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**AN INVESTIGATION INTO HOW TO BUILD AN  
EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR  
SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADERS AND MANAGERS**

**NICOLA ANN BRETTELL**

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Huddersfield

December 2016

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# **Abstract**

## ***An investigation into how to build an effective learning environment for secondary school leaders and managers***

This thesis provides an in-depth interpretation of the actual learning process that occurred on a Post Professional Development programme (PPD) in Educational Leadership and Management in order to establish what constituted an effective learning environment for secondary school leaders and managers. The participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of their learning and the impact this had on their social reality were scrutinised in detail as it is their understanding of the learning that created the social reality that the research sought to uncover.

The research was based in the constructivist paradigm and so was approached from the perspective that individuals construct their own reality so there can be multiple interpretations of the same event. An in-depth longitudinal case study approach was used that incorporated qualitative analysis techniques which included semi-structured interviews with eight participants and four line managers, forty-nine anonymous unit evaluation documents and a reflexive research journal. These methods of data generation uncovered the perceptions of the participants as social constructions.

The datasets, each representing an alternative interpretive angle, had presented positive perceptions of the learning experience and showed agreement between the participants and the line managers on the key role that the learning environment had played in the successful learning. In line with the constructivist position this effective learning environment was seen to have provided the necessary conditions for the participants to engage in both individual and collective meaning-making. The environment had been seen as an authentic leadership experience, characterised by pressure and support mechanisms that had operated simultaneously on both the macro-level (the programme environment) and the micro-level (the learning strategies). It had been the interplay between the

mechanisms on more than one level that was seen to result in the authenticity which had enacted the dynamics of leadership for the participants.

This productive mix had led to the learning journey being viewed as a collaborative pursuit where meanings had been continually negotiated, individually and collectively, which had resulted in feelings of affinity and shared endeavour. This process had generated a shared bank of resources (experiences and materials) that had led the cohort to experience a sense of belonging to each other and the environment. A design had been provided for the cohort to develop into a learning community characterised by a critically reflective, collaborative culture. The creation of a learning community was viewed as an important support mechanism which provided the necessary space for the participants to engage in various forms of discourse and critical reflection (Mezirow, 2003; Hodge, 2014). The necessary conditions had been fostered to allow the cohort to engage in transformative learning and experience a changed perspective (Mezirow, 1996). The authenticity of the experience had, in this case, led to the participants' revised leadership practice being applied habitually regardless of context which is seen to be indicative of the depth of personal and professional transformation (Hoggan, 2014). Their transformed perspective was demonstrated by a commitment to create collaborative, critically reflective cultures in their own workplaces and beyond. Therefore, this research provides a more precise interpretation of the positive role that pressure and support mechanisms can play in the creation of an effective learning environment for secondary teachers with leadership responsibilities.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

PPD: Post Professional Development programme

SLT: Senior Leadership Team

HEI: Higher Education Institute

## **Dedications and Acknowledgements**

I wish to dedicate my research to the participants on the leadership programme. They allowed me to view their social reality and leadership transformations. That process changed the direction of my personal learning journey and for that I am grateful.

I wish to thank Jim (my husband) and Lyn (my supervisor) for their support throughout my perspective transformation. Jim, you gave me the choice and freedom to pursue this dream and for that I am indebted to you and feel blessed to have such a partner in life. Lyn, I cannot thank you enough for the expert guidance and care that you demonstrated towards me throughout this process. Your finely tuned mix of pressure and support mechanisms has been invaluable and I am so pleased that you accompanied me on this journey. I could have wished for no better companions.

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# Introduction

'Rarely...has there been as much concern over finding the next generation of school leaders as there is now' (Professor John Howson, 2016).

Educational leadership is considered here as a critical case with government funding for leadership courses being withdrawn at a time when increased accountability and perpetual initiatives have become synonymous with the profession. The research presented in this thesis is focused on a Training School and university collaborative project that delivered a Post Professional Development programme (PPD) in Educational Leadership and Management. The research group was composed of two cohorts of secondary teachers, all with varying degrees of leadership responsibilities, drawn from one local authority area cluster. The time frame for the programme was 2009-2013, being set in an educational climate marred by political controversy centred on a Labour government (1997-2010) proposal for teaching to become a Masters-only profession. PPD programmes are evaluated through Impact Evaluation Summary Reports monitored by the Training and Development Agency for schools (Tda) in order to provide quantitative evidence of course provision and success.

I (a practising educational leader) was approached by Grantchester University to help to deliver the first two years of the programme in a team-teaching capacity with a university tutor. The students would then return to the university if they wished to embark on a third (dissertation) year. I had qualified as a potential Associate Tutor of the university having successfully completed the PPD in Education Leadership and Management myself. However, due to the excessive numbers of students that enrolled onto the programme at the university the original team-teaching model was abandoned which resulted in my sole delivery of the sessions.

It was the positive reaction of the first cohort that acted as a stimulus for my research. I had witnessed a number of emotional outpourings by the students from which it became evident that they perceived that the learning experience had

resulted in significant personal and professional change for them. Throughout the programme I gathered evidential material that suggested that the students were drawing upon the leadership learning in their managerial positions and were displaying the characteristics of reflective, competent practitioners. I also observed the students' commitment to the programme and to each other underscored by their high levels of motivation and I felt that they had significant understanding of the leadership learning. As a result I became interested in ascertaining which elements of their learning experience had created these apparently positive outcomes. This investigation will therefore consider whether it is possible to create the conditions for a learning community to develop and how that is related to building leadership competence (confidence to act in role). This means that the research has the potential to identify the characteristics of an effective learning experience for secondary school teachers and whether this learning produced critically reflective leaders and managers capable of autonomous thought.

The participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of their learning and the impact this had on their social reality were scrutinised in detail as it is their understanding of the learning that created this social reality that the research sought to uncover. The research was based in the constructivist paradigm and so was approached from the perspective that individuals construct their own reality so there can be multiple interpretations of the same event. An in-depth longitudinal case study approach was used that incorporated qualitative analysis techniques which included semi-structured interviews with eight participants and four line managers, forty-nine anonymous unit evaluation documents and a reflexive research journal. These methods of data generation uncovered the perceptions of the participants as social constructions.

### ***Structure of the Thesis***

**Chapter one** will provide a review of the relevant literature from the field of adult learning theory that considered the possible constituent elements regarded as significant in the generation of an effective learning environment. I incorporate literature from a broad compass of disciplines, congruent with the constructivist



tradition, that explore the necessary conditions to facilitate individual (Glaserfeld, 1995; Mezirow, 1996, 2000) and collective meaning-making (Wenger, 1998, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). In addition a smaller fund of literature will be drawn upon focused on the compatibility of these two perspectives (Eraut, 2004; Hodge, 2014) to help elucidate the participants' perceptions of their learning experience. This will provide a more detailed and representative interpretation of the participants' social reality and the processes that had operated in this particular setting. The following areas were seen to require further investigation in the light of this particular case study:

- Can an effective learning environment be created for a cohort of secondary teachers with leadership responsibilities? If so, how?
- Did this cohort develop as a learning community? If so, in what ways?
- Does Mezirow's theory of 'Transformative Learning' add to our understanding of the participants' perceptions of their learning experience on this educational leadership programme? If so, how?

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the research questions and the most suitable methodology needed to explore them.

The methodology is examined in greater detail in **Chapter two** where I provide my choice of research approach, strategy, instruments and data analysis. These choices are congruent with my ontological and epistemological position. I detail my plan for analysis, in line with my constructivist 'sensitivity'. Three datasets were generated by the research to provide a range of interpretive angles (Mason, 2002).

In **Chapter three** I present the findings generated by the data. The data was categorized using thematic analysis which worked well with an experiential focus and led to the generation of five overarching themes related to my research questions which examined in detail the roles of:

- A Facilitatory Contextual Climate
- Pressure and Support Mechanisms
- Collaborative Practice
- Critical Reflection
- Change

I provide a detailed examination of the participants' perceptions of their learning experience using quotations extracted from the datasets. Overall, the data revealed that the learning environment had been viewed positively by both the participants and their line managers. The picture generated by the perceptions had focused on the authentic nature of the learning experience which, in turn, had led to high levels of motivation (Herrington and Herrington, 2006). The data is then used to address each research question in turn.

In response to the first research question, **Chapter four** argues that the data showed that an effective learning environment had been created for these participants. The elements of the environment cited as significant are examined in detail. Of most significance was the role played by pressure and support mechanisms in the creation of an authentic leadership environment. The discussion elucidates the nature of the mechanisms that were apparent at both the level of the programme environment (macro-level) and within the learning strategies (micro-level). This discussion becomes focussed on the precise nature of the interplay of pressure and support that, in this case, had evoked a physical and cognitive authenticity in the learning environment (Herrington and Herrington, 2006).

The discussion, in **Chapter five**, will address the second research question as the development of the cohort into a learning community was viewed as an important support mechanism by the participants (Brookfield, 1995; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004). It was in this space that the participants engaged in various forms of discourse which had provided them with access to a range of perspectives from which they could critically reflect on their leadership practice. I investigate the sense of belonging that the participants felt towards each other and their environment (Wenger, 1998; Block, 2009). The bonds that characterised the group had endured and had been, in part, attributed to the length of time the participants had operated as a group and the high quality of the interaction in which they had engaged.

The learning environment had fostered the conditions to facilitate significant personal and professional change. **Chapter six** provides a discussion of the extent to which the changes, recounted by the participants, can be interpreted using

Mezirow's (2000) theory of Transformative Learning. Mezirow's work on transformative learning undoubtedly provided an understanding of the rational element of the changes recounted by the participants and the emphasis placed on the role of critical reflection and discourse in the process. However in addition to this, the interpretation of the depth of transformation will draw on literature to help assess the role played by extra-rational aspects (Dirkx, 2008) and the community (Donaldson, 2009) in the process. The chapter concludes with a discussion concerning the extent to which the revised perspectives can be viewed as habitual element of the participants' practice (Hoggan, 2014). Their transformed perspective was demonstrated by a commitment to create collaborative, critically reflective cultures in their workplaces and beyond.

In **Chapter seven** the conclusions of the research will be presented. To aid the interpretation of the participants' perceptions in this case study, a new focus was required to examine the minutiae that constituted the interplay between the pressure and support mechanisms at the macro and micro-level of the learning environment. I propose that the primary dimensions of educational leadership had been replicated in the learning environment through the design and management of a productive mix of pressures and supports. This authenticity had provided a design for the cohort to develop into a learning community characterised by a critically reflective, collaborative culture which had acted as a transformation space (Hodge, 2014). I detail the practical limitations together with the wide ranging implications of the research in the educational leadership field. I argue that educational leaders today need this type of supportive learning environment together with the community that arises from it. Therefore, the conclusions are seen to assist professional development providers in framing questions that relate to the design and implementation of future leadership programmes for secondary school teachers.

# **Chapter 1: Literature Review**

## ***1.1 Introduction***

This literature review will drill down into the constituent elements deemed to be significant by researchers in fostering an environment able to facilitate effective learning. Adult learning theory resembles a complex tapestry of interwoven ideas and concepts and therefore the aim of this review is to pull the threads together from the fields of psychology, sociology, and adult learning in order to assess their relevance to this investigation into how to build an effective learning environment for secondary school leaders and managers. It is important that the commonalities as well as the disparities of the theoretical approaches are established in the light of this challenge as all are subject to value-systems and ideological standpoints (Jarvis, 2010).

Adult learning theory, particularly the areas of experiential and transformational learning, has drawn extensively on the constructivist premise that learning is the process whereby meaning is constructed from experience (Merriam and Bierema, 2013; p.36). However, beyond this core concept ‘...there are almost as many varieties of constructivism as there are researchers’ (Ernest, 1995; p.459). An effective learning environment, according to the constructivist perspective, needs to be viewed as authentic by the learner (in terms of their practice) if they are to engage fully in both individual (Piaget, 1952; Rogers, 1969; Mezirow, 1991, 1996, 2006; Glaserfeld, 1995; Bruner, 1999) and collective meaning-making (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Shotter, 1995; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Fullan, 2011). Therefore, literature will be reviewed that sheds light on what constitutes an authentic learning experience for adults.

The diversity of these perspectives will shape this literature review as firstly, I will explore theories that focus primarily on learning as an individual pursuit and the key theme of the personal relevance of learning and the significant roles played by safety and trust, experience, reflection, discourse and educational intervention in the process. Secondly, I will explore literature focused on the collective nature of

meaning-making, in particular elaborating on the ideas of motivation, enthusiasm, communication, trust and safety as prerequisites for the creation of an effective learning environment. In each case, an overlap of themes is inevitable since the learner is not a by-stander in the process but a creative force and subsequently ‘...learning occurs through dialogue, collaborative learning, and cooperative learning’ (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007; p. 292). I will also therefore draw upon learning theories that emphasise a complementarity between the two perspectives to ascertain their relevance to this particular case (Billet 2007, Hodge, 2014). In the light of this review, I will examine the perceptions of the participants in a leadership programme of the effectiveness of their learning environment.

## ***1.2 The Role of the Individual in the Learning Process***

### **1.2.1 The Development of Constructivism**

The development of the constructivist paradigm gave prominence to both the individual’s belief systems and the contextual environment within which the learning takes place (Steffe and Gale, 1995; Tusting and Barton, 2006; Merriam et al., 2007; Merriam and Bierema, 2013). This perspective reacted against influential behaviourist assumptions (Pavlov, 1960; Skinner, 1976) that cited the individual as a passive entity who learnt through response to external stimuli; the resultant change in behaviour being the learning process in action. The influence of behaviourism within the field of education has been viewed negatively as ‘...eliminating the distinction between *training* (for performance) and *teaching* that aims at the generation of understanding (italicised in original)’ (Glaserfeld, 1995; p. 4). However, the presence of behaviourist thought is evident throughout modern day educational norms since reflective practitioners will, ‘... recognise the role of feedback, the nature of reinforcement, learning objectives, and behaviour modification in structuring learning activities for adults’ (Merriam and Bierema, 2013; p.28). The argument that behaviour is both observable and measurable has been attractive for external agencies in the design of accountability tools used for quality assurance purposes (Steffe and Gale, 1995; Ormrod, 1999; Jarvis, Holford

and Griffin, 2003; Allen, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Cross, 2009; Merriam and Bierema, 2013). Therefore, the participants on the leadership programme will have been exposed to behaviourist assumptions during their professional practice which may have influenced their expectations of the learning process.

Much of the seminal behaviourist research was dependent on animal experimentation and as a result has stood accused of a naivety that renders it inapplicable to adult thought processes (Steffe and Gale, 1995; Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 1998; Jarvis et al., 2003; Jarvis, 2010). The behaviourist focus on observable behaviours labelled the learner as a passive entity and paid scant attention to the mental processes of understanding that may lead an individual to alter their behaviour (Lovell, 1992; Jarvis et al., 2003; Tusting and Barton, 2006; Jarvis, 2010; Merriam and Bierema, 2013).

In contrast greater attention was paid to the role of the individual through the contribution of humanistic psychology which attributed the whole individual with the potential for growth and development and the freedom to make choices (Merriam and Bierema, 2013; p.29) and the early cognitivist contribution which focused on the role of the individual's mental processes in the active construction of knowledge (Piaget, 1952; Ausubel, 1968).

The humanist contribution brought the focus of the learning process into the realms of both the cognitive and the emotional, and recognised that human beings crucially wanted to control their own lives, with the underlying belief that effective learning can lead to a more fulfilled existence (Merriam et al., 2007; p.282). Humanists proposed that it was through reflection upon experience that an individual could decide which needs are to be satisfied and prioritised (Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 2013). The role of experience and the self-directed nature of learning, both key tenets of adult learning theory, are of central importance in the work of both Rogers (1969) and Maslow (2013). In Maslow's (2013) theory of motivation the issue of safety permeated every stage of his seminal 'needs hierarchy' in the personal pursuit of self-actualisation. This definition of self-actualisation is the quest for self-fulfilment '...namely, to the tendency for him (sic) to be actualised in what he is potentially' (Maslow, 2013). This should be the

ultimate goal of learning and thereby by implication the facilitating aim of the educator.

Rogers (1969) in his work on the crossover between therapy and education incorporated elements of the humanist, constructivist and thereby experiential perspectives on learning. The educator, in this scenario, should provide the conditions necessary for significant, meaningful learning to occur through experience. The learning process needed to be viewed in terms of its effect on the individual as a whole and in this sense the meanings created and the role of the individual were indivisible from the process. The effectiveness of the learning was then assessed by the individual through reflection. This ensured that change came from within as the individual was at the centre of the learning process. Rogers (1969) argued that a learner needed access to materials that were directly relevant to the creation or development of their sense of self. This was a very personal process as the learning will be seen as affecting their position and it is believed that the self loses flexibility when it feels uncomfortable or under threat. Therefore the ideal educational environment is one that is safe and accommodates a flexibility of approach. He emphasised that education should focus on the development of an individual that is fully functioning in society, even though he was tentative about what that person and society would look like (Rogers, 1969; p. 279). Rogers (1969) added a note of realism by acknowledging that the fully functioning person described was simply a model to aspire to following successful learning experiences.

The challenge from the early cognitivists also regarded the individual as having an element of control over their environment rather than simply being at its mercy. Attention moved away from the individual as a whole to focus entirely on the black box of the mind - mental processes. Two key ideas underpin cognitivism; namely, that the human brain is an active processor of information and that learning builds upon prior knowledge (Ausubel, 1968; Knowles et al., 1998; Tusting and Barton, 2006; Jarvis, 2010). This early work was significant in establishing a focus on meaning-making where individuals could rationalise and learn from each other, and through participation in activities. With its roots in Gestalt psychology, problems

were considered as a whole rather than distinct parts and it was argued that solutions came like a flash of insight. It is only then, according to Gestalt learning theorists such as Kohler (1976) that an individual can begin to process new, more complex, related ideas (Lovell, 1992; Allen, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007). A more transformative approach was taken by Ausubel (1968) who started to consider when learning became meaningful to an individual as opposed to learning by rote. This approach suggested that significant learning only existed when an individual can relate the learning to ideas that already exist in their cognitive structure which emphasised the importance of prior experiences (Jarvis et al., 2003; Tusting and Barton, 2006; Merriam et al., 2007).

Although the early cognitivist theories focused on the mind as operating as an information processor, the knowledge being processed remained a detached entity from the individual. However, the later cognitivists attributed the individual with a more active role in the meaning-making process; hence the development of the constructivist paradigm. Cognitive developmental psychologists Piaget (1952), Vygotsky (1986) and Bruner (1999) played key roles in establishing this constructivist tradition. Children were no longer regarded as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge; instead they had an element of control over their own cognitive development. Each of these theorists has been widely influential in the development of adult learning theory (Merriam et al., 2007; Merriam and Bierema, 2013).

In the case of Piaget (1952) the importance of the existence of pivotal stages within cognitive development linked to biological maturity, albeit in children, has been acknowledged (Merriam and Bierema, 2013; p.32). In particular, the focus was on the discovery element of learning that enabled the realization and construction of knowledge within mental structures through the key concepts of accommodation and assimilation (Cross, 2009; p.31). Piaget's lack of focus on the role of language and social context was addressed by Vygotsky (1986) who saw learning as a social process through his examination of the relationship between personal characteristics and sociocultural context. He introduced the idea of 'the zone of proximal development' which related to the difference in development that can be



achieved between an individual working independently (actual development) and the potential when that same individual is guided by another capable person (Vygotsky, 1986; p.187). Vygotsky's definition of a 'capable other' simply relates to the input of a more experienced person and the impact this has on the individual; therefore this could be applied to peer coaching situations and group activities in communities in the adult learning field. However, Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that, even with the inclusion of the social element, Vygotsky's work was still overly focused on the internalisation of knowledge as a commodity rather than learning being seen as a constant negotiation of meaning by the individual in the relevant social practice. Their focus involved the whole person, not simply their cognitive faculty, engaging in social practice.

The importance of the social process of learning in terms of the development and discovery of individual competencies was examined by Bruner (1999) in his work on instructional theory. This involved the individual being presented with information that added to or challenged previously known facts. The materials presented to an individual were advised to have personal relevance since 'the best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained usable in one's thinking beyond the situation in which the learning has occurred' (Bruner, 1999; p.31). Knowledge, therefore, becomes the process rather than the result. Bruner (1999) argued that when highly relevant activities are designed that stimulate but challenge the learner this can lead to a state of disjuncture for the individual. It is at this point in the learning process, according to the constructivist perspective, that one's environment can play a significant role. In order to cope with the experience of disjuncture the constructivist perspective, in line with the humanists, proposed the ideal learning environment to be safe and comfortable where the individual has the flexibility to test out and reflect on ideas and experiences (Rogers, 1969; Smith, 1982; Bruner, 1999; Dewey, 2008; Maslow, 2013). Jarvis (2010) did emphasise the instructional focus of Bruner's (1999) work and therefore doubted its applicability to more informal situations unless one considers the existence of a hidden curriculum within learning activities (Freire, 1996; Illich, 2012).

Therefore, to create a meaningful learning environment for adults the learning generated should be personally relevant to them (Ausubel, 1968; Rogers, 1969; Bruner, 1999). Consideration is required of what would be seen as professionally significant by the individuals involved in the leadership programme if the resultant learning is to have relevance beyond the point of acquisition (Bruner, 1999). In this case the learning environment will be formal and therefore research based in the instructional sphere does have relevance (Bruner, 1999).

If the participants perceive the learning to be significant then a state of disjuncture could result due to the personal nature of this process (Rogers, 1969; Bruner, 1999). In the event of this occurrence, the programme environment, in line with the constructivist position, must take into account the issue of safety if the participants are to be expected to enter into a highly personal meaning-making process and draw upon the full range of experiences available to them (Rogers, 1969; Smith, 1982; Bruner, 1999; Dewey, 2008; Maslow, 2013). The constructivist perspective enables the researcher to focus on the role of the individual and their environment in the learning process by uncovering the meanings that the learner has attached to their experiences.

### **1.2.2 The Role of Experience and Reflection**

The relationship between experience and reflection upon that experience is central to the constructivist position. Experience occupies a multifunctional position in the learning process by providing a deep reservoir upon which to draw either to stimulate discussion or for reflection, and is crucial in the process of identifying learning needs. The active construction of knowledge from individual experience is a key element in the theory which is applicable to adult learning. The literature provides little uniformity in terms of its definition and role; it is viewed through an individual's direct involvement in the concrete experience or from him/her recreating/reflecting upon previous experiences (Mezirow, 1997; Knowles et al., 1998; Dewey, 2007; Jarvis, 2010). The emphasis on reflection is a crucial element in the interpretation of experience since, 'the individual constructs new knowledge through experimentation, guided by personal intention, selecting focuses for

learning from possibilities presented in the environment, and reflectively analysing these experiments' (Fenwick, 2003; p24).

During the reflection process new knowledge is constructed either independently or via engagement in rational discourse; in some cases, according to the transformative paradigm this can lead to emancipatory change either on an individual (Mezirow, 1991) or societal level (Brookfield, 1986; Freire, 1996). The situative view would propose that many of these conversations regarding experiences are part of a social process since, 'knowledge is not considered a substance to be ingested and then transferred to new situation, but part of the very process of participation in the immediate situation and community of practice' (Fenwick, 2003; p.25). Merriam et al. (2007) argue that the conclusions appertaining to the role of experience and how to capture its full potential in adults still require much exploration and are the key issues facing adult learning (Merriam et al., 2007).

Dewey's (2007; 2008) seminal philosophical contribution portrayed a very naturally occurring relationship between education and personal experience. Experience was seen to contain the dual elements of continuity (all experiences affect what comes later) and interaction (the individual's interaction with their environment). These tenets required the educational experience to be personalised by the educator to guarantee continuity of quality '...to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction' (Dewey, 2008; p71). Problem-solving and imaginative activities were regarded as crucial to a successful learning experience since 'thought must be reserved for the new, the precarious, and the problematic' (Dewey, 2007; p.222). This means that the tutor in the leadership programme, as an insider, should be well placed to personalise the educational experience to ensure a continuity of experience as proposed by Dewey (2007). Becker (1998) argued that a practising educational leader operating within the same professional context as the participants should have an awareness of current leadership priorities as they are positioned more closely to the meaning-making process.

These seminal theoretical contributions concerning the role of experience were taken by Kolb (1984) and developed into a practitioner-friendly theory. Learning was viewed as a continuous process grounded in experience in that, 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb, 1984; p.38). The learning process was a continuous learning journey which involved reflection upon concrete experiences to inform the individual's analytical position from which future action could be taken. This cycle would lead to another concrete experience which recommenced the analytical journey. Experience had been resolutely located within the cognitive sphere.

It is argued (Fenwick, 2003; Jarvis et al., 2003; Jarvis, 2010) that greater attention needs to be paid to both the contextual and emotional frameworks, including the role of reflection, in the interpretation of experience. Various permutations of the classic Kolb (1984) cycle that paid greater attention to these core elements were forthcoming (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985; Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993; Jarvis, 2010). A more detailed understanding of the role played by reflection in the interpretation of experience was provided by Boud et al. (1985) using a three-stage model. The first stage involved the individual returning to the experience either individually or collaboratively. There followed an exploration of the feelings that were generated by the process of reliving the experience in order to encourage positive future experiences. Finally, the individual arrives at the stage of re-evaluating their experience; this is not always guaranteed if the first two stages are not complete. Therefore, the lack of consideration of the environment by the early cognitivist and behaviourist camp was rectified as, '...even in the context of externally defined knowledge, we must take account of, and build on, the unique perceptions and experiences of those involved' (Boud et al., 1993; p.7).

The theme of individuality within the process of interpretation of experience was continued by Jarvis (2010) in his refinement of Kolb's experiential model. Jarvis's (2010) model, in line with his holistic views of the learning process, proposed that each individual brings their entire 'biography' into each learning situation. When faced with disjuncture, experiences are interpreted and processed via reflection and this is added to the 'biography' of the individual. As experience grows one's

biography develops and the way experiences are interpreted alters. Often, when disjuncture is experienced the individual finds it very natural to resist those experiences that do not fit neatly into their existing mental schema (Schön, 1991, 2009; Argyris and Schön, 1992, 1996).

Argyris and Schön (1992, 1996) further developed the central role of experience and reflection through the concepts of double-loop learning and reflection-in-action. They argued that the mental maps individuals used to interpret experiences can result in actions that differ radically from their espoused theories. When faced with the unfamiliar, Argyris and Schön (1992) proposed that learning could take the form of single-loop or double-loop; single-loop is more comfortable for the individual as it deals with the familiar by placing one's experiences neatly into existing frames of reference. Double-loop learning is far more uncomfortable as experiences do not correlate with existing experiences and mental schema and, therefore, involve significant change.

The provision of valid information was seen to encourage double-loop learning as it '...makes dilemmas recognizable, which creates tension to resolve them' (Argyris and Schön, 1992; p.97). This situation appeared to act as a motivator and therefore it is important for this research to establish what constituted valid information for the participants on the leadership programme. The means by which experience is interpreted is inextricably linked to the individual (Argyris and Schön, 1992; Schön, 2009; Jarvis, 2010) and therefore each experience is unique. The learning environment should also avoid being viewed as an artificial creation where theoretical scenarios will have predictable outcomes as this will make it more difficult to transfer learning between settings as '...it is a game [simulations] whose correspondence to reality in the crucial respects is always questionable' (Argyris and Schön, 1992; p. 186).

These concepts align with Schön's (2009) knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action. Knowing-in-action occurs when we are comfortable; it is where one performs without thinking and one's activities are in line with one's existing mental schema. Reflection-in-action is where one reflects upon what one is doing whilst engaging in the activity. It is here, Schön argued, that the most significant learning

takes place because of the '...immediate significance for action' (Schön, 2009; p.29). One decides whether one's mental schema is still the correct option or whether it needs amending in the light of more information. The reflection engaged in will take a more critical form since, by engaging in 'double-loop learning' and 'reflection-in-action', current perspectives have the potential to be transformed.

The work of Argyris and Schön (1992) sustained the constructivist premise that successful learning contained personal significance for the individual (Rogers, 1969; Smith, 1982; Bruner, 1999). The concept of valid information is a useful model in the design of learning activities that will challenge the individual in a practice situation (Argyris and Schön, 1992). The onus placed on the practitioner to develop their theories-in-use as a result of field experience '...is to learn to become more reflective under real-time conditions so that effective ad hoc theories of action can be created and tested' (Argyris and Schön, 1992; p.188). The challenge for the leadership programme tutor is to provide the real-time conditions necessary to facilitate this successful learning.

The need to encourage the adult learner to be more reflective is placed at the core of both experiential and transformative learning theory. In experiential learning reflection is the crucial aspect in the interpretation of experience; whereas in the transformative sphere Mezirow (1991) emphasised the need for individuals to become critically reflective of both other peoples' assumptions and, more importantly, their own, because this can lead to a transformation.

### **1.2.3 Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning theory undermined the premise that education exists merely to change behaviours or cognitive domains and focused on the fact that it had the potential to transform individuals entirely and the social world they occupy. A plethora of interpretations of this theory have arisen since its first presentation by its 'paterfamilias' Mezirow in 1978 but all, 'underscore the importance of meaning in the process of learning' (Dirkx, 1998; p9). This tradition draws on cognitivism, humanism, constructivism and critical pedagogy and has a number of foci including

the rational (Mezirow, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2006, 2009; Hoggan, 2014), the emotional and spiritual (Daloz, 1986; Dirkx, 1998) and the emancipatory (Brookfield, 1995, 2005; Freire, 1996; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). The broad compass of issues contained in the perspective can be viewed as a sign of flexibility (Dirkx, 1998) or as signifying a lack of theoretical unification undermining academic credibility (Cranton and Taylor, 2012; p3). The accusation could be made that the theory is trying to be all things to all people.

However, regardless of focus, common features include the role of experience, dialogue, reflection and development (Dirkx, 1998; Tusting and Barton, 2006; Merriam et al., 2007; Taylor, 2009; Jarvis, 2010; Merriam and Bierema 2013; Hoggan, 2014). Mezirow (1997, 2000) closely aligned the learning process to an individual's personal development and maturation due to the fact that individuals develop as they gain more experience. Mezirow's (2000) theory of adult learning drew extensively on the Habermasian (1986) ideas of instrumental and communicative learning, and the conditions recommended for participation in successful discourse and critical reflection. Instrumental learning involved testing knowledge and was achieved through experimentation and problem-solving, whereas communicative learning was focused on understanding what and why other people are trying to communicate (Mezirow, 1996; p. 163). Successful communicative learning became the focus of Mezirow's (2000) work as it was seen to result in a more empathetic and inclusive position for the individual. The central goal of adult learning was the freedom to engage in autonomous thought since 'thinking as an autonomous agent is essential for full citizenship in democracy and for moral decision making in situations of rapid change' (Mezirow, 1997; p.7). This is highly relevant to the area of educational leadership which is characterised by a rapidly transitioning, accountable environment (Day, 1999; Fullan, 2001, 2007) and therefore the creation of a learning environment capable of fostering communicative learning and ultimately autonomous thinking would be desirable for the leadership programme.

Transformation involves a fundamental change in a frame of reference either through the individual's habits of mind or resulting points of view (Mezirow, 2000).

This occurs when an individual is faced with disjuncture created by an experience not easily absorbed into an existing frame of reference. The individual can choose to adopt the new experience or embark on a critically reflective process to change a frame of reference. The points of view that emanate from habits of mind comprise meaning schemes which are sets of beliefs and feelings that are externalised in response to a particular situation and are more prone to influence and amendment (Mezirow, 1997; p. 6). Habits of mind/meaning perspectives, however, are deeply-rooted sets of assumptions that are referred to habitually to make sense of new experiences. They are acquired through socialisation and cultural influences and can contain biased views, stereotypes and as such are difficult to amend. Habits of mind can have a limiting effect on actions (Mezirow, 1997). However, by entering into the rational process of critical reflection these deeply-held assumptions can be reformulated. This '...may be *epochal*, a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight, or *incremental*, involving a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a transformation (italicised in original)' (Mezirow, 2000; p.21). A transformation in a habit of mind is referred to as a perspective transformation and has cognitive, affective and conative dimensions (Mezirow, 1990; p.12).

The end goal of a transformative learning experience is that the individual will have generated a frame of reference '... that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable (open to other viewpoints), critically reflective of assumptions, emotionally capable of change, and integrative of experience' (Mezirow, 2000; p. 19). The individual should feel empowered to act on their transformed perspective, both in an individual and collaborative context, as opposed to uncritically accepting the assumptions of others (Mezirow, 1997; p.8). This process is regarded as emancipatory on an individual level as the individual will decide to act (or not) on the revised thinking which '...may result in immediate action, delayed action caused by situational constraints or lack of information on how to act, or result in a reasoned affirmation of an existing pattern of action' (Mezirow, 1996; p.164). Action in this sense is focused on individual critical thought on deeply held assumptions as opposed to the Freirian (1996) definition of individual



transformation that results in collective social action to effect large-scale social and political change (Mezirow, 2006; p.96).

The issue of social change and the creation of a more egalitarian society were not ignored in Mezirow's (2006) adult learning theory; both were regarded as key elements to enable individuals '...to participate more fully and freely in reflective discourse and to [acquire] a critical disposition and reflective judgement' which ultimately will provide '...the foundation in insight and understanding essential for learning how to take effective social action in a democracy' (Mezirow, 2006; p.96). Social or political action can result from a transformative learning experience if it is a personal objective for the individual. This would occur through the development of relationships with sympathetic others (Mezirow, 2000; p.30).

#### **1.2.4 The Role of Discourse in the Transformative Process**

The conditions fostered by the leadership programme should result in the participants having access to a wide range of alternative perspectives as Mezirow (2000; p.5) argued this would help generate a more dependable frame of reference that is better equipped to guide future action. It is important for the adult educator to note that discourse can take many forms that may include '...interacting with one individual at a time, including the authors of texts, or with groups of various sizes' (Mezirow, 1996; p.165). The development of an individual relationship with literature is a highly personal process and can be viewed as a substitute for absent peers since the process involves a simulated conversation with an interested party (Brookfield, 1995; p.187). This can be an emotional journey as it involves 'gaining new perspectives on our practice and questioning assumptions that we did not even realize we had' (Brookfield, 1995; p.39).

Exposure to a range of perspectives, including theoretical contributions, allows an individual to gain greater cognisance of the knowledge community and its specific discourse that they wish to access (Northedge, 2003; p.175). Viewing one's practice through a theoretical or conceptual lens is viewed positively as a means of providing an individual with a more expansive learning environment (Fuller and

Unwin, 2004; p. 139). Professional literature, although potentially challenging, is a significant lens through which to view practice in that it can help the individual understand past actions whilst also suggesting alternative routes for future action (Argyris and Schön, 1992; Brookfield, 1995). Literature '...can give us tools, techniques, and tips on how to make curricular and evaluative decisions that are negotiated rather than imposed' (Brookfield, 1995; p.203). This can be an empowering experience for an individual since '...seeing a personal insight stated as a theoretical proposition makes us more likely to take seriously our own reasoning and judgements. It also strengthens our ability to state clearly the rationale informing our actions' (Brookfield, 1995; p.186).

Research suggests that the instructor should select literature and academic articles that have a professional relevance for the participants because it is through such recognition that an individual will be prepared to challenge deeply held beliefs and assumptions (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Choy, 2009; Gravett and Petersen, 2009; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). It is through this authenticity that the participants will begin to develop a personal relationship with research as a subject (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). Therefore, the theory selected for the leadership programme needs to be recognisable to the participants and hold a personal relevance for them if a relationship is to be generated (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.192). This process will necessitate the participants having the opportunity to communicate their own thoughts towards a theory, through dialogue, as well as trying to uncover the thoughts of the author (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.193). It may be more convenient to create this dialogue through virtual world chat environments with both the academic and the student being present (Polin, 2010). This method was found to be an effective means of engaging part-time and commuter students with academic research as the research gained in relevance and was discussed '...from within an experience of the practice' (Polin, 2010; p. 171) rather than from a distance. In a group situation the use of theoretical perspectives can prevent intellectual stagnation since the process of examining practice '...can expose contradictions of which we were previously unaware and can help us make explicit those paradigmatic assumptions that are part of our intellectual furniture' (Brookfield, 1995; p.188).

The freedom to enter into reflective discourse is an essential dimension in the meaning-making process because it is the vehicle by which one negotiates and then tests out the validity of new assumptions following a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000, 2003). It emphasises the social nature of the learning process by providing collective reassurance that the new belief is valid (Mezirow, 1997; p.10). Therefore, learning is situated and will be affected by the social and cultural forces that surround it and will either allow or deny the individual access to participate in discourse and critical reflection (Mezirow, 1996; p.168). Discourse, according to this perspective is dialogue that leads to an assessment of '...beliefs, feelings, and values' (Mezirow, 2003; p.59). Dialogue is essential in the transformation process as it '...provides the medium for critical reflection to be put into action, where experience is reflected upon, assumptions and beliefs are questioned, and habits of mind are ultimately transformed' (Taylor, 2009; p.9). Imagination is regarded as playing a key role in this process since it is the means by which an individual can access alternative perspectives which can contribute to the development of a more flexible and inclusive frame of reference (Mezirow, 2000).

Possessing the freedom to engage in reflective discourse (Mezirow, 2000) or, as it is later defined, critical-dialectical discourse (Mezirow, 2003) is essential and ideally requires:

- Access to accurate, complete information with no evidence of coercion
- Access to and an empathy towards alternative viewpoints
- The development of a more critically reflective position to one's own assumptions and those of others
- The ability to assess arguments
- Equal opportunity to contribute to the discourse process
- The acceptance of a best judgment that has resulted from the process

(Mezirow, 2000; p. 13-14)

The conditions cited above are the ideal and therefore rarely realised in practice. Mutual understandings that are negotiated via this process as a result should be regarded as tentative (Mezirow, 1990, 2000). For the individual to engage effectively in this process requires emotional maturity which is externalised by

'...feelings of trust, solidarity, security and empathy' (Mezirow, 2000; p.12). The generation of these conditions therefore needs to be prioritised by the educator in order to propagate interpersonal relationships successfully. The facilitation of effective discourse therefore may be at the expense, in the early stages of interaction, of the participants reaching mutual understandings (Marsick, 1990; Mezirow, 1996). The leadership programme tutor should aim to realise the ideal conditions in order to allow the participants to enter freely into the various forms of discourse (Mezirow, 2000; p.14).

### **1.2.5 The Role of Critical Reflection in the Transformative Process**

Critical reflection stands at the core of transformative learning and '... involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built' (Mezirow, 1990; p.1). Mezirow (1997) emphasised the need for individuals to become critically reflective of both other peoples' assumptions and beliefs (objective reframing) and, more importantly, their own (subjective reframing) (Mezirow, 1997; p.7). The process of reflection was likened to problem-solving where an individual could reflect on the content, process or premise of the problem concerned (Mezirow, 1991). Reflection centred upon premise was regarded as the most significant since the process of transformative reasoning would enable the learner to examine critically '... the epistemic assumptions supporting one's values, beliefs, convictions and preferences' (Mezirow, 2009; p.22). This process must be regarded by the individual to be in their own interests but when the position is successfully embraced it does provide a clear rationale and increases the '...probability that we will take informed actions...those that can be explained and justified to ourselves and others' (Brookfield, 1995; p.22). The process of laying our most deeply held beliefs and assumptions bare to others and having to provide a rationale for such beliefs results in the creation of an emotional climate which is supportive, democratic and compassionate (Rogers and Farson, 1991; Brookfield, 1995).

Successful communicative learning is dependent on the development of the skills of critical reflection and critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1990; Brookfield, 1995;

Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 2003; Brookfield, 2009; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). Critical reflection can occur individually or collectively but as a result the individual learner will be habitually disposed to adopt a critically reflective stance towards their own assumptions and those of others; it is seen as a continuous process (Mezirow, 2003, 2009; Hoggan, 2014). Brookfield (2009) was in agreement but added that the individual's position should also result in '...the deconstruction of ideas and professional practices for the interests they serve [becoming] second nature' (Brookfield, 2009; p.127). The freedom to engage in autonomous thought was considered to allow the individual '...greater control over... [their] lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers' (Mezirow, 2000; p. 8). Critical reflection is not without its dangers: Brookfield (1995; p. xiii) warned that encouraging a critically reflective position within an individual must be accompanied by preparation for the potential struggles that may accompany the pursuit of change in colleagues or organisational systems.

Educational intervention has an important role in equipping the learner with the necessary skills to help identify and reassess meaning perspectives in rational awareness (Marsick, 1990; Mezirow, 1997; Clement and Vandenbergher, 2000). The educator is viewed as having a key role to play in the learning process and should lead the student on a carefully planned journey into the academic discourse with which they are largely unfamiliar (Northedge, 2003; p. 170). This is not an advancement of a didactic teaching position; instead it involves the educator putting a structure into place to ensure that the participant is not 'locked out' of the relevant discourse (Northedge, 2003; p.172). The educator is well placed as subject expert to '...lend students the capacity to frame the meanings of a specialist discourse by opening up 'conversations' with them and sharing in a flow of meaning' (Northedge, 2003; p. 173). This will involve both oral and written feedback that maintains structured, regular access to the specialist discourse for the student. The educator therefore should be well placed to provide timely and well planned intervention '...in providing just-in-time assistance to enable confident action in situations where confident competence is lacking' (Fenwick, 2003; p.121).

The role of the educator is therefore pivotal in fostering the conditions '...to initiate a reassessment of... [the participants'] past and present achievements' (Cohen, 1997; p63). Wenger (1998) disagreed and proposed that the traditional role of an educational instructor would be to deliver a reified curriculum to the students which acted as an obstacle to learning. The situative view argued that within an educational setting the participant can become overly dependent on reified material and therefore learning can be superficial and be limited in terms of transference to the workplace. The educator, according to Wenger (1998), should provide suitable opportunities for the students to negotiate meaning rather than simply firing knowledge-based material towards them in the hope that it hits its target. The learning strategies should encourage the student '... to adjust their professional self and their subjective educational theory to cope with the challenges confronting them' (Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000; p.93). In fact, Wenger (1998) suggested that in order to help the participants really embrace the material under study an active practitioner may have an advantage since they can demonstrate an '... authentic form of participation' which 'might be one of the most deeply essential requirements for teaching' (Wenger, 1998; p.277). The active practitioner is well placed to create highly relevant learning strategies that become quickly integrated into professional practice (Eraut, 1994; p.120).

Case studies and simulations, amongst other activities, were seen to promote such discovery learning as '...the key idea is to help the learners actively engage the concepts presented in the context of their own lives and collectively critically assess the justification of new knowledge' (Mezirow, 1997; p.10). The encouragement of a state of intersubjectivity by the educator through these strategies can also help to maintain a momentum of learning by assisting '...those who are unable for whatever reason to keep moving ahead' (Fenwick, 2003; p. 122). In this scenario the educator becomes the catalyst in encouraging the individual to solve problem based activities (Merriam et al., 2007; p.169). Effective sequencing of learning tasks by the educator can be a vital means to maintain learning momentum and to encourage a reflective stance (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; Gravett and Petersen, 2009). The individual is encouraged towards their learning edge 'where they are challenged and encouraged toward critical reflection' (Gravett and Petersen, 2009;

p.107). It becomes the role of the educator to create a supportive but challenging climate in which this can occur (Gravett and Petersen, 2009). The tightrope that should be walked by the educator between comfort and challenge in terms of their interactions with students (Gravett and Petersen, 2009; p.107) would benefit from greater clarity as to its practical implementation.

The educator is awarded the role of mentor, (Daloz, 1986) or facilitator (Marsick, 1990; Merriam et al., 2007). In both cases, the focus is on the learner's development as opposed to a reaction to a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1996). In a facilitatory role the educator was seen to assist the individual in an examination of existing frames of reference and assessment of the potential for change in a trusting environment (Marsick, 1990; Merriam et al., 2007). The importance of the mentoring role had been illustrated by Daloz (1986) through a consideration of the anxiety that many adults experienced upon a return to education following a significant sabbatical. It was at this difficult juncture that a mentor could aid the learning process and individual potential for transformation. Due to the personal nature of the process the educator will be faced with the challenge to assist the learner in making sense of emotional experiences (Dirkx, 2008; p. 9). It is through this manner of support that the learner will develop an awareness of personal perspectives and deeply held assumptions and '...they can reflect sufficiently to experience a reassessment' (Cohen, 1997; p.63). Trust is seen as a key ingredient in the generation of a relationship between educator and student to achieve such ends since 'trusting teachers is often a necessary precondition for students' speaking out' (Brookfield, 1995; p.10).

The importance of storytelling was emphasised as a means to provide a route for the individual learning journey and thereby the encouragement of dialogue (Daloz, 1986; p.22). The contextualisation of difficult concepts in story form is regarded as a useful tool in allowing students to access the frame of reference and therefore gain in confidence as the meanings associated with the example are easily internalised. It is then that students become more willing to engage in discourse and collaborative activity (Mezirow, 1997; Northedge, 2003). The programme tutor, as an insider, should be well placed to construct highly relevant case studies that

initiate a state of intersubjectivity to help the participants internalise the specialist leadership discourse (Northedge, 2003; p.173). The insider position should enable the educator on the programme to assess when intervention will have the maximum impact. The teacher is fluent in the discourse and therefore Northedge (2003) argues it is the teacher who is the person who is best placed to coach the students in speaking and understanding the discourse. The activities selected by the teacher are designed to engage with the students' own experiences but also to challenge and thereby to allow the more ambitious to seek out knowledge about related areas (Fenwick, 2003; Northedge, 2003; Merriam et al., 2007). Without this input from the academic expert these debates and potential avenues for exploration may well be overlooked in the quest to guarantee student-centeredness.

Reflective writing tasks are regarded as a useful vehicle for the adult educator, in a formal setting, to enable the learner, through an intersubjective position, to help develop the skills of critical self-reflection in order to alter self-perceptions (Belenky and Stanton, 2000; Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton, 2006; Clark and Rossiter, 2008; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). The nature of the connection the individual makes with the material is both cognitive and affective (Clark and Rossiter, 2008; p.67). Autobiographical tools can provide the learner with the space necessary to transform as they begin to view themselves as the producers of knowledge and agents of change (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). Lysaker and Furuness's (2011) research was conducted in an intensive summer school and emphasised the importance of relational aspects of learning in the transformation process. The learning strategies on the leadership programme will contain a reflective writing element and therefore the findings of Lysaker and Furuness (2011) have relevance. The context, however, differs as the participants on the leadership programme will not have access to an intensive period of time together which may impact on the strength of relations that may or may not emerge in this particular setting.

Although viewed as an effective vehicle for bringing assumptions and beliefs into awareness autobiographical tools alone are not regarded to be sufficient to foster transformative learning as the individual would remain constrained by their own meaning perspectives since 'no matter how much we may think we have an



accurate sense of ourselves, we are stymied by the fact that we are using our own interpretive filters to become aware of our own interpretive filters' (Brookfield, 2009; p.133). Therefore, exposure to alternative perspectives is viewed as essential for the individual to reassess existing meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1990; Brookfield, 2009; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). The process of critical reflection should involve '...some lenses that reflect back to us a stark and differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do' (Brookfield, 2009; p.133).

### **1.2.6 The Extra Rational Focus in Critical Reflection and Transformative Learning**

The development of a critically reflective position is regarded as a highly charged emotional journey as the process of re-examining long-held assumptions and beliefs is likely to evoke strong emotional reactions (Brookfield, 1986, 1990, 1995; Marsick, 1990; Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 2009; Taylor, 2009). The emotions experienced can range from being positive and stimulating to very negative emotions which can undermine an individual's confidence (Dirkx, 2008; p.9). The constructivist perspective recommends that learning should hold a personal significance for the individual which has signified a shift in academic focus from critical reflection being '...seen as a rational approach to learning, research has revealed that it is the affective ways of knowing that prioritize experience and identify for the learner what is personally most significant in the process of reflection' (Taylor, 2009; p.4). The development of an affective focus acknowledged the important role that emotions, imagination and creativity played in the transformation process (Mezirow, 1990; Dirkx, 1998; 2008; Taylor, 2009). Dirkx (2008) argued that the social and relational nature of much adult learning '...often fosters, elicits, or implicitly encourages learners to give voice or expression to [the] underlying affect or emotion' (Dirkx, 2008; p.9). The leadership programme may foster emotional responses from the leadership students due to the local

composition of the cohort which it can be argued has the potential to generate strong relational ties between cohort members (Donaldson, 2009; p.71).

