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## **Developing Specialist Leaders of Education:- a research engagement approach**

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### **Abstract**

*There has been little research to date on the continuing professional development needs of the several thousand Specialist Leaders of Education now designated by the National College for Teaching and Leadership in England to work across schools as consultants on school-to-school support. This case study reports on the second and third stages of a four stage research process designed to address these needs. The first stage reported on the creation of a professional development framework for SLE's using consultancy research. These middle stages test out this framework with a stakeholder group of SLEs, headteachers and broker in a Teaching Schools Alliance. The fourth stage will track the implementation of professional development activities arising from these findings. Apart from the specific needs of Specialist Leaders of Education, this study will have wider relevance for all practitioners and researchers working in and with schools on leadership development using Research Engagement strategies and Joint Practice Development approaches in a so-called 'self-improving' school system.*

### **Keywords**

*Specialist Leaders of Education, consultancy development, research engagement, professional learning, system leadership, school to school support.*

## Introduction

There are now over 7000 Specialist Leaders of Education (SLE's) in English schools. These are middle leaders designated by the National College for Teaching and Leadership to work on school-to-school support in a 'self-improving' system: a system in which teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement and leaders operate beyond the boundaries of their own institution so that all schools improve (Hargreaves 2010). The SLE role is one of a suite of system-leader roles, including National Leaders of Education and Local Leaders of Education, designated by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCSL 2012). These roles are enacted within the general shift to a decentralised and marketized system.

The SLE role is distinct from its Advanced Skills Teacher predecessor in England (Fuller et al, 2013) and from the Master Teacher role internationally (Montecinos et al, 2014). This is because it assumes that effective professional development leading to organisational success requires explicit leadership and management expertise beyond outstanding practitioner skills. This expertise includes developing awareness and influencing skills within the wider system beyond working one to one with teachers in classrooms, encouraging teacher collaboration and presenting INSET sessions.

Typically, *SLEs* will have received the equivalent of 2 days training around the role from National College materials licensed to schools (NCTL, 2014). Previous research (Close and Kendrick, 2016) found aspects of *NCTL* training that have been well received including opportunities to rehearse opening conversations with teacher clients, the ethics and skills of collecting data, giving feedback and presenting outcomes, and adopting a coaching approach. However, limitations of time meant that the plethora of organisational models introduced in the training from the business literature only received cursory attention, which precluded any joining-up of such models into a coherent whole. This limitation is further compounded by the literature itself, which is dated and business as opposed to education-oriented (NCTL 2015). In fact, beyond Hargreaves on the 'moral purpose' of system leadership, (Hargreaves, 2014) little is drawn from recent education literature on system leadership and structural reform that might give SLE's a more critical understanding of the policy context for their new role.

So, where to next? This paper addresses this question, and the limitations of training thus far, by making three assumptions about the future professional development of Specialist Leaders of Education. They are (1) that SLE is a consultancy role and so consultancy research should be used to give intellectual coherence to the role in the design of professional development activity, (2) that consultancy is a 'public' role and so recent literature on 'organisation', networks and structural reform should be used to provide a critical understanding of the wider policy context necessary for such a role, and (3) that the process of creating professional development activities from

assumptions 1 and 2 can be framed in terms of a research engagement approach. Let us examine these assumptions in turn

The notion of school leaders as consultants working on school-to-school support was first encapsulated in the title 'Consultant leaders' by Earley and Weindling (2006), to describe the work of Headteachers in the successful London Challenge initiative. Their study produced some interesting insights into the potential role conflicts and ethical dilemmas of consultancy work but could not articulate further development of such work because consultancy research was not used to interrogate the findings. In subsequent studies, 'consultant leaders', particularly the work of National College designated National Leaders of Education (NLEs), were presented as a subset of the broader notion of 'system leaders' (Higham, et al, 2009; Hill and Matthews, 2010; Robinson, 2012) and professional development focussed on taxonomies of roles and characteristics of system leaders rather than consultancy skills and relationships. So consultancy research remained untapped as a resource for designing professional development activities for system leaders. Only, more recently, has such research been used to understand the dynamics of the helping relationship in a self-improving schools system, whether this be modelling contracting relationships with school systems from the viewpoint of consulting organisations (Hazle Bussey, et al, 2014) or advancing public policy debates about consultancy and knowledge production (Gunter et. al., 2015). This study uses concepts from consultancy research to give intellectual coherence to professional development activity for SLE's that was beyond the scope of the initial training. These concepts are also relevant to the professional development of system leaders in general.

The reference to 'consultancy concepts' requires us, at this point, to be explicit about what we mean by 'consultancy research' by giving our field of enquiry its full name of *Organisation Development consultancy research*. For readers unfamiliar with this field, Organisation Development, or 'OD,' is an approach to organisational improvement with an 80 year tradition of humanistic, democratic values and an initial knowledge base in the behavioural sciences, that seeks to align structural, cultural and strategic aspects of organisation in the improvement process. (Burnes and Cooke, 2012). We have chosen this OD consultancy lens for the research because (a) the work of SLE's in other schools can be better understood in terms of consultancy cycles (entry, contracting, diagnosis, development, evaluation, exit) than middle leadership activities in a home organisation, (b) it introduces the notion of complex influencing skills required of going into organisations 'at the middle' and (c) provides a broad literature on helping relationships at micro, meso and macro levels.

