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System Leadership Development in Children's Centres in the UK

Associate Professor Kaz Stuart, Department of Health, Psychology and Social Studies, University of Cumbria, Bowerham Road, Lancaster, LA1 3JD. 07950 039206., kaz.stuart@cumbria.ac.uk.
Megan Wilcox, Lead Adviser- Children's Centres, HertsforLearning, Robertson House, Six Hills Way, Stevenage, SG1 2FQ. 07879 431207, megan.wilcox@hertsforlearning.co.uk

Abstract
Purpose: The situation of children today, their development and future is a key dimension of the sustainability agenda. This case study aims to explore the value of "system leadership" as a useful concept for children's centre leadership. Leadership in children's centres is an under researched and under-supported area. This paper makes a new contribution to this sector of leadership and, in turn, broadens the scope of attention to sustainability leadership.
Design/methodology/approach: This paper uses case study as a methodology to convey the details of "system leadership" in Children's Centres and enable the reader to assess the generalisability of the findings to their own context.
Findings: The data highlighted that the participants were coping with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity as leaders of Children's Centres. Leaders developed "system leadership" skills through action research oriented leadership development, and this enhanced their agency.
Practical implications: System leadership skills are effective in supporting leaders to cope with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity and is applicable to Children's Centres and beyond.
Social implications: Leadership development enhances the sustainability of organisations, staff and the people that they work with – in this case children and families. Investment in leadership development is therefore investment in the future of society.
Originality/value: This case study identifies leadership practices in an understudied and under theorised context – Children's Centres in the UK.

Key Words: leadership; system leadership; distributed leadership; action research; children's centres; leadership development; agency.

Article Classification: Case Study

Introduction

It may be obvious from the word itself that 'sustainability' is about the future. Therefore, as a policy paradigm, it invites attention to children alive today, as well as more abstract notions of future generations. The importance of children to sustainability policy and action is recognised by intergovernmental agreements. For

instance, the Sustainable Development Goals mention targets to reduce violence against children (UN, 2015). Prior to that, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) mapped out rights and concerns that governments and other organisations, including businesses, should respect. That agreement reflects how children are more vulnerable in our society, something relevant to sustainability, as it includes the wellbeing of those less powerful in our societies.

Young people are often advocates of sustainability, according to opinion surveys (Pew Research Center, 2016). This awareness and engagement can be welcomed and nurtured, as the development of young people is key to how societies will respond to economic, social and environmental dilemmas over time (ref). It is no surprise, therefore, that education for sustainability has been key to sustainable development policies over the past decades, ever since it was emphasised in Agenda 21 (UNESCO, 2013).

Despite their centrality to sustainability policy, children and young people have not had a comprehensive place in corporate sustainability practice or research. Attention to children in the corporate sustainability field has largely been restricted to avoidance of child labour in supply chains or the philanthropic activities of companies (Bendell, 2009). As children are not meant to be involved in the workplace, discussion of management and leadership for sustainability may not consider children at all.

With this paper, we add to this under-researched area in sustainability management and policy by looking at the leadership of children's centres in the UK. Our hope is that findings on leadership from outside the corporate sector is also relevant to management and leadership in business. We take as our starting point the notion of sustainability leadership as acts taken with the intention and effect of socially or environmental useful outcomes (Bendell and Little, 2015).

Our intention was to explore the practice of leadership in children's centres, to generate insights on how to improve such practice, while also contributing insight to the broader field of sustainability leadership.

We use the concepts of distributed leadership (Rowan, 1990) and system leadership (Senge et al, 2015), both widely discussed in the sustainability leadership fields, to structure an exploration of how people that manage children's centres are addressing difficult challenges. Given that mainstream research on leadership has concluded with the need to learn from outside the corporate sector (Bendell and Little, 2015), we hope our findings will trigger interesting questions within the field of sustainability management and leadership.

Methodology

This case study is a snapshot taken of children's centre leadership at one particular time and place. The study is based in Hertfordshire where Herts for Learning and Indigo Children's Services Consultancy provided a leadership development

programme called 'Future Leaders' for 24 heads of children's centres across Hertfordshire.

The 82 children's centres in Hertfordshire, now reorganised to 29 groups, serve a total under-fives population of 76,560 (Herts County Council, 2015). Of these, over 14% live in poverty compared to 20.7% of under-fives nationally. However Hertfordshire is a large local authority covering 634 square miles with diverse communities from urban deprivation where the child poverty rate is 43.6% to villages challenged by rural isolation; indeed some of the new centres face challenges in offering accessible services in communities covering up to 70 square miles.

The case study explores the efficacy of the leadership programme in enhancing system leadership and distributed leadership in children's centres. A pre test and post test self-assessment was completed by the leaders. This measured seven areas of leadership and contained 46 indicators. In addition to this the heads of centres completed evaluation forms at the end of programme, and anecdotal feedback was captured. Together these present a view of the role of system and distributed leadership for children's centre leadership in Hertfordshire. A further longitudinal evaluation will be conducted later in the year to inform understanding as to the extent to which learning was embedded into practice.

