Case study as a means of evaluating the impact of early years leaders: Steps, paths and routes

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that case study will need to play an increasingly important role in the evaluation of leadership development programmes as both formal and substantive theories of leadership place greater emphasis upon the role played by organizational context on leaders ability to bring about change.

Prolonged engagement within a case study provides researchers with opportunities to capture the dynamics between leaders and their organisational contexts. However, adopting a case study approach is no substitute for inadequate theorization of the link between leadership approaches and leadership effects. The paper argues for the use of inclusive and expansive theoretical notions of leadership and its relationship to organisational context.

The evaluation used to illustrate these arguments was based on a longitudinal multi-site case study methodology. The case studies ran over a three-year period and tracked the effect of 42 leaders on the quality of provision in some 30 early years settings. Both individual and collective theoires of leadership were used to trace leaders' steps, paths and routes to improvement. Three overlapping theoretical lenses were used to study the dynamics of these leaders interactions with a key aspect of their organisational contexts - the existing formal and informal leadership structures – and how these affected their attempts to improve the quality of provision of their settings.

The analysis, and related findings, were tiered in order to provide progressively more detailed descriptions of the relationships between leaders' approaches and changes in their settings' quality of provision. Each layer of analysis operated with a causal logic that became gradually less general and linear and increasingly more 'local' and complex.

1. Introduction

In an era where neo-scientific methodologies dominate many areas of educational evaluation and research, it is perhaps unsurprising that the role and value of case study have come under scrutiny. In those areas of programme evaluation where quasi-experimental designs are most influential, there is a danger of it being relegated to a peripheral role (Donmoyer & Galloway, 2010; Jolley, 2014). This could result in case study being treated only as a means of developing initial hypotheses for testing or of illustrating or grounding formal findings, rather than contributing more substantively to our understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The highly-contextualised knowledge provided by evaluative case studies might at first appear to be limited when contrasted with the 'general characteristics', linear logic models, and effect sizes generated by evaluations using randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and matched sample designs. Latterly, the utility and generalizability of such quasi-

experimental approaches have been called into question, particularly in respect of their capacity to guide the development and implementation of large-scale professional development programmes (Breault, 2013; Desimone, 2009; Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2015). It is the contention of this paper that educational leadership is an area in which evaluative case study still has a pivotal role to play in describing and conceptualising the nature of the local causality involved in leaders bringing about changes in organisations.

As studies in education have developed to include more collective, or distributed, notions of leadership theories of how individual leaders' affect change have increasing come to focus on the part played by organizational context. Context being brought out of the shadows of educational leadership research (Hallinger, 2016) has led to a radical questioning of the ways in which overlapping contexts and their effects have been conceptualised and how they interact with leaders, their approaches, and effects (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Gronn, 2011).

A key contextual dynamic is that been between groups of leaders in a given context, particularly between formal and informal leaders (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Stoelinga, 2008).

This paper argues that to capture adequately the effects of the complex dynamic between leaders and the social contexts of the organisations they work in requires the use of case study designs that use an inclusive theoretical construction of leadership. Inclusive in the sense that it includes both a focus on how individual leaders' influence others and their role in shaping the social and organizational contexts in which they operate.

Understanding the nature of the dynamics between leaders and their contexts is key to resolving the 'enactment conundrum' (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012) at the centre of the evaluation on which this paper is based. This conundrum relates to how to describe the interaction between individual factors and contextual influences when explaining the effects of leadership development programmes on participants' subsequent performance. The theoretical response to this conundrum was two-fold. Firstly, both individual and collective constructions of leadership were used to explain how existing formal and informal leadership structures, a key contextual factor (Braun, Peus, Weisweiler, & Frey, 2012), affected individual leaders' approaches to improving the quality of provision. Secondly, the dynamic between leaders and these structures was illustrated using a theoretical framework that encompassed the transactional/normative, systemic/regulative, and dispositional/socio-cognitive aspects of organizational change (Tilly, 2008).

The resulting cases described not only how leaders' attempts at improvement were prefigured by existing leadership structures but also how they set out to reconfigure these over time. The dynamic between leaders and their contexts was described using three nested constructs: steps, paths and routes, in order to reflect the complexity involved in attempting to describe the linkages between leadership effects and organizational change.

