Trust improvement perspectives

February 2024

Confederation of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts

Executive summary

This study delves into school improvement in school trusts. It employs Q Methodology and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) to explore the viewpoints of trust leaders about effective school improvement. The research blends the subjectivity-focused Q Methodology with the analytical depth of LCT to explore what trust leaders value most.

The research identified four distinct groups within the sample. Each represents a unique perspective on effective school improvement strategies. These perspectives – Domain Specific Improvers, Transformational Improvers, Leadership Improvers, and Culture Improvers – highlight the varied approaches that trust leaders adopt. The study reveals the relative values these groups place on different aspects in their quest for school improvement. These aspects include specialized knowledge, leadership styles, and organizational culture.

Key findings include the identification of four distant groups of people within the sample:

1. **Domain Specific Improvers**: These leaders emphasized concrete, knowledge-based strategies, taking a different stance to most of the other identified groups.
2. **Transformational Improvers**: These leaders favoured more abstract, vision-driven approaches. They prioritize aspirational and motivational elements over specialized knowledge.
3. **Leadership Improvers**: These leaders focus on abstract leadership styles rather than personal qualities. Their preference for distributed and instructional leadership models echoes much of the dominant educational discourse.
4. **Culture Improvers**: These leaders lean towards abstract methods, valuing both knowledge and personal attributes. Their emphasis is on creating a supportive organizational culture.

The study's conclusions are not generalizable beyond the study. It should not be extrapolated that the four perspectives identified necessarily exist elsewhere. However, the study does point to concepts and considerations that could help trusts and guide future research. It is hypothesised that by understanding and leveraging the perspectives within their teams, trusts may be better placed to direct their strategies, resources, and efforts towards enhancing educational quality.

Introduction

Trust leaders face challenges in navigating complex organizations and determining effective school improvement strategies. A range of perspectives can be beneficial (Syed, 2019) but also lead to misunderstandings if not properly understood and integrated.

The choices that trust leaders make about school improvement, therefore, are important but the way that trust leaders think about school improvement remains relatively under-researched. To address this issue, a research methodology was developed to analyze trust leaders' perspectives on school improvement. The study provides interesting but tentative insights into the range and characteristics of perspectives trust leaders hold.

While the results are specific to the sample group and cannot be generalized to all trusts due to the nature of the methodology, they say something about the range and characteristics of perspectives on school improvement within trusts. Furthermore, the study establishes and successfully tests a method that might be applied within a trust in order to understand the specific alignments/unalignments at play in that organisation.

To explore the varied perspectives on school improvement within school trusts, this study employed a mixed-method approach that combines Q Methodology and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT). While both methods are well-established in their respective fields, the combination is relatively novel and offers a unique framework for dissecting school improvement viewpoints.

The Study

Q Methodology

Q Methodology is a research technique designed to study human subjectivity (Watts & Stenner, 2012). It allows for the identification of shared viewpoints within a group. Participants were given a set of 75 statements about school improvement strategies and asked to sort them according to how effective they consider each to be as an approach to school improvement. Participants sorted these statements into a forced distribution, from most effective to least effective, thereby creating a 'Q sort.' The shape of the ranking distribution along which items had to be sorted is in figure 1.

