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Leadership identity in a Small Island Developing State: the Jamaican context

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Leadership identity in a Small Island Developing State: the Jamaican context

While the role of leadership in improving schools is attracting more worldwide attention, there is a need for more research investigating leaders' experiences in different national contexts. Using focus group and semi-structured interview data, this paper explores the background, identities and experiences of a small group of Jamaican School Leaders who were involved in a leadership development programme. By drawing on the concepts of culture, socialisation and identity, the paper examines how the participants' journeys of *becoming* and *being* school leaders are influenced by national level societal and cultural issues, experienced at a local level. The findings suggest that in becoming school leaders, the participants perceived that they had a strong sense of agency in attempting to change the social structures within the institutions they lead and in the surrounding local communities, which in turn, they hope, will have a lasting effect on the nation as a whole.

Keywords: culture; socialisation; identity; leadership

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that good leadership and management practice is vital for the success of educational institutions (Bush *et al.* 2010) and that good leadership and management development programmes are an important aspect of institutional growth (Carmichael *et al.* 2011). Key benefits of such programmes have been identified by Bubb and Early (2007) and include positive effects on learning, recruitment and retention, and staff motivation. Previous research suggests, however, that while leadership and management development practices are common in the UK educational system, they are less well established in developing countries even though the pressure on school leaders in such countries can be "particularly acute" (Bush 2009, p. 377). This finding is coupled with the fact that the majority of research into school leadership and leadership development has tended to focus on Western, industrialised countries and on

their related social and organisational structures (Nguni *et al.* 2006; Simkins *et al.* 2003; Walker *et al.* 2013). Consequently, while the role of leadership in improving schools is attracting more worldwide attention (Rhodes and Brundrett 2009), there appears to be a need for more research investigating leaders' experiences in different national contexts, acknowledging the vast cultural diversity that exists between countries in relation to school leadership (Oplatka 2004).

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to attempt to fill this gap by reporting on research which aimed to explore the background and identities of a group of Jamaican School Leaders who were involved in an on-going leadership development programme. The two main research questions addressed in this paper are:

RQ1.   What are the personal motivations and circumstances that lead Jamaican teachers to become school leaders?

RQ2.   How do Jamaican school leaders describe and understand their experiences of being in the role?

The leadership development programme in which the research participants were engaged was set up in collaboration between a UK University and a Jamaican commercial business, undertaken as part of its community development outreach work. The aim of the programme was to enable school leaders in six chosen rural schools, each school with their own specific social and educational problems, to develop their leadership skills and behaviours to positively impact on student learning.

Following this introduction, the paper is organised into five sections. First, we outline our conceptual framework. Next, we contextualise the setting in which the leaders are working and describe and justify our methodological choices. Then, we present our findings and, finally, highlight the implications for future research and practice.

Conceptual Framework

In this article, we are particularly interested in the interplay between the concepts of socialisation, identity and culture, at both a macro structural and micro agential level. Indeed, we argue that only by exploring these three inter-related concepts can we really understand some of the challenges and issues leaders face in developing their leadership skills and behaviours in international contexts. This conceptual framework is illustrated in figure 1 below and elaborated on in the following section.

Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework for exploring Leadership Identity
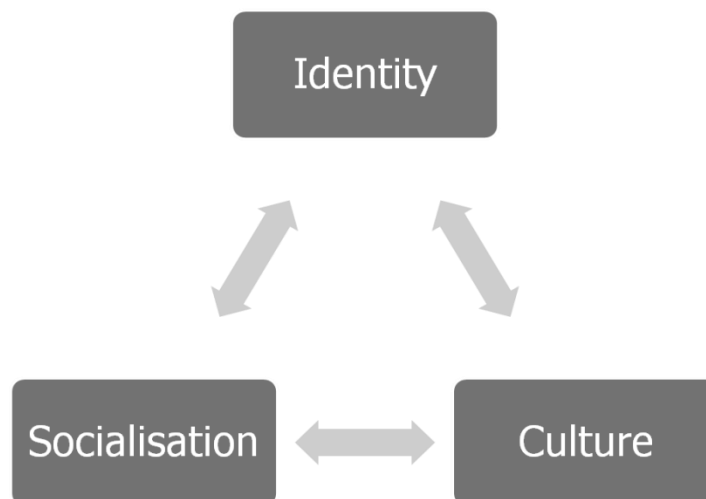
Socialisation and Identity