This broad literature base is important because, given that SLE's are consultants, our second assumption is that working *across* schools is a 'public' role, which demands understandings and skills beyond those of leadership within the single organisation. This includes new understandings of reputation and accountability in the policy and organisational context they are working in and the ability to analyse various groups of schools as organisations (Woods and Simkins, 2014). It also means understanding types of change that are possible in loosely and tightly coupled systems created by new structural arrangements (Burke, 2014) and exerting influence in individual schools (Close, 2013) as well as school networks, (Hadfield

and Jopling, 2012) so that diagnoses of client situations are better judged and consultancy action is more effective. In the cause of understanding this wider context, this study both updates the business literature of organisation and adds education literature on structural reform absent from initial SLE training.

Finally, assumption three. Using consultancy research to inform SLE professional development activity can be framed as some form of engagement process that enables researchers and practitioners to work together to progressively test out the research against current practice. In this process, the research engagement literature emphasises the importance of making research accessible to practitioners (Handscombe and Macbeath, 2003) and of devising appropriate reading strategies that will sustain such engagement (Sharp et al , 2005). More recently, models of research engagement (Broekamp and van Hout- Walters, 2007) have been applied to empirical studies in schools (Sheard and Sharples, 2016, Brown and Zhang, 2017), that suggest such a process might begin with the generation of 'research summaries' by researchers for practitioners.

One model of research engagement, Research Development and Diffusion (Sheard and Sharples, 2016), is particularly appropriate for this study. In this model, practice-oriented researchers draw on theories and decontextualised research, valuing diverse research outcomes such as conceptual frameworks, descriptive reports and learning tasks. Researchers act as mediators, who translate research into reports, policies and professional development programmes for practitioners. This describes the mode of operation and intended outcomes of our study. Our particular interests are in our role as mediators and the notion of diverse research outcomes in the research engagement process. Key to the mediator role at the beginning of the process is the introduction of the 'Research Summary' on the area of professional development and then the 'mediation' of this summary by progressively testing it out against current practice.

Sheard and Sharples, (2016) also described research engagement as a 5 stage process, which they called 'Setting the Scene', 'Digging Deeper', 'A Way Forward', 'Managing Change' and 'Consolidating Outcomes and Sustaining Change'. This study completes the first three stages of this process. Stage 1 'set the scene' with the 'Research Summary,' a review of consultancy literature by ourselves that provided a framework for professional development, (Author 3). Stages 2 and 3, which we report on here, 'dig deeper' by inviting research participants to interrogate SLE practice against consultancy research and generate 'a way forward', identifying professional development activities from this interrogation. In a future paper we will report on stages 4 and 5 of this process 'managing change' and 'consolidating outcomes and sustaining change' when we work alongside practitioners on the implementation of these professional development activities, using a Joint Practice Development approach (Hargreaves, 2013).

This paper, then, contributes new insights and practical outcomes from consultancy research for the professional development of Specialist Leaders of Education, through a research engagement process. It also has wider significance for the role of HEI researchers as strategic partners in professional development with Teaching

School Alliances. We see it as a timely contribution to a field where there is a growing need for better understandings of engagement, coordination and assessment of school-to-school support during a transitional funding period for school improvement. The Government's ambition remains that all schools will become academies within the school-led system, though acknowledges that, while there continues to be a dual system of maintained schools and academies, it is *'vital that all schools have the resources they need to tackle underperformance'* (DfE, 2016).

In the remainder of the paper, we first briefly recap on stage 1, 'Setting the Scene', for this research engagement process - the generation of the Research Summary. We then describe the design of stages 2 and 3 of the process and report on findings from those stages. These findings are discussed and conclusions drawn about future research and practice in this area as we look ahead to stage 4 of this enquiry.

### **Stage 1      Developing the Research Summary**

Stage 1 of this research engagement process had been to operationalise our first assumption:- that SLE was a consultancy role and so consultancy research should be used to inform professional development by generating a Research Summary that provides a framework for consultancy development. Echoing Hargreaves (2014), our overarching question for the summary had explicit normative assumptions around moral purpose and democratic process that challenged narrow conceptions of marketization in education. The question was *'If, as a professional community, we believe that education should be a public service in a democratic society, what sort of system leader (in this context SLE) consultants do we want in the future?'*

To address this question, principles and paradigms arising from the consultancy literature (Close, 2016) were identified. Specifically, the principles of democratic values, sound organisational analysis and sophisticated understandings of change processes from the Organisation Development literature, reviewed in Burnes and Cooke (2012), provided us with what we called the 'contextual dimensions' of Values, Analysis and Change. The paradigms of 'critical, functional and socially critical' from a review of consultancy research by Gunter et. al. (2015), gave us a device for framing micro, meso and macro perspectives of consultancy practice which we called 'operating levels'. Together, these contextual dimensions and operating levels constituted six areas of enquiry that provided our terms of reference and rationale for consultancy development within a framework for research.