The limitation of the case study is its specificity to one local authority and further research will be needed to see how generalizable the findings are. That said, the challenges faced within this context prevail nationally.

Context

Ghate et al., (2014:6) outline how the current context for people working with children is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, or 'VUCA'. On top of this is the 'perfect storm' of increased demand and decreased resources in the public service sector, and the intractable 'wicked issues' ingrained in society (ibid). This context is a complex and adaptive system (Fillingham and Weir, 2014:6; Senge, Hamilton and Kania, 2015; Zimmerman et al., 1998) that demands high levels of leadership skill.

Heads of children's centres have a highly demanding role. Whilst the core purpose of children's centres is expressed simply as: child development and school readiness, parenting aspirations and parenting skills, and child and family health and life chances (Sure start, 2014), it belies a vast array of activities to undertake and stakeholders to manage (Stuart, 2015). Indeed, it has been said that: "It is important to recognise that Children's Centre staff, and particularly leaders, are doing a difficult and complicated job which often requires a great deal of professional skill" (Policy Exchange, 2013). In addition to this, children's centres serve some of the most disadvantaged children and families in the country and are key to early help initiatives working with social care professionals at many levels to keep children safe. Undertaking this task in an increasingly VUCA context is demanding.

Despite the necessity for these services and complexity of the context and task, there is virtually no study of leadership in children's centres, literature drawn on for this paper is predominantly from early childhood settings or schools.

Early childhood leadership is shown to be in times of great change in the UK with children, young people and families the focus of much national debate and policy making. The findings of the Effective Provision of Preschool Education study (Sylva et al, 2004) indicated that integrated settings provided the best quality, and that there was a correlation between well-qualified staff and outcomes for children. Within this context, leaders need to; run safe and caring environments with high quality early education and development (Aubrey, 2011) develop best pedagogical practice and develop leadership and management practice across networks, and manage increasingly complex and rapid change. Effective leadership of early childhood settings is, therefore, fundamental to quality provision (Stipek and Ogana, 2000) yet research has shown that many educators in early childhood view themselves as managers rather than leaders (Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2003) leading some to contentiously conclude that leadership is something of an 'enigma' in early childhood settings Rodd, 2013).

School leadership is well documented and researched. The evidence base here shows that school leaders are dealing with an equally demanding VUCA context and intractable problems (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009). In addition to this, schools are torn by the dual demands of centralised control, measurement and accountability on one hand, and localised management and autonomy on the other (Robinson, 2012). Within this context, a range of leadership models have been promoted over the years, and one current approach is "system leadership" which emphasises how school leaders may increase the performance of weaker schools while also effecting systemic change – nodding to both discourses of centralism and decentralism (Robinson, 2012).

The local Hertfordshire context was also relevant for this inquiry. On top of the national VUCA context that they worked in and the complexity of their roles, these leaders were also facing the challenges of children's centre re-commissioning by the local authority and restructuring which would entail competition for new posts immediately following the Future Leaders programme.

The complexity of the modern working life has been evidenced to detract from wellbeing (BITC, 2015; Gadinger et al., 2012; Cascio 2006). It is common sense that tackling some of societies most intractable problems with reduced resources and increased demand is a stressful job. Neglecting leadership development of some of the most beleaguered leaders in society who support some of the most disadvantaged members of society is neither sustainable for the leaders, their staff, service users, or society at large. The lack of attentiveness to the human domain of sustainability is drawing increasing academic attention (Pfeffer, 2010; Simola, 2012), and this paper highlights the need for such a consideration, suggesting that leadership development can and does enhance leaders wellbeing.

Why system and distributed leadership?

System leadership

System leadership was relevant from a structural perspective because these heads were leading across a new 'system' of multiple children's centres where previously they had led only one. The system demands that the heads lead outwards across a range of centres. One of the defining factors of a system is that they are:

"a set of interconnected elements that form a whole and show properties that are properties of the whole rather than of individual elements" (Laszlo, 2012:97).

System leadership can therefore be usefully conceived as about leading a whole system rather than individual parts (Shaked and Schechter, 2013). Leading a whole system of children's centres would involve processes, relationships and interconnectedness. It involves analysis and synthesis of what is happening, how it is happening, why and what for. The capacity of system leadership to encompass these different components is argued to suit efforts at complex social and technical reform (Laszlo, 2012).

Ghate et al., (2014) wrote a comprehensive and research-informed guide on system leadership for the Virtual Staff College. In this, they ascertained that system leadership is "leadership across organisational and geopolitical boundaries, beyond individual professional disciplines, within a range of organisational and stakeholder cultures, often without direct managerial control" supporting the structural interpretation of the term offered above. Further, however, they offer that its purpose is "to effect change for positive social benefit across multiple interacting and intersecting systems" (Ghate et al., 2013:13). System leadership is being positioned as able to solve intractable social problems because such problems not singular discrete issues but best considered systems in themselves (Mason, 2008: 40). This is the second aspect of system leadership. This aspect of system leadership also resonates with the complex task of heads of groups of children's centres working with other agencies to improve the lives of children and families.

