

**What does it mean to be a Leader in a school context?**

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**Independent Research Project**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the wealth of research on educational leadership, there remains a need for deeper exploration into what it truly means to be a leader in a school context.

Existing literature has primarily focused on leadership effectiveness, traits, and behaviours, often overlooking the subjective experiences and perceptions of educational leaders themselves (Hassan et al., 2018; Lai & To, 2015). The unique challenges, complexities, and aspirations that leaders encounter within their specific educational settings are essential aspects that deserve closer investigation.

Educational leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the quality and effectiveness of educational institutions. This qualitative research project explores the multifaceted and complex nature of leadership in a school context, specifically focusing on the perspectives of educational leaders. The study seeks to gain a understanding of how leaders perceive their roles, responsibilities, and challenges, and how their perspectives influence leadership practices and decision-making processes.

The research adopts a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. A purposive sampling technique was utilised to select educational leaders from diverse school settings, ensuring a range of perspectives and experiences are represented. Data saturation will serve as a criterion for determining the sample size, with interviews conducted until no new information or themes emerge.

The study finds that the existing literature, whilst correlating well with the lived experiences of leaders, forms more of an aspirational rather than an actual description of leadership, and that the risks and barriers from the national level input are underrepresented as a factor that impacts on leadership at a school level.

The implications of this research are far-reaching. Understanding how leaders interpret their roles and responsibilities can inform the design of targeted leadership development programs, tailored to meet the unique needs of educational leaders. Furthermore, insights into contextual influences on leadership perspectives can assist policymakers and school administrators in creating supportive environments that foster effective leadership practices. By amplifying the voices of educational leaders, the research seeks to empower and strengthen the leadership capacity within school settings for the betterment of the entire educational community.

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## 1. Introduction

The role of educational leaders in school contexts is vital for fostering a conducive learning environment, shaping institutional culture, and driving positive educational outcomes (Day and Sammons 2016). Educational leadership encompasses a multifaceted set of practices and attributes that play a crucial role in guiding schools towards their goals (Sun and Leithwood 2015). As the landscape of education continues to evolve and face new challenges, understanding what it truly means to be a leader in a school context becomes increasingly significant (Myran and Sutherland 2018).

Educational leadership research has explored various dimensions of leadership, including different leadership styles (Day and Sammons 2016), behaviours, and the impact of leadership on school improvement and student achievement (Yeigh et. al. 2019). Studies have identified common themes such as transformational leadership, distributed leadership, instructional leadership, and ethical leadership as key frameworks in educational leadership literature (Leithwood et al., 2004; Harris, 2008a; Robinson et al., 2009; Woods et al., 2021). These themes have shed light on the diverse ways leaders can inspire, guide, and support their educational communities.

This research project seeks to contribute to the critical gap in the literature where the authentic voice of leaders themselves should be, by conducting an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and perspectives of educational leaders within a school context. By employing qualitative research methods, such as interviews, this study aims to capture the nuanced viewpoints, challenges, and personal understandings of leadership held by school leaders. The research delves into how educational leaders conceptualize their roles, responsibilities, and relationships

within their school communities, and how these perceptions influence their decision-making and leadership practices.

Exploring the nuanced viewpoints and lived experiences of educational leaders will provide valuable insights into how they understand and approach their roles within their specific school communities. Understanding the impact of their perceptions on leadership practices and decision-making may contribute to developing more tailored and effective approaches to educational leadership. Additionally, investigating how contextual factors interact with leadership perceptions may reveal critical factors that influence leadership effectiveness in diverse school settings.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions this study is looking at are linked to the emergent themes from the literature compared to the lived experiences. The study looks at whether the voices of leaders captured represent the same view of leadership as the existing literature, and whether there are emergent themes from interviews that develop a different understanding of what leadership means in an educational setting. Do leaders' views match the leadership outcomes, themes, and perspectives in the literature? If not, how do they differ?

The questions chosen were based on previous similar research into pastoral education (Cruickshank and MacDonald 2016) and were designed to be open ended to capture the lived experiences and journey of educational leaders (questions in appendix 1).

The findings of this research project contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of leadership in a school context. By amplifying the voices of educational leaders and acknowledging their unique perspectives, this study informs the development of comprehensive and contextually sensitive leadership practices.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the continuous improvement of educational leadership, enhancing educational outcomes and creating a positive impact on the overall learning experiences of students and educators alike, as well as enhancing the knowledge contained within the existing literature.