As Jenkins (2008) suggests, the concepts of socialisation and identity are heavily interlinked, because exploring a person's identity, or who they are in a particular context, is a complex process involving a range of social, cultural, political and historical factors. In agreement, Floyd and Morrison (2013, p. 9) claim that "…professional identities are likely to be linked to deeply-held personal values developed through prior socialisation experiences." For teachers, it has been argued that

professional identities are multiple, ever changing and continually being constructed and re-constructed with the process being influenced through "…internal factors like motivation and emotion and external variables such as context and prior experiences…" (Izadinia 2013, p. 695). In this article, then, we are interested in how our participants have negotiated, and continue to negotiate, their professional identities from becoming a teacher through to taking on a leadership position within a school in Jamaica and discovering what has influenced, and continues to influence, this journey.

We are also interested to see whether our participants' sense of identity as a leader can be understood by exploring opposing leadership theories linked to cultural, political and historical contexts, namely the trait or 'great man' approach to leadership, where it is believed that people are 'born' leaders versus more process leadership models where leadership is seen as a set of behaviours and interactions that can be learned and developed (Northouse 2013). Conceptualising leadership differently is important because if we accept trait theories, the suggestion is that leadership cannot be learned and is only available to certain people with innate characteristics. Adopting this point of view has historically excluded different groups of people from leadership positions, especially women and ethnic minorities. However, if leadership is viewed as more of a process involving human interaction and relationship building which can be developed, then we can see how appropriate professional development programmes can improve leadership practice and consequently the educational opportunities for the community within which the leaders are operating (Razik and Swanson 2010).

Culture

When exploring identity formation and change, it is necessary to examine the intersection between identity and culture. This examination is especially important when investigating leadership identities in different contexts. In line with most

educational research, here we conceptualise the term culture at a macro level by drawing on its anthropological roots, that is, "all that is learned in a social group, and includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law and customs" (Scott and Morrison 2007, p. 50). So, for Jamaica, national culture includes shared beliefs and behaviours linked to both historical and changing modern day values and customs.

At a local level, and in line with the majority of educational leadership and management research, culture is conceptualised at the unit of the institution (for example, a school) and is termed 'organizational culture' as defined by Case (2008, p. 118):

> Organizational culture can be defined as the institutionalizing processes which regulate cognitive, affective and self-presentational aspects of membership in an organisation. These processes also govern the means by which thought, perception, feeling and expression are shaped and hence encompass various auditory, textual, symbolic, physical and narrative forms.

The key point to be made here is that at both a macro and micro level of analysis, cultures are socially constructed, shifting and experienced differently by diverse groups of people. So, while a national culture may have a relatively stable espoused overarching value and behaviour system, enacted through laws and social expectations, it will also have many ever changing sub-cultures within it, which may differ from this. The same can be said about educational institutions. In turn, these cultures and sub cultures will influence, and be influenced by, peoples' identities, with individuals sensing that they have varying degrees of agency depending on their perceived position within that culture. It is these intricate inter-relationships that we are particularly interested in exploring.

Context

Jamaica's educational system is currently undergoing major reform and has recently been described as being "under stress" (Morrison *et al.* 2011, p. 70). As it strives to compete effectively in a global economy, a number of programmes have been introduced which are designed to improve the living standards and welfare of its population (UNESCO 2010). With education and training seen as linking significantly to the development of human capital, initiatives focused on raising educational attainment have therefore been pivotal to the underpinning of reforms that focus on the broader issues of economic reform and poverty reduction. Amongst other things, incorporated within the new educational framework is a specific focus on the link between the effectiveness of teachers and learning outcomes (The Ministry of Education 2004) resulting in a much greater onus on the accountability of teachers. For example, participation in professional development opportunities is now obligatory (Brown 2009).

Since its independence in 1962 Jamaica has operated a British style Education system. Like Britain, it is attempting to transform its education system to cater for the needs of pupils from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and boys in particular (The Ministry of Education 2004). As in the UK, Science and Maths results in Jamaica have been particularly poor whilst the number of students taking Sciences at CAPE or A 'level is also in decline; this is ironic at a time when the Sciences are seen as a key factor in optimising the future of the Jamaican economy (The Ministry of Education 2004).

