movement'. P4 described the effect of this, explaining that, 'everyone around me was hugely ambitious, hugely successful and hugely talented, and if you surround yourself with people like that you're always more likely to be successful'.

This sense of shared drive and ambition underpinned by high-quality training links to the third element of strong leadership identified in the literature review: concentrating activity on high-impact practices, informed by current research and shared best practice (Furlong, 2015; Education Endowment Foundation, 2018; Willingham, 2009). However it also goes beyond this, once again highlighting the way in which a strong vision and identity as a leader must also come together to create the conditions for change.

Impact and conclusion

This article set out to explore how trainees and alumni of the Teach First Cymru leadership development programme understand their contribution to educational equity in Wales. Against the backdrop of the achievement gap between richer and poorer pupils, it focused on identifying the elements of strong leadership necessary to effect change. Table 1 summarises the comparisons drawn between the elements identified in the literature review and in the Teach First Cymru case studies.

However, it became apparent that these elements did not operate in isolation from each other; instead they were interlinked and interdependent. As such, the point at which the different elements of strong leadership come together to enable change could be visualised as the intersection of a Venn diagram (see Figure 1).

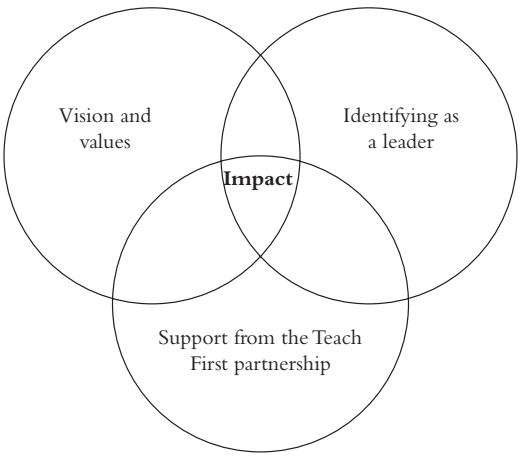
This can be illustrated clearly through two different examples given by participants when asked to describe how they have made an impact in their schools. They demonstrate how the same elements of successful leadership are present when effecting change at a class level as at a whole-school level, albeit applied in different ways.

P3 described how she developed an innovative intervention project called 'News Reader', aimed at year 9 pupils who lacked confidence in reading. As part of the project the pupils were taken to visit a newsroom, meet journalists and gain an insight into the research, preparation and production of a news bulletin. Standardised reading tests taken before and after the project saw the average reading age of the pupils increase by 2.4 years, over the course of a month.

Table 1. Comparison between elements of strong leadership identified in the literature review and in the Teach First Cymru case studies

Literature review	*Teach First Cymru case studies*
Setting a clear and compelling vision for the future and securing follower buy-in and willingness to act (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Hammerness, 2006)	Vision and values • personal connection with the problem of educational inequality • alignment with the Teach First vision • high expectations for all pupils
Viewing leadership as everyone's responsibility and enabling leadership at all levels within the school (Crowther, 2011; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001)	Identifying as a leader • leadership is everyone's responsibility • role-modelling • influencing beyond themselves
Concentrating activity on high-impact practices, informed by current research and shared best practice (Furlong, 2015; Education Endowment Foundation, 2018; Willingham, 2009)	Support from the Teach First partnership • moral purpose and structure of the programme • high-quality training • access to the Teach First network

Figure 1: Venn diagram illustrating how the elements of strong leadership come together to effect change



The impact of this intervention was achieved at the intersection of P3's strong leadership in the three areas already identified. As an illustration: without an understanding of educational inequality and a personal drive for social justice, P3 would never have been pulled away from her former career in journalism to enter the teaching profession. On entering the profession her vision was equally as important in driving the high expectations that she maintained for all pupils; without this, she would never have embarked on such an ambitious improvement agenda for her year 9 class. This would not have been sufficient however, without the belief that she could innovate and lead a project independently; P3's personal responsibility for leading change as well as her ability to influence others were paramount. Even then, the impact of the project would not have been achieved without the support of the Teach First partnership: first through the school's willingness to engage with a hitherto untested intervention, and secondly through the support that P3 received from the Teach First Innovation Unit to plan the project carefully and ensure its success.[1]

P4 described change on a larger scale in his capacity as deputy headteacher, having worked together with the headteacher to lead his school through a process of rapid improvement over the past three years. He described his pride at the school having come out of special measures with sector-leading practice, including a major increase from 27 per cent to 86 per cent of lessons deemed 'Good' or better by Estyn. The school's improvement was further reflected in the number of year 7 pupils on roll in September 2017: 240 up from 90, three years earlier. As in the previous example, P4 needed all three elements of strong leadership in order to achieve success. This began with a strong vision for social justice, which led him to take a significant career risk by taking on a senior leadership role in a failing school. This courage was enabled by his personal ambition for change, likely pushed on by his high-achieving network of like-minded Teach First alumni. His rapid career progression was also supported by opportunities arising through the Teach First network, including the chance to join the vision-aligned Future Leaders programme. Finally, P4's personal leadership ability as a role model, influencer and driver of change, as well as his commitment to continue to learn and develop as a leader, were essential.

In this way, it seems that all three elements of strong leadership are essential to the kind of change needed to close the achievement gap and achieve educational equity in Wales. The Teach First Cymru leadership development programme combines all three elements and builds teachers

and leaders committed to working for social justice long term, as illustrated in participants' expressions of their continued engagement with low-income communities and their ambitions for the future:

> P1: I think that I'd like to stay here for five years. I think that's the best way to really see the school on its journey … I think after working in a school like this and seeing what works and doesn't work, I'd like to move outside of just my classroom and find a way to influence education on a broader scale, which brings me back to the idea of working in the civil service or in policy.
>
> P2: I'd like to be a Head of Department one day. It offers the opportunity to promote change and adapt the way things are done and coach other staff, while also teaching regularly … I will continue to work in schools similar to the one I'm working in now.
>
> P3: My forte is being a teacher – I've had outstanding lessons and continue to strive to maintain that. One day I see myself in a senior leadership role in a Teach First partner school.
>
> P4: Obviously I want to be a head. And I want to be a head in a challenging school because, what's the point, you've got to go to the schools that need the most help.

While this article has been limited to a small number of case studies, it has uncovered some promising themes that would merit further exploration. Educational inequality is a fundamental injustice and it is essential that priority is given to identifying effective solutions. In highlighting the transformational effect of strong leadership at all levels within a school and the ways in which it can be cultivated, this study has relevance for those concerned with teacher recruitment and ITE. The Teach First Cymru leadership development programme offers a valuable contribution to the education community's understanding and practice in this area, at a time when there are exciting opportunities ahead for Welsh education (Donaldson, 2015; Furlong, 2015). Leadership is at the heart of these innovations, as seen in plans for the creation of a National Academy for Educational Leadership.

Note

[1] The Teach First Innovation Unit exists to find and support initiatives that address educational inequality. The team supports the development and implementation of projects that enable young people from low-income backgrounds to achieve their ambitions.

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