Collaborations: providing emotional support to senior leaders

Carla Solvason Department for Children and Families, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK
Alison Kington School of Education, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

Abstract – The purpose of this paper, based upon research carried out between a university and a Local Authority (LA) in the Midlands, UK, is to explore the phenomenon of head teachers working collaboratively across clusters of primary schools, or inter-collaboration.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative case study approach was taken and the data collection methods co-constructed with the participants.

Findings – The head teachers were eager to share what they perceived as an overwhelmingly positive collaborative experience. The findings in this paper illustrate perhaps the most significant discovery, i.e. the role that the collaborative clusters can play in offering emotional support to those head teachers involved.

Research limitations/implications – This research was based within a specific LA, so the findings reflect the values manifested there. Quite different results may have been discovered in alternative contexts.

Originality/value – The personal, social and emotional needs of leaders are often overlooked in research whilst focussing upon the support that they offer to others. This paper explores the solitary role that headship can be and the function that supportive, collaborative clusters can provide in filling that emotional void.

Keywords Leadership, Trust, Collaboration, Professional development, Emotion, Support

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There has been a shift within the UK school system over recent years towards schools working together in both formal and informal arrangements. In 2010, the Coalition Government informed us that "[s]chools working together leads to better results" (Department for Education, 2010). Evidence suggests that voluntary, self-directed school collaborations can create conditions conducive to enhancing teacher development, pedagogy, leadership and governance innovation (Baker, 2015).

These collaborations have also been proven to have a subsequent impact on pupil attainment and the enrichment of a broader educational experience (Armstrong, 2015). It was upon this premise that the Midlands Local Authority (LA) involved in this research decided that each one of its maintained primary schools (children 4–11 years) would lead an improvement network by early 2016. It used available funding to establish a leadership development programme through an existing university partnership.

The LA officers were striving for four key outcomes from their university partnership:
(1) moving leaders from an old style, LA reliance model, to a self-sustaining, self-regulating system;
(2) enabling networks (collaborations) to engage with external agencies: not being LA dependent and setting the agenda for themselves;
(3) to be outward facing: connecting with next practice whilst also celebrating their own work and learning outcomes with the wider city-wide audience; and
(4) to develop the research base of practice: producing evidence of impact compared with external benchmarks of proven standing.

In partnership with the university, the leadership development programme was implemented in the LA from 2015. There was no criterion for selection, and all maintained schools were invited to join the programme. In discussion with the head teachers, the first cohort of 30 schools was sorted into six clusters. Each cluster was made up of a geographical group of schools, with some more "successful" than others as measured by the UK inspection criteria. One cluster comprised of special schools and had a wider geographical spread. Due to the characteristic of self-selection, the clusters varied in number, between two and seven schools.

The clusters met monthly for the first school term of the programme, then half-termly for the remainder of the academic year. The meetings were coordinated by two university appointed facilitators, selected for proven expertise in leading in the primary years. A number of them were retired head teachers. These facilitators travelled from different counties and had no previous connection with the schools; they worked very closely together as a team. Prior to the cluster meetings, a piece of theoretical reading was set by the facilitator in order to stimulate discussion. The facilitators steered the meetings and took minutes.

The notion of this programme was, in many ways, contrary to the context of market values and rivalry that has developed in the UK educational system over the past three decades. Berkovich and Eyal (2015, p.131) discuss the "unstable and competitive environment" within which education professionals currently work. The educational landscape in the UK is one where "students compete for results, schools compete for students and parents compete for schools" (Coleman, 2011, p.297), albeit within the Department for Education's (2016) espoused concept of partnership working. Coldron et al. (2014, p. 391) discuss how it has become the norm for head teachers to work in "a chaotic competitive environment full of threats"; therefore, the aim of this leadership development programme was to enable a support network and thinking space for professional growth.

In addition to the challenging educational context that head teachers currently operate within, Laar (2014, p. 5) argues that "the nature and quality of leadership is now generally accepted as the critical factor affecting the quality and effectiveness of schools". This is a considerable burden for leaders to carry. This research suggests that self-selected collaborations, supported and facilitated by experienced peers, can provide an environment for the emotional and intellectual sustenance of head teachers. Before looking at the impact of this programme or the approaches taken to the research, it is useful to very briefly consider the role of school leadership within literature and to consider some of the pressures that head teachers in recent decades face.