2. Background to the evaluation

The paper is based on an evaluation of a national leadership development initiative in England: Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). The early years sector in England has historically been considered as having lower status than other sectors. Practitioners have generally been less well-paid and less well-supported by leadership development structures and programmes, which have tended to focus on schools and school leaders (*Reference deleted for peer review*). EYPS was introduced in 2007 towards the end of a period of increased central government commitment to early years provision, which had led to a rapid expansion of the sector and associated concerns about the quality of provision and its leadership. It was intended to improve the quality and status of leaders in the early years sector by both drawing in new university graduates and providing a nationally recognised leadership status for graduate leaders already working in the sector (CWDC, 2008). The developers of EYPS drew on existing into effective educational leadership development programmes, both in terms of its content, specifically the focus on the leadership of learning, and its overall mode of delivery, which was based on reflective engagement in work-based interventions and inquiries. The relative paucity of prior research into effective leadership in the early years sector at that time meant that the developers had a limited specialised knowledge base to draw on. Two linked evaluations of EYPS were commissioned. The first, a small-scale matched sample design (Mathers et al., 2011), set out to establish if the early phases of EYPS had a positive impact on the quality of provision in settings. The second, which is the focus of this paper, aimed to support the development of the programme by generating detailed insights into how leaders improved the quality of provision in different types of settings through multi-site case study.

3. Conceptualising leadership and leadership effects

The theoretical framework for the evaluation drew on school leadership research and organizational theory to supplement the limited availability of studies of early years leadership at that time. The development of a theoretically robust account of the relationship between leaders approaches, the influence of organizational contexts, and leaders' effects on the quality of provision was crucial in helping the evaluation team grapple with a very specific 'enactment conundrum' (Ball et al., 2012). The key theoretical and methodological conundrum being the relative emphasis to be given to differences in individual leaders' capacities and approaches or variations in the contexts in which they worked when attempting to determine the impact of gaining EYPS on their approach to leadership.

3.1. Effective leadership in the early years

Interest in leadership in the early years sector in England and elsewhere has developed steadily over the last two decades due to increasing recognition of the effect of early years education on children's later school performance and the related policy commitments to expand provision (DfES, 2006; Feinstein, 2000; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997). Historically, early years settings have been under-researched in comparison to schools and the extent to which findings based on school leaders can be applied to early years leadership is strongly disputed (Aubrey, 2011; Bush, 2013).

However, in contrast to the relative paucity of leadership research in the early years, a sustained research programme had explored the link between the quality of provision and longer-term outcomes for children (Mooney, 2007). Longitudinal and concurrent studies had shown that high quality early childhood education can significantly benefit children's learning, academic achievements, self-esteem and attitudes towards lifelong learning (Burchinal et al., 2000; NICHD, 2002; Sylva, 1994). Although the extent to which these early benefits persist through childhood has been found to vary across research projects (Hillman & Williams, 2015), a substantial evidence base suggests that variations in the quality of provision in early years settings can affect a wide range of cognitive, social and emotional outcomes in children's learning and development (Clifford & Bryant, 2003; Mathers & Sylva, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart., 2004).

One of the earliest accounts of effective leadership in the early years sector in England, the researching effective pedagogy in the early years (REPEY) study (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), was based on case studies of a number of settings in which high quality provision had been linked to positive outcomes for children. The main limitation of the REPEY study was that it was based on a series of retrospective case studies, which described what leaders of high quality settings were seen to do, rather than describing how they had improved these settings. Similarly, the initial evaluation of EYPS on leaders' practices and the quality of settings' provision, which used a matched sample design, demonstrated that gaining EYPS had a statistically significant impact on leaders and their ability to improve the quality of provision in a setting when assessed against an objective set of research-based measures (Mathers et al., 2011). However, it did not generate a detailed account of effective early years leaders brought about improvements in different types of settings.

The lack of prior research in early years leadership led to the decision to utilise a multi-site case study methodology in order to explore how 30 leaders with EYPS in a range of different types of settings brought about improvements in the quality of their provision. The leaders were conceptualised as 'practice leaders',[1] using the

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[1] To minimise confusion, practitioners with EYPS have been described throughout this paper as 'practice leaders'.