

Fostering Equity and Peace through Intensive Leadership Learning

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Abstract

Effective school leadership is widely recognized as pivotal in fostering student learning and enhancing the well-being of children, families, and communities (Leithwood, 2021). However, school leaders face significant challenges as they navigate the increasingly complex internal and external dynamics of educational environments, including shifting demographics, growing diversity, and stringent accountability frameworks (Groenewald, 2020). This study aimed to examine the influence on educational leadership students of participation in an intensive, 'Just Peace Leadership Programme.' The programme was designed to identify core leadership values and enhance cultural competency to develop social justice and peace education literacy. The overarching goal was to empower participants to drive transformative educational change in the pursuit of social justice. Twenty-one participants were drawn from two institutions in Northern Ireland and a state university in the United States. An interpretative research design was employed, with data collected from a pre-experience questionnaire, learning journals, focus group reflections, action plans for practice development and a focus group conducted three months post-programme. Data analysis was hermeneutical, dialectical, and interpretative (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Findings indicate that the intensive programme design enhanced exposure to diversity, reflection, and motivation for action-oriented planning for change. Participants reported shifts in their professional identities and recognised their capacity to affect educational transformation. The programme supported aspiring school leaders to develop competence and confidence as authentic moral agents for social justice and systemic change. This study underscores the importance of leadership development initiatives that are explicitly designed to prepare educators for the challenges of fostering equity, inclusivity, and peace within diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Leadership development; Professional learning; Intensive programmes.

1. Introduction

Educational leadership has emerged as a critical factor in determining school effectiveness and student outcomes [1]. Leadership is complex however, as contemporary educational contexts present multifaceted challenges requiring leaders who can navigate increasingly diverse student populations, address systemic inequities, and foster inclusive learning environments [2]. In recent years, there has also been a growing recognition that effective school leadership extends beyond managerial competence to encompass more transformative dimensions including, moral purpose, cultural responsiveness, and commitment to social justice [3].

This paper considers a sample of data collected from a larger study which was concerned with the extent to which an intensive, immersive leadership programme supported the development of leadership capacity for social justice amongst a participant sample of educational practitioners from Northern Ireland and the United States. The programme focused explicitly on cultivating values, cultural competency, and an action orientation to support transformative change. The nature and outcomes of leadership development initiatives such as this warrant critical examination within the broader landscape of educational leadership preparation.

2. Literature Review

To begin, the literature review examines contemporary research on educational leadership development primarily across the UK, Europe, and USA. Selected studies were analysed to identify key themes, methodologies and findings related to preparing educational leaders as agents of social justice and systemic change.

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly shifted from viewing educational leadership as primarily administrative, to understanding it as being intrinsically moral and political in nature [4], where “a change agent’s commitment must first start with a willingness to serve as a role model and lead by example” [5, p. 520]. The premise being that leadership must be ‘activist’, in order to challenge inequitable societal and school practices and policies [6], and that effective leadership preparation therefore must acknowledge the socio-political contexts in which schools operate [7]. Research from the UK for example, has emphasised how effective school leaders must be able to navigate competing policy demands whilst maintaining commitment to equity and inclusion [8]. In the USA, it has also been noted that social justice orientation in leadership involves both knowledge, and practical skills to disrupt inequitable practices at all levels [9].

This complexity of leadership practice poses significant questions regarding appropriate leadership preparation. Studies across international contexts reveal a range of key considerations to developing leaders for social justice. In the first instance, some studies suggest that leaders’ personal histories and cultural backgrounds influence their understanding of, and commitment to social justice, and as such, there must be an intentional focus on identity development [10]. Supported by international evidence, critical reflection has also emerged as a central pedagogical strategy, whereby structured reflective practices help leaders examine their identity, positionality and privilege, essential to developing authentic commitment to equity [11]. Exposure to diversity represents another key approach in contemporary leadership preparation. A USA study found that sustained engagement with diverse communities significantly enhanced cultural competence and commitment to inclusive practices [12]. Similarly, UK-based research has demonstrated how structured intercultural experiences challenge assumptions and expand leaders’ capacity to support diverse student populations [13]. Allied to this, sustained, immersive experiences have been found to be more effective in developing critical consciousness than short, isolated courses. One study for example, found that international study visits which facilitate the development of a trusted validating community group are more effective than straightforward transmission models of development [14]. Overall, more intensive programmes and action-orientated programmes have been found to support more transformative learning experiences and may be particularly effective for developing a social justice orientation [15].