A focus on the importance of emotions in the learning process does not render rational awareness redundant, according to Cranton (2006) since '...any insightful theory of transformative learning...should include both dimensions of the learning process' (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.134). The interrelation of the rational and the affective forces is seen as conducive to the development of an individual's emotional intelligence, a key ingredient in the process of personal transformation and effective leadership (Goleman, 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2003). Transformative learning '...requires a climate of both affective and cognitive trust, something that usually develops over weeks or months, often spread over time, and involves both the head and the heart' (Marsick and Maltbia, 2009 ; p.170). This process could lead to individual empowerment which is seen as a necessity if the critical reflection process is to result in a challenge to society's existing norms and values (Brookfield, 2012; p.133). This means that the learning strategies used on a leadership programme should aim to stimulate both processes as the development of emotional intelligence is viewed as a necessity in the transformation process (Mezirow, 2000; 2003) and in the development of a leadership approach able to '...inspire, arouse passion and enthusiasm, and keep people motivated and committed' (Goleman et al., 2003; p.x)

The self, from this position (Dirkx, 1998; Dirkx et al., 2006), is a creative force and therefore reflective discourse should involve the unconscious part of the mind as well as the conscious if deep rooted emotions are to be transformed. This is because it is 'through environments that are both supportive and challenging' that individuals co-create, '...visions that are more meaningful and holistic, that lead them to deeper engagements with themselves' (Dirkx, 1998; p.10). The development of a deeper intersubjective relationship, Dirkx (2006) argued, would enable more productive relationships with others to develop due to the inextricably connected relationship between the inner-self and the learning process (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.129). A complete transformation of perspective is impossible without a consideration of emotions (Dirkx, 1998). Emotions and feelings are contained in the

symbols and image that surface during the learning process (Dirkx, 1998). In this sense transformative learning cannot be imposed on an individual by the educator; it should emerge from within oneself (Cohen, 1997; p.63). Emotions will affect both one's meaning perspectives and whether it is possible to act upon reflective insight (praxis) (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 2000). The creation of learning strategies that hold a personal significance for the participants should evoke a range of emotions which can help foster a transformation (Taylor, 2009). The challenge is to locate meaningful aspects of the leadership learning that will help individuals to develop a critically reflective stance (Dirkx et al., 2006). The next section will address the need to generate a critically reflective stance to meet the challenges of extrinsic pressures.

### **1.2.7 The Influence of Critical Pedagogy in Transformative Learning**

Mezirow (2009; p.23) argued that the process of becoming more critical involved a recognition of the myriad of influences that constitute a frame of reference including power, ideology, race, gender and class. However, recognition alone of such forces is regarded as insufficient to facilitate a transformation since it is the underlying structures that perpetuate the beliefs that need to be changed (Brookfield, 2012). This perspective is representative of the field of critical pedagogy where the role of power and ideology in the transformation process are considered in greater detail (Freire, 1996; Brookfield, 2005, 2012). Emancipatory action, according to this perspective, cannot be contained within an individual transformation; it should result in large-scale change and movement towards the creation of greater democracy (Freire, 1996; Brookfield, 2005, 2012). Mezirow (2006, p. 97) questioned the relevance of this interpretation of social action within a democratic society, although Shaul (1996) maintained that the theory has relevance wherever and whenever inequality is present.

In the literature power relations are examined in the learning process from both the micro (learning environment) (Brookfield, 1995, 2005; Illich, 2012) and macro (societal) position (Foucault, 1994; Freire, 1996). The individual no longer took centre stage instead the context surrounding the learning process became the

focus. The objective of critical reflection, from this perspective, is to engage in ideology critique to equip the learner '...to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices' (Brookfield, 2005; p. 13). Effective adult learning would enable teachers '...to critique trends which question the legitimacy of their knowledge and experience as vital to critical conversations about school improvement' (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.183). The limiting nature of these influences on individual decision making has to be recognised in order for a profound transformation to occur (Brookfield, 2012). Power is seen to be ubiquitous and it is illusory to imagine that one can think or be or act meaningfully without reference to the power structures already found in the social body (Foucault, 1994; Brookfield, 2005).

In his discussion of disciplinary power Foucault (1994) argued that even if an individual acted against the existing power structure, that very structure will still condition them. The individual therefore produces their own docile subjectivity: an identity, a set of behaviours which correspond to the regime that they find themselves in (Foucault, 1994). Even with the omnipresence of power, resistance is seen as a natural response even if actions are small and localised (Foucault, 1994). Power and knowledge are seen as one and the same thing, and knowledge is a social construct (Foucault, 1994). Therefore, according to Foucault (1994) the participants on the leadership programme will be faced with many different forms of knowledge on a daily basis. Power becomes almost transcendent and the individual is compelled to monitor their behaviour internally and take on a subjectivity that will ally with the operations of power (Foucault, 1991; pp. 135-169). With this in mind, this research should recognise the wide range of surveillance methods that teachers are subject to and the potential effect this may have on the critical reflection process (Hope, 2013; p.43). Critical reflection and learning therefore are political entities, as power is ever present, and will therefore permeate every meaning constructed by the participants on the leadership programme both individually and collectively (Foucault, 1991, 1994). Therefore, power will be present in the leadership programme and the educator should remain cognisant of the fact that no environment is neutral or safe and must be prepared to intervene to ensure a more egalitarian educational approach (Brookfield, 1995,

2005, 2012). The perceptions of the participants must be continually assessed to identify any concerns that may negatively impact on classroom interactions (Brookfield, 1995). Therefore, it is naïve to suggest that students and educators occupy an even playing field and so an awareness of these inequalities needs to be addressed for there to be a democratic learning process. The development of trust can play an important part in this process as students will assess their position '...only after the teacher's credibility has been established to their satisfaction and after they have learned what she stands for' (Brookfield, 1995; p.6).

The emancipatory focus of Freire (1996) had a significant influence on the transformative field through the potential of people to develop, through dialogue, critical faculties and fight against oppression. Empowerment was seen to result through dialogical interactions that involved respect and questioning of the perceived reality that enabled the individual to transcend the dominant ideology and become cognisant of inequalities and oppression (Freire, 1996). He rejected the banking concept of education where the student was seen as a passive receptacle in favour of a problem posing approach as the contextual nature of the problem gave the individuals ownership which led to commitment on their part (Freire, 1996; p.62). Although this perspective is concerned with the power of group transformation, the methodological discussion has relevance for alternative contexts. The ability to contextualise problems has an important role if learning activities, in the case of a formal learning environment, are to be made personally significant. The educator on the leadership programme should have awareness and understanding of the students' reality which may result in greater commitment on the part of the participants (Freire, 1996). In order to be liberated Freire (1996) argued that the oppressed must help to develop education programmes that allow them to be in a state of praxis: to reflect on their positions and realise that change is necessary and that they can empower themselves and act upon the situation to transform their existing reality.

The educator according to Freire (1996; p.62) would operate as a co-investigator so the role and motives of the tutor become crucial in terms of their influence in the transformation process as the presence of any hidden agenda would undermine the

entire emancipatory process. In his seminal work, 'Deschooling Society' Illich claimed that the educator is inextricably linked to the hidden curriculum that formal education contains as '...even the best of teachers cannot entirely protect his [sic.] pupils from it' (Illich, 2012; p.32) and therefore they will replicate the inequality and oppression of society undermining the notion that education programmes will result in transformation. So Critical Learning theory could be accused of actually perpetuating its own ideology and therefore being as problematic as other schools of thought. The educator should aim to maintain a transparent position in terms of their own experience, skill, knowledge if an environment of trust is to develop in a learning environment (Brookfield, 1995; p.6).

### ***1.3 The Collective Nature of the Learning Process***

There is much consensus within adult learning theory that education and training activities remain overly focused on the traditional transference of knowledge reliant on a didactic teaching methodology (Mezirow, 1997; Wenger, 1998, Northedge, 2003; Herrington and Herrington, 2006; Laiken, 2006; Laksov, Mann and Dahlgren, 2008; Polin, 2010). There is less acquiescence however, as to whether the most effective learning environment is intentional (Mezirow, 1997; Northedge, 2003; Herrington and Herrington, 2006; Laiken, 2006; Polin, 2010; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011) or situated within the participants' practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

#### **1.3.1 The Contribution of Situated Cognition**

The development of authenticity in the informal learning environment and the idea that learning occurs in context for adults was explored in detail with the situated learning work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and further developed through the development of the Communities of Practice concept (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Learning was seen as situated within the social practice that an individual was engaged in, as opposed to the cognitive and reflective processes associated with intentional learning situations (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Using a number of discrete case studies Lave and Wenger (1991) identified the various processes by

which new members (*apprentices*) from different groups were socialised into the role of professionals (*experts*) within an organisation. Greater onus was placed on the role of learner as opposed to educator and decontextualized educational settings were seen as supplementary to the learning process (Wenger, 1998; p.250). From this perspective learning becomes indivisible from practice and therefore holds great potential in the field of adult and workplace learning. The definition of learning, from this position, involves the constant negotiation of meaning through participation in practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning in communities of practice was founded on four key concepts:

- That humans are innately social creatures
  - Knowledge is viewed as competence in respect to valued activities e.g. being a successful educational leader
  - Knowledge is a matter of being actively engaged in relevant shared activities to achieve competence
  - The creation of meaning is the outcome of learning
- (Wenger, 1998; p.4)

As participants engage in shared tasks and collectively discuss views to find terms of agreement, the learning community develops. Although many communities of practice evolve in an organic way, with their learning being largely unintentional, Wenger (1998) and Wenger et al. (2002) made it clear that some communities of practice will emerge because of the institutional context within which they exist. They recognised the importance of training activities in that they allow people to meet, share experiences and provide opportunities to create communities but criticised the separation of training activities from actual practice. An extractive approach to training was seen to transform practice resources into institutional artefacts (e.g. a set of notes) which are then reintroduced into the workplace in a reified form (Wenger, 1998; p.249). The educational leadership programme may be seen as an extractive phenomenon as the learning experience would be separated from the participants' practice and as such the educator should strive to create a more integrative learning experience to encourage a participative approach focused on authentic educational leadership practice (Wenger, 1998; p.249).

It is recognised that individuals, in their day to day existence, may have little opportunity for engagement on a professional level and so '...the relationships that are created, and the exchange of experiences may well end up being more significant than the content of any instructional program' (Wenger, 1998; p.250). Ideally every individual within a group should engage in the collective meaning-making process as the collective targets implicit in the process should help to create an essential learning spirit (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). This becomes a primary motivational factor in the learning. Mutual interaction through free communication is an essential prerequisite in the process of sharing information and constructing social capital within the learning community (Wenger et al., 2002; p.37). Wenger (1998) outlined three characteristics shared by communities of practice:

- 1) *Mutual Engagement*: this refers to the building of collaborative relationships through participation within the community. Membership implies commitment to a domain (e.g. educational leadership) which binds the members of the group together.
- 2) *Joint enterprise*: members of the group establish a common understanding of what it is that unites them through participation in the community. There is continuous fluidity as the terms of agreement on the meanings are fixed and then developed further through collective and individual renegotiation.
- 3) *The development of a shared repertoire of resources*: as part of their practice, the community produces a set of shared resources which can include a range of personal experiences which become a shared repertoire to inform future practice.

Agreement exists in community of practice literature surrounding the fundamental premise that communities of practice contain groups of individuals who share particular values and interests and engage in shared activities (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). During this process shared meanings are continually negotiated and '...over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices and approaches' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.5). Situative learning has relevance for this research since case study work in the field of education has revealed the impact that communities of practice can have in higher education settings in terms of improved teaching and learning (Laksov et al., 2008; Polin, 2010). The development of teaching and learning within an academic department



utilised a community of practice model and was seen to result in an improved quality of teaching. This occurred through the creation of more appropriate social spaces to engage in professional discourse and collective meaning-making (Laksov et al., 2008). The social learning model has a flexibility that is attractive to an educational researcher. Polin (2010) suggested a compatibility of the model with social computing applications on graduate degree programmes. The web-based tools had provided the part-time and commuter students with greater opportunities for community engagement than had been the case in the traditional university setting.

However, a large proportion of community of practice literature originates from the area of knowledge-intensive industries where ethnographic studies have used the concept as a key vehicle to monitor organisational competence (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Orr, 1996; Cohendet, Diani and Lerch, 2005; Zboralski, 2009; Iaquinto, Ison and Faggian, 2011). Researchers in this field see great potential for communities of practice in terms of promoting innovation and spreading tacit knowledge within an organisation. The concept is so widely used in this field that one could be excused for seeing a community of practice as '...some kind of organisational tool or managerial stratagem' (Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007; p.2). The broad usage of the concept has led researchers to accuse Lave and Wenger (1991) of coining a term with so much flexibility '...it has seemed in danger of losing specificity and analytical edge, sliding into a catch-all term' (Hughes et al., 2007; p.4). Although the research from this field can be accused of being a far cry from the organic, self-emerging structure originally proposed by Wenger (1998) the conclusions are useful in a consideration of the generation of an effective learning environment. Discussions have centred on the role of motivation, enthusiasm, communication patterns, trust and safety (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005; Muller, 2006; Laksov et al., 2008; Zboralski, 2009; Polin, 2010; Iaquinto et al., 2011) which are all key elements of the adult learning process from the constructivist perspective and have a relevance for this research.

Therefore, social learning theory does suggest that when one participates in social practice, experiential learning will result, as the community refines and amends its

practices and filters out those that are no longer fit for purpose (Fenwick, 2003). Whether this type of learning actually mirrors the best practice in a field at any given time has been questioned by critics in terms of the community's ability to filter out detrimental practices that may be '...harmful, unjust, exclusive, or just plain dysfunctional in preventing the community from fulfilling its core purposes' (Fenwick, 2003; p.27). It is at this juncture that intentional learning could have a role in modifying this knowledge and therefore its absence could be seen as counterproductive as 'educators can intervene and help create positive practices and reaffirm the adult learner' (Merriam et al., 2007; p.184).

Without this, one must question whether the learning from legitimate peripheral participation is going to differ radically from the routine socialisation that occurs when one enters an unfamiliar occupational field (Fenwick, 2003; Fuller, 2007). Therefore, knowledge embedded in practice could lead to an individual performing without giving appropriate weight to the necessity of the task or the methods employed (Fenwick, 2003). Critics have argued that the knowledge acquired only has cogency within that community and therefore has limited transferability due to its "situated" nature since '...a successful path from legitimate to full participation typically appears to occur with minimal changes to practice or social relations' (Fuller, 2007; p22).

It would appear then that the removal of learning from an educational context does not ensure equality of access, as some individuals are already in possession of the necessary skill-set to ensure rapid progression in a competitive environment (Bourdieu, 1977; Fenwick, 2003). Fenwick (2003; p.27) also queried how participants who have become marginalised reintegrate themselves back onto the path of becoming an expert. Therefore, can Lave and Wenger (1991), expect that all participants on the periphery have an equal chance of journeying to the position of expert? The answer would be negative as potentially individuals could corrupt the community to serve their own ends and the absence of intentional instruction would signify that the chances of redressing endemic inequalities are limited (Fenwick, 2003; Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Merriam et al., 2007). Fenwick (2003) took a stronger line in suggesting that some of the methods employed by the community

could have a discriminatory effect on the participants since '...natural community structures and power imbalances may exclude some learners from participation' (Fenwick, 2003; p.94). This could lead to the exact opposite of the type of learning advocated by Lave and Wenger (1991) in that the community '...might become a place where employees are 'indoctrinated' and where knowledge, ideas, innovations become 'appropriated' by those who hold the most power resources within that community' (Hughes, 2007; p.38). To adopt a critical, emancipatory position towards the situative stance, power relations and the resultant inequalities within both the community of practice and the learning journey of the apprentice require greater consideration if equality of opportunity is to be addressed effectively (Fenwick, 2003).

Many of the criticisms of communities of practice can be attributed to a misunderstanding of the Lave and Wenger's (1991) intentions since '...their primary aim was not to construct a treatise on how learning *ought to be* but, rather, to develop an approach which could help reveal learning as it *actually is* (italicised in original)' (Hughes, 2007; p.32). Lave and Wenger (1991) have been accused of undermining the important role played by the individual in the learning process (Eraut, 2004; Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Billet, 2007; Fuller, 2007). Therefore, a fusion has been requested between the social and individual perspectives on knowledge and learning '...in the complex, rapidly changing, post-modern world' (Eraut, 2004; p. 201). This branch of literature does not attempt to encourage the reader to view learning in terms of a dichotomy between the individual or social perspective but instead to award the individual equal billing to the community in which they are situated (Billet, 2007). The two processes are regarded as operating interdependently in the learning process since it is '...the negotiated contribution of both the personal and the social world [that] shape[s] human cognition' (Billet, 2007; p.59).

Individuals are seen to function in multiple social groups where they will both give and receive knowledge and this important experience does require exploration (Eraut, 2004; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004; Fuller, 2007). The fact that an individual can belong to range of communities, led researchers (e.g. Hodkinson and

Hodkinson, 2004) to call for a narrower definition of the concept to more accurately represent their experience. An individual's multiple participation in a range of settings, including formal education, is argued to provide a more expansive experience than individuals who remained within one setting (Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Fuller, 2007). The participants on the leadership programme, as is the case with the teaching profession, will belong to and operate within a number of different communities (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004) and therefore their role within multiple social groups does need to be recognised in terms of the learning experience. The call for an individual to gain experiences from a range of perspectives does appear to echo the transformative perspective of learning (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 2000).

Situative learning and transformative learning may initially appear to be polar opposites since '...individual meaning-making is the focus of transformative learning theory whereas practice-based accounts view participation in social practices as the key to understanding learning' (Hodge, 2014; p.1). It has become apparent, however, that a complementarity and interdependency exists between the approaches (Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000; Eraut, 2004; Billet, 2007; Fuller, 2007; Hodge, 2014). Hodge (2014) suggested that the two perspectives are complementary since social practices have a pivotal role in the individual transformation process and both therefore effectively inform practice. From this perspective the potential for transformative learning lay in an individual's movement between social practices, '... an "inter-practice" phenomenon' (Hodge, 2014; p1). Greater exploration was necessary into the possible motives for an individual entering a transformation trajectory. This is because the theory of social learning suggests that this may be the result of a social practice no longer being seen as fit for purpose by an individual and an alternative community being seen as more attractive or the two may be interconnected (Hodge, 2014; p.16).

Collaboration is regarded as the key skill in professions characterised by rapid change, such as educational leadership (Day, 1999; Fullan, 2001, 2007) since the process of 'becoming critically reflective of the assumptions of others is fundamental to effective collaborative problem posing and solving' (Mezirow, 1997;

p.9). Therefore, the leadership programme should aim to provide an environment to foster a collaborative culture and the participants should be provided with opportunities to engage in both individual and collective meaning-making for an effective learning experience to occur. Effective collaboration, Clement and Vandenbergher (2000; p.85) argue, is dependent on an individual having the self-confidence and freedom to know which approach (autonomous or collegial) should be utilised in a particular situation. This results in a cyclical view of the concepts since '...in order to collaborate adequately, teachers need to work alone sometimes, and vice versa' (Clement and Vandenbergher, 2000; p.85). Collaboration in both practice-based learning literature and transformative learning literature emphasises the important role that a community can have in the generation of an effective learning environment for adults. The importance attributed to the role of community from the perspective of both sets of literature makes it relevant to this particular research. Careful consideration is needed in terms of the conditions required to foster such a collaborative culture in an educational leadership programme that will be delivered in a decontextualized setting to ascertain the possibility of successfully generating a sense of belonging amongst the participants (Wenger, 1998; Block, 2009).

In the literature the communities can be referred to as Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002), Professional Learning Communities (Dufour, Eaker and Dufour, 2005), Networked Learning Communities (Katz, Earl and Jaafar, 2009), Learning groups (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004) or simply, communities (Block, 2009). The relevant aspects of all of these permutations of the concept will be drawn upon in this discussion. However, common to both the situative view and the transformative perspective, is the desire to foster a learning environment founded on the prerequisites of '...trust, solidarity, security, and empathy' (Mezirow, 2000; p.12). These are viewed as the ideal conditions needed to generate a collaborative culture and collective meaning-making (Marsick, 1990; Rogers and Farson, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Mezirow, 2000; Dewey, 2007; Gravett and Petersen, 2009) and therefore require examination in terms of this educational leadership programme. These tenets provide effective signposts by which constructivist literature can be navigated to identify the conditions needed to foster

such an environment. In both cases, albeit at different stages of the meaning-making process, individuals will interpret their experiences through collaboration with others (Merriam et al., 2007; p.159). Critical reflection may be viewed in the initial phases as a solitary endeavour but ultimately the process will embrace a collaborative format (Brookfield, 1995; p.36).

Collaboration through participation in critical-dialectical discourse is of central importance to the process of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; 2003). Perspective transformation is an individual phenomenon but the need to participate fully and freely in critical-dialectical discourse to validate transformed perspectives emphasised that learning was indeed a social process that '...leads towards a clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgement' (Mezirow, 2000; p.11). In the following section each of Mezirow's (2000) prerequisites (trust, solidarity, security, and empathy) will be examined in turn to illustrate their potential to generate a learning environment characterised by collaboration and collective meaning-making.

### **1.3.2 Trust**

The generation of interpersonal trust amongst individuals is viewed, by the literature, as a key prerequisite in the development of a collaborative culture and collective meaning-making (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Tripp, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005; Muller, 2006; Laksov et al., 2008; Choy, 2009; Marsick and Maltbia, 2009; Zboralski, 2009; Musanti and Pence, 2010). For many individuals this outcome is regarded as important as membership of the community itself and teachers have attached great significance to '...warmth and mutual trust in their relationships with other team members' (Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000; p.98). This supportive climate is seen to be of great value to an individual as many community environments are characterised by change (Muller, 2006; p.385). The bonds that tie members together are seen to be governed by shared norms and values '...qui guident les actions des membres qui y adhèrent, de même que l'intensité des relations de confiance qui semble gouverner les relations (translated as ... which guide the actions of members who

belong, just as the intensity of trust relations which seem to govern these bonds)' (Cohendet et al., 2005; p.133). A learning environment permeated by trust and respect is viewed as essential if individuals are expected to enter into high quality interaction (Tripp, 2004; Choy, 2009; Zboralski, 2009) and share deeply held personal experiences and knowledge (McCotter, 2001; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Roberts, 2006). The adult educator should aim for high quality interaction and the unfettered sharing of experiences; therefore, the potential for fostering trust in an education leadership programme has great significance for this research.

The adoption of a critically collective position is achievable when trusting relationships have been established since it '...allows learners to share their understandings, question, and contest meanings to gain consensual understanding' (Choy, 2009; p. 78). In short, trust requires an in-depth understanding of each other's practice through the development of an empathetic position (Wenger et al, 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004). This can take an emotional toll on the learner so in order to engage in collective meaning-making an open and safe atmosphere is required (Wenger et al., 2002; Roberts, 2006). Group members are seen to be more willing '...to share ideas, expose... [their] ignorance, ask difficult questions and listen carefully' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.27). It is within a climate such as this that 'the individual [will] feel safe enough to incorporate new experiences and values into his [sic] concept of himself [sic]' (Rogers and Farson, 1991; p.190). The assumptions that the individual may explore and revise will involve risk-taking and therefore trust must permeate the core of the learning space (Tripp, 2004; p.198). Gravett and Petersen (2009; p.107) describe being removed from one's comfort zone as like being on the edge of new learning. By cajoling a student out of a familiar learning territory and into the unfamiliar they are in fact being pushed towards their learning edge where it is more likely for critical reflection to take place. For this to occur, trust and respect must be present in the learning environment (Gravett and Petersen, 2009; p.107). Ultimately, the generation of emotional and cognitive trust could foster the necessary conditions for a personal transformation (Marsick and Maltbia, 2009).

To generate this intensity of trust can take time, '...and involves both the head and the heart' (Marsick and Maltbia, 2009; p.170). The participants during the leadership programme will interact for an extended period and therefore may have the potential to develop the depth of trust necessary to adopt a critically reflective position. The educator, however, can play an important part in this process through the provision of an appropriate learning space for students to engage in critical discourse (Brookfield, 1995; Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). This necessary space may take the form of autobiographical writing tasks (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Dirkx et al., 2006; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011) or be brought about through the provision of physical space by an educator's physical withdrawal from the learning environment (Brookfield, 1995; p. 11). The complete withdrawal of the educator from the learning environment is representative of the trust that can be generated between learner and educator by treating learners as adults (Brookfield, 1995; p. 227).

Bogenrieder and Nooteboom (2004) argue that where relations have not previously been established 'intensive collaboration can set in motion a positive cycle of emerging trust' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.296). Trust is viewed as an essential buffer against the relational risks attached to collaborative activities. Power relations will permeate social interactions and affect the extent to which participants are willing to trust each other (Roberts, 2006; p.628). One of the risks cited by Bogenrieder and Nooteboom (2004; p.294) concerned the potential for knowledge 'spillover' which could potentially damage an individual's competitive position. This concept may have relevance for the participants on the leadership programme as they emanate from the same local authority cluster and may find themselves disadvantaged professionally if the knowledge they have willingly shared has provided another member with a competitive advantage in terms of career progression (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.294). This may limit the extent to which the participants are willing to engage in knowledge spillover and they could '... hold back on their knowledge while exploiting knowledge from others' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.294). A high level of professional competition between participants is regarded as detrimental to the establishment of a collaborative culture and community (Roberts, 2006; p.629).



Relational risks can be appeased by the creation of mutual dependency based on self-interest or genuine trust. The latter is based '...on other, more social and personal foundations' and '...entails the expectation that others will not behave opportunistically even if they have both the opportunity and incentives for doing so' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.296). This has also been referred to as the creation of reciprocity based on a deep understanding of mutual value, as all are seen to contribute to '...a pool of goodwill – of "social capital"...that allows people to contribute to the community while trusting that at some point, in some form, they too will benefit' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.37). Bogenrieder and Nooteboom (2004; p.297) have further categorised trust into competence and intention, the former being focused on the ability of one's peers to communicate appropriate knowledge effectively to the group and the latter being focused on the true nature of one's intentions following knowledge appropriation. The development of competence trust is seen to increase an individual's confidence in the ability of others through the successful transference of tacit knowledge (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p. 302). The group members begin to feel secure in each other's ability and are more likely to share knowledge. To trust the intentions of another is seen as key to the development of real trust since an individual needs to be confident that knowledge generated by the group will be utilised for the good of all concerned (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p. 297). Therefore, it would be desirable for the participants on a leadership programme to generate trust based on the group's professional competence and intentions. According to the literature (Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004) both elements are necessary for the development of genuine trust that may ultimately result in shared knowledge and practice.

Once personal trust has been successfully established in a learning environment the participants will accept a collective commitment to the enterprise of the community rather than the pursuit of individual outcomes (Wenger, 1998, Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Roberts, 2006). The generation of trust in an education leadership environment should be a priority if a successful collaborative culture is to be generated and collective meaning-making encouraged.

### **1.3.3 Solidarity**

A feeling of solidarity (or sense of belonging) is argued to result from community engagement and lies at the heart of a collaborative learning culture (Wenger et al., 2002; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004; Block, 2009; Zboralski, 2009). Learning is viewed as '...a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.29). Research suggests (Wenger, 1998, Wenger et al., 2002; Block, 2009; Iaquinto et al., 2011) that an individual's development of a sense of belonging should be prioritised in social settings which are subject to fragmentation and isolation. This is considered to be the case for the teaching profession where the sense of isolation is well documented and research has referred to the profession as being characterised by rapid change and increased accountability (Day, 1999; McCotter, 2001; Tripp, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Polin, 2010). Fullan (2007; p.24) argued that this level of isolation can result in the development of a limited perspective towards professional practice rather than consideration of the bigger picture.

A professional environment identified with significant pressure can limit the opportunities that individuals have for collective meaning-making and reflection (Day, 1999; Fullan, 2007; Polin, 2010). This can, however, be tempered by the generation of a feeling of belonging by individuals as they adopt the active role of both creator and co-creator of a community (Wenger, 1998; Block, 2009). This process need not be left to a chance occurrence as it should be possible to structure an experience of belonging (Block, 2009; p. xii). Basing his findings on large group methodology Block (2009) suggested a need to examine the existing accepted structures of patterns of individual engagement in order to encourage a process of transformation. His suggestions identified the role of leadership, group composition, tasks and the development of social spaces in the process of developing a sense of belonging. They, therefore, have relevance for the structure of a higher education leadership programme as these key issues can be applied to any group purporting to be a community.

The frequency and quality of interaction experienced by an individual is cited by researchers as a key prerequisite in the potential development of a sense of belonging (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005; Schenkel and Teigland, 2008; Block, 2009; Zboralski, 2009; Polin, 2010; Iaquinto et al., 2011). Frequency and quality need to operate simultaneously in the community to facilitate the development of shared norms and a common language (Wenger, 1998; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005; Muller, 2006; Iaquinto et al., 2011). The distinguishing line between formal and informal interaction, Schenkel and Teigland (2008; p.115) argue, decreases in line with the quality and frequency of the interaction amongst group members as dialogue becomes increasingly open. Without this degree of mutual understanding the creation and consolidation of new knowledge is not possible (Wenger, 1998; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005). This should be regarded as a priority for the adult educator since the creation of new knowledge is regarded as essential to the health of a community to counter stagnation and complacency (Achinstein, 2002; p.426).

To achieve the suggested frequency and regularity of communication diverse methods can be utilised including the vast array of web based applications (Cohendet et al., 2005; Polin, 2010). Therefore, the method of communication is not as relevant to the development of effective interaction as is its frequency and regularity (Wenger et al., 2002; Cohendet et al., 2005; Schenkel and Teigland, 2008; Zboralski, 2009; Polin, 2010; Iaquinto et al. 2011). Polin (2010) found this to be the case on a graduate programme as the majority of the cohort were teachers, studying part-time and having to commute to the university campus. The lack of meaningful, professional interaction experienced by this cohort of students, Polin (2010) argued, had impacted negatively on the quality of their overall educational experience and their ability to connect effectively to professional educational practices (Polin, 2010). This had been exacerbated by their professionally isolated position which she felt would not be remedied upon enrolment onto a graduate programme. This, however, had been mitigated by the increased use of web tools on the programme in an attempt to intensify the frequency and quality of student interaction as it provided easier access to

collaborative work opportunities and scarce resources (Polin, 2010). The obstacles to effective interaction cited by Polin (2010) may be applicable to the education leadership programme as the participants will also be part-time, commuter students. Attention needs to be paid to the generation of high quality and frequent interaction opportunities for individuals if a successful collaborative culture and collective meaning-making opportunities are to be established (Cohendet et al., 2005; Polin, 2010; Iaquinto et al., 2011).

A dense structure of linkages that can result from processes of interaction should be encouraged in order to create strong group ties since '...the more shared experience people have, the greater cognitive similarity will be, and communication can take place efficiently' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.291). The generation of enduring ties between members is central to the creation of a vibrant community (Wenger et al., 2002; p.62). If this occurs over a significant time period, individuals have the opportunity to outline their hopes and expectations attached to the interaction process which will ultimately facilitate the development of trust, empathy and cohesion between the group (Zboralski, 2009; p.94). Levels of reciprocity between members should be high as individuals become confident that the benefits they receive from the group will match the efforts they personally expend; this is indicative of a strong sense of belonging (Wenger et al. 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Block, 2009). This is not a negative sense of mutual dependency but an intense valuing of mutual effort (Wenger et al., 2002; p.37).

The frequency of interaction, which includes communication between formal group sessions, is regarded as vitally important to the development of a sense of belonging and the creation of new knowledge (Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005; Choy, 2009; Polin, 2010; Iaquinto et al., 2011). In addition to frequency and regularity positively impacting on interaction, Bogenrieder and Nooteboom (2004; p.293) identified the elements of intensity, openness of communication and duration of ties as having an impact on the strength of links. High levels of enthusiasm and motivation should permeate the

collective learning process since it is suggested that this will ultimately determine the creation of a collaborative culture (Iaquinto et al., 2011; p.17).

Interaction is identified as high quality when individuals are provided with the opportunity to talk about their work and share professional experiences (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Zemke and Zemke, 1995; Wilson and Berne, 1999; McCotter, 2001; Wenger et al, 2002; Herrington and Herrington, 2006). When experiences are shared on a more frequent and informal basis individuals are '... informally bound by the value that they find in learning together' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.5). The development of a sense of solidarity consequently is resultant of the collegial support that is generated from the process of sharing one's experiences (Clement and Vandenbergher, 2000; McCotter, 2001). Spending time with like-minded people is significant 'for those who have devoted most of their lives to learning one profession, connecting with others who share that passion is rewarding in itself' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.44). At times this can be intellectually challenging but may result in the generation of new ideas for group members (Clement and Vandenbergher, 2000). Learners want to engage collaboratively during the learning process (Gergen, 1995; Shotter, 1995) in both the role of co-learner and critical friend (Tripp, 2004). The collaborative environment created should provide teachers with '...the opportunities and the autonomy to create knowledge, to share knowledge and be engaged in informal collegial learning' (Tripp, 2004; p.195).

The value individuals attach to their interactions may also result from the perceived forward momentum associated with collaborative activity and collaborative successes (Fullan, 2011). Group members need to feel that both collectively and individually their progress has been a cumulative process (Likert, 1991; Zemke and Zemke, 1995; Fullan, 2007). Wenger et al.(2002; p.62) referred to this as a community's 'rhythm' since greater frequency of interaction between group members was seen to provide a strong and rhythmic beat which results in a more vibrant community as opposed to irregular interaction which results in a lethargic entity. Collaborative success can be intrinsically motivating since 'personal contributions are all the more gratifying when they are part of a team effort melding personal and social goals' (Fullan, 2011; p.3). Individuals are likely to

experience increased levels of self-confidence and self-belief which, in turn, encourages them to embark upon greater professional challenges (Eraut, 2007; Mujtaba, 2010). This can be viewed as a triangular relationship where challenge, support and confidence are seen to interact in a successful collaborative culture (Eraut, 2007). Support from one's colleagues is regarded as a crucial consideration when deciding upon the feasibility of future challenges. These sentiments were debated by Zboralski (2009; p.98) who suggested that individuals primarily participate in the learning process for personal profit and thus she rejected a connection between levels of personal motivation and the overall quality of interaction. Researchers (Likert, 1991; Tripp, 2004; Fullan, 2008, 2011) have suggested that a strong connection actually does exist between the two elements and that altruistic attitudes may emerge during the research process which place greater emphasis on collective goals as opposed to personal goals.

The development of a sense of belonging involves the individual recognising the importance of the bigger picture which can result in the development of a more holistic perspective overall (Fullan, 2001, 2007, 2008). Regardless of the collaborative context, group members are deemed to become '...almost as concerned about the success of other schools...as they do about their own (Fullan, 2008; p.50). High quality interaction will create a successful collaborative culture where the group members, through their expectations of one another, will exert positive pressure to realise collective goals (Fullan, 2008; p.63). Peer pressure generated by the collaborative accountability can result in high levels of engagement and motivation (Likert, 1991; Block, 2009; Fullan, 2011). The participants associated with this particular leadership programme will originate from a common school local authority cluster and therefore relationships may have had a competitive element. One of the goals of a programme tutor should be to encourage competitive feelings to be replaced by a more altruistic concern for collective progress and a collaborative culture (Fullan, 2008).

The strength of ties and sense of togetherness experienced by a group of individuals will influence the extent to which learning is viewed as a collective enterprise (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and

Nooteboom, 2004). Group members need to feel a sense of ownership of the domain within which their collective enterprise is located (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al. 2002; Iaquinto et al., 2011). The collaborative negotiation of a shared domain is central to the individual development of a sense of belonging as group members need to agree on what topics and issues they really care about (Wenger et al., 2002; p.45). The participatory activities need to provide the potential to create and negotiate meaning through the engagement and knowledge of the learning group

'... yet encourage them to explore new territories... [with] enough continuity for participants to develop shared practices and a long-term commitment to their enterprise and to each other' (Wenger, 1998; p.272). Individual commitment to the collective enterprise is illustrated by a willingness of all concerned to participate equally in collaborative and collective meaning-making activities (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Tripp, 2004; Iaquinto et al., 2011). The intensity of the collaboration should be a highly motivating (Wenger, 1998; Iaquinto et al., 2011) and empowering process as group members are seen to be in control of task outcomes and are responsible for collective learning and progression (Mezirow, 1997; McCotter, 2001).

One of the outcomes of a successful collaborative enterprise is the creation of a shared bank of resources focused on a shared domain that may contain '...a body of common knowledge, practices and approaches...they also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting... a common identity' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.5). The resources generated may include '...cases and stories, theories...lessons learned, best practices... [and]...include both the tacit and the explicit aspects of the community's knowledge' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.38). Individuals have ownership of the resource bank (Iaquinto et al., 2011) which they can draw upon in response to their current needs and when confronted with future challenges (Wenger et al., 2002; Iaquinto et al., 2011). The resources that have been negotiated by the group have direct relevance to their current needs and 'all these have meaning for the community of practice but can also be used in the production of new meanings' (Laksov et al., 2008; p.130). The shared knowledge

and practice created acts as a 'mini-culture' that generates a sense of solidarity between members (Wenger et al., 2002; p.39).

Whether the existence of a leader within a community impacts positively or negatively on the development of a sense of belonging is a prevalent theme in the literature. Leaders can be seen as playing a pivotal organisational, motivational and communicative role in the effective operation of a community (Muller, 2006, Laksov et al., 2008; Zboralski, 2009; Iaquinto et al., 2011). Zboralski (2009; p.93) argued that the leadership role is crucial if a community is to function successfully as their role can have a positive influence on the frequency and quality of interaction shared by the group. Leadership was seen to be most productive when internally located and distributed across all group members; although no formal recognition is required, internal legitimation is deemed to be essential (Wenger et al., 2002; p.36). The encouragement of distributed leadership was seen to result in more informed decision-making overall than that resulting from a solitary leadership figure (Likert, 1991; p.252).

Alternatively, individuals are seen to have a greater chance of developing strong ties with the emergence of a more egalitarian structure (McCotter, 2001; Tripp, 2004; Tyler, 2009). The absence of a leader enables learners to organise their learning and interactions according to their immediate concerns and needs rather than a curriculum being imposed by one member (Reynolds, 1998; p.196). The creation of a more democratic structure may reduce the likelihood of power issues developing amongst the membership (McCotter, 2001; p.691). This does not imply that the group will operate harmoniously as conflict is seen to strengthen a community equipping it to '...handle dissension and make it productive' since 'in good communities, strong bonds withstand disagreement, and members can even use conflict as a way to deepen their relationships and their learning' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.37). Notwithstanding, members are considered more likely to have an understanding that everyone has something valuable to offer (Brookfield, 1995; McCotter, 2001; Tripp, 2004). Dispensing with the leadership role and instead occupying a position of co-learner '...means that everyone, regardless of their professional status and varied experiences, can meet each other on the same



platform and recognise each other's expertise' (Tripp, 2004; p.198). This vision of an egalitarian community is important if all views are to be heard and respected and may involve the removal of a hierarchical and competitive culture (Brookfield, 1995; p.140). The development of a more egalitarian structure does seem to be a more effective means of fostering a sense of belonging amongst group members (McCotter, 2001; Tripp, 2004). This could present itself as a challenge in the case of an educational leadership programme that incorporates a broad compass of expertise; it may not be possible to extinguish the hierarchical barriers that may thwart feelings of equality (Tripp, 2004). Ensuring frequency of interaction between members is viewed as a helpful means to break down these barriers and allow for the creation of a more equitable atmosphere conducive to "mindful" learning (Choy, 2009; p.71). A "mindful" approach to learning involves a willingness to recognise and consider new ideas and perspectives in the learning process (Choy, 2009).

#### **1.3.4 Security**

The size and structure of a learning group has relevance if an educator wishes to foster the conditions necessary to create feelings of security within a learning environment (McCotter, 2001; Block, 2009; Donaldson, 2009; Gravett and Petersen, 2009). The need for a safe learning environment has long been established within the constructivist perspective (Rogers, 1969; Smith, 1982; Dewey, 2008; Maslow, 2013). Researchers (Likert, 1991; McCotter, 2001, Wenger et al., 2002; Block, 2009, Donaldson, 2009; Gravett and Petersen, 2009) are in agreement that the more intimate an environment, the increased likelihood that nurturing, empathetic and supportive relationships will result. This can be achieved using a cohort structure which can facilitate supportive relationships between participants and educators which are regarded as conducive to feelings of interdependency (Donaldson, 2009; p.70). Interaction that takes place in a small group context can lead to the '...discovery that we are not alone, that others can at least understand what is on our mind if not agree with us, is what creates a sense of belonging' (Block, 2009; p.95). The level of intimacy created between group members is viewed as a necessary prerequisite if the more authentic and personal

details of one's experiences are to be shared (McCotter, 2001; Wenger et al., 2002). Block (2009) contended that an intimate and safe group could potentially mitigate the effects of isolation, thereby allowing individuals to become engaged in a common pursuit. However, this level of stability and intimacy within a group of individuals can act as a hindrance to innovation since it '...may create a toxic coziness that closes people to exploration and external output' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.144). Wenger (2010) suggested that a possible means to remedy this was through increased membership turnover.

The advice apropos the development of a social space has included detailed specifics ranging from the use and positioning of tables and chairs, the need for appropriate technology, and the provision of refreshments (Block, 2009; p.154) to discussions relating to the management of lighting and heating systems for the creation of the most effective learning environment (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; p.47). When one moves away from these particulars the literature does agree that, the more comfortable and safe an environment is, the more likely it is that individuals will be encouraged to enter the space and engage in high quality interaction (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; Wenger et al., 2002; Laksov et al., 2008; Block, 2009). The traditional classroom layout is largely rejected as an option due to its association as a vehicle to decontextualize knowledge (Westwood, 1980; Argyris and Schön, 1992; Zemke and Zemke, 1995; Knowles et al., 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Block, 2009). The general consensus suggests that in order to create security and a sense of belonging for a small group, furniture should be arranged in a circular formation with minimal distance between participants (Block, 2009; p.154).

However, Brookfield (1995; p.9) suggested how power permeates every aspect of a learning environment and cast doubts on the particular practices favoured by adult educators. One of his most cited causes celebres being the contention that a circular seating arrangement is indicative of a democratic and egalitarian environment (Brookfield, 1995; p.9). The learner who is lacking in confidence may feel an overwhelming sense of vulnerability when exposed to this form of seating arrangement as it may be associated with an '...implicit or explicit pressure from

peers and teachers to say something, anything, just to be noticed' (Brookfield, 1995; p.10). These methods therefore need to be employed with an element of caution; the key consideration being to elicit ongoing feedback from the learners themselves as to their perceptions of the context (Brookfield, 1995; p.10). An essential prerequisite in this process, as advocated by Brookfield (1995; p.227), is to treat the learner at all times as an adult. The majority of higher education programmes will not have the resources to be this discriminating and flexible towards a potential teaching environment. The leadership programme in question will be delivered in precisely the environment seen to bombard the adult learner with decontextualized knowledge i.e. a traditional classroom (Westwood, 1980; Wenger et al. 2002; Block, 2009) and therefore this may have an adverse effect on the learning experience. If the environment surrounding the leadership programme is deemed to be artificial this may not be the most effective means to prepare leaders to deal effectively with practice (Argyris and Schön, 1992; Wenger et al, 2002).

The generation of a supportive, secure and intimate learning environment can foster the conditions necessary for high quality interaction (Likert, 1991; McCotter, 2001). In fact, the presence of support Clement and Vandenbergher (2000; p. 87) argue holds the potential for learning opportunities to develop into learning experiences for the individual. Block (2009; p.95) suggested that a small group (between three and twelve individuals) may have transformational potential as it allows intimacy to blossom and connections to be nurtured. Support and trust will characterise the environment since revealing one's professional successes, failures or insecurities to group members for critique or advice can be unsettling (Likert, 1991; Rogers and Farson, 1991; Brookfield, 1995; Wilson and Berne, 1999; McCotter, 2001; Donaldson, 2009). A safe environment can enable participants 'to take risks by surfacing their assumptions, clarifying their mental models, expounding their personal theories, experimenting with new ideas and practices and sharing their successes and problems' (Tripp, 2004; p.198). Possessing the confidence to discuss one's practice with another is a powerful vehicle in '...clarifying confusion, identifying appropriate questions and reaching significant insights' (Knights, 1985; p.90). This process of collective critical reflection can

generate collegial support which can result in a feeling of empowerment '...to make sound professional decisions' (McCotter, 2001; p.702). Collective meaning-making should be a creative process and individuals require security to be able to explore and experiment with ideas without fear of risks or negative consequences (Likert, 1991; Rogers and Farson, 1991; Brookfield, 1995; Richardson, 1997; McCotter, 2001; Donaldson, 2009). If the environment is not rendered secure by group members this may result in reluctance on their part to innovate (Brown and Duguid, 1991; p.53). To disclose one's experiences fully and to respond creatively and thoughtfully to learning strategies requires a feeling of psychological safety. This would then lead the individual into full participation in 'transformative dialogue' (Gravett and Petersen, 2009; p.108). Potentially, the number of participants on the leadership programme will be in line with Block's (2009) ideal and therefore the group members may experience an intimacy conducive to the full disclosure of their professional experiences (McCotter, 2001).

Feelings of security can also be generated through the provision and development of the social spaces that individuals are expected to occupy (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 1996; Wenger et al., 2002; Laksov et al., 2008; Block, 2009). Social spaces should be invitational with facilities that encourage high quality interaction (Laksov et al., 2008). The space provided should be seen as conducive to '...reflection and discourse and a reduction in the power differential between educator and learner' (Mezirow, 1991; p.171). The formation of successful relationships can benefit from '...some open time during a break or lunch, with enough space for people to mingle or confer privately, [or] invite one-to-one discussion' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.50). This is seen to necessitate the removal of the educator from the social space since 'for students to pretend that a teacher is not in the room is almost impossible' (Brookfield, 1995; p.11). The opportunity to interact privately as a group may facilitate the sharing of personal details which can break down barriers and create shared norms and values (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.302). Frustrations can be vented, some having relevance to the learning situation and others not, but all seen as potential obstacles to an individual's full engagement in meaningful reflection (Knights, 1985). The development of mutual understandings is essential for the creation of a community

since 'knowing each other makes it easier to ask for help: You know who is likely to have the answer and you can feel confident that your request is welcome' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.34). This form of space can take on mystical qualities for those involved, according to Richardson (1997; p.184), who used the term "sacred space". Within this space, members would feel secure to share the personal changes they had and were currently experiencing; they would feel an overwhelming sense of being connected to the community that surrounded them; they would feel connected by a common passion and finally would display a gratitude for the safety experienced (Richardson, 1997; p.185). It would appear that the participants on a higher education programme would indeed benefit from the opportunity to develop interpersonal relationships (Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004). Therefore, there needs to be careful consideration of how this suggestion can be successfully implemented on a part-time education leadership programme. To provide such a space that may be seen as a haven (Richardson, 1997; McCotter, 2001) would operate in addition to a formal teaching and learning session and therefore would potentially extend the length of the whole session. The educator must be prepared for the fact that this may not be met with enthusiasm since '...the stress of the work itself ensures that beyond that time [the school day], energy levels are low for most teachers' (Day, 1999; p.171).

A learning experience grounded in the practice of the group members is suggested to provide the learner with an authentic experience (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Argyris and Schön, 1992; Wenger, 1998; Northedge, 2003; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Herrington and Herrington, 2006). Being challenged with authentic tasks will resonate with the learner who will be '...motivated to learn in rich, relevant and real-world contexts' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.x). The relevance of an authentic task will result in a greater level of engagement from the student and is argued to contribute to the generation of genuine collegiality, as opposed to a short-lived response to a forced request for collaboration (Likert, 1991; Day, 1999; McCotter, 2001). Authentic learning strategies have the potential to offer a form of safety to group members as

engagement in collaborative strategies directly counter the potential isolation that may be felt in their profession (McCotter, 2001; p. 701).

The constructivist perspective established the necessity for learning strategies to have a personal relevance for the learner if the constructed knowledge is to have transference to a range of situations (Rogers, 1969; Wenger, 1998; Bruner, 1999; Northedge, 2003). Researchers (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; Laiken, 2006) argue that the concept of authenticity is multi-faceted in that it goes beyond the issue of the perceived relevance of the learning for an individual, suggesting '...that it is the cognitive authenticity rather than the *physical authenticity* that is of prime importance in the design of authentic learning environments [italicised in original]' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.3). Cognitive authenticity has been achieved if a problem feels real to a learner and therefore the learner will be fully motivated to devise a solution. The problems presented to the learner will have a validity that makes the '...dilemmas recognizable, which creates tension to resolve them...this tension motivates learning' (Argyris and Schön, 1992; p.97). To achieve this level of authenticity the learning strategies presented to learners should preserve '...the complexity of the real-life setting' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.4) and thus will place the learner close to genuine practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Argyris and Schön, 1992; Wenger et al., 2002; Herrington and Herrington, 2006; Laiken, 2006). The educator should provide support that corresponds '...to the real needs of the community... and what those needs are can only be understood by understanding the details and sophistications of actual practice' (Brown and Duguid, 1991; p.45). More emphasis was placed on physical authenticity in the learning process, by Fullan (2005), who suggested that the development of effective educational leadership involves '..."learning in context"- that is, learning in the actual situation we want to change' (Fullan, 2008; p.58). The question of what constitutes an authentic leadership environment should be a concern for the adult educator as to whether the emphasis of the learning strategies should be on the creation of cognitive authenticity (Argyris and Schön, 1992; Herrington and Herrington, 2006) or physical authenticity (Wenger et al., 2002; Fullan, 2011).

