An exploration of the terms educational system leader and educational system leadership

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Diolch x

Abstract

This thesis explores the concept and practice of **system leadership** within the context of Welsh education reform. In the context of significant policy change and curriculum transformation, the study investigates how leadership that transcends individual schools can contribute to system-wide improvement. It specifically examines the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership**, using an interpretivist approach (Thomas, 2017) to understand how these are perceived by educational leaders, advisers and policy influencers.

Grounded in sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 1990, 1995, 2003), the research is framed by two central questions:

What is understood by the term **educational system leader**?
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To address these questions, the study employed two qualitative data collection methods: an online questionnaire distributed to a purposive sample of global education professionals and follow-up interviews with four headteachers from across Wales. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), supported by Rogoff's (2003) analytic framework, led to the development of seven themes. These findings culminated in the identification of five core principles of a **system leader** and eight essential aspects of **system leadership**, together forming an empirically derived model of **system leadership** in action.

The study argues that **system leadership** in Wales is not merely an extension of traditional within-school leadership, but a distinct and necessary form of leadership that supports collaboration, coherence and reform across the education system. It contributes to the field of educational leadership by offering a contextually grounded understanding of **system leadership** and its role in driving sustainable change. The model developed through this research provides valuable insights for policy, practice and future research, particularly in supporting the ongoing transformation of education in Wales.

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Chapter 1: The Welsh context

Background to the study

In the context of Welsh educational reform, **system leadership** is a critical factor in driving sustainable improvements and encouraging collaboration across various levels of the Welsh education system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014) (OECD). Fullan (2025) argues that sustainable educational change depends on building capacity at every level of the system, blending bottom-up innovation with system-wide coherence, a principle that underpins the Welsh approach to reform. This research explores the concept of **system leadership** within the Welsh education system, aiming to clarify what is understood by the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership**.

Understanding **system leadership** is vital because it could provide a framework for leaders to work beyond their own schools, supporting and influencing other professionals to achieve collective goals (Greany and Higham, 2018; Higham *et al*., 2009; Hopkins, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2016; Hopkins *et al.,* 2008; Muijs, 2015a, 2015b). This approach is particularly important in Wales, where educational reform efforts are focused on improving the quality of teaching and leadership, promoting bilingual education and ensuring high standards across the system (Jones, 2024, 2025; OECD, 2014, 2020; WG, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2020, 2021a, 2023b, 2024b). By exploring the concept of **system leadership** this research aims to inform strategies that can help Wales achieve its educational goals and create a more cohesive and effective education system.

This study is underpinned by Higham *et al*.(2009) and Hopkins' (2007, 2009) principles of **system leadership**, which promote moral purpose, leadership beyond the school, strategic capacity and personal qualities. These principles serve as a theoretical lens through which the leadership structures and reform strategies within the Welsh education system are critically examined. For the purposes of this research, **system leadership** is defined as leadership that transcends individual organisations to influence and enhance the performance of the wider education system (Higham *et al*., 2009). However, within the Welsh context, the term remains inconsistently defined (Harris, 2020; Harris *et al*., 2021b) and insufficiently conceptualised, with limited consensus among policymakers and practitioners. This conceptual ambiguity

presents a significant challenge, as it undermines the coherence and strategic alignment of leadership development initiatives. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a more contextually grounded and operationally defined understanding of **system leadership** that reflects the specific demands and aspirations of the Welsh education landscape.

Clarifying terminology: Educational versus Education

I use the term **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership** because the adjective *educational* highlights the values, practices and professional judgement central to leading within and across schools. It emphasises pedagogy, learning and moral purpose, whereas *education system* refers more broadly to structures and policies. This distinction ensures my research focuses on the human and values-driven aspects of leadership, not just the system itself.

Chapter synopsis

This chapter is structured to offer a comprehensive overview of the context, challenges and initiatives related to educational leadership in Wales, laying the foundational background necessary for comprehending the study's emphasis on **educational system leadership**. By examining the complexities of **system leadership**, the research seeks to explore how this leadership approach can drive educational reforms, encourage collaboration and ultimately enhance the overall effectiveness of the Welsh education system.