Other studies however, have revealed limitations in leadership preparation programmes. These studies indicate that leadership development needs to be connected to systemic reform initiatives and integrated with efforts for improvement. The research has found that leadership candidates who develop and implement broader, equity-focused action plans demonstrated greater self-efficacy and sustained commitment to equity initiatives [16]. Another key aspect of leadership development relates to peace education literacy and some studies have shown that research in this area is scarce and needs further exploration and effort [17].

Whilst all of the above considerations are important, evaluating the effectiveness of leadership preparation programmes related to social justice presents significant challenges [18]. Berkovich for example found that leadership candidates often report immediate attitudinal changes following social justice-focused preparation, but longer-term behavioural changes prove more elusive [19]. Some studies also reveal limitations when programmes are based solely on self-reported measures of leadership growth, and highlight the need for multiple assessment approaches [20]. Longitudinal studies are rare, but some suggest that leadership impacts unfold over extended timeframes as implementation requires the navigation of complex institutional contexts [21]. The importance of context cannot be underestimated as some studies have found that leaders who completed equity-focused preparation were more likely to implement culturally responsive school practices, though institutional constraints often moderated these efforts [22]. This interplay between individual and institutional context is important as shifts in professional identity have been seen as a significant outcome of effective leadership preparation, particularly when programmes actively challenge participants to reconsider their professional roles and responsibilities [18]. Similarly, leader self-efficacy has been shown to significantly predict willingness to implement equity-oriented reforms [23]. It is clear then, that despite growing emphasis on the importance of leadership for social justice, there remain persistent challenges in developing leaders as effective change agents. One area for consideration, for example, is the extent to which conventional leadership development approaches

sufficiently address necessary systemic change. An analysis of UK leadership programmes for example, suggests that many overemphasise individual leadership, whilst underemphasising collective action and systemic transformation [24]. Studies across international contexts also reveal tensions between managerial expectations and transformative leadership roles, underlining how accountability pressures can undermine leaders' focus on equity initiatives [10;11]. Boske's longitudinal USA study of leadership graduates also found that many struggled to implement social justice initiatives when faced with institutional resistance and resource constraints [25]. Differences in cultural contexts can also shape capacity for social justice leadership, with research revealing important variations across national settings and demonstrating how sociopolitical contexts influence how leaders conceptualise and approach equity [13].

This review has considered a range of evidence-based approaches to developing leadership for social justice, including critical reflection, exposure to diversity, and action-oriented learning. It also raises questions as to the effectiveness of leadership development programmes in terms of sustaining impact over time, particularly as leaders must navigate complex institutional, social and cultural contexts. The review also highlights the need for greater attention to collective leadership approaches, as contemporary research increasingly emphasises that transformative change requires distributed rather than individual leadership and so future leadership development initiatives might more explicitly address how participants can foster collaborative networks for sustained change.

Based on the above, this study considers the extent to which one particular leadership development programme, helped emerging leaders identify core leadership values, enhance cultural competency and develop social justice and peace education literacy, with an ultimate view to drive transformative educational change in the pursuit of social justice, in their particular educational contexts.