The changing face of school leadership
The Education Reform Act of 1988 saw a marked shift in school responsibility and accountability, with it moving it away from local authorities and towards schools and head teachers. By 2004, 90 per cent of all maintained schools' budgets were handled by head teachers (Earley and Weindling, 2004). It has long been noted that strong school leadership is key to a school's success, but the form that this leadership should take has changed immeasurably over recent times. The responsibility of running a school no longer weighs solely upon the head teacher, the burden is shared, and distributed. "Achieving results through others" is now considered the very "essence of leadership" (Earley and Weindling, 2004, p. 3). This focus upon relationships has caused the emotional capability and complexity of the individual leader to come under scrutiny.

Ofsted (2003) recognised that "good leadership" was contextual. Rather than charisma, the sought after attribute became "emotional intelligence" (Goleman et al., 2002). School leaders must be human and show empathy. Jacobson et al. (2005) found that the values and traits of headteachers were the

driving force behind successful schools and Leithwood et al. (2008, p.36) argued that their research results suggest:

> […] that at least under challenging circumstances, the most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values, persistent (e.g. in pursuit of high expectations of staff motivation, commitment, learning and achievement for all), resilient and optimistic.

With such lofty expectations of an individual, it is not surprising that there is now a scarcity of teachers prepared to take on this role.

So where are we a decade later? The focus upon the effective characteristics and qualities of successful leaders has now become embedded to the point that entire training courses are based upon them in the USA (see Welch and Hodge, 2018). When Laar explored "exceptional head teachers" in 2014, a recurring trait was distributed leadership. More recently, educational leadership has embraced the concept of authenticity, putting the emotional intelligence, values and traits of the individual leader more squarely under the microscope; with a focus upon self-knowledge and how this is demonstrated through behaviour (Shamir and Eilam-Shamir, 2018).

The training and development of school leaders
The UK based National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2012) identified a dearth in those applying for headship roles. Apple (2010) put this reluctance down to the increased accountability, inspection and competition that had emerged through policy change. Maxwell and Riley (2017, p. 496) discussed how "schools are rife with emotionality, as they deal with people's most important hopes, fears and dreams on a daily basis: the lives and futures of children". Significantly, most of the burdens that leaders face are dealt with in seclusion from any form of emotional support for themselves. As Tahir et al. (2016, p. 422) explained, head teachers "tend to feel isolated and separated from other teachers". The expectation that leaders offer unwavering support, care and enthusiasm for others, with no obvious source of replenishment for themselves, must inevitably take its toll.

Berkovich and Eyal (2017a) carried out a comprehensive review of 49 articles exploring the concept of emotion in the head teacher role. Articles over recent years have focussed upon areas such as the "linking [of] principals' emotion recognition ability with teachers' experience of emotional reframing" (Berkovich and Eyal, 2017b, p. 317), suggesting that head teachers now need a qualification in psychology rather than management in order to do their job effectively. Additionally, a moral or ethical aspect exists; leaders are expected to lay their personal needs aside whilst they motivate their team, all in order to achieve the greater good of the school (Bass, 1996).

Leadership has increasingly become emotional labour. Brennan and Ruairc (2019, p.142) discuss the demands of the role and how many headteachers, particularly in disadvantaged areas "invested their heart and soul to make a difference in the lives of the children". Maxwell and Riley (2017) explored the emotional investment of school principals and the concept of "burnout" in particular. Their empirical research found that "school leaders face significantly increased emotional demands compared to the general population, and this is associated with poorer psychosocial health" (p. 493). Most significantly, they felt that the role was not sustainable, that head teachers "may be nearing their capacity as the requirements of the role continue to increase" (Maxwell and Riley, 2017).

In this paper, we suggest that the collaboration and collegiality of like-minded peers can play a significant role in providing emotional sustenance for the careworn leader.