## **2. Literature Review**

Educational leadership has been extensively studied within the existing literature, with several common themes emerging that provide valuable insights into the dynamics of educational leadership. However, despite substantial research efforts, some gaps persist and this review discusses both the common themes in the literature and identifies some gaps that necessitate further exploration.

Leadership perspectives in the UK education system have evolved over time, reflecting the changing demands and priorities in the field. Distributed leadership, transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and ethical leadership have all emerged as significant perspectives. The literature indicates that effective leadership practices can positively impact student achievement, school culture, and policy implementation. However, ongoing research is required to deepen our understanding of leadership in the education system and address the challenges that arise in its implementation. Some key aspects of the future direction for leadership studies are highlighted by the literature and can be seen in the table below.

<b>Key theme emerging from literature:</b>	<b>References:</b>
The subjective experiences and perceptions of educational leaders within a school context significantly influence their leadership practices, decision-making, and overall effectiveness in fostering a conducive learning environment and driving positive educational outcomes. This suggests that leadership, and the perception of leadership play a vital role in the development of educational settings. Understanding leaders' perspectives on their role is therefore a key factor in determining the effectiveness of leadership in each setting.	Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008.; Gronn, 2002.; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2019.; Sergiovani 2005; Gumus 2014; and Fullan 2014

<p>One of the recurring themes in educational leadership literature is transformational leadership. This leadership style emphasises visionary and inspirational leadership that motivates followers to achieve higher levels of performance and personal growth; Studies have shown that transformational leaders positively impact school culture, teacher motivation, and student achievement.</p>	<p>Bass &amp; Riggio, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2008</p>
<p>Distributed leadership is another prominent theme in educational leadership research. This approach recognises that leadership is not confined to a single individual but rather distributed among multiple individuals within an educational organisation. Research suggests that distributed leadership can lead to increased teacher collaboration, improved decision-making, and better school performance.</p>	<p>Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2008b</p>
<p>Instructional leadership centres on the idea that effective school leaders play a vital role in shaping teaching and learning practices. This emphasises the significance of leaders in setting high academic standards, providing instructional support to teachers, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Educational leadership research has extensively explored the impact of instructional leadership on student achievement and school performance.</p>	<p>Hallinger &amp; Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2009</p>
<p>Leadership development programs are essential for cultivating effective leaders in the education system. Research emphasises the need for high-quality and targeted leadership development opportunities that address the specific challenges and demands faced by educational leaders. Investigating the impact and effectiveness of leadership development programs, including their design, content, and delivery methods, can contribute to enhancing leadership capacity and improving educational outcomes and ethical responses to leadership.</p>	<p>Chaplain, 2019a; Chaplain, 2019b; Silins et. al. 2002 and Dimmock, O'Donoghue and Gamage 2021; Dimmock et al., 2021; Kennedy, 2011b; and Woods et. al. 2021</p>
<p>External factors, such as changes in government policies and funding, have a significant impact on leadership practices in the UK education system. These external influences can shape the priorities, decision-making processes, and resource allocation within educational institutions</p>	<p>Gunter, Blackmore and Williamson 2019</p>

Despite these numerous studies exploring various aspects of educational leadership, a notable gap exists in the literature concerning how leaders in education view leadership itself. Educational leadership operates within intricate systems comprising diverse stakeholders, institutional structures, and cultural dynamics (Gunter et al., 2019; Kennedy, 2011a). Understanding how these contextual elements interact with leadership perceptions is critical for developing targeted and effective leadership approaches tailored to the specific needs of each school (Day and Sammons 2016). Existing research on educational leadership often focuses on the traits, behaviours, and effectiveness of leaders in educational settings, or categorises leadership

through models or within contexts such as institutions or national policy. However, there is a dearth of comprehensive studies that delve into how educational leaders perceive the concept of leadership itself (Hassan et. al. 2018 and Lai & To 2015). Without a thorough understanding of their perceptions, it becomes challenging to design leadership development programs tailored to the unique needs of educational leaders (Hoy & Miskel, 2018 and Brauckmann & Lankford, 2018). This potential gap hinders the improvement of leadership practices within educational institutions. The literature predominantly emphasises quantitative research methods to measure leadership effectiveness (Leithwood and Riehl 2003; Bass & Avolio 1995; Kouzes & Posner 2003; Carless et. al. 2000; Walumbwa et. al. 2008; Liden et. al. 2008; Brown et. al. 2005; Yukl 2002; Spilane et. al. 2004; and Hallinger & Murphy 1985). While these approaches provide valuable insights, they often overlook the subjective experiences and perspectives of educational leaders (Gronn, 2002). The gap in the literature lies in the absence of qualitative studies that capture the nuanced viewpoints and lived experiences of leaders in education, potentially hindering the identification of underlying challenges and opportunities for improvement, this is further highlighted by the work of Reeves et. al. (2003), and is partially addressed by Roland (1990).