The context associated with the practice of educational leadership is one of pressure and ever-increasing accountability (Day, 1999; Fullan, 2001, 2007). The pressure is high as '...schools are suffering the additional burden of having a torrent of unwanted, uncoordinated policies and innovations raining down on them from hierarchical bureaucracies' (Fullan, 2001; p.109). The task of managing these pressures can be viewed positively if they are balanced with support (Fullan, 2005, 2007, 2011; Eraut, 2007; Mohr and Wolfram, 2010; Mujtaba, 2010). The interaction between the forces of pressure and support have been widely documented in relation to educational reform (Fullan, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2008) and in terms of the generation of motivation in adult learning strategies (Laiken, 2006; Eraut, 2007). Successful, collaborative educational leadership culture is seen to depend on '...combining and integrating pressure and support (Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher, 2005; p.56). Fullan (2011, p.12) views positive pressure as being motivational since peer based accountability is built into a collaborative culture. This is a feature of highly effective groups as '...each person can exert sufficient influence on the decisions of the group to prevent...setting unattainable goals for any member while setting high goals for all' (Likert, 1991; p.251). To encourage the potential for collaboration between educational leaders there does need to be a strong focus on accountability, but this should be accompanied by supportive strategies since '...solutions must come through the development of *shared meaning* [italicised in original]' (Fullan, 2007; p.9).

Learning strategies should resonate with the learner as being authentic to encourage a collective response that will ultimately be viewed as a whole group achievement (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.6). The sense of achievement can be aided by learners being provided with opportunities to articulate and defend collaborative solutions since '...more authentic tasks require articulation of ideas in one form or another' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.7). The challenge/pressure attached to tasks should not be removed by the educator and instead support should be offered at pivotal junctures to enable the task to reach completion (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.8). The structure of a group can play a pivotal supportive role in this process acting as '...the glue and the foundation needed for students' meaning structures to be critically interrogated and

changed through more specific and precisely applied instructional strategies' (Donaldson, 2009; p.71). Through the introduction of pressure into a learning strategy the learner can experience a feeling of "optimal anxiety" which is seen to provoke a learner to respond to a challenge without being paralysed by anxiety (Laiken, 2006; p.19). This is a fine balancing act as too much pressure can produce intolerable levels of stress and anxiety that will ultimately create a '...psychological impediment to transformative learning' (Donaldson, 2009; p.72).

Researchers (Laiken, 2006; Block, 2009) argue that the authentic nature of a task can induce the positive pressure required as the learner is aware that the problem may be faced outside of the learning experience. According to Block (2009) questions should focus on the personal, the ambiguous and be anxiety-inducing for pressure to be produced. It is essential for questions to discriminate if the outcomes are to have any significance and impact attached to them. This element of challenge can lead to a greater possibility of experimentation and engagement on the part of the individual (Block, 2009; Donaldson, 2009; Mujtaba, 2010). The generation of positive stress in such a situation may indicate to the learner '...that the possible mastery of a situation would enhance their skills or professional standing' (Mujtaba, 2010; p.16). This is possible if the level of challenge experienced by a learner is commensurate with the level of support (Laiken, 2006; p.21). Support can take many forms including a supportive, nurturing environment (Brookfield, 1995; Richardson, 1997; Day, 1999; McCotter, 2001; Laiken, 2006; Block, 2009; Mujtaba, 2010) or in the provision of a highly structured course and learning strategies since these are considered to provide '...a sense of psychological safety for learners' (Gravett and Petersen, 2009; p.108).

The generation of a secure learning environment is a key prerequisite if an educator wishes to encourage the development of a collaborative culture and collective meaning-making amongst a group of individuals (Brookfield, 1995; McCotter, 2001; Block, 2009; Gravett and Petersen, 2009; Mujtaba, 2010). The generation of an authentic learning experience is deemed to be an effective means of placing learning close to an individual's practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). This could potentially result in higher levels of motivation and a deeper



engagement on the part of the learner and therefore has great relevance for a higher education programme. The literature regards the practice of education leadership as synonymous with high levels of pressure and innovation overload (Day, 1999; Fullan, 2001, 2007). The educator should focus on learning strategies that counteract elements of pressure with support in order to induce a state of positive stress (Laiken, 2006; Mujtaba, 2010). The leadership programme will be delivered in a decontextualized setting which may prove too great a distance from the participants' practice.

### **1.3.5 Empathy**

A learning environment that is characterised by trust is argued to result in the development of '... a sense of morality, well-being, and empathy towards others' (Taylor and Snyder, 2012; p.45). Empathy is seen to emanate from trust in that, once individuals have the confidence to share experiences, the more likely it is that a close connection will result (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Tripp, 2004). Listening to experiences can help to nurture close, empathetic relationships as the process itself '...provides more information about people than any other activity' (Rogers and Farson, 1991; p.189). The more experiences that group members are willing to share, the easier it becomes for them to identify with alternative experiences and perspectives (Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004). A collaborative examination of experiences shared by group members '...may reveal deeper or stronger assumptions that are held mutually' (Tyler, 2009; p.140). This can act as a support mechanism as potential feelings of isolation can dissipate being replaced by shared concerns and experiences (Brookfield, 1995; McCotter, 2001; Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Block, 2009). This, in turn, impacts positively on the generation of community spirit as individuals recognize that their individual concerns are common to the group (Brookfield, 1995; Wenger et al., 2002; Block, 2009). The creation of this community spirit has the potential to lead '...to shifts in students' meaning structures about how they relate to others and provide leadership within their own organizations (Donaldson, 2009; p.70). In addition, group members may begin to share a '...common "life world"...here, we may not only understand, but also

sympathize with weaknesses, and tolerate deviations from expectations' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p. 297). The participants on the leadership programme will have had a range of different leadership experiences, but they may discover that '...although no one lives the teaching life in exactly the same way, there is often much more that unites us than we realize' (Brookfield, 1995; p.141).

Having the capacity for empathy enables an individual to become a "connected knower" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1997; Galotti, 1998) or "critical friend" (Tripp, 2004; p.198). This involves a group member attempting to '...empathize with the other person and to refrain from judgement' (Galotti, 1998; p.282). Different perspectives are volunteered; provocative questions are raised but at all times the critical friend will occupy a supportive position (Tripp, 2004; p.198). Criticism is not avoided; in fact, due to the trusting environment it may become a more prevalent feature of interaction but always performed in a "connected" way (Belenky et al., 1997; p.118). Connected criticism is deemed to be acceptable as the experiences being reflected upon are common to the group (Belenky et al., 1997). The intensity of this type of relationship will take time to nurture and most educational programmes are viewed as not being fit for purpose as 'often members of the class do not even know each other's names, much less their styles of thinking' (Belenky et al., 1997; p.120). The participants on the educational leadership programme will be interacting over an extended period of time and therefore the latter concern should not apply to their situation. In order to provide the individuals with the opportunity to connect, generate and nurture supportive friendships a range of opportunities needs to be provided for high quality interaction over the extended period (Belenky et al., 1997; McCotter, 2001; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004).

The local composition of a group may favourably impact on the development of empathetic connections as individuals are more likely to be cognisant of the context of common problems (Fullan, 2001; Wenger et al., 2002; Schenkel and Teigland, 2008; Donaldson, 2009; Iaquinto et al., 2011). This contextual knowledge enables individuals to become '...local sources of support, membership and solidarity' (Donaldson, 2009; p.71). The close proximity is logistically conducive to frequent

and informal interactions by group members which can help maintain high levels of confidence and trust (Schenkel and Teigland, 2008; p. 116). By utilising pre-existing social capital between individuals it is possible for the educator to encourage the development of positive relationships between group members more quickly, making interaction easier as a support group is already in place (Iaquinto et al., 2011; p.15). Potentially there could be greater value in harnessing the local connections between schools as this would allow individuals to learn in context which has '...the greatest payoff because it is more specific (customized to the situation) and because it is social (involves the group)' (Fullan, 2001; p.104). The educational leadership programme cohort is likely to be comprised of several representatives from each school depending on the volume of applications. If this is the case then it may be possible for the participants to foster closer relationships more rapidly than would otherwise be the case in a more disparate cohort (Wenger et al., 2002, Iaquinto et al., 2011).

The development of an empathetic position is enhanced by a learner having access to a wide range of experiences (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 1996; McCotter, 2001; Tripp, 2004; Tyler, 2009). It is through the exposure to a broad compass of perspectives that common concerns become apparent and a deep understanding of a colleague's practice develops which contributes to the generation of real trust (Wenger et al., 2002; p.85). The process of sharing one's perspectives will be characterised by debate and even a conflict of views (Achinstein, 2002; Musanti and Pence, 2010; Wenger, 2010). When an experience is shared '...listeners will naturally hear stories through a filter of their own experiences, thereby yielding an alternative point of view' (Tyler, 2009; p.140). This should be encouraged as the inherent differences in perspective are argued to make community bonds stronger and can add to the possibility of longevity as 'conflict can create the context for learning and thus ongoing renewal of communities' (Achinstein, 2002; p.422). Group members will begin to understand each other and personal connections and trust are nurtured (Wenger et al., 2002; Iaquinto et al., 2011). This can assist the individual in the meaning-making process as it becomes more likely that they may encounter '...an interpretation that fits what is happening in a particular situation' (Brookfield, 1995; p.36). The recognition of a diversity of perspectives can lead to

more competent decision making as group members become ‘...more daring in taking risks or trying new things, knowing they have a community to back them up’ (Wenger et al., 2002; p.15).

Group members need to be sufficiently motivated by the common concerns that have surfaced during group discourse to ‘...see the value of sharing insights, stories and techniques’ (Wenger et al., 2002; p.71). Stories play an important role in the development of a collaborative, empathetic culture and collective meaning-making since it is through story telling that the commonalities of one’s experiences become apparent (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Orr, 1996; McCotter, 2001). Individuals can find stories easier to identify with as ‘...“storied” information has a sort of learning adhesive that makes it stick to previous learning and experience’ (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; p.44). The telling of a story allows an individual to attach meaning to their experiences (McCotter, 2001; Clark and Rossiter, 2008). This process requires a trusting, supportive environment as an individual’s insecurities and vulnerabilities may emerge (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996; Richardson, 1997; McCotter, 2001). A group member must feel assured that their declarations will not be subject to rebuke or reprisal (Tyler, 2009; p.140). The acknowledgement of similar experiences and common concerns is seen to be generative of a supportive culture through the group ‘...suggesting solutions or strategies, and simply expressing support, orally and non-verbally’ (McCotter, 2001; p.693). One group member sharing a personal story can inspire others to follow suit by dipping into their own repertoire of experiences encouraging ‘...authentic dialogue, an exchange that can open new perspectives, make sense, and create new meaning’ (Tyler, 2009; p.141).

The process of telling a story provides the basis for an individual to establish an identity within a group (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Orr, 1996), whilst the collaborative feedback received from colleagues presents the individual with an alternative perspective from which to engage in critical reflection and critical self-reflection (Brookfield, 1995; McCotter, 2001; Tripp, 2004). Once similarities of experience have been recognised the storytelling process becomes a way of ‘...pushing the facts around, trying other perspectives to see if they suggest other

interpretations' (Orr, 1996; p.126). The act of listening may lead to '...changes in people's attitudes towards themselves and others, and also brings about changes in their basic values and personal philosophy' (Rogers and Farson, 1991; p.189). Stories circulated within the group domain add to both individual and collective knowledge and become communal property in the form of a shared repertoire of resources (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Orr, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Iaquinto et al., 2011). The stories do not remain a static entity as they undergo modification in response to individual needs as 'once the war stories have been told, the stories are artifacts to circulate and preserve...through them, experience becomes reproducible and reusable... each retelling is, in a sense, a re-representation' (Orr, 1996; p.126). Orr's (1996) seminal discussion of the practice of Xerox technicians placed storytelling at the heart of the learning process and has relevance for all professions with a shared practice. Stories inevitably contain jargon and in the case of the educational leadership programme may be '...barely recognizable to outsiders as stories' and in some cases the jargon may lead to confusion and therefore '...in an interactive situation, the teller can count on the hearers to indicate if the ellipsis is too great' (Orr, 1996; p. 125). This may be the case with the participants on a professional development programme as the vast majority of the educational reforms and initiatives will be or should be common to them and therefore shorthand may be employed.

## ***1.4 Conclusion***

The purpose of this literature review has been to reflect upon a variety of perspectives from a range of disciplines, including traditional learning theories that have made a significant contribution to the field of adult learning.

This review commenced with a brief overview of the behaviourist contribution and its core belief that learning involved an observable change of behaviour which occurred as a response to external stimuli. The influence of behaviourist norms on accountability systems within education is undeniable, but the basic tenets of the theory lack a sociocultural context and focus on the passive role of the individual in the learning process. As such this approach has limited applicability to my research.

The role of the individual was given more prominence through the early work of the cognitivists who focused their learning theory on the individual's mental processes in meaning-making, but knowledge and the individual remained distinct entities. The learner began to be viewed as a whole through the work of the Humanist perspective which argued that the learning process involved the whole person and their potential for growth, not merely the black-box of their mind.

The focus was firmly placed on an individual having an active role in the learning process and this line of thought was embraced with the development of the constructivist paradigm.

Constructivism encompasses a number of perspectives and many theorists from a range of fields draw upon its key tenets. This literature review suggests that the constructivist field is most closely aligned to the proposed investigation as I intend to examine and interpret the participants' perceptions of their learning experience - their social reality. The individual is seen as the keystone of the meaning-making process and learning is focused on the production of meaning from experience. Particular emphasis has been placed on contributions from the fields of situated cognition, experiential and transformative learning to ascertain their relevance to the proposed case study.

An effective learning environment from the constructivist perspective should lead to the generation of knowledge on an individual and a collective basis. A common thread woven throughout the constructivist learning theory is the facilitating role of experience, reflection, and effective discourse in the meaning-making process. Individuals should regard the environment as authentic, in terms of their practice, if they are to engage fully in successful meaning-making and critical reflection. The importance attributed to these elements by the literature led to my first research question: *'Can an effective learning environment be created for a cohort of secondary teachers with leadership responsibilities? If so, how?'* In line with Taylor's (2007) suggestion, it seems necessary to look more closely into the role of specific learning contexts, especially in terms of groups and workplace settings. This particular investigation will concentrate on a cohort operating from a school within a local authority cluster; therefore, the graduate leadership programme is

neither entirely workplace based nor university based. The school setting may still be seen as a vehicle for the decontextualisation of the learning for the group members and could result in a chasm developing between the learning experience and professional practice. Authenticity is seen as the key to enact high levels of motivation within a group of learners and therefore its creation must be a priority for the leadership programme if the learning is to survive beyond the original point of acquisition and be successfully transferred to the individual's practice. This raises the question of which conditions (if any) proposed in the literature will be viewed as significant in this particular setting in fostering an authentic environment.

Learning is regarded as a situated phenomenon by the constructivist perspective and therefore consideration of the sociocultural context surrounding the learning process is essential. Discourse must be entered into to validate one's beliefs and assumptions. The process of becoming critically reflective of one's own assumptions and those of others is seen to lead to more competent decision-making. To enter freely into reflective discourse involves the generation of a supportive and trusting environment and therefore the nurturing of interpersonal relationships should be a priority in any adult learning setting. A common theme in both the situative, experiential and transformative literature examined was the necessity to foster a learning environment grounded in '...trust, solidarity, security and empathy' (Mezirow, 2000; p.12). The creation of an effective collaborative culture is seen as both desirable and necessary if an individual is to engage successfully in both individual and collective meaning-making. The constructivist learning theories examined in this review, regardless of whether individual or collective meaning making was prioritised, concur that the creation of a community will impact positively on a learning experience. This discussion prompted my second research question: *'Did this cohort develop as a learning community? If so, in what ways?'* The importance that research has attached to the development of a collaborative culture, especially in the case of professions characterised by rapid change and increased accountability, led to this being viewed as a priority in the research. It is desirable to create a collaborative school culture that should aim to establish '...good communication, collective decision making, the creation of learning opportunities and learning space, the development of "networks" (also outside the

school), and commitment to reflect critically on the education offered' (Clement and Vandenbergher, 2000; p.98). The nature of the leadership environment and the learning strategies employed require examination to see if they have the potential for the participants to develop a sense of belonging and a collaborative culture and how this would be perceived by the participants. Communities, in whatever form, take time to establish (Wilson and Berne, 1999) and then become prone to dispersal upon project completion. Collaboration, in this particular setting, may not be seen as a priority or even as desirable as the schools involved were unavoidably ensconced in an externally imposed competitive culture.

The process of becoming more critically reflective on one's own assumptions and those of others lies at the heart of transformative learning. Mezirow's (2000) seminal adult learning theory outlined the transformational potential of learning, the conditions required for successful communicative learning, and full participation in discourse and critical reflection. The mastery of communicative learning is seen to lead to the development of a more empathetic, imaginative and flexible frame of reference; all desirable attributes of an effective leader. The core of Mezirow's theory focused on the learner needing the freedom to engage in autonomous thought which is an essential prerequisite in professions undergoing continual change. An individual learner having the potential to alter personally held deep seated beliefs and values and to not act uncritically on another's assumptions inspired my final research question: *'Does Mezirow's theory of 'Transformative Learning' add to our understanding of the participants' perceptions of their learning experience on this educational leadership programme? If so, how?'* The development of a propensity for critical reflection and autonomous thought should create a more competent leader able to deliver more considered decision making. It is necessary to make a judgement in this leadership programme setting as to whether transformation as defined by Mezirow is an achievable goal for the educational practitioner. It is important to differentiate between real transformation and mere exposure to a good teaching and learning experience (Newman, 2012). The emancipatory claims of transformative learning theory do indicate that adult learning has the potential to result in significant change given the appropriate facilitating conditions. Both Mezirow (1991) and Freire (1996) cited reform as a



goal, whether restricted to the personal domain or, in the case of Freire, societal change. There is no doubt that future educational leaders need to develop a finely tuned critical faculty, but it must be determined whether becoming an 'active change agent' as proposed by the more emancipatory transformative perspective is a necessary prerequisite of a successful learning experience and whether it has a place in the contemporary educational context. This context is one where teaching and leadership ability is assessed, both internally and externally, using behaviourist inspired methods of quality assurance.

Drawing on the broad compass of research contained in this literature review I will now consider the most appropriate methodology to address my research questions. This will be congruent with providing an interpretation, *my interpretation*, of the participants' perceptions of their learning experience.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

The overall aim of this thesis is:

An investigation into how to build an effective learning environment for secondary school leaders and managers

To this end there are three relevant research questions:

- Can an effective learning environment be created for a cohort of secondary teachers with leadership responsibilities? If so, how?
- Did this cohort develop as a learning community? If so, in what ways?
- Does Mezirow's theory of 'Transformative Learning' add to our understanding of the participants' perceptions of their learning experience on this educational leadership programme? If so, how?

The purpose of this chapter is to justify why the methodological design I have chosen is the most appropriate for addressing these research questions. First I discuss my epistemological and ontological position then I justify and explain the use of case study design, finally I explain the data collection methods and the process of thematic analysis I intend to use to interpret the data.

### ***2.1 Paradigms, Ontology and Epistemology***

There is extensive debate within the research community about the definitions and nature of paradigms and it is argued that 'at a most fundamental level different paradigms provide particular sets of lenses for seeing the world and making sense of it in different ways' (Sparkes, 1992; p.12). Sparkes emphasises the dependent nature of our chosen paradigms on our own life histories and individual socialisation experiences. Guba (1990) suggests that to decide upon a paradigmatic position a researcher must answer three fundamental questions concerning their ontological, epistemological and methodological positions:

1. Ontological position – What is reality?
2. Epistemological position – What is the nature of knowledge?
3. Methodological position – How do we find out about knowledge?

My responses to the above will identify the most appropriate paradigm to utilise and form the keystone of my decision-making from the choice of study area, my selection of research instruments to my preferred data analysis process.

As a researcher I am presented with three 'umbrella' paradigmatic areas; namely, the spheres of the positivist, the critical theorist and the interpretivist. The term 'umbrella' is essential to this discussion since no paradigm contains homogenous schools of thought and intraparadigmatic similarities do exist (Sparkes, 1992; p.18). It would be naïve of the researcher to expect one paradigm to be the fountain of all knowledge; instead, 'each is an alternative that deserves, on its merits (and I have no doubt that all are meritorious), to be considered' (Guba 1990; p27).

The *positivistic position* is not suitable for my purposes as its underpinning assumptions '...that the social world external to individual cognition is a real world made up of hard, tangible and relatively immutable facts that can be observed, measured and known for what they really are' (Sparkes, 1992; p. 20) are not conducive to an in-depth, interpretive examination of the meanings that participants attribute to their learning experiences. The reality I wish to explore is multifaceted in which the individual occupies the key creative role; it is not a detached, objective reality that exists independently of them. My role is one of interpretation rather than the production of value-free 'facts' (Guba, 1990).

The *critical paradigm* also acknowledges the existence of a 'reality' that is 'out there' but this entity differs radically from the positivistic perspective because it claims that this is a value-laden, false reality both at a societal and an individual level; a social construction, created by the interaction of historical forces and power relations. The reality, although objective, is a 'false consciousness' and so the researcher's role is to help individuals transcend their oppressed position to reach the utopia that is 'true consciousness' (Guba, 1990; p.24). The purpose of my research is to understand my participants' perceptions of their learning experience; not to facilitate their emancipation. Although power relations and societal values are present in the meaning-making process and could therefore impact upon an individual's perceptions, I would argue that a process of individual transformation

would not result in that individual having access to one, objective (albeit) 'true' reality.

A key element of a good critical study is that researcher and participant create the research together in a participatory process as the participants should '...help to frame questions, interpret data and to examine and explore how the insights gained from their engagement in the process might assist in the promotion of change' (Sparkes, 1992, p. 43). My participants did not corroborate in the research design and process as the structure of the educational programme and my observation of it was determined externally. The context surrounding my research therefore does not lend itself to a critical approach which would be judged on the elements of transformation and change.

This external-realist ontological approach would not facilitate my exploration of my participants' social reality. I instead favour a position on the relativist ontological continuum which suggests that there are a multitude of interpretations of reality, all of which are valid. Therefore, I would argue that the critical perspective is not appropriate for my research because each of the perceptions that I wish to examine, each interpretation of reality, is as individual as the participants themselves.

My research is best served by the all-encompassing *interpretive approach* and will be securely grounded in this qualitative, constructivist research tradition. An understanding of the social world can only be gained through an examination of the construction of reality by the individual through their interactions with others (Guba, 1990). These meaning-making processes are innately social whereby meanings are constantly being negotiated, '...between the self-understanding person and that which is encountered, whether a text, a work of art, or the meaningful expressions of another person' (Smith, 1990; p.176).

Therefore, an understanding of an effective learning environment and the participants' subsequent learning can be achieved by analysing the 'reality' of the situation as understood by those who participated in the course and those who observed their theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1992), i.e. the perceptions of both

the participants and their line managers. This will lead to insights into the multiple realities of these key stakeholders, and it is by exploring these that I will be able to establish a deep, rich understanding of their social reality since, '...knowledge is a *human construction* (italicised in original), never certifiable as ultimately true but problematic and ever changing' (Guba, 1990; p.26). This 'relativist' ontological position states that 'reality' is dependent on the ways that one comes to know it and how each individual constructs their own reality. I accept that my interpretation of this particular learning experience will be one among many, but I intend my analysis, '...to be plausible, coherent and grounded in the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.20).

The constructivist position recognises the biases within the data and 'incorporates them into the analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.21). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009; p.212) have argued that 'a researcher's presuppositions enter into the questions he or she poses to a text and thus codetermine the subsequent analysis' so many interpretations will result from data analysis but this should not be viewed as a weakness. The researcher and participants are therefore linked, constructing knowledge together which is embedded in the social and cultural contexts in which it resides; these dynamics cannot be ignored so, '...what can be known and the individual who comes to know it are fused into a coherent whole' (Guba, 1990; p.26).

The participants in this study, I believe, control their own lives; they are not simply observers of a reality that exists independently of themselves because, '...people are the controllers and not the controlled and there is a sense of agency, autonomy and 'free will'' (Sparkes, 1992; p. 13). As a result I must uncover their perceptions of the learning experience to understand their construction of social reality. This interpretive theoretical position will therefore provide the most appropriate paradigmatic umbrella to guide my approach, strategy, instruments and data analysis.

## **2.2 Research Approach**

'Never assume that qualitative methods are intrinsically superior [...] no method of

research, quantitative or qualitative, is intrinsically better than any other' (Silverman, 2010; p.10).

Qualitative and quantitative approaches have their merits and limitations; however, in order to address my research questions the qualitative paradigm provides the most appropriate route as it, '...records the messiness of real life, puts an organising framework around it and interprets it' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.19). The meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences are often complex and a qualitative research strategy embraces this through its organic and flexible nature (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.24). This strategy is clearly in line with my ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Qualitative research and the multiplicity of methods that it encompasses facilitate the generation of knowledge produced in context and allow small samples to be used effectively. It is the depth and richness that qualitative research methods produce that is one of the significant advantages of this method as 'participants' experiences and meanings [...] *drive* (italicised in original) experiential qualitative research' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p. 24).

The selection of this strategy has the potential to validate the meanings, views and individual perspectives expressed through the data. It will produce 'rich' and detailed data because I will be focused on the individuals' interpretation of their experience. The approaches that can be utilised under the qualitative umbrella allow for a flexibility of investigation that can accommodate unexpected themes arising from the data.

### **2.3 Research Strategy – The Case Study**

'Case Study is a study of the singular, the particular, the unique' (Simons, 2009; p.3)

This case was pre-selected, as my evaluation will be centred on the leadership programme that I delivered, and therefore was '...a distinct alternative to the randomisation principle associated with classic experiments and large-scale

surveys' (Denscombe, 2010; p.56). I intend to utilise the case study as a research strategy in its own right and not simply as a tool for data generation; thus enabling the research to develop comfortably from the objectives stage to a robust conclusion (Yin, 2009; Denscombe, 2010). I could utilise the survey method using a large-scale questionnaire administered to the entire cohort leading to key cases being identified and examined, thereby culminating in the identification of issues and patterns. However, the case study strategy will facilitate the 'drilling down' into experience that I feel is necessary to understand the individual perceptions of the learning process.

Since I subscribe to a constructivist ontological and epistemological position which demands 'vigorous interpretation' of data I intend to drill down into each participant's perception of the learning process to generate thick description (Stake, 1995; p.9). The adoption of an 'intrinsic' focus will enable me to understand this case in detail as opposed to using an 'instrumental approach' which would utilise the case as data to address a different issue.

A good case study according to Denscombe (2010) should be selected on the basis of the prevalence of its distinct features. This case is distinct in that I, as a practising secondary school leader, delivered a leadership programme in a school setting on behalf of a university. My motivation is to study and understand one case, establishing that social processes operate in a specified way in that setting - a valid pursuit as 'the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization' (Stake, 1995; p.8). Credibility will always be an area of debate, although a defence is possible when one considers that '*although each case is in some respects unique, it is also a single example of a broader class of things* (Italicised in original)' (Denscombe, 2010; p.60). The priority according to Wolcott (1994) is to gain an understanding of the case study, not to establish facts as in many cases the understandings researchers generate are '*...not matters of fact* (italicised in original)' (Wolcott, 1994; p.368). Therefore, it is hoped that the conclusions reached about the learning process and environment in this programme will be useful in the design and execution of other programmes since '...the

investigator is striving to generalise a particular set of results to some broader theory' (Yin, 2009; p.43).

A strong justification for utilising the case study strategy for Yin (2009) is if the research can be labelled a critical case. The issues surrounding educational leadership today, I would argue, qualify it as a critical case, with government funding for leadership courses being withdrawn at a time when senior leadership teams in schools are held accountable for the findings of government accountability measures which can lead to displacement of the team. It is essential, therefore, to understand the prerequisites of an effective learning environment for leadership students so that they may acquire the necessary skills to withstand the pressures of an ever-changing and accountable environment, whilst still being able to innovate autonomously.

I will employ a theoretical framework in the interpretation process as 'this role of theory development, prior to the conduct of any data collection, is one point of difference between case studies and related methods such as ethnography' (Yin, 2009; p.35). My theoretical foundations are the constructivist and critical pedagogical theories of adult learning which point to the transformative, situative and experiential power of the meaning-making process, supported by literature that focuses on learning communities and environments (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Northedge, 2003; Bogenreider and Nooteboom, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Block, 2009; Polin, 2010).

Subjectivity, rather than objectivity, is at the heart of any case study and 'it is through analysis and interpretation of how people think, feel and act that many of the insights and understanding of the case are gained' (Simons, 2009; p.4). From my constructivist viewpoint subjectivity and personal involvement in research is seen very much as a strength with researchers being 'encouraged to include their own personal perspectives in the interpretation' (Stake, 1995; p.135). Personal reactions should be displayed where relevant, although it is important '...to draw a distinction between revealing my feelings and imposing my judgements' (Wolcott, 1994; p.352). Therefore, the in-depth single case study embraces the subjectivity that it is impossible (and not desirable from my point of view) to avoid. This



strategy will award me the freedom required in the selection of research instruments since, 'whatever is appropriate can be used for investigating the relationships and processes that are of interest' (Denscombe, 2010; p.54).

## **2.4 Research Instruments**

To generate relevant data I will employ three research instruments: semi-structured research interviews, anonymous unit evaluation documents and my own research journal; this will allow me to regard the dataset from a range of interpretative angles.

Interviews are the most widely applied technique to generate 'rich' data and a semi-structured format will accord me the flexibility necessary to employ my questions as guides rather than diktats (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.34). The advantage for the participant will be the opportunity to deviate where necessary and answer 'on their own terms' (May, 2001; p. 123). In addition to interview transcripts I will also refer to the participant-generated textual data using unit evaluation documents, which should not be confused with a traditional questionnaire/survey as it is an ongoing compulsory element of the assessment process. Finally, I intend to include personal elements from my research journal to ascertain the extent that my own biases and assumptions may potentially impact on the data analysis process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

### **2.4.1 The Semi-Structured Interview (Interview guides – appendices one, two and three)**

'Getting acquiescence to interviews is perhaps the easiest task in case study research. Getting a good interview is not so easy' (Stake, 1995; p. 64)

The intricacies of the interview process should not be prone to oversimplification as '...it is fraught with hidden danger' (Denscombe, 2010; p.173) and it may be more appropriate to refer to the mastery of qualitative interviewing as a 'craft' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; p.xv). A qualitative research interview is far removed from an everyday conversation as '...they involve a set of assumptions and understandings

about the situation' (Denscombe, 2010; p.172). These essential differences focus on the necessity of the researcher to gain consent prior to the event, the right the participant has to speak 'off the record' and the fact that the agenda is primarily in the hands of the researcher.

May (2001) identifies four types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, unstructured and group. Whilst the structured interview might result in greater data comparability, there can be difficulties if the interviewer does not share a similar culture as there could be greater variability in the interpretation of the question (May, 2001). Although I did share the educational leadership culture of my participants, this formal approach would not allow me to acquire the deep, interpretive understanding of my participants' perceptions of their learning experience. Instead, I require a research instrument that will allow me to drill down into each individual case to accommodate the emergence of unexpected themes.

I feel that the semi-structured research interview with my participants and their line managers is the most appropriate instrument for the '...exploration of more complex and subtle phenomena' (Denscombe, 2010; p.173). It would allow for the generation of the 'rich' detail required to interpret my participants' perceptions through their responses to '...critical, probing questions' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p. 34). This style of interview would provide some structure to enable data comparability whilst simultaneously providing greater opportunity for clarification and elaboration.

The interviews will be one-to-one because I want the participants to feel at ease and to be able to express their views freely. I will act upon the advice of Wolcott (1994) and focus on listening carefully to the participants without displaying signs of '...contradictions, blatant disbelief, or shock' and will ask for clarification and confirmation of what I hear, making notes following the interview to help prevent biases or pre-interview judgements (Wolcott, 1994; p.348).

#### **2.4.2 Anonymous Unit Evaluation Documents (appendix 4)**

Documents are 'constructions' and need to be read and interpreted in the light of

why the document was, 'produced, used, what meanings they have, what they are seen to be or to represent culturally speaking' (Mason, 2002; p.111).

The primary purpose of this university document is quality control and impact-evaluation. Each participant completes the qualitative survey electronically or by hand and submits it to the university to signal module completion. The completion of this compulsory document *will* guarantee data generation, but it could lead to 'thin' data as 'questions are set in advance, responses are constrained: they cannot be probed and extended' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p. 141). The answers could produce more standardised responses due to the absence of the 'interviewer effect' as there is less opportunity for a biased response and may elicit a contrasting picture of their learning experiences (May, 2001; Mason, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2013). The participants however, will still be using their own words, 'so their frameworks are still prioritised which is important for qualitative research' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.137).

This 'safe', anonymous, writing space will enable the participant to elaborate and would 'reflect the full richness and complexity of their views' (Denscombe, 2010; p.165). The documents are one interpretation of an individual's reality at a particular point in time and, although not 'factual records', will enable me, alongside interview transcriptions, to view the participants' perceptions from a different angle which may result in a new interpretation, a direct challenge to my interpretation or a new angle with which to approach my research questions (Mason, 2002).

The unit evaluations contained a mixture of 'closed' and 'open' questions. I will only refer to data generated by the 'open' questions in section ten (please refer to appendix 4, p.257) since the stimulus statements that warranted a 'closed' response from the participant using the Likert attitude scale will not generate the depth and interpretive detail required to understand perceptions; I do not believe that perceptions can be interpreted by placing responses on a continuum.

I gained access to these documents after their consideration by the university and following an examination of the responses to the 'open' questions I became aware

of a marked variation in the detail provided. Therefore to generate a relevant sample I identified the questions that were most meaningful in terms of my research questions. This resulted in five questions being selected and only evaluation documents that had provided a response for these were included in this sample. The questions selected were focused *on the impact the programme had on:*

- a) Subject knowledge/pedagogical knowledge
- b) Changes in individual practice and/or colleagues' practice
- c) Individual confidence/professional esteem
- d) Creation/membership of new networks
- f) Individual capacity for reflection on professional practice

Forty-nine evaluations fulfilled these criteria and the remaining evaluations are excluded from the sample. This will create some degree of consistency and transparency for the interpretive process whilst I acknowledge that each response will remain an individual social construction. I will number the unit evaluations sequentially to provide another validity check concerning the consistency and transparency of my interpretive process. This will also allow the reader to be aware of the range of the quotations used.

### **2.4.3 Research Journal**

My research journal is a reflexive tool enabling me to record my thoughts and feelings at particular junctures in the research and data analysis process. I will record 'critical incidents' sporadically (both positive and negative) in the teaching environment and during interview sessions at both a functional and personal level (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This can act as a useful tool in the stimulation of reflexivity as it is seen to encourage 'self-triangulation' in the interpretive process (Drake, 2010; p.85). Mason (2002) argues that this is a more convincing means of presenting memories and unrecorded observations that can then be used to generate data. On a functional level it is important to consider how the interview process and compulsory documents may influence participants' responses and, on a personal level, my entries succeed in 'bringing the researcher into the research, making us visible as part of the research process' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.37).

Entries during the leadership programme allow for a period of critical reflection on the appropriateness of my responses and assumptions to relevant situations especially when I feel they may influence my interpretive judgments (Mason, 2002). The journal entries will contain both an emotional and analytical commentary of the process as 'our research can profoundly affect us, and our emotional process around this can affect the research' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p. 71).

My journal will contain transparent field notes from the two sets of interviews which will have great contextual importance in the interpretive process (Appendix 5). During the initial noticings and coding period of the datasets I will record elements of interest, in addition to the coding process on the transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p. 205). My aim is to clarify my thought processes behind my interpretations and the journal is one means that a researcher can use to 'develop a richer, more thoughtful, complex analysis, informed by a reflexive position' (Braun and Clarke, 2002; p.71).

## ***2.5 Understanding this Case – Credibility and Reflexivity***

Interpretation is the 'keystone' of my research strategy therefore I must avoid misrepresenting perceptions. I do accept that some form of confirmation process is necessary to enable the reader to judge the credibility of my interpretive process, but I refute the conventional positivistic cries for triangulation and the quest to secure internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This positivistic desire to establish 'the truth' and 'real meaning' suggests, 'a belief in the existence of some basic meaning nuggets stored somewhere, to be discovered and uncovered, uncontaminated, by the objective techniques of an interviewer' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; p. 217). Even post-positivist tempered definitions of triangulation employ data and methodological triangulation to validate interpretations to establish 'if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstances' (Stake, 1995; p.112).

Alternative criteria have been proposed to assess the credibility of the interpretive process. Terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity are deemed to be more appropriate for the qualitative researcher than the positivistic equivalents: internal validity, external validity, objectivity and reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). However, the similarity to the original positivist terms and the need still to embrace a version of triangulation ‘...depend on a contradictory philosophical position, because the belief in “multiple constructed realities,” [...] which lies at the heart of the constructivist paradigm, is not consistent with the idea that criteria for judging the trustworthiness of an account is possible’ (Seale, 1999; p.468). A preoccupation with positivistic criteria is inappropriate and could inhibit the researcher’s ability to adopt a productive, creative approach; an example of this being failing to develop unexpected leads in an interview in favour of elements that can be more easily verified (Wolcott, 1994; Stake, 1995; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

I will provide one interpretation of my participants’ reality accepting that knowledge is a social construction that occurs in context between the researcher and the participant where meanings are renegotiated and refined (Kvale and Brinkmann; 2009; p. 218). Subjectivity is valued and the reader should accept that both the participant and the researcher, being the primary interpretive force in the interview situation, will bring their own assumptions, experiences and beliefs into the process (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013). My subjectivity permeates the entire research process from the topics I have chosen to study, the methods I employ and the knowledge produced as ‘these reflect who we are, our *subjectivity* (italicised in original)’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.36).

To distinguish between a biased subjectivity and a perspectival subjectivity is helpful at this juncture; the former only favouring evidence that supports the views of the researcher and the latter being open and honest about the perspective from which the interview process and subsequent data analysis is approached (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; p.213). A reflexive approach becomes particularly significant in this case study to ensure a ‘rigorous subjectivity’, which involves adopting a transparency towards the interpretive process that considers the researcher’s role

in the production of knowledge, as I intend to present *my* interpretations of the participants' experiences (Wolcott, 1994; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Becker (1998) argues that researchers are more likely to gain an accurate interpretation of an individual's meanings the greater the understanding they have about their experiences yet, one should not claim this as an 'epistemological privilege' when assessing the validity of interpretations (Mason, 2002). Therefore, I am more likely to gain an accurate interpretation of my participants' perceptions of their learning experience through having occupied a comparable leadership position myself because, '...without knowledge based on first-hand experience to correct our imagery, we not only don't know where to look for the interesting stuff, we also don't know what doesn't need extensive investigation and proof' (Becker, 1998; p.15). I aim to minimise any negative impact of projection through transparency and consistency whilst employing a recursive approach to the dataset to avoid losing touch with the raw information (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2013).

It is the transparency and defensibility of my beliefs and prejudices throughout the research journey that will enable the reader to judge the quality of my interpretive process (Wolcott, 1994; Mason, 2002; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Therefore, I need to establish the validity of my method and interpretation; the latter '...directs attention to the quality and rigour with which you have interpreted and analysed your data in relation to your intellectual puzzle' (Mason, 2002; p.191). Often 'member checking' is cited as a helpful tool for interpretive credibility involving the distribution of raw or interpretive data to participants to establish or refute validity of interpretation; however:

Just [...]as a single researcher cannot unequivocally claim epistemological privilege simply because they belong to a specifically defined social group, or occupy a specific social location, so too we cannot assume that a single research subject (or even a group of research subjects) unequivocally possess such a privilege (Mason, 2002; p.193).

## **2.6 Context and Sample**

In this section I describe my three samples and discuss the context surrounding my research. The inclusion of detailed context will assist the reader's clear

understanding of my interpretive journey and enhance the transparency of my research process. This was undertaken in a Training School (pseudonym - Applegate High School) which collaborated with a local university to deliver a Post Professional Development programme (PPD) in Leadership and Management in 2008. The programme consisted of three potential awards: a post graduate certificate following completion of the first programme of study, a diploma after the second programme and a Master's degree on completion of a dissertation. I delivered the postgraduate certificate and the diploma programme on site at Applegate High School with the students returning to university to complete the full Master's degree. The first cohort of students enrolled onto the programme in September 2008 and a second in September 2009.

Applegate High School was permitted to restrict the selection of the first cohort to the local cluster of partner schools they regularly collaborated with in a Training School capacity. These schools were in the same local authority (beyond this the authority had no involvement in the programme) and each took responsibility for their own recruitment protocol resulting in a non-standardised procedure. Sixteen students were accepted onto this programme; it was their initial positive reaction that acted as the stimulus for my research.

These perceptions together with an opportunity to research an element of my personal practice, prompted me to seek permission from Grantchester University to conduct research into the learning experiences of a second cohort. Fifteen students were enrolled onto the course of whom thirteen successfully qualified for the post graduate certificate at the culmination of the first year. One of these students did not continue onto the Diploma stage, making the Diploma cohort twelve students. The anticipated duration of the programme was September 2009 to July 2013.



### 2.6.1 First Sample – First Phase Interviews

Using a purposive sampling strategy I targeted students from the second cohort who had elected to continue onto the Diploma stage of the programme since my, ‘...concern is to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; p.117). I chose to conduct this first phase of interviewing at this juncture as the participants had all completed the first part of the programme and therefore had approximately two years’ experience of the learning environment. This led to a first sample of twelve students (the entire Diploma cohort). In addition I requested volunteers from the first cohort (the initial sixteen students) who wished to participate in the research. This resulted in three volunteers who became part of the first sample below. I wanted to interpret their perceptions of their learning experience so far; their social reality.

Data was generated through the use of semi-structured interviews (appendix 1) and anonymous unit evaluation documents (appendix 4). Each sixty minute interview took place between June 2011 and October 2012 and focused on the participants’ perception of their learning experience.

**Table 1: First Sample**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Age / Gender</b>	<b>Name of Secondary School</b>	<b>Role</b>
1	Lewis	2	25-30 / M	Applegate High School	Subject Leader
2	Robert	2	40-45 / M	Morgan High School	Member of Senior Leadership Team
3	Max	2	30-35 / M	Morgan High School	Departmental Leader
4	Alan	2	30-35 / M	Applegate High School	Subject Leader
5	Rita	2	40-45 / F	Meadows High School	Responsible for Staff Development
6	Abigail	2	40-45 / F	Meadows High School	Departmental Leader
7	Jemma	2	25-30 / F	Morgan High School	Subject Leader

8	Melissa	2	35-40 / F	Meadows High School	Subject Leader
9	Kimberley	2	25-30 / F	Castle High School	Subject Leader
10	Justin	2	30-35 / M	Castle High School	Departmental Leader
11	Helen	2	30-35 / F	Meadows High School	Subject Leader
12	Imogen	2	35-40 / F	Meadows High School	Subject Leader
13	Eva	1	50-55 / F	Meadows High School	Subject Leader
14	Charlotte	1	45-50 / F	Meadows High School	Subject Leader
15	Linda	1	40-45 / F	Applegate High School	Academic Key Stage Leader

### **2.6.2 Second Sample – Second Phase Interviews**

My initial intention had been to conclude my research at the end of the programme and this goal had been communicated to the participants during their enrolment; this was the schedule to which they had subscribed. Towards the end of the Diploma programme, however, I decided to adopt a longitudinal approach to the research. I wished to conduct follow-up interviews a year after course completion which deviated from my original research intention. Therefore, for ethical reasons, this necessitated asking for informed consent (appendix 6) from volunteers willing to participate in the research beyond course completion. Eight of my first sample expressed an interest in being part of this new longitudinal research. Therefore, my findings will be based on the interviews of these eight participants. Their interest in wishing to remain part of the research project will allow me to engage in a deeper exploration of the issues surrounding their learning experience, as they will have been engaged in the programme for three years. The rich data would serve the purpose of my research allowing me to gain an in-depth understanding of individual perceptions (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.34). These sixty minute interviews will take place in July 2014.

The adoption of a longitudinal time-frame in my research will facilitate a 'prolonged engagement' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) with the eight participants by examining their perceptions both during the programme and following completion. This will allow me to focus on the changes experienced by the participants over time and the extrinsic/intrinsic factors that may impact on their developing leadership practice. This intense involvement in the research will enable me to be '...present during the changes to record an event after and before the change occurs' (Golafshani, 2003; p.600). This strategy will provide a detailed picture of each participant's journey from being part of the programme to their present leadership roles. This will allow me to learn their '..."culture", testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or of the respondents, and building trust' thereby increasing the credibility of my research through transparency (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; p.301). The amount of time needed to 'soak up the culture' is variable between cases, but the key indicator according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is that the researcher exists in the case without challenge. The researcher constantly needs to adopt a reflexive position towards these potential distortions. Given this opportunity to develop trust the researcher needs '...to demonstrate to the respondents that their confidences will not be used against them; that pledges of anonymity will be honoured; that hidden agendas [...] are not being served' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; p.303). The development of trust, however, is very different from immersing in the group and I need to be mindful of this. My transparent position as course tutor would always lead me to occupy a peripheral position.

Prolonged engagement with the group will allow me to generate 'multiple sources' of data which in this case imply, '*multiple* copies of one *type* (italicised in original) of source (interviews)' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; p.305) to aid the credibility of my interpretative process. The additional interpretation of the participants' practice by their line managers will enable the reader to regard the dataset from a range of interpretative angles in the quest for interpretive credibility (Golafshani, 2003).

**Table 2: Second Sample**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Age / Gender</b>	<b>Name of Secondary School</b>	<b>Leadership Role</b>
1	Lewis	2	25-30 / M	Millgate High School	Member of Senior Leadership Team
2	Robert	2	40-45 / M	Morgan High School	Member of Senior Leadership Team
3	Max	2	30-35 / M	Morgan High School	Departmental Leader
4	Alan	2	30-35 / M	Applegate High School	Academic Key Stage Leader
5	Jemma	2	25-30 / F	Cameron High School	Departmental Leader
6	Eva	1	50-55 / F	Palmer High School	Member of Senior Leadership Team
7	Charlotte	1	45-50 / F	Meadows High School	Academic Key Stage Leader
8	Linda	1	40-45 / F	Applegate High School	Member of Senior Leadership Team

### **2.6.3 Third Sample – Line Manager Interviews**

To complement the second phase of interviews I intend to seek out a further perspective through an opportunistic sample of line managers of the participants' leadership practice, 'discovering and portraying the different views' (Stake, 1995; p. 134). My interpretation of the line managers' perceptions will provide the reader with additional evidence from an alternative source about the impact of the programme.

I requested interviews with the six respective line managers of which four agreed to be interviewed and to have their comments recorded in accordance with the consent form (appendix 7) they had signed. The remaining two line managers did not respond to my request to take part in the research project. Despite my not being able to interview two of the line managers all of the participants had, at some point, been observed by one of the four in this sample. This observation may have been for a limited period as a result of the participants' role changes or relocation

due to career progression. These forty-five minute interviews will take place in July 2014.

**Table 3: Third Sample**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Name of Secondary School</b>	<b>Leadership Role</b>
1	Barrett	45-50	Applegate High School	Member of Senior Leader Team
2	Sophie	50-55	Morgan High School	Member of Senior Leader Team
3	Leonard	50-55	Applegate High School	Member of Senior Leader Team
4	Thomas	55-60	Meadows High School	Member of Senior Leader Team

## ***2.7 Ethical Issues***

'In situations where participants are members of a relatively small community, issues of ethics and anonymity require extra thought' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.64)

This case study will drill down into my participants' experiences and every effort must be made to establish 'a relationship with participants that respects human dignity and integrity and in which people can trust' (Simons, 2009; p.98). I will adhere to the ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, February 2011), although researching ethically is more than adhering to a rule book and should permeate all aspects of the research process (Creswell, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013). The codes governing research focus on respect - the researcher should do their utmost to maintain an individual's privacy and confidentiality; they should have obtained informed consent and the participants should be allowed to leave the research project at any time (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Upon obtaining permission from Grantchester University to conduct the research project, recruitment commenced through written applications and formal interviews

with the Grantchester University contact/Director of Training School and me. The outline of the research was discussed fully with the applicants at this stage to ensure the transparency of the research process and to address any queries or fears. Students were told that they could transfer onto the equivalent programme at the university that operated without the research element. It was essential that '...participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway' (BERA, 2011; p.5). Informed consent was obtained verbally from all applicants in the presence of a witness. I liaised with the programme leader and Head of Faculty from Grantchester University to ensure that my actions were in line with policy.