The terms of reference were as follows: system leader consultants are skilled as 'professional helpers'. They build 'levels of mutual acceptance' with clients, through ever changing combinations of 'expert', 'diagnostician' and 'process' roles that depend on task, client expectations and organisational context (Schein, 2002). System leader consultants are committed to democratic values (Burnes and Cooke, 2012). They base their diagnoses of client situations on policy appropriate organisational analysis (Woods and Simkins, 2014), and understand networked relationships between agency and structure in the work they do (Hadfield and Chapman, 2009, Hadfield and Jopling, 2012). Consultancy work arising from their analyses is politically astute and ethically aware (Author 2). It acknowledges the

complexity of contracting relationships (Hazle Bussey et al, 2014), and of change processes (Burke, 2014), and takes a critical stance in public policy debate around consultancy and knowledge production (Gunter et. al., 2015).

Our rationale was that contextual dimensions of consultancy development started within the democratic values tradition of the Organisation Development Literature. These contextual dimensions drew from a variety of research literatures for organisational analysis and found the concepts of sensemaking, identity formation and loosely coupled systems particularly relevant for understanding change in the new policy landscape. At the ‘micro’ level of client/ consultant relationships, ‘political coaching’ was important for learning how to exert influence with clients. At the meso organisational level, new models of contracting between consulting and school system organisations were useful for engaging strategic partners. At the macro level, system leader consultants would benefit from understandings of wider public policy debate around consultancy and knowledge production that were appropriate to their role and function. These six areas of enquiry were then expressed as ‘propositions for action’, starting points, grounded in everyday practice, that justified their inclusion in the consultancy development research framework.

Drawn together, the central proposition was that the effective exercise of system (SLE) leadership depended on certain understandings and proficiencies about which there was considerable knowledge from the field of consultancy and that more attention to this literature would provide an intellectual foundation for what was required to develop principled and long-term helping relationships in a self-improving school system. The resultant framework appears below.

*Table 1: A consultancy development research framework:- areas of enquiry and propositions for action (Close,2016)*

<b>Areas of Enquiry</b>	<b>Propositions for Action, that....</b>
<b>Contextual Dimensions</b>	
Values	1...consultancy development is located within the democratic tradition of the Organisation Development literature.
Analysis	2...consultancy development is grounded in organisational analysis that draws from established literatures of ‘organisation’ structural reform and network theory.
Change	3...consultancy development draws on change theories around sensemaking, identity formation and loosely coupled systems,
<b>Operating Levels</b>	
Micro	4...consultancy development requires ‘political coaching
Meso	5...consultancy development is informed by new models of inter-organisational contracting.
Macro	6...consultancy development includes reaching positions in public policy debate around consultancy and knowledge production.

## **Stage 2      Testing the agenda:- research design.**

Stages 2 and 3 of our research, reported on in this paper, trace how SLE professional learning from engagement with our Research Summary translated into a menu of professional development activities. In stage 2, we asked the questions, *'What are system leaders learning about SLE practice?'* and *'How can consultancy research further inform such practice?'* In stage 3, we asked the question, *'How can we combine learning from this practice with the research literature to generate professional development topics and activities?'*

The context for our research was a Teaching Schools Alliance in the North West of England. The TSA had been founded by two Gateway Heads in 2014 and now had a cross-phase/sector board of six schools. It served an outer ring of 38 schools and worked within a county-wide structure and network of system leadership at both strategic and operational level. One of us had already developed an ongoing relationship within this network through work-related opportunities. The TSA had recently appointed 20 Specialist Leaders of Education of which 6 had already been deployed. All six deployments were in the primary phase. The TSA was keen to put in place some continuing professional development provision that would help SLEs and the TSA board learn from their deployments. We approached the two Gateway Heads and the Support Officer (SLE broker from the Alliance) with our Research Summary and a manageable project for using it in an engagement process that advanced the argument for consultancy research and that promised practical outcomes. Our TSA partner saw potential in our approach for meeting the continuing professional development needs of their SLE's and the engagement process had begun. All SLEs with deployment experience were invited to participate in the process. Four SLEs, Maths and English coordinators, and two primary deputy Heads, were available for the research engagement process.

The enquiry began with interviews with the sample of SLE's, the two Gateway Heads and the Broker. These initial interviews gave participants the opportunity to reflect upon deployments and then to consider these reflections in relation to the research summary, sent to participants prior to interview as a stimulus paper. Interviews were transcribed and returned for member-checking. The initial interview was conducted in two parts. The first part used concepts from consultancy research to ask questions about tasks, relationships, skills, clients and outcomes in SLE deployments... and then brought these reflections together by considering issues, challenges and achievements emerging from work thus far. In this first part of the interview, although the schedule was informed by concepts from consultancy research, we were merely gathering SLE practice accounts and not yet asking for comments on that research.

In the second part of this interview, in keeping with the Research Development and Diffusion model, we introduced our 'Research Summary' based on the consultancy development framework outlined in table 1 above. We asked participants to tell us about 'entry points,' points of interest in the summary for their practice that they



wished to pursue. Based on these points of interest, we then provided access to a choice of five follow-up readings from consultancy and related research that enabled interviewees to explore these 'entry points' in some depth. These consisted of three book chapters (Block, 2013, Schein 1998 , Schein 2002) on specific aspects of consultancy practice and two journal articles (Close,2010,Close,2013) . Second interviews were then conducted to allow participants to further interrogate their practice against the readings they had selected. These follow-up interviews were again transcribed and returned for member checking. The follow up interviews ended with consideration of how the professional learning from this research engagement might translate into a menu of professional development activities. (see appendix for interview schedules).

