NQT MENTORING Project Action Research:   
Newly Qualified Teacher Leadership Development

All Saints Teaching School and Plymouth Marjon University conducted this research working with NQTs from over 14 schools, interacting with 20 teachers and potentially impacting on over 600 of their pupils.

**Grant Contract Objectives**

The Church of England’s newly formed Foundation for Educational Leadership, has initiated a priority focus upon leadership development, and provided a range of £5,000 grants that could be applied for associated with leadership development. All Saints Teaching School Alliance, in collaboration with Plymouth Marjon University, were successful in securing this funding; the focus being on examining whether a model for NQT development could enhance NQTs’ motivation and resilience to become a leader, as well as enhance their understanding and aptitude to be an outstanding leader in a school/academy. The intention of the research is to examine whether a particular model of leadership development based around coaching and mentoring of NQTs can have an impact on these factors

Our approach focused in (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1023) terms upon human capital (developing the talent of individuals), social capital (the collaborative power of a group) and decisional capital (the wisdom and expertise developed over time). As such, we focused our project on a *principled professionalism*(Goodson, 2000); a professionalism that holds cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning and teaching within a firm understanding of the moral and social purposes of education. The key is that NQTs need to reflect, and will have time to reflect, on their own values and beliefs and will be challenged to do so. There is evidence that those who are able to *position* themselves rather than be *positioned* by policy (Lea, 2013) will show greater resilience and strength within their roles. The Foundation has prioritised leadership and our project aims to develop the resilience, vision, and strategic focus required for outstanding leadership. Notably, this is not just about ‘aptitude’ but also about ‘attitude’ (Murphy, 2011) and thus the mentoring role, the challenge and requirement to reflect are pivotal.

**Aims of this project:**

* To develop an approach to early leadership for mentors to shape their discussions with NQTs.
* To develop early leadership traits in NQTs to enable them to flourish through high quality mentoring.

**Overview of Programme**

The participants were divided into two groups – a control group and a test group. Both groups received an initial questionnaire with the same questions. These questions were aimed at teasing out the NQTs’ thoughts around seeing themselves as leaders, their understanding of leadership and thoughts around their anxieties in order to assess their emotional resilience.

The test group were then part of a focus group which enabled the facilitator to delve more deeply into this groups’ understanding of leadership and how they saw themselves. Data was collected through a semi-structured group interview process moderated by a group leader. This method was selected as it enabled the researchers to explore a attitudes and decision-making that did not lend itself to other data collection methods, for example observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys, it was used to ascertain perspectives and experiences from people on early leadership.

The focus group provided access to comparisons that focus group participants made between their experiences, beliefs and aspirations as such it provided access to consensus/diversity of experiences of early leadership.

This was followed by a face to face session with Pat McGovern who introduced the NQTs to early concepts around leadership, and the qualities of leadership such as self awareness and efficacy. The mentors also participated which allowed both NQTs and mentors to share an understanding of this initial approach. Together they explored ideas about what they admired about what makes an effective leader and how all teachers are leaders. Anecdotally, it was interesting to hear the NQTs discuss their fears around being ‘told off’ and they were encouraged to see that they themselves were in control of many decisions e.g. around working late and having a workload balance. We then asked the mentors to include an element of the leadership aspect within their mentoring sessions which were held fortnightly. Mentors were encouraged to talk to their NQTs about self-management and future career roles when they felt that this was appropriate.

Finally, we completed the project by inviting the test group of NQTs to a focus group in order to compare their reflections from the beginning of the year. We also sent a questionnaire to the mentors to capture what their thoughts were around the progress of their NQTs in terms of their understanding of leadership and of themselves as leaders. It was interesting to see that many of the mentors were able to also to describe where their NQT thought they were in developing their leadership traits.

**Evaluation of the Project against the Objectives**

The qualitative categories of themes, discourse and data that emerged from the research are described below.

**Objective 1: To develop early leadership traits in NQTs to enable them to flourish through high quality mentoring**

**Articulating Concepts of Positive Leadership Traits**

As a result of analyses of the final focus group and in conjunction with anecdotal evidence we can say that the test group of NQTs were able to more frequently than at the beginning of the research period to recognise leadership qualities that they found admirable and those that were less so. Many NQTs were able to describe and recognise leadership qualities in their leaders which they considered important or even vital. They used words like resilient, positive and inspirational. Some NQTs used words and phrases around leadership and leadership traits which directly came from Pat McGovern’s presentation and in put.