A portion of the first course session was dedicated to ethical expectations; this was essential as there were multiple representatives from institutions. The learning environment was designated a 'safe haven' with confidentiality breaches resulting in places being withdrawn. My priority was to protect the integrity of each individual and subsequently their line managers. The raw dataset will be of a sensitive nature as the coding process will be focused on a participant's own words or behaviour and 'this increased sensitivity requires a high degree of thought and action regarding the subject's informed consent, protection of confidentiality, protection against abusive use of raw or coded data, and protection against abusive application of the results of the study' (Boyatzis, 1998; p.61).

With the adoption of a longitudinal approach, prior to the second phase interviews, it will be necessary to obtain informed consent as the programme will be at an end and therefore the students are no longer affiliated to Grantchester University. The participants, both the learners (appendix 6) and their line managers (appendix 7), will be asked to sign a consent form prior to these interviews. As Braun and Clarke (2013) argue, this consent can really only be for our broadest research interests as the final form of the analytic approach is not usually decided until the data coding process commences. I had outlined my ethical principles and the potential issues that were likely to arise in the research process as part of a formal research proposal to Huddersfield University. Following a formal review by the Integrity and Ethics group approval was gained in August 2014.

All interview participants will be awarded a level of anonymity in that I alone will transcribe all of the digital recordings and they will not be identified by name, school or precise leadership position - pseudonyms will be used instead. This will be necessary as there are a number of participants based at the same schools and if I simply anonymise names then the pseudonyms will be identifiable. Participants will be made aware that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed since anonymised extracts from the data would be viewed by Huddersfield University. When using pseudonyms care should be taken not to change the meanings within the data; to do this successfully, 'requires an extensive knowledge of the phenomenon investigated' (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009; p.272). I have an extensive knowledge of the case, the participants and the leadership programme therefore the use of pseudonyms should have little impact on the interpretation of individual perceptions and experiences. All of the documents will be stored securely, to be destroyed two years following the end of the project. The digital audio records will be deleted, following transcription, to avoid any on-line security breaches as there is a significant possibility that participants can be identified from text or digital recordings (Boyatzis, 1998; Mason, 2002).

## **2.8 Data Analysis**

'In the very act of constructing *data* out of *experience*, the qualitative researcher singles out some things as worthy of note and relegates others to the background (Italicised in original)' (Wolcott, 1994; p.13)

This quotation stresses the key role of the researcher as a research instrument and the subjective nature of the data analysis process. Mason (2002) emphasises that using multiple sources is not simplistic; although the unit of analysis (the participants' perceptions) remains constant, the research instruments must be consistent on both an ontological and epistemological level. I will integrate data from the unit evaluation documents and the qualitative research interviews. These methods of data generation are complementary, as they both seek to uncover the perceptions of the participants as social constructions thereby both generating

subjective data. In both cases I will take notice of salient features and will make the decision of what constitutes data and what does not.

I intend to code both sets of data thematically to ascertain whether there are common codes/themes or whether alternative codes emerge in response to the research questions.

Securing good quality research within this paradigm rests on the researcher developing an 'analytic sensibility' which pertains, 'to the skill of reading and interpreting data' through a theoretical framework, as opposed to rigidly 'following the rules' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.201). Approaching the data interpretively with a constructivist 'sensibility' will allow me to gain a detailed understanding of the participants' perceptions, looking deeply to explore how the accounts were generated in order to provide my construction of what it means (Mason, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2013).

### **2.8.1 The Transcription Process**

Fully aware of the time-consuming process of transcription and the warning that '...the amount of taped data a researcher can work with is very small' (Stake, 1995; p.56), I will still opt to record my interviews digitally and transcribe them verbatim. I want to focus on '...*what* was said rather than *how* it was said (Italicised in original)' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.169).

Transcription being the first stage of the process of experiential thematic analysis invokes the need for the individual texts to be of a high quality and I have decided against editing my data to improve fluency; instead only documenting the more significant paralinguistic features that may be important in understanding the sentence e.g. extended pauses and laughter since '...the whole point of collecting spoken data is that we capture how people express themselves' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.163). These complete accounts will capture sufficient detail to allow for the generation of a rich, interpretive account of individual perceptions providing the rigour and transparency necessary for the reader to observe the interpretive journey.



This is a very subjective process since 'the transcript is a product of an interaction between the recording and the transcriber, who listens to the recording, and makes choices about what to preserve, and how to represent what they hear' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.162). The reader is aware that the salient features in this case will emanate from my interpretive, constructivist framework concerning adult learning theory and learning environments. I dispute Stake's (1995) claim that recording the interview can be to the detriment of the interpretive process as it detracts attention from the crucial element – the meaning. Simply to listen and take notes can lead to portions of the interview being seen as irrelevant and maybe even overlooked, only for them to take on greater significance later on as unexpected twists and turns emerge through the recursive nature of the experiential thematic analytical process.

Transcriptions are only representations of the event, being two stages removed from the actual interview, a selective arrangement for the purposes of analysis and 'with each step, information is lost or changed in some way' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.162). I will be using a transcription notation system to ensure consistency and transparency which will be identified for the reader using an exemplar transcript as it is important that they understand how I am coding the transcripts and how the themes and patterns emerge (Appendix 8). The reader will be provided with contextual information surrounding the interview, if appropriate, to help diminish the gap between the transcript and the actual interview as, '...the physical space is fundamental to meanings for most researchers and most readers' (Stake, 1995; p.63). The data commentary will identify why particular extracts have been used and found to be more credible in relation to my research questions.

### **2.8.2 Experiential Thematic Analysis**

I will employ experiential thematic analysis as it is an effective means of 'encoding qualitative information' (Boyatzis, 1998, p.vii) without the rigidity and allegiance to epistemological and theoretical positions of alternative categorisation approaches. Grounded theory would be unsuitable since my experiential focus and categorisation process will be firmly situated within a constructivist framework of

adult learning theory as 'this provides some insight about where to look and what to look for - or, more accurately, what to be ready to "see"' (Boyatzis, 1998; p.10). Engaging with literature prior to analysis is not in line with the grounded theory tradition which strives to avoid the influence of preconceived ideas on theory construction (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

I intend to note everything of interest within the dataset in terms of my research questions (complete coding) on the transcript/text and in a research journal if deemed a critical incident, to act as 'triggers for developing analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.205). These initial 'noticings' will be treated reflexively, to ensure that they are not just personally significant or simply obvious (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This contact with the data is important and in order to hone our 'analytic sensibility' it involves '...reading words *actively, analytically* and *critically*, starting to think about *what the data mean* (italicised in original)' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.205). I intend to use both semantic (data-derived) and latent (researcher-derived) codes thereby using, 'conceptual and theoretical frameworks to identify *implicit* meanings within the data whilst being fully inclusive of its context (italicised in original)' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.207).

The selection of codes and themes is a subjective process with little possibility of analytical duplication (Wolcott, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998; Mason, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2013). Regardless of the theoretical lens through which the dataset is examined, the literature agrees that the consistency of approach to both coding and interpretation is crucial (Boyatzis, 1998; Mason, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2013). The dataset will be organised manually and viewed holistically to ensure that context is central rather than viewing segments of data in isolation. It is by referring back to the entire dataset with potential themes that I will be in a strong position to question my interpretations, their appropriateness to the original material and to spot contradictory evidence. My data will be presented within the argument as I do not want to conceal my perspective as '...it is better that this presence is articulated and substantiated in an argument that makes clear the grounds on which the data were included or excluded' (Mason, 2002; p.185).

When actively developing themes and patterns emanating from the coding process, frequency of occurrence will not be a deciding factor for inclusion in the final analysis; instead there should be a centrally organising concept that captures, '...the different elements that are most meaningful for answering your research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.223). The themes selected will encompass a number of codes, that '...at the minimum describes and organises possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998; p.vii).

I will be developing both latent and semantic themes in order to generate the 'candidate themes' which will be constantly 'reviewed and revised through the developing analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.227). I will then examine how the themes construct the participants' reality in particular ways in the context of the case to contextualise the analytical process. Operating within the interpretive, constructivist framework I refute the claim that thematic analysis can have 'limited interpretive power' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.180) as my accounts will be detailed interpretations rather than descriptive accounts of participants' concerns.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

I am using a constructivist 'sensitivity' to provide a comprehensive understanding of my participants' perceptions of their learning experience in this case study. My methodology complements my ontological and epistemological position believing reality to be a social construction created in the interactive space between participant and researcher. My interpretations are but one possible representation of the phenomena. To generate a 'rich' dataset I will employ a qualitative research strategy that will allow me to drill down deeply into an individual's perceptions whilst providing the flexibility necessary to address unanticipated issues that arise due to the recursive nature of the analytical process.

Generating the data using a triumvirate of research instruments (semi-structured research interviews, anonymous unit evaluations and my research journal) I will analyse the data using an experiential thematic analysis approach. The subjectivity

inevitable in constructing my interpretations from a variety of angles will be presented to the reader transparently to allow them to assess the consistency of my judgments and therefore the credibility of my interpretation. I will continuously clarify my interpretive process from a reflexive position which demonstrates that I understand the constructivist 'sensitivity' from which I approach the research and that I have considered my dataset from a range of interpretive angles (Mason, 2002; p.192).

## **Chapter 3: Findings**

### ***3.1 Introduction***

The following chapter will provide a detailed interpretation of the key issues I identified from my interviews with the participants and line managers and my analysis of the respondents' unit evaluation documents from the two cohorts in relation to my research questions. These three datasets are distinct and will be examined separately.

#### **3.1.1 The Three Datasets**

The first data set comprised eight participants each of whom were interviewed twice resulting in sixteen participant transcriptions (see Table 2 on page 98). The second data set comprised an opportunistic sample of four of the original six line managers (see Table 3 on page 99). The two interview sets are not directly comparable because they contained different interview questions. Additionally, on an ontological level each response is a construction between the interviewee and the interviewer and thereby cannot be replicated. However, an examination of these two different realities would enable me to gain a rich understanding of what constituted an effective learning environment together with a view of the programme's impact by analysing the reality of the situation as understood by those who had participated in the programme and those who had observed their leadership practice.

The third data set was the unit evaluation document. This had been generated anonymously across both cohorts and so provides an alternative interpretive angle from which to consider the participants' perceptions of the learning experience and its subsequent impact on their social reality.

In the rest of this chapter I will: first clarify my position within the research to assess any potential distortions of interpretation to aid the transparency of the interpretative process. Second, as a result of having employed a complete coding

approach in the data categorization process, I will explore each of the themes identified in all three samples using illustrative quotations. Finally, I will draw all three detailed accounts together to allow me to construct *my* interpretation of their social reality.

### **3.2 Positionality and Reflexivity**

Throughout my research journey I occupied multiple roles so a priority was to provide a transparent and reflexive account of my interpretive process. This would be highly subjective in line with a constructivist sensibility. This was a development of Braun and Clarke's (2013) 'analytic sensibility' and involved 'reading words *actively, analytically and critically*, starting to think about what the data mean (italicised in original)' (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.205).

#### **3.2.1 Positionality**

Positionality in this case study was complex and my interpretations of the three datasets resulted from having occupied a variety of positions along the insider/outsider continuum (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane and Muhamad, 2001; Mercer, 2007). This was due, in part, to the multifaceted position I occupied of programme tutor, researcher and practising educational leader together with the individual needs of the cohort and their respective line managers. This gave me access to the advantages of both positions since: 'the researcher's relationship with the researched is not static, but fluctuates constantly, shifting back and forth along a continuum of possibilities' (Mercer, 2007; p.13).

I consider that the insider position was advantageous because I was able to understand the participants' leadership roles and thereby made the learning professionally relevant. This should have positioned me closer to the actual conditions in which their meaning-making occurred, which in turn could allow for a more accurate interpretation of the participants' perceptions (Becker, 1998; Mercer, 2007). As a result, I was able to recognise both direct and indirect connections

within the context and occupy '... a position to assess the implications of following particular lines of enquiry' (Griffiths, 1985; p.211).

My insider status, however, was compromised by my position as the programme tutor which meant that I occupied a more peripheral place in the cohort. I had previously completed the programme successfully and now occupied the position of assessor; this resulted in me not having the participants' sense of affinity and shared endeavour. I needed to be acutely aware of and negotiate the power issues that could potentially permeate my relationship with the participants as they are irrefutably present in all research (Brookfield, 1995). The participants had elected to embark on a programme led and assessed by a colleague and therefore difficulties may have arisen due to my position within the school or how I was viewed by a particular individual (Mercer, 2007; Drake, 2010). Throughout my research I adopted a reflexive position whilst remaining cognisant that familiarity does not ensure '...thicker description or greater verisimilitude' (Mercer, 2007; p.6).

In the interview context I had occupied more of an outsider role, a more reserved version of my real self, to avoid leading the participants (Mercer, 2007), but at times the questions elicited responses which required a shared understanding of the leadership role which shifted me back towards being an insider. During my interpretation of the unit evaluation documents I shifted between positions of having the contextual knowledge of the programme tutor and the interpretive role of educational researcher.

My shifts in position from insider to outsider were dependent on my understandings, 'formed through the researchers' experience, enhanced by the perception of and dialogue with others, and his or her position in the world' (Drake, 2010; p.96). In no way would I suggest that the insider elements of my positioning awarded me automatic access to the participants' experience or provided me with an epistemological privilege when assessing the validity of the interpretation (Mason, 2002). I would concur with the view that all positions along the continuum have merit and have a role in the unlocking my participants' perceptions and understanding how their accounts were generated (Merriam et al., 2001; Mercer, 2007).

The line managers would have interacted with me in all my roles. My role as a practising educational leader awarded me insider status; however, this shifted along the continuum towards that of an outsider due to my role as programme tutor and educational researcher. My position as a practising educational leader gave me an appreciation of the extraneous pressures and agendas faced by the line managers which could have positioned me closer to their general meaning-making (Becker 1998; Mason 2002). I consider that the involvement by the line managers in the new Teaching Schools' agenda was relevant to the interpretative process.

### **3.2.2 Reflexivity**

Throughout the research, regardless of my insider/outsider position, I operated a reflexive approach. The adoption of a longitudinal focus with the participant dataset was a crucial element in my establishing the validity of my methods and interpretation (Mason, 2002) as it provided me with a period of 'prolonged engagement' with the group (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This gave me the opportunity to establish an environment based on trust and confidentiality and for me to become cognisant of the culture of the cohort. This extended period of time allowed 'the power-based dynamics inherent in any and all research' (Merriam et al., 2001; p.413) to be negotiated. During this period the participants perceived that the environment was safe and that no hidden agenda was in operation. This placed me in a strong position, regardless of my place on the insider/outsider continuum, to identify any misinterpretations of the data generated either from my own potential distortions or from the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The unit evaluation document was an additional task for the participants and from a reflexive viewpoint I recognised that this could result in less detailed responses.

In adopting a reflexive approach, I remained cognisant of potential political agendas in order to avoid any possible distortions or misrepresentations of the line managers' perceptions. As a group the line managers all wanted reassurance concerning the degree of anonymity and confidentiality attached to the research; I addressed this through the use of a signed consent form.



### **3.3 Data Categorization Process**

To assist in the maintenance of a consistent and transparent approach I used experiential thematic analysis to categorize all the data generated to ascertain whether there were common themes/codes prevalent in the dataset. This method provided a flexibility which complemented both my epistemological and methodological position. Using a constructivist sensibility, I noted everything of relevance to my research questions. I listened to the participant and the line manager interviews repeatedly and read the anonymous unit evaluation documents several times. This allowed the material to be approached as data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). It was during this early familiarisation process that I identified ideas that had relevance to my research questions. The noticings were treated reflexively since ‘...our personal experiences shape how we read data; they can be a great source for analysis, but they can also limit what we see in data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.205).

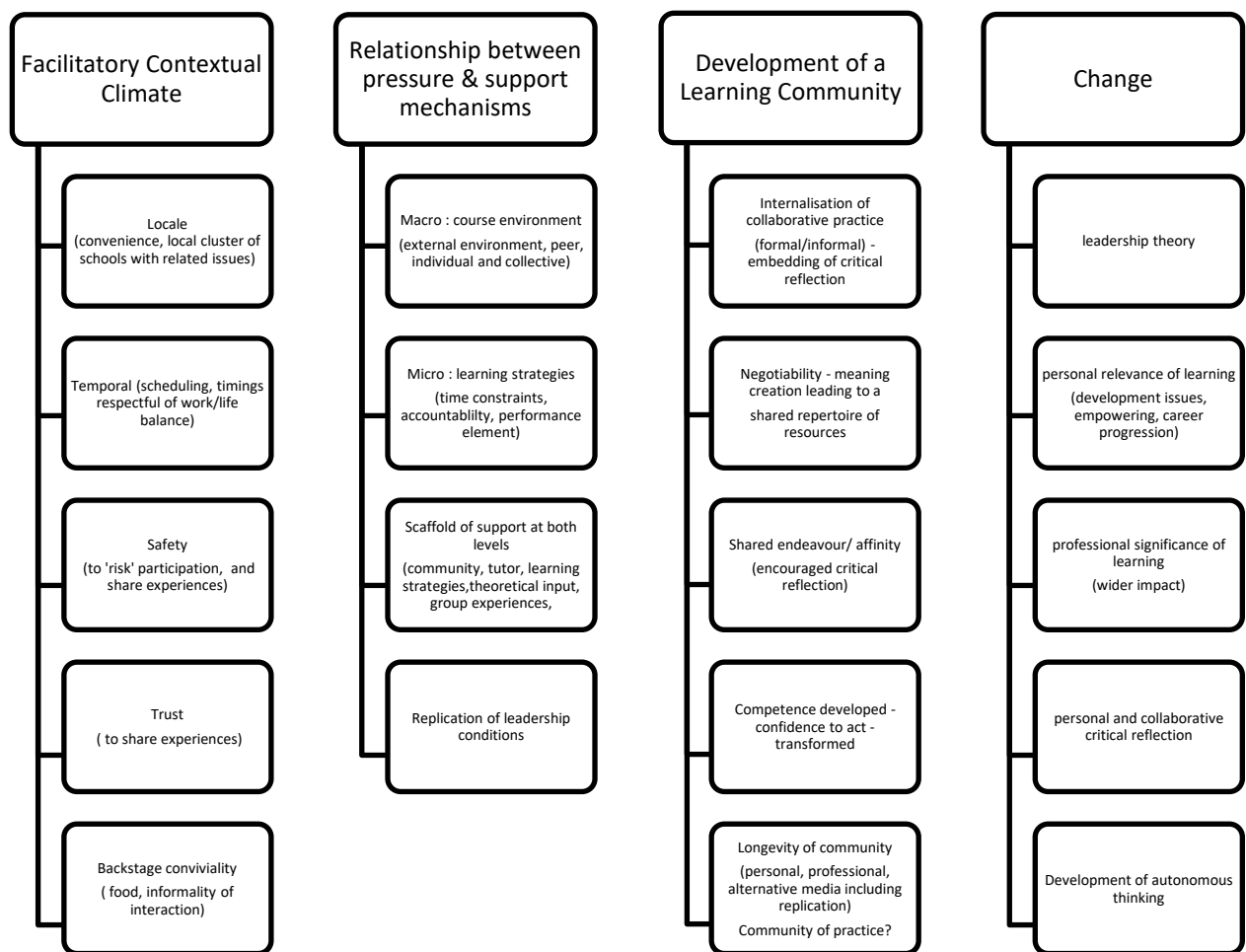
I kept detailed records of the noticings and potential codes on the actual transcripts, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013). This process is detailed in Appendix 8 (p. 266) in relation to a worked example from each of my three datasets. This allowed me to adopt a recursive approach to the datasets and ensured that the context remained central to the entire interpretive process. I wanted to do this manually, as opposed to using a software programme, to help to maintain a consistent approach to both the coding and interpretive process (Boyatzis, 1998; Mason, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2013). As a result of this approach I felt very close to the data. The application of a complete coding approach to the data generated was conducive to my reflexive position as the detailed accounts were embedded in the context of the dataset. This enabled me to check my understanding and ensured that I had considered all possible alternative interpretations of the data, especially in the event of unanticipated themes.

#### **3.3.1 Overarching Codes**

From these candidate themes a number of overarching codes and sub-codes were

generated. The themes all contained “a centrally organising concept” that captured the most salient patterns in the data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p.225). At this point I reread all of the transcripts to ensure that the approach I had taken was rigorous and consistent. This placed me in a strong position to question my interpretations and check for any contradictory evidence that may have been missed in the data analysis process. A preliminary version of the overarching/sub-codes that had been generated as a result of this process can be seen in diagram 1.

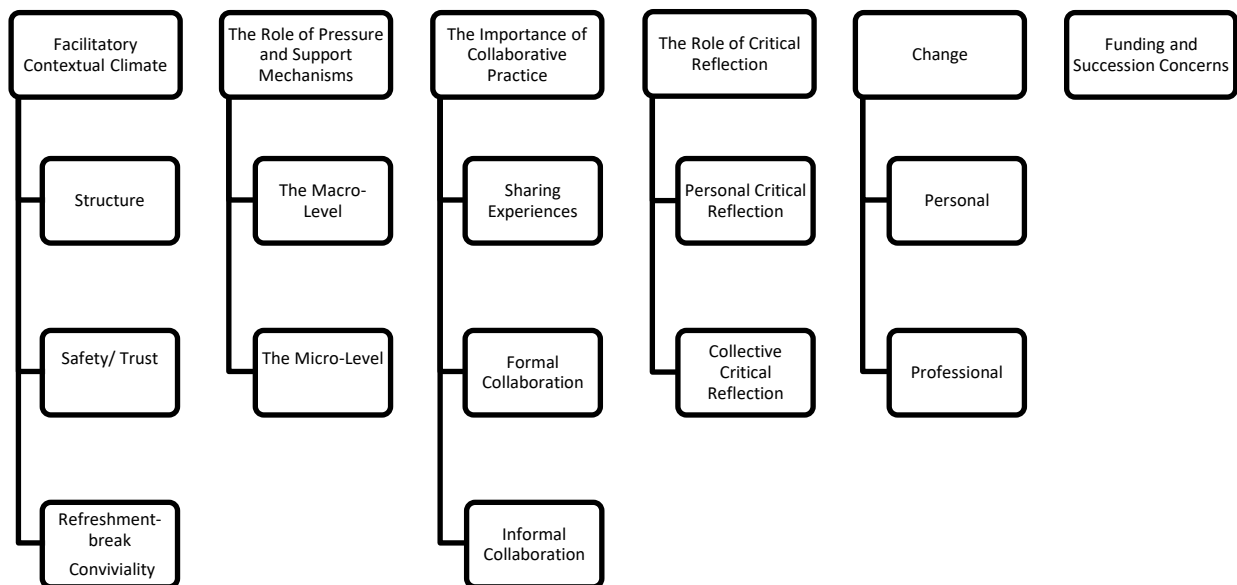
**Diagram 1: Early impressions of emerging overarching codes**



Following my interpretation of the datasets I was in a position to decide upon the most salient codes that would then be used to address my research questions. The recursive approach that had been applied together with the range of interpretive

angles had led to the overarching codes having evolved throughout the process of the data analysis. The final interpretation of these codes can be seen in diagram 2.

**Diagram 2: The final version of the overarching codes**



I will now provide a detailed examination of each of the themes I identified within the datasets as a result of the categorization process. The overarching codes will be illustrated by quotations from the participants or line managers. These are followed by their pseudonyms. Any words in bold type denote that significant emphasis was placed on them during the interviews. Where I felt that extra contextual information would aid the transparency of my interpretative process I have done so in square brackets. Due to the anonymity of the unit evaluation responses the extracts will be accompanied by their sequential number and a letter indicating the question being answered.

## **Section One – The Participant Findings**

I identified five overarching codes from the longitudinal dataset:

1. Facilitatory Contextual Climate
2. The Role of Pressure and Support Mechanisms

3. The Importance of Collaborative Practice
4. The role of Critical Reflection
5. Change

The quotations taken from the first phase interviews are represented as (1) and from the second (2).

### **3.3.2 Facilitatory Contextual Climate**

This overarching code deals with a broad compass of issues that relate to the learning environment that was created for the participants. This environment was perceived to have acted as a key driver for both their initial application and their willingness to participate in the collaborative and critically reflective activities. This overarching code will be divided into the following sub-codes:

- Structure
- Safety/Trust
- Refreshment-break conviviality

#### **3.3.2.1 Structure**

Participants' answers focused on locale and temporal considerations with a key issue being the convenience and location of the programme: 'I don't think I would ever have done the course if it hadn't been made manageable for me in terms of environment. So, where the course was, the timing of the course was crucial for me' (Linda, 2). This succinctly illustrated the importance of these issues in the development of a facilitatory contextual climate. The overriding perception was that the programme was delivered in a familiar, convenient location at a time and with a frequency that enabled the participants to be more receptive to the learning experience. One of the main advantages cited was the avoidance of stressful travel: 'I would hate to have to think that I was going to have to fight my way through to Grantchester (pseudonym) and fight my way to parking every Monday; in fact it would have been impossible' (Robert, 1). This point was developed, '...when we actually switched to the university later in the course, it was **very difficult** to

actually get there, to do [it] in a timely fashion for the start of the tutorial' (Alan, 1).

The convenience factor allowed participants to gain back time which contributed to the maintenance of a work/life balance: 'I'd then have time...[to] do some of the marking, write references, all of the other jobs I have to do as part of my daily work' (Alan, 1). Three of the female participants awarded greater significance to this contextual factor which emerged as the key lever to their participation. Work considerations *were* still viewed as a priority, but this was in addition to the pressure of family commitments: 'I have two children. I had to work commitments in around the degree course, and this was just so convenient. It meant I was able to - **actually**, consider doing it' (Eva, 1). Charlotte concurred and emphasised the complementary temporal issues, '... doing the course straight after the school day left me with time with my family and for school work' (1). These responses led me to reassess my views on access issues faced by teachers. I had expected locale and temporal issues to have a positive impact on the participants' work/life balance, but I had not anticipated that they would act as the key lever in participation. This was perhaps because I did not have a family and had only experienced work-load obstacles to access. As I had not shared these pressures I shifted along the continuum towards that of outsider. This persuaded me to revisit the entire dataset, placing all relevant quotations back into context, so as to avoid misrepresenting or distorting perceptions.

The small cohort size was viewed as an advantage as the equivalent programme at the university would be 'possibly in large groups. I mean, I did know this would be a relatively small, intimate group, and that appealed to me' (Eva, 1). Negative preconceptions concerning the university environment became evident: 'I don't think you can have the same level of intimacy in that university setting' (Lewis, 1) together with an expectation of greater informality, 'to some extent it felt like it was going to be like a tutorial where you have already built up a relationship with people' (Alan, 1). In addition, the sessions were held in a school environment which would be familiar and non-threatening to the participants. This cohort had all enjoyed some degree of success in the educational system and therefore the

negative connotations that many adults associate with the formal school environment in this sense were reversed. The school environment appeared to act as a support mechanism as conceptually this located the learning in school, thereby replicating the leadership learning in its correct setting. Therefore, the delivery of the early stages of the programme 'in situ' took on a greater professional significance for the participants as opposed to its later delivery in a decontextualized setting.

The local composition of the cohort also appeared to act as a support: 'it was a local thing ...it would allow me ... to network with people of a similar level in their career but in the local area... who know **what** the situations are that we come across' (Alan, 1). There was a perception of empathy, 'I think it's good we have a local slant on it, and we all understand each other's problems and issues' (Robert, 1). Some participants regarded this as 'a comfort blanket' (Jemma,1) which appeared to intensify the professional significance of the collaboration '... it was very useful having some understanding of each other's context, because it allowed you to place individuals' experiences, in context, quite easily' (Eva, 1). The empathy that was perceived to characterise the cohort appeared to have contributed to the creation of feelings of affinity and shared endeavour. This affinity was in part characterized by the apprehensions created by the programme pressure, '...it's just...knowing that everybody else feels the same as you or you're having the same problems or same worries' (Jemma, 1).

### **3.3.2.2 Safety/Trust**

To be enveloped by a safe environment characterised by confidentiality and trust was seen as a vital component of the success of the learning experience. These characteristics encouraged initial participation on the programme and the subsequent willingness to share experiences. The participants wanted to provide themselves with the best conditions to succeed regarding the environment as, 'safe and accessible' (Eva, 1) whilst providing the opportunity to study 'with supportive colleagues' (Max, 1).

Adult educational participation is intensely personal and the fears and vulnerabilities associated with the learning experience can result from extrinsic or intrinsic issues (Smith, 1982; Daloz, 1996). It appeared that this particular context contained an additional vulnerability – that of ‘relational risk’ (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.293). The professional and personal discourse entered into by the cohort could potentially lead to a feeling of vulnerability as relationships would continue for the duration of the programme and potentially following its completion. Therefore, establishing confidentiality and trust in this environment was ‘going to be key’ (Eva, 1) obviating any potential for leaks of information: ‘You were very clear at the beginning and I trusted you, that everything would be within the four walls, and if anything came outside of those four walls then we would be off the course’ (Robert, 1).

This reassurance was perceived to be the keystone of the learning experience ‘...because if I really wanted to share my experiences, I wanted it to be in a group where you were able to establish trust’ (Eva, 1). The air of confidentiality and trust enabled the cohort to engage freely in rational discourse and critical reflection: ‘it had to be quite a trusting environment, and we had to, kind of accept that people would say things that you might not agree with’ (Charlotte, 2). Once this climate had been established participants were willing to give more to the learning experience as ‘...I’d find it easier to be more open’ (Max, 1). Therefore, the trust that had emerged acted as a reassurance for the participants: ‘we could only get positive aspects from it [the sharing of experiences] as long as people are aware that it is absolutely in confidence’ (Alan, 1).

The explicit inclusion of myself in the group’s confidentiality protocol supported the idea that relational risk was a consideration, ‘...fair enough you’re SLT (Senior Leadership Team) so you mix with SLT from all over, but at the same time, I know that what’s in that room stays in that room’ (Jemma, 1). For the majority of my prolonged engagement with the cohort I was viewed as a middle leader and thereby occupied a low risk position in relation to the participants, ‘nothing was ever secretive...you had no secret agenda’ (Jemma, 2). This led to power relations not becoming a core issue in the research (Mercer, 2007). When my status did alter

to that of a senior leader it appeared inconsequential: 'you became a member of SLT (Senior Leadership Team) mid-way through the course but trust had already been established in our group' (Lewis, 1).

### **3.3.2.3 Refreshment-Break Conviviality**

Being provided with the opportunity to interact informally in a designated social space during the refreshment-break was viewed as a positive aspect of the programme. In this environment participants discussed: 'different schools and different issues they face and [the] different approaches that they've taken' (Lewis, 1). Being able to share experiences and critically reflect as a cohort without my presence was important '...because we discussed school issues further, we discussed issues from sessions further' (Eva, 1). Positioning me as an outsider at this juncture appeared to allow the participants an opportunity to express themselves openly without fear of causing offence '...that's when people were really picking things apart because when you've got someone in the room who clearly knows a lot about the subject and was very passionate about the subject you don't always want to appear like a naysayer' (Alan, 2). This interaction was seen to be high quality being where, '...you had your really good conversations' (Charlotte, 2) when '...the real ... **critical** reflection occurred' (Alan, 2).

It was here that confidential information was disclosed and programme frustrations vented: '...for me personally, I felt it was where I was able to talk about my frustrations at work' (Eva, 1). Participants reflected collectively and critically on the theoretical foci of the sessions and thereby created shared meanings and a shared reality. The individual and collective construction of reality appeared to contribute to feelings of affinity and a sense of shared endeavour, '...there wasn't a sense of individual ownership amongst individuals, and there wasn't a sense of being precious about things that we were doing within that environment' (Alan, 2).

This manifested itself explicitly when members of the cohort encountered setbacks, '...in one meal break someone admitted that they had failed an assignment, and we all wanted to know what we could do to help' (Max, 1) and then, 'shared resources



were offered' (Eva, 1). This informal environment lent itself to these offers of support: '...that's when people start to go "I've got a fantastic resource for..." where they might not want to put their hand up [in class] and... say "I've got all these resources if you want them"' (Alan, 1). This collaborative support-package could include practical assistance that ranged from, 'if someone else was looking to do a certain title for their assignment, it might be that we ran something very similar that they could come in and have a look at,' (Alan, 1) to sourcing useful resources 'I've ... emailed resources... and found ... journals... and things to help with people's research' (Max, 1).

The responses suggest that the provision of food was seen as a real community-builder as well as meeting basic physiological needs, 'the food is a big bonus... if I wasn't getting fed and had to wait until 7 o'clock you'd never... keep my attention' (Jemma, 1). The sharing of food was pivotal in forging relationships and encouraging the successful sharing of experiences '...because we were sharing food, we were comfortable, we opened up to each other' (Eva, 1) as well as being conducive to offering support, 'they'd [the participants would] happily say over a bhaji that they've got things that will be useful to the entire group' (Alan, 1). A protocol did appear to have operated in terms of the food distribution, '...I enjoy the joint unwrapping of sandwiches, and even the sharing and passing of food makes us interact more than if we were just having coffee and biscuits' (Max, 1). The collaborative nature in which the food was distributed does appear to mirror the participants' perceptions of shared endeavour on the programme.

The refreshment-break conviviality was a key element of the facilitatory contextual climate that provided the conditions that allowed the cohort to perceive themselves to be a community. My peripheral role, as an outsider, was crucial to the facilitation of the informal collaboration and critical reflection that occurred here.

### **3.3.3 The Role of Pressure and Support Mechanisms**

Throughout the learning experience it appeared that the cohort were exposed to a

range of pressure and support mechanisms that operated simultaneously on two distinct levels:

- The Macro-Level
- The Micro-Level

The macro-level refers to the programme environment (incorporating the demands of the programme together with the different intrinsic desires of individuals to meet these demands) with the micro-level focusing on the individual learning strategies. The preferred vocabulary of the participants in describing these mechanisms was *challenge* and *guidance*; however, having adopted a recursive approach to the dataset, I would argue that *pressure* and *support* mechanisms are more appropriate and useful terms, being more representative of their perceptions. The pressure mechanisms were not recognised as negative because they had been converted into a positive force during the learning experience. They appeared to have been offset by perceptions of affinity and shared endeavour which created a positive pressure for the participants. This positive pressure became synonymous with the learning experience and helped explain the participants' propensity to use the term challenge rather than pressure to interpret their experience.

### **3.3.3.1 The Macro-Level**

On a macro-level, the programme environment was the pressure mechanism, whilst the facilitatory contextual climate operated simultaneously as a support mechanism, 'The elements of the course that...were very challenging was the reading and the theory and the guidance throughout that, because that was one of the things I hadn't done since graduating' (Linda, 2). The two mechanisms operating together created a positive atmosphere: 'the whole environment felt, although, we'd got the task to do, we got a lot of work to do each session – it felt relaxed and it felt safe to explore our views' (Eva, 1).

Participants wanted to hone their leadership skills for a variety of reasons that included professional satisfaction, '...so I could be more effective in the role I was in' (Alan, 1), together with the desire to embark on a personal challenge, 'I'd been

disappointed in myself, really, for my original degree' (Robert, 2) or to overcome a fear of failure, 'If I'm honest it [the Masters programme] wasn't something that I thought I would do, or, I could do' (Linda, 2). This pressure created an affinity shared by the participants as they doubted whether they possessed the necessary skill set to succeed on the programme since, in the majority of cases, they were embarking on this learning journey following a significant break from academic study.

In some cases the pressure appeared to have been extrinsic, 'I think it was quite a few peoples' perception, at my school... I was in my current role until retirement' (Eva, 1); for others, however, it was intrinsically located, 'I have months, I have weeks when I wish I'd never started it [the course]...I sometimes sit there just thinking that I haven't got a clue what anybody's talking about... and think, 'Oh, man, am I ever going to be like that, ever?' (Jemma, 1) The context that surrounded this comment arose from Jemma's doubts that she possessed a similar academic ability to the rest of the cohort. A lack of confidence, regardless of its origin, can increase the potential relational risk that the participants felt they had exposed themselves to during this learning experience.

Paradoxically, these extrinsic and intrinsic pressure mechanisms appear to have contributed to the creation of affinity amongst the cohort based on shared experiences and shared concerns, '... you almost feel like you've been through [to] hell and back' (Max, 1) which arguably led to the development of a spirit of shared endeavour: 'we... found the course challenging but we had a "no-man's [sic] gonna be left behind" mentality' (Eva, 2). These perceptions appear to have converted the macro pressure into a positive force, '...the key advantage this course has, is this whole team approach that we're all working together and we're more of a unit' (Lewis,1).

My position as an insider was viewed as a key support mechanism by the group, '...we actually had a practitioner who was not only talking to us about the academic nature [theory], but how it applied within the... setting we were all in' and was regarded as, '...a huge benefit to have someone who was there at the chalk face – certainly early on as you're finding your feet within the course' (Alan, 1). When I

drilled down into these perceptions it became evident that this enthusiasm actually centred on my perceived ability to contextualise the academic theory; this in turn had increased the professional significance of the learning. In addition it was felt that as an insider I could empathise with individual school situations, 'I think you have a greater understanding of the pressure I am under' (Max, 1). Therefore, the participants chose to access my insider position in response to their need to create a 'safe' learning environment thereby providing themselves with the best possible conditions to succeed.

Another prerequisite that was perceived to contribute to the success was the tutor's possession of appropriate subject knowledge: 'whether the tutor is a practising teacher or lecturer...I was interested in the quality of the delivery, the preparation of the stimulus material we were given, their enthusiasm, and their commitment' (Eva, 1). In order to fulfil the participants' need for academic rigour it was felt that the course tutor and university should enter into a mutually supportive relationship, '**You cannot** deliver that level of course without the support of a HEI [Higher Education Institute]...as...you narrow your field of study... you need the breadth of study the HEI represents' (Alan, 1). The participants wanted the academic support that the university could offer, '...what I did on the course, sometimes I felt was not with the support of the institution [university]... I felt it needed much more input. I **needed** to feel much more inclusive in having the institution [university] working with the school' (Linda, 1).

Responses suggested that the learning experience generated a cumulative interest in the relevant academic resources: '...the depth of reading that I'm doing is significantly more... I think as the course has gone on... you want to have a breadth of reading and that breadth of knowledge there to aid your research' (Lewis, 1). One of the stimuli for this interest was the participants becoming cognisant of its professional impact: 'I'm spending more time looking at what's being written because I know the value of it... I've been reading around from universities, from other schools, speaking to staff from other schools' (Charlotte, 2). The university was perfectly placed to act as the support mechanism to meet these developing needs of the cohort.

### **3.3.3.2 The Micro-Level**

Simultaneously, pressure and support elements operated at the micro-level of the learning strategies. They had been developed in a way that structured the participants' involvement, '...I liked the fact that we'd got materials to interact with and problems to solve...I quite liked those tasks and the fact that we had to present to the rest of the group ' (Eva, 1). Each task/strategy was designed to be engaging, embracing a variety of methodologies which required creative responses and immediate action. The participants had clear objectives which required them to make informed decisions and accept feedback rather than taking a passive role. The imposition of very tight time limits and the inclusion of a performance element all put the participants under pressure to deliver. The activities were high quality in terms of relevance to the participants' professional lives, '...we examined the theory in the light of the problems that the group were facing in their current leadership roles. And that for me gave the course an interactive, practical approach rather than just dry theory' (Lewis, 2). Support was offered by the tutor through the provision of the relevant materials to enable the participants to progress successfully.

These tasks were paradoxical in that they constrained participants because of the pressure mechanisms; however, they appeared to be somewhat like a protocol because they disciplined participants' responses. The pressure of the situation could have impeded creativity, but it appears that the pressures instead evoked a creative response from the participants. The participants' perceptions were that these structured, collaborative sessions, although challenging, enabled a great deal of material to be covered in sessions, '...we got through a lot, which I did like, but the time went very, very quickly' (Eva, 1). A forward momentum was maintained by completing the tasks sequentially, thereby facilitating the accumulation of knowledge and competence, 'as it was delivered, it meant that you got a feel for the subject that you were studying, and then you could build on it' (Alan, 1).

The participants perceived the structured nature of the learning strategies as crucial, which was emphasised when an alternative methodology was imposed by

the university during the later stages of the programme as a quality control mechanism. At this point the pressure mechanisms were still in operation but the nature of the support mechanisms had changed, '... I needed the structure and the approach of [being] given the information and time to process that, rather than being given...random information... and having to go away and try to cope. I needed a little more guidance' (Linda, 1). It was suggested that the theory had become increasingly abstract in character with a consensus that the learning strategies were more suited to individualised study than the preferred collaborative approach, 'you didn't feel like you could explore it within a group setting; you had to go away [and] digest it (Alan, 1).

These interpretations are interesting as the difficulty tariff of the theory was comparable throughout the programme. The professional relevance of the material studied was viewed as an important support mechanism to the cohort and, if the academic material was perceived to be detached from the participants' social reality, it was viewed negatively, being 'a little bit harder... to understand how it [was] helping me as a leader, because it changed from being very leadership training, into academia' (Robert, 2).

### **3.3.4 The Importance of Collaborative Practice**

Collaborative practice was perceived to be a major contributory factor to the success of the learning experience. The participants appeared to appreciate the opportunity to engage in professional discourse and share their experiences both in the formal programme setting and through informal interaction. The prevalent sub-codes identified were:

- Sharing Experiences
- Formal Collaboration
- Informal Collaboration

#### **3.3.4.1 Sharing Experiences**

Being able to share experiences with colleagues was highly valued by group members, 'I found it really interesting comparing and contrasting schools when we

were sharing our experiences' (Charlotte, 1). The cohort contained a vast array of experiences which was regarded as important on both an individual and collective level, '... while all of us came from a similar geographical area, there was a **huge** variety of experience...that variety was good for the group as...we were all facing very different challenges but we could learn from each other's experiences' (Lewis, 2).

The safe environment that had been established allowed participants to share openly both their personal and professional experiences and this opportunity was embraced '... to spend time with like-minded colleagues, and to have the time to discuss professional issues' (Eva, 1). Leadership practice could be discussed within a confidential environment in terms of '...what had worked, what hadn't worked and to share that with others' (Eva, 2) which facilitated the exploration and experimentation of their leadership ideas. The sharing of experiences for some was highly significant 'I felt it was much more of a coming together, a unifying experience, having people in the local area to share experiences with' (Linda, 1).

The term 'unifying' does appear to indicate a bonding within the cohort as they appeared to evolve into a community: 'I really enjoyed sharing the experiences in group practice...that was a part of the experience that I look back on with great fondness because the friendships I made then have continued to enrich my life' (Eva, 2). The intense nature of this collaboration was valued, 'they were sharing their experiences, and you ended up with...a very positive learning environment' (Alan, 2). The nature of the sharing was deemed particularly significant to the maintenance of a forward momentum within the group, '...we all shared those experiences fully, and I think, because of that sharing and that reflection that happened together, we, actually, progressed faster due to that' (Eva, 1).

The sharing of experiences allowed the participants to create new meanings both individually and collectively as a cohort. This meaning-making was constructed through formal and informal interaction, and was cited by the participants as contributing to a bank of shared experiences that had been, and still are, frequently drawn upon '...knowing that we could share experiences and practices, was really

important, in the role now that I've gone on to do, because it helps to inform everything I do' (Linda, 2).

### 3.3.4.2 Formal Collaboration

The learning strategies that characterised the formal learning environment had a collaborative format '... it was presenting information, group work, time to go away and look at tasks and to think how to process that information and to discuss that with other people' (Linda, 1). This format was viewed positively '...there were plenty of opportunities for new educational theories to be explained and to discuss ideas in groups. It was good we were allowed to relate theory to practice and reflect on our own schools' (Charlotte, 1).

The collaborative challenges appeared to lead to the formation of closer and more creative relationships founded on trust. The safe, familiar environment facilitated experimentation and exploration through the activities: '... there'll be the big sheets of paper, more collaboration, swapping of markers, the level of amusement...you, sort of, consolidate someone's life's work into one drawing...and I think everyone got to know each other quite well' (Max, 1). However, trust was seen as the key component to the activities' success: 'when you're given a marker and a big sheet of paper and you're asked to work collaboratively... **it really got** people working together. It built that ... environment of **trust**' (Alan, 2). It appeared that allocating the cohort time alone to collaborate on the formal tasks enabled them to operate collectively which in itself acted as a support mechanism for the participants. Robert suggested that the collaboration had created community bonds: '...where we're... working closely together as a group... like a learning community... everybody in the group worked really well together – fired ideas off each other and I thought that was stimulating' (Robert, 2).

This interplay between collaboration and reflection was seen as a key means of encouraging a more holistic view of education 'what it gave me...was ... actually reflecting on education in a wider sense, rather than just thinking about my individual, kind of, ideas and worries and concerns' (Charlotte, 2). It was suggested



that the development of a more holistic outlook acted as a diversion from a professionally insular position to considering leadership learning in the broader sense. This transition appeared to contribute to the creation of a sense of affinity 'having gained from the course more of a shared vision about what we're doing, and why, perhaps we need to work together more' (Charlotte, 2).

### **3.3.4.3 Informal Collaboration**

The refreshment break had provided one venue where the foundations of the cohort's informal collaboration were laid: 'there is a 'team spirit' amongst the group... we have shared email addresses and phone numbers so that we can communicate away from the session...I think the relationships are building... beyond our provision on Monday evenings' (Max, 1).

The collaboration occurred both electronically and socially in a variety of venues and was frequently cited in terms of its personal and professional relevance to the participants, 'you can ring up and email people, other than the ones that are just in your school and it's been massively beneficial' (Lewis, 1). The cohort designed a social media platform to request, share and create resources which enabled members: '...to look at a certain resource, and there would be a tweet sent out and you would click on it and it would take you to that document and that page' (Max, 2). There was a great deal of confidentiality surrounding this particular collaborative assistance and I remained unaware of it until the second phase of interviews following course completion. It appears that the cohort operated successfully away from the formal programme environment and that this brought them closer, 'quite often, we went to the pub at the end of a session...and we'd have really positive talks' (Robert, 2). Max elaborated on this: 'say, we're there for an hour – maybe, half an hour chat about things we've discussed at the Masters, and then, just half an hour chat, just about social things' (2).

It appears that these collaborative relationships have endured. The existence of a common bond, an affinity, between the members featured strongly in the responses during the programme, and were mentioned just as frequently in the

interviews following programme completion ‘...you’ll bump into someone who has done the Masters, and **instantly** you’ve got that shared experience’ (Alan, 2) which enabled participants to ‘...feel comfortable discussing... the processes that you’ve put in place, and also asking advice of other people’ (Alan, 2). This collaboration has been evidenced by small-scale collaboration, ‘there are...challenges to do with staff or to do with government change and we do discuss that [because] we’ve got this common bond’ (Eva, 2) to liaising with the whole cohort ‘...I have rang them or contacted them when... I need help with something. So I know that they’re on the end of a phone and I know they’d be positive and they’d support me’ (Eva, 2). She attributed this, in part, to their prolonged engagement since ‘... the relationships that you form and that professional respect between each [other] was something quite precious really’ (Eva, 2).

The common bonds that permeated the cohort appear to have intensified as a result of their extended time together ‘I think as the course went on... the group of people became a more tight-knit community’ (Max, 2). Initially, the shared endeavour of the cohort was successful programme completion whereas, following programme completion, this was replaced by a shared desire to hone leadership practice, ‘If I’ve got a question or a problem, or some of my colleagues have, we’ll ring up...and ask how we could change things, how they could do things’ (Robert, 2). The informal collaboration has allowed the cohort to continue to negotiate shared meanings, ‘when we talk about what we’re going to be doing, or what things have bothered us in terms of our work, it’s a kind of talking through to come to better decisions’ (Charlotte, 2) with ‘...discussions based upon management and strategies and we discuss ways in which we might do something’ (Jemma, 2). The participants viewed themselves as a community, ‘I think our relationships...[have] become... a learning community... where we’re all getting together...working on problem-solving’ (Robert, 2). Communication between members is multi-faceted, ‘the ones [participants] I see on a more regular basis I collaborate with very closely [and] the ones that I ... have email contact with...we do collaborate with in a theoretical sense’ (Alan, 2). Forms of electronic communication appeared to play a significant role in enabling the cohort to collaborate, especially for those members

now separated geographically, '...we do share resources via e-mail and I do actually still contact them via a professional social e-mail' (Lewis, 2).