Although we set out a staged research model here, the process at each stage was emergent. In stage 1, we made our values explicit in our initial research question, but this did not shut down debate. 'OD' is a well critiqued tradition of enquiry and there was much paradigm crossing on the way to arriving at the reviews that eventually came to define our framework. As for participants, there were choices to be made at all subsequent stages of the model:- about important deployment experiences in their practice accounts, points of interest in the research framework, follow up readings (which we were tasked with searching for) and professional development activity to take the enquiry forward. The generation of activities for SLE professional development was very much a process of co- construction on the basis of how to translate practice topics of perceived importance into activities, and the choice of learning sets for the forthcoming stage was on recommendation of all participants.

Our borrowings from the Research Development and Diffusion model extended to diverse research outputs and the mediator role of the researcher. The outputs consisted of a conceptual framework for the design of professional development activities, transcripts of interviews for member checking and a descriptive report to participants for validation of findings. Reflecting Sheard and Sharples (2016) staged research engagement process, our mediator role as researchers had begun in stage 1 as translators of consultancy research. It now progressed, in stages 2 and 3, to co-constructors of professional development activities opportunities. In the forthcoming stage 4 , it will progress again to co-facilitators of learning sets designed to implement that professional development choices. We now present our case study findings and will return to some of the conceptual and processual issues raised here in our subsequent discussion.

## ***Stage 2 Findings from the research engagement process***

This findings commentary tracks a research engagement process through four emerging themes of consultancy work for SLE's :- 'Relationships, Skills, Outcomes and The Wider Context'. The engagement process begins with practitioners' own accounts of SLE deployments. It then progresses to identification of 'entry points' of interest for practitioners in the Research Summary, and then onto further

interrogation of those entry points against SLE practice via follow-up readings. Each thematic commentary follows these three staging points in charting the development of understandings and insights from this process.

## **2:1 Consultancy development and relationships**

SLE's were at an early stage of their deployments in this newly designated role. Practice accounts reflected this in uncertainty about the promotion and representation of the role, although there was much optimism about potential client relationships. Schools needed more information about the nature of the service, its access and its funding so it became '*how most people think*'. Labels at this early stage could be problematic. Introducing oneself as a Specialist Leader of Education was an affront to professional modesty, while representing oneself as a 'consultant' sent the wrong market - orientated messages. At the same time, professional integrity was asking questions about value for money for the service they were providing. This wariness was tempered with optimism...Starting with positive intentions and eliciting the client's strengths was essential.... SLE work was a peer relationship and meant using a coaching and mentoring approach rather than making teachers feel '*they were being done to*'. SLE's were also impartial, which made it acceptable, on occasion, for teacher clients to vent their feelings about a situation.

The Research Summary introduced psychological and political 'entry points' of interest for SLE's about these relationships. The first of these was the 'psychodynamics' of helping. The second was the notion of 'political coaching,' or learning how to influence client situations more effectively. This was prompted by a deployment vignette in the summary where a SLE discovers that the Head of Science and Headteacher have different agendas for and interpretations of 'the problem' under consideration.

In the follow-up reading, Schein's book chapter on the psychodynamics of helping (Schein, 2002) enabled SLEs to unpack this relationship further by recognising 'traps' and 'stereotypes' and the need to move through 'mutual levels of acceptance' in order for work to proceed. Reflections on this reading in the follow-up interviews showed that these ideas had clearly resonated with SLE practice, '*Stereotypes of help can get in the way of the help the helper can actually give. If you're not sensitive to the dynamics that the client might be ashamed of having a problem then you have to deal with being 'the expert' and a resentful and defensive client who is always checking your knowledge and expertise..... and on mutual levels of acceptance - I liked this idea very much. The way Schein defines this process as constantly recalibrating the responsiveness of the client, has helped me better understand the ways in which I determined how fast to go in my last deployment.*'

Schein's book chapter on 'the concept of client' (Schein, 1998) helped SLE's further reflect on power relationships in consultancy work by asking the question, 'Who is the client?' and responding through the now familiar typology of contact, intermediate, primary, ultimate, unwilling and involved non-clients'. SLEs found this helpful as an analytical tool for assessing the success of past deployments in meeting the needs of multiple clients. It was also seen as a useful device for

rehearsing the politics of working at different levels and with different interest groups in future deployments. The potential precariousness of building relationships in consultancy work was brought home to us by one SLE who identified 'involved non-clients' in a recent deployment, a type often overlooked in this kind of analysis. As he put it, *'These can be allies of the primary client, for example, friends of the teacher in the school who are telling them "you are great, you don't need to do that." This might happen during dinner time. Perhaps you need to pop back into the classroom and you will see them chatting. When you return you almost have to rebuild the relationship.'*

## **2:2 Consultancy development and skills**

Consultancy skills identified in the practice accounts centred on contracting, or as one SLE put it, 'setting agreements.' Contributory skills around setting agreements included 'having appropriate conversations', negotiation and delegation as well as coaching and facilitation. It was also recognised that skills acquired through deployments in other schools had been transferable to practice in their own school.

