

Teacher excellence at the heart of leadership

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The reformed national professional qualifications (NPQs) for teachers and leaders acknowledge that ‘The quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor for improving pupil outcomes’ (DfE, 2021, p. 4). These leadership reforms align coherently with the Early Career Framework, rightly placing teacher excellence at the core of all professional development. The Church of England Vision for Education, ‘Deeply Christian, serving the common good’ (2016) offers the whole sector a vision of the flourishing of children and adults through four core areas: educating for wisdom, knowledge and skills, educating for hope and aspiration, educating for community and living well together and educating for dignity and respect. At the heart of both of these visions for leadership is building a culture of teacher excellence.

Developing a sustainable culture of teacher excellence is the central role of every leader in education, at every level, in every context. Therefore, placing teaching and learning at the heart of leadership development is a welcome and necessary development of the reformed NPQs, for which the Church of England is one of nine lead providers, working with delivery partners nationally.

While there has been much to be learnt about leadership from other domains such as business, political or religious leadership, there has also been a tendency for leadership development programmes to over-emphasise these aspects. At times, this may have inadvertently drawn leaders (particularly those at the most senior levels) away from the classroom towards

the boardroom. This stretching upwards of the profession towards executive leadership accidentally make the art, craft and science of teaching itself appear somewhat distant to school leadership. This is now being redressed by re-stating leaders’ primary purpose – placing teacher excellence as the ‘golden thread’ woven through each of the new reformed professional development opportunities. Leaders and teachers that focus together as a team on this golden thread can collectively enable their school to provide young people with the rich and life-giving educational experiences that will enable them to truly flourish.

The re-shaping of the generic ‘middle leadership’ qualifications to the group of specialist NPQs, particularly ‘leading teaching’ and ‘leading teacher development’ rightly emphasises teacher excellence in the formative stages of middle leadership development. There is also encouraging subject specificity within this, so that this leadership focus is not simply highlighting generic conceptual understanding of excellent teaching and learning. Rather, our approach to the NPQs will be strongly focused on championing the specificity of teaching in music, geography or maths, ensuring that this subject specificity is not reserved for secondary heads of department, but rather extended across subject leaders in primary schools (including rural and small schools) and indeed more specialised contexts such as SEND provision or PRUs. This is a particularly important part of our vision for leadership development in small and rural schools (the Church of England operates around two thirds of all such schools nationally) as in smaller

staff teams, most teachers will be leading multiple subjects across a school, and are therefore in need of subject-specific professional development to ensure the best outcomes for children. At its heart, these reforms call school leaders to develop a robust evidence-informed approach to teaching, rightly recognising and celebrating the vital nuances of subject specificity.

There has been a significant shift over the last 10 years in the way in which we understand and apply knowledge about teacher excellence and the significance of this regarding improving pupil outcomes across a range of contexts. Muijs and Reynolds (2018, p. 1) argue that ‘teaching is, of course, the most important thing that happens in schools. It is the most important thing that teachers do. Yet it is only in the last decades that the study of teaching, the generation of agreed teaching “best practice” and the related policy attempts to improve teaching have really taken root in the United Kingdom’. Leading organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation, Chartered College of Teaching, NfER and The Sutton Trust have been highly influential in cultivating a culture of research engagement to improve the quality of teaching across the sector. Such engagement can lead to the generation of agreed best practice and related policy documentation. Furthermore, it creates a helpful intersection with (and at times, counter-balance to) centralised reforms, enabling appropriate tailoring to context and the particular starting points of individual pupils and school communities.


Despite this, the changes to professional



development of teachers and leaders could also be interpreted as a technocratic or ideological reform by some, whereby a particular understanding of pedagogy is being pushed through a range of centralised reforms. It is easy to assume that across the a sector, there is a strong understanding of what it means to take an evidence-informed approach towards

teacher excellence, but the reality is that a significant majority of teachers and school-leaders may have been attending to different aspects of the evidence base. For these leaders the frameworks may present a particular challenge because, for example, they may not yet be fully acquainted with approaches based on an interpretation of science (such as Rosenshine's (2012) principles of instruction, Cognitive Load Theory or retrieval practice). Such approaches are strongly promoted within the NPQ frameworks or the new EEF funded systematic review of the evidence about these approaches (EEF 2021), which highlights the strengths, the gaps and the edges of the evidence underpinning the effectiveness of such principles. However, what is clear is that there is a need for leaders who are able to support skilled and nuanced interpretation of the framework and its underpinning evidence in the light of the starting points of their colleagues and their pupils. The NPQs seem to us to represent an important opportunity to support leaders in making this journey, helping them to become evaluative in the way they apply evidence to pedagogy. Enquiry-oriented professional learning and support from expert coaches has the potential to help leaders feel confident

about evaluating simple 'silver-bullet' approaches to rising to the challenge of excellence in teaching and learning. Furthermore this can enable leaders to collaborate across the programmes and the sector in ways that anticipate the possible benefits and challenges of applying specific evidence-informed practices within their own contexts by drawing on their collective expertise.

Leaders in schools have a crucial role to play in creating and leading communities of teacher excellence. They can do this by empowering evaluative practitioners to engage in responsive professional learning so that everyone in the school building is curious about their practice, innovative in their pedagogical approach and focused on ensuring their own professional learning further improves their practice. The new NPQs present an exciting opportunity for school leaders to develop a deep understanding of how to create sustainable communities of teacher excellence through rigorous and supportive programmes of professional learning. The Church of England is excited by the potential presented by the NPQ reforms to further the role of educational leadership, with teacher excellence firmly at the heart of our vision for the flourishing of children and adults. 



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