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The promise of leadership: Policy, new teachers and leadership ambition in primary multi-academy trusts

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This paper reports on selected findings taken from a research study that explored the professional identities of early career teachers (ECTs; defined as having up to five years' teaching experience for the purpose of this study) working in primary schools in England that were situated within a **multi-academy trust** (**MAT**). The research study explored how teachers 'positioned' their professional identities in response to policy discourse (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). Gaining a better understanding of how new teachers working in primary academies related to leadership discourse was a particular focus of the study, as the expansion of the MAT model post-2010 had been positioned by policymakers as facilitating leadership opportunities for entrants to the teaching profession (**DfE** , 2016).

Methodology

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, I analysed 439 policy documents broadly identified as reflecting education policy, including **Ofsted** reports, political speeches, white papers and the Get into Teaching website. The second phase of the study involved in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with 12 ECTs and six senior leaders across four primary schools within two MATs, to determine the effects of policy on ECT identity and behaviour. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach was taken to analysis within both phases of research (Fairclough, 1992). CDA is used by researchers to illuminate the "common sense" assumptions or ideologies implicit in the conventions beneath people's conscious awareness that legitimizes

existing power relations' (Zhang Waring, 2018, p. 186). Although CDA is a **qualitative research** methodology, it differs from many qualitative approaches to analysis in that linguistic patterns, rather than themes, are emphasised. Rather than searching for a hidden 'truth', researchers who take a CDA approach understand that language is strategically deployed to construct and maintain particular social structures and identities. The aim of CDA is to reveal these common-sense assumptions, in order that they can be interrogated and critiqued, rather than simply accepted as the truth. Researchers who use CDA do not hold that individuals have innate or essential characteristics, such as 'ambition'. Instead, they explore the language that surrounds individuals within society, in order to identify why individuals position themselves as such.

Education policy and early career teacher leadership

Policy documents produced between 2010 and 2018 idealised ECT leadership. The effect of such discourse was to normalise rapid career progression and to associate a 'talent' for teaching with a quick ascent to leadership.

In 2017, the government's recruitment portal Get into Teaching included 30 'real-life experiences' of 10 trainee teachers and 20 teachers in England, intended to encourage interest in the profession. Eleven of these case studies profiled teachers who had been quickly promoted to a leadership role, normalising rapid career progression. The 2016 white paper 'Educational excellence everywhere' had a specific focus on leadership, promising wider opportunities for high-quality teachers to gain leadership qualifications, particularly within MATs.

Rapid progression to leadership was not only normalised within policy texts but praised. The veneration of school leaders was notable in speeches delivered by ministers working within the **Department for Education**, who repeatedly praised young teachers who had rapidly risen to leadership roles. For example, Max Haimendorf, the Principal of ARK King Solomon Academy, was described by Nick Gibb as a 'brave and free-thinking school leader' (Gibb, 2016). Ofsted reports of primary academies from this period also equated teacher effectiveness with rapid progression to leadership posts. In one report, the executive principal of an academy was praised for being 'adept at identifying talent and allowing staff to flourish', resulting in 'committed leaders who are thirsty for career development' (Ofsted, 2016, p. 3). In another, Ofsted reported that '[m]iddle leaders have been identified by the academy and federation for their talent as teachers' (Ofsted, 2015, p. 4). Such language constructed a causal link between innate talent or strength as a classroom teacher and progression to leadership roles.

New teachers entering teaching during this period were therefore exposed to policy discourses that promised rapid career development to new teachers, and which also associated leadership with positive characteristics such as talent and commitment.

Early career teachers' responses to policy

Interviews with early career teachers who participated in this project indicated that new teachers positioned themselves as potential leaders. For some teachers who participated in the study, this positioning was explicit. Simon (note: as with all names in this article, this is a pseudonym in order to preserve the anonymity of research participants), an NQT, described himself as a 'young teacher' who was 'wanting to progress as soon as possible', explaining how, in his school, 'experts of four or five years, some of them are now deputy and assistant heads'. This may reflect increased progression opportunities available within MATs. However, although Simon was keen to move up within his school, he professed a dislike for other schools within the trust, indicating that opportunities for ECTs to progress within MATs may not be as attractive as policymakers suggest. Logan and Abigail, both of whom were career changers, also explicitly self-positioned as future leaders. Logan described himself as 'biding my time in the classroom - I don't see myself in the classroom forever'. Similarly, Abigail stated that she didn't want to be 'you know, just a class teacher forever'. Simon, Logan and Abigail therefore discursively distanced themselves from the classroom teacher role, instead identifying as future leaders.

Even ECTs who did not profess a desire to move into senior leadership worked to position themselves as leaders. Isabella stated that she had no ambitions to become a headteacher, describing the role as 'stressful'. However, despite this, Isabella worked to position herself as a potential leader, saying, 'even though everyone, like, that's all I hear, "I could see you being the head. Definitely."' Isabella was therefore determined to position herself as a potential leader despite having no aspirations to headship.