The importance that the cohort placed on the role of collaboration can be illustrated by their efforts to replicate the strategy in their own institutions, '... seeing its value within the group, I've tried to maintain it within my current leadership role where I've tried to develop collaborative teams and have people working together and feeding in their best practice' (Eva, 2). Their collaborative social media activity has also reached a wider audience: '... I still use that same learning community and it's grown' (Max, 2).

### **3.3.5 The Role of Critical Reflection**

It appears that critical reflection became highly significant to the participants' professional practice for the duration of the programme and in their current practice. Critical reflective techniques were perceived to have become habitual and as such were awarded priority status within their leadership roles. The key themes I identified were:

- Personal Critical Reflection
- Collective Critical Reflection

#### **3.3.5.1 Personal Critical Reflection**

It appears that personal critical reflection was seen as a crucial element in effective leadership practice, '... critical reflection techniques have been invaluable, really, in my role at work [without them] I don't think I would have been as effective a leader' (Eva, 2) since '...now I'm looking at the actions I'm taking within the department, with theory in mind' (Eva, 1). Some participants approached this process through writing, '...I've got to write it in the book [reflective journal] and then I've got to think about it later' (Jemma, 2) and, '...they [reflective writing exercises] did allow me to see just to what extent I was practically implementing the theory that I learnt in the lectures and actually critically reflecting on that' (Lewis, 2). The reflective process was viewed by the participants as intense and

worthwhile because of the importance of the leadership role, '...it's a deeper reflection when you're thinking about outcomes and how that's going to support the people you work with' (Charlotte, 2).

Participants suggested that the leadership learning provided an important reference point in the critical reflection process, '...**what I** can do is look at decisions I have made and be reflective upon those in terms of how management or leadership theory applies to it' (Alan, 1). This allowed practical problems to be overcome, 'at that time ...I had a disparate team and I really felt I could use the theory learnt on the course to help effectively manage that team' (Lewis, 2) and to assess previous actions, 'I can also reflect on what I've done in the past as well and realised why things haven't worked as well as they should have worked and understand different approaches to how I've done it' (Robert, 1).

Therefore, participants suggested that their practice relied less on instinct and more on critical reflection, 'I think we all think we are good at gut feelings. But, just sometimes, you've to stop, reflect; think about it a little bit more' (Robert, 2). Such a commitment to critical reflection was seen as time-consuming, 'I make sure that one of those sessions [free periods] is totally my time to reflect' (Jemma, 2) but necessary, 'I've... given myself the target of slowing down the decision process, literally stopping really and building in reflection' (Lewis, 2).

Taking time out for critical reflection could result in delayed decision-making which was regarded as a challenge in the present educational climate, '... it's very hard to stop the treadmill; step off it, think about what you're doing, then, step back on the treadmill, because it's so fast, and changes are, sort of, hitting you every second of the day' (Robert, 2). This consequence however, was perceived to be necessary, '... [if] a member of my department asks me something major, they're not getting a response there and then, because I need time to think about it' (Jemma, 2) and congruent with their vision of effective leadership, '...I am making sure that I do have time to make the **key decisions** in my role...I am **not** making decisions in a hurry'. (Eva 2). This was illustrated when Linda instigated a range of politically sensitive policies which took, '...a long time to plan and to test out with people before it was actually developed with the whole staff'; this preparation she deemed

to be essential, with 'an awful lot of critical reflection leading up to that, to ensure that I was delivering the best possible for staff' (Linda, 2).

### 3.3.5.2 Collective Critical Reflection

The ability to draw upon the shared experiences of the cohort was also perceived to have played a key role in the critical reflection process, 'there was a lot of input coming in from the theory, from colleagues, from experiences, through the assignments' (Eva, 2). The sharing of these experiences in both formal and informal contexts was made possible by the presence of trust. Being provided with an opportunity to enter into academic discourse and critical reflection allowed the participants to negotiate meanings constantly, through the sharing of experiences which resulted in a co-construction of reality. This is illustrated by the following incident during a refreshment break where a theory previously dismissed by Alan was reassessed, '...you can then vent forth about why...you ask...these particular questions... but then...through that process [collective critical reflection] you'd get insight from other people and you'd realise ...it is a valid methodology' (Alan, 2).

These experiences became an important part of the shared bank of resources and materials that participants critically reflected upon, '... it helps me to think back to the experiences of other people and what worked and what didn't – **particularly** with leadership... and that's helped change my views' (Linda, 2). The resultant impact on individual leadership practice was commented upon, 'you'd remember anecdotal examples from the group as well, and it really allowed you to put into practice not just your idealised theoretical models that you'd learnt, but it allowed you to also tweak those for a practical setting' (Alan, 2). He added '... you'd hit barriers to change which would then make you stop and think back to what you'd discussed in those breaks and within the taught components as well' (Alan, 2).

Participants perceived the relationship between the collaborative activity and critical reflection to be very significant, '...I became more critically reflective ...due to the nature of the tasks that you set, the way in which you **set** the tasks... go away in your little group, talk it through, critically reflect and then present' (Jemma, 2). For

many, the frequency of the collective critical reflection made it more significant, 'it was more sort of a drip feed type thing because we were reflecting through the course...week on week because we were discussing it [the learning] amongst ourselves' (Eva, 2). This intensity appeared to be missed by the cohort, 'I do **miss** that level of contact and that chance to be reflective with your peers' (Alan, 2). This appeared to result in attempts to replicate collective critical reflection techniques within the participants' own work circles. Lewis replicated the collective critical reflection techniques from the cohort in some of the institutions he was involved with nationally. This replication supported the holistic view of education shared by the cohort, 'I think you want educating in your little bubble...You're seeing a whole, national picture of what education is like across the country and it leaves you as a more informed individual and it helps you reflect' (1).

### **3.3.6 Change**

A significant theme in the responses concerned the perceived changes that the participants had experienced both during and following completion of the learning experience. Answers focused on significant changes that had occurred in terms of their individual thinking towards educational leadership and how this had resulted in tangible changes in their professional practice. Therefore the sub-codes identified were:

- Personal Change
- Professional Change

#### **3.3.6.1 Personal Change**

Participants focused on the changes that had occurred on a personal level, 'I just think I felt clever, and I'd never felt clever before. So it's, kind of, been that bit of inner confidence' (Robert, 2). Increased confidence appeared to result in feelings of empowerment: 'I think having done my MSc has been one of the major impacts on my confidence, how I speak to other people, and also self-belief' (Charlotte, 2). In the case of Max this led to a more honest relationship with his team, 'I'm... more confident to share with the team the things that I do wrong and my inadequacies

than maybe I would have done before' (2). This self-belief resulted in the participants feeling empowered in a variety of contexts, 'I feel more knowledgeable...I'm much more confident to engage with staff... in a role higher than mine, as well. I don't feel now that I'm on the periphery' (Linda, 1). This appeared to lead to a more transparent and confident leadership approach: '...because I have more confidence, I can say things that I truly believe now, better, and can say why things are being done in a certain way' (Max, 1). It was suggested that being able to draw upon the cohort's shared bank of resources was a crucial factor in the rise in personal confidence, '...I feel stronger... because of what I did on the course' (Linda, 2) and this strength changed personal perceptions '...I didn't class myself as an overall leader...whereas now, being in the new job with the course materials behind me, I've just got the confidence now to do things on my own' (Jemma, 2).

Increased confidence and greater self-belief appeared to contribute to the participants being able to revise their leadership thinking. Answers suggested that their thinking had changed as a result of being critically reflective, '...it's made me not just do things just because somebody tells me that I have to do it' (Jemma, 2). The process of personal critical reflection altered the participants' social reality and appeared to encourage autonomous thinking, '... in terms of critically reflecting, it's what's the practice for? What's the purpose? And therefore, how are we going to go about doing this, and would that work?' (Linda, 2) whilst retaining a holistic view, '...am I implementing this change, because I've been told to implement this...is this change, or is this policy in the best interests of my staff? Is it in the best interests of my students?' (Charlotte, 1) Autonomous thought is defined here as the participants having operated beyond specific leadership directives given to them; instead they have adopted a holistic view of the true role of educational leadership. Participants wanted their leadership practice to adhere to their educational vision, 'what we can do to provide an education that is meaningful' (Eva, 2); not simply following government directives, 'I'm thinking about things, it's not just about what's being imposed upon me but also critically reflecting on how I can make the best changes which are going to reflect the needs of my students and my staff' (Charlotte, 2). The adoption of a revised viewpoint affected how decision-making

was approached, '...with regard to the government and...all the different measures they are bringing in, how important it is that we implement those off the back of some critical reflection' (Eva, 2). These priorities sometimes led to feelings of disappointment with seemingly inappropriate leadership directives, '...I...get frustrated that new initiatives don't seem to learn from the past...that they're [the government] grabbing ideas from other countries that haven't worked...then they're bouncing it back to us' (Robert, 2).

The holistic thinking that characterised the participants' leadership practice appeared to be habitual, '...being able to look at different research practitioners and different theories was really instrumental in changing the way I thought about education and what I was doing on a daily basis' (Eva, 2). This was seen as a deeply personal experience '...it was more of a personal journey for me in terms of looking at education and thinking about the wider context' (Charlotte, 2). The critical reflection element of their thought was perceived to be a natural process as Lewis explained, 'I critically examined the immediate environment and the leadership practices that were taking place... and I found I started to critically reflect on everything... it's something that you start to do quite naturally'; this provided him with a different view of his school, 'you start to notice elements of your school that you didn't notice before' (2).

This new thinking appeared to be a deep-seated phenomenon that had become part of their inner self, '...I think it becomes part of your overall being? You just naturally think in that way, whereas, in the past, maybe I didn't; I thought about getting a job done; now it's a natural flow of things' (Robert, 2). It appeared that the changes were habitual: '... as it became so ingrained in my psyche as to how we go about managing change...' (1); Alan went on to elaborate, 'I use leadership management theory without even thinking about it...it was a case of there was a synergy between what we were learning and what we were doing at the same time' (Alan, 2). It appeared that the changes had occurred simultaneously with the leadership learning: 'I didn't see that in the day I did my job and in the evening I did my Masters. It was very much one complemented the other' (Max, 2). The participants regarded these changes as being fundamental to their outlook, '...what



we did [the cohort]... is to look at everything from 360. Whereas before ...I tended to just look at everything from the left, from the right, as opposed to, how is this going to affect everything all the way round' (Jemma, 2).

In Alan's case, this led to a significant alteration in his academic perspective, 'I was used to hard data, so I struggled quite a bit initially with anecdotal data...but gradually talking to other people...made you realise that [it] was a really useful tool' (2). The collective critical reflection process together with the collaborative learning strategies led Alan to alter his thinking from dismissing qualitative research as merely common sense to a recognition of its central role in his practice: 'I think part of the reason I thought it was just common sense is because I was transitioning so rapidly from what I was before the course started, to where I am now', which led him to say, 'that things seemed obvious within the research because I was already thinking in that way due to the learning...the leadership management theory is so ingrained in what I do' (2).

The participants' revised thinking towards education leadership appeared to have facilitated personal career progression amongst the group, 'since then, obviously I've moved schools, I've moved positions, and I've been promoted twice' (Lewis, 2). This rapid career progression was attributed, in part, to the cohort's changed perceptions of their ability and potential: 'the course...gave me the confidence to apply for my current role' (Charlotte, 1). In some cases this had manifested itself in a desire for promotion: '...it's accelerated my career aspirations...doing the course has opened my eyes to ... what you can do and it's really inspired a desire to improve and mould a school and it's something I... intend to do' (Lewis, 2). In other cases it simply increased the propensity to apply for positions: 'it's made me think about it more...it will make me frustrated, if I don't move on. Whereas, I think before I did the course, I wouldn't have been as frustrated – now I know what's out there' (Robert, 1). In some cases, the altered perceptions had stimulated a latent force: '...I was Head of...Department...but I had been wanting a further challenge...the course was the impetus that made me believe that it might be possible' (Eva, 2). Being in possession of a new-found confidence led to a clarification of individual expectations, 'I've got quite a thirst at the moment, I love

the job I'm doing now ... I think I would look to the future and see what other skills I can gain... for... a more senior role' (Linda, 1). Linda had just received a promotion when she stated this further ambition; this, in turn, was realised before the end of that academic year.

A key motivator for career progression amongst the cohort was the desire to implement their vision of competent leadership as opposed to personal aggrandisement: '...moving into a position where I can influence possible change or...where I can apply what I know is an effective method of doing things, where I can apply the learning that I've gained to those situations' (Alan, 2). For Max this changed thinking made him totally reassess his personal expectations and, '... made me realise how important it [leadership role] is', which resulted in his decision to delay promotion, '...for my belief of what I think true leadership is, I think I've got more opportunity to make a bigger difference with the job that I have' (2). His personal decision, however, was compatible with the cohort's shared vision of effective leadership: '...some of the group have taken...a sideways move, but it's allowed them to really start to explore implementing real change on a school-wide basis rather than...a department one' (Alan, 2).

### **3.3.6.2 Professional Change**

Participants also focused on the changes that had occurred in their professional practice due to the learning experience. It appears that critical reflection on shared experiences and collaborative activities had resulted in revised practice, 'The course ...allowed us to draw on different aspects of each other's leadership techniques and each other's skills and the theory that we're looking at, in order to form a better leadership model' (Alan, 2). Eva emphasised the significance of the personalisation process, '...there was an article on how each leader brings a historical back story, which inevitably impacts on their leadership style...it gave me the confidence to bring my own back story...I don't have to be a leadership robot' (Eva, 2). The change in practice was viewed as a natural result of the learning strategies, '...you set up many changes...you gave us lots of scenarios. We did [studied] change

through our assignments and that then became the natural progression as to being able to practise the leadership throughout my job role' (Jemma, 2).

The professional changes were seen as being significant, 'I've changed the way I communicate; I've changed the way I deliver change and decisions' which involved Lewis replacing impulsive decision-making with a, '...a more measured approach, which has not come naturally to me' (2). Charlotte demonstrated her changed practice to a range of key stake-holders, '... I've sent out evaluations to staff, to students, to Heads of Departments... and looked at their thoughts and feelings in a more systematic way... then, when I've actually tried to implement a change, I've had evidence', which she attributed to her being, '... a bit more academic...in terms of how I look at a change...but also, again, it's [the learning experience] increased my confidence in what I want to do' (Charlotte, 2). Robert developed this point: '...I have spent a lot of time talking to colleagues who are outside of SLT about the implications of the paper [a White Paper]...I don't honestly think I would have had the confidence before I started the course' (1). Later he elaborated on this, '....I think now the theory behind what we learnt...puts me in a far stronger position ...when I'm talking to members of staff' (2). This changed practice had been recognised by colleagues, 'I share an office with two or three other people and they all comment that I've changed in the way I approach problems and the way I discuss things' (Robert, 1).

The revised professional practice appeared to operate in a variety of contexts, '...whether it's encountering a member of staff who doesn't agree with something...whether it's guiding more senior people in something that I believe in; whether it's dealing with different stakeholders such as governors' (Linda, 2). Linda's perception was that the change in her leadership practice involved having access to the cohort's shared bank of resources: 'whenever...I had to work out how to deal with something, I was reflecting back on prior learning' (2). She demonstrated this frequently, '...there are...middle leaders who constantly ask for advice and strategies to support what they're doing...if I hadn't done this course, I wouldn't have that knowledge' (Linda, 1). Participants suggested that they now felt academically equipped to dispense advice, regardless of any status differential, '...I

would like to think that me doing the course changed this structure (SLT), because we spoke... with the new Head Teacher and now...we have a big picture overview of everything as opposed to micro-managing' (Robert, 2). The changed leadership practice had resulted in school-wide change, 'I... talked through a lot of the theories on how schools could - **not should** - but could be organised, really, to get the best out of people. And I really do feel that I may have influenced the Head's recent restructuring' (Eva, 1).

Their critically reflective position appeared to make the participants more inclined to scrutinise their peers, '... it's made me look at people [her line manager] and wonder why they're not reflecting in the same way', which in this case, resulted in a direct challenge, '...I said to him [her line manager]... "Do **you** not reflect? **Have you not** thought about this?" Which is pretty harsh as a comment...but for me... one of the problems is you don't understand when other people **don't**' (Charlotte, 2). She later explained, '...I would never have done that four or five years ago' (2). This critical position extended to school-wide concerns, 'I know that...it [her school] could be a better place...but that's not going to happen until they implement some sort of structure and...[provide] time to critically reflect' (Jemma, 2). The holistic view of education that had emerged from within the cohort appeared to act as the bench mark for their evaluation.

The participants appeared committed to the revised practice, even when faced with resistance, '... some of the team were saying, "It doesn't matter. It's a completely fresh start." Where I was... digging my heels in, and saying, "It's not a fresh start. We need to learn from the mistakes of the past"' (Robert, 2). They modified policies to be commensurate with their own vision: '... this is a change that was imposed on us but that didn't mean we couldn't put our own spin on [it]... a huge amount of the theory from the Masters was used for that' (Lewis, 1). Eva elaborated: '...you might be being forced down a particular route... then you've just got to hold firm to your principles really, and values, in terms of critical reflection' (Eva, 2).

The revised practice appeared more sensitive to the needs of colleagues, 'I have implemented a lot of Senge's thinking into my leadership style... I have applied those critical reflection techniques and am becoming aware of the sensitivities of

people' (Eva, 2). This resulted in paying greater attention to the composition and value of their teams, '...I know them [his department] better from understanding a bit of their personalities and different characteristics from the human resources management module' (Max, 1). This empathetic practice enabled the participants to, 'bring out the **best** in the people' (Linda, 2) through being, '... more receptive to other peoples' opinions' (Charlotte, 2). It was suggested that there was an increased desire to develop colleagues through relinquishing some professional autonomy, being '...happier delegating to someone else' (Lewis, 2). This was particularly significant in Max's case where, 'I wouldn't let them [his department] near certain things...it was all mine, all mine...now I think I do try to trust them' and his increased confidence had resulted in his ability 'to...direct someone to give them a particular job to do and that then has empowered them' (2). This element of his revised practice was not restricted to his workplace, '... I've probably tried to do more on developing others... some of the things I do out of school has had a really big impact on other teachers' professional development' (Max, 2).

A key part of the revised practice appeared to be the propensity to replicate aspects of the learning experience within the participants' own schools, 'I have... really enjoyed the theory... I've used it in departmental meetings and in meetings with my line manager and talked about it with colleagues in other schools' (Lewis, 1). Participants discussed the creative methods used in the replication process, 'I always presented back to the SLT...and shared with them... my new found knowledge which was great. We spent a bit of time doing Belbin challenges... to see what the structure of the department [SLT] was' (Robert, 2). The cohort's shared belief in the value of critical reflection was perceived to have been central to their revised practice and an element they were keen to disseminate, 'I think what I'm trying to do is try to pass that on, perhaps, to some staff that I work with who are less reflective, and trying to get them to think about, perhaps, reflecting more' (Charlotte, 2). This was achieved by using their own practice as an exemplar, '...certainly, with colleagues it's this, kind of, almost guiding colleagues who've not necessarily studied at the same level where you can encourage them to be critically reflective through you being critically reflective' (Alan, 2).

Aspects of the refreshment-break conviviality were replicated to encourage collaboration and critical reflection, 'I do what you used to do where you used to leave us because by leaving the strand [department] it allows the time for them to critically reflect, to have a discussion...without me being in the room' (Jemma, 2). The sharing of food was also used for this purpose, '...I provide cheese and biscuits and... a glass of wine... I think it's talking about serious issues but in an informal setting, I think sometimes brings out the best in them [his department]' (Max, 2). It appeared that the cohort strove for collaborative practice to become the norm, '...we'd turn up for our sessions [on the programme], and they were always open discussion based. I've kept that going. I like the fact that people can try and be honest' (Jemma, 2). It was acknowledged that for this to happen aspects of the facilitatory contextual climate needed to be in place. This climate had been perceived as the key to why the cohort had shared their experiences so successfully and regularly during the learning experience, '... [I'm] trying to get people to trust that this is the environment I create, whether it be a tutor meeting, or whether I'm working with students, [it] should be...a trusting environment' (Charlotte, 2). The theme of safety was prevalent, 'Nothing was ever secretive [in the programme] so I've taken that approach' (Jemma, 2). The process of replication extended beyond the workplace, 'I'm trying to foster a community within... outside industries. I'm looking for an Applegate business forum, much of which has come from the Masters' (Lewis 1).

## **Section Two – The Line Manager Findings**

The following section will provide a detailed interpretation of the key issues that I identified from the line managers. Their responses focused on their perceptions of the participants' leadership practice both during and following the programme. They individually constructed these accounts from line management meetings, appraisal interviews and personal observations.

The line managers' responses identified issues that linked to two of the five overarching codes and sub-codes that had been generated previously by the longitudinal dataset, with one additional theme. I had not expected the line

managers to comment on the learning experience itself as they had not taken part in that process. Three overarching codes were identified:

- Facilitatory Contextual Climate
- Change  
and
- Funding and Succession Concerns

### **3.3.7 Facilitatory Contextual Climate**

The perception of the line managers was that the local nature of the programme provided a great advantage in terms of time gained not travelling, their colleagues' personal well-being and its collaborative potential. The line managers identified issues associated with the following sub-code:

#### **3.3.7.1 Structure**

The line managers considered that, '...the convenience must have had an impact, rather than having to travel' (Leonard). The local venue was regarded as ideal in that, 'it was much better not to be at a university...it has to be near the schools to be relevant for people; they can't transport themselves to the other side of Grantchester, it's impossible' (Sophie). Therefore, locale was regarded as a key lever to enable their colleagues to participate in the programme.

The responses did suggest a shared concern that the alternative, involving arduous travel, could potentially impact negatively on their colleagues' leadership roles, 'time is vitally important for our staff. This is added on to their own day job, which is **huge**, so travel needs to be kept to a minimum' (Sophie). Barrett linked this more explicitly to a concern about their work/life balance; he regarded, '...the bonus of having a local location...for the wellbeing of the colleague...just talking to the colleagues who have been involved they've really benefited and really felt the value of having the course on the doorstep'. This temporal issue was elaborated upon by Thomas who suggested that 'balancing work and family life is hard enough, but fitting meaningful study in on top of the other two is extremely challenging. The local venue is a massive help with this'.

A prevalent theme across the accounts was the concern that leadership responsibilities remained a priority for their colleagues; using a local venue was viewed to be beneficial in achieving this. 'The ideal would seem to be to study locally, close to home and school, collaborating with colleagues from other institutions for that valuable broader perspective, while keeping focussed on their own work and responsibilities here in school' (Thomas).

### **3.3.8 Change**

The line managers' perception was that the learning experience had equipped the participants with the necessary skills to adopt a more critically reflective position towards their professional practice. It appeared that the participants had changed in their professional disposition and practice both during and following completion of the learning experience. This is commented upon through their individual interpretations of their colleagues' actions. This data generated issues associated with the following sub-code:

#### **3.3.8.1 Professional Change**

The line managers observed that their colleagues' professional practice had altered as a result of their understanding of leadership theory 'I think it has helped them to realise that in order to move change you do need a critical mass of people who want to work with you...those people in that mass need to have ownership of whatever initiative is to be driven through' (Leonard). Being able to draw upon leadership theory in the reflective process was felt to have strengthened their belief in their proposed actions since 'staff realised that the theory behind leadership carried some clout. They felt better informed and more **justified** in some way in tackling issues' (Thomas). He added that this had led to an increase in confidence: 'it has given staff confidence to be more quietly assertive in role, knowing the theory behind the good practice' (Thomas). Barrett added 'it's the skills and the knowledge that they've built up along the way that's helped them...when they're making decisions... in their role, you can see the philosophy of where it's coming from'. The participants were now considered to be more mindful of the



consequences of their decision-making, '...they've weighed it [decision-making] a lot, you know, it's not just for the benefit of their department - they see how it fits in for everyone' (Barrett); he added '...they will analyse the projects and look at where the areas of strength are and where the areas for development are'.

This was seen to prepare colleagues well on a daily basis, 'it can equip you for some more delicate situations, such as dealing with recalcitrant parents or people who are very confrontational by actually reflecting on what good, professional practice is' (Leonard). He went on to add the perceived impact this had on his colleagues' practice, 'I think that the theoretical construct had allowed them to be... more reflective practitioners but also to actually understand the nature of things like change management' which he felt had assisted in 'dealing with complex leadership situations [since] they were able to reflect on various models of seeing a process through, and that was probably informed by higher level study on the Masters programme'. Becoming more cognisant of leadership theory, '... makes people happier... [because] they understand how complex leading others is, and so they can reflect on how they address and lead others and how others lead them' (Sophie).

The development of a more holistic outlook within the participants' leadership practice was a common theme: 'I think one of the great skills... is being able to really see the big picture, not just where ... [their] area of focus is, but the actual big picture of the whole school and how it all fits together' (Barrett). This has in turn led to the participants seeking out greater responsibilities in line with a more holistic vision: 'a couple of those members also came to me and asked to do more in terms of leadership after the course and be more strategic' (Sophie). This was viewed by the line managers as being advantageous for their institutions 'how the school has benefitted from that wider input...taking on additional responsibilities, more prepared to take it on because they understand, they understand the breadth of the school' (Barrett).

Thomas interpreted this as colleagues having developed a greater awareness of whole school needs 'they were keen to put themselves forward in terms of mentoring other staff and sharing their expertise'. They also demonstrated a

greater preparedness to engage in difficult dialogue with colleagues; one of the participants who 'was not very confident at having a professional critical review with other colleagues has become more concise and focused on that area now'; when charged with delivering difficult news they no longer avoided it or delegated the task: 'they actually deal with the bad news in a way which is really positive and helps the person along and supports the person through coaching' (Sophie).

Line managers perceived that the rate of the professional growth of the participants was accelerated compared to other colleagues 'I think you can always see growth and development within colleagues, but I think what you've seen within these colleagues is...exponential...a much higher rate of growth' (Barrett). Thomas elaborated on this by suggesting 'there has been greater awareness and a more confident and reflective approach emerging from those who followed the Masters'. Much of this was attributed to the participants' adoption of a critically reflective position 'I do think people with a theoretical background are able to articulate much more lucidly how they can manage change and also how they have reflected on their own practice and grown professionally' (Leonard); this in turn placed them in a stronger position to realize 'their ability to lead others' (Sophie).

A link was made between this and potential career progression: 'I suppose the very fact that they have had fairly exponential rises in terms of their jobs in the last two or three years, is partly evidence towards the fact that they are equipped for taking on very senior roles' (Leonard). He attributed this to the acquisition of leadership theory: 'I'm sure that particular person...was able to move into a promoted position more easily because he was equipped with a theoretical background in terms of leadership and management' (Leonard). Barrett added: 'I think I would say specifically if you're moving into senior leadership from a different school...that's where such things as the Educational Leadership programme are invaluable'. He described these stages as 'pinch points' that benefit from an individual having a more holistic outlook, '... they do need that wider understanding, that greater depth and they can be very challenging - **not impossible** - but very challenging if you're not really getting that bigger picture' (Barrett). The learning experience was viewed

as having provided these individuals with a '... considerable bonus in terms of their professional development' (Barrett).

### **3.3.9 Funding and Succession Concerns**

The line managers' responses showed that funding issues acted as a key lever in colleagues' participation in the programme. It was recognised that this fully funded course had widened access, 'it enables colleagues who may not normally be able to do that course to actually access the course' (Barrett). This comment related to the financial constraints experienced by teachers as opposed to the practical constraints that had already been highlighted by the participants.

The concern emerged that if leadership programmes ceased to be funded, 'what we're going to lose out on... [is] the almost exponential growth of some colleagues. I'm not as convinced that this will happen without the input that they've received...we're not going to utilise colleagues to the extent we... can' (Barrett). He went on to argue that a skill gap could develop between the significant career progression stages 'it does concern me a little...if we can't provide for our middle leaders, you know, those wanting to move up to middle leaders' courses and those wanting to move up into senior leadership' (Barrett). The line managers regarded leadership training as an essential element towards a potential leader developing a wider perspective: 'somebody can do a course and it gives them a competitive edge but only on paper. With an effective course you can actually see the growth that brings [to] that person' (Barrett). Leonard reinforced this point 'I think in terms of managing systems and getting procedures followed through, then I do think a theoretical understanding is important and very useful in terms of managing people'.

The line managers' views on the funding of university leadership courses appeared to differ depending on their current level of involvement in the Teaching Schools' agenda. The level of involvement here differed across the sample: some line managers had contributed to Teaching Schools' activities, whilst the schools of others had already attained Teaching School status. Therefore, there could have

been a political bias, favouring in-house designed programmes as opposed to those offered by universities. One suggested that university involvement had been reduced by some schools to a quality control instrument, '...we then look to Grantchester to come in and rubber-stamp the theoretical quality of [a] programme to give it points towards a Masters, or something like that...that's how the universities are fitting in now' (Sophie).

The line managers' concern regarding funding and succession issues was tempered by the belief that participation in leadership programmes was ultimately dependent on individual resolve and determination, '...some of those people... might well elect not to do so because it would have to be self-funded. Having said that, those people who have an absolute drive to progress in their careers will make that sacrifice' (Leonard). The restrictions experienced, and commented on, by some of the participants were not referred to by this sample; instead there was a firm belief that 'a colleague who really wants it - will go anywhere' (Barrett). He added that '...there's part of me that still believes that the outstanding [leader] will come through, will be spotted, will be guided, will be encouraged; it's just that if you can put more depth [leadership learning] into them then it's even better' (Barrett). Sophie did allude to an 'outlier' within the funding discussion when she suggested that all programmes should be self-funded to ensure commitment from the participants '...if you get it for free, completely, I think some people don't take it as being, not as important, but it's something they can drop out of more easily'.

The funding debate and succession concerns were viewed by the line managers as more challenging due to budgetary constraints: 'the concern obviously is that meaningful CPD opportunities like this will be lost. When you are making people redundant because of budget cuts, it is hard to justify offering funds to others to pursue further studies' (Thomas). Line managers expressed a concern that suitable leadership learning opportunities are not available: 'the problem is there are so many different pockets now and different groups doing different things, it's a bit disparate, and so it needs pulling together' (Sophie). She added that her concern regarding the Headship shortage is acute and therefore 'we're looking at how we develop our aspirant future leaders through Assistant Head teacher and Senior

Leadership Teams and how we get them [colleagues] to think about Headship because they aren't any Heads out there'.

### **Section Three – The Unit Evaluation Document Findings**

The following section will provide a detailed interpretation of the key issues that I identified from the respondents to a selection of the open-ended questions from section ten of the anonymous unit evaluation document (see appendix 4, p.257). The dataset comprised of forty-nine evaluations which contained the respondents' individual perceptions of the impact of the leadership programme. The illustrative extracts taken from the documents will be supplemented by a number and letter in brackets. The number is indicative of the order in which I examined the documents (1-49) and the letter indicates the question being answered (a, b, c, d or f).

The data generated identified issues that linked to sub-codes from three of the five overarching codes generated by the longitudinal dataset:

- The Importance of Collaborative Practice
- The Role of Critical Reflection
- Change

#### **3.3.10 The Importance of Collaborative Practice**

The respondents valued being provided with an opportunity to share professional experiences with colleagues from the local area. It appeared that this made the collaborative activities more professionally significant to them both in the formal programme setting and through their informal interaction. Both forms of collaborative activity were considered crucial to the perceived success of their learning experience. The respondents identified issues associated with the following sub-codes:

- Sharing Experiences
- Formal Collaboration
- Informal Collaboration

### **3.3.10.1 Sharing Experiences**

The respondents considered the opportunity to share experiences as being vitally important to the success of the learning experience, 'I have enjoyed discussions with fellow colleagues and sharing good practice' (38, a). The shared experiences were regarded as an important means of gaining a broader educational perspective, 'the sharing of ideas and innovations has been invaluable, this has allowed me to gain insight into different working practices and allowed me to discuss ways forward with colleagues who listen' (23, d). Another respondent commented: 'this course provided an excellent opportunity to gain insight into other schools and how they work and to form a network within my own school' (4, d).

Answers suggested that the geographical proximity of the participants made collaboration more professionally relevant. It provided 'an excellent opportunity to communicate with schools in the local area' (39, d) in order 'to share experiences with others within the local area but in very different settings' (32, d). The time and space provided on the programme to share experiences also strengthened relationships between colleagues from the same school: '[it's] been good to spend time with other staff from my school and get different perspectives' (10, d).

### **3.3.10.2 Formal Collaboration**

The collaborative format of the learning strategies was considered to be effective: 'I have developed *working* [my italics] relationships with different colleagues – liberating!' (33, d). The learning strategies provided the respondents with a range of educational perspectives: 'working with colleagues from other schools has been excellent in gaining relationships outside of my department with people experiencing similar challenges' (34, d). This broad compass of experience was seen as a useful tool in the potential revision of leadership practice: 'all colleagues have different situations, aspects etc. to bring to the discussions which is quite enlightening. This gives you thoughts about other ways of managing scenarios' (13, d).

### **3.3.10.3 Informal Collaboration**

The development of a safe, trusting environment was considered to be crucial in encouraging successful informal collaboration: 'it's been good to talk in a confidential environment about the different problems that exist in schools – it makes you realise that you're not the only one' (10, c). This informal interaction resulted in the development of '... strong and trusting relationships. We often seek advice from other members of the group regarding educational issues' (36, d). The 'advice and support from the group has been essential' (19, d) to the development of leadership practice as respondents were 'able to discuss and plan/seek advice on how others have implemented change and discuss what theory worked and which hasn't' (46, d). The programme setting was seen as a facilitatory climate in that individuals felt able to 'test out ideas in a safe environment' (32, d) since there was 'a very good working relationship within the group' (37, d).

Responses suggested that 'a strong support network' (22, d) existed beyond the confines of the programme environment. This was supported using ICT: 'I regularly contact all members of my course via email for help and advice' (40, d). This provided a further opportunity to '... share resources... that we develop' (39, d). It was hoped that the networks would have longevity: 'I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with colleagues from other schools and share ideas and good practice – networks I hope will continue when the course has finished' (12, d).

### **3.3.11 The Role of Critical Reflection**

The respondents considered that their personal critical reflection on their professional practice was the keystone to their revised leadership practice. The adoption of a critically reflective position that drew on the leadership learning appeared to have resulted in greater confidence and self-belief among the respondents. From the data generated I identified issues associated with the following sub-code:

- Personal Critical Reflection

### **3.3.11.1 Personal Critical Reflection**

The opportunity to engage in personal critical reflection in a professional context was regarded as a key element in the revision of leadership practice; it being considered 'Invaluable! I have been able to reflect deeply throughout the unit' (23, f). The provision of 'this time and space is invaluable in the busy educational environment and some breathing space to reflect and think strategically, which I can take back to my workplace' (12, f).

The respondents indicated a commitment to a critically reflective leadership practice: 'professional reflection is a practitioner's best friend and this has been confirmed by the course' (47, f). The reflective techniques had been made into a priority 'time constraints withstanding, I am persistently trying to incorporate more reflection into my time' (19, f) since 'making reflection part of daily practice is very important' (41, f). Answers implied that this led to more considered decision-making: 'the unit has encouraged me to think more deeply about how to plan for and measure our effectiveness and improvement' (36, b) which could result in delayed decision-making: 'I have seen the value of such reflection and the need for considered work before important decisions are made' (14, f).

The respondents indicated that the leadership learning was frequently referenced in the critical reflection process: '...as the awareness of different models gives you other perspectives' (17, f), whilst 'it constantly facilitates reflection on your practice historically and in the present' (16, f). Becoming cognisant of relevant theoretical approaches was seen to provide a reflective framework 'the reading provided gave me opportunities to reflect and evaluate my own practice' (2, a) because it 'has given me more focus' (48, f). Having an understanding of the theory '...enabled me to consider theoretical views to adapt my approaches' (1, a) which resulted in them being able to, '...understand how some parts of the theory fit better into the school environment than others' (34, a).

The adoption of a critically reflective approach acted as a support mechanism during role change since it had 'made me reflect on my whole approach to



leadership and management especially in the adjustment to a new whole-school role' (31, b). The techniques, however, were equally valued in the respondents' assessment of their current practice: 'I now realise why I floundered as a Head of Department and the... theory has definitely provided different ideas to try as solutions' (33, b) since '[I] can see why things went wrong/worked and can build/reflect on for future situations' (6, f).

The majority of the respondents considered the practice empowering as 'it builds esteem, as you recognise strengths' (41, f), although in one case even though their '...capacity for reflection on professional practice has increased significantly...it makes you doubt yourself more' (4, f). One respondent cited that their propensity to reflect was not instinctive: 'Initially this was difficult for me to do but as the course has progressed I have been able to reflect and analyse with greater depth' (25, f).

### **3.3.12 Change**

Answers in this section concentrated on the perceived changes that the respondents had experienced both personally and professionally. It was suggested that a more critically reflective position had been adopted habitually by the respondents which resulted in a more confident practitioner with a more holistic outlook. This change in leadership thinking appeared to have a significant impact on individual leadership practice. Issues were identified that related to the following sub-codes:

- Personal Change
- Professional Change

#### **3.3.12.1 Personal Change**

The respondents suggested that the learning experience had resulted in significant personal change: 'my learning and awareness in this area has been exponential helping to clarify and dispense with any previously held views and misunderstandings' (5, a). The development of a more holistic outlook was

considered to be significant: 'before I saw improvement just from my perspective, as someone who was affected by it' (42, a) whereas 'this has helped me to understand that... when reflecting [it's] not just the impact on me or students but also individual staff and other departments' (8, f). The adoption of a wider perspective was celebrated, 'I now see a much bigger picture of my organisation and am able to address issues and topics in an informed and confident way' (28, b). This resulted in some respondents requesting greater challenge in their leadership role: 'I have gained a lot of confidence while completing this unit as I have been encouraged to move out of my subject area and focus on whole-school issues' (35, c). It was suggested that this could result in greater autonomous thought: 'I can see why we do what we do and question whether it is for the good of the students or... the school or are they ultimately the same thing' (20, f).

Being provided with the opportunity to personally critically reflect on collaborative learning strategies was viewed as a key element in the acquisition of greater self-belief and confidence: 'Knowledge is power! Really helped my confidence' (38, c) since, 'I feel that the sharing of ideas and facility to problem-solve together has led to an increase in confidence and self-esteem (11, c). In this sense leadership theory was viewed as a support mechanism in the reflective process since 'the underpinning knowledge has also helped to build my confidence... knowing there is research and a sound rationale for action' (11, c). Another respondent concurred: 'my confidence has improved massively in my role in school; this is due to having clear theories about how to actively manage change rather than a vague direction which I had before' (34, c). For one respondent this focused on the learning having provided 'key words which have helped to improve the level I speak to others' (29, a).

An increase in confidence and self-belief were considered to be contributory factors in career development: 'This course has facilitated my career progression' (16, a) as many respondents felt '...that I am able to progress... because I have studied the relevant theory' (27, a). Answers suggested that 'with the research as background it has helped me to grow in confidence' (12, a) which increased their motivation to 'seek promotion' (2, c).

However, two of the respondents found their personal exploration into leadership unsettling: 'In some ways the course has made me doubt my own abilities as it has made me aware of my own practice and it has made me feel that I have not used the right information to make decisions in the past' (4, c). This outlier was further developed: 'in some respects because I am facing my weaknesses my confidence has been knocked. However, if I address those weaknesses then I do believe I will begin to feel more confident in my role' (48, c).

### **3.3.12.2 Professional Change**

The respondents went on to consider the professional impact of the personal changes on their leadership practice: 'it has led to my practice being more thoughtful, considered and informed. I have dealt with issues regarding colleagues with greater patience and professional confidence' (14, b). It was felt that a more personalised approach to leadership had been demonstrated: 'I feel that I will be a better manager for attending this course, it will help me to understand the needs of personalities different to my own' (26, a) which could result in 'an individualised approach [with] more flexibility' (41, b). Gaining a deeper insight into their own leadership ability was seen as a starting point: 'it has highlighted some of my own strengths and weaknesses and those of my department. I am beginning to look closely at those things I need to address in order to improve my own performance and that of my department' (48, b).

This process had involved significant changes in their daily practice: 'I have changed the way that I hold meetings, create discussions and deal with group problems' which led to '... a more effective team [which] has had a positive impact on the department and pupils' (1, b). Some of these changes were structural: 'one of the main things I have learned is that the leadership within my own department needs to be further distributed to give other members areas of responsibility and thus challenge and motivate them' (36, a). These changes were considered to be habitual: 'changes have been implemented in the department and are now ingrained' (19, b).

It was suggested that the development of the respondents' leadership practice had occurred simultaneously with the learning experience, 'my leadership has and will continue to evolve' (47, b). The impact has been far reaching: 'in all areas this has had an impact from using the tools/systems to my professional advantage, the use of models to apply to situations and more importantly the reflective nature of the course to continue developing' (13, a). Some of this increased leadership proficiency was attributed to the course being '... underpinned with a substantial body of knowledge and this was well related to my workplace' (11, a).

The professional relevance of the leadership theory was considered crucial to the respondents' revised practice: 'I used [the] work on the motivation of team members [to] get them on board because they wanted to, because I have tapped into what motivates them' (6, b). One respondent elaborated on this point: 'This has helped me to face a difficult challenge ...without this unit I would not have engaged in the literature, reflected on my practice or had the experience or confidence to take the action I have' (14, a). Becoming increasingly cognisant of the theoretical approaches was seen to affirm actions, 'I have much more confidence to know and understand some theory behind the decisions that I make on a daily basis' (40, a) where it was clear that individuals had '...consciously applied theory to practice' (41, a).

Answers suggested that increased self-belief was a key characteristic of the revised practice 'because my confidence has improved I think I am more effective in my role as Head of department. I can act faster with certain situations and feel that I can have better conversations with all colleagues because I know more than I did before' (8,b). When faced with difficulties the respondents appeared to experience less self-doubt: 'I feel more able to lead the team the way I want to but giving people autonomy at the same time. I am more confident in times of conflict to stick to my guns and found I was able to get people on board' (6, b).

The changed professional practice appeared to prioritise the needs of respondents' team members: '[the leadership learning] enabled me to develop my managerial skills to manage my team more effectively' (1, a). Seemingly this had involved greater sensitivity on the part of the respondents: 'I am much more aware of the

needs of others in my department...this makes the team more harmonious as people are happier and feel valued' (44, b). This encouraged greater flexibility in leadership practice: 'it [the learning] has made me aware of other points of view and [has] given me the resources to research them. It has helped to look at the department and find alternative ways to reach the goals' (13, b). Respondents indicated that they were more cognisant of the pivotal role that colleagues played in ensuring *their* leadership practice was successful: '[I have a] better understanding of how to make my department successful and how to get the best out of a team and that how you lead it and interact with its members makes a big difference' (6, a). In order to remain aware of these needs one respondent had '... tried to install a feedback policy into the change process. Hopefully staff are more confident in [using] this than before' (27, b).

Becoming a more critically reflective practitioner did appear to lead to an increased propensity to scrutinise the leadership practice of others: 'I can reflect on my own practice and those of others in school' (42, f) due to being 'much more aware of both large and subtle changes in them' (37, b). For some the reflection was focused on their colleagues' needs: 'this course has led to my reflection on the motivation of staff, how our team works together and my style of leadership' (11, b). This scrutiny was evident at 'all levels in the environment' (16, c) through the adoption of a wider perspective: 'I have been able to closely analyse performance in all areas and provide suggestions for improvement' (24, b). The fact that practice was applied to a variety of contexts does indicate that it had become habitual: 'this course has given me the confidence to provide feedback to other more experienced staff about how they can improve their effectiveness. It has really pushed me out of my comfort zone' (36, c).

The respondents' commitment to their revised practice is demonstrated by their desire to replicate aspects of the learning experience within their own schools and further afield. The opportunity to critically reflect on collaborative practice was considered a key element of the revised practice and was frequently replicated: 'networks have been made with other people on the course but also within [my] own school as [I] have spoken to various staff and SLT members during the

reflection process' (44, d). This commitment was further demonstrated by this practice being replicated further afield: 'I have benefited from sharing knowledge and supporting colleagues within school and have extended this to colleagues within other schools' (41, d).

### **3.4 Conclusions**

The common thread that linked the datasets was an overwhelmingly positive perception of the learning experience. I was mindful of this and had approached the data interpretively and reflexively with a constructivist 'sensitivity' that had enabled me to examine, in detail, the context that surrounded the generation of the data. Each dataset examined the learning experience from a different interpretive angle that was dependent on their access and relationship to the experience. A consideration of power and relations associated with it was at the forefront of the interpretive process. In this case this involved a number of differing relationships: my different roles as programme tutor, educational leader and researcher, and the power differential between line managers and their colleagues (the participants). As a researcher I needed to adopt a reflexive stance towards these putative power relations.

The participants and the line managers were in agreement that the facilitatory contextual climate had played a crucial role in the creation of an effective learning environment. The findings from the participants' interviews, as a result of their prolonged engagement with the programme, generated an in-depth exploration of the climate whereas the line managers, who had not personally experienced it, constructed their accounts through discussions with the participants. The participants suggested that the climate comprised of three key ingredients: the structure, the role of safety and trust and refreshment-break conviviality. They thought that the programme sessions had been structured to ensure accessibility, convenience, comfort and safety. The convenience of the programme was widely commented upon by both participants and line managers since it was considered advantageous not to have to travel long distances after a day at work. Participants and managers agreed that it would have been extremely difficult to access the

programme at the university. In addition, stressful travel would have undoubtedly impacted negatively on the participants' work/life balance. Both groups felt that the time saved through not having to travel was a great bonus and a key lever for participation. The line managers considered these structural issues to be crucial as they minimized their concerns that the programme demands might have been detrimental to the participants' performance in their schools. The participants concurred that the structural advantages of the programme had been vital to their participation due, in part, to their concerns about the demands of their professional roles but also, as importantly, the pressures of family commitments. In some cases these issues would have meant that they would not have accessed the programme. The participants valued the local composition of the cohort which appeared to have increased the professional relevance of the learning for them as they considered it easier to contextualise the professional discourse. The line managers concurred and recognised the collaborative potential that this local composition could potentially generate. These small, intimate sessions set in a familiar school environment had conceptually located the learning in its correct setting which had contributed to the generation of feelings of affinity and shared endeavour for the participants.

These structural features had created an environment characterised by feelings of safety and trust which according to the participants had guaranteed the success of the learning experience. Paradoxically the cohort's local composition was seen to have intensified the participants' feelings of vulnerability. Therefore the creation of a confidential environment was considered to be the cornerstone of the learning experience, if the cohort were to engage freely and effectively in professional discourse and critical reflection. The participants also placed significant value on being provided with the opportunity to engage in private, informal interaction during the refreshment break. This was perceived to be the arena where the truth could be spoken freely without causing offence and where critical reflection was regarded as the norm. The opportunity to interact informally in a safe, social environment had contributed to their feelings of affinity and had enabled them to develop a sense of shared endeavour. Alongside the communal act of sharing food, the participants collaborated and critically reflected on all aspects of the leadership learning without my presence. It was through developing a shared bank of

resources (experiences and materials) that the participants had begun to perceive of themselves as a learning community. The informal interactions that took place in this convivial climate provided a blueprint for the cohort to design alternative modes of communication outside the formal setting of the programme.

The participants in their interviews commented on the atmosphere of pressure and support that permeated the facilitatory contextual climate at both the macro and the micro-level. This productive mix of pressure and support mechanisms that operated simultaneously at both the level of the programme environment (macro-level) and within the learning strategies (micro-level) was viewed as a positive force by the cohort. This in turn helped to elucidate why terms such as 'challenge' were used by the participants in their perceptions of the learning experience, as opposed to the more negative connotations associated with 'pressure'. As the programme tutor I was seen as a key support mechanism at this juncture since the participants felt that I was well-placed to contextualise the leadership theory and learning strategies which in turn increased their professional significance.

