Systems leadership in the early years

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Abstract

This paper describes a new leadership coaching model that was delivered as part of Manchester city region's delivery of
the Department for Education's Early Outcomes Fund. The coaching model explicitly paralleled the relational practices
that are increasingly shaping early intervention policy and practice. Goodwin's theory of professional vision (1994) and
Shotter's theorisation of with-ness (2011) provided the conceptual lens for this paper. The coaching facilitation aimed to
afford the emergence of a new way of seeing leadership by scrutinising events of relational practice between participants
in the coaching sessions (using video recording and review) and creating discursive practices using strengths-based ana-
lysis. We exemplify the coaching model using notes from a collaborative ethnographic evaluation of the six half-day group
coaching sessions, surfacing how a new way of seeing *silence* may have seeded a new 'object of knowledge' in the group's
emerging professional vision of leadership in the early years.

Keywords

coaching, leadership, early years, systems change, relational

Introduction

Jonathan Lear's (2006) anthropological exegesis of hope is
based on the history of the North American indigenous
people, The Crow. In the face of catastrophe, their survival
depended on the elders' ability to listen to and learn from an
enigmatic vision brought to them by a younger member of
their community. Whether coronavirus (Covid-19) is
forcing or prefiguring an *existential* crisis in the public
sector is yet to be seen, but there is a lot to be learned
from The Crow elders in the wake of Covid. Established
leaders need to be attuned to the narrative infrastructure
(the stories and the way that they are told) that shape their
cultural identity, they must operate with processes that
afford challenge to existing wisdom and they must value
relational-responsive dialogue for its role in representa-
tional renewal. How do you get leaders to behave like the

Crow elders? People, who are so attuned to the concepts
of their culture that they can include, not disregard, the
innovations that arise at the borders. Leaders who shape
reform through their inclusion of knowledge from all
people. Leaders who are adept at letting go of established
ways of knowing to make new ways possible. These
ways of leading are as relevant to system change models
for children's services today (Bostock et al., 2018) as they
were to The Crow.

Covid-19 has highlighted the imperative for systems'
change (Dougall et al., 2018) and raised the stakes for

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leadership. Leaders need to be practised at operating in complex ecologies, but they must also have the confidence to dialogue in the midst of uncertainty to create generative collective responses to improve the system. According to Shotter (2011), this sort of generative action arises in moments of dialogue where the opportunity to begin joint action, which is always entailed in institutional change (Rogers, 1995) resides. These moments are a fissure in the normal message sending and defending or receiving repertoires that characterise a lot of institutional talk; these fissures or gaps are spaces with affordances for joining, for *with-ness* (Shotter, 2011). The trouble is that these moments can be masked by a lot of noise inside the individual (Binney, et al., 2009) and the organisation (Shotter, 2010). Creating a movement towards, or 'readiness' for change is not only a challenge for institutions, it is a challenge at the site of practice. Any family practitioner will tell you the ability to work productively with challenge is a valuable, but often missing, tool in the box. Working from a strengths-based perspective avoids pushing people into defence and is a tried and tested way to enable change even in the most difficult circumstances (Kennedy et al., 2011; Oppenheim and Goldsmith, 2007). Making explicit parallels between the challenges of practice leadership and institutional leadership is one way to ensure a system, an early years' system, has the narrative coherence, conceptual and values based integrity necessary for diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 1995).

There is relatively little literature on leadership in the context of early years' services, an observation made by others (see Coleman et al., 2016; Curtis and Burton, 2009), and very few papers that explicitly parallel the practices in early years with leadership. However, of the literature that does exist, recently reviewed by Nicholson et al. (2020), leadership is constructed as relational. Nicholson and colleagues sum up leadership up as, 'inherently complex and intersubjective, involving such processes as sense making, boundary spanning, collaboration'. Purposeful action results from relational rather than individual agency. The ability to tell, re-tell and re-story were highlighted for their emancipatory role; making practices and people visible through narrative practice. The challenge for the narrative or relational early years' leader is not to fix a narrative, just like The Crow elders, the task is to *renew* the narrative by inclusion of the as yet untold stories or unheard voices. Scholars of leadership, writing through the lens of the pandemic, have surfaced leaders' use of compassion, empathy and care to support colleagues and stakeholders and reduce crisis-related anxieties in the workforce (Tomkins, 2020; Wilson, 2020). The indirect link between leadership that supports systems functioning and the wellbeing of young children and their families has also been made (Lawson et al., 2020; Masten and Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). The Covid-19 literature tends to echo the dominant individualised notion of leadership, where the intellectual and emotional resources of individuals are deployed or directed to the support of other individuals. Whilst, the case for distributed and collaborative leadership approaches where leaders employ wisdom flexibly to enable innovation