However, it has been argued that Jamaica is an educational system with its own unique cultural problems. For example, it is a country where children can be exposed to a large amount of school and societal violence and the amount of exposure to such

violence has been identified as a possible reason why some children do not perform well educationally, especially in urban areas like Kingston (Baker-Henningham *et al.* 2009). It appears that some children can experience violence from a variety of sources, including corporal punishment at home and at school, and witnessing and involvement in violence with their peers. Relatedly, a prevalent culture of school bullying, both from peers and teachers, throughout the country has also been identified as negatively impacting on behaviour and psychological well-being amongst school children, with corporal punishment being identified as an accepted sociocultural norm in some areas of Caribbean society (Pottinger and Stair 2009). These and other social and cultural problems present many challenges for Jamaican school leaders, challenges which will be explored later in this paper.

Many strategies to improve educational attainment in Jamaica have been tried to date. These have included efforts to improve teacher-pupil interactions as well as policy reforms that attempt to improve the curriculum (The Ministry of Education 2004). In addition, a specific focus on the strategic leadership of schools has resulted in a National College for Educational Leadership being established to run key development courses such as the Effective Principal Training Programme. There also appears to have been a recent major policy shift within the country to help tackle the educational achievement gap more aggressively:

> In the educational community in Jamaica, major changes have been proposed in order to resolve issues related to excessive dropout rates and to low reading, math, and science scores. The Ministry of Education in Jamaica is now willing to embrace revolutionary change by promoting a paradigm shift from preserving past traditions to generating innovative and collaborative strategies for restructuring all levels of education…" (Morrison *et al.* 2011, p. 71)

It is within in this context that our research project becomes particularly relevant as it

considers how leaders are experiencing such major national policy shifts at a local level.

Methods

To answer our research questions, we adopted an interpretive methodological approach informed by social constructivism. This approach allowed us not only to explore the experiences, motivations and understandings of Jamaican school leaders, but also to make sense of these within their unique social and cultural context. We used a case study research design, which drew on a range of data sources. Case study research is grounded in the interpretive paradigm and allows depth as opposed to breadth; portraying the lived experience that permits an analysis of cause and effect within the social context (Cohen *et al.* 2011). Yin (2003, p. 13) states that case studies enable an analysis of "contemporary phenomenon... [and are useful] especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". In particular, case studies are useful when wanting to "penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis" (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p. 289). To enable us to explore the area we were interested in and with the depth that we also wanted to achieve, the case study approach was therefore deemed to be the most appropriate.

Data collection

Data were collected via six case studies which drew on focus group and semi structured life history (Goodson and Sikes 2001) orientated interviews as the primary source for data collection. Data was first collected via an initial focus group, carried out with all six participants. A particular strength of a focus group is that they create a more natural environment than an individual interview (Litosseliti 2003) and thus allow, via conversational interaction, a more relaxed exploration of areas of interest. In this research, a focus group was used to explore the experiences of head teachers by focusing on participants' perceptions and experiences of national and local cultures,

social and political issues as well as education within the Jamaican context. The focus group lasted for just over an hour, was recorded and then transcribed. The focus group was important in terms of understanding the factors that impact on the role of a head teacher, both structural and contextual, but was also crucial in making sense of the areas which were explored later, via interview.

Alongside the focus group, individual interviews were also carried out with each participant. Interviews ranged between 1 and 1 ½ hours in length, were recorded and then later transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured in design and included an outline of topics to be covered. However, questions were also designed to allow participants "ample freedom and time to unfold their own stories" (Kvale and Brinkman 2009, p. 131). Questions explored participants' personal biographies in terms of their backgrounds, how they become school leaders, their experiences in the role over time, and what being an educational leader meant to them.

Additionally, and to add greater depth, we drew on unstructured observations and conversations with the participants during their engagement with the leadership development programme alongside documentary analysis of independent reports written about their different schools, research reports completed as part of their programme, and evaluation forms completed at the end of the programme.