Taylor (2014) points out that traditional forms of management and leadership are reliant on reductionist linear thinking, involving causality and predictability. Systems theory recognises that our natural, social and economic realities are complex in ways that reduce the effectiveness of such reductionism. Systems theory is also informed by complexity theory and evolutionary systems theory, which posit that survival is more likely for organisms that can develop, evolve and adapt (Morrison, 2002:6). If we extrapolate into the social sphere, this perspective suggests children's centres need to be adaptable to survive (ibid: 16). Therefore, adaptability and evolution to stay afloat in an ever-changing context is the third rationale for system leadership. From this perspective system leadership is itself in a process of evolution, and would lead the evolution of the system of children's centres. Laszlo (2012) goes on to claim that many of the complex 'wicked issues' that challenge modern day society are as a result of a lack of system thinking and resultant unintended effects (2012:96).

Though not explicitly building upon the theories just outlined, a form of system leadership has been required in educational leadership in the UK since the millennium, in the form of federations and, or chains of schools and academies (DfES, 2005; Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009). In the schools context, the assumption is that head teachers can develop the practice of other weaker schools who are in their system, and so contribute to change in the UK schooling system overall. In some respects then, this was decentralisation with head teachers taking charge of system reform (Fullan, 2004). This has received some critique as head teachers are still constrained by centralised policy whilst trying to act autonomously as system leaders (Robinson, 2012) a stressful situation in its own right (Bottery, 2004). The educational use of system leadership focuses on structural systems and systemic problems of low attainment, with less attention given to the way in which the leadership is enacted to create an organic and adaptable organisation.

To summarise, in the emerging theory, 'system leadership' is argued to have three aspects: leading across a system of geographical or structural sites, solving systemic problems, and leading in an adaptive way. These are now often conflated into one term – system leadership, but we propose that they are kept distinct as discrete aspects of system leadership. Adding to the confusion surrounding system leadership, is its proximity to concepts of 'distributed leadership' which we will now discuss before examining the findings from our case study.

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership is a term used in both practice and research to describe an awareness and approach whereby leadership acts are considered to be undertaken by various participants in an activity, whether or not they have authority or remain as recognised leaders at other times. This perspective relates to all three aspects of system leadership we described above. To begin with, system leadership is reliant on distributed leadership as the task of a system leader is too great for any single heroic leader at the 'top' effecting change (Fillingham and Weir, 2014:16; Garmon, 2004). Working across organisations requires leaders to "empower a wider cadre of staff to act and think more strategically, both to sustain leadership capacity and to enable staff at every level to contribute to leading learning" (Higham, Hopkins, and Matthews, 2009:66). Distributed leadership is relevant in that these heads of children's centres would have to share the leadership activity across the new system of children's centre staff with 'absent presence' (Robinson, 2012:51) as they cannot be in all the centres at all times. If they are leading the solutions to systemic problems, then they also need to distribute leadership amongst the people who may contribute to the multifaceted solution. And in order to lead an adaptable and evolutionary organisation, everyone must be able to change and take on new or different responsibilities.

Distributed leadership has been in use in schools to share leadership activity (Harris, 2003; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2001) since the 1940's (Benne and Sheats, 1948) and was popularised in the 1990's (Rowan, 1990; Hart, 1995). There were no

case studies or research on distributed leadership within children's centres or early childhood, so the literature on schools has been exclusively drawn upon. A range of claims are made that distributed leadership in schools is; democratic, increases capacity, and is collegial (Bell, McKenzie and Locke, 2014).

Many have taken issue with the claim that it is democratic. Hatcher (2005) comments that it may increase individuals agency but within hierarchical school and national structures where it is not possible to operate it. This has led Corrigan (2013:267) to claim that it will not work in reality and is merely a palatable cliché. Perhaps therefore the strength of the distributed leadership is dependent on the strength of the discourse in individual school (Hall, Gunter and Bragg 2013:467) and their appetite for subversiveness (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009). Secondly, there are also critiques of distributed leadership as ill defined, purely conceptual and poorly evidenced as being successful (Hartley, 2007). Finally one of the most profound drawbacks of distributed leadership is its dependence on the will and ability of the people it is distributed to (McKenzie and Locke, 2014:166), and its reliance on the leadership capacity of those people. As Timperley states: "distributing leadership over more people is a risky business and may result in the greater distribution of incompetence" *(*Timperley, 2005:417).

Embedding distributed leadership within the system leadership across these children's centres would therefore demand that the leaders contended with issues of power and democracy, and that they were able to develop the leadership capacity of other people across the system. They would also need to collect their own evidence of the success of both system leadership and distributed leadership as it is under researched and evidenced per se, and particularly in children's centres.

Programme Design Principles

Action Research and Praxis

Rather than offering a 'taught' programme that could be drawn on superficially, the designers aimed for an engaging 'process of inquiry' that would lead to deep learning (Biggs and Tang, 2011). An action research approach was used to achieve this. Action research is:

"a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities" (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 1).