and adaptation to the situation have been well made (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020), there is little research on how to turn these ideals into practice and how to challenge the dominant individualised conceptualisation of leadership. In this paper, we outline a novel approach to leadership coaching that was underpinned by a belief that transformational leaders need not, in fact probably should not, enact leadership through individual acts whether those acts are loud or soft (Wood, 2017). Instead, actions should evolve as an adaptive response to the practice context (Male and Palaiologou, 2015), focusing on the social and relational processes that support trajectory (not outcome) of individuals and institutions (Robson, 2013).

Our proposition was that systems transformation, the traditional territory for enactment of leadership, does require an element of personal transformation (Mezirow, 1991). In line with the dialogic theory of the coaching design, our intent was to create a dilemma in the group's response repertoires. Triggers for new understanding of the self were produced in the collective. Personal transformation was not the product of individual reflection as in Mezirow (1991). The aim was to create a context where participants could experience the priority of the other in the renewal of the self (Freeman, 2014). Using video review of interactions provides the potential for this and has been used successfully to change habitual practices in education, health and social care contexts through individual coaching (James et al., 2016). However, using video review with teams, rather than individuals, has been successful in creating collective change in institutions (Iedema et al., 2013). Videoing interactions draws attention to the dialogue where existing wisdom in the group surfaces. In recent work in the field of special education, a team-based video review intervention changed the metaphors and stories that underpinned teams' theories of practice around children with complex needs (James et al. 2021). Iedema et al. (2013) suggest that visualising practices using video review helps to distribute intelligence in teams through collective reflexive conversations about work. Methods that distribute intelligence are aligned with principles of co-design, where knowledge within groups is activated and expanded leading to co-production of artefacts that embody aspects of the communities' collective knowledge (Bell and Pahl, 2018). The social justice ideals that underpin co-design and co-production promise much for service reform in the early years' sector, yet whilst these words are often heard and spoken in local government contexts, the principles and values are not easy to see in action in local government (Brown et al., 2019). In order to give participants an experience of co-production, we used video review of situated group practices as the coaching method and we adopted a collaborative ethnographic approach to research that process.

Our aim here is to describe the approach and exemplify it with episodes from the coaching sessions that were conducted as part of the Manchester city region's delivery of the Department for Education's Early Outcomes Fund (DfE, 2018). The coaching aimed to support participants to tune in to the narratives that were shaping identities

(their own, others' or the system's), challenge their conceptualisation of leadership and support their relational practices. The participants had different disciplinary backgrounds and were from different local authority areas. Working together in the sessions provided an opportunity for them to experience a relational-responsive developmental process (Shotter, 2011); experiencing their own development using the same strengths-based process, and relational principles that are shaping policy and practice in early childhood (http://www.cpcs.org.uk/index.php?page=empowering-parents-empowering-communities; https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/early-years-toolkit/social-and-emotional-learning-strategies/; National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2016). Not only did the coaching aim to develop individual 'performance', the group context afforded the development of what Goodwin (1994) referred to as 'professional vision'. The facilitator aimed to co-create a shared 'way of seeing' through the cropping and editing and coding of video recordings of relational practices and to use those recordings to activate the knowledge stimulated in the group's response to the videos with the hope of co-producing a new 'object of knowledge'.

Methods

We conducted an ethnographic qualitative research evaluation of a group-based leadership coaching model with workers from multi-disciplinary backgrounds who were all leading a locality's implementation of the Pathways to Talking Project in the city region. Some of the project leaders were from allied health roles, and they could not be included in this study because their employment by the National Health Service (NHS) necessitated ethical governance procedures that we did not have time to complete within the short timescale of the project. The loss of the NHS leader's perspective was regrettable. It meant that we ran two coaching groups.