First, I present a brief synopsis of the historical political background (Evans, 2021; Rees, 2007; Rees and Power, 2007; Reynolds, 2008;) highlighting the impact of devolution on education policies and initiatives. This section includes a description of the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL, 2018) (Welsh Government (WG) 2017a) detailing its role in developing leadership capacity. Secondly, I provide an overview of the Welsh education performance, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results and their implications for Welsh education. The next section describes how the disappointing PISA results triggered a series of external reviews and reforms. It highlights the growing recognition of **system leadership** as a key driver of educational improvement in Wales (OECD, 2014).

Next I share an overview of the context and current educational environment, including statistical and contextual evidence that emphasises the unique socio-economic and linguistic context of Wales. This is followed by a section where I discuss key educational policy initiatives that prioritise leadership, with a particular focus on Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b), Additional Learning Needs (WG, 2021a) and the Welsh language (WG, 2017b). Following this, I provide a summary of findings from Wales' national inspectorate for education and training (Estyn) on school leadership, as well as internal reviews (funded by Welsh Government) on leadership conducted by Harris *et al*. (2021) and Jones (2024, 2025).

This study aims to explore the practices and impact of **system leadership** offering insights that can help support the success of the Welsh education system and inform educational improvement globally. Having outlined the chapter's structure and aims, this section now examines the political context that has shaped educational policy in the Welsh education system since devolution. Understanding this historical background is essential for analysing the development of leadership initiatives and the persistent challenges confronting the Welsh education system.

1.1   Political background: policies and initiatives

The 1998 devolution referendum marked a pivotal shift for Wales, granting the Senedd powers over key policy areas, including education (Evans, 2021). This autonomy enabled Welsh policymakers to design education strategies tailored to the nation's socio-economic and cultural context. Described as the "power to spend" and to "construct its own policies" (Reynolds, 2008, p.753), devolution was seen as a licence to innovate (Evans, 2021). However, despite this potential, outcomes have fallen short of expectations. Rees (2007) observed that Welsh education policies became increasingly distinct from those in the rest of the UK, yet the persistent challenges of poverty linked to attainment remain (WG, 2023b).

A key barrier has been the lack of sustained investment in leadership capacity as stated by Reynolds (2008) and Harris *et al*. (2021a) who stress that successful reform depends on building leadership at all levels. Over the past 25 years, Wales has seen six First Ministers and nine Education Ministers, each introducing new priorities. This frequent turnover in policy direction, while indicative of evolving political leadership, has also contributed to a lack of

cohesion. Reynolds and McKimm (2021) argue that no other system has changed more in its leadership and management since 1998 yet this inconsistency may have hindered coherent development.

Early efforts to define a Welsh approach to education were set out in The Learning Country (WAG, 2001), which envisioned a distinct, inclusive system. It prioritised leadership as a driver of improvement, advocating for a "Made in Wales" framework of continuous development (WAG, 2001, p.43). However, the lack of a robust implementation strategy and limited leadership infrastructure meant that its impact was constrained (Daugherty & Jones, 2002). While England established the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) (UK Government, 2008) in 2001 to support leadership development, Wales lacked a comparable institution until the creation of NAEL in 2018. NAEL was tasked with quality assuring leadership programmes and elevating the status of leadership development across the system. Delivered locally through regional partnerships, these programmes aimed to support leaders at all levels, from aspiring headteachers to middle and senior leaders.

Despite this progress, comparisons with England remain evident. Egan (2016) notes that England invested more strategically in leadership for disadvantaged schools, while Wales struggled to appoint strong leaders in similar contexts. Reynolds and McKimm (2021) attribute this to Wales' resistance to top-down models, favouring a more collaborative ethos. Yet, without a clear and consistent system-wide approach, leadership development has remained underdeveloped. The School Effectiveness Framework (WAG, 2008), for example, was largely neglected by schools (Reynolds & McKimm, 2021, p.61).

System leadership, defined as leadership that extends beyond individual institutions to influence and improve the wider education system (Higham *et al*., 2009; Hopkins, 2007) is therefore essential. It offers a means to align policy with practice, develop collaboration and build the leadership capacity needed to deliver reform. As Wales continues its journey of educational transformation, embedding **system leadership** at the heart of its strategy will be critical to achieving coherence, equity and sustainable improvement.

Created to address Wales's leadership capacity gap, the establishment of NAEL in 2018 marked a pivotal moment. Understanding NAEL's role, structure and impact is therefore critical to evaluating how Wales is building the leadership capacity needed to deliver on its educational ambitions.