The specific research questions for the overall project were,

1. To what extent do participants develop self-understanding of their own values and leadership perspectives? (Self-awareness)
2. To what extent do participants develop cultural awareness and understanding of other people and contexts? (Other Awareness)
3. In what ways can participants embed the learning gained from the programme into their own professional practice and context? (Systems Action)

The findings presented here, specifically address the first research question.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

The programme in question emerged from a collaborative partnership between two institutions in Northern Ireland (NI) and one on the East Coast of the USA. It involved a week-long immersive experience, held in the USA in the summer of 2024 wherein participants engaged in mutual examination of leadership for social justice and peace education, investigating potential interventions they could apply within their respective contexts.

3.2 Participants

All participants were aspiring educational leaders engaged in masters' level leadership development programmes in one of the three respective institutions. The programme was fully funded, and based on meeting certain criteria, students were invited to apply to participate on a voluntary basis. A sifting process was conducted and the final sample consisted of 7 participants from each institution ($n=21$ in total), with different levels of experience and responsibility in their respective educational contexts. The overall sample consisted of a total of 8 males and 13 females. Five of the males were mid-career professionals and 3 were in the early career stage. Three of the females were in mid-career and 10 in early career. The participant profile can be seen in Table 1. The codes following the pseudonyms indicate Male/Female and Early/Mid-career, e.g. Participant 1, Maria, is a female, mid-career teacher studying in NI at institution 1.

Participant	NI institution 1	NI institution 2	USA institution
1	Maria (FM)	Susan (FE)	Janine (FE)



2	Mary (FE)	Sarah (FE)	Julie (FE)
3	Margaret (FM)	Sally (FE)	Jane (FE)
4	Michael (ME)	Sophie (FE)	Josie (FM)
5	Mark (ME)	Stella (FE)	Joseph (MM)
6	Matthew (MM)	Simone (FE)	John (ME)
7	Martin (MM)	Stephen (MM)	Jack (MM)

Table1. Participant Profile

3.3 Research Design

The full study utilised a qualitative, interpretative research design [26], collecting data from a pre-experience questionnaire survey; daily learning journal entries; three end-of-programme focus groups, conducted with mixed groups of 7 participants each; action plans detailing integration strategies; and a three-month post-intervention virtual focus group to assess sustained implementation. The data which is the focus of this paper emerged from the three, end-of-programme focus groups.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was hermeneutical, dialectical, and interpretative [27] and involved the researchers conducting independent coding processes followed by collaborative cross-referencing to identify convergent and divergent patterns and establish consensus regarding emergent and final themes [26].

3.5 Research Ethics

The study received ethical approval from each of the participating institutions. Adherence to ethical research protocols was maintained throughout, with all twenty-one students providing informed consent after clear communication that participation in the research element of the programme would be entirely voluntary and anonymous.

4. Findings And Analysis

The findings presented here relate specifically to research question one and are presented under five themes. They show how the participants' thinking on leadership practice evolved and developed during the week-long programme. What is evident, is the emergence of a complex and nuanced conceptualisation of leadership, its development and its application.

4.1 Courage vs. Vulnerability

A recurring aspect of leadership, highlighted by multiple participants was the need for courage and confidence. Margaret stated,

"And I think this is what this has given us this week...it's not just the skill base and the content and the knowledge. But personal courage to deliver it..."

Mary also talks about leadership involving courage, but also aligns it with vulnerability and learning from failure:

"Whenever you step up to be a leader having... courage to do that...sometimes you're going to be wrong sometimes you're going to have to hold up your hands and say, that didn't go well we need to try something else."

Mary therefore frames leadership as a learning process that requires vulnerability and willingness to acknowledge mistakes. The point was also echoed by Sarah,

"it's also important that as a leader that you evaluate everything so that because you're on a learning journey too and you know it's about, I suppose being vulnerable and asking

somebody how do you think that went? What can I do to improve on my leadership skills because nobody is perfect..."

Reflecting the idea of leadership involving a change in professional identity [18], these perspectives emphasise the importance of leadership being seen not just as a position or set of skills but as requiring a much more extensive personal and interpersonal skill set, which needs to be contextually sensitive and nuanced.