An action research oriented programme would continually inquire into the most appropriate form of leadership to achieve outcomes for children and families. It would be grounded in the experiences of the heads of centres, they would be acting, reflecting, theorising and practicing, all to support their service users to flourish.

Action research is usually reserved as a research method, and this programme was perhaps innovative in using it as a learning process, although the links to experiential learning cycles (Kolb, 1984) and learning organisations (Senge, 1990) are obvious. Action research differs epistemologically from other approaches in that it focuses exclusively on the paradigm of praxis (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Praxis involves developing knowledge from practice, and practice from knowledge. This would help ensure that the system and distributed leadership knowledge did not remain at a conceptual level, but became embedded in practice, and that the theory of system and distributed leadership were defined and refined with practice knowledge.

From this perspective, action research: "is necessarily an action science, which draws on extended epistemologies and continually enquires into the meaning and purpose of our practice" (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 7). Action research positions practitioners as the repositories of expertise, who engage in and co-create meaning enhancing their critical awareness and practice (Winter and Sobiechowska, 1999; Reason 2003; McIntosh 2010). This approach resonates with the emphasis placed on groups of people solving systemic problems and adapting and evolving together, both of which are contingent on learning.

The programme was therefore a combination of; theoretical inputs, discussion of practice, analysis of practice in the light of theory and theory in the light of practice, reflection and practical activities.

Theoretical Framework

As described above, the theoretical framework for the programme was system and distributed leadership allowing the heads of centres to enact leadership successfully across and through networks of centres.

Ghate et al (2014:11) developed a nested model of system leadership. Improving outcomes for service users is central to the model. This is surrounded by six key attributes that a system leader needs to enact. This is then surrounded by ten characteristics of system leadership that need to be implemented in public services, within the outer ring of nine factors that defined the operating context. The attributes included:

- Ways of perceiving, seeing and hearing
- Ways of thinking, cognition, analysis and synthesis
- Ways of relating, relationships and participation
- Ways of doing, enabling behaviours and actions
- Ways of being, personal qualities
- Ways of feeling, personal core values.

Similarly, Taylor (2014) developed a list of 11 competencies necessary for 'system leadership' to be successful. These included:

- The ability to actively engage

- The ability to collaborate
- The ability to continually learn
- The ability to hold diverse perspectives
- The ability to express emotional maturity
- The ability to engage with paradox
- The ability to make meaning
- The ability to see and understand patterns
- The ability to undergo profound change
- The ability to see and understand connections
- The ability to sustain effort.

These two lists highlighted that a relatively simple concept hid a great deal of complexity. According to Ghate et al. (2014) and Taylor (2014) the heads of centres needed to not only understand the concepts of system and distributed leadership, but also to master the attributes and competencies listed above. Strikingly, these lists do not comprise the outcomes or content of most commercial leadership development programmes. Many of them are meta-cognitive skills, learning to learn (or learning to lead) rather than leadership and management skills per se. These would be developed through the process of inquiry, further reinforcing the need for a robust action research approach. Rather than dictating what system and distributed leadership were to the heads of centres, we would engage them in a process of inquiry, ascertaining what it is in their systems of centres, and how they would enact them, developing their own theories in practice.

Inquiring into the nature of system and distributed leadership was not deemed to be enough by the design team. Encompassed within these two 'meta' concepts are a host of sub theories, skills, knowledge and understanding from leadership and management. The design team considered that the programme would need a range of these to be able to successfully enact leadership. This resonates with the experience of McKenzie and Locke (2014) who followed the practices of six teacher leaders working within a US school with distributed leadership. Those teachers experienced issues with dealing with conflict, negotiating agendas and diversions, and frustration at their lack of influence and impact (pp173-183). They concluded that "if teachers won't lead, don't know how to lead, or are prevented from leading, distributing leadership among them will do nothing to improve instructional practices and, consequently, student achievement" (2014:183).

Equally, Senge, Hamilton and Kania (2015:13) and Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2014:27) advocate for systems leaders building a large and varied toolkit (2015:33). As such, the pre programme self-assessment was used as a diagnostic tool to indicate which areas of leadership the heads of centres identified as needing support.

As the leaders were dedicating time and effort to the programme, the design team offered them accreditation to validate their learning. A level 4 award in leadership and management from the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) was studied by 12 heads of centres. This is an applied qualification route, demanding that

learners demonstrate that they have applied the knowledge that they have gained from programmes in leadership practice. This further reinforced the action research approach.

The final programme constituted a ten day programme spread over three months to allow time for reflection, practice and learning. The approach to delivery was based in action research to enhance learning to lead. The content was developed from system and distributed leadership theory and the leadership and management sub-skills indicated as most weak by the heads of centres. The programme also offered accreditation through the Institute of Leadership and Management. The ambitious programme commenced in January 2015 for three months. The rest of this paper interrogates the extent to which the programme (approach and content) facilitated the heads of centres ability to apply system and distributed leadership in their children's centres.