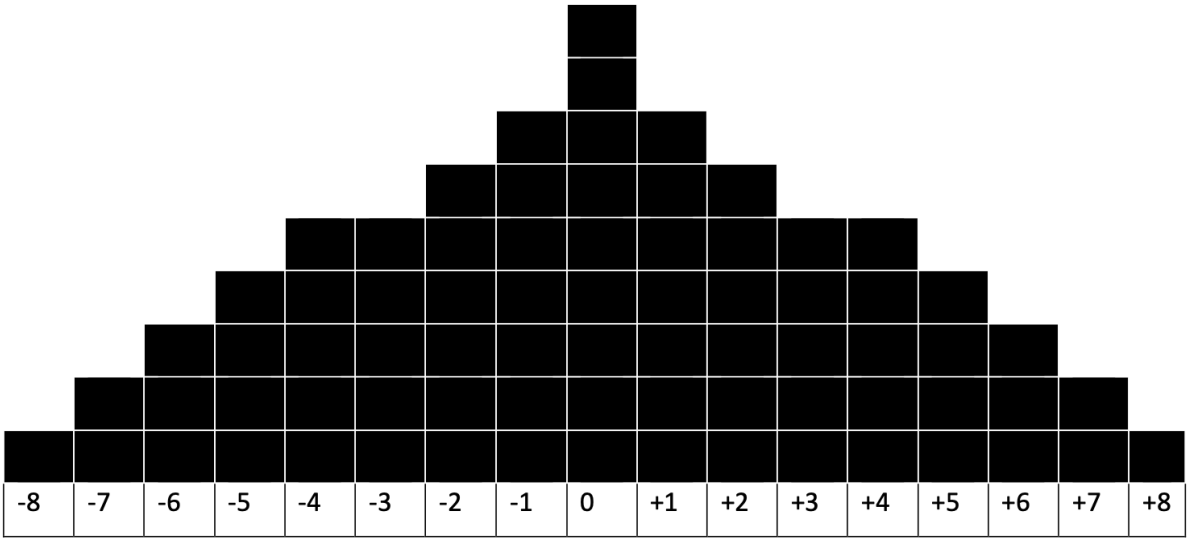

Figure 1: Ranking distribution

Factor analysis is then used to calculate correlations with the sorts undertaken by other people, identifying clusters of individuals who sorted the statements in similar ways, and revealing shared perspectives within the sample. This process allows us to generate 'composite' sorts that are the combined view of participants whose Q sorts are statistically similar to each other. These can be analysed to understand and compare the shared view of one group with that of another group. The appendix gives further information about the methodology. What is important to know at this stage is that Q method identifies groups of people whose views seem to be statistically similar to each other but different from those of other groups.

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT)

LCT is a sociological framework that allows for the analysis of how knowledge is organized, legitimized, and valued in different social fields (Maton, 2014). In the context of school improvement, LCT enables us to explore trust leaders' views by analysing them in relation to specific dimensions like 'Specialization' and 'Semantics'. In Semantics, semantic gravity refers to

the degree of context-dependency of knowledge, while semantic density refers to the complexity of the knowledge. Specialization allows us to explore the extent to which epistemic relations (what we know) and social relations (who we are) are emphasized. The LCT lenses allow us to move beyond analysing individual approaches ranked within the Q Sort to see something more fundamental: the patterns and organizing principles that underlie what trust leaders consider to be important about school improvement approaches.

The four perspectives

The study identified four 'factors'. Each factor is a group of participants with similar views on effective school improvement approaches. This means that the people within each group tended to identify the same approaches as more/less effective. Importantly, they do so in a way that is different from the other groups.

The composite sorts of each group (factor) were analyzed based on LCT concepts of Specialization and Semantics. LCT sees things in relative terms, not absolute terms. For example, a school improvement approach could be relatively more or less abstract compared to others. We use + and - to show the relative strengths of:

- Semantic Density (SD)
- Semantic Gravity (SG)
- Epistemic Relations (ER)
- Social Relations (SR)

We use the relative strengths of these dimensions to analyze the characteristics of the items being discussed, in this case, school improvement approaches. This analysis can reveal things like how concrete or abstract ideas are, how much emphasis is placed on specialized or technical knowledge, and how much emphasis is placed on personal attributes. For this study, each perspective was given a descriptive name that captures its essence. This helps summarize the four perspectives and place them within the wider literature context.

Important note about LCT

LCT analysis tends to be concerned with relative weightings (Maton, Hood & Chen, 2016). Accordingly, LCT researchers are interested in the relative existence/importance of the dimensions outlined above. Favouring something does not imply the complete absence of something else. Language is chosen carefully. For example, saying that a group *favoured* concrete strategies does not mean that abstract knowledge was not evident or valued at all. Similarly, saying that a group is oriented towards specialized knowledge does not mean attributes of knowers were not valued. It is a comment about their relative weighting. So, where leaders are found to favour, for example, epistemic relations (and thus specialized knowledge) this does not mean they don't care at all about social relations (who we are and what we're like). It just means they seem to be value it *relatively* more.