Research approach

The sample

In order to evidence the perceived impact of the leadership development programme, a case study was co-constructed with the group of head teachers that had been involved since its instigation, in 2015. The research took place during the second academic year of the intervention, 2016–2017, and sought to answer the following key questions:

RQ1. What were individual leaders' reasons for joining the network?
RQ2. What did they envision as the benefits?
RQ3. How were the aims of the network established?
RQ4. How were relationships established and maintained?
RQ5. Did the leaders perceive there to be positive results as a result of joining the network?
RQ6. If there were positive developments, how would these be sustained?

All of the cluster head teachers actively involved in the second year of the programme (n=29) were invited to participate in the evaluation; only 14 shared their views through the audit tool; however, the remaining 15 played a more active role, through participating in focus group discussions and interviews. The 12 facilitators involved also contributed their observations of impact.

The area of the UK in which the programme took place was one of significant deprivation and, therefore educational challenge. The city had a high percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals: 27 per cent compared to 17 per cent nationally (Ofsted, 2015). But there was also significant diversity between schools in the most deprived and the most affluent areas. Challenges faced by participant schools varied extensively, with one school coping with 21 per cent pupil mobility during the evaluation year and supporting 29 different languages due to migrating families; whilst another had to overcome issues relating to a predominantly white British population who were suffering third generation unemployment.

Data collection methods

The approaches taken to data collection were co-constructed with the head teachers to ensure that no unreasonable demands were placed upon them. As a group, the headteachers decided that it was too early on in the programme to begin to see statistical evidence of development, so instead there should be a qualitative focus upon perceptions of influence. Following discussion in an initial meeting with head teachers from each of the clusters, it was agreed that data collection tools for the head teachers would comprise:

• an audit tool to be completed by head teachers throughout the year;
• termly, semi-structured, focus group interviews; and
• individual, semi-structured, interviews towards the end of the year.

In addition, a focus group interview was employed with the 12 facilitators. All focus group interviews and individual interviews were carried out by the lead researcher, who had no previous interaction with the head teachers or the schools involved in the development programme.

The audit tool was based upon the findings of Baker (2015), who explored effective school partnerships and identified the key areas listed below. The headteachers involved in the research were asked to provide any evidence of any impact in the following areas since the onset of the programme:
• pedagogy;
• motivation;
• innovation;
• openness/sharing of good practice;
• shift towards an enquiry-based culture;

• CPD and career enhancement; and
• curriculum development.

The audit also requested barriers to development to be identified.

Due to the collaborative culture already established prior to the commencement of the research, the head teachers chose to submit joint audits for their clusters. The numbers involved in the termly focus group interviews with head teachers varied between 6 and 10. These semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to direct the conversation that was initiated by the researcher through a small number of key questions. These key questions related to those outlined above. They were audio recorded and transcribed. As each focus group interview was transcribed, themes began to emerge, which were then pursued in the following interviews.

In sum, 12 facilitators were present at their focus group interview which took the same approach. Very little prompting was needed during this discussion as the group reflected upon the purpose of the network clusters and their own role within that, by responding to one another's ideas. Again, these were transcribed and key themes identified.

Toward the end of the research year, individual interviews were carried out with eight head teachers, to add richness and depth to the data. These interviews were individualised for each leader, based upon the content of their audit, which had been received previously. As such, the questions asked were more specific. As an example, some of the questions asked in one interview are shown next:

• The importance of values keeps coming up in the data collected so far. Could you explain how these values came to be developed/ shared within your network?
• How do you negotiate the different priorities of schools (e.g. English as an Additional Language or Special Educational Needs) within your network?
• Something that has been noted as key to improving pedagogy is the concept of "learning walks"; can you tell me a little more about how these were organised in your cluster?
• It has been mentioned that as a result of the networks there has been "less tolerance for underperformance". How has that "looked" in your network meetings and then back in your schools?

These individual interviews were also recorded and transcribed in readiness for analysis.

Research ethics
Prior to data collection, full ethical approval was gained from the University Research Ethics Committee. In order to obtain fully informed consent, and in line with standard ethical principles (British Educational Research Association, 2018) and requirements of research governance, the study ensured that participants were fully informed of the aims of the research and the uses of the data collected, ongoing opportunity to withdraw was provided and participants were assured of confidentiality.