**Describing and Seeing Themselves as Leaders**

In the final focus group, one NQT in particular described an assistant head within her school that exhibited leadership attributes such as being a role model, approachable and knowledgeable about teaching and learning with managerial attributes such as having authority and being highly organised. One NQT reflected that she wished to be like this leader and could see career progression into leadership for herself.

**Retention**

Out of the test group, the participants all expressed a high probability of staying within education, although two were choosing to take a gap year before continuing with their careers in education. This compares with the control group where 2 out of 10 participants actually did not complete their NQT year. Fascinatingly, one of the reasons given for remaining was that many had seen that teachers can now diversify within education and were not solely confined to a traditional model of classroom practitioner with eventual progression to head. They recognised the contribution that specialisms such as SLEs and SEND leads can make to the outcomes of pupils.

**Objective 2: To develop an approach to early leadership for mentors to shape their discussions with NQTs**

It became apparent that creating a toolkit to be used for assessment purposes was not appropriate as some mentors felt that this would place an additional ‘pressure’ on NQTs to perform, when actually the purpose of the research was to support mentors to facilitate professional discourse with their NQTs to progress through the year with the requisite skills and attributes that they will need for their future success. So the mentors focused on a more incidental approach – drawing on the initial input as necessary. This has led to a couple of mentors who have experimented with adapting a generic NQT target sheet provided by the local authority to capture thoughts around developing leadership.



The questionnaire at the start and end of the intervention enabled individuals to articulate their own beliefs and perceptions of themselves as teachers entering their careers and to consider their aspirations using qualitative data. In addition descriptive statistics were used to highlight particular elements and to show complimentary relationship between qualitative and quantitative data, one clarifying the other throughout the study.

At the start of the questionnaire they were asked if they viewed themself as a leader now 82% said that they did, exploring the characteristics of a good leader and characteristics that the NQTs held themselves as a leader there were some interesting observations that suggested that the trainee felt that at this stage they already held the qualities of a good leader, but notably some characteristics that they did not feel they possess but considered important qualities of a good leader. Figure 1 identifies three elements of leadership qualities, the first column contains qualities that NQTs felt outstanding leaders had that they believed they already possessed, the second qualities that they felt outstanding leaders had that they did not and the third qualities of leadership they possessed that they did not consider in describing qualities of outstanding leaders.

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| **Figure 1 Qualities of leadership** | | |
| **Shared qualities NQTs and outstanding leaders** | **Qualities unique to outstanding leaders** | **Qualities unique to NQTs** |
| Approachable Calm Confident Determined  Encouraging Good communicator Good listener Inspiring  Motivated to succeed Nurturing Passionate Personable Positive attitude Proactive Supportive of others Trustworthy Understanding Welcoming | Ambitious Clear thinking Consistent, yet flexible Consistently modeling behaviours Drive for improvement - no ceilings Empowering Genuine interest in you - not just as an employee but as a person Leading by example Manage a team of people effectively towards a common goal Open minded | Action based approach Enjoy a challenge Reflecting on my own practice Resilient  Talk in real terms |

In contrast, by the end of the intervention when re-questioned all remaining NQTs on the programme claimed that they were leaders and started describing themselves more in the terms of qualities they saw as qualities unique to outstanding leaders such as ambitious, driven and using language that looked more at the impact of their leadership rather than just personal qualities.

*‘I am only just starting my journey as a leader and I believe I have a long way to go/develop until I am an outstanding leader. I am however, very hard working, ambitious and driven. I passionate about making a difference to children's lives and believe that I can work well with my team to ensure that we provide a quality education for all*.’

The focus groups provided a group dynamics that brought out aspects of the leadership discussion showing multiple understandings and meanings which supported information from the questionnaire. Interestingly, when asked about key attributes of an outstanding leader, their explanations supported the ideas in the Figure 1; suggesting that a leader should focus on modeling expectations, leading by example, or being there for support and guidance ‘*A leader works with and for a team*’ or ‘*a leader practices what they preach*’. One aspect not addressed was the notion of being strategic role of a leader which might explain some of the issues identified when looking at career ambition.

When considering career ambitions in the questionnaire most NQTs responded that they had ambitions to remain in teaching and progress into different roles predominantly their reason for this were that they were passionate about working with children and developing them as individuals and their learning and being a positive influence on children's futures. This exemplified by one NQTs views ‘*I can see many opportunities within education and will always feel passionate about educating and supporting tomorrow's generation*.’