Group 1: Domain Specific Improvers

Group 1 exhibited concrete (SG+, SD-) ways of understanding the most effective school improvement approaches, and a *clear* orientation towards a knowledge code (ER+, SR-). This is a

significant finding and runs counter to much of the school improvement discourse, as identified in the literature review that preceded the study. Indeed, Barker and Rees (2020, 2021) argue the discourse of school leadership and improvement tends to focus on the personal qualities of leaders. They argue that effective school leadership and improvement depends on the development of domain-specific knowledge. They say this is more important than generic approaches from other fields, or individual character traits. Group 1 would seem to concur with Barker and Rees' (2020, 2021) view of the world.

Therefore, Group 1 might be considered the 'Domain Specific Improvers' in the study.

Some of the highest ranked items focus on improving teachers' specialized classroom practice. For example, 'Ensure pupils have high quality learning materials', 'Develop teachers' subject knowledge', and 'Ensure teaching materials align with the curriculum'. This perspective resonates with the some of the research identified in the literature review (Steward, 2019; Reynolds and Neeleman, 2021). However, although this perspective exhibits an orientation towards thinking about school improvement in terms of pedagogical approaches, it is not the case that it favours all pedagogical approaches. For example, 'Personalisation', which was advocated by Hargreaves (2006) is ranked negatively, as is 'Track pupil progress using flightpaths' and 'Ensure teachers provide detailed written feedback'.

What is remarkable about Group 1 is that concrete items tended to be ranked very positively and very negatively. Many of the more abstract items ranked more towards the middle. It would seem reasonable to conclude that this is because their preference for domain specific knowledge means they feel they have a strong sense of specific pedagogic practices which work, and also those they feel do not. This perspective would seem to be very much in keeping with the 'evidence-led' paradigm described by Weston and Clay (2018), Holme (2021) and Holme et al. (2020).

Group 2: Transformational Improvers

Group 2 showed a clear orientation towards more abstract (SG-, SD+) ways of understanding school improvement approaches. They also showed a relative orientation towards a 'knowledge code'. They believe effective school improvement is based on leaders' vision and personal attributes more than specialized knowledge. They emphasised statements like, "Demand everyone is the best we can be," "Lead with optimism," "Be values driven," and "Establish an inspiring vision." These sorts of concepts are described by Warrick (2011) as 'Transformational Leadership', which was identified in the literature review.

"Transformational leaders motivate followers by raising their consciousness about the importance of organizational goals and by inspiring them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization," (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Accordingly, the Group 2 perspective could be described as that of the **'Transformational Improvers'**.

Gumus et al. (2018) suggests that a Transformational Leadership style is prevalent in leadership discourse. So, it is not surprising to see school trust leaders thinking about their leadership of effective school improvement in such terms.

This study was not concerned with appraising the effectiveness of each perspective. But it is worth noting other research which suggests that a leadership discourse that is uniformly abstract could limit the sector's ability to share concrete knowledge about how to improve schools. Pfeffer (2015), for example, criticizes highly abstract ways of thinking about leadership. He argues that it's impossible to test such ideas empirically. This concern is echoed by the likes of Tian et al. (2016).

Moreover, Gronn (2003) considered the Transformational Leadership approach to be linked with 'Hero' leadership. Barker and Rees (2020) indicate the hero paradigm is problematic, as it leads to unachievable performance expectations.

Maton's work (2014, 2020) gives an interesting insight into the nature of abstraction in discourses. He argues that knowledge building takes place when knowledge 'waves' between the abstract (SG-, SD+) and the concrete (SG+,SD-). This can be seen in Curzon's (2019) analysis of semantic waves in the teaching of computing.

