Follow the (Teacher) Leader

A tale of formal and informal leadership development

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Much has been made in recent years of the importance of having formal mentoring structures in schools for teachers, and of the need for teachers to complete formal leadership courses. This article explores the importance of developing leadership skills both formally and informally. It also delves into the idea of building friendships within the school environment which can then lead to mentoring friendships.

Gaining confidence to become a teacher leader

Nowadays everything seems to be represented by acronyms, abbreviations, or emojis. Consequently, I was apprehensive when I received an email in October 2021 with the subject line 'STEAM in Action'. My first thought was: What is STEAM? Is it just an additional letter in the more common acronym STEM? However, when I delved further into the world of STEAM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics – I was impressed at what I found and the research that had been done in this area.

Each year, in the numeracy group in school, we endeavour to introduce novel ideas and initiatives. The aim is to help the entire school community engage with numeracy, not just in the context of the maths classroom but across all curricula and all areas of school life.

With this idea of introducing a new initiative, I began looking into research papers based on the topic of STEAM and also referenced the Junior Cycle For Teachers webpage. Being truthful, I hadn't practised such research work since my undergraduate studies. In recent years it was not something that I implemented into my practice, through lack of time or not feeling like it would benefit my teaching.

Furthermore, earlier in my career I was not confident enough to relay exciting new ideas and lead them, so I was of the mindset that it would not have been a worthwhile exercise. I am someone who has led in other areas of life – sport, friendships – but never felt confident enough to fully lead in my work and school context. This stemmed from my own self-belief and feelings of being judged for ideas that I may put forward.

Study and training

At the time, I had completed the PDSL (Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership) and was in the latter stages of the MESL (Masters of Education in School Leadership). Throughout this two-year journey, unbeknownst to myself, I had gained a great deal of knowledge and confidence in my own leadership abilities and my self-belief. I realised that, through being mentored by more experienced teachers in my school and by other teachers on the courses I have completed, I had gained confidence in my abilities and, in particular, in my development into a teacher leader. Angelle and DeHart (2011) exemplified teacher leadership as sharing knowledge of pedagogy and classroom management with colleagues, being willing to accept leadership opportunities when asked, and routinely stepping beyond required teaching duties to serve students and the school.

While all six modules that I studied in the PDSL helped me gain and learn worthwhile leadership knowledge, there were two modules that I related to best and took the most out of: 'Building Culture, Capacity and Teams' and 'Mentoring and Coaching'. Why? Honestly, they made me reflect on my own experience of teaching, how being part of a team and working together in a team are two completely different things. They made me ponder my experiences of being a mentor and being mentored. Also, the importance of trust, communication, having a role, and being able to share opinions were all things that I learned to be key factors in building a strong team.

Research and relationships

All of the school leaders in my study stressed how important a mentor is, and how having a deep-rooted friendship with that person adds to the level of trust and honesty between them.

With all of this in mind, I chose to look further into two areas for my thesis for the completion of the MESL: the importance of being in a team and mentoring. I chose to explore school leadership in Ireland – the influence of involvement in camogie, Gaelic games, and ladies' football, at an elite level, on the daily practices of school principals. This was something that always interested me, but I would never have looked at it through the perspective of a researcher: Does being involved in these sports benefit school leaders?

One of the major findings in my research was that involvement in these sporting arenas allows deep-rooted friendships to be forged and informal networks to be built up. These are relationships that assist leaders when they need advice, support, or just someone to talk to. All of the school leaders in my study stressed how important a mentor is and how having a deep-rooted friendship with that person adds to the level of trust and honesty between them.

The idea of informally developing leadership abilities came up repeatedly. This was something I had never thought of. I have been involved in sport from a young age and had never reflected on the skills I had developed through my involvement: administration, organisation, management of

large groups of people, dealing with pressured situations, and showing leadership.

STEAM in school

This brings us back to the topic I mentioned briefly at the start: STEAM. Using the skills I had developed throughout my studies, and having researched STEAM, I returned to the group with this idea of introducing a STEAM-based topic to one class group and using their findings to guide the direction of the initiative.

In the numeracy group there were two other teachers who had greater experience than I did. But when I approached them they were extremely supportive and great at offering informative feedback and support. This was instrumental in empowering me to bring the idea to the principal, who allowed me to go forward and guide the initiative. It was entitled 'How can Ireland and Roscommon Meet Energy Demands in a More Sustainable Way?'

Students in third-year geography and science classes investigated the sustainability of meeting energy needs in County Roscommon. Research was carried out and found that wind energy was one of the most sustainable ways to meet increasing energy demands. In the third-year maths class, students looked at the geometry of wind turbines, and in the physical education class, students went on a 10-kilometre hike around a local wind farm.

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After these activities they were asked how they felt the school could be more sustainable in its energy needs. The answer was simple: Cut down on 'vampire energy' (Chan, 2011). This is when devices are left on standby and use small amounts of energy even when plugged in. Laminated cards were placed in every classroom, and an email was sent every Friday to remind teachers to plug out all devices possible.

Any teacher can be a leader

From reflection, I believe that making the first leap and going forward with your idea can be the hardest part of the process – fear of being shot down or not feeling that your idea is worthy enough. Completing my studies in educational leadership enabled me to gain greater confidence in my skills – those skills that I had developed both formally and informally. Then I wasn't afraid of putting my idea to my colleagues or of not feeling good enough.

I believe this can be something that prevents teachers from all experience levels from going forward with ideas. Any teacher can be a leader within their classroom and within their school. You don't have to have the formal middle

or senior leadership position. It is all about having confidence in yourself and feeling supported by those around you, your trusted colleagues. Don't feel like you can't instigate or lead an initiative. Ask, plan, introduce, ask for help again if needed, and review.

For any younger teachers embarking on their teaching journey, there are mentoring programmes now in place to make the transition into the world of teaching easier. But it is also worth remembering that you can be mentored by anyone, and that getting involved in initiatives in drama, music, or sports is one of the best ways to get to know students, and colleagues, outside the classroom. Some of the best mentors and friends I have made over the years are from schools where I helped out in extracurricular activities. I became more acquainted with them outside of the four brick walls of the school.

Going forward into this new school year, as I continue in my teaching journey, I feel revitalised in my career. I have a new-found purpose. I may not have a formal leadership position in my school, but that does not mean there are not lots of exciting initiatives and ideas that I can bring forward to my own classroom in my subject area of science, and to the wider school community. According to Hunzicker (2017), teacher leadership in today's schools is essential, whether teacher leaders hold formal titles and official positions or simply step up when needed. Wenner and Campbell (2016) called this 'an important component of school reform' (p.2).

It would be easy to continue to do what I have always done, but personally I love a challenge – something new and exciting to research, plan, and implement. Teaching is essentially all about enriching students' lives, making them better so that they progress in life. As a teacher and a teacher leader, if I can continue to do this, then I will continue to be happy in my profession.

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