Data analysis
Following the transcription of the recorded data, they were sorted into emerging themes using a data reduction grid. The views of the head teachers were triangulated against the perspectives of the facilitators in order to produce a multi-faceted picture of perceived influence. An example of this is shown in Table I.

The issues that emerged were extensive and related not only to the leaders involved but also to the whole school community; therefore, it is impossible to explore them in one paper. For this particular discussion, we have chosen to focus upon three areas which arose repeatedly as key to the success of

the clusters: provision of a reflective space, the importance of trusting relationships based upon similar values and the role played by the clusters in providing emotional support. Although these are, to some extent, interrelated, the data have been categorised into those sections next.

[Table 1 inserted here]

Results

A reflective space
The regular meetings of the head teachers and facilitators provided a valuable space for personal professional development. They were seen as providing a forum for the head and deputy head teachers to consider broad, macro-Government policy and new ideas within the meso context of the LA, taking into account the micro-parameters of their own contexts and values as individuals and as a development group. Some comments made during individual interviews about the space to consider significant issues are illustrated as follows:

> *I think that's really important, having some time out […] to think about what you are doing and to think about what you are doing well and what you can improve on.*

> *[…] I think that's been fantastic time, those sessions I've found really, really useful for reflection and just time to discuss issues.*

Surprisingly, the head teachers did not find allocating the time to meet difficult. They planned the cluster meetings well in advance, prioritised that time and, if they were not able to attend, sent a replacement, often the deputy head. Conversely, what they did find challenging was finding space for their own, individual, reading and research. Because of this, they particularly valued the time incorporated into the meetings to enable this.

One head teacher said:

> *[…] I've got about four books on the side of my bed […] actually educational books. I'm really, really interested and I really, really want to read. But my god, can I find time? No I can't […] I do want to learn more and take things on board […] but in the day to day running […] it's just really hard […] So we actually have that reading time, and then we can discuss it, the reading. I think that's important because you can then have that professional discussion, can't you?*

The facilitators considered it their responsibility to manage or "hold" this thinking time. They discussed the importance of creating the right context for thinking to germinate. One facilitator commented that his role was "allowing people to experience and realise the impact of having space".

This space was clearly appreciated by the head teachers, with one commenting:

> *And it is space to think because […] we usually, as a group of heads, we go to meeting to hear what's got to be said and we come away. […] the space to be reflective and to think what's next, what else can we do? What are we doing wrong? What are we doing right? And that time to appreciate that actually we are doing some really good stuff […] time to spend together, the four heads, away from the school. Just talking, sometimes […] And it was nice just to have the time […].*

Trusting relationships based upon similar values
Something perceived by all respondents as fundamental to the success of the leadership clusters was the relationships that were established. The facilitators carefully orchestrated the development of

that trust through taking time to understand the individuals that they were working with. Comments made by them included:

> […] we proactively do work around trust. We don't expect it to just happen.

> One of the other things that has been important is to listen, to listen carefully to who they are, get to know them as people. So that not only do they build trust with each other but they build trust with you and they do trust us with the things that they are going to say. Because they do open up with some things that are really personal to them. So I think knowing them as people has been extremely important.

One of the facilitators commented that "the word trust has come up countless times in our group", and added that "in the modern educational world, that model of accountability sometimes tends to forget that schools are about people". Another facilitator added, quite simply "You get to know them as people not just colleagues". Some noteworthy methods of establishing trust were mentioned in the data, these included the headteachers sharing their values and their career stories. One head teacher said:

> […] we established those values as heads along with facilitators from the University. So we individually listed our values, we then compared each other's lists to see the common values. We really felt that one of the exercises that we did with the facilitators, talking about our journeys into teaching, we felt that was really useful, to actually bond as a group of heads.

Another approach, which emerged as being crucial in this bonding process, was the head teachers accommodating "learning walks" in their schools. The heads visited one another's schools within their own cluster in order to appreciate and better understand their colleagues' context. As one teacher puts it, they "showed everything, warts and all". The tours gave the headteachers a sound grasp of the culture that their colleagues worked within and a chance to better understand their opportunities and their limitations. One head teacher reported:

> […] when we walk round each of the schools, again, you are on show, you are vulnerable. You are showing your weaknesses. And as leaders we put hands up and say, well actually, we are not very good at that. It's not a strength and can we learn from you?