The literature on educational leadership frequently disregards the influence of contextual factors on leaders' perspectives, and cultural factors within the context of the educational setting (Kennedy, 2011b). Leadership in education operates within complex systems, encompassing diverse cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and institutional structures. Understanding how educational leaders perceive leadership in different contexts is crucial to develop effective leadership strategies (Gunter, 2016; Reeves et. al. 2003; Brauckmann & Lankford, 2018 and Ylimaki & Jacobson,

2019). The scarcity of studies exploring this relationship represents a significant gap in the existing literature.

This literature review highlights the evident gap in the educational leadership literature regarding how leaders in education view leadership. The lack of comprehensive studies exploring leaders' perceptions, limited attention to subjective experiences, overlooking contextual factors, and the absence of cross-cultural perspectives collectively contribute to this gap. Addressing this research gap will not only enhance our understanding of educational leadership but also inform the development of effective leadership practices to improve educational outcomes for students and institutions alike.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of educational leaders in a school context. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it enables the capturing of leaders' perspectives directly, a key element of the research and a key factor discussed in the effectiveness of leadership in school settings. Qualitative research also supports the development of the research field as most of the previous research has been quantitative (Leithwood and Riehl 2003). Qualitative research allows the authentic leadership voices in educational settings to be captured effectively (Sofaer 1999) and allows emergent themes to be explored in context rather than purely analysed (Rowley 2012).

*“If we focus research only on what we already know how to quantify, indeed only on that which can ultimately be reliably quantified, we risk ignoring factors that are more significant in explaining important realities and relationships.”* (Sofaer 1999)

The semi-structured interview method provides flexibility for participants to express their views while allowing the researcher to maintain focus on key research themes (Smith, 2015), and allowing for the researcher to explore set themes with prompts (Rowley 2012). Through in-depth interviews, this study aims to gain rich and nuanced insights into the multifaceted nature of educational leadership.

The sample consists of educational leaders from diverse school settings, including primary and secondary schools, urban and rural locations, and public and private institutions. Participants will be purposively selected to ensure a diverse representation of leadership experiences (Patton, 2015). The sample size was determined based on data saturation, where no new information or themes emerge from subsequent interviews (Guest et al., 2006) the interviews will cease, however this will be qualified by the timescale of the IRP which is a significant limiting factor. Data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the selected educational leaders. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions, allowing for open-ended questions to explore participants' perceptions and experiences in their own words (Gibbs, 2007). The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and field notes taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information (Smith, 2015).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview transcripts. This approach involves identifying patterns, themes, and categories within the data to address the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the interviews were coded, and codes grouped into preliminary themes. These themes were refined through constant comparison and iteration to establish a coherent and comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences (Guest et al., 2012). The

theme was considered to be a high-level emergent theme if it was mentioned by all participants and had < or = to 5 mentions throughout the interview.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed several strategies. Firstly, member checking will be conducted, where participants will have the opportunity to review and verify the accuracy of their interview data (Creswell, 2014). Finally, an audit trail will be maintained, documenting the decision-making process throughout the research (Smith, 2015). Reflexivity is a critical aspect of qualitative research that involves acknowledging and addressing the researcher's own influence on the research process and findings. It helps enhance the research's credibility and transparency by making the researcher's subjectivity explicit. To maintain reflexivity, the researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the research project, documenting personal reflections, biases, and preconceptions that may have influenced various stages of the study. By being transparent about their own subjectivity, the researcher can provide readers with a clearer understanding of how their perspectives may have shaped the research process and findings (Finlay, 2002; and Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

This research will adhere to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences (Bryman, 2016). Given that the researcher is involved in the education sector in the region, there was an implication for research participants being well known to the researcher. For this reason, the research followed guidance on the ethics of researching friends (Brewis 2014) and of ethical considerations within qualitative research (Orb et. al. 2001). The research has received ethical approval from the ELMPS Ethics Board of York University.

#### 4. Research and Results:

There were 5 in depth interviews carried out for this study, all of which lasted several hours; although this represents a small sample size which does represent potential issues for validity of findings (Saunders and Townsend 2016), it was felt despite the small sample size that suitable levels of data saturation had been achieved (see Table 1).