The focus group elicited a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context, the benefit of this was to promote interaction that enabled participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences. When the same question around career ambitions was discussed in the focus group the teachers engaged in a lively and passionate discussion and they had the opportunity to voice concerns as well as reinforce opinions evident from the questionnaire. They reinforced the passion for working with children, the reward they get from the work and interaction with children and young people and being reflective continuing to learn. There were elements that became common concerns specifically the pressure, workload and work conditions of teachers, ‘*the role of a teacher being physically and mentally exhausting*’; in addition the current and future direction of education policy and how that impact on practice were also concerns aired. They showed concerns of the direction of education reform and the rapidity of change, in addition to the people promoting change ‘*they have* *very little experience of education being in charge of education is worrying’.* They also voiced concerns about the length of a career in teaching pension age having gone up, ‘*I cannot see myself working in this role at 75’*.

*‘Before I did think that I would teach until I retire, now I do not know how long I will be a teacher – I just want to be really good at what I do now’*

A number saw opportunities for promotion or rejuvenation through other roles in education, picking up other roles in education, areas that interest them, experiencing educational systems in other countries or compare strategies, approaches and ideas or engaging more in research activities.

‘*I don’t think the destination is that important, it is more about the journey’*

Supporting their ideas from the focus group and their concerns about the longevity of a teaching a career and what they want to get out of their career, the researchers used subjective well-being and autonomy questions developed from Burchardt et al. (2012) and Weinstein et al. (2012). Students respond to the numbered statements below, on a seven point Likert scale with one intervening point description. Aspects that came out most strongly as being important in their career and them feeling positive about their career support the concerns that they voice about the future of education and their control of over this, these can be seen in Figure 2.

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| **Figure 2: Subjective well-being and autonomy statements that NQTS Strongly agree with** | |
| I want my future role to feel meaningful and thought-provoking. | 64% |
| I wanted to use and develop a range of approaches and techniques for my future development. | 64% |
| I want to feel I am free to decide for myself how to develop my career. | 73% |
| I want to feel that my career pathway is full of opportunities. | 82% |

This further supported by questions around what motivates them as teachers, with common themes being working closely with people with same believe system, enabling children to achieve, be the best they can in their role and impacting not just on the children they work with but their families and future employees.

*‘Undertaking a good job and helping to improve the life chances for every child I have contact with is my desired motivation. While I enjoy working on a project on my own, I'm particularly motivated by the buzz of working in a team. It's very rewarding working closely with others who share the same common goal.’*

**Our Reflections and Learning from the Project**

**Longer term impact on CPD for trainees and mentors**

What we were able to see through the impact was that even a modest initial input coupled with mentoring that kept the conversation going enabled some NQTs to exhibit attributes that could point to increased resilience and self awareness. They were able to describe strategies that they were now employing to help them to develop a work life balance and we could see that the language employed pointed to an awareness that they themselves were responsible for managing the balance and to be kind to themselves.

We have recognised the benefits of introducing concepts of early leadership as a direct stand-alone input and have decided to incorporate that into our provision for NQTs as a part of their professional development package. Other NQTs from outside our own partnership will also be able to access that as we have designed sessions to be included in the course ‘Journey to Outstanding’ which is a series of workshops aimed at developing pedagogical practice and understanding for NQTs and is free to all NQTs across Torbay.

To continue to develop the current crop of NQTs to continue on their leadership journey, we have also given them access to a course called ‘Leap into Leadership’ which is facilitated by a Head. Each participant who applies to do the course, will work alongside another mentor and will deepen their understanding of leadership further, for example by exploring different styles of leadership or how to manage a difficult conversation.

As a direct result of this research, our Multi Academy Trust partnership has advertised and recruited a senior mentor. This role is designed to share best practice and work alongside other mentors to develop their practice. We see this as an early leadership development for the mentor as well. Being able to develop another teacher is a stepping stone to being an effective leader of teaching and learning for a larger team.

Finally, as an ITT provider through our teaching school, All Saints Teaching School Alliance, we will incorporate this approach for our trainees. They will also receive an input on early leadership traits and characteristics to help them develop resilience and emotional awareness, while mentors will receive additional training to increase their capacity to provide effective mentoring that not only helps our trainees to meet the Teaching Professional Standards but develop wider attributes that increase the ability of trainees (and NQTs) to develop coping/managing strategies and remain positive.

**Personal Reflections by the Researchers**

* Being part of this project was powerful for all concerned and has led to substantial changes in the provision for professional development directly as a result of the data gathered from the focus groups and the discourse revealed.
* This research has empowered NQTs to reflect upon their experience from qualifying to completing their NQT period, it has been a pleasure to be part of their honest, detailed and frank discussions.
* The data collected has been extremely rich and has opened up opportunities for further research into recruitment retention and development of the teaching workforce.
* One NQT said at the end of the focused group; *‘this has been really fascinating’.*