4.2 Consistency Vs. Change

The questions around courage and vulnerability, also highlight the issue of consistency and change in educational settings and how leaders at all levels must navigate this in order to affect positive change whilst at the same time, remaining consistent in their approach. Some of the participants clearly viewed leaders as change agents but more specifically, leading such efforts by their own example.

John for example, shared

"...when I think of leadership, I think of the art of leading. And when I think of it, leading happens when there's a movement. You know, you are leading something because there's something moving...So, when you are considering yourself as a leader is because you are also leading other people, either by examples or by influencing them in a good way that they can buy in, into the movement or into the vision that you have".

Jack, who had been experiencing a period of consistent change in his setting highlights the importance of leadership consistency amid organisational change:

"... it's causing me to think a little bit more about, if the admin's going to always be changing, then I can't take my cues from them entirely."

Jack recognises there is a need for consistency and values-based leadership rather than merely following shifting organisational changes or priorities. This dichotomy between consistency and change reflects the literature cited above which highlighted the necessity of an action orientation towards improvement and, by association, equity and social justice [16; 23].

4.3 Designated vs. Distributed

A key theme in the literature centres on roles and functions of leadership being distributed, which is recognised as necessary for contextual and systemic transformation [24]. Aligned with this position, some of the participants discussed the idea of leadership being distributed within different spheres of influence, regardless of formal position. Michael discusses leadership as being distributed and about empowering others:

"I think it's your job to empower everyone else in your classroom whether it's a classroom assistant...could be people higher than you...could be your children."

Michael acknowledges the necessity of leaders recognising leadership in others. In addition, leaders must encourage buy-in from others to make change. John also stated,

"...we need that collaborative mindset that also adds up to you become an exemplar to others because that's how you buy in. You get people to buy in and when they buy in that's how you are creating a carriage of next leaders or next generation to make change."

There was also a clear recognition of leadership as a transformational activity. Mark discusses this as follows,

"Leadership is about identifying the skills in other people as well...leadership for me was previously... I always thought of the big chair, the big office, all that. And it's just far more than that. That's just a figurehead. It's a lot more. But even that's transformational leadership...But leadership is effectively, it is about leading but about bringing people on a journey with you. But you need people to buy into that journey."

Building on the idea of layers of leadership, Stephen articulates,

"each of us are at different levels...in the structure within schools and but yet we all have a sphere of influence..."

He then goes on to reflect on a tension within hierarchical conceptions of leadership:

"I think everyone is a leader within their own sphere and, but some are leaders of other leaders..."

This reflection reveals a nuanced view that reconciles hierarchical aspects of leadership (leaders of leaders) with the belief that everyone has leadership capacity within their context.

These perspectives clearly establish the link between both personal agency within the individual's immediate context and the collective power of collaborative leadership to effect broader change. These perspectives frame leadership not as concentrated power but as a shared responsibility that can empower others, including those who might not traditionally be seen as leaders, such as students and support staff.

4.4 Consensus Vs. Conflict

The literature has identified that all leadership activity will inevitably give rise to tensions between transformative and transactional actions [10; 11]. In terms of the skills of leadership necessary to navigate these tensions, Michael emphasises dialogue and compromise as essential,

"I think active listening is very important... I'm willing to listen to your opinion. And at the end can we make a compromise?"

This perspective highlights leadership as facilitative rather than directive, focused on building consensus through open dialogue rather than imposing solutions.

In contrast however, Margaret adds a more nuanced perspective, that leadership involves accepting inevitable conflict,

"... despite the compromise there will be conflict because it is inevitable... It's important that you... develop a tough skin and you make the tough decisions knowing that ultimately, they're from a good place..."

This acknowledges that leadership is not about avoiding all conflict but rather about navigating it constructively and making difficult decisions with the right intentions.

4.5 The Importance of Relationships

The dichotomies and challenges presented above show a clear understanding of the challenges of educational leadership. The participants did not shy away from this however and were positive in their outlook, emphasising the importance of relationships to leadership development and application.

