



# CULTURE BEFORE *courses*

WE ALL HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENTS



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**E**ncouraging teachers at all career stages to continuously develop their practice and skills does require access to good-quality learning opportunities and resources, but it may well not be the most critical aspect supporting their development.

Expectations regarding the quality of leadership in Scotland are high; you need only glance through the National Improvement Framework, the teaching standards or HGIOS 4 to be reminded these expectations are for leadership across all levels. Time has been invested in realigning and redesigning courses which support leadership development at various levels. Being involved in much of this first-hand means I am party to many discussions with teachers on their leadership experiences. The insights of staff at all levels into their position in relation to the leadership landscape can paint a contrasting picture.

Firstly, I want to tell you about Allan who is a Principal Teacher in the midst of leading a major change initiative in his school. During a recent conversation he reported good news in that the initiative was well under way with lots of positive development and growth as a leader and that he and his immediate staff were likely to reap rewards. The bad news was he was thoroughly disheartened about

the whole enterprise, frustrated with the lack of support from his formal leaders and forming the opinion it was perhaps time to jump ship from a school he had previously been fairly content to work in. He had been delegated full responsibility for the initiative and yet something was going wrong for this developing leader.

Now let's talk about Jan who is without doubt one of the most inspirational ITE students it has been my pleasure to work with – totally immersed in her professional learning, loves to debate, question and explore her teaching role. Her last teaching placement was nearly a total disaster. The school was ready to send her back within a few days and in the end it boiled down to her “outspokenness” – something I might have called “developing as a leader”. Increased expectations in the initial education of teachers are in line with those for the profession as a whole, and I have news for you – there may be more and more Jans appearing in schools. Fortunately, Jan also had the people skills and emotional intelligence to deal with the situation and complete the placement, but I do worry about where she will end up in the future.

Developing as a leader is not expected to be a smooth path and it is often the challenges faced that bring

the most growth. Allan and Jan have been working across two different environments: one in which the individual was encouraged to question and explore the potential leadership role they could play, and in contrast one which, for unknown reasons, appeared to place less value on this. This was causing real tensions and frustrations for all involved. These experiences, although uncommon, are not particularly rare; so what seems to be going wrong?

To provide some insight let's focus on what we are referring to as “teacher leadership”. Research shows that teacher leadership in its truest sense is enacted by a teacher who works to develop and have an impact on their own professional development and the development of others working across the whole school and beyond. Research provides undeniable evidence that the key aspects which will either support or act as barriers to a teacher's development in these leadership activities are school culture, and the roles and relationships within schools. These supports and barriers are key to the development of leadership at all levels.

In light of Allan and Jan's experiences we could surmise that no matter how good the leadership preparation and how keen and willing the teacher is to take on that role, their

ambitions will wither and die if they don't have the right environment in which to grow. For every Jan and Allan there are, of course, many more positive experiences to report, but I don't want to reassure you to the point of complacency.

With the current aspirations and the challenges ahead for Scottish education, it is without a doubt that we need to capitalise on every single asset we have. Good-quality development opportunities where we encourage teachers at all levels to develop their leadership skills and capacity will support this, but it is only the development of truly collaborative and supportive cultures that will allow them to flourish. At the moment, those with the potential to lead the change do not always end up in the right environment that encourages them to grow, lest we forget the support needed for our middle and senior leaders. If you work in any aspect of education at any level then you have a role to play in leadership development.

Changing a culture can be a challenge and it takes time and effort, but it can be done. No amount of standards, courses or expectations will solely develop leaders; leaders are essential in developing leaders.

*(Names and details have been changed.)* <sup>TS</sup>

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