Sample

The six participants in this research included four male and two female senior leaders from six different schools, ranging in age from 47 to 64. The participants are shown in table 1, alongside the name of the school they were leading. All names of participants and schools have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Table 1 – Participants and their schools

Name	**Age**	**Position**	**School Name**

Abigail	61	Vice Principal	Sea View
Anthone	57	Principal	Riverside
Joshua	47	Principal	Hillside
Marcia	57	Vice Principal	Mountain View
Randall	64	Principal	Lakeside
Raymone	56	Principal	Valley High

Data analysis

Transcripts from both the focus groups and interviews were analysed to identify key themes, acquired through a process of iteration. This inductive and systematic approach allowed us to immerse ourselves within our data and by doing so, themes that appeared relevant and significant to our research focus began to emerge. To compare for similarity and difference in this process, transcripts were explored and then analysed and organised thematically by two separate coders. The results of the process were then reviewed. Comparing the similarity and difference in this approach to analysis, via a form of inter-coder reliability testing, allows us a degree of confidence both in the reliability and validity of the themes that were identified and with their application to the data. This was due to a high degree of thematic similarity.

For the purposes of this paper we draw on the focus group and interview data. The key themes we consider here are those that relate to '*becoming*' and '*being*' a school leader.

Ethics

In carrying out this research full ethical clearance was sought and granted from the University's Ethics Committee and all ethical procedures and guidelines were complied

with. Given the nature of the programme in which our participants were included, an important ethical consideration was that of the informed consent of those invited to take part. Participants were made fully aware of the research, in terms of its aims and methods, and were reassured that their participation in the research was entirely optional and would not affect their participation, nor any outcomes, of the programme. In reporting the data, all identifying information has been removed.

Findings

Data analysis is presented thematically within 2 broad research domains aligned to each of the two research questions. In turn, each of these is focused on the key underlying concepts of this paper, namely culture, socialisation and identity.

What are the personal motivations and circumstances that lead Jamaican teachers to become school leaders? (RQ1)

In deciding to become school leaders, a number of factors appeared important, both in terms of the process and the motivation in taking on a leadership role. For the school leaders in this research, the role of context mattered as did the role of social networks. However, other important factors also had a bearing.

Of the six leaders, only Joshua and Randall had seen teaching as a vocational choice, something that they felt drawn to do, and whilst still at school. For Joshua the decision emerged through experience gained from an opportunity that was offered:

> I started looking towards that direction [teaching] having completed my all-age schooling. I'd say about fifteen, or there about, I'd started doing some teaching at the early child level. My school had a basic school and the principal asked if I would do some lessons there for the students. (Joshua – IV)

The rest of the leaders had initially been interested in pursuing other careers. Raymone had wanted a career as a policeman, Anthony a minister, Marica an accountant and Abigail a nurse.

Teaching was not therefore a strongly vocational choice for over half of the participants, primarily due to the generally low pay associated with teaching at that time. The leaders discussed their transition into teaching as a career choice as the result of other related experiences, for example, engineering training. However, a broader desire to do social good as well as to use the innate leadership skills they felt they possessed gave the impetus to make teaching their profession of choice.

A striking feature of the participants in this study was the sense that leadership and the skills required to do it were an intrinsic part of their character. For some, this had always been apparent whilst for others it was a trait that was recognised, identified and then encouraged by others:

> From day one I saw myself as a leader (Anthony – IV)

> I discovered that somehow others look to me for that kind of guidance…[and] what
> I know is that I have that skill…from about age 13, 14…but it has to [do] too with
> my family background in that, within my family I was like the big brother
> so…from boyhood, I did deal with a…leadership role (Randall – IV)

As well as perceiving that they had the traits necessary to lead, they made it clear that becoming a teacher resulted from a range of different personal and contextual factors. For example, Anthony discussed how he initially wanted to become a minister but felt that he may not be able to handle the role. His personal desire to '*give something back*' however, resulted in a shift that led him into teaching:

> There was a significant shift from what I was thinking at the time as opposed to
> what I realistically thought I could handle…so I really started looking at the field

of engineering, and further than that, I thought that perhaps one of the best things I could have done with my life is to train young men, to try and give back part of what I had got from the [education] system…this was my transition into teaching (Anthony – IV)

For Marcia, despite her '*dream*' of becoming a Chartered Accountant, a lack of funds and the non-paid training she was required to undertake before taking up a job in a bank meant that she had no option but to accept an alternative position, which she had also been offered, in a teachers' college. From this role she moved into teaching.