**Table 1:**

Background and specialism of Leader	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Primary provision	y	y			y
Secondary provision	y		y		y
Independent Provision	y		y	y	y
Alternative Provision				y	
Rural	y	y	y		y
Urban				y	

Table 1: The breadth of participants within the study showing specialism, age range of learners and school catchment as rural or urban.

Across the interviews the coherence in themes led to there being little or no new information meeting the data saturation criteria used for the research (Guest et al., 2006). The leaders were both emergent and experienced with one having been in leadership for decades and another having only recently stepped up from middle management. Given that Guest et. al. (2006) suggest that validity is reached where the convergence of themes from interviews is reached regardless of sample size the research does represent a valid sample size and has clear thematic outcomes that can be discussed in relation to the research questions. Despite having achieved a sample breadth in line with the intended research outcomes, given further time it would have benefitted the study to further extend the sample size of interviews (Saunders and Townsend 2016).

There were three high level main emergent themes from the interviews (see Table 2) which had a high degree of data saturation. These were drawn together from a wider set of themes coded from the interviews and collated into the broad themes for discussion (see Table 2. For a more in-depth view of the emergent themes and grouping please see appendix 3).

**Table 2:**

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Positive Environment	8	6	6	5	9
Change	6	8	5	3	5
Career and Qualifications	12	6	8	6	3

Table 2: The frequency of comments for each identified high level emergent theme based on the themes recorded for each participant interview conducted, (more in-depth data is in appendix 3).

Taking these high-level emergent themes Table 3 gives the relative % to each other as well as showing where data saturation was at or below the benchmark given in the methodology.

**Table 3:**

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
<b>Section 1. Emergent theme spoken about by participant? y/n?</b>					
The need to make or lead change	y	y	y	y	y
Creating a Positive school environment	y	y	y	y	y
Value of Leadership Qualifications	y	y	y	y	y
<b>Section 2. Emergent theme throughout interview (nos of times mentioned in interview)</b>					
The need to make or lead change	8	6	6	5	9
Creating a Positive school environment	6	8	5	3	5
Value of Leadership Qualifications	12	6	8	6	3
<b>Section 3. Emergent theme % in relation to each other (section 2 with highest frequency taken as baseline across all participants and elements [in this case 12=100%])</b>					
The need to make or lead change	66.6%	50.0%	50%	41.6%	75.0%
Creating a Positive school environment	50%	66.6%	41.6%	25.0%	41.6%
Value of Leadership Qualifications	100%	50.0%	66.6%	50.0%	25.0%

Table 3: High level emergent themes and data saturation levels. Note; Where emergent theme has met baseline against methodology it is highlighted in yellow, where it has fallen below it is highlighted in orange. All other results exceed baseline as set in methodology.

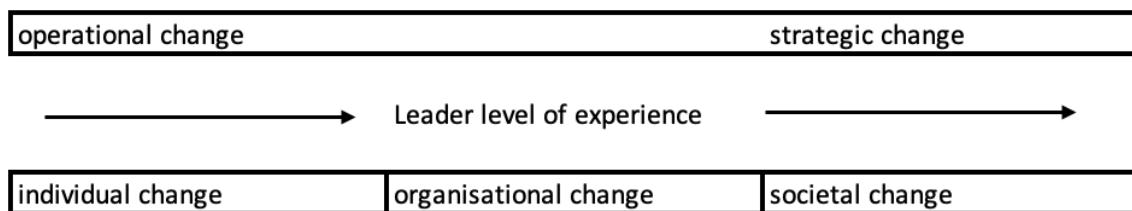
These high-level emergent themes are discussed in detail below with reference to the literature and the research questions.

## 5. Discussion

### Theme 1: The need to make or lead change.

The first high level emergent theme that came from the interviews was around the need to make or lead change. This theme can be modelled to show the development of the theme depending on the experience level of the leader (see model 1).

#### Theme: Being a change agent



Model 1: Components of the high-level emergent theme from the interviews showing the spectrum of answers on the theme in relation to Leadership experience.

More experienced leaders spoke about the need to change social injustices, other leaders spoke of the need to represent change for the organisation and the least experienced leaders spoke of needing to change or fix operational problems seen to be getting in people's way in their roles. All leaders described the need to make a change that helped people to be more effective in their roles.