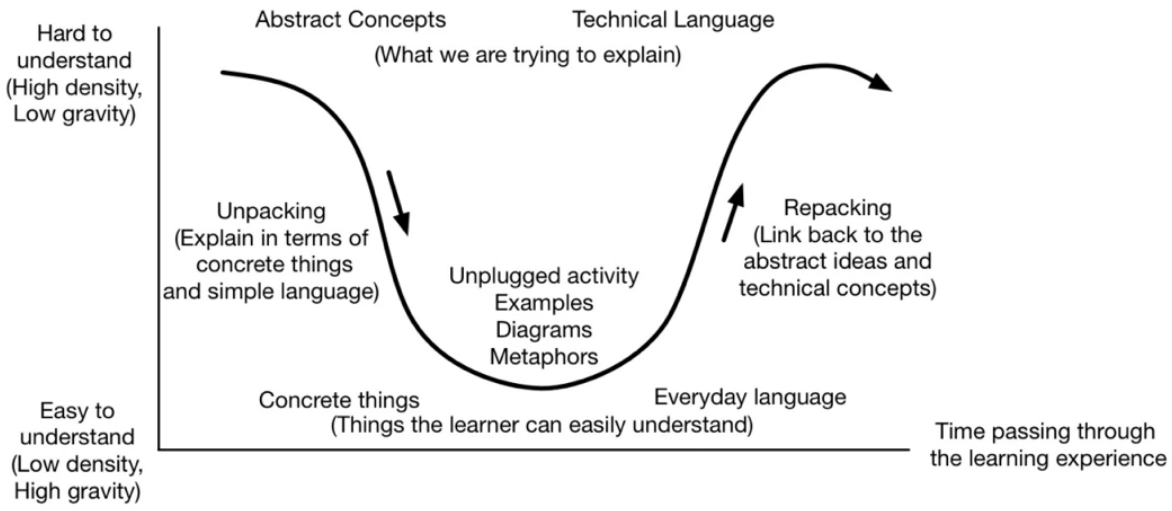

Figure 2: Semantic Wave (Curzon, 2019)

Where this 'waving' does not take place, and knowledge practices remain either in the abstract *or* concrete, this is seen as 'flatlining' (Kirk, 2017), which can limit opportunities for knowledge building. So, the tentative conclusion reached here is not that an abstract leadership

discourse is necessarily bad. Rather, we need to be aware of the need to 'unpack' it into more concrete exemplifications and actions if it is to be effective in building knowledge.

Group 3: Leadership Improvers

Group 3 also exhibits more abstract (SG-, SD+) ways of understanding school improvement approaches. Two of the three highest ranked approaches in the Group 3 composite Q sort relate to styles of leadership. These participants prefer items like 'Be an instructional leader' and 'Distribute leadership'. This echoes the school leadership and improvement discourse identified by Coe (2022). It is characterized by vague terms that can be hard to define and hard to prove. Coe (2022, p. 7) refers to these notions as "jingle jangle fallacies".

The Group 3 perspective shares some similarities with Group 2. However, it is different because Group 3 focuses on the leadership strategy through which leaders discharge their duties. In contrast, Group 2 is more about their personal qualities and values. Group 3 is about leadership more than leaders. Accordingly, this perspective could be described as that of **'Leadership Improvers'.** Gumus et al. (2018) finds that Distributed and Instructional leadership are the two leadership models most abundant in leadership discourse. It's not surprising that some participants in this study ranked such leadership styles highly.

Group 4: Culture Improvers

Group 4 was marginally oriented toward more abstract (SG-, SD+) ways of understanding effective school improvement approaches. They also demonstrated a Specialization code that emphasised both what leaders know and their attributes (ER+, SR+). However, several of these top-ranked items focus explicitly on aspects of organizational culture. For example, they include 'Build positive relationships with pupils', 'Build a supportive culture', and 'Consistency.' This suggests they particularly see improvement through the lens of how the organization feels for the people within it. For this reason, the Group 4 perspective could be described as the **'Culture Improvers'**. This would seem to resonate with the findings of Sammons et al. (2011), who found the culture of teachers and the learning culture of pupils to be significant factors in improving schools.

Consensus

Meaning can also be found by exploring areas of consensus. For example, all four perspectives ranked 'Ensure teachers provide detailed written feedback' in the two lowest positions. This is a significant finding. It shows that, even where trust leaders tend to think in abstract terms about effective school leadership, they all agree on more specific pedagogical approaches that are ineffective. This may also reflect that research, such as the findings of Elliot et al.'s (2016) evidence review of marking, has permeated the profession's consciousness. Their review found

limited evidence of the efficacy of extended written marking. Or it may be a reflection of what is, and is not, 'in vogue' in the professional discourse at the current time.