Another research interview highlighted the disappointment that ECTs felt when their career ambitions were not recognised. Jemima, a participant who was in her fifth year of teaching, was disappointed when she was not spontaneously offered a middle leader role that had become vacant in her setting, and instead had been required to go and ask her headteacher for the job (which she was offered, as there appeared to be no formal recruitment process). Jemima's story highlighted the expectations that ECTs have regarding rapid career progression, and how their professional identities can be damaged if these expectations are not met.

Senior leaders' responses to policy

Policy talk about rapid career progression not only positioned early career teachers as potential leaders, but also positioned senior leaders as talent spotters and enablers, whose role was to identify which teachers were worthy of progression and to support them in this endeavour. Such identities were evident within the present research. Natalie said that, as a school leader, one of her 'favourite things is spotting talent [in teachers] [...] at an early stage'. In a similar fashion, Mason spoke about how he wished to promote a particular NQT in recognition of her classroom capability. Natalie and Mason both unproblematically aligned with policy expectations that school leaders would facilitate ECT leadership.

However, other senior leaders resisted such positionings. Charlotte and Margaret, who had significantly more experience than Mason and Natalie, were critical of rapid career progression for ECTs. Charlotte said 'I think it's scary, rapid rise to leadership [...] I think you need to have experienced lots of things. [...] I think early on in your career you're often just working out how to be a good class teacher.' In a similar fashion, Margaret also argued that significant experience was necessary for successful leadership, saying, 'I always worry that people do need to do their time and they need to craft their craft because if you go up too quickly you lose something.' Rather than being positioned as talent spotters of new entrants to teaching, Charlotte and Margaret instead emphasised the importance of promoting those who had experience.

Charlotte also spoke about the structural problems raised when many teachers expect to progress to leadership, explaining her high turnover of staff by arguing that 'sometimes you can only have so many deputy heads'. Becoming part of a MAT had not resolved Charlotte's retention problems, as teachers still moved out of her school and out of the wider MAT when they gained leadership opportunities elsewhere. Indeed, at the time of her interview, Charlotte was losing a high-performing assistant head, who had been able to secure a position as a deputy head elsewhere.

Reconciling policy and practice

The present research project revealed some of the expectations of ECTs and senior leaders regarding leadership progression, and the relationship of these expectations to policy texts. The study was small, and as such it would be difficult to generalise from the findings presented here. However, the study raises some interesting issues, which are worthy of reflection.

This study suggests that ECTs desire to be recognised as potential leaders by school management. The tendency of policy texts to entwine talent as a classroom teacher with rapid progression to leadership goes some way to explaining this attachment. ECTs identify as potential leaders not only because they desire leadership responsibilities, but also because they desire to be recognised as competent and capable classroom practitioners, at a time in their career when they are primarily focused on building self-efficacy as a classroom teacher (Huberman, 1993; Day et al., 2007). Indeed, very few teachers are motivated to join the profession because they want to become leaders; the majority of entrants are driven by a desire to make a difference to children (Perryman and Calvert, 2020). However, once they become teachers, it appears from this study that ECTs may feel a pressure to identify as potential leaders in order to present a socially acceptable professional identity. Further research would need to be undertaken to better understand the extent of this issue.

Supportive and frank meta-discursive conversations in academy contexts could help senior leaders to manage the expectations of ECTs regarding leadership progression. ECTs should be encouraged to discuss the structural issues within teaching that prevent the type of staged progression that is evident in other professions (most obviously medicine), and to explore avenues for professional development beyond formal leadership roles. The comparatively flexible nature of progression within the teaching profession provides opportunities for school leaders to exercise a high level of subjective power over their human resources, particularly within academies (Courtney and Gunter, 2015; Keddie, 2019). The talent spotting that occurs in academies may reward compliance rather than excellence, with practical implications for both the staff who work in academies and the children who are taught by them. School leaders should reflect on their recruitment processes for leadership roles, ensuring that these processes are fair, transparent and rigorous, and do not rely on favouritism. Such processes would be more likely to encourage ECTs to focus on improving and developing their classroom practice than current systems, in which ECTs expect leadership opportunities but are often unaware of issues of power within their school that may negatively impact upon their chances of promotion.

Despite policy promises that MATs could offer increased progression opportunities, the present research project suggests that such promises have not come to fruition, at least within the MATs sampled in this study. ECTs like Jemima remained frustrated with leadership progression, and school leaders like Charlotte were still losing staff as a result of being limited in the leadership roles that they could offer. In order to develop the stable sense of professional identity necessary to build resilience within teaching (Johnson et al., 2016), ECTs need to be supported to separate the notions of classroom capability and leadership ambition that have become intertwined in policy discourse. One way in which senior leaders can assist with this disassociation is by building supportive relationships with ECTs that promote the development of stable, assured professional identities, firmly rooted in effective classroom practice.

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