*Setting agreements.* Getting a client to willingly commit to desirable action is, of course, a key skill in consultancy and it was clear that considerable thought and preparation had gone into, as one SLE put it, *'soft ways of holding to account'*. She explains:- *'I knew that 'having a conversation' with clients at the beginning of the deployment was not enough to set agreements in stone and typed versions of such conversations could also be interpreted in different ways. So I bought a book that was helpful in setting agreements because it was filled with visual illustrations that you might use with staff, such as the clouds model to draw up barriers to implementing the tasks we had identified and how we might deal with them (Bird, and Gornall, 2015). Models like this, combined with post it notes, were helpful in focussing down action plans and giving staff opportunity of changing their minds until they were sure they had articulated the task they were going to commit to.'*

*Conversations, negotiation and delegation.* Having 'appropriate conversations' included taking on the Head's management agenda, yet *'understanding leadership issues from the staff point of view, and then having monitoring conversations with coordinators and brokering conversations to keep everyone happy'*. Key subskills within these conversations were negotiation and delegation. Negotiation was defined by one SLE as, *'giving the client latitude on how to go about the task according to their strengths and preferences within agreed parameters'*. Delegation was about, *'building trust, understanding strengths and weaknesses and keeping up communication with clients to ensure that delegated tasks were carried out in their absence and that staff were prepared for meetings in advance.'*

The main skills entry point of interest for SLE's in the Research Summary was the notion of consultancy 'operating levels', or adapting skills learned in one to one situations for work across the whole school or in the wider CPD context outside the school. As one SLE observed:- *'working with one teacher in one class, I hadn't really thought about different 'operating levels' and 'the politics' of SLE work required for working at different levels: this has made me question my motives and interests.'*

The follow-up reading for this theme, chapter one from Block's seminal text *Flawless Consulting* (2013) helped SLE's relate skills identified in the practice accounts to stages in the consulting cycle and picked up concerns SLE's had had about dealing with resistance to change. *'Once skills at stages have been learned, my question - to what purpose? remains - "has anyone learned anything new and /or changed a policy, structure or procedure as a result of my deployment?".....Of the specific consulting skills in the Peter Block chapter, I would say that identifying and working with different forms of resistance and not taking it personally are most relevant to my experience.'*

### **2:3 Consultancy development and outcomes**

Positive outcomes from consultancy work are, of course, of crucial importance, but often complex to measure or predict. The practice accounts linked outcomes in turn to measurement, design, dissemination and career development, while the follow-up readings extended understandings around their 'politics'.

*Outcomes and measurement.* The introduction of a new reading scheme that improved pupil attainment and engaged all staff in its development were seen as measurable outcomes. Likewise, the introduction of targeted tuition, that raised the SATs results of eight 'at risk' pupils in one class. But then, more complex aspects of measurement came to the fore. These ranged from offering '*value for money*', to, '*calming strained relationships*' or having an effect on the '*sustainability of improvements*' in practice post-deployment.

*Outcomes and design.* The opportunity to re-negotiate the design of the deployment with the Head to better meet the needs of the school was identified as an important factor in achieving intended outcomes. A Maths SLE had been initially asked to go into school for 2 weeks full time, but in the end, the actual deployment was for only 3 and half days, distributed across several weeks, '*because improvement takes time and I wanted to make a careful diagnosis of what was needed before rushing into action.*' The initial contract of an English SLE had been for nine days but was extended through pupil premium funding to eleven days, once the deployment had begun. This enabled the SLE to keep contact with school on one day per half term, '*to keep the ball rolling so measurable outcomes could be looked at after SATs.*'

*Outcomes and dissemination.* Headteachers had an important role in enabling SLE's to disseminate outcomes from their deployments to wider groups of staff. One SLE had been enabled to provide drop-in workshops for all teachers to observe development of extended writing with children. As one Headteacher put it, '*When the SLE is deployed there is a triad relationship between the SLE, HT and teacher/TA of the target classroom, set within the wider context of whole staff CPD.*'

*Outcomes and politics.* The Research Summary and follow-up readings enabled SLE's and their managers to think further about the use of influence in achieving outcomes. SLE's related strongly to Schein's (1998) key idea of working with the client's wider system, noting the phrase, '*the power balance is always open to ambiguity and negotiation.*' The broker used notions of 'complex responsive

processes', from Close, 2010 and 'political coaching' in Close, 2013 to think further about the co-creation of outcomes in SLE deployments,... *'heads create the conditions for integrating the SLE into the school and enabling them to influence the future sustainability of changes'* ... Political Coaching is needed to, *'understand micro-political activity'* and the *'steering and nudging necessary for a positive outcome'*

*Outcomes and career development.* SLEs regarded their competency, reputation and career development as 'outcomes' for themselves. They wanted to know how they could get feedback *'using a competency-style diagnostic'* specific to the SLE role. Reputation mattered as well as accountability. SLEs questioned, what would happen to their reputation in the wider system if something went wrong with a deployment? And what of the future? ...senior management promotion or further advisory opportunities? It was clear, even in these early deployments, that the dynamics of the role would need careful consideration in the context of future opportunities and risks for career development.

## **2:4 Consultancy development and the wider policy context**

Our assumption that SLE was a 'public' role has already been touched on in SLE concerns about reputation and accountability in the 'outcomes' commentary. Where this became a focus for interviewees, three further concerns emerged from the interrogation of the practice accounts against the research readings. These were (1) aspects of consultancy service transactions (2) issues of moral purpose and marketisation related to these aspects (3) the 'mobilisation' of learning from school-to-school support across the wider system.