Simultaneously the participants had also experienced pressure and support mechanisms at the micro-level of the learning strategies. These varied strategies placed participants under pressure to deliver a creative response because a performance element was attached to each task. The collaborative tasks required participants to engage in rational discourse and adopt a critically reflective position. The tasks were viewed as being of a high quality in terms of their relevance to the participants' professional lives and they valued being able to work collaboratively in this safe, contextualised environment where they were able to implement experimental and exploratory leadership practice. The participants felt that a forward momentum had been maintained because of these strategies and that they had accumulated both individual and collective knowledge. This was viewed as a support mechanism because the cohort's shared bank of resources could be drawn upon professionally. The pressure associated with the learning strategies was seen by the participants as a challenge and converted into a positive force. The exposure to this productive mix of pressure and support mechanisms collectively had



encouraged feelings of affinity and shared endeavour to develop within the cohort which led to a perception that they now operated as a community.

The participants and the respondents both valued the opportunity to engage in collaborative practice with colleagues from the local area. The regular and successful sharing of experiences was attributed to the safe, confidential environment that had been created. Confidentiality was seen as the keystone to the success of the learning experience. The feeling of affinity amongst the participants was intensified by the local composition of the group as they perceived that lasting bonds had been created between them through the depth and intensity of their shared experiences. The findings from the respondents' unit evaluations concurred with this and suggested that local perspectives had increased the professional relevance of the collaboration by allowing them to develop a broader leadership perspective. The participants had viewed their learning journey as a collective pursuit where meanings had constantly been created both individually and collectively through both formal and informal interaction.

The participants and respondents had valued being provided with access to a range of perspectives and experiences in the formal collaborative programme environment which they regarded as a useful tool in the revision of their practice. The participants considered that the challenge generated by the learning strategies intensified the cohort's relationships. The safe and trusting environment had encouraged experimentation amongst the cohort and the need to respond to the pressure mechanisms developed community bonds.

The feelings of affinity and shared endeavour that had developed during the periods of formal programme activity appeared to have been consolidated informally through various channels of communication outside of the programme environment. The findings from the participants' interviews and the unit evaluations emphasised the professional and personal importance of these channels to the development of critically reflective leadership practice. In addition to face-to-face interaction, channels of electronic communication were hailed as the key vehicle that had enabled collaborative activity to endure. Both sets of findings suggested that communication had been frequent and that this had been made possible

through the establishment of a safe and trusting environment. The relationships that were forged had longevity and the participants highlighted the common bonds and affinity that acted as an invisible thread in their maintenance. Collaborative activity has continued under a range of guises to accommodate the participants' individual learning needs. Their commitment to the cohort's shared reality has also been demonstrated by the participants' attempts to replicate key features of their learning experience in their own schools and further afield. Clearly the collaborative activity had evolved into a variety of forms; however, its importance to the participants remains irrefutable.

The findings from the participants' interviews and the unit evaluations regarded personal critical reflection as a key element of their revised leadership practice. This deeply personal process was viewed as a priority and the findings suggested that leadership theory had become a key reference point in this process. Although time-consuming, the critical reflection process was deemed essential to decision-making. According to the participants, a close relationship existed between the collaborative activity and the critical reflection process with their shared experiences being frequently drawn upon. Being provided with an opportunity to enter into academic discourse and collective critical reflection in both the formal and informal environment had allowed the participants to negotiate meanings continually which were perceived to have contributed to their shared reality.

Significant personal and professional change was another key theme that linked the three datasets. They illustrated that significant changes had been experienced personally and professionally as a result of the learning experience. The findings from the participants' interviews and the respondents' unit evaluations agreed that on a personal level they had evolved into more informed, confident leaders who now approached leadership with a holistic outlook. The ability to reflect critically on collaborative learning strategies and leadership theory was regarded as a key element in the development of greater personal self-belief and purpose. Both sets of findings revealed that this perceived alteration in personal leadership perspective was viewed as a significant factor in career progression. The findings from the participants' interviews showed that their revised thinking had been applied

habitually in a range of contexts regardless of hierarchical protocol. These changes were now seen as ingrained; a part of their inner self.

A revision of leadership thinking through critical reflection on shared collaborative experiences had resulted in revised professional practice according to the participants' perceptions and the unit evaluation findings. The line managers concurred that their colleagues had adopted a more confident professional outlook which had resulted in more critically reflective practitioners. The adoption of a critically reflective position was viewed by the participants and respondents as their new natural state; being able to draw upon a professionally relevant, shared bank of resources had provided a menu-for-action that not only informed practice but resulted in a personalisation of their leadership styles. Both of these datasets demonstrated that their habitually changed practice was evident in a variety of contexts regardless of hierarchical protocol. Participants and respondents had a greater propensity to engage in leadership scrutiny in accordance with their holistic view. The line managers agreed and felt that their colleagues had consistently operated with a more holistic outlook. The development of a holistic outlook was deemed an essential prerequisite of effective educational leadership in the findings of all three datasets. They agreed that such an outlook was beneficial as the adoption of a wider perspective increased an individual's confidence to approach and embrace new professional challenges.

The findings generated by the participants' interviews and the respondents' unit evaluations demonstrated a commitment to a critically reflective, collaborative position with greater sensitivity to the needs of colleagues. This increased sensitivity had encouraged a more flexible leadership approach which had been demonstrated to the line managers in that the participants were able to manage and present change to others more successfully and with greater recognition of the potential consequences of their decision-making. All three datasets emphasised an increased confidence and self-belief that had become characteristic of the revised leadership practice. The participants and respondents demonstrated a commitment to this revised practice through the replication of key aspects of the learning experience that they felt would encourage collaboration and critical reflection in

their own schools. Upon completion of the programme the participants further disseminated the cohort's collective vision through the application of the norms, values and procedures of the cohort to a range of new contexts beyond their own institutions.

The findings from the line managers' interviews showed that the learning experience had resulted in an accelerated professional growth of the participants which in turn had aided their career progression. The line managers argued a contributory factor in this was the ability to reflect critically on leadership learning. This led to a concern being expressed that the withdrawal of funding for leadership learning programmes would result in succession issues due to the failure of potential leaders to acquire the requisite holistic viewpoint. This worry was diminished by some of the line managers who suggested that ambition alone should be sufficient to embark on a leadership journey. It was at this juncture that the participant findings radically differed, having identified many tangible obstacles to accessing professional development programmes.

In the next three chapters I shall be drawing on these findings together with the existing literature to address my research questions.

## **Chapter 4: Can an effective learning environment be created for a cohort of secondary teachers with leadership responsibilities? If so, how?**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I draw on my findings to discuss my first research question. The findings from all three data-sets showed that an effective learning environment had indeed been created. I will drill down into the constituent elements of this learning environment that were cited as significant by the participants and their line managers. To elucidate the relationship between these components I intend to draw primarily on the findings from the first overarching code: *the facilitatory contextual climate* and the second overarching code: *the role of pressure and support mechanisms*. My interpretation of effective learning is firmly couched in the constructivist tradition; hence for a learning environment to qualify as effective it would need to create the necessary conditions to facilitate both individual (Rogers, 1969; Mezirow, 1991, 1996, 2006; Glaserfeld, 1995; Bruner, 1999) and collective meaning-making (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Shotter, 1995; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Fullan, 2011).

As programme tutor I strove to create the conditions necessary to facilitate an authentic learning experience for the participants. Authenticity, in this case, involved the creation of a programme environment firmly embedded in the participants' leadership practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Northedge, 2003; Herrington and Herrington, 2006; Laiken, 2006). It can be argued that this realm consists of a plethora of externally and internally situated pressure phenomena that are subject to constant negotiation by the individual leader since their role '...has become dramatically more complex and overloaded over the past decade' (Fullan, 2007; p.155). Potential leaders must be equipped '...to operate under complex, uncertain circumstances' (Fullan, 2001; p. ix) and therefore '...feel comfortable with the 'turbulence', 'change' and 'uncertainty which characterises education' (Day, 1999; p.89). To achieve authenticity of this nature, constructivist literature argues that an environment is needed where individuals

'are motivated to learn in rich, relevant and real-world contexts' and ideally it will be focused on 'immersive and engaging tasks' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.x).

The participants had described the programme learning environment as being challenging, whilst being simultaneously, supportive. I would propose that the pressures associated with the course had not been viewed negatively by the participants; instead, they had been converted into a positive state. The support structures that permeated the learning environment had acted as a further positive force for the participants. When pressure does convert into a positive force it is considered to play a highly effective role in a learning environment (Laiken, 2006; Fullan, 2008, 2011; Block, 2009).

The role of pressure and support is well-represented in the literature especially within the context of the implementation of large-scale reform (Fullan, 2005, 2008) and in aiding the development of successful learning strategies in an educational context (Laiken, 2006; Eraut, 2007). Putting the context to one side for a moment, this literature does concur that when the pressure placed on an individual is balanced by support a positive outcome can result (Mohr and Wolfram, 2010; Mujtaba, 2010). This did appear to be the case for the nascent educational community of the leadership programme. Little research, however, appears to have been conducted on the interplay between pressure and support mechanisms on both the macro and micro-level on discrete leadership development programmes. The combination and interaction of the pressure and support mechanisms in this learning environment was perceived by the participants and their line managers to have resulted in significant personal and professional change. The terms *pressure* and *support* may appear to be opposites; however, I would argue that when the positives of both mechanisms are present at both levels simultaneously then a positive situation is created. It is this positive situation that will be investigated in the following discussion.

## ***4.2 The Role and Operation of Pressure Mechanisms in the Learning Environment***

A number of pressure mechanisms were cited by the participants and their line managers as being significant in the learning environment; these included:

- Programme demands
- Intrinsic pressures
- The learning strategies

### **4.2.1 Programme Demands**

The practical demands of the programme exposed the participants to a number of pressures. At the outset the commitment to a graduate education programme would involve the careful negotiation of work-life balance issues. The participants and their line managers had expressed concern that an involvement in the programme should not be to the detriment of their professional roles. In order to minimise these concerns the participants needed to be part of a supportive school culture that embraced lifelong learning (Day, 1999; Eraut, 2007). The interview findings indicated that the line managers had espoused a commitment to their colleagues' participation on the programme and had acknowledged the benefits of the learning for their schools. However, to espouse these values but still express concern regarding programme demands suggested that an extrinsic pressure was being placed on the participants and that the school leadership had not convincingly established a climate centred on '...encouragement and staff development' (Coleman, 1996; p.323). If this supportive climate had been viewed by the participants as more akin to a veneer then this may have acted as an obstacle to participation since 'the schools where the ethos was to create a harmonious atmosphere for staff that genuinely aimed for collaborative working environments enabled teachers to build on positive stress whilst controlling the negative repercussions of negative stress' (Mujtaba, 2010; p.8).

In addition to this, familial responsibility was a key consideration for three of the female participants who had stated that poor scheduling of previous leadership

development programmes had precluded their participation. This particular concern had not been articulated by any of the male participants on the programme (Weiner and Burton, 2016). This is a particular concern as the gender inequality of educational leaders is well documented in the literature (Probert, 2005; Seay, 2010; Smith, 2011, 2015; Coleman, 2012; Weiner and Burton, 2016). The compatibility of the programme with child care arrangements was considered to be a priority for these participants. The literature agrees that it is still the case that women have greater responsibility for domestic arrangements which can act as an obstacle to career advancement (Coleman, 1996, 2012; Probert, 2005; Smith 2015; Weiner and Burton, 2016). The views of these particular participants demonstrate that commitment to a leadership programme is therefore '...the outcome of a complex and highly gendered set of negotiations and compromises within the household' (Probert, 2005; p.70). This may be the result of the prevailing gender discourses in society that place specific expectations on women in their roles as mothers and carers (Smith, 2015). Probert (2005; p. 70) suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to the impact of the household on the main carers' ability to develop their careers.

Part-time study whilst being employed full-time can also result in very limited professional participation patterns. This observation was based on the logistical pressures and demands of full-time employment that are routinely faced by part-time students which result in fewer social opportunities to engage in discussions regarding professional practice (Polin, 2010). These problems were experienced and commented upon by some of the participants upon their return to the main university site during the final stage of the programme, since '... the stress of the work itself ensures that beyond that time, energy levels are low for most teachers' (Day, 1999; p.171).

Collectively, these practical pressures can generate feelings of anxiety when embarking on an education graduate programme; anxieties that would be expected from adults who may have had a significant break from academic study (Daloz, 1986; Mezirow, 1991; Laiken, 2006). All of the participants had resumed academic study following a break, of varying duration, and a number had found the academic



tariff of the programme challenging. For example, my Research Journal noted that two had found the academic reading set for discussion at the start of a session as being “almost impossible” (*Journal*, 21/9/10). This frustration is common to students embarking on a new academic adventure where, ‘their eyes scan the words, most of which are familiar, but no meaning goes in...struggling through even the first page or two is a huge and seemingly fruitless effort’ (Northedge, 2003; p.171). For some, this challenge was due to the unfamiliar discipline area, whereas for others the resumption of academic study had generated: ‘feelings such as self-doubt, concerns about “fitting in” and anxieties about having less (or more) to offer than others’ (Laiken, 2006; p.19). This led to some of the participants displaying a lack of self-belief and confidence as to whether they possessed the necessary skill-set to be successful on the programme.

#### **4.2.2 Intrinsic Pressures**

In addition to the pressures that had been generated by the programme demands, the participants had also placed themselves under both intrinsically and extrinsically located personal pressure. Personal motivators are rarely mono-causal as ‘...it has become evident that learners’ motivations...are many, complex and subject to change’ (Merriam et al., 2007). The participants had acknowledged the intrinsic pressure of wanting to maximise their leadership potential; whilst for some of them an extrinsic pressure existed of wanting to overcome their perceived professional invisibility in their respective workplaces (Fullan, 2008). It became apparent that some of the cohort felt professionally overlooked which they perceived to be related to their development stage or as a result of their work-life balance choices.

These pressures can lead to the development of a short-sighted perspective as ‘it *isolates them from other adults*, especially meaningful interaction with colleagues; *it exhausts their energy*; and it *limits their opportunities for sustained reflection* (italicised in original)’ (Fullan, 2007; p.24). This can be minimised by the development of a supportive school culture as ‘school cultures do not always encourage adult learning’ (Day, 1999; p.20). The ethos created in the workplace will determine the amount of pressure that the participants place on themselves

and the level of success that can be realised as a result of the learning since the capacity to learn is seen to be directly related to both the personal and social context 'if self-esteem is low, or the social context 'unfriendly' then it is likely that this capacity will be minimised' (Day, 1999; p. 73). In this case the potential impact of this variant was minimised by the creation of a range of support structures within the programme environment.

The local composition of the cohort had added the variant of confidentiality to the pressure mechanisms that were operational within the learning environment. The establishment and maintenance of confidentiality was considered to be of critical importance if the participants were to fully engage with the programme. They were concerned that there was no possibility of transgressions from their colleagues and the programme tutor as their professional discourse carried a 'relational risk' for each of them in terms of the potential damage that could occur both to reputation and promotional prospects (Bogenreider and Nooteboom, 2004; p.294). These participants may have found themselves in a competitive promotional situation which could have resulted in a reluctance to divulge sensitive professional information that could furnish a colleague with some form of professional advantage.

#### **4.2.3 The Learning Strategies**

The learning strategies on the programme also contained a pressure element in order to create an authentic leadership experience for the participants. Each collaborative learning strategy was designed to be challenging and problematic to encourage autonomous thinking (Mezirow, 1997), and constrained by tight time-limits. The participants documented that they had found the tasks challenging and had felt pressurized to deliver a creative response. This collaborative culture naturally builds in accountability through the operation of peer pressure (Fullan, 2011). This inducement of anxiety within the tasks allowed the problems to be considered authentic as they dealt with issues that each participant may be faced with outside of the programme environment (Laiken, 2006; Block, 2009).

The problems posed to the cohort were designed to establish a 'cognitive authenticity' where the situations felt real (Herrington and Herrington, 2006). My Research Journal (*Journal*, 3/5/10) noted that a task that had involved the overall restructuring of a school's leadership responsibilities had generated an atmosphere of anxiety and heightened emotions. The participants had found this engaging.

At times the cohort felt the work-load was overwhelming and difficult to fulfil as the pressure was sustained throughout the formal programme element. A performance element was attached to each collaborative task which placed the participants under pressure. However, being provided with an opportunity to articulate their views and arguments is argued to have a pivotal role in the learning process as learning strategies need '...inherent opportunities to articulate, and in particular the public presentation of argument to enable defence of the position' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.7). The expectation of performance may have contributed to an atmosphere of '..."optimal anxiety" where the learner is stimulated sufficiently to be open to learning, but not so anxious that he or she feels immobilised' (Laiken, 2006; p. 19). This may, in part, have been due to the anxiety that the topics being covered had induced (Block, 2009) or the level of challenge being presented (Mujtaba, 2010). The significant factor was that the activity was felt to be of a high quality professionally which made it worth the challenge (Smith, 1982; Zemke and Zemke, 1995; Bruner, 1999). Any anxiety experienced by the participants was viewed as a challenge because the pressure had taken on its positive form through the support mechanisms that had been put into operation. Completion of the tasks involved the participants having to accept collective accountability for the outcomes which would add an additional peer pressure.

The pressures cited by the participants operated on two levels, those at the macro-level of the programme environment and those on the micro-level of the learning strategies themselves.

#### ***4.3 The Role and Operation of Support Mechanisms in the Learning Environment***

On the other hand, operating simultaneously within the learning environment was a

range of constituent elements that were considered to have acted as a support structure for the participants. Each of the following will be examined in turn:

- The creation of a facilitatory contextual climate
- The role of the programme tutor
- The learning strategies

#### **4.3.1 The Creation of a Facilitatory Contextual Climate**

The facilitatory contextual climate encompassed a number of support mechanisms within its structure that were considered to be significant in the creation of an authentic structure (Herrington and Herrington, 2006). These support mechanisms encouraged the cohort to develop a sense of belonging and affinity (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Block, 2009).

The participants and their line managers were positive about the beneficial temporal arrangements of the programme. The fact that the cohort had been relieved of the pressures associated with stressful travel and incompatible programme scheduling was considered to be a significant support mechanism. The structure of this programme had enabled the participants to consider their work-life balance and participation was not regarded to be to the detriment of their personal and professional commitments.

Room layout and location are argued to be significant elements in an individual being able to develop a sense of belonging (Block, 2009) and as such have the potential to act as a support mechanism since it is argued that '...light, sound, heat, cold, supplies and amenities must be conducive to thought, focus, and serious discourse' (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; p. 47). The programme sessions had been held in traditional classrooms where a lack of space rendered inviting, circular table and chair configurations unfeasible. This could have resulted in an additional pressure mechanism for the cohort since the use of a traditional classroom environment is regarded as a key vehicle in the de-contextualisation of knowledge for the adult learner (Westwood, 1980; Knowles et al., 1998; Wenger, 1998; Block, 2009). This then could act as an obstacle to the education graduate being able to

engage with professional educational practice as opposed to schooling practice (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; Polin, 2010).

The seating arrangements had been discussed on one occasion as noted in my Research Journal, when the participants had strongly expressed the desire to return to a traditional desk layout from the existing grouped arrangements. The reasons proffered centred on their perceptions of comfort (*Journal*, 14/4/09). The strong feelings displayed concurred that education graduate students approach training with a set of preconceptions that are firmly grounded in their role as a teacher (Polin, 2010). However, this did not result in the traditional layout being seen as an additional pressure mechanism; paradoxically, the familiarity of the locale and room layout became part of the support mechanism which contributed to their sense of belonging.

I propose that the choice of a school locale had operated as a key support mechanism due to its familiarity and comfort. This was an environment where the participants had experienced success and were engaged in a practice at which they were 'already quite adept' (Polin, 2010; p.166) hence their participation in a graduate leadership programme. The locale did not hold the negative associations and potential alienation experienced by some adults who had experienced a less successful educative journey (Westwood 1980; Knowles et al., 1998; Wenger, 1998, Herrington and Herrington, 2006). In fact, situating the programme within a school allowed the training to be contained in the community where the subject matter was most relevant (Wenger, 1998). Conceptually this located the leadership learning in its correct environment, not a decontextualized one, as this was the environment where the learning will be eventually operationalised. For this cohort then, the classroom was not supplementary to the learning but central to it (Wenger 1998). This authenticity had increased the professional significance of the leadership theory for the participants.

Overall, the 'authentic' environment had acted as a support structure since the learning environment would 'encompass a physical environment which reflects the way the knowledge will be used' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.4).

Regardless of this not being the actual site of the participant's professional practice,

its authenticity was convincing enough that on a cognitive level it felt real which is deemed sufficient to constitute an effective learning environment (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.3). These findings suggest that the attempt to establish a physical authenticity is a great advantage in enacting the dynamics of leadership for the participants. This programme environment had gone further and achieved authenticity on both the cognitive and physical level for the cohort. It is viewed as crucial that the participants' real professional situation was understood as it is only possible to provide for their learning needs '...by understanding the details and sophistications of actual practice' (Brown and Duguid, 1991; p.45). This was evidenced through the participants reporting a synergy between the programme environment and their professional environments.

The participants' initial decision to partake in the programme in this locale was considered to have provided them with access to a supportive learning environment which they had thought would furnish them with the best chance of success and therefore was 'low risk' (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; p.43). They considered the locale to be convenient, familiar and intimate. Safety and trust were considered key ingredients in the environment (Smith, 1982; Brookfield, 1986; Wenger, 1998; Mezirow, 2000) and prerequisites for the participants' initial participation and subsequent willingness to share experiences (McCotter, 2001). From the outset this was seen by the participants to be more achievable in a small, intimate environment (Block, 2009) as smaller groupings are considered more likely to result in nurturing supportive relationships (McCotter, 2001).

The participants saw support as a prerequisite of participation. This is not uncommon in a profession that can be isolating since professional discourse can be hindered: 'by incompatible schedules that allow rare, brief opportunities to engage on matters of substance' (Polin, 2010; p.164). The participants had enjoyed the opportunity to establish relationships with like-minded colleagues from the local area; this had been viewed as a means of gaining a broader leadership perspective.

Safety was defined in the participants' accounts as the establishment of trust and confidentiality. The programme environment was considered to have provided a safe space where the participants could test out leadership ideas amongst

supportive colleagues whilst firmly establishing '...a pool of goodwill' (Wenger, 2002; p.37). The safe space described in their accounts was reminiscent of Richardson's (1997) 'sacred space' where they felt 'safe to be and experiment with who they are and who they are becoming' (Richardson, 1997; p.185). To regard a space as 'sacred' is considered essential if real trust is to develop (McCotter, 2001).

Confidentiality within this learning environment was an essential prerequisite if the participants were to engage freely in professional discourse and critical reflection. The cohort coming solely from the local area could have been viewed as a pressure mechanism due to potential confidentiality implications; instead it was seen as an important support mechanism. The participants' insider knowledge of each other's schools had led to the rapid contextualisation of their shared experiences which had awarded them professional significance. More importance needs to be placed on the development of local links since '... it is the local networks that count, because it is when we are learning in context that knowledge becomes specific and useable' (Fullan, 2001; p. 105). The "spillover" (Bogenreider and Nooteboom, 2004; p.294) of professional and sensitive knowledge was prevalent as professional vulnerability was not regarded as an issue. Therefore, a potential pressure mechanism had been mitigated 'by the building of mutual trust' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p. 294) which was considered to be at the core of the learning environment's support structure.

The participants had described the deep, supportive trusting relationships that characterised the learning environment since they had 'the expectation that others will not behave opportunistically even if they have both the opportunity and incentives for doing so' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.296). I would argue that their motives for establishing trust were not based on mutual-dependency; it was, 'more personalised, on the basis of empathy, identification or friendship' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.296). The participants considered that these feelings had been heightened by their intimate conversations since: 'in the small group discussion we discover that our own concerns are more universal than we imagined. This discovery...is what creates the feeling of belonging' (Block, 2009; p.95). They felt able to empathise with each other as they had an understanding of

each other's schools and the extraneous pressures they all faced. The development of empathy or 'connected-knowing' had enabled their experiences to be shared, understood and reflected upon (Belenky et al., 1997; Galotti, 1998). This was seen to generate feelings of affinity in response to the pressures generated by the programme and it was noted that an individual focus had dissipated within the cohort. They had started to view themselves as a 'team' and the successful completion of the programme was seen as the pursuit of a shared endeavour.

Mutual trust had permeated the formal and informal learning environment. Being provided with an opportunity and designated space to interact informally during the refreshment-break was viewed as a significant support mechanism. This facility had allowed the cohort to evolve into a mutual support mechanism addressing concerns that part-time students had limited social opportunities for professional engagement outside of programmed sessions (Polin 2010). By scheduling in the refreshment break I had added thirty minutes to the programme duration which could have been viewed negatively. Instead, the value of this time was vociferously defended by the participants in terms of being able to create a space where they could relax and be totally open '...to err, transgress, because there is space for tensions and differences to be acknowledged, celebrated, rather than buried or eaten alive' (Richardson, 1997; p.186).

The findings indicated that it was during the refreshment break that the participants discussed their personal insecurities, disappointments and perceived failings. These pressures were balanced by the supportive relationships that enveloped the cohort. It was in this safe space that the cohort's trust was tested through discourse and critical reflection. I was particularly surprised that the participants had shared their assignment grades as I had presumed they would want this information to remain confidential. The sharing of this sensitive information and the level of personal disclosure indicated their shared interests and goals and therefore it felt natural to offer each other assistance (Muller, 2006) whilst demonstrating the safety within their learning environment. The stories and anecdotes were akin to the "secret stories" (McCotter, 2001; p.694) which reveal our insecurities and vulnerabilities. To have access to a safe environment where they can be shared is crucial, since



'...they allow us to make meaning out of and share our experience' (McCotter, 2001; p.694).

The risks taken here allowed their prejudices and feelings of competition to be broken down, whilst at the same time establishing mutual understandings and the shared construction of new knowledge (Dewey, 2008). Being provided with the opportunity to vent their frustrations allowed them to evaluate the overall parameters of the learning situation they found themselves in and make collective sense of it. In creating mutual understandings and shared meanings they continued to develop a sense of affinity and feelings of their shared endeavour.

Being able to share personal experiences during the refreshment-break provided the mutually supportive environment that the participants had sought. Support is viewed as a key ingredient in high quality interaction: 'The support is an essential component of our interaction; without feeling supported, it would be difficult to share anything with other members of the group' (McCotter, 2001; p.694). The support offered by the participants was emotional in terms of their knowing-connectedness (Belenky et al., 1997; Galotti, 1998) but also practical, in terms of task support, which in turn indicated that the cohort saw successful programme completion as a shared endeavour. Support was offered freely between the participants as 'this kind of reciprocity is neither selflessness nor simple tit for tat, but a deeper understanding of mutual value that extends over time' (Wenger, 2002; p.37).

This particular support mechanism was seen to engender their 'real' behaviour; the participants described it as the place where in-depth discourse and critical reflection occurred. Did this imply that the discourse during the formal programme sessions was a masquerade? I would argue not. The discourse was simply different by the very nature of its being 'backstage' from the formal programme environment (Goffman, 1990; p.114). I took the decision not to join the participants in their refreshment-break as I felt the space should be private: '... that no member of the audience will intrude' (Goffman, 1990; p.116) to help the cohort generate a sense of belonging. This provided the participants with an opportunity for free expression to voice any criticisms and misgivings concerning the programme or its contents. It

is through this discourse, away from the formal programme environment, that their mutual understandings developed and their learning could thrive (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004).

A key ingredient of the cohort's informal interaction was the presence of food. It could be argued that the decision to provide a buffet-supper acted purely as a support mechanism to satisfy physical needs but the findings revealed its greater importance as a real community-builder. The refreshments were seen to have contributed to the creation of a safe and welcoming environment since: 'It brings the sacred into the room... the symbol of hospitality' (Block, 2009; p.148). One participant described the protocol that had operated during each break which involved the shared distribution of the food. I would suggest that the way the whole group unwrapped and passed round the food mirrored their perception of shared endeavour as a cohort on the programme.

The food had great emphasis placed on it; however, it was not the critical element in the development of a sense of belonging. What the food did do was to provide a comfortable, safe, supportive environment in which the participants could engage in meaning-making. I would argue that its fundamental role was the generation of quality interaction between the participants. The production of a buffet in itself does not create the experience of belonging; rather it provided a central point of encouragement for the participants to enter a social space (Laksov et al., 2008). Once the participants had accessed the space they could then choose to engage in discourse of a public nature involving the whole cohort or could focus their attention on 'one-to-one networking during which people share information with a limited number of people' (Laksov et al., 2008; p.129). If food had been absent from the social space, would the participants have entered into discourse surrounding leadership issues? The participants felt that their reply to this would have been a negative and that the provision of food helped to strengthen their relationships as a community.

### 4.3.2 The Role of the Programme Tutor

The creation of this authentic learning environment was founded on the high quality interaction that had been made possible by the supportive infrastructure. My role as programme tutor was seen to occupy a significant position in this through the formal delivery of leadership theory and the facilitatory role of the learning strategies as I felt: 'it is possible for teachers to pass on their knowledge of the subject without reverting to the tedium of didactic monologues' (Northedge, 2003; p.170). The cohort had welcomed the structure and guidance provided by me and had displayed their dissatisfaction when this had been removed in the later stages of the programme since 'adults tend to want a structure to help them keep track of details and facts in relation to one another' (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; p.44). This again reiterated the argument that education graduates tend to base their training expectations firmly in their schooling practice (Polin, 2010). They had wanted to be taught and they expected guidance.

The resumption of academic study had acted as a pressure mechanism for the participants and I quickly became cognisant that the role of programme tutor was seen as a vehicle to help mitigate this. My position as an insider was seen to offer a student-centred approach 'in the sense of paying attention to the learning processes fostered within each student' whilst at the same time the cohort clearly viewed: 'the teacher's capabilities as subject expert are a resource vital to their... progress' (Northedge, 2003; p.170). The participants had wanted a supportive learning environment and considered that the teacher's 'academic expertise [had] a central role in the teaching/learning process, whilst also recognising that teaching must begin where the student is' (Northedge, 2003; p.179). This support mechanism was viewed as particularly necessary in the formative stages of the programme when levels of confidence had been low. The nature of programme tutor as teacher being the support mechanism was then seen to transform into that of academic facilitator as participant confidence increased. A key role of the programme tutor was to act as a guide into the breadth of specialist knowledge that the participants had become interested in and then '*the teacher as a speaker*

*of the specialist discourse, is able to 'lend' students the capacity to frame meanings they cannot yet produce independently* (italicised in original)' (Northedge, 2003; p.172). As their interest in the leadership knowledge community intensified through the recognition of the professional impact of the leadership learning some of the participants wanted a closer relationship with the university in order to access the breadth of knowledge desired to encourage '...the knowledge creation capacities of individuals' (Eraut, 1994; p.57).

The tutor being viewed as an insider was central to its operation as a support mechanism. The tutor had a "lived authenticity" in the eyes of the participants and therefore 'being an active practitioner with an authentic form of participation might be one of the most deeply essential requirements for teaching' (Wenger, 1998; p.277). The support consisted of the tutor's ability to take a more empathetic approach towards the delivery and contextualisation of programme material. This was seen to have increased its professional significance for the participants since, 'the best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained useable in one's thinking beyond the situation in which the learning has occurred' (Bruner, 1999; p.31). This was seen as a support since the leadership theory became highly significant to the participants' personal lives (Smith, 1982; Barth, 2005) and their professional lives (Westwood, 1980; Eraut, 1994; Wenger, 1998). The programme materials were easy to relate to and highly relevant to the workplace, not being viewed as reified material distinct from their professional practice since learning 'does not become part of professional knowledge unless and until it has been used for a professional purpose' (Eraut, 1994; p.120). The participants did view the tasks as being high quality in terms of the relevance to their lives and 'educators must assume responsibility for setting objectives that explicitly include autonomous thinking and that this requires experiences designed to foster critical reflectivity and experience in discourse' (Mezirow, 1997; p.10).

### **4.3.3 The Learning Strategies**

The professional relevance and collaborative format of the programme tasks was

seen as a key support and therefore it can be argued that they were a 'crucial aspect of the design of any learning environment' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.4). It was felt that there was little distinction between the learning strategies on the programme and the participants' leadership practice in the workplace: '...only real-problem contexts should be presented to ensure authenticity' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; p.3). These authentic tasks had been considered enjoyable and 'the more students are engaged, the more they learn, and the more they retain' (Reeve, 2006; p.viii). The conversion of stress into a positive form led to the tasks being viewed as a surmountable challenge which they did feel able to embrace (Mujtaba, 2010). I would argue that the learning strategies had created a cognitive authenticity for the participants; the tasks felt real and thereby provided opportunities for meaningful reflection (Day, 1999; Herrington and Herrington, 2006). It is widely documented '...that although adults prefer active to passive learning...the activity must contain a reflective element if learning (or change) is to occur' (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; p.45).

The development of a critically reflective, collaborative culture was seen as a highly effective support mechanism by the participants since '... it is the collaborative group that accelerates performance...the results occur because the day-to-day pressure and support is built into the work' (Fullan, 2011; p12). The existence of powerful peer pressure and being able to work collaboratively on tasks became the cohort's preferred learning methodology as they enjoyed, 'engaging, incorporating, and critically exploring the views of others' (Gergen, 1995; p.34). A collaborative approach is able 'to counter the isolating tendencies of schools' (McCotter, 2001; p.701) and provide students with access to a range of perspectives. This interaction amongst the participants provided the engagement that results in commitment to a task and to each other (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Day, 1999; Sternberg and Zhang, 2005; Block, 2009). In this sense, peer pressure and peer support characterise an environment of positive pressure which contributed to their feelings of shared endeavour. It is when we contribute as part of a team that our personal contributions become more meaningful (Fullan, 2011).

The elements of pressure that the tasks contained were viewed as a challenge due to the counter-balancing action of the support structure. The short, collaborative tasks had successfully maintained a forward-momentum for the participants' learning by increasing their theoretical knowledge incrementally. The maintenance of a forward-momentum is an important element as it helps '...learners organize and integrate information, present one idea at a time...pace the training so that the learners can master one element before moving on to the next' (Zemke and Zemke, 1995; p.44). This collaborative success acted as an intrinsic motivation for the participants (Fullan, 2007; Mujtaba, 2010) and increased levels of self-belief and confidence. It is argued that this ensures that '...development will be continual' (Day, 1999; p.81). This can be viewed as a triangular relationship as '... confidence arose from successfully meeting *challenges* in one's work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which learner felt *supported* in that endeavour by colleagues (*italicised in original*)' (Eraut, 2007; p.417).

The peer pressure that had operated in the cohort was positive in that the participants wanted successful outcomes for each other. The creation of a collaborative culture had ensured that everyone responded to the challenges placed before them. It is argued that this peer pressure generated by the collaborative accountability had resulted in high levels of engagement and motivation amongst the participants (Block, 2009; Fullan, 2011). The support mechanisms had enabled the participants to take risks and engage in experimentation thereby utilising the beneficial aspects of positive stress (Mujtaba, 2010). The tasks had been viewed as authentic and therefore negated the claim that authenticity can only be found in sustained, extended tasks which place the learner closer to genuine practice (Herrington and Herrington, 2006; Laiken, 2006).

All of the constituent elements discussed above provided a support structure within the learning environment that was conducive to the generation of high quality interaction amongst the participants; an essential element for the creation of shared knowledge (Bogenreider and Nooteboom, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005).

#### **4.4 Conclusions**

In answer to the research question 'Can an effective learning environment be created for a cohort of secondary teachers with leadership responsibilities? If so, how?' it is proposed that an effective learning environment had been created for these participants. Its effectiveness rested on the programme's capacity to generate a truly authentic leadership experience. The creation of this level of authenticity was dependent on the twin pillars of pressure and support (Fullan, 2011) enveloping the participants both on the macro-level of the programme and the micro-level of the learning strategies. This went further than simply delivering an authentic cognitive experience; it also created a physical authenticity for the participants (Herrington and Herrington, 2006). It was this productive mix of the positive elements of both of these forces that enacted the dynamics of leadership for the cohort which is seen to have resulted in significant personal and professional change. It is argued that 'when leaders...have opportunities to learn more deeply in context, they have a chance of transforming the contexts that constrain them' (Fullan et al., 2005; p.64).

It was the synergy between the two positive forces on two levels that was conducive to the creation of an effective learning environment since 'the more that pressure and support become seamless, the more effective the change process will be' (Fullan et al., 2005; p.56). The twin forces of pressure and support, in this case study, had not acted as polar opposites. The pressures cited by both the participants and their line managers had been counterbalanced by the support mechanisms and thereby converted into their positive state (Laiken, 2006; Mujtaba, 2010).

At the micro-level of the learning strategies pressure and support were built into each task. The participants had described the pressure of the collaborative tasks as a challenge, their choice of language indicating that conversion to a positive state had taken place. An affinity was seen to exist amongst the participants and this had led to a sense of shared endeavour. They put their eagerness to embrace new challenges both in the programme environment and in their workplaces down to the

existence of a strong support structure. The pressure and support mechanisms that had operated at the micro-level were seen to create an authentic leadership environment that had been recognised by the participants. I would argue that this was necessary to enact the dynamics of leadership for the participants and that this explained the synergy that was considered to exist between the programme environment and their workplace leadership practice. The two had become indistinguishable because of the professional relevance of the learning strategies.

Simultaneously, authenticity characterised the macro-level of the programme environment. I would suggest that the locale had made it easier to apply and operationalise the pressure and support mechanisms to create a physical authenticity, since the leadership learning was conceptually located in the correct environment in which it would be used. The pressures generated at this macro-level were converted into a positive form through the operation of the facilitatory contextual climate which had exposed the participants to an educational design that facilitated the creation of a sense of belonging (Block, 2009). This sense of belonging was demonstrated by the creation of feelings of affinity and shared endeavour amongst the participants.



## **Chapter 5: Did this cohort develop as a learning community? If so, in what ways?**

### ***5.1 Introduction***

In this chapter I will be drawing on my findings to answer my second research question. First I will outline what is meant by the term 'learning community'. The literature is prolific, particularly the focus on professional learning communities, learning groups and communities of practice but the definitive features of the term *community* differ in each. My interpretation, following a review of the literature, is of a group of individuals who demonstrate a commitment to each other and to their collective enterprise. This commitment is the result of an extended period of collective critical reflection and collaborative practice whereby the group generates a bank of shared resources. This leads to the creation of new mutual understandings regarding their leadership practice which becomes a shared reality.

This discussion is underpinned by the literature that relates most closely to the participants' perceptions of the programme. The literature does consistently show that engagement in a community should enable an individual to develop a sense of belonging (Block, 2009) which is externalised as the individual emerges as a creative and co-creative force within its parameters since '...learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process, involving the heart as well as the head' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.29). This creative force is collaborative where the success of the collective enterprise becomes the priority (Fullan, 2011). Central to this process is the development of mutual trust and understandings (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Cohendet et al., 2005). This provides a sound foundation for the individuals to engage in high quality interaction (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005).

The participants' accounts suggested that a collaborative culture had been established which had, in turn, facilitated their collective meaning-making. An individual commitment to the development of a collaborative culture is viewed as central to the facilitation of collective meaning-making (Shotter, 1995; Fullan,

2007, 2011). The participants emphasised the link between their collaborative practice and critical reflection in the development of a feeling of affinity and a sense of shared endeavour. Day (1998) argued that a genuine collaborative culture should have critical reflection and experimentation at its heart. The participants all suggested that collective critical reflection on their shared experiences, stories (Reynolds, 1998; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) and educational leadership theory (Brookfield, 1995; Northedge, 2003) had been essential to the creation of new learning for the group.

Individual engagement in shared practice and the constant negotiation of meanings was seen to result in the generation of a shared repertoire of resources by the community (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). The participants' accounts made frequent reference to the importance of the shared set of resources that had been created by the group. They were considered the key element in the creation of new knowledge that was used to inform their leadership practice.

In the findings the following characteristics were identified from an analysis of the participants' accounts as being the ways in which they had indeed formed a learning community:

1. The Development of Trusting, Supportive Relationships
2. High Quality Interaction
3. The Role of Collective Critical Reflection
4. The Development of a Collaborative Culture

Each characteristic will be examined to ascertain if a learning community had in fact been established as a result of the leadership programme. This discussion will focus on the participants' perceptions of the conditions that made them '...willing and able to learn by exchanging, sharing and jointly producing knowledge' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.293). The discussion will draw primarily on the third and fourth overarching codes: *the importance of collaborative practice* and *the role of critical reflection*. The understanding of these processes will then enable the reader to consider the extent to which they acted as constituent elements of the participants' perceived personal and professional change.

## ***5.2 The Development of Trusting, Supportive Relationships***

The creation of trust is an important factor in the establishment of a community (Wenger, 1998; Cohendet et al., 2005; Zboralski, 2009) not only '...to mitigate relational risk...a trust based relation may be valued as an end in itself' (Bogenreider and Nooteboom, 2004; p.296). The participants' accounts suggested that trust had been established rapidly in the learning environment and they had regarded the relationships created as occupying a significant role in their professional lives since 'some of their [communities] greatest value lies in intangible outcomes, such as the relationships they build among people, the sense of belonging they create' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.15). The cohort considered their community to be a strong entity '...based on mutual respect and trust' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.27). The empathetic relationships that had been established in this learning environment had enabled the participants to judge the trustworthiness of each other since '...beyond empathy, we can identify with people, to the extent that we share the same perceptions, interpretations and evaluations' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.297). Once mutual trust and respect is in place, Tripp (2004) argued that genuine dialogue will result. Being able to understand another's practice is considered the key to the development of real trust in a community (Wenger et al., 2002; p.85). The participants felt that an empathetic understanding had been established effectively due, in part, to the local composition of the group. Their insider knowledge of the local schools had enabled them to contextualise each other's experiences with ease.

Trust and mutual respect was seen to be at the core of the cohort's collective meaning-making since without its presence the process of collective critical reflection and the production of shared knowledge would not have been possible. The participants' accounts demonstrated the belief that the cohort's trust was 'real' since '...when a relation has been going well for a time, one may no longer be attentive to opportunities or pressures for opportunism regarding oneself and others in the group' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.297). This intentional trust developed as the group became assured that all knowledge shared and

generated will be used for the benefit of the group as a whole and ‘...that making the community more valuable is to the benefit of everyone’ (Wenger et al., 2002; p.37). Trust relations are considered to govern the bonds and norms that tie the learning group together (Tripp, 2004; Cohendet et al., 2005) and therefore will permeate all of the characteristics cited by the participants. As a result, trust will be discussed in each section in context.

### **5.3 High Quality Interaction**

Being provided with the opportunity to spend time with like-minded professionals was valued by the participants, which in itself can act as a creative force in the construction of a community, in terms of being provided with an opportunity to share and create experiences (Wenger, 1998; Wilson and Berne, 1999; McCotter, 2001; Polin, 2010). The participants relished the opportunity to talk about their leadership practice with their peers; this concurs with the idea that professional learning ‘...ought not to be bound and *delivered* but rather *activated* (italicised in original)’ (Wilson and Berne, 1999; p.194). The participants said that it was the high quality of their interaction throughout the programme that had helped to create a sense of community. The literature shows that the interaction process is important to the development of a learning community as its structure ‘...is both the basis and the result of processes of interaction’ (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.292).

Cohort size was seen as a contributory factor in the generation of high quality interaction as it was easier to ‘... become more authentic and personal with each other’ (Block, 2009; p.95). A more intimate environment had enabled the participants to share their experiences fully (McCotter, 2001; Wenger et al., 2002) without fear of breaches of confidentiality. This openness may also have been the result of the cohort having operated democratically as the participants’ accounts had made no reference to a leadership or coordinator figure. The literature suggests that a distributed form of leadership is the most effective in a community although, to realise full potential, a coordinator role is necessary (Wenger et al., 2002). The absence of this key figure did not have an adverse impact on the quality

of the cohort's interaction as has been alluded to in the literature (Wenger et al., 2002; Zboralski, 2009; Iaquinto et al., 2011) and it had made it less likely that power hierarchies would permeate the cohort (McCotter, 2001). Power concerns had not featured in the participants' accounts of their trusting, supportive network.

The small group structure had remained stable during the programme which is viewed as an important feature of building trust (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004). However, the absence of membership turnover is considered to hinder innovation within a learning group due to the decreased cognitive distance between members (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004) which can lead to a stagnation of innovation. Wenger et al. (2002) argued that this situation can also produce a clique as a group becomes '...exclusive, either intentionally or as an unintended outcome of the tightness of their relationships' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.145). This was not the case for the participants who reported that the stability and safety of the cohort had made them more willing to experiment and explore leadership ideas rather than having experienced any curtailment of innovation. The participants felt they had entered into genuine dialogue due to the trust that had been established and this, in turn, had encouraged them '...to take risks by surfacing their assumptions, clarifying their mental models, expounding their personal theories, experimenting with new ideas and practices and sharing their successes and problems' (Tripp, 2004; p.198). Wenger et al. (2002) attributed the propensity to embark on more daring behaviour by individuals to the community being regarded as a backup mechanism for their actions.

The participants regarded their learning environment as being 'open' with the psychological risks associated with knowledge-sharing in this cohort being mitigated by the building of mutual trust and so the 'spillover' of knowledge between the participants had been frequent (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.294). They had, in this sense, aligned to Tripp's (2004) definition of a 'critical friend' where in addition to being able to offer an alternative perspective on leadership issues, a priority had become to want success for one's colleagues. This was an expected outcome of collaborative activity due to '...identifying with an entity larger than oneself... [which makes] school leaders become almost as concerned about the

success of other schools...as they do about their own' (Fullan, 2008; p.49). I noted in my research journal a discussion between the participants where a successful implementation strategy for a new coursework model had been shared by a participant together with the necessary resources. This information could potentially lead to an improved subject performance which, in turn, would increase the school's competitive position (Journal. 15/10/11). This was voiced at a time when competition for students was fierce among the local schools and, as such, is illustrative of the participants having developed a sense of belonging to each other and to their learning environment. Through the development of shared practice a community should be geared to future demands and it should '...provide[s] resources that enable members to handle new situations and create new knowledge' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.38). Therefore, spillover was seen as an important part of the cohort's interaction and was viewed as '...an essential part of sharing and jointly developing knowledge' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.294).

The experiences shared through interaction, whether anecdotal or in the form of story-telling, were viewed as high quality in the generation of enduring ties between the participants and enduring ties are viewed to be 'at the heart of a community' (Wenger et al., 2002; p. 62). Being able to recall stories in their entirety without omissions, their 'secret stories', was only possible '...to other teachers in other secret places' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996; p. 25); this was indicative of the trust and safety attributed to the social space (McCotter, 2001). Story-telling is of central importance to the practice of a community, as once shared, it adopted the form of an artefact and 'through them, experience becomes reproducible and reusable' (Orr, 1996; p.126). Each re-telling and re-representation of each story is seen to increase the knowledge of the community and demonstrate individual membership (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Orr, 1996). In this sense 'stories are more than a celebration of practice; they are an essential part of the practice to be celebrated' (Orr, 1996; p.143). Zemke and Zemke (1995) suggested that individuals find stories much easier to connect with previous learning and experience. It was through the sharing and remodelling of stories that

the participants discovered that they faced similar situations (McCotter, 2001) which they reported had resulted in the generation of affinity.

The recounting of stories had become a key component of the group's shared set of resources which were used to help make sense of their current leadership issues since they '...can also be used in the production of new meanings' (Laksov et al., 2008; p.130). In addition, the consideration of the shared stories was seen as a key tool to help meld the theoretical material from the programme to its practical application as the stories enabled the participants to '...gain new perspectives on situations and go back and address them in a more thoughtful way' (McCotter, 2001; p. 694). Much of this learning was tacit knowledge which the participants utilised in their personal reflection process which indicated the existence of competence trust between the participants as knowledge was viewed as being useful and fit for purpose (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.302). The literature considers the creation of communal resources as a key element in shared practice whether they are in the form of '...stories, theories...articles...best practices' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.38). This shared bank of resources was the property of the cohort which is argued to be indicative of a successful community of practice (Iaquinto et al., 2011).

The participants' enduring ties were also attributed to the 'frequency of interaction' which had been intensified by the length of time they had operated as a community – their 'duration of ties' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p. 292). The participants' accounts reported that their relationships had become increasingly tightly-knit as the programme progressed. The frequency of interaction is a key element in the development of trust and sympathy between individuals and '...interacting frequently over time will give community members the chance to articulate their expectations and demands for a fruitful communication' (Zboralski, 2009; p.94). It is through regular interaction that '...members develop a shared understanding of their domain and an approach to their practice... in the process; they build valuable relationships based on respect and trust' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.35).