Procedure

There were six coaching sessions between October 2019 and March 2020. They were held monthly and lasted two and a half hours with up to ten participants in each session. The first author led the coaching and the second author led the evaluation. The main aims of the evaluation were to document the content and process of the sessions, observe the group's responses and co-construct the meaning of the observed responses with the participants.

Ethics

The study was reviewed and approved by Manchester Metropolitan University's Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (approval number 11449). Having two coaching groups meant that participation in the research was voluntary. Participants on the Pathways to Talking Project could participate in coaching and choose whether to be part of the research. Inclusion to the study was open to all local project leaders on the Pathways to Talking Project who were employed by local authorities and not working with a co-leader employed by the NHS. People on the strategic leadership group, who were not employed by the NHS, were also eligible for inclusion. All of the potential participants were female. There were eight locality leaders who met the inclusion criteria and two strategic leaders. They all had information about the research and returned written consent. Along with the principle of voluntariness, the anonymity and privacy of participants were important considerations especially given the small number of localities in the project. We anonymised all data in this paper and shared it with all participants prior to submission. There were no suggestions or requests for changes. Two participants (the fourth and fifth authors) have contributed personal reflections on their experience of coaching. They were both strategic leaders on the project.

Participants

All eight locality project leaders and both strategic leaders who met the study's inclusion criteria consented to participate. Participants were from six localities in the region. They were all female. They had varied professional and practice backgrounds, including social care, teaching and early years.

The coaching intervention principles

Charles Goodwin (1994) exemplified his concept of 'professional vision' by comparing the ways that archaeologists and farmers come to see the same thing differently. He showed how these professions could be distinguished by the way they discussed a patch of soil. For Goodwin the interplay between what is seen and how it is talked about creates new 'objects of knowledge', which form the theories, artefacts and practices that differentiate professions. Facilitation aimed to create opportunity for a new way of seeing and talking about leadership in a group of early years' leaders who came from different professions and different places in the city region. This was done by setting up authentic moments of relational practice within the coaching sessions, scrutinising those moments using video recording and review, creating discursive practices to offer new ways of seeing and talking about relational practice. The hope being that the new 'objects of knowledge', having been created through the coaching group, would retain traces from the diverse professions, personal histories and places, so that the new concepts would be recognisable and relevant to diverse early years workforce in the city region, enabling boundary spanning and collaborative working – desirable assets in early years leadership (see Nicholson et al., 2020).

In order to create a dialogic discursive practice within the group so that these new conceptual artefacts could emerge, the concept of knowledge needed to be addressed. Shotter's (2011) distinction between referential/representational and relational/renewal ways of knowing was in the facilitator's mind. The challenge was to *show* the value of the renewal of knowledge (with all its power to unsettle established

referential knowledge). Goodwin's archaeological example influenced the way this binary was made visible in the coaching practice. The first concept that emerged as important to the group was to do with the safety of the space. Safe-space was deconstructed and the discussion was conducted in a tone that mirrored the softness of an archaeologist's brushing. Gentle and repeated attention to the artefact was made by drawing on the participant's knowledge of safe-space. Their knowledge of this, and other concepts, always identified elements that were collective and through their knowledge, the relative limits of the individualised conceptualisation of leadership were surfaced (Dougall et al., 2018; Gilburt, 2016; Timmins, 2015). The group frequently talked about good communication in terms of 'getting your point across'. Facilitation challenged this idea through continuous re-focusing on the relational; for example, by drawing attention to the relational antecedents and impacts of an interaction (rather than the content of the words) within the situated context of the coaching, the project and the service system. This highlighted *response* awareness and diverted attention from *messaging*. The relational-responsive mode was modelled by the facilitator and made visible in the video edits, where the response to what was said, or not said, was highlighted.