SLEs, in their practice accounts, were concerned about providing 'value for money' in their deployments as a matter of professional integrity. Yet, because funding mechanisms at the local level and financial contracting with client schools was left to the broker, they were not brought into discussions which could inform their self-evaluations of integrity. They saw the Research Summary as useful in this respect because its brief resume of models and operation of CPD and school improvement funding from the National Strategies of the 1990's, through the National College era, to current debates over Joint Practice Development, helped them put this need for financial understanding at the local level into a national context. This knowledge of the wider context was seen as particularly important for discussion of the future sustainability of SLE work.

Transactions for consultancy services were being worked out in a number of ways. In the practice accounts of the Gateway Heads and the Broker a percentage of funds was allocated for brokerage, which could be described as policy. Payments to SLEs for time spent planning deployments was left to the discretion of individual schools, while a decision to reduce SLE daily rates (from £350 to £250) was a modification of external (National College) guidance. It was clear that running beneath such decisions was, as the broker described, *'the board's one hundred percent commitment to children in the locality and not on making money'*, especially as the

TSA was still, *'in the early years of its four-year funding'*. Consequently, potential tensions and contradictions between moral and commercial purpose were not evident. The SLE brokerage service was made available to schools beyond those Requiring Improvement while the decision to reduce SLE daily rates had been made on the basis of *'ensuring opportunities for all schools to engage with improvement opportunities was affordable'*. At the same time, one gateway head felt, *'the exchange of money for SLE time had somehow "sharpened practice", with its focus on outcomes, compared with previous National Curriculum Consultants and Advanced Skills Teachers.'*

While transactions were being worked out in the practice accounts, the Gateway Heads and the Broker used the Research Summary and follow-up readings to explore broader issues of importance to them around marketisation in the context of SLE work. For the gateway heads, the Research Summary set the tone, *'this sentence on page 17, "we need a moral and ethical discourse to challenge economism in the central endeavour of redefining public worth in a marketized system" is where it begins and ends for me! My own understanding of public worth feeds into the ethos of my own school and this is the framework on which the whole school rests.'* For the broker, after a detailed practice account of his role in gathering *'intelligence'* about schools that might be struggling in his patch of the wider system, the notion of *'knowledge mobilisation'* in the Research Summary was of particular importance.

The Research Summary had introduced generic concepts of 'public worth' and 'knowledge mobilisation' to the wider context of SLE work. The follow-up readings helped put these into the specific context of the ethics and dynamics of academisation. After reading the article on political coaching (Close,2013 ) one of the heads was prompted to say *'academisation had to be 'for ethical ends: a MAT cannot stand on existing relationships alone, it needs to survive whoever is the head teacher, so to form a MAT it is about fleshing out why this is a good idea for families and children'*. The broker drew from the Organisational Analysis paper, (author1) to observe that academisation was, *'creating "new hierarchies and new networks" that would require school leaders to have 'intelligences' for the micro and macro mobilisation of the system, as 'conveyors of policy', 'creators of the wider system' or, 'the mechanism by which the wider system co-evolves with its constituent organisations.'*

### **Stage 3      *Combining practice with research: a menu of professional development activities***

Towards the end of the second interviews, participants were asked to say how they thought needs identified in their practice accounts might combine with skills and understandings discussed in the readings to create a menu of professional development activities. SLE's had engaged with the readings to the extent that it was suggested this might become an ongoing habit through a consultancy reading group. The ethics and politics of consultancy work had been a subject of lively debate from

the ‘OD’ readings and it was suggested that this could further develop thinking about codes of practice for SLE work beyond the existing professional guidance across the County. A variety of skills workshops were proposed, using Block’s work, to link skills with stages of the consultancy cycle. Topics of perceived importance to SLEs in their deployments, designing for impact and working with multiple clients, were considered appropriate for seminar discussion, using a case study approach. The notion of ‘wider picture updates’ on practical implications of the developing policy context were deemed to be necessary. Finally, the setting-up of SLE action learning sets (McGill and Brockbank, 2004) was felt to be the most useful way forward for collaborative problem solving in consultancy work.

This process of combining practice with research is represented in table 2 below. This progressed from practice accounts to ‘entry points’ of interest in the Research Summary and then onto further interrogation of those entry points against further research, ending with professional development activities. So, for example, SLE’s talked about consultancy relationships in their practice accounts and then found entry points of interest around agendas and ethics in the Research Summary to help them explain those relationships. Further readings generated by those entry points then allowed more detailed interrogation of agendas and ethics through the psychodynamics of the consulting relationship. This process of articulation culminated in proposals for an ethics workshop activity. Such an activity might begin with scenarios from SLE practice accounts that have posed ethical dilemmas, and then considering these dilemmas against relevant sections of the international code of practice for ‘OD’ consultants (White and Wooten, 1986) with a view to drawing up a code of practice for SLE’s to supersede general County guidance on professional ethics in its specificity to SLE consultancy work.

These activities were validated *by SLE’s and TSA board members* in our research report (Close and Kendrick, 2016) presented at a TSA feedback meeting, against the three criteria ... relevance to need, ease of organisation and low cost.