The heads commented that they were used to going to meetings and being talked at, told what they needed to do (being "done to" as one headteacher put it). Or, if visited in their own schools, they were used to putting on a show. One headteacher reflected, below, on the open and supportive nature of the visits by the collaborative team, compared to the usual guardedness created by the accountability culture:

> So you are letting someone come in to a fairly dusty dirty corner of your school and look at it and do some reflection on it and come up with some ideas. Whereas with Ofsted you put on your Sunday best and you are pristine, and you stand in front of the dirty corners […] And I think that making yourself vulnerable is important to development.

Essential to the trust needed for this was the lack of hierarchy within the cluster meetings. One facilitator commented:

> […] I think when we started we were a self-directed group. And in that self-directed group there's no one leader, no hierarchy there. And everyone felt, as equals, able to say their bit.

A significant way in which the close and trusting bond between group members had been established was related to the sharing of common values. Clearly, a shared understanding was dependent upon the "type" of leaders that the head teachers chose to work with. One head teacher stated:

> *We are just like minded people really [...] We went for the people who were interested the children, in nurturing schools, who were not particularly bothered about results and that kind of thing; who were doing the job for the children. It's a community as well. And also we are all schools that didn't see the need to try to take over other schools [...].*

Most of the head teachers that took part in this research were quite pointed in the fact that they did not choose to work with leaders that were preoccupied with their own self-interest. For example, one said:

> *We found that we've got the same core values. That we are doing it to benefit the children of [the LA]. We haven't got a head that's power crazy in our group and wants to rule the world and I think that's what's drawn us together, really.*

The children of the LA were regarded as a shared responsibility. When the phrase "our children" was used, repeatedly, in discussion, it referred, not to the children of the head teacher's own school, but to the cluster of schools, or even to children citywide. For example, when discussing the focus of a cluster training day, one head teacher said: "[...] it 's specific to our children, to our collaboration [...]". The head teachers below made clear that the only way to improve the experience for the children in their city was through working collaboratively:

> *I think we are all professional and mature enough to realise that every school's context and challenges are different and in this tough game that we are in, of survival in [our LA], and data is vulnerable, so if we can help each other out and all improve on the back of that, then that's going to be beneficial to everybody.*

> *We all want each other to do well. It's not about competition; it's about "these are our children" isn't it? These are all [the LA's] children, aren't they? They are our children. And we want all the schools to be good or outstanding because that's in the best interests of the children.*

The culture of the head teachers involved in this research was one of shared responsibility, or "Ubuntu" as one leader mentioned; a South African term with many definitions but all based upon the idea of a shared humanity, whereby we sustain one another and take responsibility for one another's mistakes, which brings us from values to support.

Providing emotional support

The data suggest that a genuine honesty was developed with the assistance of the facilitators, built upon mutual professional respect and acceptance that all schools and all head teachers have both strengths and weaknesses. The openness and sharing that was nurtured in the cluster meetings was very different to the normal, day-to-day working experience of many of the heads. They did not have what it takes to be the indefatigable leader, and could reveal their human frailties. One head teacher commented that they had "[...] already got that network of people there, that I could ask those questions to that, you know, might sound a bit stupid". Another headteacher stated that "it was almost like group therapy"; a place to bring professional dilemmas and obtain an objective view from equals that understood their experiences and would not criticise areas of failure or difficulty. One head teacher shared this:

I think it's nice because you can go and somebody will say "Does anybody else feel like this?" or "Has anyone else found this?" and it's nice to feel that other people are feeling that way […] that your own school issues are not isolated just to your school, that can be reassuring, can't it?

A facilitator commented on the "grounding" nature of the group which prevented head teachers from catastrophizing in difficult situations:

Partly because it's cathartic, they can have some time to share things and to maintain a perspective. Because I think each of us goes off in our lives and we are thinking "this is a really big issue". And then you talk to colleagues and think, no, it isn't actually, it's part of the real world, its manageable, and we can do this, this and this. So it helps to maintain a perspective, I think, or to get shared input to help somebody to maintain a perspective or address an issue.