The participants said that they had increased the frequency of their interaction as a result of the trust that had been generated and ‘...because they find value in their interactions’ (Wenger et al., 2002; p.4). The sharing of their different repertoire of experiences over a significant period of time was seen to reduce the cognitive distance between group members as ‘the more shared experience people have the greater cognitive similarity will be’ (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.291). The participants said that by having access to a wide repertoire of experiences a sense of affinity had been generated between members as they became cognisant of common concerns. This level of empathy is seen to contribute to the creation of knowledge and expertise since ‘...practitioners need opportunities to engage with others who face similar situations’ (Wenger et al., 2002; p.9). This point was emphasised by a participant who stressed the ease of communication between group members when they met following programme completion. Their shared experiences were seen to provide an instant connection and as a result it can become easier to empathise with each other’s situations and perspectives (Bogenreider and Nooteboom, 2004).

The frequent nature of the cohort’s interaction had resulted in the participants viewing their learning as a collective enterprise (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Bogenreider and Nooteboom, 2004). The intensity with which their experiences had been shared led the participants to consider their collective learning as having followed a forward trajectory (Zemke and Zemke, 1995). The group viewed their progress enthusiastically which is a key element in the successful establishment of a community (Wenger et al., 2002; Iaquinto et al., 2011). Ultimately, the successful completion of the programme was the end goal, their joint enterprise (Wenger et al., 2002). The participants said that they were committed to this collective enterprise and this had generated feelings of affinity.

The refreshment break had provided the safe, social space necessary where the participants could ‘...mingle or confer privately, invite one-to-one discussion and relationship build’ (Wenger et al., 2002; p.50). It was here that personal contact details were shared that enabled the cohort’s interaction to become more frequent. The cohort started to communicate through a wide range of channels outside the



formal programme sessions. Communication between sessions is viewed as a key element in the creation of a successful community (Iaquinto et al., 2011). One of these channels involved the creation of a social platform which was considered a key tool by the participants in enabling them to sustain frequent interaction (Polin, 2010).

The participants reported that they had experienced both frequent and high quality interaction which was representative of the significant professional friendships that had been established. Both are regarded as essential elements for the creation and consolidation of new knowledge within a community (Cohendet et al., 2005; Polin, 2010). The interaction had resulted in the creation of shared understandings concerning the nature of educational leadership for the cohort and this collective meaning-making had been greatly missed following programme completion. This may be explained by a commitment to the shared domain, in this case educational leadership, or because they simply valued being with like-minded people (Wenger et al., 2002; p.45). The possibility that the community may have dissolved following programme completion may have contributed to the participants' enthusiasm to retain it.

#### ***5.4 The Role of Collective Critical Reflection***

The participants considered that they had become more critically reflective due to the collaborative nature of the tasks that had been set; this was viewed positively as '...critical reflection is as essential as collaboration to strong communities' (Achinstein, 2002; p. 425). The process of critical reflection had allowed the cohort to draw both on the shared experiences of the group and leadership theory. This agrees with Brookfield's definition of a critically reflective practitioner as experiences, both individual and shared, are seen to have a dialectical connection with academic theory '...with one constantly illuminating and informing the other' (Brookfield, 1995; p.194). The process of collective reflection can generate feelings of group affinity which could foster the conditions necessary for individual transformation (Laiken, 2006). This was the case for the participants who said that

the collective questioning of existing beliefs and assumptions had contributed to the revision of their leadership thinking (Reynolds, 1998).

The sharing of leadership experiences and the collaborative approach to learning strategies had enabled the cohort to engage in meaningful reflection (Herrington and Herrington, 2006) which allowed them to construct shared understandings which reflected their collective view of reality (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). The cohort's collective critical reflection on leadership theory arguably made conversations with peers more valuable (Brookfield, 1995); this was certainly the view of the cohort. The introduction to different theoretical perspectives had enabled them to apply different perspectives to their practice since '...reading theory can jar us in a productive way, by offering unfamiliar interpretations of familiar events and by suggesting other ways of working' (Brookfield, 1995; p. 186).

The collective critical reflection that took place during the refreshment break was seen to have a greater depth and intensity than any other during the programme. The participants said the critical reflection had felt 'real' and it had become safe to explore and experiment (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Brookfield, 1995) with leadership ideas. It can be argued that the provision and development of this social space (Wenger et al., 2002; Laksov et al., 2008) and the quality interaction that was engaged in was crucial to the participants' development of a sense of belonging (Wenger et al., 2002; Block, 2009) and to the emergence of the community (Brown and Duguid, 1991). The sense of belonging to a community displayed by the participants had emphasised '...the emotional warmth and psychological security' (Brookfield, 1995; p.244) required for effective critical reflection. Being provided with an appropriate private space had allowed the participants '...the free space for reflection and discourse' (Mezirow, 1996; p.171) where they had felt able to adopt an honest approach with their colleagues (Wenger et al., 2002). The absence of a hierarchical structure in the group had allowed the '...participants to support and to confront, to learn from others and to contribute in turn to others' learning' (Reynolds, 1998; p.196). These key conditions of democracy, respect and insight

are considered to be the keystone for the generation of critical conversations amongst groups (Brookfield, 1995; p.142).

The outcomes of this interaction were viewed by the cohort to have generated mutual understandings and shared meanings surrounding their leadership practice (Wenger, 1998). Bogenrieder and Nooteboom (2004; p.289) regard these prerequisites to be essential elements in the joint creation of new knowledge. The participants' willingness to question their practice and engage in collective meaning-making is a departure from Wilson and Berne's (1999) findings that suggested a habitual reluctance amongst teachers during training to change their professional views. I would attribute this variation to the operation of the facilitatory contextual climate within the learning environment which the participants felt had encouraged and supported the experimentation of leadership practice. The collective knowledge generated through the cohort's critical reflection on shared experiences and leadership theory was subsumed into their shared bank of resources which acted as the core of their personal critical reflection process. The creation of knowledge is considered significant to the health of a community due to the provision of '...alternative perspectives and growth and thus serves to counter myopia and stagnation' (Achinstein, 2002; p.426).

By taking the decision to enter into '...discussion, feedback and critical questions by colleagues' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.305) the participants reported a reassessment of their leadership practice as a result of exposure to alternative perspectives (McCotter, 2001). The process of delivering and receiving feedback is an important means of challenge and support as 'participants are helped to acknowledge their strengths and successes; to see obstacles not as failures, but as learning opportunities' (Laiken, 2006; p.22). Critical reflection is a social process where one's peers enable us to appreciate our practice and sometimes ourselves in a very different light (Brookfield, 1995). One participant explained how this process had led him to positively re-evaluate a theoretical model he had previously dismissed. The academic discourse that he had entered into had enabled him to collectively negotiate new meanings concerning the theory. This instance

demonstrates that the learning process can be deepened through disagreement and discussion (Wenger et al., 2002).

Due to the trust that had been established the participants were able to enter into critically reflective conversations on their leadership experiences, both successful and unsuccessful, and to consider ways to improve their practice (Brookfield, 1995; McCotter, 2001). They had accepted that different views would surface during their professional discourse as discourse ‘...is a conscientious effort to...build a new understanding, sometimes through a synthesis of viewpoints...and settling for a clearer understanding of issues...reaching a consensus is a theoretical goal but not the only function of discourse’ (Mezirow, 1996; p.170). In fact a strong, productive community is characterised by debate and controversy since ‘...active engagement in conflict, a dialogue of differences, is a normal and essential dimension of a functioning teacher community’ (Achinstein, 2002; p.422). Members can even use conflict as a way to intensify their learning and their community ties (Achinstein, 2002; Wenger et al., 2002; Musanti and Pence, 2010). The findings confirmed this because the process of collective critical reflection had enabled the participants to reach more informed decisions aligned with their preferred holistic view of education. McCotter (2001) argues that this results from the collegial support that is generated through the process. This collective reflection was seen by the participants as an integral element of both their individual and collective meaning-making which can be considered empowering in professional decision-making (McCotter, 2001).

### ***5.5 The Development of a Collaborative Culture***

The intensive collaboration that occurred during the learning strategies had been seen as an important element in the establishment of trust within the cohort. In group situations where trust has not been previously established then ‘intensive collaboration can set in motion a positive cycle of emerging trust’ (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p. 296). Individuals are seen as more likely to intrinsically develop trust through ‘...interactions that are mutually beneficial, such as engaging in shared problem solving’ (Wenger et al., 2002; p.147). Trust is regarded by

teachers as '...an essential component to build collaborative relationships with other teachers' (Musanti and Pence, 2010; p. 80).

The requirement to solve challenges collaboratively and present their solutions orally had made each participant accountable for the task outcome through the natural operation of peer pressure (Fullan, 2011). In this sense the collaboration was viewed by the participants as empowering as they controlled the outcomes of the activities and had become responsible for helping each other learn and progress (Mezirow, 1997; McCotter, 2001). This collaborative approach had converted the challenge of the learning strategies into a positive force as 'what makes it possible...to enjoy such an experience, is that level of support offered to each learner equals the level of challenge' (Laiken, 2006; p.21). The participants reported that the learning strategies had generated authentic tasks which had made the leadership theory professionally relevant. This had enabled them to empathise and identify with the leadership experiences presented by the cohort since 'empathy and identification are generally based on shared experience' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.297). The engagement in intensive collaborative practice appeared to have created an affinity between the participants; they had '...a willingness to participate in meetings and to collaborate and share expertise' (Iaquinto et al., 2011; p.8).

The collaborative structure of the learning strategies had ensured that all participants were provided with '...the opportunities and the autonomy to create knowledge, to share their knowledge and be engaged in informal collegial learning' (Tripp, 2004; p. 195) which was acknowledged as a primary motivational factor in the learning process (Wenger, 1998). By working collaboratively the group constructed shared knowledge since 'the insight accumulated is not a private substance, but socially constructed and distributed' (Brown and Duguid, 1991). This intense involvement by all the participants is viewed as important for professions prone to professional isolation (Brookfield, 1995; McCotter, 2001; Tripp, 2004). The participants' accounts indicated that the collaborative activity had resulted in mutual engagement in the programme and to each other which is considered to strengthen group ties (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004). There was no display of

resistance within the cohort which has been argued to be an inevitable outcome '...in professional development programs that foster prolonged collegiality and collaboration' (Musanti and Pence, 2010; p.87). When individuals become mutually engaged and committed to participation in a domain, in this case the leadership programme, then learning is seen to be the natural result (Wenger, 1998).

The local composition of the cohort had not been seen to limit the breadth of experience encountered and the participants said that they had enjoyed being exposed to and being able to offer, a range of educational experiences. The variety of competences operating within the collaboration would make it more likely that the group would feel a strong connection (Iaquinto et al., 2011) as it allowed for 'open engagement with real differences as well as common ground' (Wenger, 2010; p.126). They had acted as 'co-learners' during the collaborative activities and felt that their individual experiences had been embraced and respected with an equal opportunity to participate in the discourse (Brookfield, 1995; Tripp, 2004). They had felt comfortable enough to negotiate their meanings collectively surrounding their leadership issues since 'today's complex problem solving requires multiple perspectives' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.10). Through having access to such a range of perspectives they felt better equipped to approach their own challenges and so, in Wenger and colleagues' words, '...devise better solutions and make better decisions' (Wenger et al., 2002, p.15). A community is seen to be more effective if founded on a range of different experiences as a '...good dose of diversity makes for richer learning, more interesting relationships, and increased creativity' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.35). The participants commented on the creativity that the collaborative learning strategies had produced. This genuine collaborative approach was considered possible as it was founded on an environment of trust (Musanti and Pence, 2010).

In addition to this, the participants felt that the sharing of the group's experiences had been made more significant due to the local composition of the group. The cohort were cognisant of each other's professional context which they felt had contributed to the development of a community as 'It is often easier to start a community among people with similar backgrounds, but having a problem in

common is also a strong motivation for building a shared practice' (Wenger, et al., 2002; p. 25). Having more than one participant from each school, in the majority of cases, had enabled existing social networks to be used; this may have allowed for more rapid interaction of cohort members (Wenger et al., 2002; Iaquinto et al., 2011).

The provision of a social space to share experiences is significant in the generation of a collaborative culture since the sharing of personal details helps '...reduce behavioural ambiguity and to develop *shared norms of behaviour* (italicised in original)' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.302). The development of interpersonal relationships are critical to the creation of effective discourse (Mezirow, 1996) and community as '...knowing each other makes it easier to ask for help...you know who is likely to have the answer and you can feel confident that your request is welcome' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.34). It appeared that the break had provided the back-drop for the participants to draw upon the goodwill (Wenger, 1998) generated by the group. Reciprocity is considered to be an important feature of participation in a community ' ...it is a pool of good will – of "social capital",...that allows people to contribute to the community while trusting at some point...they too will benefit' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.37). The examples recounted by the participants demonstrated how they had embarked upon research and had shared resources on each other's behalf at times of individual difficulty and professional vulnerability.

They had contacted each other without hesitation when they wanted to ask for leadership advice or assistance. They took the decision of when to collaborate on issues, thus striking a balance between maintaining their professional autonomy and their collaborative stance which is considered to be an important component of effective learning for teachers (Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000). The participants displayed a certainty that support would be forthcoming which was indicative of the strong sense of belonging (Wenger, 1998; Block, 2009), and the dense community structure (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004) that had developed. The density of ties that characterised the group was seen to contribute to the building of trust '...in mutual give and take' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p. 294). The

participants' accounts revealed a mutual dependency based on friendship and goodwill as opposed to vulnerability (Wenger, 1998; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004).

The cohort felt that they had successfully established a collaborative culture which had contributed to the view that community bonds had been created. The extended period of collaboration appears to have shifted the focus of their shared endeavour away from programme completion for intrinsic gratification to the honing of their respective leadership priorities for altruistic reasons. The participants said that a shared vision had developed focused on the necessity of a collaborative approach for effective educational leadership. The development of a shared vision is illustrative of an effective community as it '...embodies a certain way of behaving, a perspective on problems and ideas, a thinking style, and even...an ethical stance' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.39). This deviates from the view that to expect full individual participation in the learning process there has to be a focus on personal profit (Zboralski, 2009).

The participants considered that collective critical reflection upon collaborative activity in this authentic learning environment had resulted in their generation of a more holistic educational perspective. This can be seen as the result of engaging in dialogue based on '...collaboration, reflection, critique and support' which had enabled them '...to engage in a discussion of what we sense is wrong, or unjust, or inequitable in society and schools' (McCotter, 2001; p.702). Kelchtermans (2004) reminds us that a learning community, in itself, is no guarantee of the development of critical professional learning; however the participants had indeed demonstrated a movement away from a professionally insular position. Participation in, and commitment to, a collaborative leadership culture was considered to be the cohort's *modus operandi* and one they attempted to generate in their respective work environments and further afield; such was their commitment to its tenets. They maintained this to be the most effective method of ensuring that best practice was shared; again this is in line with their commitment to a more holistic view of education.



The collaborative culture was supported by the use of professional social media platforms throughout the programme and following its completion. The use of web tools can be seen as having enabled the participants to enter into collaborative work more regularly and gain access to scarce resources (Polin, 2010). This was certainly the view of the participants who found the sharing of, both individually and collectively generated, resources to be a great academic support. The resources generated held significance for the group since '...they are not just objects by themselves but are part of the life of the community' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.10). The motivation behind the development of the professional platform was to simplify informal collaboration and resource sharing for the cohort. Wenger et al. (2002) argue that the generation of such resources is possible because the needs of the practitioners have been understood by community members.

The innovative approach of the participants runs counter to the argument that, in order to facilitate authentic learning, a scheduled resource-sharing session is required (Laiken, 2006). The cohort had not been provided with such an opportunity and instead had taken the decision to design for its own learning needs. They became increasingly reliant on the facility when confronted with less face-to-face interaction following programme completion, especially for those now distanced geographically. The platform was considered to still be very relevant to the cohort's leadership practice as it now attracted a wider audience of leadership scholars. The platform also had the potential to attract new members to the community which was deemed important to prevent curtailment of innovation (Wenger et al., 2002). New membership had not been a consideration to the cohort, up to this point, due to the finite nature of the leadership programme.

Wenger, et al. (2002; p.62) argue that 'at the heart of a community is a web of enduring relationships among members'. For this cohort the ties that held them together demonstrated a longevity that exceeded the timescale of the programme. The participants reported that they interacted and collaborated on a regular basis two years on from programme completion. Regular contact was important since '...next to duration and frequency, regularity serves to enhance the intensity of ties' (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004; p.310). A group demonstrating 'duration of

ties' is indicative of the importance that the shared practice had in the life of the community (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004). The shared practice, in this case, had not been considered redundant once the programme was at an end; instead it had continued to evolve as it was still considered relevant to the group members (Orr, 1996; Wenger, 1998). The shared understandings and practice had created a common bond which informed the collective critical reflection that occurred whenever the members entered into discourse.

## **5.6 Conclusions**

In answer to the research question 'Did this cohort develop as a learning community? If so, in what ways?' it is proposed that this cohort did develop into a learning community. The leadership programme had provided a design for the cohort to learn how to become a community '...a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.34).

The discussions demonstrate that a 'real' trust had developed between the participants and this had acted as the core of the creation of this learning community. The trust, both intentional and competence trust (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004), had enabled leadership vulnerabilities and insecurities to be uncovered on a collaborative platform in a safe, trusting environment. This community was viewed as the place '... where people have the freedom to ask for candid advice, share their opinions, and try their half-baked ideas without repercussions' (Wenger et al., 2002; p.61). This level of trust and openness enabled the participants to immerse themselves in the collaborative learning strategies over a significant period of time which intensified their relationships. They became fully committed to a collaborative, critically reflective approach which led them to prioritise the cohort's collective progress and achievement. A group of individuals with a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators had since developed a common identity and common goal and had come to see themselves as a single entity moving forward together. This is indicative of the sense of belonging felt by the participants to each other and their environment (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al.,

2002; Block, 2009) and is indicative of their transition into that of a learning community.

The sharing of their experiences had generated an affinity between group members based initially, on the successful completion of the programme, and later, the honing of individual educational leadership practice, and both became viewed as a shared endeavour. The open environment founded on trust had created a safe testing ground where new ideas and practice could be explored. The participants reported that their individual experiences had been shared without hesitation; this full participation being a sign of a successfully functioning community (Iaquinto et al., 2011). This created a shared bank of resources upon which the cohort could draw (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). The collective critical reflection that had occurred, both formally and informally, on shared experiences and leadership theory had generated shared meanings and ultimately a shared reality for the participants (Wenger, 1998). The mutual understandings negotiated by the cohort had focused on the necessity of taking a more holistic and collaborative approach to educational leadership. These communal resources, which took a variety of forms, became the keystone of their personal critical reflection on their leadership practice.

In addition, the participants felt that the extended period of time the group had operated together, with such a stable, intimate membership had significantly contributed to the creation of a tightly knit community. The trusting, supportive environment was seen to have facilitated genuine dialogue of a high quality (Tripp, 2004) which was considered essential to the creation of new knowledge (Cohendet et al., 2005). The shared understandings and practice negotiated by the community had become a shared reality and had relevance for the members during the programme and following its completion. The frequency and regularity of the cohort's interaction was a key factor in their evolution as a community as they were willing to '...communicate, collaborate and share expertise outside of meetings' (Iaquinto et al., 2011; p.8). It was during the informal communication that the cohort had begun to recognise themselves and describe themselves as a community.

The cohort, now a learning community, were bound by enduring ties and collaborated regularly on leadership issues without hesitation. There existed a certainty concerning reciprocation amongst the members akin to community membership (Wenger et al., 2002; Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004). The group had collaborated throughout the leadership programme and this was still the norm two years following completion. The cohort had grown into a community and still displayed a sense of belonging to the community members and their joint enterprise in the domain of educational leadership (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Block, 2009). Their enthusiasm for their joint enterprise is a key element of their successful operation as a community (Wenger et al., 2002; Iaquinto et al., 2011). The professional friendships forged on the leadership programme were considered to have played a significant role in their lives which emphasised the importance of '...belonging to an emotionally sustaining peer learning community' (Brookfield, 1995; p.244).

## **Chapter 6: Does Mezirow's theory of 'Transformative Learning' add to our understanding of the participants' perceptions of their learning experience on this educational leadership programme? If so, how?**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I draw on my findings to discuss my third and final research question. As chapter three showed the participants perceived that they had undergone significant personal and professional change as a result of the learning experience on this educational leadership programme. These changes will be discussed with reference to transformative learning '... the process of effecting change in a *frame of reference* (italicised in original)' (Mezirow, 1997; p.5). This change is seen to involve a fundamental alteration of deep-seated beliefs acquired through one's culture and socialisation which is achieved '...through *critical reflection on the assumptions* upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based (italicised in original)' (Mezirow, 1997; p.7). The transformation process as explained by Mezirow (2000, 2006), has two strands; the first being focused on the key role of critical reflection on the assumptions of others (objective reframing) and one's own assumptions (subjective reframing) and secondly, the need to engage in discourse to validate one's new or revised interpretations. The resultant revised interpretations are then used by the individual as a guide to future action (Mezirow, 2000).

The participants perceived that changes of this nature had occurred during the learning experience and that the process of critical reflection, engaged in collectively and individually, had been the keystone of this transformative journey. Mezirow's (1997) work had awarded comparable significance to the role of critical reflection and the techniques honed by the participants during the programme were now regarded as habitual. The cohort felt this significant change had resulted in a fundamental alteration in their leadership thinking and a movement towards a more holistic perspective. The central goal of transformative learning is '...to help the

individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others' (Mezirow, 1997; p.11). The transformative learner will have developed '...a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience' (Mezirow, 1997; p.5) which would ultimately enable the individual to become open and flexible to alternative views.

This section will investigate whether the participants had, in fact, demonstrated a more flexible and more inclusive frame of reference; thereby rendering 'transformative' a more appropriate term than 'change' to interpret their learning experience. An analysis of the participants' accounts, in the light of the literature, has identified the following themes related to Mezirow's definition of 'Transformative Learning':

- The Role of Critical Reflection
- Personal Change
- Professional Change

The discussion will draw primarily on the fourth and fifth overarching codes: *the role of critical reflection* and *change* which will enable the reader to assess which terminology is most appropriate to interpret the participants' perceived changes.

## **6.2 The Role of Critical Reflection**

The participants firmly positioned critical reflection at the core of their revised leadership thinking and practice which indicated that the cohort considered the learning process to have occurred within the rational sphere '...through critical reflection on assumptions' (Mezirow, 2006; p.101). Mezirow (2000, 2003, 2009) argued that individual transformation could not occur without critical reflection - the process of '...challenging the presuppositions in prior learning' (Mezirow, 2000; p.12). Discourse played a central role in this process, as dialogue is focused on '...assessing reasons presented in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view' (Mezirow, 1997; p. 6). This critical-dialectical discourse required the individual to have '...an open mind, learning to listen empathetically, "bracketing" premature judgement, and seeking

common ground' (Mezirow, 2003; p.60). This can contribute to the development of one's authentic voice as the adoption of a critical rationale is seen to ground '...difficult decisions in core beliefs, values, and assumptions' (Brookfield, 1995; p.23).

The cohort had attributed their successful critical reflection to the collaborative culture and high quality interaction that had been generated by the collaborative learning strategies and the varied opportunities provided for informal interaction. The discourse entered into via the collaborative learning strategies was conducive to transformative learning since '...educators need to create the conditions under which learners are pushed to their learning edge, where they are challenged and encouraged towards critical reflection' (Gravett and Petersen, 2009; p.107). The pressure and support mechanisms that the cohort associated with the learning strategies was akin to Gravett and Petersen's (2009) 'learning edge' concept in terms of fostering transformative learning.

Informally, the participants had valued discourse which ranged from reflective conversations about leadership theory to informal interaction with their peers during the refreshment break. Mezirow (1996) suggested that discourse can take a variety of forms, from individual relationships with texts, private one-to-one conversations or forms of collaborative interaction and that all are relevant to fostering transformative learning. Mezirow (2006) argued that when one enters into discourse learning is forced into the rational awareness which would encourage critical reflection on assumptions as opposed to a reliance on intuition. The participants' accounts agreed with this interpretation as they now considered their revised leadership practice to be centred on critical reflection whereas previously they had felt guided by instinct and gut reaction.

The interaction entered into by the cohort was considered to have led to *real* conversations and *real* critical reflection through the process of '...discourse and exploration, talking and listening, questions, argument, speculation and sharing' (Belenky et al., 1997; p.144). The participants reported that they had developed a deeper understanding of the prior assumptions that had been used to guide past actions which would, in turn, be used to guide future leadership actions. Being

provided with an opportunity to share experiences of '...past experiences, present assumptions, and future goals' (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.189) had allowed the cohort to reflect back on 'the memories, experiences, and interpretations that were regarded as instinctual responses' (Brookfield, 1995; p.42). The experiences shared together with critical reflection are seen to have an interdependent relationship which can, in turn, foster a change in perspective (Taylor, 2009; p.7). The generation of shared understandings and values as a cohort becomes a catalyst for new ideas and future actions (Tyler, 2009; p.139). The participants' consideration and concern for their future leadership actions is viewed positively and is argued to move an individual from a position of self-reflection to that of critical self-reflection (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011) by value being placed on personal experiences (Brookfield, 1995; p.185).

The close relationships that characterised the cohort had a key role in fostering effective participation in rational discourse and critical reflection. The participants described bonds founded on trust, support and empathy, all of which are regarded as, '... essential preconditions for free full participation in discourse' (Mezirow, 2000; p.12). Therefore, the learning environment can be seen as having provided the ideal conditions to foster transformative learning as it acted as '... a safe haven, an emotional buffer... [for] critically reflective practitioners' (Brookfield, 1995; p.245). In addition, the cohort had provided the generative space necessary '...to take action on the learning that emerges from the [dialogue] exchange' (Tyler, 2009; p.139). The participants had attributed their cohesion, in part, to the extended period of time spent together since '...a climate of both affective and cognitive trust...develops over weeks or months, often spread over time, and involves both the head and the heart' (Marsick and Maltbia, 2009; p.170) and can result in deep, transformative learning.

The learning experience had enabled the participants to access a wide range of perspectives successfully. Mezirow (2000) viewed one having access to a wide range of experiences very positively as a contributory factor in the development of a more flexible and inclusive frame of reference. The participants had seen the local composition of the cohort as supportive, which had created a low risk environment



in which to share their experiences in order to provide a fresh perspective; since experiences are heard '... through a filter of their own experiences, thereby yielding an alternative point of view' (Tyler, 2009; p.140). This is an important element in the transformative learning journey since 'to become critically reflective, we need to find some lenses that reflect back to us a stark and differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do' (Brookfield, 2009; p.133). The more experiences one can access in the critical reflection process the easier it becomes to imagine oneself in alternative contexts (Mezirow, 2000; p.20). The participants commented on the ease with which they had accessed and contextualised their colleagues' experiences during reflective discourse.

The participants' leadership practice had also been viewed critically through the lens of literature (Brookfield, 1995; p. xiii). Leadership theory had been regarded as a central element in both collective and personal critical reflection by the cohort. In this case, the authenticity of the materials used in the learning strategies led the participants to approach research '...as a "subject" that represents some aspect of who they are and can be known in a personal way' (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.192). This is important because '...if a writer's theoretical insights are shown to be grounded in, or connected to, experiences that teachers recognize as their own, it is taken more seriously and has greater impact' (Brookfield, 1995; p. 194). This had resulted in theory becoming synonymous with the participants' practice and had acted as a catalyst for a deeper interest in wider educational research (Polin, 2010).

The development of a relationship with literature can help foster the conditions necessary for transformation (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011) as the personal space that is created allows one's inner-self and emotions to be expressed since '...we are drawn to certain passages in the text and not others...we seek to understand and make sense of a statement of fact' (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.127). This personal process can help one develop a better sense of one's individual role being part of a larger system which can lead to a deeper understanding of '... the spiritual implications of our learning, life and work' (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.128). This interpretation illustrated the emphasis the participants placed on literature having

become part of their natural being as opposed to being an extension of an existing fund of knowledge (Kegan, 2000; p.50).

On a personal level, the participants cited the reflective nature of the programme assignments and reflective journals as being helpful in the development of critical self-reflection (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). Mezirow (1991) agreed that reflective tools did have value but only if used in conjunction with other forms of discourse, otherwise they did have limitations as the individual is still contained by their own meaning schemes and perspectives. The use of reflective tools was seen by the cohort to have provided the necessary space for the adoption of a recursive approach to their internal dialogue (Belenky and Stanton, 2000; p.95) since it is through an intersubjective position that '...thoughts change and hence [becomes] a fertile ground for transformation' (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.191). The participants had considered this to be a deeply personal and emotional process since '...the everydayness of study...deepen[s] the meaning of our experiences, our relationships with others, and fundamentally, our relationships with ourselves' (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.129). Although emotionally this can feel like being on a roller coaster it can lead to feelings of empowerment as, through writing, individuals come to value their professional experiences '... as legitimate sources of knowledge' when asked '...to think about themselves as knowers and thinkers, to examine their beliefs about teaching, research and leadership' (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.186).

The participants had valued being able to view their practice critically through a range of perspectives (shared experiences, leadership literature and autobiographical, reflective tools) although the interaction between the perspectives was regarded as the *most* significant element to be drawn upon (Gravett and Petersen, 2009; p.107). The adoption of a critically reflective position was seen to empower individuals as they developed into '...socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers' (Mezirow, 2000; p.8). The participants agreed and considered their critically reflective position to have created a more holistic leadership perspective and an awareness of their wider social responsibility through '...a

deeper appreciation of how meaning in our lives is intimately bound up in our relationships with others ' (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.129).

### **6.3 Personal Change**

The participants identified the acquisition of greater confidence and self-belief, on a personal and professional level, as a significant element of the changes they had experienced during the programme. Both attributes (greater confidence and self-belief) are regarded by Mezirow (2000, 2006) as key conditions to foster a transformative learning experience. The presence of trust and support is considered a key ingredient in order to nurture '...a more confident, assured sense of personal efficacy' which one required to become '...capable of becoming critically reflective of one's habitual... assumptions' (Mezirow, 2000; p.25).

A lack of self-belief and confidence, particularly in regard to academic ability, had been disclosed by some of the participants during the early stages of the programme. This insecurity may be more readily associated with individuals who, for a variety of reasons, had been labelled as failures by the educational system (Cohen, 1997; Tett, 2016) whereas, in this case, the participants were seemingly successful examples. Therefore, these signs of vulnerability suggested previous exposure to negative experiences which had resulted in the development of '... a distorted assumption about themselves' academically (Cohen, 1997; p.62).

Although the contexts examined by the literature (Cohen, 1997; Tett, 2016) differ from this case study, the level of emotion attached to the participants' development of personal efficacy, I would argue, was more than comparable.

One participant explained that this was their first recollection of *feeling clever* which went on to have a profound effect on their professional confidence. Another example supplied by a participant stated how at programme inception they been despondent about their career trajectory which was attributed to perceived ageist discrimination in their school. This had now dissipated as a result of the learning experience and the participant had successfully secured two successive promotions in an alternative school. I noted in my Research Journal that the participant said, in

relation to the application for promotions, they would ‘...in no way have had the confidence to do that before the course’ (Research Journal 14/12/10).

Changes of this kind, according to Mezirow (2000) are explained by the exposure of an individual to a series of positive learning experiences; this cumulative effect may ‘...lead to a transformation in self-concept (“I am a smart, competent person”) – a habit of mind’ (Mezirow, 2000; p.21). The participants’ accounts indicated that inner confidence and self-belief had equipped them to lead with ‘...empowered sense of purpose’ (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.184). This had increased their propensity to partake in action informed by their new validated belief (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.124). In a similar vein, Brookfield (1986) summarised the scenario of empowerment in terms of an adult having transitioned from a reactive position to a proactive position (Brookfield, 1986; p.11) which is akin to the participants’ accounts of how they now felt like leaders.

The participants had been cognisant of these personal changes having occurred gradually throughout the learning experience as opposed to only gaining recognition of ‘... the learning that they have experienced once the course is over’ (Laiken, 2006; p.30). Mezirow (2000, 2006) explained this as cumulative transformation rather than a reaction to a ‘...sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight’ (Mezirow, 2000; p.21). The authenticity of the learning experience had enabled the cohort to engage in frequent and meaningful reflection and discourse (Herrington and Herrington 2006, Laiken, 2006) which, in turn, appeared to have facilitated ‘...a progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in points of view and leading to a transformation in habit of mind’ (Mezirow, 2006; p.94). The changes had been viewed positively and I would argue that a more appropriate term to describe the process would be *an orienting episode* as the learning experience was seen to provide the cohort with rational *and* emotional signposts to continue along their own personal learning journey. The transformations appeared to have followed the participants’ positive desire to experience the leadership role, to experiment with proposed leadership actions and to develop leadership competence and their own self-confidence (Mezirow, 2000; p.22).

The fact that the changes had been viewed as gradual did not diminish the highly charged personal nature of the process since ‘...transformation is often a difficult, highly emotional passage’ (Mezirow, 2006; p.95). The transformative journey, according to Mezirow (2000), required an emotionally intelligent approach since ‘...a reassessment of the self must come from within’ (Cohen, 1997; p.63). Mezirow’s focus on learning-in-awareness involved an affective element in the recognition of ‘...both the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need for change’ (Mezirow, 2000; p.6). Cranton (2009; p.190) argued that transformation involved ‘...the breakthrough moments, the recognition of a long-held unquestioned assumption...the seeing of self in a new way’ and the participants’ accounts of personal changes agreed with this definition.

Dirkx (2008) endeavoured to provide greater detail on the key role that emotions play in the transformation process. His focus on the extra-rational sheds light on an incident noted in my Research Journal (*Journal*, 22/11/10) which had involved two participants. At the close of one of the programme sessions both individuals had spontaneously displayed intense emotion. The response was centred on their belief that the learning experience had been “life-changing” (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.132) and a return to previous practice was untenable. Emotional events of this nature that ‘...break through to consciousness in the middle of carefully orchestrated conversation, deep feelings and emotions that erupt into our waking lives with a force that surprises...us’ (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.126) are illustrative of the important role that our emotions play. The extreme reaction to the change in a participant’s deepest assumptions can be expected when ‘...what we thought of as fixed ways of thinking and living are only options among a range of alternatives, the whole structure of our assumptive world crumbles’ (Brookfield, 1990; p.178).

In line with these views, the participants reported that they had been unaware, at times, of the rate and depth of their transformation that was now regarded as their natural self. The terms used by the cohort to illustrate this all denoted there being no perceived distinction between leadership practice on the programme and in the workplace. The seamless transition of their practice between the two environments indicated that elements of the transformation must have occurred outside of

rational awareness (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.133). The cohort's preoccupation with the role of critical reflection does not sufficiently explain the emotionally charged outbursts experienced by some the participants or a lack of awareness of the rate and depth of their personal transformation. Their frames of reference had undergone significant revision, which can in part be addressed through the rational critical reflection process and engagement in discourse (Mezirow, 2000), but the use of such emotive language does appear to signify that they had been moved emotionally (Dirkx et al., 2006). In that sense, it is helpful to one's understanding of *this* case, to draw on both the rational and extra-rational dimensions of transformative learning to construct a valid interpretation of the participants' personal journey of change (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.134).

The participants' accounts, in agreement with Mezirow (2000, 2006), had placed critical reflection at the core of their revised leadership thinking and subsequent transformation. The process of transformative learning can be seen '...as the epistemology of how adults learn to reason for themselves - advance and assess reasons for making a judgement' (Mezirow, 2009; p.23) rather than being dependent on the views of others. This level of autonomous thinking was viewed as the central goal of adult education (Mezirow, 1997). The participants considered their revised thinking to be more congruent with their holistic view of educational leadership. This can be seen as an epistemological change since the individual '... makes choices about these external values and expectations according to ... [their] own self-authored belief system' (Kegan, 2000; p.59). This had definitely been the view of the participants who felt that it had become habitual to question the motives and implications of the educational policies they were expected to implement. This outcome is considered crucial for potential leaders as their professional discourse should '...critique trends which question the legitimacy of their knowledge and experience' (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011; p.183).

Mezirow (2009) cited ideological considerations as one of the plethora of influences that an individual considered in the rational process of transformative reasoning. It appeared that the discourse engaged in by the cohort drew upon both critical reflection and ideology critique to result in '...an informed, objective consensus'

(Tyler, 2009; p.141) to create a meaningful educational environment for their colleagues and students. They did not appear to favour the narrower focus of ideology critique focused on '... uncovering, and challenging, the power dynamics that frame practice' (Brookfield, 2009; p.126). Many argue that an emancipatory position can only be realised through an ideological critique of this type which results in social change (Freire, 1996; Daloz, 2000; Brookfield, 2005, 2009, 2012; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011) however, I consider that Mezirow's (2000) focus on the realisation of personal objectives to be more representative of the participants' perceptions of their reasoning process.

This position can also be deemed emancipatory since a critically reflective practitioner has become cognisant of the plurality of routes available to '...make an informed and reflective decision to act or not' (Mezirow, 2009; p.22). In most instances the decision making had been influenced through collaborative activity and collective critical reflection which indicated the emancipatory potential to effect changes on a larger scale by seeking '... out others who share their insight' (Mezirow, 2000; p.30). The participants agreed that it was not always possible or even desirable to act against a dominant ideological line and therefore, as Mezirow (2000; p.23) argued, the '...decision may result in immediate action, delayed action, or reasoned affirmation of an existing pattern of action'. However, partial adherence to a dominant ideological line did not deny transformation as the frame of reference that informed the critical reflection process is seen to have undergone transformation (Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 2000).

An individual can still achieve praxis through informed decisions, in line with revised thinking, to achieve their own personal objectives (Mezirow, 2009). The process of transformative reasoning (Mezirow, 2009) can call '...the foundations and imperatives of the system itself into question, assessing their morality, and considering alternatives' (Brookfield, 2009; p.127). In the case of the participants this had involved an assessment of the ideological and hegemonic assumptions that undergirded top-down policies (Brookfield, 2009) to ensure congruence with a more holistic educational perspective. The commitment displayed by the cohort to the tenets of critical reflection denoted a transformation in perspective as opposed to a

change in a point of view as the latter is '...more accessible to awareness, to feedback from others' (Mezirow, 2006; p.93).

The participants' accounts demonstrated '...habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting' (Mezirow, 2006; p.92) with critical reflection taking centre stage as an ingrained element of their inner self. A participant recounted an epistemic transformation that had occurred through his '...participation in constructive discourse' where '...the experiences of others [were used] to assess reasons justifying these assumptions and making an action decision based on the resulting insight' (Mezirow, 2000; p.8). The discourse had involved the cohort presenting alternative interpretations of a research approach previously dismissed by the participant. The process of reflective discourse had awarded the methodology credibility which was seen as a significant transformation as it involved '...a critique of premises regarding one's self' (Mezirow, 1996; p.163). The participant had demonstrated a more flexible and inclusive frame of reference as a result of the discourse (Mezirow, 1997). The change was not due to a mechanistic recall of leadership theory or shared experiences but the learning '...becoming an integral part of our being...and when this happens, it has the potential to transform our sense of self and our being in the world' (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.130). This is the level of transformation depicted in the participants' accounts; a complete change in outlook and one that was deployed naturally.

The cohort had prioritised having the independence to act upon their revised thinking a priority in order to implement the shared vision of competent educational leadership. Mezirow (2000) saw this as an important aspect of the transformative learning process since the acquisition of greater autonomous thought involved '...not just the will and insight to change but also the power to act to attain one's purpose' (Mezirow, 2000; p.24). Career progression had become one of the avenues used to achieve this aim and the cohort had demonstrated a successful trajectory. The line managers commented that the participants' success in this area was evidence of their accelerated professional growth which they ascribed to the development of a holistic perspective. This was viewed as vital to the process of



successful transition between professional positions, but more importantly in movement between institutions.

In addition to having the will and power to act on one's revised assumptions (Mezirow, 2000), self-belief and strength are also viewed as necessary prerequisites to realise alternative perspectives (Brookfield, 1986; p. 284). The participants attributed their success in this area to perceptions of increased confidence and professional ability, together with a previously unrecognised desire for progression having been ignited. Aspirations had changed, according to the participants, from feeling unsure of their leadership potential to knowing with certainty it was the path they wanted to take.

The most expedient route, for the majority of the cohort to act on their revised thinking was to take advantage of promotional opportunities. This was not the case, however, for one participant whose revised leadership thinking had led to a questioning of personal expectations and expected leadership trajectory. Mezirow (2000) explained this scenario as being illustrative of the cultural expectations implicit in our frames of reference which can determine our priorities and limit our action and therefore '...we need to become critically reflective of their assumptions and consequences' (Mezirow, 2000; p.24). It can also be seen as the discovery of one's authentic voice which '...often means that we question the evaluative criteria that determine our professional advancement and restrict our opportunities to practice in ways we find humane and congenial' (Brookfield, 1995; p.46). As a result, the participant concerned made the decision to delay their personal promotion on the basis that their present role would enable their leadership vision to be implemented on a wider scale. Whichever route the participants had decided to take, their actions appeared to be altruistically founded, the priority being the implementation of a shared vision. The participants were, in effect, living out their new perspective.

#### **6.4 Professional Change**

The learning experience had been regarded by the participants as authentic and

therefore the progression to practising leadership in the workplace had been described as seamless. The methodology used on the programme was congruent with the ideals of transformative education in enabling '...the learners actively [to] engage the concepts presented in the context of their own lives and collectively critically assess the justification of new knowledge' (Mezirow, 1997; p.10). The participants had drawn upon the full range of perspectives available to them (leadership theory, shared experiences, autobiographical tools) '...in ... [their] critical journey... [as] they are dialectically connected, with one constantly illuminating and informing the other (Brookfield, 1995; p.194). These perspectives were used to construct their own leadership model based on a tentative best judgement (Mezirow, 2000; p.11).

One participant described the personalisation process she had embarked upon to avoid adherence to a standardised leadership model. She had critically reassessed and re-evaluated her own leadership *story* and experiences which became part of her model; this demonstrated an openness and flexibility towards alternative perspectives. The development of a more '...inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change' frame of reference is seen as beneficial for the generation of '...beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (Mezirow, 2003; p.58).

The cohort's professional practice demonstrated a commitment to their transformed perspective and ability '...to act upon a transformed insight' (Mezirow, 2006; p.94). This proactive approach had been duly noted by their line managers who celebrated their increased desire to take on new challenges and responsibilities in line with their revised perspectives. Numerous examples had been provided by the participants where leadership policies had been delayed or modified using critical reflection, to achieve greater congruence with revised leadership thinking. One participant explained how a directive was overhauled following critical reflection on leadership theory to ensure greater compatibility with their perspective. This can be seen as a 'reasoned affirmation of an existing pattern of action' (Mezirow, 2000; p.30) rather than the generation of a policy completely congruent with a new

perspective. In many cases this type of action had been regarded as more effective and realistic than contemplation of large-scale institutional change.

A reliance on critical reflection as opposed to intuition was found to be time-consuming and more prone to obstacles and opposition. However, the participants' increased confidence and self-belief had provided the necessary emotional fortitude to be able to act on their revised assumptions (Mezirow, 2000). This had prepared them '...to challenge behaviors, values and beliefs accepted uncritically by a majority' (Brookfield, 1986; p.283). The participants refused to make decisions out of haste regardless of extrinsic pressure and provided many examples where their emotional strength had allowed them to remain true to their revised perspective. The development of a more informed and considered approach (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 2009; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011) signalled a significant departure, for some of the cohort, from their instinctual reaction but it was now considered their *modus operandi*. A participant said that this had allowed them to feel like a leader as they felt much better equipped to discuss their leadership actions with colleagues. This was echoed by one of the line managers who had noted an increased willingness to provide detailed justifications of leadership actions and be prepared to engage in difficult dialogue with colleagues. The adherence to a critically reflective position was regarded as an essential prerequisite for effective leadership practice and acted as a benchmark in their evaluative process of the behaviour of others.

The participants felt that their leadership practice had gained a transparency as it was now founded on a clear rationale which provided a justification of their actions for themselves and colleagues (Brookfield, 1995; p.266). The line managers agreed and noted that the participants' leadership actions were informed by a clear rationale grounded in leadership theory. The relationship that the participants had developed with leadership theory comprised a key element of the rationale since '...seeing a personal insight stated as a theoretical proposition makes us more likely to take seriously our own reasoning and judgements' (Brookfield, 2005; p.6). The authenticity of the literature had led the participants to view theory positively as a supportive mechanism and a *menu for action* in their daily leadership practice as it

enabled them to justify the reasoning behind their decision-making confidently and cogently (Brookfield, 1995; p.186).

The possession of a clear rationale for leadership actions had led the participants to argue that they acted upon their revised assumptions on a habitual basis (Mezirow, 2000). Reference to the habitual and ingrained nature of changed practice had been prevalent across the participants' accounts which indicated that the term required greater exploration. The participants and their line managers had volunteered some specificity to the term by way of the revised practice being apparent in a variety of professional contexts regardless of status differentials. A participant recounted how the adoption of a critically reflective position had empowered them to make informed decisions and deal professionally with the full range of stakeholders within the workplace. This attribute had been noted by the participants' line managers who considered the participants to have developed a more empowered and justified approach to their decision making across the school. The accounts were closely aligned to Hoggan's (2014) narrower definition of transformation which argued '...that learning outcomes must present both depth and breadth of change' (Hoggan, 2014; p.5). The transformative learning, in the case of the participants, had been apparent across multiple contexts being regarded quite simply as their natural state.

Using a critically reflective position as the benchmark for leadership practice had at times resulted in explicit displays of intolerance by the participants towards unsupportive colleagues and ill-thought out initiatives. This disposition is characteristic of transformative learning as individuals '...become more critically reflective of ... [their] own assumptions and those of others' (Mezirow, 2006, p.94) and tend to reject ideas that fail to conform to their established, revised frame of reference (Mezirow, 2006; p.92). The increased propensity for scrutiny had brought one participant '...into direct conflict with...hierarchies of power' (Brookfield, 1995; p.40) through a direct challenge to a senior colleague whose practice was seen to fall short of critically reflective expectations. The focus of the frustration felt by the participants was disbelief that colleagues had not recognised the necessity and value of a critically reflective position. Unfortunately, according to Brookfield (1990,

1995, 2005) in line with the example cited, this frustration can translate into a patronising attack on the non-reflective colleague which is likely to result in damaged self-esteem and resentment. This is unlikely to generate a sympathetic ear; therefore, resistance to critical reflection should be respected and understood since then '...we are much better placed to begin the task of convincing sceptical...colleagues that they should take this activity seriously' (Brookfield, 1995; p.261).

The majority of the cohort had expected *but* respected the lack of critically reflective behaviour in their colleagues. Their commitment to a transformed perspective had led them to model the collaborative, critically reflective behaviour they wanted to encourage as opposed to haranguing their colleagues (Brookfield, 1990; p.181). One participant had used this approach in departmental meetings through the adoption of a transparent style towards his own professional shortcomings and vulnerabilities as a means of establishing the trust necessary for the propagation of a critically reflective environment. The trust and safety generated through the sharing of difficult stories is considered to help foster an emotional climate where exploration and experimentation are valued (Brookfield, 1995; Tyler, 2009).

The climate that had been generated by the participants had also resulted in an increased awareness of and concern for their colleagues' needs. The line managers agreed and reported the importance that the participants had attributed to the development of team members in their revised practice. This is an outcome of successful communicative learning and the development of autonomous thought since the process of greater self-awareness also leads one to a greater awareness of '...the assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values' of others' (Mezirow, 2003; p.59). This manifested itself within the workplace, for the cohort, as an increased sensitivity to the needs of others. The participants reported having a greater cognisance of the individual needs of their colleagues and strove '...to create conditions under which each person is respected, valued, and heard' (Brookfield, 1995; p.27). One of the participants reported that a real change had occurred in his team's relationships where trust and respect had replaced suspicion and control as

the norm. He had relinquished a great deal of professional autonomy as a result of his revised perspective and his colleagues' professional development had become a priority as '...creating this culture involves breaking patterns that emphasize competitiveness and a privatization of knowledge' (Brookfield, 1995; p.141). Prioritising the needs of others is considered to be characteristic of a critically reflective practitioner as they have a '...quest to accomplish what ... [they] think is educationally important' (Brookfield, 1995; p.43) and the participants demonstrated that their actions had become focused on their team's best interests.

The participants' commitment to their transformed perspective (Mezirow, 2000) was also made explicit through the desire to recreate a critically reflective, collaborative culture in their own institutions and further afield. They considered the programme's learning environment to have successfully generated these conditions and, as a result, a replication process of the key elements had been instigated within their own workplaces. The participants had prioritised the creation of safe, honest spaces for their colleagues to engage in collaboration and critical reflection as this is considered to provide the ideal conditions to encourage a critically reflective culture (Brookfield, 1990; Dirkx et al., 2006; Lysaker and Furuness, 2011). The quest to create a collaborative, critically reflective culture within their teams and on a school-wide basis can be explained as the participants having achieved praxis.