Practices – personal goals

In session 1, participants developed personal goals for change. They were supported to link goals with the relational and social processes known to be present in successful public sector implementation (May and Finch, 2009). Participants also aligned the personal goals with their locality implementation plans. By drawing attention to the other participants' responses to an individual's self-concept, facilitation highlighted the others' perspective in the renewal of self-perspective. This was conducted using strengths-based feedback. The unique contribution of each participant's contribution to the collective process was identified and named by the facilitator. This facilitation meant that the development of each person's goals was dispersed amongst the group and rooted in the wider project which meant development of individuals was achieved through a collaborative process.

Practices – video recording

Video recordings of group conversations about the project's implementation challenges were taken in sessions 3, 4 and 5. Edited clips from these recordings were reviewed in sessions 4, 5 and 6. The facilitator analysed the video recordings and edited them using the group's emerging theory of relational practice. Edited video footage was shared to highlight strengths in that practice. The aim was not to use the video edits to create or crystallise evidence of success or skills. It was to develop the emerging theory of relational practice and create opportunity for it to be revised and refined. Where possible, video edits related to participant's personal and project goals.

Evaluation

Participants co-designed the in-session observation framework used by the researcher. The first session was observed in an unstructured way and during this session participants discussed appropriate foci for evaluation and a draft observation schedule was created. Participants were given a copy of the schedule each week to review and to record their own observations. The researcher shared an excerpt from her observations at the end of each session for discussion. This provided some transparency on the researcher's observation practice. It also modelled a degree of co-design. The discussion below includes extracts from the researcher's observation notes.

Structure of analysis

The main aim of this paper is to describe the coaching process. So, the priority is to provide a clear, chronological description of the process drawing attention to episodes that resonate with themes from Shotter's (2011) and Goodwin's (1994) theoretical frameworks. Those theories guided the selection of extracts from researchers' notes, descriptions of the video clips and quotations from participants.

Discussion

Session 3 – first group recording

Participants were recorded having a conversation about their project implementation plans and progress and were encouraged to practice their goals. For example, if a participant wanted to give more space for other people to talk, then they would try to practice that in the conversation. The conversation was recorded for 15 min. The facilitator edited the recording whilst participants had a refreshment break. The first clip was two and half minutes long. It was chosen because it showed the relational construction of meaning. All participants were actively constructing the links between personal coaching goals, project implementation and systems change. This clip was the focus of review and discussion. A second much shorter clip that highlighted emotion expression through body movements was also edited. It was reviewed in session 4.

Before filming the room was rearranged to create a group semi-circle for conversation. Participants openly expressed anxiety about being recorded and, despite the room rearrangement and guidance on the purpose of the conversation and the filming of it, several participants thought they were going to be recorded individually. The indented text below is an extract from the observation notes that depicts the content of the edited clip.

> During the clip, the conversation turns to the topic of professional transitions. Sarah[1] talks about moving into a 'different phase' of her 'leadership journey' where she can see the role of soft-skills in empowering others. This becomes an exchange with Nicola, who talks about the difficulties of bringing colleagues along in a fast-paced environment. Both participants talk about their own frustrations, the pressure they are putting on themselves and feelings of anxiety

about future collaborations. These reflections on collaborative and relational working in the context of a pressurised work environment bring Emma and Lisa into the conversation. Emma relates her own goal, saying that she is working on implementing a brokerage role that brings people on board and encourages distributed ownership of the project. She refers to the impact of the coaching sessions on her practice, saying that they have created space for her to think through this approach. The group are vocal in their agreement with these points, with lots of nodding and murmurs of 'yeah' and 'absolutely'. Lisa then extends these thoughts, commenting that the formation of these relationships is creating a legacy for the project, to which Emma adds that this relational work has 'real worth' and is creating longevity for the project. Sarah and Nicola then return to the effectiveness of Emma's soft skills, and Emma responds that she has related to and learnt from the experiences and reflections of others in the group and applied that in her locality. In her comment, Emma names three members of the group including Amy who has not yet spoken in this conversation, creating space for her to contribute which she does not take – Amy remains silent.

Despite the initial nerves, the conversation flowed, and continued after the facilitator switched off the video recorder. The clip was titled, 'constructing common purpose in the group' as it demonstrated the creation of shared understanding as to why personal coaching was part of the wider project. Until this session, the links between coaching and project implementation had been quite obscure for project leaders. During the discussion of the clip, the group was asked to consider the themes in their conversation and 'culture change' came up. The indented text below is an extract from the observation notes.