*Table 2 Consultancy Development for SLE’s :- combining practice with research (Close and Kendrick, 2018)*

<b>Themes arising from Practice accounts (Interview 1)</b>	<b>Research Summary ‘entry points’ identified by participants (Interview 1)</b>	<b>Further readings selected by participants (Interview 2)</b>	<b>Proposals for development activities suggested by participants (Interview 2)</b>
Consultancy Relationships	Values Agendas and ethics	Psychodynamics (Schein, 2002)	Ethics workshops
Consultancy Skills	Values ‘The Consultancy Curriculum’	Consultancy cycles (Block , 2013).	Skills workshops
Consultancy Outcomes	Political coaching (Close, 2016)	Political coaching (Close,2013)	Consultancy reading group/ SLE Learning sets

Consultancy and the wider context	Organisational analysis and knowledge mobilisation	Organisational analysis (Close,2010)	Seminar topics/ 'wider picture' updates
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## ***Discussion***

In our introduction, three assumptions informed our research design. First was that SLE was an 'OD' consultancy role and so 'OD' consultancy research would provide intellectual coherence, a values base and an appropriate skill set for such development. The second assumption was that, because working across schools was a more public role than working within a single school, SLE's also needed access to related research on 'organisation', structural reform and networks to help them make sense of the wider context for their work, particularly around issues of reputation and accountability. The third assumption was that an appropriate research engagement process could be conceived whereby such research could be introduced and interrogated against SLE practice in order to design professional development activity that was at once relevant to need and viable. Now we have operationalised these assumptions in a small case study, what have we learned that might have broader significance for future research and practice in the field?

Let us consider the first two assumptions about use of research content. We were aiming in our study for three outputs common to the Research Development and Diffusion model. These were conceptual frameworks, a descriptive report and teaching tasks (in this case, professional development activities). The descriptive report was used to validate our findings at a feedback meeting and the menu of professional development activities appears at the end of the last section. So what use the conceptual frameworks? Nutley et al, (2007) say how the conceptual use of research can enhance understandings of key issues in the field and provide a source of motivation for new ideas. It can also offer perspectives on practitioners' experiences, challenge existing ways of thinking and doing and promote informed discussion and debate. From our findings, the OD consultancy concepts introduced in our Research Summary and further readings clearly enhanced understandings and offered perspectives. There were also indications, particularly in the journal articles, that they were informing discussion and debate about the wider context relevant to SLE work. Whether they challenge existing ways of thinking and doing will, of course, remain to be seen.

Our third assumption, that a process could be conceived that would engage practitioners in the interrogation of consultancy practice against consultancy research leading to a menu of professional development activities, seems to have been well founded. The practice accounts of deployments were an accessible way



in, and the Research Summary, cautiously introduced as ‘an overview of the field in which you may find one or two entry points of interest for your practice’, readily suggested follow-up readings for further exploration.

So, overall, in what Rickinson (2005), calls a ‘values- rich’ and ‘interactive’ process, our Research Summary and follow-up readings have engaged the interest of school leader participants at both middle and senior levels. They have enabled us to report on an emerging professional development agenda that includes both consultancy skills acquisition and understanding of wider policy context, what Godfrey, (2016) calls ‘the educational ecosystem’, within which those skills have to operate. As is evident from the findings, the interrogation of these readings against practice has allowed participants to explore psychological, political and ethical aspects of that practice, beyond functional skills agendas, that were beginning to surface in their practice accounts. During this stage of capacity building, what Brown and Zhang, (2017, p.385) call, ‘an understanding of cycles of enquiry and an approach to measuring impact’ has also begun in the context of consultancy skills development for Specialist Leaders of Education. Regarding research ‘outcomes’, the end point of stages two and three of this study has been a menu of professional development activities generated from the interplay of research reading and practice reflection. The recommendation in the menu for a ‘consultancy reading group’ bodes particularly well for continued research engagement in a field that faces challenges of sustainability. At the validation meeting there was also recognition that choices of activities could be made within this menu

So far, we have been very positive about how our research assumptions have been realised in practice. Let us now consider the limitations and some of the problematic aspects of this study. The limitations of this study are clear. It is small scale, only looks at SLE practice, in *early stages of deployment*, in one TSA, from a primary perspective and, at this stage, confines its focus to building capacity of individual school leaders for engagement with research rather than exploring any wider organisational factors around culture, learning environments and structures, systems and resources that the research engagement literature (NCTL, 2013; Godfrey, 2016; Brown and Zhang, 2017) identifies as important for the sustainability of this approach.

The positive findings about SLE practice could be considered over generous in its interpretation. We would make three points in answer to this charge. First, we had the advantages of two favourable conditions in this small scale study. Our participant SLE’s were volunteers in early stages of their deployments, keen to learn about practice from accessible research. Their managers, the two Gateway Heads and Broker, were committed to funding development from this research. Second, it wasn’t all ‘good news’, SLE’s expressed apprehensions around a range of practice and developmental issues, such as potentially ‘resistant’ clients and delivering ‘value for money’, as well as reputation, accountability, career futures, that will be ongoing concerns in the enquiry.

Third, our interpretation of the data is still, in some respects, incomplete, as there is still a final stage of the research to complete, the monitoring of the SLE learning sets.

So, for example, there were differences in choices of follow up readings between the SLEs and the Headteachers and Broker. The SLE's chose the book chapters on consultancy practice issues, the Heads and Broker the *journal articles on wider context issues*. As SLE's had raised wider context issues about the future of 'system leadership' and its funding and the nature of Joint Practice Development in their earlier practice accounts, are we to put these differences down to simple pragmatics of role (SLE's operational , Heads and Broker strategic) or do they reflect more underlying clashes in agendas and values? The answer is that we simply don't know at this stage of the research. The request for 'wider picture updates' in the menu of professional development might seem to address these differences, but it still raises the further question of whether middle-senior dialogue should be structured into professional development activity through say, mixed membership of learning sets if our second assumption that knowledge of wider context beyond updates is necessary for the SLE role.