All groups ranked 'Prioritise Homework' negatively, apart from the Domain Specific Improvers. They only ranked it in the middle of the distribution. This concurs with the literature review, which found that although homework is cited as a potential school improvement strategy, it is not a commonly advocated strategy. A similar finding could be observed regarding the use of digital technology as a school improvement strategy. All groups showed a relative ambivalence. None of them ranked it higher than the midpoint of the distribution. This sentiment would seem to concur with Higgins et al.'s (2012) argument that a causal link cannot be established between digital technology and improved educational outcomes.

Behaviour management emerged as an important theme in the literature review. It had the third highest frequency. It was unsurprising, therefore, to see that all groups ranked aspects of behaviour management positively. There were, though, a few differences. For example, Groups 1, 3 and 4 ranked 'Teach rules and behaviour expectations explicitly' in the top 5 ranking positions in the distribution. Group 2, on the other hand, ranked it only in the +1 position, suggesting they valued this item less favourably (although not necessarily negatively).

However, this does not mean that Group 2 leaders (Transformational Improvers) do not value positive pupils' behaviour. These participants, like those of Group 3, ranked 'Build positive relationships with pupils' in one of the highest-ranking positions. This difference might reveal less about whether positive relationships matter (as they seem to agree on this). Instead, it might show differences in how people think positive relationships are formed.

Conclusions: Implications for trusts

Trusts operate in different ways (Greany and McGinity, 2021). However, there has been relatively little research into the different approaches to school improvement that trust leaders adopt. There has also been little research into the perspectives that inform these approaches. The study successfully identified and extracted four different, holistic perspectives about what trust leaders consider effective school improvement approaches. As such, it makes a modest contribution to filling that gap.

The four perspectives identified in this study could exist elsewhere. It is possible, but not necessarily probable. Further research would be necessary to ascertain this. As Fontein-Kuipers (2016) notes, the findings of a specific Q study are not generalisable. However, it can be an effective way of generating a hypothesis for further research.

Furthermore, there are no claims made in this study about the efficacy of the perspectives identified. Again, additional and more complex research would be required in order to explore whether trust leaders identified with one of these perspectives were any more effective in improving schools than any other.

However, what the study seems to have demonstrated is that the methodology is able to deduce patterns among a group of leaders that reveals:

- **Who** seems to agree on what matters (the people who 'load' onto each factor/perspective)
- **What** they think matters (the ranked items)
- **How** they think about school improvement (an underlying perspective)

The study demonstrates what we intuitively know to be the case: people think differently about how to improve schools. But it goes further than this simple truism by helping to expose *how* perspectives differ.

Four distinct ways of thinking about school improvement emerged from the study, each characterised by a unique orientation towards particular improvement approaches. While these are not claimed to be universally extant, the principles underpinning their identification could potentially serve as a tool for trust leaders to explore alignment, understand different viewpoints, and tailor strategies that resonate with their teams. It could also precipitate further research.

The journey of school improvement is fraught with challenges and complexities. This study offers a promising avenue for trust leaders to gain valuable insights into the intricate tapestry of perspectives that shape their organizations. By doing so, they may be better able to understand the strategies, resources, and efforts they turn towards the collective goal of elevating educational quality.

Appendix - Methodology

This study utilised 'Q method', broadly following the approach described by Watts & Stenner (2012). Readers interested in understanding the specifics of the method should refer to this for a detailed description. A brief account of this study is provided in this section for context.

The findings are not universally generalizable due to the inherent limitations of Q Methodology (no representative sampling). It focuses on understanding a specific group of people, not on broad generalizability. However, they offer valuable insights into the range of perspectives that *might* exist within a similar educational context.