As well as the need to create change, there was a clear thread throughout the interviews that related to the inability to change things; the perception of pressure from the educational system was a barrier to creative problem solving with two of the most experienced leaders expressing clearly that they felt the fear of Ofsted stopped them from developing the change they would like to in the schools they lead. It was a

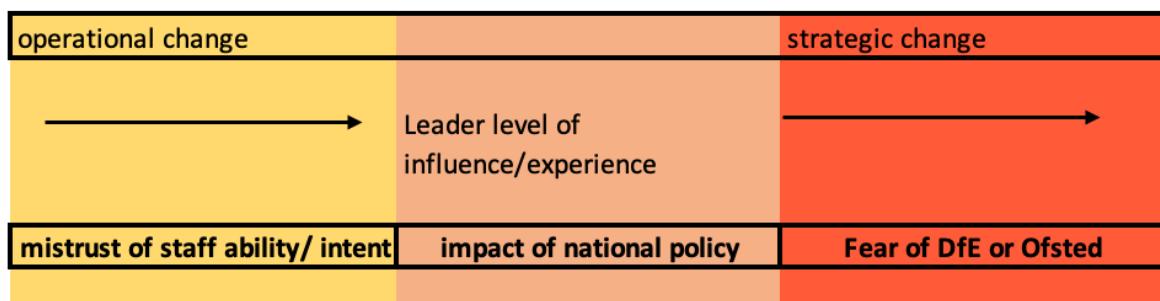
strongly held belief by 100% of the interviewees that the risks of changing too much from the status quo, for themselves and for their staff were too great, and this was a significant limiting factor on their leadership. All the participants also expressed a clear motive for entering leadership being the recipient of poor or ineffective leadership in the past. Gunter, Blackmore, and Williamson (2019) demonstrate the high degree to which prioritisation and resource allocation is shaped by the national legislative picture in education, this was a point raised by two of the more experienced leaders. It was felt that the levels of control exerted by the education system at a national level created issues that could not be overcome by school leaders. This emergent theme is largely at odds with the literature on what effective school leadership looks like, whether that is transformational (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2008), instructional (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2009) or Distributed (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2008b).

All participants also noted the fact that they saw a freedom in levels above their leadership level to make radical change and alterations that were at odds with the constraints they felt. One participant suggested that the ability for school leaders to opt out of SATs was not possible, and yet DfE had changed both A levels and GCSEs radically in a few short years (Participant 1). Another participant suggested that the level of work-related stress staff feel is at the same time both monitored by and caused by Ofsted (Participant 2).

The literature does not represent well constraints the national frameworks of DfE and Ofsted place on the leaders in schools. This pressure was spoken about as both a personal threat "*I could lose my job I get a poor result*" to organisational threats "*my whole school could be in serious trouble and people could lose their jobs*". Operating with this pressure from above has a significant impact on what leaders feel able to

do in their role. It is beyond the scope of this study to demonstrate that this pressure is impacting on leadership to its detriment, (although Au (2011) does argue this point) however it does raise the question as to whether this impact needs to be considered more to develop the school leadership research in line with the lived experiences of leaders in schools. The barriers felt by leaders are not well represented within the current literature (Boote 2006) and the development of further studies with these perspectives in mind would add significantly to future research. Model 2 shows the participant interview themes mapped out to show potential barriers to change felt by school leaders broadly placed on a spectrum of influence and experience. The data in this study does not provide enough evidence to make this case but further research in this area would be useful to better describe the leadership experience as mapped against the barriers to change in schools.

#### **Theme: Barriers to change**



Model 2: Broad themes emergent from participant interviews showing potential barriers to change mapped against leaders influence and experience.

#### **Theme 2: Creating a positive school environment**

The theme of creating appositive school environment can be viewed through both the positive and the negative motivations expressed by the participants (see model

3). These can be viewed as push pull factors that support the development of change (Leone and Tian 2009).

Positive (Pull)	→	Motivational Factors towards creating a positive school environment	←	Negative (Push)
Welfare				Previous experience of poor leadership
Empowering those being led				Personal welfare of leaders themselves
Support for learners				Pressures of the sector
Support for staff				Staff absence and turnover

Model 3: The positive and negative motivational factors that led to the development of positive school environment creation as emergent themes from participant interviews.

A catalyst for all the interviewees (see appendix 3) was the sense that they could lead an organisation better than the organisations they had been in previously. In this regard the interviews aligned with the literature on the importance of leader's subjective experiences in shaping the leadership journey (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008.; Gronn, 2002.; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2019.; Sergiovani 2005; Gumus 2014; and Fullan 2014).