1.1.1 National Academy for Educational Leadership

In 2017, a report by OECD (commissioned by the WG) stated that there had been a "shift in the Welsh approach to school improvement" (p.7) but further policy attention was required in "making leadership development a prime driver of the Welsh Education Strategy" (ibid). In response to the OECD's report (2017) to improve standards of education in Wales, Williams (the then minister for education), launched Education in Wales: Our national mission (WG, 2017a). In its action plan it lists four enabling objectives to move its reform journey forward. One of the four enabling objectives is the requirement for Wales to have "inspirational leaders working collaboratively to raise standards" (WG, 2017a, p.28). Williams' plan outlines the steps required to achieve this and focuses on revised professional standards for teaching, leadership and   teaching assistants (WG, 2017c); improved collaboration between the regional consortia (which consists of five partnerships across Wales primarily funded through Welsh Government grants to support school improvement services, professional learning, curriculum development and leadership support)   to align support for school leaders; a revised NPQH aligned to the new professional standards and Hill's recommendation in 2013 to turn "the national leadership development board into a teaching and leadership academy or foundation - independent of government but receive some grant funding to support its remit" (Hill, 2013, p.7).

NAEL (2018) was established under the Companies Act 2006. It is a company by guarantee at arm's length of WG but is grant funded by WG. This was possibly the first time WG had given leadership the status and focus required to support its policies and initiatives with tangible outputs. NAEL has its own board of directors and receives its remit from the Cabinet Secretary for Education which details objectives and targets informed by WG's wider policy developments. The remit (Williams, 2018) received by NAEL in 2018, following its constitution stated that it needed "to continue the development of the Academy Associates as the basis of future development of **system leadership**" (ibid, p.3).

NAEL Associates are practising senior educational leaders drawn from across the education system, including schools, the youth work sector and post-16 education through an open recruitment process. This cross-sectoral representation adds significant value by enabling collaboration across institutional boundaries and enabling a more integrated approach to leadership development. Associates play a vital role in connecting between policy and practice, ensuring that the voice of leadership is embedded in national dialogue and decision-making (NAEL, 2018). Their work is underpinned by a collective moral purpose, to improve outcomes for all learners and promote equity across the system. As **system leaders**, they operate both individually and collectively, supporting peers, contributing to joint research commissions and championing the interests of learners and practitioners beyond their own organisations. Central to their role is the cultivation of professional networks that develop collaboration, challenge complacency and share effective practice (NAEL, 2018). By building trust, modelling ethical leadership and facilitating knowledge exchange, NAEL Associates strengthen the system's capacity for self-improvement and coherence.

The term **system leadership** is not defined in the NAEL (2018) remit (Williams, 2018) and the meaning of the term does not have collective agreement within the Welsh system to date. This unequivocally demonstrates the critical importance of this research for Wales offering an insight into what is understood by the term **system leadership**.

It is important to note my own positionality (see 3.2.4 reflexivity, for detail on my positionality and how I mitigate my position within the research). When I started this research I was the assistant director responsible for quality assurance and leadership development within NAEL (2018). I had a direct responsibility for developing the Academy Associates (Williams, 2018) and I needed a thorough understanding of the term **system leadership** to fulfil my responsibilities completely. I became the Chief Executive Officer of the organisation on April 1st 2020 (see 3.2.4 reflexivity). I recognise that I bring a unique and multifaceted perspective to my research on **system leadership**, shaped by my background, experiences, beliefs and values (Bryman, 2012), all of which influence the lens through which I view and approach my research.

Although the OECD (2014, 2020) frequently refers to the concept of **system leadership**, it offers no clear definition or contextualisation specific to Wales. This lack of clarity reinforces the relevance and necessity of my research, which aims to explore and define what **system leadership** means within the Welsh education system and how it can be effectively developed and applied.