> Lisa says that the Pathways to Talking Project 'is not just another Greater Manchester thing', and Emma agrees, saying that this has 'struck' her too. Karen supports this view, saying that this approach to leadership provides an opportunity for changing culture and that it 'feels different to how we normally work'. Emma attributes this difference to the group's creation of a safe space, which has been created by their 'shared passion and determination to make change happen', and 'bring people on board'. She also shares that for her the 'difficulty is going back to areas' and potentially being 'a lone voice'. Lisa and Karen re-join the conversation to acknowledge Emma's concern. Lisa describes herself as 'optimistic' and Karen says that 'Greater Manchester's way of working is very different'.

Despite the positive way the participants spoke about their new understanding of the rationale for the leadership coaching and the potential they saw for it in terms of culture change, at the end of session 3, there was an unspoken but strong feeling of discomfort. Amy had not found her voice in the 15 min conversation. The participants were not able to raise this in the conversation. The facilitator noted this as a point of interest in post-session reflections. There was a sense of failure and more than that, the failure was floating freely amidst the group defying the neat deposit of it in an individual or couple of individuals.

Summary

The participants began to distinguish the new way of leading from the prevalent culture. Differentiation between old and new ways of working is an essential element of innovation diffusion (Rogers, 1995). Its emergence could also be the beginning of a new object of knowledge, which could change the way the group saw and spoke about leadership practices. However, the strong emotion at the end of the session is what subsequently became the clearest seed of a new object of knowledge.

Session 4 – group recording

The theme of silence that tacitly emerged during the group conversation in session 3 was picked-up in session 4 by the facilitator who encouraged the group to consider the work of silence in the group interactions at the beginning of the session. The episode below is from a discussion where the group was asked to discuss the role of the video review in the group's learning. One participant, Dawn, shared her thoughts about what she has seen in the video (taken from the evaluation notes):

> Dawn says that although she can *feel* the dynamics of the group, it has been really useful to *see* them. The video clip she is referring to has showed her as mainly silent. She elaborates that she often views her silence as a 'negative part' of herself but she valued seeing it and realising that she didn't 'look' silent.

In subsequent written reflections, Dawn elaborated further on this as a 'new realisation', saying that she has a 'deeper understanding of silence', values it more personally and with others in meetings, and that she is 'going to work on seeing it in a more positive light'.

Amy's silence and the group's initial unspoken, but strong response to it was not left unspoken. This meant that for Dawn, remaining silent was permissible and she was not the only one whose way of seeing and talking about silence (inside and outside the group coaching sessions) changed. The facilitation scaffolded the group's ability to see silence as a leadership practice. Dawn's reticence could be included as a legitimate act of leadership and thus create a sense of belonging for Dawn (and Amy) as regional leaders. In expressing her feelings of inclusion, Dawn also exemplified how socially organised 'ways of seeing' could lead to personal and collective renewal. In this example, that renewal was dependent on facilitation that created a dilemma by surfacing an unspoken story (i.e. the collective feelings of discomfort about silent voices) and an unspoken voice (Amy's silent role in the group). The collective response to the silence at the end session 3 was what the facilitator needed to be aware of in order to recognise it as a narratable micro-story. By re-telling the story it became an artefact or knowledge object. Using strengths-based discursive practices, the object could be renewed by the group, which further exemplified a *relational* conceptualisation of leadership in the group.

Reflections on coaching

Two members of the group were asked for their perspectives on the sessions, and these are presented below (fourth and fifth authors of this paper).

> It's a rare opportunity to be able to watch yourself on film, get immediate feedback on your own behaviour and have such open and honest discussions. This was an uncomfortable process at times, even though discussions were positive and affirming. It was also surprising, and reassuring, to hear outwardly confident leaders sharing their self-doubts and leadership challenges. [*fourth named author*]

Discomfort is prominent in this extract. Whilst this leader is continuing to think in terms of individual leadership behaviours, she also went on to say that the process had supported her to make a leadership transition. The witnessing of other's experiencing self-doubt about their leadership roles mirrored her own mind-set. Experiencing a shared sense of struggle with self-belief provided reassurance that she used to support her role transition . The collective sharing of doubts and challenges was attributed as an important part of the process.