This sense of being able to do better, as well as the reflective practise involved in finding these solutions to past problems was clear from all the interviews, and this personal values-based motivation to lead is also clear as a significant motivator within the literature (Clemons and Fields 2011). Whilst Gupta and Sayal (2013) found that push pull factors varied significantly by gender, this research found very little variation with the most significant push motivator (mentioned by 80% of the participants) being the previous experience of poor leadership and the most significant pull factor being welfare of staff and students (100% of participants).

These were the most significant factors found in the research regardless of levels of experience or gender of participants. Experience of poor leadership can also be seen as negative expectancy (McMahon and Jones 1993) which is understood in medical research but not so well represented in leadership research.

Leadership impact was linked to both job title and level in the hierarchy as well as to the size of the school. One leader for example who was an executive head suggested that being the head of one larger school instead of executive head of 2 smaller schools would be a bigger leadership role (participant 2). This correlates with the clear theme in all interviews that supporting staff and learners was central to the role. All the interviewees stressed the motivation of creating a space that works for learners and staff properly as key to their decisions to step into leadership roles. This perspective is seen in the research on instructional leadership in schools (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2009). It is likely, (and expressed in participant interviews although not clearly enough to be considered a theme) that this leadership perspective is a factor in the barriers to change felt by leaders (Model 2), where legislature and industry regulation do not align with this leadership value. Comments such as "Ofsted monitor staff welfare but seem unaware that they negatively impact on it" (Participant 2) are indicators that this is the felt sense of school leaders.

However, the creation of a positive school environment is clearly a high priority for leaders, it is also well documented as an expected outcome by Ofsted so the pressure and the motivation of leaders should align well on this point. It is clear from the interviews that the pastoral elements of leadership are felt to be under pressure and targets are perceived to be more important than welfare. For instance, this was backed up in the interviews with concrete examples being referenced such as the case of Ruth Perry who sadly took her own life after an Ofsted Inspection. It was

perceived, especially by the two most experienced leaders interviewed, that the welfare of staff was not adequately weighted within the expectations of the job, but as importantly that the welfare of leaders themselves was wholly lacking. It would be beneficial for future research to better understand the weighting and perceived constraints of the roles in educational leadership so that a more holistic view of the role could be developed.

### **Theme 3: Value of Leadership Qualifications**

The value of leadership qualifications as a theme can also be developed along two lines; the status and hierarchy that are associated with the level of qualification achieved, and the relevancy of the qualifications to the lived experience of the roles performed. Where participants derived value from leadership qualifications was in the doors they opened and the status within the system, not the content of the courses, one participant (participant 3) gave anecdotal evidence of a colleague on the National Professional Qualifications (NPQ) course who was applying for a masters degree “to get the letters after my name” rather than for the learning. This was a theme emergent in all the participant interviews to varying degrees with one (participant 4) stating the “there is no point for me in doing leadership qualifications, they don’t add anything to my role”.

The creation of better targeted training and development was highlighted by both the interviews and the literature (Hoy & Miskel, 2018 and Brauckmann & Lankford, 2018). However the research findings clearly show a divide regarding the leadership qualifications, whilst they provided a clear frame of reference from which leaders could demonstrate their experience and justify their position within a strongly hierarchical system, the validity of the content was frequently questioned by all

participants. This suggests that there may be a gap present in the skills development of leaders in education and that the current value of qualifications for teachers is not in the intended outcomes of qualifications. Further research in this area would benefit future leadership course design and improve the body of literature on the subject. More focus on the motivation to lead (MTL) could be beneficial to understanding the catalyst for leading (Clemons and Fields 2011, and; Chan and Drasgow 2001) and would contribute to more meaningful course content development in future.

The NPQs in teaching are evidence informed and framework based which helps standardise approaches, however they are in many cases a bottleneck as the only recognised pathway for senior leadership or headship. This was an element of concern for one participant in particular (participant 1) who described this as having the capacity “to create leadership clones”. Leaders who participated wanted to better understand things such as how to support conflict between team members effectively, how to build consensus in decision making, and how to deal with holding divergent perspectives with no easy solution (such as the tension between needing to be financially viable and provide the best education possible for learners). These more nuanced elements of leadership were not well addressed by the NPQ programmes, this is a perspective also highlighted by the work of Allen and Sims (2018).

The legislative and regulatory constraints within the sector are powerful barriers to the performance of educational leadership (Allen and Sims 2018) in the way it is both understood by leaders themselves and how it is represented in the literature (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999 and; Stromquist & Monkman 2000). The elements emergent from the participant interviews contribute to themes of high quality and

targeted leadership development in education being a critical future development as suggested by Chaplain, 2019a; Chaplain, 2019b; Silins et. al. 2002 and Dimmock, O'Donoghue and Gamage 2021; Dimmock et al., 2021; Kennedy, 2011b; and Woods et. al. 2021.