Findings

The Participants
32 female heads of children's centres applied to the Future Leaders programme. 24 were heads of centres judged by Ofsted or HertsforLearning to be 'good' or 'outstanding'. 52% had professional qualifications above degree level, and 85% had completed the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leaders (a level 7 leadership programme targeted at children's centre leaders). The 24 heads of good or outstanding centres were invited to join the programme as the maximum possible cohort size.

The Needs
The heads of centre self-assessed their leadership and management skills against 42 indicators that comprised seven areas of leadership. The table below shows these areas of leadership and the total percentage skill acquisition for the group of 24.

Cluster	**% acquisition of skills**
Administrative Leadership	68%
Communicative Leadership	71%
Supervisory Leadership	69%
Strategic Leadership	71%
Pedagogical Leadership	65%
System Leadership	51%
Personal Leadership	68%

Table 1: Percentage Acquisition of Leadership and Management Skills (n=24).

Overall the leaders perceived themselves to be skilled, however system leadership and pedagogical leadership were the weak areas of leadership. Alongside these, a

range of leadership and management sub-skills needed specific attention as shown by low scores on individual indicators. These included:

- Pedagogical innovations 50%
- Funding and commissioning 51%
- Andragogy 53%
- Managing interprofessional teams 55%
- Applying relevant leadership models and theories 56%
- Fostering interprofessional learning 56%
- Linking research and practice 56%
- Managing change 57%
- Developing strategic plans 57%.

The heads of centres were also asked to name the leadership challenge that most worried them at the time. The following results corroborated the needs identified in the diagnostic, and added more to the list. The areas of concern identified by more than one head included:

- Change management
- Resource management
- Time management
- Collaboration and networking
- Strategy
- Delegation

These needs confirm the VUCA context to some extent in that each of the leadership challenges named above are directly linked to the incessant change, increased demand and decreased resources encapsulated within VUCA, and the skills analysis further showed that the areas that the leaders perceived themselves to be less skilled at were exactly those most in demand in the VUCA context. It may not be that the leaders were particularly 'unskilled' at them, but that unprecedented use of these skills is now demanded of them.

Evaluation Data

There were 22 of the 24 leaders that completed the programme. Two had to withdraw due to changes in employment. At the end of the programme 20 of the 22 completing leaders re-assessed themselves with the needs analysis. The groups percentage of skill acquisition was calculated at the start and end of the programme. These are shown alongside one another in the chart below. The start score of this group is different to the start scores shown in the previous chart as this only includes the scores of the 22 leaders who completed the programme rather than the initial 24.

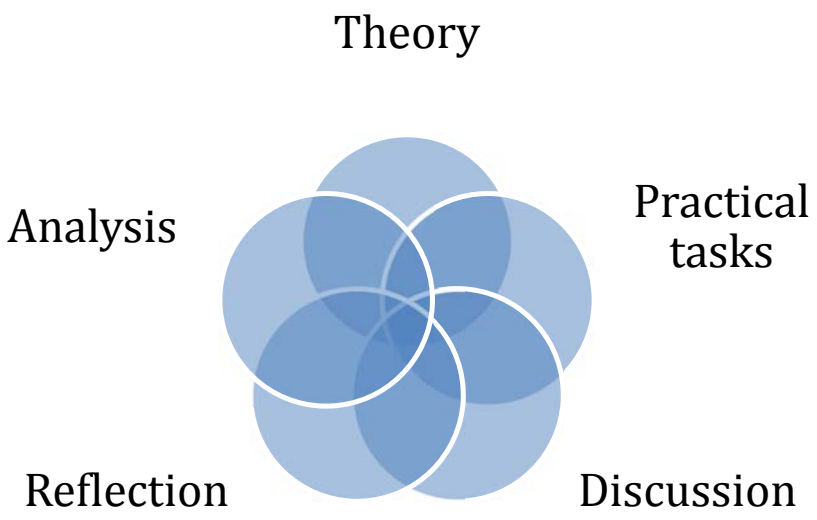

Figure 1: The elements of the programme that promoted learning.

Despite very high initial scores of 71% - 76%, there were positive gains across all seven areas of leadership. The increases were all in the range of 8% - 12% with a mean 10% increase. The percentage change for each of the seven clusters is shown in the chart below.