Sophie, a relatively newly qualified teacher stated,

"It's been so inspiring to get to chat to people who are a few years ahead of me, people who are department coordinators or vice principals..."

As a young teacher, she highlights the importance of mentorship across experience levels in developing leadership capacity.

Similarly, Jack emphasises the importance of working with partners with shared perspectives and values,

"Something that's coming out for me is this week has been a reaffirmation of my need to tap into groups like this on a regular basis... people who are congruent with the way that I'm thinking about school."

Here, Jack underlines how leadership can be isolating and requires intentional community-building to sustain energy and vision.

4.6 Conclusion

The findings reveal a developing and multifaceted understanding of leadership that extends far beyond mere administration or formal positions or authority. This rich conceptualisation is especially significant in educational contexts where the need for leadership at all levels is essential for creating equitable, inclusive, and peaceful learning environments. The participants' reflections demonstrate how their understanding of leadership has evolved through the programme, with many expressing new confidence in their developing leadership capacity regardless of their formal position.

5. Discussion

The design of the programme at the core of this study reflects many of the characteristics of several, recognised, evidence-based approaches to developing leadership for social justice. These include the focus on critical reflection [11] exposure to diversity through the cross-national approach [12], and action-oriented learning [16]. The programme's emphasis on professional identity development [10] and cultural competency [12] also aligns closely with contemporary understandings of effective leadership preparation.

The findings presented in this paper show that the participants conceptualise leadership as a series of dichotomies: requiring courage whilst embracing vulnerability; maintaining consistency amidst continual change; operating within, yet distributing power across spheres of influence; and engaging in dialogue for consensus whilst accepting conflict. Underpinning the inherent challenges of leadership, however, is also the recognition of the importance of relationships and mentorship within supportive communities.

It is important to note that the data presented here is only a small section of the overall data collection which emerged from the study. Tentative analysis of other data from the reflective journals, action plans and the three-month post-experience focus groups indicate change in professional identity, underpinned by increasing confidence; continued collaborative engagement; and implementation of specific in-context actions, as a result of connections made during the programme.

Despite these positive outcomes, a number of caveats are worthy of consideration. Firstly, intensive, intercultural programmes such as this, whilst clearly valuable, are expensive to fund and so their continuation can only rely on trickle-down approaches to sustainability where participants act as advocates and disseminators of knowledge and practices learned.

Secondly, small-scale qualitative studies, whilst offering rich insights into participants' experiences, provide limited evidence regarding broad-scale or long-term systemic change, particularly when social justice concerns manifest differently across cultural, political, and institutional settings. This limitation is particularly evident in research that uncritically applies frameworks developed in Western contexts to diverse international settings.

Thirdly, whilst this study has attempted to document the participants' transformative experiences as a result of their engagement in the programme, its parameters do not allow for a full examination of the barriers they will inevitably encounter when attempting to enact social justice leadership in their institutional contexts. Therefore, as Armstrong and colleagues note, "appropriate spaces, supports, and time need to be provided for all educational actors to develop the leadership capacities and micropolitical competencies required to promote, discuss and critically reflect on social justice action" [28 p. 134].

With these considerations in mind, future research might extend follow-up periods to assess both self-reported growth and observable practice changes. Additionally, examining institutional factors that enable or constrain implementation would enhance understanding of how leadership development translates to organisational change. Further exploration of how participants adapt learning to specific social and cultural contexts would also enhance understanding of programme transferability.

Finally, whilst the findings from this research indicate post-programme extended collaborative activity, future leadership development initiatives might more explicitly address how participants can foster collaborative networks for sustained change.

6. Conclusion

Whilst there are significant concerns regarding sustainability and long-term systemic change, this study demonstrates that immersive leadership development programmes such as the one in question, can effectively foster nuanced understandings of educational leadership which can subsequently provide a foundation to support future individual and collaborative action for social justice, peace education and inclusive educational practice.

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