A number of the head teachers described their cluster as a vital safety net of emotional support that they knew they could confidently turn to in times of pressure or confusion. The head teachers in this study felt that they had developed a bond of genuine care for one another that could help them through difficult times. Three head teachers referred to this during the focus group interviews; they said:

You've got someone to say "I've got this person saying this and I've got this person saying that" and they'll ground you and say, "well, you need to think about what your school needs". So actually having the comfort of your buddies and people you love and have kind of chosen to actually help you solve those problems has been a real saving grace.

[…] the support that she's gained from the group has been really invaluable […] I just think that kind of level of knowing that other people are really gunning for you is really important.

One head teacher whose own school had been in special measures stated:

It was a support network […] I think two of the schools were in special measures, requires improvement, so that was supportive as well, so you didn't feel that you were bottom of the league, really. […]It was non-threatening […] people looked for the good. […] And it was very supportive […] And I think also that because it's not directly linked to the local authority. You can be a bit more open. […] And some people would be better than you, some people would be as good as you […] We were all very open about that. We just wanted to help each other.

This support included validating the successes of head teachers and schools, providing reassurance and nurturing confidence. One head teacher reflected:

[…] sometimes you don't see it, do you? Sometimes you just get caught up on all the negatives. Especially when you are getting towards the end of term or something like that. So it's really good for somebody to say: "look how far you've come […] look what […] you've done this, you've done this, you've done this […]".

The development of confidence and reassurance was also reflected upon by the facilitators. Again referring to the head teachers' development autonomously and as part of the cluster, one explained: "[…] you are also building their confidence […] We are building people's confidence within a safe environment. They are more powerful individually, but also as a group". Emotional strength is nurtured.

Discussion

Despite Weiss et al. (2002) describing collaborations across schools as a potential threat, and Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) regarding them as a means of increased scrutiny, the findings from this research suggest that meeting and working collaboratively provided significant support for the head teachers involved. There was a pervading culture across all of the clusters that this was not about the success of individual schools, but about maximising opportunities for all children in their LA. The head teachers spoke with passion, underpinned by shared core values. Whereas the admission of feelings and sensitivity would previously have been stigmatised (Berkovich and Eyal, 2015), as would the admission of flaws; emotion, fallibility and a willingness to learn from others were very much at the forefront of discussions during this research.

All of the head teachers that were interviewed during this evaluation recognised the influence that a dedicated time of reading, reflection and debate had upon their own professional development. Ainscow et al. (2006) discuss how, for these learning communities to work, they must recognise the cultures of the schools represented and provide a collaborative space of challenge and negotiation. Woods et al. (2009, p. 268) stress how important it is to provide "opportunities" to "disturb" accepted notions and everyday assumptions' Woods et al. (2009, p. 291) find that "89% of heads said that they would value more time for reflection". But in order for them to genuinely gain from this time, it was important that the leaders met within a context where they felt secure. And this arose from the trusting relationships that were carefully nurtured.

The importance of strong relationships based on openness, which were sensitively cultivated by the facilitators in this research, also emerges in literature. Dering et al. (2006) discuss the role that trust plays in developing the richness and depth of collaborative relationships, and Coleman (2012, p. 86) stresses that the key role that trust takes in associations is "difficult to overstate". He goes on to discuss "the essential role that trust plays in partnership working between schools and with other agencies, as it mitigates leaders' and followers' vulnerability in times of uncertainty, supports risk-taking and serves as a bridge across organizational boundaries" (Coleman, 2012, p. 101). It appears that trust served as a safety net across these collaborations.

Woods et al. (2009, p. 269) discussed how "Reflection on personal and professional values is integral to this dimension of leadership development". But developing shared values, as a group, was vital. As Coleman (2012, p. 92) discovered through his own research, "having confidence that others held similar values on the importance of education was important in individuals' decisions to trust". This is why the headteachers were careful "when considering with whom to make an alliance – which club they wanted to belong to " (Coldron et al., 2014, p. 399).