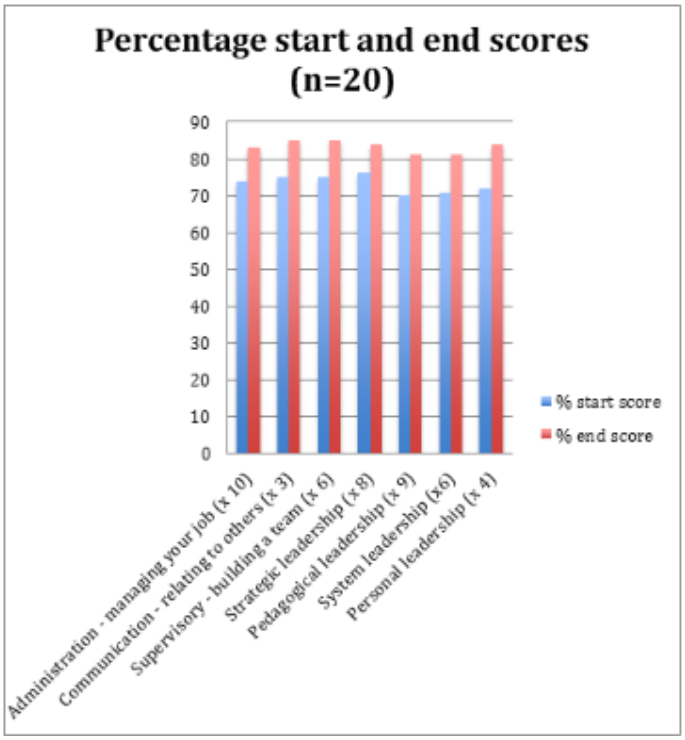

Figure 2: The percentage start and end scores of the group

**the numbers in brackets refer to the number of sub-questions in each area of leadership.*

This is a striking increase in leadership skill in a group already performing at a high level, demonstrating that the action research approach and practical tools did support leadership development.

In addition to the needs analysis, an end of programme evaluation sought to establish the extent to which the intended learning outcomes had been met, and the usefulness of the range of tools provided. 16 of the 22 participants completed the evaluation.

The aim of the Future Leaders programmes was to enable leaders to develop effective leadership of networks of Children's Centres. The extent to which the aim of the programme had been met was scored 1-10. The mean score was 8.8 (range 7-10) indicating high success.

The extent to which the outcomes were met was scored 1-10. The mean score across all the outcomes was 8.8 (range from 6-10) indicating the leaders perception of the programme as successful. The means for each outcome are shown in the table below.

Outcome	**Mean score**
a) Reflect on practice and develop the ability of others to reflect on practice with current tools and models of leadership	8.9
b) Utilise current early years leadership models in daily practice	8.6
c) Identify and lead best practice across networks	8.9
d) Establish shared multi-professional communities of system leadership	8.8

Table 2: Mean scores for the extent to which outcomes had been achieved (n=16).

The leaders were asked to score the content and the facilitation skills of the tutor. Aside from that, the evaluation questions were all open, seeking to understand what the leaders felt were the best parts of the programme, what they had gained, and what they would take away with them. These comments were open coded and are included in full below. Seven factors were found to have contributed to the learning that the heads of centre gained; the content of the programme, the action research

approach, the tools, the presenter, peer support, the validation of the leaders skills and experiences and the accreditation of the programme. These are detailed below.

a) Content

The programme contents were rated on a 1-10 scale for relevance, appropriateness, quality and pace. The scores for each were very high, ranging from 8-10. The mean scores were as follows:

Relevance:	9.7
Appropriateness:	9.7
Quality:	9.6
Pace:	9.5

The programme was evidently designed in accordance with the needs, hopes and fears expressed by the participants in the initial needs analysis. This was further substantiated by open comments about the quality and appropriateness of the content, for example:

- *Content, delivery by tutor. We were asked what we wanted from the course, it was designed for us as leaders.*

It would seem therefore that taking a needs led approach and really seeking to understand what these leaders needed to navigate their worlds was of vital importance and a key factor in the success of the programme.

b) Action research approach - praxis

The use of action learning as a pedagogical approach seemed particularly successful. The leaders provided many open comments to the effect that they had learned from the theory and practice. For example:

- *Looking at my style of leadership*
- *Links between theory and practice - renewing and refreshing learning, providing focus post-Ofsted*
- *Linking theory to practice deepening my knowledge of system leadership.*
- *System leadership - delegation of leadership*
- *New ideas to lead staff and process*
- *Learning about distributed leadership. Learning how to use 'models' within the everyday life of the CC*
- *It has made me reflect more and identify areas for development*
- *I can't thank you enough for this experience and once the new world has started can't wait to put my learning into practice.*

To some extent the process of being away from work seemed to create learning for them:

- *Time to come away from the centre and revisit or learn new ideas*
- *Taking time out of the centre to develop my own practice*
- *Time out of the office/centre to gather some thoughts*
- *Valuing the importance of lifelong learning and continuing to inspire others to jump on board.*

The action research approach was cited as supportive. Neither an entirely practical nor an entirely theoretical programme would have been as effective in supporting system and distributed leadership development.

c) Leadership and Management Sub-skills and Tools

A range of 62 sub-skills, tools and models had been used to underpin the meta-concept of system and distributed leadership and management. The leaders were asked which were the most and least useful to them in their day-to-day work. Although we refer to 'least useful' tools, it should be noted that the lowest score for usefulness was 4.2 out of 5, hardly a low score at all. These are summarised in the table below.

Tools with a mean score of 5 out of 5 for usefulness.	**Tools with a mean score of 4.5 or less out of 5 for usefulness.**
Distributed leadership tools	Activity theory
System leadership tools	Strategic capability assessment
Trust models	Game theory
Resource management models	Comfort Zones
Time management models	Seven types of strategic thinking
Tools to support andragogy	Skills for researching pedagogy
	Forcefield analysis
	PESTLE analysis

Table 3: Most and least useful tools (n=16).