Sample and data collection

The study involved a sample of 35 trust leaders, drawn from CST's Directors of Improvement Professional Community, representing various sizes, phases and regions. They ranked 75 statements about school improvement along a given distribution (Figure 1). These statements were derived from a comprehensive review of existing literature and professional discourse. We ensured the statements adequately represented the most common ideas exemplified in the discourse around school improvement. They are not claimed to be exhaustive. The sort was supplemented by a short survey that further probed and cross-referenced what each person considered to be more/less effective in bringing about school improvement. These can be seen in the table below:

Table 1: Q-Set items to be sorted

Q set item number	Q-set item
1	Use insights from cognitive science to improve teaching
2	Read the research literature about school improvement
3	Collaboration
4	Improve attendance
5	Work closely with colleagues across the Trust
6	Improve pupils' reading
7	Read challenging texts aloud, and at a fast pace
8	Run coffee mornings with local community groups
9	Involve parents
10	Establish 'non-negotiable' characteristics of all teaching

Q set item number	Q-set item
11	Script key routines for staff
12	Allow teachers to teach how they wish because there is no 'best way'
13	Develop teachers' use of high quality questioning
14	Prioritise homework
15	Make sure tasks are differentiated for pupils
16	Implement mentoring for teachers
17	Implement instructional coaching
18	Use video coaching to improve teaching
19	Ensure leaders take responsibility for managing behaviour
20	Implement a restorative approach to behaviour management
21	Teach rules and behaviour expectations explicitly
22	Base decisions on data
23	Ensure teachers provide leaders with half termly progress data
24	Prioritise the needs of SEND pupils
25	Lead with optimism
26	Leaders must be on the gates at the start and end of each day
27	Ensure leaders are highly visible around school
28	Write a detailed school improvement plan
29	Establish a talent strategy
30	Track pupil progress using flightpaths
31	Teach a knowledge rich curriculum
32	Teach a skills-based curriculum
33	Ensure subject curricula are sequenced appropriately
34	Ensure the curriculum is enjoyed
35	Reduce class sizes
36	Consistency
37	Distribute leadership

Q set item number	Q-set item
38	Ensure teachers provide detailed written feedback
39	Be an instructional leader
40	Prioritise PSHE
41	Peer-led evaluation
42	Ensure all leaders continue to teach
43	Nurture a growth mindset culture
44	Build a supportive culture
45	Put relationships first
46	Self-evaluation
47	Sweat the small stuff
48	Improve staff retention
49	Focus on a small number of priorities
50	Pupil voice
51	Develop teachers' subject knowledge.
52	Target training at specific groups (e.g. skilled teachers or middle leaders)
53	Provide teachers with clear and consistent feedback on quality of teaching
54	Put staff first
55	Use digital technology
56	Interactive whiteboards
57	Tuition
58	Be values driven
59	Establish an inspiring vision
60	Focus on wellbeing
61	Innovate
62	Borrow ideas from successful schools and trusts
63	Personalisation
64	Praise effort, not ability

Q set item number	Q-set item
65	Make sure teachers are part of their community of practice
66	Build positive relationships with pupils
67	Set pupils clear targets
68	Performance management
69	Ensure pupils have high quality learning materials
70	Promote students' self-efficacy
71	Ensure teaching materials align with the curriculum
72	Demand everyone is 'the best we can be.'
73	Ensure there are effective safeguarding practices
74	Rigorous lesson observation and quality assurance of teaching
75	Move on persistently low-performing staff

Figure 3: Example Q Sort

Factor analysis

Each participant's sort produced a diagram showing the rankings of each Q-set item. The rankings were represented by a rank number between -8 and +8. These rankings were then compared across participants to determine the intercorrelation between them, which produced a correlation matrix.

The correlation matrix was exposed to Centroid Factor Analysis. This was done to identify factors—clusters of people who shared similar perspectives. Four factors (groups of participants) were identified where the correlation between their sorts was found to be meaningful and not random.

Interpretation

A composite Q sort diagram was produced for each factor. It is simplest to think of this as being the 'average' Q Sort constructed by all those participants whose Q Sorts were statistically similar to each other.

So, to summarise so far, four factors (groups of people) were identified on the basis that the way they sorted the items was statistically similar. A composite diagram was produced for each of these four groups, allowing one to compare the four groups.