However, in direct contrast to the view on the usefulness of the qualifications that they had achieved in leadership the participants placed a lot of emphasis on the job titles they achieved; comments such as "I was assistant head not deputy head" (participant 2), or "I was head of media but not head of English" (participant 1) suggest a strongly embedded hierarchical system of leadership in education that defines leadership for and within educational leaders. This hierarchy is at odds with the interviewees rationale for becoming leaders, and with their perspective on what leadership in education should be as described in previous discussion of the themes. It is also at odds with the benefits of both the literature on the power of subjective experience in leadership development (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008) and the research on distributed leadership in education (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2008b). It is clear that leaders who participated gained value from the leadership courses they undertook in most cases (80% of participants), however it is also clear that the value derived was not necessarily that envisioned by the course developers. Further research into the content and value of leadership qualifications would align this better with the lived experience of leaders in schools.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research set out to address a gap in the literature that represented the authentic lived experiences of leaders in education. It asked the question whether the research to date represented leadership in education effectively, and whether the courses and

the qualifications leaders were doing were supporting what they understood leadership to be. The results have been both a validation of the research and a rebalancing of the priorities the research should be placing on the various elements that support and constrain leaders in education.

Ultimately understanding from participants the lived experience of leaders in education has gone some way to verify the leadership perspectives from the literature, however, the interviews have highlighted that the leadership represented in the literature, whilst clearly correlating with what leadership can mean to those interviewed, remains somewhat aspirational given the weight felt from the regulatory and national pressures, and the gap between values and perspectives of leaders and the qualification content and regulation within the industry. It is likely this gap will be present in all industries and this tension is necessary to some degree in order to create better standards of education, however the participants experiences represent a significant values gap that is a divide large enough to create issues across the industry, the current media discussions of Ofsted in the light of the Ruth Perry case are a good example of how these tensions are being felt in education on a wider scale.

The risks imposed on education leaders through legislation and regulation are underrepresented in the literature, however the leadership styles and perspectives such as human-centred, transformational, and instructional leadership do explain well the aspirations of educational leaders. The end goals appear to be well constructed, however the journey towards these aspirations is less clear. There exists in the literature a gap where an explanation of how to move towards these aspirations should be. The felt sense of leaders is not well understood or represented at present. Further research on the development of change

management specifically directed towards the welfare and pastoral aspects of education would be beneficial additions to the literature in future.

The results on the leadership courses are also inconclusive, and there is a clear divide in leaders' perspective between the value of the courses in terms of content, which is largely considered to be problematic, and the value of having achieved the courses in terms of status in the hierarchy. The courses for educational leaders were largely considered to be at odds with what leaders saw their primary roles as being. The use of qualitative interviews to capture the lived experiences of teachers has played a beneficial role in better contextualising the research within the existing literature and has provided some avenues for further study. Ultimately, the research has supported the better understanding of educational leadership, the priorities they place on their roles and the barriers they face in their attempts to lead their schools.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Research Questions**

#### **Research questions for the IRP interviews**

1. Talk me through your leadership journey
2. What does being a leader mean to you?
3. How well is your leadership role understood and/or reflected in what is written about leadership?

## **Appendix 2:**

### **Independent Research Project; Invitation to Participate**

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by Shevek Pring from York University. The purpose of this study is to explore leadership perspectives in educational settings. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a semi structured interview process to explore the theme of leadership in education. The interviews will be about 1 hour long and will be exploring your understanding of leadership and your personal leadership journey. The aim is to capture the authentic leadership voice of those in leadership positions in education, this is something that is not well documented in the current literature and would add a valuable first-hand perspective on what it means to be a leader in education. The aim is to draw from the interviews the emergent themes and compare and contrast these to the established leadership elements in the literature. There will be 1 interview for each participant and potentially 1 more follow up interview meaning a maximum of 2 hours of your time to participate. The data collected will be used solely for research purposes and will be kept confidential, all transcripts will be provided to you as part of a fact checking exercise to ensure you are comfortable with the data collected.