The second leader gave her observations on the generalised impact of the coaching sessions.

> During this pandemic, using soft skills such as active listening to support effective interactions and collaboration has enabled me to lead our response and influence wider partnerships. The concept and practice of creating shared safe space has guided me in bringing partners together with a common purpose. This has been crucial in enabling us to create forums for innovative and creative responses to the crisis.

Participants frequently returned to the quality of the space, often conflating and interchanging the concepts of 'safe-space' and 'soft-skills' in a developing narrative that they used to distinguish the leadership coaching from other ways of working.

Conclusion

The coaching sessions were designed to enable the creation of a new professional vision of relational practice. The emergence of themes from the video recording and video editing meant that participants experienced co-creation (albeit restricted to themes for inquiry and development). The co-creation fostered critical engagement with the concept of relational practice and the videos of interaction made sure the concept was firmly rooted in reality. The video edits exemplified the concept of relational leadership. Watching videos of themselves in the context of their coaching goals created an opportunity for reflection on the self-narratives that were structuring their expectations. Dawn's reflections indicate a shift in *meaning perspective* as her pre-existing understanding of herself and her leadership was challenged (Mezirow, 1991). Participants began to see and discuss leadership differently. They moved away

from visions of heroic leaders making incisive points with penetrating accuracy, towards seeing leadership as letting go of setting the agenda. Their new concept of leadership favoured setting the conditions (including the affective conditions) to dialogue with others. Having co-produced objects of knowledge the participants were also able to produce a narrative about the new way of being a leader.

In the context of the project, the group coaching drew attention to the *process* of the implementation challenges in the Pathways to Talking Project. It gave participants a greater grasp on the connection between the process and outcomes of the project. With respect to building theories of change, the coaching also made visible the links between relational practice and the social process theory of normalisation (May and Finch, 2009). Making the implementation science relevant and applicable to a diverse group of participants was intentional, to see change leadership as a relational practice. The facilitator also ensured the coaching process was in dialogue with the principles and practices from the early years' field. This alignment engaged participants in the coaching, especially at the outset, when they had trouble seeing the point of it. At the most basic level, the knowledge that parents do interventions that involve video feedback gave some participants the impetus to overcome their own fears of being videoed in session 3.

The participants witnessed and monitored each other's coaching goals. The goals themselves became a window on the person's self-narrative which, because of the perceived safety in the coaching space and the dynamic of trust that developed, opened up over time. During the coaching sessions participants got to know each other and they contributed to each other's development. This was a real experience of peer learning. Unsurprisingly, the participants have continued to meet. They also identified the collaborative peer learning on the project as an attribute of the culture that distinguished it from the normal culture that prioritised the sharing of best practice (Greater Manchester's City region report, 2020) which can set up defensive reactions leading to distance rather than openness to learning. The participants' narration of the impact of this new way of being a leader has led to the coaching model being commissioned for further co-development within the early years' system in the city region.

Finally

On the face of it, The Crow leaders' and the locality leaders' contexts and challenges had little in common. However, The Crow's successful navigation of survival through catastrophe relied on the elders' abilities to listen to and respond to the new stories that emerged from within their tribe. Their ability to listen was rooted in their culture. The locality leaders' experience of a relational dialogic approach and collaborative co-construction renewed their practice theory and meant that they talked about their new professional vision in a way that enabled the 'elders' in the City Region to *get-it* (Shotter, 2011). For the Crow, listening ensured cultural survival. This paper shows how the

practice of listening, especially to what is not said, can be crafted within public sector cultures.

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Note

1. All names have been changed.

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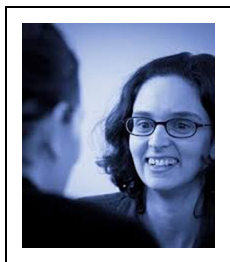
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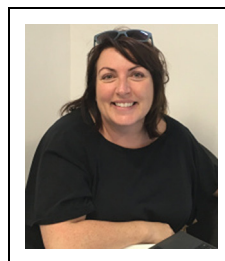
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