The following comments further bring to light the value of practical tools underpinning leadership concepts:

- *Was real for me*
- *Useable tools that are relevant to role*
- *I felt very positive about having new tools and models to refer to*
- *The tools you are sharing with us and the opportunities you are providing for us have given some of us our positivity back*

The group particularly valued tools that would support them to manage the re-structure of the children's centres that they were involved in at that time.

- *Helped my own wellbeing and that of my staff at this time*
- *Tools around building a new team - building trust and rapport*
- *Useable tools e.g. important/urgent matrix, OK corale for team use*
- *Strategies for supporting transition to group/network*
- *Managing change process*
- *Thinking about the centre team*
- *I feel optimistic that the "new world" will be absolutely fine and that I have the tools to manage it.*

This supports the view that the underpinning skills were vital to the successful enactment of system and distributed leadership, and would suggest that further leadership capacity development is needed across the systems that these heads will lead.

d) Presenter

The presenter was rated on a 1-10 scale for approachability, expert knowledge and facilitation skills. The scores were all at a maximum 10. The mean score for each of those areas is therefore 10.

Approachability: 10
Expert knowledge: 10
Facilitation skills: 10

A range of open comments also supported the finding that the facilitation contributed to the learning experience.

- *Facilitator was great, interesting, thought provoking, inspirational - content bang on!*
- *Facilitator was great!*
- *Inspirational delivery - Kaz was open to change, involved us all in the learning*
- *Content, delivery by tutor. We were asked what we wanted from the course, designed for us as leaders*
- *Thank you for being so fabulous and managing the sensitivity of our current situation so well.*
- *I really valued learning from Kaz - she is quite inspirational*
- *I want to thank you for all your support and just say how much I have enjoyed the journey!*
- *Kaz's experience*
- *You have been amazing, warm, so easy to listen to and interact with.*
- *Thank you so much for all of your expertise, work and support.*

This suggests that quality of delivery is important, the input needs to be carefully tailored to the needs of the participants at any given time, challenging the validity of 'off the shelf' set leadership development programmes.

e) Networking and peer support

Despite the value placed on the external facilitator, the group also really valued the time that they spent with one another. Comments that support peer learning include:

- *Networking, supporting, great tools to take away*
- *Peer support*
- *The group of people were also keen, inspirational and fun*
- *The input and support from the group has been brilliant and enhanced my learning greatly*
- *Everything – networking, discussions, learning*
- *Learning with other leaders*
- *Peer support*

This is a really promising finding, suggesting that the heads of centre will be able to sustain learning for each other.

f) Validation

A further unexpected outcome from the programme was the validation that the heads of centres reported as a result of the programme:

- *Building confidence*
- *To remind me that my leadership style is a recognised one!*

- *Supporting development of future leaders and developing my confidence*
- *Worthwhile, confidence that I am doing a good job*
- *I would like to go onto the next level, it has given me confidence*
- *Enabled me to focus on the benefits of leading through this challenging time*
- *I feel the course has enabled me to believe in my leadership and my ability to lead a larger team*
- *At a time of uncertainty I feel inspired*
- *Affirming*
- *It's been a very personal and supportive learning journey that I would recommend*
- *Feel stronger as a leader - ready to distribute more and feel motivated to develop*
- *The course has valued what we do as leaders and peer support has been brilliant!!*
- *I feel motivated to lead staff through future changes and cycles*
- *I want to inspire my middle leaders*
- *I feel valued and that I contribute to something quite special!*
- *I appreciate how hard you both worked to make it work for us all but mostly I wanted to say thank you for validating us.*

This data suggests that the leadership development programme improved the leaders' wellbeing. They gained confidence, self-esteem, experienced empowerment, and thus felt more able to take on the organisational re-structure and VUCA context.

This can be related to the literature on 'agency'. Agency is an individual's ability to be aware, to make choices from this awareness, and to then act on the choice made to bring about desired outcomes (Stuart, 2014). The theory, dialogue and inquiry offered in the action research pedagogy increased the leaders awareness of their context, of system and distributed leadership. The practical tools offered in the action research pedagogy increased the leaders choices of tool or method to use to implement system and distributed leadership. The increased awareness and choices had certainly enhanced the leaders will to take action and sense that they could take action. It is too early, however to find out the extent to which they do achieve what they need to.

The possibility that the Future Leaders programme increased leadership agency supports the value of investing in leadership development as it sustains leaders to sustain their organisations, which in turn, promotes wellbeing for children and families.

g) Accreditation

The programme offered optional accreditation with the Institute of Leadership and Management. Twelve of the leaders completed a level 4 certificate in leadership and management. This required that they complete two modules, one on managing a complex team activity and the second on developing a culture of innovation and change. Some people completed the certificate as they wanted current leadership qualifications to support their job applications (within or outwith the children's

centre groups). Others wanted the structure of the assignments to enable them to further embed learning. The prime reason for not completing the certificate was the current stress and workload invoked by local authority restructuring of children's centres. Of the twelve leaders who commenced the accredited route, eleven completed and gained the qualification.