Berkovich and Eyal (2015, p.131) discuss how there is a dearth in the literature surrounding the emotional aspect of leadership, yet coping with "an unstable and competitive environment" inevitably took its toll on the well-being of leaders. Access to a trustworthy support network came up as a theme repeatedly during discussion with the head teachers. This is particularly important due to the "unique structural isolation" (Berkovich and Eyal, 2015, p. 139) that head teachers' experienced in their roles. In the culture of "community and camaraderie" (Davenport and Mattson, 2018, p. 17) that the cluster meetings fostered, guards could be let down.

Blackmore (2010, p.642) contends that educational leadership is about "the desire to make a difference", but adds that "leadership is equally about fear of failure, pain, exhaustion […] and guilt associated with the ethical dilemmas that leaders confront on a daily basis". Earley and Bubb (2013, p. 782) describe the "relentless, complex and emotionally demanding workload" that head teachers shoulder. Similarly, Berkovich and Eyal (2015, p. 136) explain how "principals described significant emotional investment in their work, with increased individual accountability" because their own success and the success of the school are inextricably linked. It has been suggested that successful

educational leaders possess high emotional intelligence (Berkovich and Eyal, 2015, p.130) and those headteachers interviewed for this research certainly demonstrated an openness and understanding that signified comfort and ease when dealing with emotionally demanding topics. For many head teachers, their emotional understanding is a trait used tirelessly in the support of others. The cluster groups provided opportunity for some of that emotional support to be reflected back.

Although emotionally nurturing, the data demonstrated that these groups of like-minded individuals also helped to ground the head teachers and look at issues rationally. The importance of the facilitators supporting rather than leading the groups, empowering rather than creating dependency, came through clearly. Daly (2009) explains how a compassionate team of equals can lessen the perceived impact that a threat possesses. It can help them to keep a lucid head, but also, conversely, in both this research and that carried by Coleman (2012), it is a supportive group that supports risk-taking. Livesay et al. (2005, p.17) found in their research that collaborative partnerships could "support the ongoing work of teachers and expand our conceptions of what's possible". Collaborations can broaden the leaders' perception of achievable opportunities.

Conclusion

There would be no surprise should a reader be cynical about the overwhelming positivity demonstrated in the data explored in this paper and to question its validity, or at least its representativeness. Throughout the data collection, questions were asked by the researcher about barriers and issues. But these queries were continually batted away by a group of head teachers that had totally invested in the idea of working together as a compassionate, reassuring, yet, at the same time, challenging and stimulating group.

Although the findings from this research are not intended to be generalisable, the ideas that have emerged through this small group could be of interest to others involved in educational leadership development; particularly that involving collaborations between a number of schools. Of course, as is inevitable with data collection, it was those who found the development meetings more difficult, and those who struggled with time, that withdrew from the research. Their voice is absent. It is possible that this group would have had a different story to tell of their experience of collaborative working.

It may be that the success of these groups was specific to this LA. After all, the sense of shared responsibility when the head teachers came together, towards "their" children as a collective, was palpable. This sense of Ubuntu, an LA community, where the success or failure of one reflects up on all, was not something that was predicted at the onset of data collection. It did not fit with the rhetoric of competition that so many educational critiques portray.

In their research, Woods et al. (2009, pp. 257-258) found that 84 per cent of head teachers favoured partnerships involving universities and education authorities as the best way of meeting their Continuing Professional Development needs. Perhaps, it is the balance between intellectual challenge and emotional, practical support that works so effectively: the recognition of head teachers as competent, intellectual, yet humanly imperfect, individuals. Perhaps, it is the space provided for reflection at the intersection of theory and practice: rather than a relentless focus on doing. Unfortunately, we did not have the space to discuss in great depth the steps taken by facilitators to nurture this reflective space here, but that is the focus of an article in development.

By the end of this research, LA funding was being cut, including the investment in programmes such as these. It is hoped an accumulation of evidence demonstrating the enriching nature of horizontal collaborations might make government more willing to channel funds into initiatives such as this in the future.

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Corresponding author
Carla Solvason can be contacted at: c.solvason@worc.ac.uk