Your participation in this study will be treated with strict confidentiality. All data collected will be anonymized, and no personal identifiers will be used in any reports or publications resulting from this research. Only the research team will have access to the data, and it will be securely stored on the University of York google drive and password protected. Interviews conducted may be recorded to support with transcription, you will be asked for your permission prior to this happening and if you would rather recording did not take place that is absolutely fine.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and there will be no consequences if you choose not to participate or decide to withdraw at any time during the study. Your decision to participate or decline participation will not affect your current or future relationship with York University or The Outdoors Group Ltd. This research is being undertaken within the University of York Code of Practice and Principles for Good Ethical Governance, covering elements such as collection, storage and disposal of Data

**Independent Research Project;  
Consent Form for Interviewees**

This form is for you to give consent to be interviewed as part of this study. Please read and answer each question and do not hesitate to ask for more information if you require it.

I have read and understood the information provided above in the invitation to participate

Yes  No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study and are satisfied you have had all the information you need?

Yes  No

Are you aware that the data you provide will form part of a masters research project and be submitted to the University of York?

Yes  No

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Yes  No

Do you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study on leadership perspectives?

Yes  No

If yes, do you agree to your interview being recorded? (*you may take part in the study without consenting to this*)

Yes  No

Participants Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participants Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 3:

Emergent Themes from Interview				
Grouping:		Change	Positive Environment	Career & Qualifications
Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
solution focus	saw things that needed to be fixed	argue me to yes	education system doesn't support learners well	imposter syndrome
fixing things seen to be wrong	all about the staff	supporting staff is main part of role	welfare and trauma of students not recognised	recognition is important
all about the students/ staff	qualifications allowed for career progression	struggle to bring people with you	staff welfare not recognised	supporting staff is the most important part of the role
fixing things for others	MPQ content not that valuable	change management is key but difficult	training and courses not helpful to role	leadership programmes aren't that useful as they aren't specific enough
will to fix things when others wont/ cant	risk in training is that people will leave	fixing problems that others don't see	coaching and mentoring much more important to development as a leader	solving problems for people is a key motivation
reflective practise is crucial	status of leader is linked to school size/ no. of schools	operational challenges take up a lot of time that stops strategic practise	working out what problems to solve is key	helping the learners when they struggle is rewarding
leaders welfare not considered at all	leaders don't get supported in their role well	MPQ gives relevant research opportunities but doesn't fit the reality of the job well	supporting staff in their work is the job of leadership	training and CPD is crucial to leading people well
being able to hold problems with no solution	leaders in school don't have much freedom due to DfE/ Ofsted	staff CPD and training is key	creating a culture people want to be a part of	fear of Ofsted stops people innovating
MPQ's are a bottleneck	Imposter syndrome	recognising leaders impact on staff is important	doing something that makes a difference	can't always support learners as well as you would like due to constraints from DfE/ Ofsted

explaining the why is key	MPQ limits leaders from doing other courses	who do I need to be in this situation?	recognition for what you do is important	pastoral and behaviour support are not recognised properly but are crucial to the role
MPQ course content very prescriptive	fear of Ofsted stops leaders acting	modelling best practise is key	learning from your mistakes is important	reflective practise is important as a leader
pressures from above school leadership have significant limiting impact	Ofsted judge on staff welfare but also impact on it in the way they inspect	important to know what you are aiming for in order to measure effectiveness	AP vital as it offers something different for learners who aren't coping	it's not easy to be vulnerable as a leader
leadership courses teach too much and don't allow for personal professional growth	reflective practise is key	hard to let go of control unless you have trust in staff	being strategic is hard to maintain but vital to change and development	staff need to know they can trust you and you need to trust them
can you teach leadership at all?	being vulnerable is important	imposter syndrome	would not do further quals such as MPQ or Masters as doesn't add any value to role	being honest with people is important to the role
vulnerability as a leader is necessary but not understood	letting people see you make mistakes is valuable	recognition is important		showing people you care is really important
fear of Ofsted is a significant limiting factor	staff welfare is key as this impacts on learners too	career choices are about impact not about status		leadership is transferrable as a skill between roles
inability to challenge the status quo	stepping up when others don't/ won't	making a difference in your work is vital		qualifications should be specific to target skills shortage
the risks are too high to being innovative	career progression choices are based on having an impact not on status	MPQ isn't teaching a lot of new skills		
DfE/Ofsted do things a lot that they don't want school leaders to do	developing the next generation of leaders is a crucial legacy	Experience in post is more valuable than qualifications		
school leaders need to be pragmatic and this limits innovation	personal ambition changes with age and experience			
to make a difference				
high expectations				

being a leader changes with experience and time				
leadership as control				
happiness should be a metric of success				
imposter syndrome				