Cost Benefit Analysis

Cost benefit analysis is a process that assesses the relation between cost of an undertaking and the value of the resulting benefits. The costs are the total costs of all the resources input, and the benefits are all the associated outcomes. When valued with money the cost benefit can be calculated to show value for money (Reason Network, 2013). The Future Leaders programme was a significant investment of money from Hertfordshire County Council, alongside the time allocated from HertsforLearning and we were interested in whether there was a clear monetary value alongside the value demonstrated in the evaluation.

This programme had three outcomes with well-established monetary values:

- Participation in adult learning
- Increased confidence
- Gaining a qualification

These were allocated proxy values from relevant sources.

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2015) has valued participation on adult learning programmes at £897 per learner. This gives a total social value of £10,764 for the 22 participants. All the leaders reported an increase in confidence. The value of high-confidence is valued by Trotter et al. (2014) as £13,065 per year. This gives a total social value of £143,715 for the 50% of course members mentioning such a gain. In addition BIS (2011) value a level 4 qualification at £3,125 of worth to individuals (Returns to Higher Education Qualifications). This suggests a social value of £37,500 for the 12 participants that took the accreditation option. The total value of these outcomes is £191,979.The total cost of the Future Leaders programme was calculated from all the design and delivery time, administrative time, travel and venue costs. These gave a total value of £21,712.50

The cost benefit calculation is present benefit value / value of the inputs. In this case there is a 6.6:1 cost benefit ratio. This means the programme had £6.60 of cost benefit for every £1 invested. If the argument for leadership development to sustain the wellbeing of organisations, leaders, staffs and children and families is not compelling enough, if the possibility of systemic change is not rich enough, then hopefully the fiscal argument will convince funders of the value in investing in such programmes.

Implications

The theory on distributed leadership suggests that distributing decision making responsibilities is not enough to achieve expressed outcomes, those that receive

that power need capacity and capability to enact it. This suggests the need for further investment in leadership development.

The findings of this paper suggest that leadership development programmes need to be inquiry-based and developing a rich praxis. Working in the realm of the conceptual or practical alone may not achieve such powerful narratives of learning.

Tailored programmes delivered by high quality staff promote learning, and the process of being out of the children's centre and amongst colleagues is also valuable. Despite the current resource constraints in the UK schooling and youth sectors, it is not a time to reduce investment on leadership development. Such investment supports learning, empowers leaders and could enhance outcomes for children and families in these settings.

Distributed system leadership in children's centres, in fact, leadership per se in children's centres warrants further attention and research.

This programme levered the agency of a group of heads of children's centres and allayed their stress within the current context of re-organisation. Enhancing the agency of leaders through an inquiry process based in praxis has the potential to increase the wellbeing of their systems of children's centres, levering efficacy and therefore improving the wellbeing of the children and families that they serve. This possibility is worthy of further investment and research.

Conclusion

The pre-test and post-test needs analysis, evaluation data and anecdotal comments have shown that the design principles were effective in promoting learning about system leadership and distributed leadership. Needs analysis enabled the design team to tailor an action research inquiry into leadership with the heads of centres, underpinned by a significant amount of practical tools. The tensions of accountability and local management and distribution of power within hierarchies were explicitly tackled rather than left unspoken. Three aspects of system leadership were addressed – leading across a structural system, leading to solve systemic problems, and leading in an adaptable ever-evolving way. The content and facilitation contributed to the success of the programme, but the peer support from colleagues was equally valuable. It would seem, from the comments of the heads of centres about their increased self-confidence and self-esteem that the programme has enhanced their wellbeing to some extent, and they certainly felt more equipped to tackle the re-organisation that they were involved in. The programme was also found to be cost beneficial for the local authority. Time, and a longitudinal evaluation, will show the extent to which the learning from this programme was embedded into practice, and the extent to which system and distributed leadership does help tackle the VUCA context will be further tested. For now, we have evidence that system leadership and distributed leadership concepts were experienced as useful, practical and empowering. In other words, the programme had enhanced the leaders' agency to be systemic in their approach. They had increased awareness of

how to enact distributed system leadership, and in increased choice of tools with which to do so. What remained was to see how they put this into action, the third part of agency (Stuart, 2014). This enhanced leadership agency in turn enhanced leaders' wellbeing, at least immediately after the programme –the follow up evaluation will establish the extent to which it endured and therefore contributed to organisational and social sustainability.

Most of the people engaged in child centre leadership had a clear sense of purpose, to help the next generation. This motivation is an important dimensions of sustainability leadership (Bendell and Little, 2015). Whether our findings relate to other situations may depend on the extent they also have a clear sense of organisational purpose. That purpose could come from an explicit commitment to enhancing sustainability performance. However, if an enterprise is engaged in sustainability as a secondary consideration, it is unclear whether that provides a sufficient motivational basis to enable lessons on system and distributed leadership to be transferred from our case study. Nevertheless, our findings may help broaden the focus of the growing field of sustainability leadership, and hopefully invite more attention to children's issues in the field of corporate sustainability.

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