In the forthcoming 'fourth' stage, we will test our professional development agenda further across a range of TSA's through the medium of networked action learning sets for Specialist Leaders of Education. This was the activity from the menu most recommended by SLE's and supported by the headteachers and broker as a future commitment to professional development. In this stage, we will use this data to identify what we call four 'starter areas' that SLE's can use to group consultancy problems that they want to bring to and work through in their learning sets. We call these 'starter areas' because they were areas for practice concerns of SLE's well-served by the OD consultancy research literature, and 'starter' because we anticipate that SLE'S will also bring consultancy problems to the sets that will require new 'areas' of research enquiry. The four problem areas from the data were contracting, expressed as 'setting agreements', understanding and dealing with resistance to change, working with multiple clients and designing for and assessing the outcomes of consultancy work. Our findings on 'wider context' issues would also suggest that we need to see how practice is played out in environments of 'light' (moral purpose/collaborative spirit) and 'heavy' (commercial purpose/ competitive spirit) marketization.

In this fourth stage our mediator role will switch to initial facilitator of the learning sets until members become self-facilitating. Thereafter the mediator role will be an observational one, monitoring and recording learning processes and outcomes. At the end of the learning set programme ethical tests of 'appropriate confidentiality' will be agreed between researchers and participants in order to produce a public account of consultancy learning from the sets that can be disseminated more widely to groups of schools interested in applying this model of professional development to their own contexts. As some readers will be aware, the use of learning sets as a vehicle for professional development of those working in consultancy roles in public services is now a well-trodden path with an established literature, (Stark, 2006, Abbott and Mayes, 2014). Yet, to our knowledge to date, it has not been combined with a research engagement process for the consultancy development of SLE's in English schools.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has set a new agenda for the continuing professional development of Specialist Leaders of Education in English schools. Drawing from 'OD' consultancy research, it has shown how such an agenda can be values-based, intellectually coherent and relevant to need. It has raised practical questions about skills acquisition, outcomes, career development and understanding of the wider context necessary for any long-term consideration of such development. By creating and tracking a research engagement process it has also shown how such an agenda can be interrogated against SLE practice and translated into practical development activities through a collaborative partnership between University researchers and practitioners in a Teaching Schools Alliance.

Now we have 'set the scene', 'dug deeper' and found 'a way forward' in Sheard and Sharples (2016) characterisation of the research engagement process, we look forward to the final stages of the process in running this model of professional development through SLE learning sets. This will be very much concerned with 'managing and sustaining change', and, we hope, 'consolidating outcomes' into a new stable form of practice. This engagement process is still small scale work in progress and we look forward to hearing from HEI or school-based colleagues who are considering or currently involved in similar work around Research Engagement and Joint Practice Development approaches to the professional learning of Specialist Leaders of Education in particular and 'system leaders' in general.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **USING CONSULTANCY RESEARCH IN SLE DEVELOPMENT:- RESEARCH PROJECT**

*Initial interview*

Dear colleague,

Thanks again for giving time to take part in this project. Here is a reminder of what we are trying to achieve in the project and a schedule of questions to help you prepare for your first interview, which will take about 45 minutes. We look forward to working with you.

Basically, we want to hear your thoughts about your SLE deployments so far and then gather your reactions to ideas in the research paper attached that particularly interest you in relation to aspects of your practice.

We'll then look for some follow up research readings to enable you to explore your practice interests in more depth and set up a second interview to further discuss your practice in the light of those readings. During this second interview we will also consider what practical professional development activities might emerge and be taken forward in your TSA from this interrogation of practice against research.

### *Questions*

- 1 Can you briefly tell us a bit about your background and experience as a SLE in this TSA?
- 2 Can you now talk us through your experience of a SLE deployment , according to the following:-
  - The task you were assigned to carry out.
  - The main stages of the deployment, as you saw them, from receiving the request for support, to completing the task.
  - The skills you felt were needed at each stage of deployment
  - The different roles you found yourself taking on during the deployment. (For example, research identifies 'expert', 'diagnostician' and 'process helper' as 3 main consultancy roles. Is this a fair summary of your experience, or were there other roles you took on?
  - The clients you were serving during the deployment. Did you feel at any time that there were any conflicts of interest here?
  - The impact and outcomes of your SLE work, and how you measured them.
- 3 And, looking back on the deployment as whole, what did you feel were its main issues, challenges and achievements that you will bear in mind for future practice?
- 4 Now you've read the research paper, you will have gathered that it goes for scope rather than depth and presents a lot of condensed ideas about the future of 'system leader' development. Which particular idea is an 'entry point' for you, that is, an area of enquiry of potential interest and relevance to the practice issues you have identified above that you would like to explore further?

### *Follow up interview*

- 1 Are there any issues you would like to pick up on in the practice account transcript we sent you for interview 1?

- 2 Which follow- up readings most interested you in relation your practice. How have they helped you develop your understandings further?
- 3 Overall, what major topics in SLE practice and consultancy research would you like to see in professional development activity?
- 4 How could we translate these topics into activities?

