

# How thinking about '*persistent problems*' can solve our persistent problem with school leadership development

It's always a good day when you change your mind. On Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> September at the annual ResearchED conference I changed mine.

What I once thought were helpful phrases in the discourse around developing school leadership - 'domain specific' and 'generic' - I now believe to be at best too general and at worst actively unhelpful. Whilst they served a purpose for a time, I think we're now ready to move on.

## **Once upon a time...**

To explain how I got there we'll need to go back a bit.

When my organisation, the Institute for Teaching, merged with Ambition School Leadership I became responsible for a broad suite of school leadership development programmes for a few thousand participants each year from middle leadership through to executive leadership.

The programmes I inherited focussed on content such as setting a vision, communication and building a culture as well as attempting to understand and develop your personal traits through personality tests and 'executive' coaching.

Like many courses at the time, there was little if any content on curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, behaviour or SEND; meaning for most of the course you could participate from just about any sector or profession. I described them as 'generic' leadership courses, I was sceptical of them, and I contrasted them with the 'domain specific' courses that I believed the evidence suggested would better serve the participants taking part in them.

Transformational leadership approaches often left participants feeling inspired (much needed when you're leading in a tough school) and individuals benefited from some practical help with everyday tasks, networks and time away from the day job that the programmes provided.

But when we know how important school leaders are to improving outcomes for pupils and we know how precious little time school leaders get to focus on their own development, the opportunity cost doing something that didn't help enough was too high. We needed to do better.

## **Skipping On**

This took time. If you want to see how the thinking evolved you can scroll back through the blogs, articles, speeches and presentations from this team over the past few years. For those in the TLDR camp I'll skip to a brutally high level view of where the thinking currently stands.

1. The aim of school leadership programmes is to develop school leadership expertise.
2. Expertise is the ability to efficiently and effectively solve the persistent problems you face in your role. If school leaders are more expert they'll make better decisions and their school, and the outcomes of the pupils within it, will improve.
3. School leaders solve the persistent problems of their roles using their mental models. Mental model is a fancy term for what we know and how that knowledge is organised to guide our actions.
4. School leaders will develop their mental models fastest by deliberately acquiring new relevant knowledge and practicing its application in increasingly complex situations i.e. through a structured, taught programme.
5. We should take an expansive view of the word 'knowledge' - we don't just mean knowledge you'd read in a book. We mean knowledge of things like your context, the people who work within it and knowledge of your relationships with each of them.
6. This all means that when designing a curriculum for a school leadership development programme we should identify the persistent problems school leaders in particular roles face (these will be different for say senior leaders than they will be headteachers). We should identify what knowledge is needed to solve those persistent problems and what skills need to be developed through practicing its application.
7. This process will lead us to a conclusion that knowledge about curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, behaviour etc is essential as the persistent problems of school leaders are in a large part about how to make these things better.
8. We should then teach this relevant knowledge to our participants through our programmes and create increasingly complex opportunities for them to practice its application. We should use as much formative assessment as we can, adjust our teaching accordingly and ensure we're creating an environment where participants feel safe and motivated.

## **The Mistake**

At the time, myself and others used a high-level shorthand to describe where our programmes were and where I wanted them to be. We wanted to move away from generic approaches to leadership development and towards domain specific ones. Unfortunately, this

has been further truncated in the discourse to 'generic is bad and domain specific is good'. It's not that simple.

Advocates of the 'domain specific' approaches, myself included, didn't do enough to acknowledge that some content is both critical and transferable. Advocates of the 'generic' approaches didn't do enough to recognise the obvious shortfalls of the generic only approaches that had gone before, the appetite to move the debate on and the poor evidence based on which aspects of them were built.

And into this rut we have become a bit stuck. What follows is a contribution to the debate that I hope might help to move the conversation on.

### **The Remedy**

The mistake I made is that neither 'domain specific' nor 'generic' have a clear boundary. We can't answer the question 'What counts as a domain?' Is it education? Teaching? Geography teaching? Geography teaching in Morecambe?

We also can't answer the question 'How transferable does something have to be for it to be generic?' Is it between two middle leadership education roles in the same school? Between two roles in the same school? Between two middle leaders in different sectors?

Without a shared and crisp understanding of these two ideas we can't make any progress. And we can't make the concepts crisp - they are just woolly by nature. So we shouldn't try. The can describe a general trend from one direction to another but not much more.

I'm optimistic that a different organising principle has potential. It is an idea coined by Mary Kennedy that that has started to become part of the discourse around Teacher Education more recently in England - the idea of persistent problems.

As I set out above, we should think about different roles as being organised around different sets of persistent problems. And then ask ourselves what does someone need to know and be able to do in order to solve those persistent problems.

The beauty of asking ourselves this question is that it forces us to provide an answer that goes beyond a simple 'generic / domain specific' classification. Because whether it's one or the other doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is whether it is helpful in someone attending to the persistent problems of their role.

If we then want to understand the extent to which knowledge and skill are transferable it's the detail and specificity of this answer that then becomes useful. We move away from a simple categorisation - is a particular piece of knowledge or skill generic or domain specific? - towards a more comparative assessment - to what extent might a particular piece of knowledge or skill be transferable between two clear roles?

The more similar the persistent problems of two different roles are, the more knowledge will transfer. The more different the persistent problems of two roles are the more different its persistent problems (and the knowledge and skill required to solve them) will be, and so less will transfer.

Contextual knowledge of your school will transfer with you to a new role in the same school and HR law will transfer with you from managing a team in a school to managing a team in a hospital or university. But delivering against the different performance targets in a school (improving outcomes for pupils) requires knowledge that won't serve you well when trying to do the same thing in a hospital (improved outcomes for patients). The more things like the sector, seniority and context of the leader's role changes the less knowledge the persistent problems have in common.

Some knowledge will be useful for lots of people in lots of different roles in lots of different sectors. Some will be very specialised for particular individuals in particular roles in particular sectors.

So let's do the work. Let's identify the problems, identify the knowledge and skills required to solve them, put it out there and do some comparisons. We can all place our bets and see where we come out.

**Matt Hood**

**Principal, Oak National Academy**