One way to consider these groups is to simply observe how they ranked the 75 items and comment on similarities and differences in the ranking of items. However, it is even more instructive to focus on what each group ranked significantly differently to the other groups. This gives a sense of how they uniquely see school improvement. In Q Methodology these are known as 'distinguishing statements'. The table below shows only the distinguishing statements for each group.

Table 2: Distinguishing statements and rankings for each Group

Group 1 distinguishing items	**Rank**
Ensure pupils have high quality learning materials	+7
Improve attendance	+6
Use insights from cognitive science to improve teaching	+5
Ensure leaders take responsibility for managing behaviour	+4
Prioritise homework	-1
Reduce class sizes	-2
Ensure the curriculum is enjoyed	-4
Innovate	-5
Track pupil progress using flightpaths	-8
Group 2 distinguishing items	**Rank**
Demand everyone is 'the best we can be.'	+8
Lead with optimism	+7
Self-evaluation	+6
Rigorous lesson observation and quality assurance of teaching	1
Implement instructional coaching	-1
Put staff first	-2

Read the research literature about school improvement	-4
Use video coaching to improve teaching	-5
Read challenging texts aloud, and at a fast pace	-8
Group 3 distinguishing items	**Rank**
Distribute leadership	+7
Be an instructional leader	+7
Ensure teachers provide leaders with half termly progress data	+5
Ensure all leaders continue to teach	1
Prioritise the needs of SEND pupils	-1
Collaboration	-3
Improve staff retention	-4
Promote students' self-efficacy	-5
Involve parents	-5
Group 4 distinguishing items	**Rank**
Build a supportive culture	+7
Use digital technology	0
Move on persistently low-performing staff	-4
Script key routines for staff	-6
Sweat the small stuff	-8

The theory behind Q method is that people may hold an underlying perspective about a topic, and that this might be shared with other people. This perspective may not be visible ordinarily but through the ranking activity we are able to see echoes of it by viewing the way people arrange the items. Q does not necessarily revel a direct view of perspective itself but something more akin to a glimpse in the mirror (where the mirror is the sorting activity). Having caught this glimpse of an underlying perspective, we might then ask more fundamental questions of it.

This study achieved this by viewing the results through the lens of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) to interpret the underlying perspective of each group. Each item in the sort was 'coded' according to the LCT dimensions of Specialization and Semantics (Maton 2014). This meant that the composite sorts could be analysed to identify any patterns and orientations according to LCT. These were then cross-referenced against the survey results. This was done to check whether the interpretation of the Q sorts was consistent with the views shared in the survey questions. The survey questions were similarly analysed in relation to LCT.

It is important to know that LCT analysis tends to be concerned with relative weightings. That is to say that, according to LCT, there is always knowledge and always knowers at play in practices. And many practices tend to involved aspects of concrete and abstract forms of knowledge. Accordingly, LCT researchers are interested in the relative existence of these. Language is chosen carefully. For example, saying that a group *favoured* concrete strategies does not mean that abstract knowledge was not evident or valued at all. Similarly, saying that a group is oriented towards specialized knowledge does not mean attributes of knowers were not valued. It is a comment about their relative weighting. Indeed, in some LCT studies of other social practices two dimensions are found to be equally valued.

Using LCT it was possible not only to analyse the composite Q sorts and compare the rankings among the four groups. It was also possible to comment on these groups in relation to the LCT dimensions of Specialisation and Semantics. In short, this meant that interpretation could be made of how far each group's Q sort demonstrated orientation towards:

- Concrete ways of thinking about school improvement
- Abstract ways of thinking about school improvement
- Approaches that emphasised specialised knowledge as the basis of effective school improvement
- Approaches that emphasised the attributes, leadership styles and characteristics of effective improvement
- Any combination of the above

As noted above, the methodology employed in the study does not lead to generalisable claims. Accordingly, this study does not assert that there are only four 'types' of perspectives about school improvement. Neither does it suggest that the perspectives found in the study are to be found in all schools and trusts. In that way the study seeks to provide something of a compass to assist the navigation of perspectives about school improvement rather than a map of the territory.

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