Trust and support had been demonstrated by some of the participants having awarded their colleagues private time and refreshments in meetings to create a transformational space. This was intended to encourage the development of collaboration and critical reflection '...to assist in the development of a group culture in which adults can feel free to challenge one another and can feel comfortable being challenged' (Brookfield, 1986; p.14). The participants had prioritised the creation of an honest and open environment with no hidden agenda since '...where a culture of secrecy exists, reflection is doomed' (Brookfield, 1995; p.251) in order to foster '...the conditions of social democracy necessary for transformative learning' (Mezirow, 2000; p.31).

## **6.5 Conclusions**

Mezirow's theory of Transformative Learning significantly adds to an understanding of the participants' perceptions of their learning experience as the changes discussed were akin to a profound change that '...transforms problematic frames of reference...to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow, 2003; p.58). Critical reflection, according to Mezirow (2000), was at the core of the transformation process. The participants agreed and placed it at the core of their revised practice since they '...contested [their] beliefs through discourse, taking action on...reflective insight, and critically assessing it' (Mezirow, 1997; p.11). The adoption of a more critically reflective, autonomous position by the participants was seen to be now habitually ingrained.

The emphasis placed on critical reflection by the participants concurred with the view that the cohort's communicative learning was considered to have occurred in rational awareness (Mezirow, 2006). Their deeply held assumptions had been thrust into awareness through the engagement in various forms of discourse. However, the focus on learning in awareness offered by Mezirow (2000) does not fully explain the intense emotion and at times lack of awareness of the rate of transformation contained in some of the participants' accounts. Therefore, the work of Dirkx (2008) does shed light on the extra-rational aspects described in the accounts and how elements of both rational and extra-rational approaches are necessary and should be viewed as '...complementary rather than contradictory' (Dirkx et al., 2006; p.137).

The successful engagement of the participants in discourse was attributed to the collaborative culture that had been created and the opportunities that had been provided for high quality interaction. The learning environment, therefore, can be seen to have fostered the conditions necessary for transformative learning through the creation of a safe and supportive environment where critical reflection and discourse could flourish (Mezirow, 2000). The cohort itself can be viewed as part of a support structure that can be seen to have fostered '...shifts in students' meaning structures' (Donaldson, 2009; p.70). The facilitatory contextual climate did appear

to have acted as a support mechanism for the participants through the delivery of the prerequisites cited by Mezirow (2000) as necessary for rational discourse. Mezirow's (1997, 2000, 2003, and 2006) work enables one to understand that the participants' learning environment had been a contributory factor in fostering the appropriate conditions for their transformation.

The plethora of opportunities provided for discourse had enabled the participants to critically view their practice using a range of alternative lenses which could have led them to a reassessment of their most deeply held assumptions. This was indicative of the development of a flexible, more inclusive frame of reference since '... they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (Mezirow, 2006; p.92). The participants had reported a sense of empowerment due to the revised perspectives which had led them to take more informed and considered decisions (Mezirow, 2000).

The commitment by the participants to their transformed perspective and the strong desire to act upon their new reflective insight (Mezirow, 2000) was to be expected. The adoption of a more critically reflective, autonomous position was considered to be habitually ingrained within their self and therefore was indivisible from their leadership practice. In addition to the expected commitment to the revised perspective offered by Mezirow (2000), the work of Hoggan (2014) provides a greater understanding of the participants' perceptions of the ingrained nature of the changes. Their interpretations of the empowerment felt in numerous contexts can be understood through Hoggan's (2014) use of depth and breadth to indicate a transformation. The participants recounted many instances where their revised interpretations had operated in multiple contexts thereby having indicated a true transformation in their habits of mind. The adoption of a revised perspective that drew on a number of perspectives (shared experiences, leadership theory and autobiographical tools) was not simply demonstrated on the programme '...the very context in which it was learned' instead it had become '...habitual (depth) in a variety of contexts (breadth)' (Hoggan, 2014; p.5).

Mezirow's (1996, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009) work has undoubtedly helped to explain the participants' interpretations of the changes that had occurred as a



result of their learning experience. However, the inclusion of a greater range of transformative perspectives does enable one to gain greater insight into the extra-rational component of the process as well as unpicking the term habitual, one of the more prevalent terms used by the cohort. On this basis I would argue that this discussion does indicate that the term transformation as opposed to the more generic change is a more accurate representation of the participants' views.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions

'Studying a phenomenon while one creates it always presents particular problems, for two distinct reasons. For one, the endeavour is complicated because one's attention must be bifocal: creating meaningful professional development and doing rigorous research' (Wilson and Berne, 1999; p.198).

These sentiments aptly describe the learning journey that I embarked upon to provide my interpretation of the participants' social reality of their learning environment on the leadership programme. My aim from the outset was to understand the social processes that had operated in this particular setting. Using a case study strategy, research instruments and a thematic analytical approach consistent with a constructivist sensibility I strove to uncover the perceptions of the participants as social constructions. I was fortunate to enjoy a period of 'prolonged engagement' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) with the longitudinal sample which had allowed an in-depth exploration of the key issues surrounding the learning experience from their perspective.

In this chapter I will firstly provide a summary of the key themes generated by the data in response to my three research questions. The original aspects contained in these themes will then be extrapolated to provide an explicit picture of the contribution this work has made to this field of study. I then anticipate possible limitations of this investigation whilst revealing the breadth of the practical applications the research contains for the consideration and design of future learning environments. Finally, I consider the potential for further investigation into implications of this thesis.

### ***7.1 Summary of My Key Findings***

In this thesis I have explored three research questions. In response to the first question ('Can an effective learning environment be created for a cohort of secondary teachers with leadership responsibilities? If so, how?') I found that an effective learning environment had indeed been created for these participants. The

environment had generated the authentic conditions necessary for the group members to engage in both individual and collective meaning-making. The leadership learning had 'felt real' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006) to the participants, the environment being described as supportive yet challenging. The operation of pressure and support in this educational context, both on the micro and macro-level, had created a facilitatory contextual climate which had allowed the pressure mechanisms to take on a positive form. The climate had resulted in programme sessions being viewed as accessible, convenient, comfortable and safe. This had led to the rapid creation of trusting, supportive relationships which fostered the necessary conditions for the group members to engage in a variety of discourse including critical-dialectical (Mezirow, 2003; Gravett and Petersen, 2009). This discourse had occurred in the formal programme environment and through informal channels. The frequent, high-quality interaction enabled the participants to view their practice through a range of perspectives with confidence (leadership theory, shared experiences and autobiographical tools) and led to the generation of new knowledge. The presence of pressure and support mechanisms operating simultaneously in this particular setting had enacted the dynamics of leadership for the participants and had created a synergy between the programme environment and the workplace. Therefore, the professional relevance of the learning had enabled the leadership learning to be transferred seamlessly beyond the point of acquisition.

The authenticity of the environment, generated by a productive mix of pressure and support mechanisms, delivered a positive response to the second research question ('Did this cohort develop as a learning community? If so, in what ways?'). The climate had successfully fostered the conditions necessary for the creation of a critically reflective, collaborative culture - a learning community. Experiences had been shared freely and due to high levels of motivation the participants had embarked on the collaborative learning strategies without fear of reputational risk (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom, 2004) or reprisal (Wenger et al., 2002). The interpersonal relationships that had been established had provided a safe space where leadership ideas could be tested and explored. Successful communicative learning had been achieved where shared meanings had been negotiated and

tentative judgements reached (Mezirow, 2000). The participants perceived of the leadership programme as a joint enterprise. The shared meaning-making was characterised by mutual engagement and the creation of a shared repertoire of resources. These resources were drawn upon habitually by the participants for their individual and collective critical reflection both during the programme and following its completion. The learning journey that had been initially embarked upon individually was now seen as a shared endeavour with a focus on collective goals and a common identity. The community members demonstrated a sense of belonging to each other and to their environment. The cohort had operated together for an extended period of time which had only served to strengthen their community bonds.

The changes recounted by the participants, during the learning experience, had confirmed the necessity to consult Mezirow's (2000) theory in order to gain an in-depth understanding of perceptions. Therefore, in response to the third research question ('Does Mezirow's theory of 'Transformative Learning' add to our understanding of the participants' perceptions of their learning experience on this educational leadership programme? If so, how?') I found that due to being able to view their practice through a variety of lenses, individually and collectively, the participants had adopted a critically reflective position towards deeply held assumptions and beliefs. The learning space generated on the leadership programme had therefore fostered the conditions conducive to personal transformation. Critical reflection and autonomous thought had become central to the participants' practice. The perceptions of the participants revealed personal and professional changes that reflected a deep seated transformation (Mezirow, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2003; Hoggan, 2014) as opposed to a change that may be attributed to a good educational experience (Newman, 2012). The participants had critically reassessed their professional leadership practice together with their underlying belief-systems. Using Hoggan's (2014) interpretation of the term 'habitual' the participants' changes were defined by their breadth, depth and permanence. The changes had become second-nature to the participants and the transformed perspectives were evident in a wide range of contexts regardless of organisational or hierarchical protocol. The revised perspective was more flexible and inclusive and

was argued, by the participants and their line-managers, to have resulted in more considered decision making (Mezirow, 2000). These participants had become cognisant of a broader, more holistic perspective of educational leadership. A commitment to the generation of a critically reflective, collaborative culture was evident. In practice, this had involved replication of elements of the facilitatory contextual climate in their own schools and other communities of which they were members.

## ***7.2 The Contribution of the Research to Knowledge***

This work has great significance for the area of leadership learning as it provides new insights into how an effective learning environment can be generated for secondary school leaders and managers. My findings established an explicit link between the operation of pressure and support mechanisms and their role in the generation of an effective learning environment for educational leaders and managers. An understanding of this relationship is highly significant to the creation of an authentic leadership experience for the learner. My examination of the minutiae that comprised this mix of pressure and support confirmed that a balance between the two mechanisms was essential to a successful leadership learning experience; in addition, however, this clearly needed to occur on more than one level. My findings suggest that the interplay between the mechanisms resulted in a productive mix that created an authentic leadership experience by enacting the dynamics of leadership for the participants.

This area is underrepresented in the literature and as such this work has extended the understanding of the concept of pressure and support mechanisms. My findings demonstrate a departure from the literature reviewed that has previously linked pressure and support to the generation of a collaborative culture on a macro-level (Fullan, 2005, 2008, 2011) and to the design of individual learning strategies at the micro-level (Laiken, 2006; Eraut, 2007; Gravett and Petersen, 2009). My findings support the necessity for a balance between the two mechanisms in the production of a successful learning experience already established in the literature, but also provides practitioner-friendly advice as to what form this '...careful balance between

challenge and comfort' (Gravett and Petersen, 2009; p.107) should take. This research has shed light on how the pressure and support within this particular context enabled learning; an exploration of this type of context is seen as an under researched area (Wilson and Berne, 1999; Taylor, 2007).

Initially, pressure and support mechanisms may appear to be polarised but when both are present, as in this case, a positive situation can be created that enacted authenticity in the form of the dynamics of leadership for the participants. This had gone further than the establishment of cognitive authenticity (Herrington and Herrington, 2006); it had also created a physically authentic experience. The familiar classroom setting, in this case, was not indicative of decontextualized learning but rather contextualised the learning for these participants. The leadership role was enacted in its correct locality which had positioned the learning closer to the participants' practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Argyris and Schön, 1992). My findings suggest that the generation of this depth of authenticity shaped participants' views and experiences in that it dissipated any distinction that may have existed between the programme environment and the workplace environment. This is a significant feature of the research as it enabled the transference of revised practice between settings to be viewed as a natural occurrence.

The pressure and support mechanisms operated at both the macro-level (the programme environment) and the micro-level (the learning strategies). The macro-level pressure had been created by the programme demands and the different intrinsic desires of individuals to meet these demands, with the facilitatory contextual climate operating as a key support mechanism. The macro-level pressure of meeting the demands of the course to satisfy their own individual motivations had been converted into a positive force due to the supportive role of the facilitatory contextual climate. This in turn helped to elucidate why terms such as 'challenge' were used by the participants in their perceptions of the learning experience, as opposed to the more negative connotations associated with 'pressure'.

Simultaneously, the participants also experienced pressure and support at the micro-level of the learning strategies. The learning strategies placed participants under pressure to deliver a creative response with a performance element being attached to each task. The collaborative tasks required individuals to engage in a variety of discourse which fostered the conditions necessary for the critical reflection needed '...to develop more advanced meaning perspectives' (Choy, 2009; p.72). The challenges that the participants faced to their existing belief systems could have resulted in disjuncture or the kind of disorientating dilemma identified by Mezirow's (2000) work. In this case, however, the changes had been viewed positively and generated empathetic, supportive relationships. Therefore a more appropriate term to use would be 'an orienting episode' as the learning experience was seen to provide the cohort with rational *and* emotional signposts to continue along their own personal learning journey. Operating alongside this pressure were the support mechanisms that the participants could draw upon which included the role of the tutor, the ability to draw upon a shared repertoire of resources and the facilitatory contextual climate.

These conditions encouraged feelings of affinity and shared endeavour to develop within the group which led to a creation of a learning community. The participants belonged to and operated within multiple communities inside their workplaces and externally to it (Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004; Fuller, 2007; Choy, 2009). This provided the cohort with the advantage of a more expansive educational experience as described by Fuller and Unwin (2004). By operating in a range of settings the participants had access to formal training, new communities and were provided with an opportunity to step away from their leadership role to engage in meaningful individual and collective critical reflection.

My findings also suggest that for the participants on this particular programme being able to achieve distance from the workplace and engage in critical dialectical discourse had provided a space for transformation. This supported the idea that transformation takes place in the movement between communities; that it is an "inter-practice" phenomenon (Hodge, 2014). However, the significance of my work, in terms of its contribution to knowledge in this area, is that it demonstrated the

form the transformative space should take and thus extended Mezirow's conceptualisation. The new term I will use to describe this form is "inter-practice community". The transformative space, according to my findings, needed to facilitate the development of a learning community that operated between a participant's existing and revised practice, if a transformation was to be effected. I therefore propose that the learning community that evolved from the authenticity of this learning experience acted (and still acts) as an "inter-practice community". This confirmed the complementary nature of the processes of individual and collective learning as both had informed leadership practice (Clement and Vandenbergher, 2000; Eraut, 2004; Billet, 2007; Fuller, 2007; Hodge, 2014). This duality had contributed to the authenticity of the environment. The participants had developed the self-confidence to demonstrate autonomous thinking in a range of contexts. The collaborative relationships had evolved '...into more friendly associations, the learners were open to accept informed, objective, and rational consensus' (Choy, 2009; p.72).

The successful movement between communities was made possible by the communicative learning that had occurred in the programme environment. Because this programme was neither situated in the workplace nor the university it provided the participants with the advantage of having the freedom to decide when, and with whom, collaboration would take place. Clement and Vandenbergher (2000) suggest that this level of self-confidence is indicative of a successful collaborative experience. It appears that the norms, values and procedures of the community were applied to new contexts through the replication of features of the facilitatory contextual climate. The learning community still occupied a pivotal role in each participant's practice but had evolved to satisfy the differing needs of the individual members.

The significance of this work's contribution to the understanding of leadership learning is in its precise examination of the interplay between pressure and support mechanisms that need to be in place if an authentic leadership learning environment is to be generated.



### **7.3 Limitations of the Research**

The researcher operating as the primary research instrument could inevitably lead to a highly subjective interpretation of this learning experience. However, my aim at the outset of this research was to provide my interpretation of the social processes particular to this case study (Wolcott, 1994), not to procure facts. My conclusions are, therefore, context sensitive which is congruent with my ontological and epistemological position. A model that could be applied to another setting is simply not achievable or desirable from a constructivist position as both the data and analysis generated are subjective.

This position is further supported by the potential limitations to the research of the size of the longitudinal sample and the voluntary nature of participant recruitment. Both factors raise questions as to the extent to which these findings can be generalised to alternative educational leadership programmes which is congruent with my epistemological position. However, the perceptions of the eight participants that comprised the longitudinal sample provided the rich description necessary to generate a convincing analytical narrative. The case study research strategy and the adoption of a longitudinal approach enabled me to drill down into each participant's experiences taking into account the effects of time. The perceptions were socially meaningful and addressed my research questions comprehensively.

The adoption of a constructivist 'sensitivity' demanded rigour and a transparency of methods. The data sets had provided a detailed account of perceptions and the research approach had validated the meanings that the participants had attributed to their experiences in the context in which they occurred. I had adopted a reflexive position at each stage of the interpretation process which enabled me to reflect critically on the accuracy of my interpretations of the participants' perceptions. In order for my interpretations to have relevance for other situations I strove to establish the transparency of my methods and interpretative approach. Although my epistemological stance cannot offer conclusions applicable to other contexts, they are able to frame questions for other settings. My findings did demonstrate

agreement with research from this field and does provide important insights into the understudied area of the interplay of pressure and support mechanisms in the creation of an authentic learning environment for leadership students. Therefore, this interpretation could be used in the design and execution of other public sector professional development programmes.

#### ***7.4 Practical Implications of the Research***

The transformation experienced by these participants in an authentic learning environment had a significant influence on their future leadership practice. They became committed to the generation of a critically reflective, collaborative culture in their respective workplaces and in other organisations of which they were a part. The climate the participants strove to create was ‘...an atmosphere of trust fostering teachers’ commitment...the taking of risks, the development of creativity and the engagement in innovations’ (Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000; p.86). This had involved the replication of key elements of the facilitatory contextual climate in order to create an authentic learning space with the potential to foster change. In doing so, they demonstrated congruence between their revised beliefs and their behaviour (Laiken, 2006; p.16).

Commitment to the development of a supportive, collaborative school culture, by educational leaders, is seen as a necessity in a perpetually evolving educational environment (Day, 1999; Laiken, 2006; Fullan, 2007, 2008, 2011). It is in a genuinely supportive environment, together with the community that arises from it, that teachers can discover their leadership potential. To encourage the generation of reflection and critical thinking in their colleagues the priority is to create a challenging yet supportive environment (Laiken, 2006; Gravett and Petersen, 2009). The leaders on this programme demonstrated the motivation and capability to do just that. This research developed a practitioner-friendly model to illustrate how this particular context had generated high quality educational leaders. The learning experience had fostered a community of leaders who collaborated frequently on professional issues.

This research was particular to one educational leadership context and therefore this model of authenticity cannot be directly transferred to a different setting. However, the conclusions can be used to help generate and frame questions applicable to the design and implementation of other educational leadership programmes. Following the cessation of funding for Masters-level study in education and professional development budgets being continually squeezed, it is essential to understand the prerequisites of an effective learning environment. A genuine collegial leadership culture, as this research demonstrated, takes time to establish and the imposed collaborative format attached to many professional development opportunities will not necessarily result in a truly authentic experience (Belenky et al., 1997; Wilson and Berne, 1999; Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000; McCotter, 2001). In a professional development culture where one-day workshops are regarded as sufficient to satiate a teacher's professional development needs, a re-think is necessary.

This should be a priority in education leadership as individuals need to possess the skills to withstand the pressures of an ever-changing and increasingly accountable environment. The lessons learnt from this research experience include the necessity to create critically reflective leaders, equipped with theoretical knowledge and a shared bank of resources to inform sound decision making. Mezirow (2000) saw the central goal of adult education as the development of autonomous thinking; a necessity in educational leadership. Leaders are expected to negotiate a range of extrinsic and intrinsic pressures whilst simultaneously creating support structures to help their colleagues achieve high standards commensurate with government expectations.

In order to foster a learning environment with the potential to create high quality leaders, professional development design must discern the nature of authenticity *in that particular context*. Resources should be invested into what constitutes valid information in that context, as this can generate high levels of motivation and collegiality (Argyris and Schön, 1992; p.97). When this has been established the potential then exists to create a learning space where transformation can occur. A balance must be secured between pressure and support mechanisms if a learner is

to be encouraged towards discourse in order to engage in individual and collective meaning-making. The experience should evoke a sense of physical authenticity in addition to cognitive authenticity if learning is to enact the dynamics of professional practice. This is essential if the position of the learning is expected to be close to actual practice. This research suggested that, when a learning experience is encompassed by authenticity on a number of levels, it is more likely that this will enact the dynamics of the individual's professional practice.

A cohort structure can become an important support mechanism in the development of a collaborative culture. The composition of this cohort had a positive bearing on the learning process as the participants had been selected from a localised professional community. Issues of professional autonomy had been swiftly overcome which allowed movement towards creating a learning community. Effective collaboration between and within schools is seen to lead to the development of a more holistic viewpoint (Fullan, 2008). The leadership students had adopted a holistic leadership approach and had become as concerned with their colleagues' success and leadership practice as their own. I would argue that this collegial atmosphere and the supportive relationships that emanate from it will be beneficial to the schools' key stakeholders - the students and the staff. The participants on this programme placed great emphasis on the supportive, trusting relationships that had been generated and the enduring impact they had on their professional lives. The learning community had been seen as '...emotionally sustaining...a second family' (Brookfield, 1995; p.245).

The provision of an expansive learning experience (Fuller and Unwin, 2004) can provide access to a wide range of alternative perspectives through which practice can be viewed, thus generating a critical perspective. It is important to allow a learner to participate in a range of communities as this creates the necessary space and opportunities to engage in reflection. Academic theory emerged as a significant lens through which to view individual practice. Its role had been emphasised in the discourse process as a prerequisite for the individual to develop into a critically reflective, confident practitioner. It is essential that potential leaders are provided with an opportunity to view their practice through a theoretical lens as it can help

to legitimise actions which, in turn, can positively impact on levels of self-belief and confidence (Brookfield, 1995; Choy, 2009). Therefore, a scaffold of academic support should be negotiated between universities and workplaces as part of the creation of an effective learning experience. This partnership should be a priority and not side-lined. This research demonstrated the significance attributed to this element of the environment; the participants had highly valued their journey into academic theory. Without this theoretical input the shared bank of resources created by a learning community may be largely anecdotal. The range of perspectives upon which an individual can draw in their critical reflection process will, in turn, be reduced.

### ***7.5 Possibilities for Future Research***

Further longitudinal research could be conducted via an examination of the frequency and quality of interaction engaged in by the learning community following programme completion. If the participants' transformed perspectives had been sustained, had the patterns of interaction evolved in response to extrinsic pressures? Towards the end of the investigation into this particular case study the professional leadership platform created by the community had been frequently commented upon as a significant resource in the cohort's critical reflection process. This platform had developed significantly following programme completion with leaders and academics from a variety of professions taking a contributory role. Due to the successful promotion trajectory of the cohort this may have formed a more convenient vehicle to maintain access to a range of perspectives and the generation of a collegial support network. Research could examine to what extent this web-based tool had replaced face-to-face interaction as the 'go-to' learning space for the participants.

The creation of a learning community had occupied a pivotal role in the individual transformation of the participants on this programme. No reference had been made in the findings of the necessity for a leadership or coordinator role in this process. The relationships had endured and the community was sustained through the actions of its members. More research would be beneficial in this area to ascertain

the importance that a more organic, non-hierarchical structure can play in the generation of a learning community, capable of fostering the conditions necessary for transformation, in a variety of contexts.

The importance that this research uncovered of the structural and logistical aspects of professional development programmes requires further investigation; of particular concern are accessibility issues. The relationship between temporal issues as support mechanisms and the maintenance of work/life balance needs to be explored in greater depth by researchers. In particular, in response to my findings, I feel that there could be a more in-depth examination into ‘...how particular structures (e.g., cohort models, residency requirements, etc.) and instructional content may mitigate or exacerbate gender stereotypes’ (Weiner and Burton, 2016; p.360). The needs of *all* aspirant leaders should be taken into consideration since ‘...the complexity of people’s lives is increasing, as they juggle the demands of work and family’ (Probert, 2005; p.62). This research suggests that paying attention to these issues will impact positively on the overarching problem that is the maintenance of a steady stream of high quality, male and female, school leaders.

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# Appendices

## ***Appendix 1***

### Interview Guide - 2011-2012

#### **Student Perceptions on the effectiveness of the PDP provision by a Training School and HEI provider**

##### Provision aspects

1. Why did you decide to apply for a place on the Masters programme?
2. Why did you decide to participate in this school based course rather than at the university?
3. What are your opinions of your fellow students all being serving teachers in the same LA?
4. Did any aspects of the provision beyond the teaching and learning style appeal to you?
5. What were your opinions of the teaching and learning styles used on the course (strengths and weaknesses)?
6. How did you feel about your tutor being a practising secondary school teacher?

##### Impact on the workplace

1. Did you talk to colleagues about any models/ theories gained from the Master's course?
2. Did you disseminate materials (either from the course, or prepared as part of the course) to colleagues?
3. Have you changed any procedures or developed any strategies as a result of the Master's course?
4. Was your school supportive of this PDP programme?
5. How does your line manager view the connection between the Masters course as professional development and your school's development?

##### Impact on the teacher

1. Have you developed your leadership skills as a result of the Masters course?
2. Do you reflect upon aspects of the course?
3. Upon completion of the course do you intend to continue your academic leadership reading?
4. Do you talk to colleagues more about educational issues since commencing the Masters course? If yes, give details.
5. How has the course affected your career aspirations?

##### Impact on the pupils

1. Have you incorporated any new leadership strategies in your institution, directly related to the Masters course, in order to enhance the performance of your pupils?
2. In your opinion have any pupils benefitted by your attendance on the programme. If so, in what way?



## **Appendix 2**

### Interview Guide - July 2014

1. A year on from completing the course how do you look back on your learning experience?
2. Are the changes that you implemented in school whilst on the course different from the changes you have implemented subsequently? If so, in what ways are they different?
3. Are you still in contact with your fellow students? If so, do you still work collaboratively with them?
4. Did any aspects of the course environment and the types of learning strategies used on it prepare you for your current leadership role? If so, in what ways?
5. Was there was a transition period between practising leadership on the course and doing so in the workplace? If not, why was this case?
6. Have you applied your critical reflection techniques at work? If so, could you describe what you did?
7. Does the leadership learning/theory influence your day to day work? If so, how?
8. Have you encountered any obstacles which have prevented you from being critically reflective? If so, please provide examples.
9. What strategies have you used to overcome these obstacles?
10. Have your career aspirations changed? If so, in what ways?

## ***Appendix 3***

### Interview Guide for Headteachers - July 2014

1. Did you encourage your colleagues to take part in this Education Leadership programme? If so, why?
2. Do you think the location of the course affected the numbers of applicants? If so, why?
3. Has your institution benefitted from your colleagues' participation? If so, in what ways?
4. Has your colleagues' practice changed over the past two years? If so, in what ways? (Students not to be named).
5. Have you seen the individual students critically reflecting on projects that they have been involved in? If so, in what ways?
6. This course was fully funded with a competitive application procedure – that funding has now disappeared - what consequences will there be, if any, for the profession?
7. Does having formal leadership training have any advantages for aspiring senior leaders? If so, what are they?

## **Appendix 4**

### **PDP UNIT EVALUATION DOCUMENT**

UNIT TITLE: .....

UNIT NUMBER: .....

**Name of Respondent (optional)** .....

Please tick the appropriate box(es):

- (1)     **The teaching/learning on the unit was stimulating/challenging**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
-------------------	-------	----------	----------	----------------------

Please comment further...

- (2)     **Class discussions were effective learning occasions**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
-------------------	-------	----------	----------	----------------------

Please comment further...

- (3) **My background experience was respected and built upon**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
-------------------	-------	----------	----------	----------------------

Please comment further...

- (4) **I was helped to learn in a way, and at a rate, that was effective for me**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
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Please comment further...

- (5) **Assessment tasks were relevant to professional/organisation needs in my workplace**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
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Please comment further...

- (6) **Assessment reflected the content of the unit**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
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Please comment further...

- (7) **Class materials (handouts, videos, simulations etc) were suitable**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
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Please comment further...

(8) **The class was well-managed by the tutor**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
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Please comment further...

(9) **Tutor was available to provide help (in person or by emails etc.)**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
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Please comment further...

## (10) Impact Evaluation

Please indicate how the unit has made, or could make, an impact on aspects of your work.

Please comment in all appropriate boxes:

TDA funding and support for PDP courses requires the collection of this information.

<b>Question a) My subject knowledge or pedagogical knowledge</b>

<b>Question b) Changes in my practice and/or colleagues</b>
<b>Question c) My confidence or professional self-esteem</b>
<b>Question d) Creation/membership of new networks</b>
<b>My performance management targets/priorities</b>

<b>Question f) My capacity for reflection on professional practice</b>

<b>Improved learner/client/pupil experience, motivation or academic achievement</b>
<b>Ability to be a ‘practitioner researcher’</b>
<b>Other types of impact the unit has or could make</b>

(11) **Please suggest any ways in which the course unit could be improved**

(12) **Any other comments/observations**



## **Appendix 5**

Extract from Research Journal (June 2012) following a first phase interview with Max. These notes were referred to during the interpretive process to achieve a more reflexive position.

*It was clear from the sessions that Max was having a challenging time in his school although this had not adversely affected his passion for his subject. He was ambitious **but** it had become increasingly apparent to me that he had become more intent on solving the problems in his large department as opposed to personal ambitions.*

*One of his department was 'blocking' his requests causing disquiet overall. He knew the colleague was absent from school without good reason. He was finding this very **frustrating** coupled with his perception that his school were showing him inadequate support.*

*Throughout the programme he was very enthusiastic and very good to work with. He adored the Human Resource Management module and had clearly tried most of the theoretical ideas out with his department.*

### **Overall thoughts following completion of the programme.**

*Max wanted and appreciated support as he did lack confidence at the outset of the programme. He needed reassurance and appreciated frequent email contact with myself.*

*In his final dissertation year Max took advantage of the voluntary support sessions that I had organised at Applegate High School.*

## **Appendix 6**

### **CONSENT FORM**

**(For the learner)**

#### **Evaluation of adult leadership learning in a Masters-level work-based programme**

**Please tick box**

##### **Purpose of the study**

I understand that the purpose of this study is to find out about the learning experiences of leadership students on a Masters-level programme.

☐

##### **Procedure**

I understand that if I agree to take part in the study I will be asked to talk about my experiences as a learner and as a leader.

☐

##### **Confidentiality**

I understand that information relating to me will not be identified by my name, and that this information will be kept in locked storage. It will be destroyed two years after the end of the project.

☐

##### **Recording**

I understand that the interview may be recorded and I consent to this.

☐

##### **Right of Refusal**

I understand that it is entirely my decision to take part in the study.  
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give a reason for doing so.

☐

I ..... (name of participant)  
understand the information presented to me and agree to take part in the research study.

**Signature ..... (Participant)    Date: .....**

Nicola Aldred, Research student, University of Huddersfield.

## **Appendix 7**

### **CONSENT FORM**

**(For the line manager)**

#### **Evaluation of adult leadership learning in a Masters-level work-based programme**

**Please tick box**

##### **Purpose of the study**

I understand that the purpose of this study is to find out about the learning experiences of leadership students on a Masters-level programme.

☐

##### **Procedure**

I understand that if I agree to take part in the study I will be asked to talk about leadership practice generally and in relation to my colleagues.

☐

##### **Confidentiality**

I understand that information relating to me or my colleagues will not be identified by name, and that this information will be kept in locked storage. It will be destroyed two years after the end of the project.

☐

##### **Recording**

I understand that the interview may be recorded and I consent to this.

☐

##### **Right of Refusal**

I understand that it is entirely my decision to take part in the study.  
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give a reason for doing so.

☐

I ..... (name of participant)  
understand the information presented to me and agree to take part in the research study.

**Signature ..... (Participant)    Date: .....**

Nicola Aldred, Research student, University of Huddersfield.

## Appendix 8

### 'A glimpse into my interpretive journey'

#### **First stage of the analysis**

In the example extracts comments that relate to an initial noticing are preceded by the letter 'N' and potential codes by the letter 'C'. I identified codes in terms of their relevance for my three research questions. The research questions were abbreviated to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3. Please note that the data, where appropriate, was coded for its relevance to more than one research question to ensure flexibility.

#### **A) Worked example from a participant transcript – first phase interviews**

Audio File Name: Linda (pseudonym)  
Date: 2012. First phase interviews.  
Comments: Good, clear audio

#### KEY:

Cannot decipher: (unclear + time code)  
Sounds like: [s.l + time code]  
**Bold type:** word emphasised by participant  
***Italic + bold type:*** code sentence  
***Italic + underline type:*** code sentence  
***Italic + bold + underline type*** code sentence

(Pause) – significant pause

**I: = Interviewer (Interviewer in bold)**

R: = Respondent

Data	Codes
<b>I: Aspect one is about provision. Why did you decide to apply for a place on the</b>	

<b>Masters programme?</b>	
<p>R: Because I was at a <u>stage</u> where I felt I needed to develop and possibly <b>look at going into</b> some sort of leadership role. I thought it was important for me, because <u>I needed to stretch</u> my learning deeper and I thought it was a <b>good opportunity to meet with others from different schools, different environments and to share our practices.</b></p>	<p><u>N: Significance of age?</u></p> <p><b>N: Underlying desire for promotion. Is this linked to age?</b></p> <p><u>N: Personal challenge</u></p> <p><u>C: RQ1 Seeing personal challenge as necessary to learning</u></p> <p><b>N: Opportunity for networking and collaboration</b></p> <p><b>C: RQ1/RQ2 Sharing practice is important (between local schools)</b></p>
<p><b>I: Thank you. Why did you decide to participate in this course, here at school rather than the university?</b></p>	
<p>R: <u>I don't think I would have been able to commit</u> to going <b>somewhere else.</b> I think this was an</p>	<p><u>C: RQ1/2 Fearing failure – giving oneself the best chance to succeed</u></p> <p><b>N: Convenience of location</b></p> <p><u>N: Perception the environment was conducive to learning</u></p>

<p><u>excellent environment</u> for me.</p> <p><b><i>It fitted in with what I needed to do in my life and <u>it gave me the opportunity to feel very comfortable where I was, and I think that's important for my learning.</u></i></b></p>	<p><u>C: RQ1 Seeing the convenience of location as key driver in terms of participation</u></p> <p><b><i>N: Life stage/developmental stage reference</i></b></p> <p><b><i>C: RQ1 Seeing developmental stages as relevant to seeking learning</i></b></p> <p><u>C: RQ1 Comfort and safety linked to effective learning experience</u></p> <p><u>N: Comfortable environment – again conducive to individual learning</u></p>
<p><b>I: How did you feel about your fellow students all being serving teachers in the same local authority cluster?</b></p>	
<p>R: That, to me, was quite a <b><i>reassuring</i></b> thing. It didn't matter where they were from, to be honest, <u>but I didn't mix that well</u>, at that time, with other staff in other schools so it was an <b><i>opportunity for me, again, to develop my skills</i></b> - getting to know what things were like in <u>other establishments.</u></p>	<p><b><i>N: Safety?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>C: RQ1/2 Seeing safety as an important factor in the learning experience/ environment</i></b></p> <p><u>N: Lack of opportunity to collaborate previously</u></p> <p><u>C: RQ2/3 Seeing the opportunity to share as important</u></p> <p><b><i>C: RQ1 Intrinsic desire to develop</i></b></p> <p><u>N: Wanting to share and listen to others experiences</u></p>

<p>and <i>I felt it was much more of a coming together, <u>a unifying experience</u>, having people in the local area to share experiences with.</i></p>	<p><b>C: RQ1/2/3 Seeing the sharing of experiences within one locality as important (providing depth) to the learning experience</b></p> <p><b><u>N: Wanting to share locally (does this indicate the breaking down of school empires and the culture of ‘splendid isolation’ that emerged alongside the publication of league tables)</u></b></p>
<p><b>I: Okay. What aspects of the provision, beyond the teaching and learning, appeal to you?</b></p>	
<p>R: Certainly in terms of the <u>organisation and the timing</u> of things. Having to devote, if we’re looking at when the sessions took place and where they took place, that to me was invaluable because I <b><i>didn’t actually have to go anywhere else.</i></b> It fitted in with the busy <u>job I had here already.</u> It meant that I could <b><i>manage it with my own lifestyle</i></b> which, to me, if I couldn’t do that</p>	<p><u>N: Convenience?</u></p> <p><b><u>C: RQ1 Seeing the convenience of location/schedule as key drivers in terms of participation</u></b></p> <p><b><i>N: Being educated on site a great advantage?</i></b></p> <p><b><u>C: RQ2/1 Seeing the learning as convenient as well as the location/schedule</u></b></p> <p><b><i>N: Trying to maintain a work/life balance</i></b></p> <p><b><i>C: RQ1 Seeing an effective learning environment as one that embraces work/life balance</i></b></p>

<p>then I don't think I would have achieved what I have now. <u>Also I was at a stage where, having a family,</u> what I did had to <b>fit in with their needs</b> and that did this beautifully being based here. The provision of a meal was massively important because when you have had a day doing your job and then you're going on to do something very demanding, you need to be able to break and have something to <u>eat and talk</u> to people and refresh your brain cells before you come back and carry on.</p>	<p><u>C: RQ1 Seeing development stage as important to the learning experience</u></p> <p><b>N: The programme had to fit in with family commitments</b></p> <p><u>N: Food – The importance of sharing food as a social event as well as a practical requirement</u></p> <p><u>C: RQ1/2 Seeing the social act of eating as nourishing the mind but as encouraging engagement with the group</u></p>
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## **B) Worked example from a participant transcript – second phase interviews**

Audio File Name: Linda (pseudonym)  
Date: June 2014. Second phase interviews.  
Comments: Good, Clear audio.

### **KEY:**

Cannot decipher: (unclear + time code)  
Sounds like: [s.l + time code]



Dotted underline type:

word emphasised by participant

***Italic + bold type:***

**code sentence**

*Italic + underline type:*

code sentence

(Pause) – significant pause

**I: = Interviewer (Interviewer in bold)**

R: = Respondent

Data	Codes
<b>I: Do you feel that any aspects of the course environment, or the types of learning activities you engaged on in the course, prepared you for this current leadership role?</b>	
R: <u><i>I don't think I would ever have done the course if it hadn't been made manageable for me in terms of environment.</i></u> So, where the course was, the <b><i>timing of the course</i></b> , was crucial for me because I don't think I would have been able to find the time, first of all, to do it. I think, aside from that,	<u><i>N: Importance of the environment (location, timings) maintained and reinforced. Incredible after 2 years that the same elements are focused on again. Accessibility</i></u>  <b><i>N: The modules were based over greater number of weeks compared with the university programme– the perception of this participant appears to be that this element eased the pressure of doing the course</i></b> <b><i>C: RQ1 Still seeing convenience/timing of the course as key driver in terms of participation</i></b>

<p>the elements of the course that really appealed to me, and were <u>very challenging</u> was the <b>reading and the theory and the guidance throughout</b> that, because <u>that was one of the things I hadn't done since graduating.</u></p> <p>I think the <b>collaboration with other schools</b> was excellent. <u>And I think the opportunity to have the freedom to say whatever I wanted to in that environment, knowing that we could share experiences and practices, was really important.</u> in the role now I've gone on to do, <b>because it helps to inform everything I do.</b> In terms of when I'm planning, either for change, or I'm dealing with conflict – whatever it is in the school environment, it helps</p>	<p><i>N: Challenge and guidance emphasised (P+S)</i>  <i>C: RQ1/2/3 Seeing the structure and challenge/support of the tasks as central positive element to the learning experience</i>  <b>N: Task structure and tariff emphasised</b></p> <p><i>N: Quite typical for teachers – so did the structure of task together with the environment increase confidence</i></p> <p><b>N: Opportunity to collaborate was valued</b>  <b>C:RQ1/2/3 – seeing collaboration as central to the learning experience</b>  <i>N: 'Safe' environment gave the opportunity to critically reflect</i>  <i>C: RQ1/2/3 Seeing safety conducive to critical reflection within the environment as crucial to future practice</i></p> <p><b>N: The importance of the group's experiences for future action – becomes part of the critical reflection process. Learning from other people's stories. Now Linda taking them with her on her journey.</b>  <b>C: RQ1/3/2 Critical reflection on the learning group informing practice</b></p>
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<p>me to think back to the <u>experiences of other people</u> and what worked and what didn't – particularly with leadership, and what it was in some schools that people felt quite aggrieved about, and didn't feel supported; and <b><i>that's helped change my views</i></b> as I've gone along as to maybe how I need to manage change.</p>	<p><b><i>N: The learning group played a 'key role'</i></b></p> <p><b><i>N: Willing to transform – did these other experiences help Linda change.</i></b></p> <p><b><i>C: RQ1/2/3 Learning experience as part of the group resulting in transformation</i></b></p>
<p><b>I: Thank you. Do you feel there was a transition period between practising leadership on the course and engaging in your leadership role in the workplace?</b></p>	
<p>R: I think I have probably always had some aspect of leadership along the way, and I don't think</p>	

<p>there was ever a time when it suddenly changed. I think it <u>has developed</u>, but throughout it... it has been quite an honest, reflective time because <u>whatever we've done there has been an integral part of what I was doing at that time.</u></p> <p>I think I've got <u>stronger</u> with it and I would like to think my skills have become more developed as I've gone along, but I don't think that there has been a <u>significant increase; I think it has been a bit seamless between the two.</u></p>	<p><b><i>N: Didn't see any difference between the leadership practiced during the course and afterwards (was that because of the replication of the leadership role on the course?)</i></b></p> <p><u>N: There does appear to be a replication of the leadership experience</u></p> <p><u>C: RQ2/1 – leadership learning/practice integral to learning experience</u></p> <p><b><i>C: RQ1/2/3 – learning experience resulting in transformation</i></b></p> <p><u>N: Was an effective leadership environment created then?</u></p> <p><u>Was this a natural progression because she is a reflective practitioner?</u></p>
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### **The second stage of analysis**

At this stage, I placed each code (according to line number) under the relevant research question heading in order to formulate the initial themes or candidate themes (represented as **CT** in the comment boxes). The themes were chosen according to their relevance to the research questions as opposed to the frequency of their appearance in participant responses.

#### **C) Worked example of the second stage of analysis (Linda)**

RQ1 How can an effective learning environment be created for secondary teachers with leadership responsibilities?

<b>Data</b>	<b>Candidate Themes</b>
Seeing the convenience of <b>location</b> as key driver in terms of participation (17)	<b>Environment</b>
<u>Seeing safety</u> as an important factor in the learning experience/ environment (24)	<u>Environment</u>
Seeing the opportunity <b>to share</b> as important (25)	<b>Collaboration</b>
Seeing the <u>sharing of experiences</u> within <b>one locality</b> as important (providing depth) to the learning experience (29)	<u>Collaboration</u> <b>Environment</b>
Seeing the <u>environment</u> as <b>challenging but supportive</b> in that thinking time is awarded away from a pressurised arena (61)	<u>Environment</u> <b>Pressure and Support</b>
Finding the <u>notes based methodology</u> not as stimulating (69)	<u>Learning strategies</u>
Seeing the <b>task structure</b> and <u>support</u> as an important element of	<b>Learning strategies</b> <u>Support</u>

the learning experience (74)	
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### **The third stage of analysis**

In order to gain an alternative interpretation of the participants' learning experience I then proceeded to code the line manager transcriptions. An examination of this data may further contextualise the existing themes that had been generated by the participants but also had the potential to bring to light alternative themes in need of consideration. Therefore the line manager transcripts were read with the existing codes in mind and identified issues that supported two of the existing overarching codes and highlighted an additional theme of funding and succession concerns.

#### **D) Example extract from a line manager transcript**

<b>Data</b>	<b>Candidate Themes</b>
<b>I: Do you feel that your institution has benefited from your colleagues' participation in the course? If so, how?</b>	
R: Yes, absolutely. <i>What we've gained, as I say, going back to what we were previously saying about staff being involved in small areas that they manage, with that</i>	<b><i>PERSONAL CHANGE: Participants recognising and supporting the bigger picture</i></b>  <b><i>PROFESSIONAL CHANGE: Participants demonstrating a more holistic view of leadership and operating on a broader scale</i></b>

<p><b><i>bigger picture there's been more input across the breadth of the school and,</i></b> as I say, just referencing the colleague who has taken on, well, progressed very well through the promotion system has gone from Head of Year to Assistant Head to Deputy Head; you can see in each of these stages <u><i>how the school has benefited from that wider input within their taking on additional responsibilities, more prepared to take it because they understand, they understand the breadth of the school</i></u> and, as I say, it's--sorry for repeating it a bit more--but <b><i>they can see a bigger picture, and when they see the bigger picture the inputs that they put, you know, they've weighed it up a lot, you</i></b></p>	<p><u><i>CONFIDENCE: More willing to get involved at a strategic level</i></u></p> <p><u><i>PROFESSIONAL CHANGE: Has enabled participants to contribute more across the school because they are thinking in a more holistic way</i></u></p> <p><b><i>Level of autonomous thinking</i></b></p> <p><u><i>CRITICAL REFLECTION: Professional</i></u></p>
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<p><u>know. It's not just for the benefit of their department they see how it fits in for everyone</u> within their... and that's been really beneficial.</p>	
<p><b>I: Do you think your colleagues' practice has changed over the past two years?</b></p>	
<p>R: Very much so.  <b><i>I think you can always see growth and development within colleagues, but I think what you've seen within these colleagues is--I don't know if the word exponential is right--but you've seen a much higher rate of growth within there.</i></b> I'd say, you know, you've seen somebody move effectively within, you know, a three-year period from Head of Year, to Assistant</p>	<p><b><i>His perception is that the group have progressed at a faster rate. Personal change</i></b></p> <p><b>PERSONAL CHANGE</b></p>



<p>Head, to Deputy Head, you know, and you can see how that person has changed within there... within the other the colleagues as well <u>you can see growth, you know, beyond what you'd describe as a norm really in terms of the way that they've been prepared to take on activities and to take on projects and to actually effectively deliver</u> within there as well.</p>	<p><u>Personal and professional change -CONFIDENCE</u> <u>Is this faster progression due to increased confidence</u></p> <p><u>Professional change – maybe due to increased confidence</u></p>
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### The fourth stage of the analysis

A further interpretive angle was provided through my examination of the anonymous unit evaluation documents. The analysis focused on the responses to the open-ended questions in section ten (see Appendix 4). I looked at the questions most relevant to my research questions and coded forty-nine evaluations.

These responses were collated to ascertain the extent to which new themes had emerged in the light of the research questions or whether existing themes were provided with further contextualisation.

An example of the coding process applied to **question (f)** of the unit evaluation document follows:

#### **A) Example extract from an anonymous unit evaluation document**

##### 10. Impact evaluation

Students to assess the impact the unit has made on.....

f) My capacity for reflection on professional practice

(A selection of responses)

Data	Candidate Themes
This project has enabled me to <b>reflect deeply</b> and develop my practice (1)	<b><i>Critical reflection increased</i></b>
My capacity for <u>reflection on professional practice</u> has increased significantly even if it makes you doubt yourself more (3)	<u><i>Critical self-reflection</i></u>
Greatly improved, <b>especially when placed alongside the theory and practice</b> covered.(4)	<b><i>Critical reflection supported by leadership theory and shared experiences</i></b>
Much improved, can see <u>why things went wrong/worked and can build/reflect</u> on for future situations (5)	<u><i>Allowed the participant to understand why things went wrong in the past</i></u>
It has really helped me to understand that I need to consider when reflecting not just the impact on me or students but <b>also individual staff and other departments</b> .(6)	<b><i>A broader perspective (Personal change)</i></b>
This time and space is invaluable in	

the busy educational environment and some <u>breathing space to reflect and think strategically</u> , which I can take back to my workplace.(10)	<u>The importance of critical reflection</u>
This has improved as I have seen the value of such reflection and the need for considered work before <b>important decisions are made.</b> (12)	<b><i>Delayed decision making (Professional change)</i></b>
Constantly reflecting and referring <u>back to theory</u> to improve practice.(13)	<u>Critical reflection linked to theory</u>
Again ' <b>feedback</b> ' now features as a large part of my reflection.(25)	<b><i>The role of feedback(Professional change)</i></b>
I now find myself reflecting on and referring to the theory we covered during the unit. I am now starting to <u>make links with previous units we have studied and use the research</u> when discussing educational issues with others (34)	<u>The importance of theory in the reflective process</u>
There is <b>a great amount of need</b> for personal reflection; this has turned me into a truly reflective practitioner (35)	<b><i>The importance of critical reflection</i></b>
Significantly improved - Making time to do this has been particularly	

important: making reflection part of daily practice is very important – <u>it builds esteem</u> , as you recognise strengths (39)	<u>Link between critical reflection and self-esteem</u>
Increased as become much more self-aware and aware of <b>how my actions and attitudes affect others. More aware of how my attitudes may not be shared by others</b> and the reasons for this (43)	<b>Increased sensitivity to the needs of others (Personal change)</b>