Abigail also reflected on how she came in to teaching as the result of circumstances:

> Well, when I was at school the furthest thing from my mind was becoming a teacher, I wanted to be a nurse [but one day on the athletics field] my friend got hurt and I realised that the sight of blood was just not my thing…when I left [school] I'm from a very poor background so I had to work to help myself through college…so I was at home after I left school…still not working or anything. My minister was the chairman of a primary school and asked me if I would go and teach, pre-trained you know…and I worked there for one and a half years…I have been teaching now for thirty six and a half years…teaching was my first job and I am still teaching. (Abigail – IV)

To some degree, a lack of opportunity to pursue first choice careers for a range of reasons, as well as the importance of the church, were significantly influential for some of the participants, both in explaining their routes into teaching as well the leadership roles they would go on to take. The transition in to leadership, however, was often the result of the encouragement and opportunities offered by others:

> I never had the faintest idea of becoming a leader. But, having worked at my school for eleven years, the principal saw that I had leadership capabilities and encouraged me. He said "Joshua, I think it's time for you to move on. Not that I want to get rid of you – you're an excellent teacher". There was an opening and I applied, went for the interview and I was successful. (Joshua – IV)

Interestingly, having graduated from Teachers' College, I taught only for a year and a half…I was then invited to take over a private school and I started there. So, for most of my teaching career I have been operating as a principal…somebody recognised it in me, and then I remember the principal saying "go for it!" and gave me her blessing. For the first school, when the invitation came I said to myself, "I am not the one who made that step. Someone made an offer to me". So, it must be something that somebody sees in me. I said "You know what? I am going to give it a try" (Randall – IV)

However, drive and ambition, linked to earlier comments regarding perceived innate leadership traits, were also important:

Okay I am not a person who likes to be in the back, I like to move forward. So the first opportunity I get to excel or to move, I always try to be in that position. So being in a leadership position it's no accident, it's no accident. It's something that I aspired for; it's something I wanted to do (Abigail – IV)

Whilst the motivations and routes into teaching varied for the leaders, as well as the factors that shaped and influenced their pathways to leadership, what was plainly clear was that most had a desire to channel their skills in a role that they considered meaningful. A strong commitment to the social good of Jamaica, through the education of its young people, was also a clear underlying theme and, whilst not always the motivator for becoming a teacher it was, none-the-less, a very powerful factor in deciding to remain one. Strong social bonds to family and community were also evident, as was the important role the church played in the lives of the principals we spoke to. These themes will be highlighted in more detail in the following section.

How do Jamaican school leaders describe and understand their experiences of being in the role?(RQ2)

What does it mean to be a school leader?

As mentioned above, the leaders in this study felt a very strong sense of pride that through their role as a school leader they were helping to change some of the cultural

and societal issues facing Jamaica as a whole. These issues were identified during the focus group and included poverty, low literacy rates, unemployment, and crime and violence linked to gangs, as shown in the examples below:

> The unemployment rate is very high, and that again is being influenced by other social factors. We are grappling with somewhat of a low literacy rate, compared to other countries, and as a result of that there have been serious difficulties in people transitioning from school into good jobs. There are jobs available, but the people are not ready for those jobs. So we're working at that. And…there are issues of crime and violence…(Raymone - FG)

> Yes, another concern among us is gangs…gangs coming into some of the schools…the school is a reflection of the wider society, and what happens out there reflects itself sometimes in the school. So we have to be very strong as leaders…so it doesn't spread and manifest itself in dysfunctional behaviour in our schools. (Randall - FG)

The causes of these issues were discussed in relation to the history of the country, with education identified as the key solution:

> I think one of the underlying reasons that we shouldn't forget is that we are a society that was once in slavery with all the implications of race, land, poverty and so on. So all of those things tie in to where we are now. And it was envisaged that education would be the liberating force to equalise things. And we're still on track with that, but we haven't yet got it right…we are still searching for the best practices that will educate the population as effectively as possible…(Anthone - FG)

> the fundamental cure for poverty is not money, but education...so parents are now focusing and encouraging their children to get a good education…(Abigail - FG)

That the participants perceived education to be the key solution to these issues, and believed that their role as a school leader was vital in this process, was evident from the interview data. For example, Anthone discussed what being a school leader meant to

him:

>It is being in a position to help children because in the Jamaican context…fruition is a long term thing…we have problems of poverty and a number of obstacles that pose challenges to the children. And I think I can help to rescue some of the boys, especially, who are prone to gang violence and drugs and drop out of school. So leadership to me is about maximizing resources to help as many students as possible from being lost or ending up becoming unproductive citizens. (Anthone - IV)

Using similar terms, Joshua explained:

>How should I put this? My whole purpose was to create a vision for not just the school but an idea that could be translated into the nation. And I'm pretty confident that I am achieving my objective because I find that though my school is a very challenging one because of where it's located, because of the profile of the students that we get, I am seeing a lot of gains. I have focused my attention primarily on developing characters. So I have shifted the focus somewhat from the kids delivering grades, but instead delivering good attitudes, good values, making themselves into productive human beings and good citizens. (Joshua - IV)

The belief in the power of education to change society was also shared by Raymone, who mentioned in his interview that:

>…the school builds a foundation and unless you have that solid foundation, good principles, good manners, social values…if you don't have those values: honesty, respect, compassion, love patience and tolerance…You are not going to work as a society. (Raymone – IV)

Furthermore, Raymone believed that you needed to be an exceptional person to be a school leader because of the important community aspects of the role:

>You have to be an exceptional person…people see you as a person who should be able to transform and relate to all levels of society. They see you as a role model… You're respected by the community, by the church, by all the civic organizations and persons gravitate to you. They want you to be the leader in the clubs and other

societies in the community.   They want to participate in their church functions. You have to participate in funerals, to be writing the eulogy, to be speaking at these graduation ceremonies for various schools…(Raymone – IV)

Randall also highlighted the importance of the community, especially in rural schools like his own:

The job of a principal…is a big one in Jamaica. A big one because you serve so many sectors and the community has its own expectations of you…There are certain things that people expect of you as a principal, especially rural Jamaica. (Randall – IV)

The significance of the role of the head teacher and how it links to the local church community was also referred to:

You're respected by the community, by the church…and people gravitate to you. …they want you to participate in their church functions. You have to participate in funerals, to be writing the eulogy, to be speaking at these graduation ceremonies for various schools. (Joshua – IV)

For one of the participants, who combines being a head teacher with the role of an Ordained church Minister, balancing the secular demands of school leadership with their spiritual leadership created tensions in their experiences of being a head.

What preparation did leaders have for their role?

For most of the leaders, unless they had undertaken a leadership focused degree programme, they had experienced little formal training or role preparation. Joshua's comments were typical:

Quite frankly, I would have wanted to benefit at that time from some kind of structured course being run by the powers-that-be…Perhaps that might not have been the best approach, but it would have provided some tools that other successful Principals have used in the past and could have served as a good template for

persons like myself. But there was nothing like that at the time, so we basically had to bluff our way, draw on our own experience and all of that. (Joshua – IV)

Marcia also discussed her lack of training and support when she first took on the role of Vice Principal (VP) in her school:

> The most challenging part of my work to me was when I started as a VP. It was challenging in that it was a new role and I don't think the nurturing I got was very good…things were just thrust upon me…So a lot of it I had to feel around for myself... (Marcia – IV)

Although Anthone mentioned that he could have had more training, he felt that he was able to face the challenges of the role, most of which he thought were caused by gang related issues:

> It was no big problem because I had done my research and knew precisely what I was getting into…I knew precisely the conditions that existed then. There was a heavy drug culture, heavy gang culture, teachers would not go to classes as they were afraid of the boys. The school was highly sexualised. There was gang violence from the inner city communities that spewed into the school. I knew all of that, but I was prepared to stand up. I really think that once you show the courage and you stand up to the boys, once you let them know that you are not afraid of them and you are there to help them to better themselves, things gradually came around. (Anthone – IV)

Some of the leaders had taken on leadership training during their tenures. For example, in his first leadership role, Randall had learned on the job, but as he moved to a bigger school he decided to undertake a postgraduate degree in school leadership:

> In my younger days, in my first school, I got no training then in leadership. That was on the job where I learned. Then I took leave and did my degrees in school leadership…I moved from a small school to a bigger sized school. And I recognized that times are changing and with a teacher's certificate alone, that

would not make it. So you recognize that you need to grow professionally…with the changing trends, you need to upgrade yourself professionally. (Randall – IV)

However, although initially Randall talked a lot about developing his skills through reflection and learning from his mistakes, he also believed that leadership ability was innate:

There are some gifts that you are born with, naturally. It's not that you learn it. Some things just come naturally because of who you are. You're your own person. To say what makes a good leader, I don't think I could make one sweeping statement. (Randall – IV)

School improvement strategies

In the focus group, it was acknowledged that there had been great strides made by the government in recent years to improve the quality of the education system in Jamaica, as highlighted by Marica:

…in recent years, the Government has undertaken a transformation in education, and that is a move to bring a professional faith to teaching. We have just instituted what is called the Jamaica Teaching Council, which has overall responsibility, I think, in certification and the whole issue of the teacher as a professional. The inspectorate is now looking at schools critically, to close the gap…to close the gap between what was branded as schools that were not performing, as opposed to those who were considered to be high performing schools…(Marcia - FG)

From the interviews, there were a number of more localised strategies that the leaders adopted to help them improve their schools. For example, Joshua discussed how he developed a five year development plan through discussions with school staff and the local community:

I quickly realised that if I were to survive at all, then I had to put some kind of plan of action together. And therefore I pulled the board together, pulled the school community together. I said, look, we are going to design a five year development

plan for the school and this is going to be done as a unit, not just the Principal but all of us will have some kind of contribution, we'll all have input…and as we went along we looked at the quality of the teaching and the learning. We have also developed an expectation for the students, high expectations, putting them in the deep end, giving them challenging tasks, focusing on formative assessment and evaluation as we go along. We also look at our relationship with the community…We also look at the climate within the school, whether it can be supportive, inclusive. Those are the kind of things we did… (Joshua – IV)

In Anthone's case, it was the discipline within the school that he targeted first, which he felt was crucial for any subsequent school improvement strategies to work:

…we just had to be working on discipline. The school lacked discipline, it lacked systems and policies…a case in point was the last principal who was known as a drunkard, and the persons were not interviewed for jobs. His friends would meet in the bar and ask if there was any openings, so the persons who came there were not interested in teaching but just getting a job to earn…so setting up a vision and motivating the staff and being an instructional leader, those I had to put on the back burner just to get the discipline in place…(Anthone – IV)

And Randall talked about the importance of putting the pupils' needs at the heart of any decision making processes:

When problems arise…I go home and give it some thought. Then I will call the parties involved and I will say to them, "Okay, my colleagues. This is happening in the school. I want to hear your own views on this matter." I listen carefully, make some notes, then I will say to them, "Okay. This is my take on the subject too. This is a problem for all of us. And for the interest of all of us, especially the students, we need to do this." We are there to serve them. The kids are why we are here. (Randall – IV)

Difficult parts of the role

Several challenges were highlighted by the leaders linked to implementing these school improvement strategies. For example, Joshua talked about what he felt was a disconnect

between the cultural values and behaviours being espoused and enacted at school and those in the communities within which the school was situated:

> All right. You know, I'll admit the fact that with all these wonderful programmes in place, the kids come to us and we organise them. We get them to show respect for self at school. We get them to conform to rules and regulations and we provide a structure at school. But the truth is at the end of the day when they go through the gates of the school, go back to their communities, we really do not have much to do with them. So lots of what we would have done at school would have been affected by what happens at home. So I really want to see more being done to control what takes place at home. I don't know how that can be done, but there has to be, simply put parents have to be held more accountable. Gone are the days in my country where the village together would be responsible for training that young man…So that if a child misbehaves on route from school to home, anybody could have spoken to that child, anybody could have corrected that child. What we have experienced is a shift. So therefore what happens at school is not supported by what happens on the street or even what happens at home. So to my mind I am somewhat disarmed and somewhat frustrated thinking that all we do at school can really amount to nothing if that's not supported by civil society. (Joshua – IV)

Other leaders talked about the difficulties of changing the culture in their schools, from the perspective of students, staff and the community:

> The difficult part of the role is managing the human capacity…You're eager to make changes and improve the academic performance, you want to improve the values and the attitudes of the students. You want to have parents buying into your vision, supporting your PTA meetings. You want to be, overall, to be successful. And you became a bit impatient with all of these things and want more people to buy in…(Raymone – IV)

> The difficult part is really to get people to understand their roles and responsibilities and to enforce them fairly across the board…holding people accountable causes tensions between administrators and staff. But that is because they were never held to account before, and I strongly suspect that as people begin to understand their roles and responsibilities more clearly, and those are clarified,

then people will show less resentment and conflict about being held to account for what they are employed to do. (Anthone – IV)

Enjoyable parts of the role

Despite the difficulties outlined above, it was clear that all the leaders in this study enjoyed being in their roles with all participants commenting on how fulfilling it was to be a school leader in Jamaica. The most commonly cited aspect of this fulfilment was when they saw their students succeed, as the following two examples show:

> When you see students who persons had given up on, when you let them know that they can perform as well as any other student. When you see the joy on their faces that they have succeeded at something, and the eagerness that they want to learn… those things are very joyful...(Anthone – IV)

> When my students succeed, I am happy. When my students achieve their learning goals, I feel on top of the world. When I'm able to talk with a child and to make a difference by just talking to that child and that child relating to me and I see a change in behaviour, I am happy. Personally I get a lot of satisfaction from just teaching, from just leading the teaching and learning process, it's something that provides me with great personal satisfaction… (Joshua – IV)

Discussion

At the beginning of this paper, we argued that in order to fully understand the challenges and issues that Jamaican school leaders face it was necessary to explore the three inter-related concepts of socialisation, identity and culture at both a macro structural and micro agential level. Through our data, we have shown that our participants' narratives of *becoming* and *being* a leader are very much influenced by national level societal and cultural issues, experienced at a local level. The issues identified in this study mirror those previously highlighted (Baker-Henningham *et al.* 2009; Morrison *et al.* 2011; Pottinger and Stair 2009). The data also suggests that in

becoming school leaders, the participants perceived that they had a strong sense of agency in attempting to challenge and change the social structures within the institutions they lead and in the surrounding local communities, which in turn, they hope, will have a lasting effect on the nation as a whole, particularly in relation to notions of citizenship and upholding traditional societal values (based on a strong Christian faith). Through the narratives of some of the leaders, it was clear that the church and their faith were powerful features of their personal and professional identities and had been – and indeed remain - a site of significant social and cultural experiences. The strong community relationships that the church provided offered a network of support as well as places to develop skills that principals would later utilise in their leadership roles. This point also appears connected to the ideas of 'social good' that school leaders often articulated, in relation to their understanding and experiences of their role.

In addition to exploring the leadership identities of Jamaican school leaders through our conceptual framework, we also set out to discover whether our participants' sense of identity as a leader could be understood by drawing on opposing leadership theories linked to cultural, political and historical contexts, namely the trait versus process approach to leadership (Northouse 2013). It was here where we saw some interesting contradictions from the data, characterised by ambivalence. First, there was evidence from the focus group discussion and interviews that our participants saw leadership as innate, with several individuals talking about being 'born leaders'. This belief may well link to the perceived importance of the church, religion and faith in our leaders' lives, and the idea that certain people are born with 'god- given' gifts or talents. However, what was thought-provoking from a leadership development point of view was that although the participants held this perspective, they all talked about how they

had grown and developed as leaders through undertaking courses, critically reflecting on practice and experiences, and talking issues and situations through with peers and other teachers. This process approach to leadership was also evidenced through the extremely positive evaluation forms completed at the end of the leadership development course reported in this paper, with the data suggesting that they had grown and developed as leaders throughout the time on the programme.

Implications

What are the implications for the research presented here? Although small in scale, the study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of school leaders' identity formation, maintenance and change in Jamaica. It has shown that school leaders' experiences can be illuminated and understood by using an analytical framework based on the nexus and inter-relationships between the concepts of socialisation, identity and culture. This framework provides a powerful lens through which researchers and policy makers can comprehend more clearly some of the challenges and issues school leaders in Jamaica face, and suggests that future research in this area may well benefit from adopting a similar approach.

There are also implications for leadership development practice. The leaders in this study initially all identified with the idea that leaders were 'born' and not 'made', to a greater or lesser extent. However, as they discussed their experiences and reflected on their actions in more detail, it was clear that they actually bought into the view that leadership skills and behaviours could be nurtured and developed. Thus, leadership development programmes in Jamaica may need to take into account the fact that any participants may be unwilling to fully engage with the programme at the start, and that any initial activities may need to be based around breaking down and re-constructing widespread cultural beliefs on notions of leadership. This knowledge is important when

thinking about who is able to *become* and *be* an educational leader, and how people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences - who perhaps have traditionally been excluded from becoming school leaders in the past - can be encouraged into these crucial roles. Moreover, as argued in the introduction, if leadership is conceptualised not at an individual level but as a developmental process involving human interaction and relationship building between people (Haslam *et al.* 2011), then tailored programmes adopting this framework can enhance leadership practice for school leaders and, in turn, improve the educational opportunities for their pupils and the local community (Razik and Swanson 2010).

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