1.2 Welsh educational performance

The persistent underperformance of Wales in the international benchmark, PISA, highlights a longstanding challenge in educational leadership and system capacity (Reynolds, 2008). In 2006, the PISA tests raised serious concerns about the effectiveness of Welsh education policies, with Wales ranking lowest in the UK across mathematics, science and reading (Statistics for Wales, 2006). This trend continued in 2009, prompting national reflection on the adequacy of existing policies and practices (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2009). Reynolds (2008) attributed this decline to several systemic issues, including socio-economic factors, limited educational investment and weak delivery mechanisms within educational authorities. Crucially, Reynolds (2008) noted that "little attempt was made to build the capacity of the Welsh system to innovate and change" (p.763), suggesting that leadership development had been significantly neglected. Reynolds (2008) suggests, that this lack of investment in leadership capacity hindered schools' ability to implement reforms effectively. Although the establishment of NAEL (2018) represented a positive step forward, there remains a pressing need to strengthen leadership across the system (Egan, 2022). In response to the 2009 PISA results, the then Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning, Leighton Andrews, responded to the poor PISA results and introduced a twenty-point reform plan, including integrated PISA assessments (Andrews, 2010). While there was modest improvement by 2018 (Sizmur *et al*.), the 2022 results again placed Wales at the bottom of the UK rankings (Ingram *et al*., 2023). However, PISA is only one measure of performance. Wales also uses internal metrics such as Estyn inspections (see section 1.5 Inspection of education and training in Wales), national qualifications data (Qualifications Wales, 2024) and Welsh Government data (WG, 2023a) to assess educational progress.

A key insight from Reynolds (2007) is the importance of addressing "within-school variation" (WSV)(p.2) the disparities in teaching quality and learner outcomes within the same school.

He argues that focusing solely on between-school differences overlooks the significant impact of internal inconsistencies. This view is supported by the OECD (2014), which found that most achievement differences in Wales occur within schools. Reynolds further contends that improving WSV requires attention to teacher competence, consistent implementation of strategies and reducing pressure that undermines performance. While Andrews' reforms focused on structural accountability, Reynolds (2007) and Reynolds and McKimm (2021) advocate for a more introspective approach, which supports empowering schools to learn from their own best practices. As they state, "a focus upon WSV moves us closer to a world where no school needs to wait for Welsh Government or another school to help it out, since it can help itself by looking at its own best people and learning from them" (Reynolds and McKimm, 2021, p.63). Still, the recurring issues highlighted by PISA emphasise the need for deeper structural reform.

The lessons from PISA (Andrews, 2010; Bradshaw *et al*., 2009; Ingram *et al*., 2023; Reynolds, 2008; Sizmur *et al*., 2018) and subsequent reviews offer a broader understanding of the challenges facing Welsh education and provide a foundation for building a more resilient, self-improving system. Therefore, this research into **system leadership** is both timely and necessary. It aims to support the development of leaders who can drive school improvement and effectively deliver educational initiatives.

Building on the discussion of Welsh performance in PISA, it is important to consider external leadership reviews that have been conducted to address these challenges. These reviews provide a comprehensive evaluation of leadership practices and offer recommendations for improvement.

1.3 Welsh policy scrutiny

The disappointing PISA results in 2012 (Statistics for Wales, 2015) prompted the WG to commission a comprehensive review of education services by Robert Hill (2013). While earlier policy frameworks such as The Learning Country (WAG, 2001) and Andrews' (2010) twenty-point plan had aimed to tailor education policy to Welsh needs (Rees, 2012), the PISA outcomes raised concerns about their effectiveness. Hill's review, comprising 80 recommendations across five domains, placed significant emphasis on strengthening school

leadership and developing collaboration among schools, regional consortia and local authorities. He acknowledged the presence of exceptional school leaders in Wales but criticised the underutilisation of their expertise in developing broader leadership capacity, particularly in executive and school-to-school leadership (Hill, 2013).

Subsequently, the WG invited the OECD to conduct a further review in 2014. This report recognised Wales' commitment to systemic reform but highlighted the need to prioritise the development of **system leadership** as a 'key driver of educational improvement' (OECD, 2014, p.45). Notably, this marked the first explicit reference to **system leadership** in Welsh educational discourse, though the term remained undefined.

The WG later requested that the OECD (2020) undertake another review. The evaluation offered Wales several recommendations to support its reform journey and the realisation of the new curriculum. Among these, the OECD recognised the recent establishment of NAEL as a significant contributor to the ongoing work of Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) and emphasised its potential to enhance the quality and consistency of professional learning, particularly in leadership development (OECD, 2020). The OECD (2020) proposed that the WG should sustain the co-construction process through **system leadership** over the medium term and invest in leadership for curriculum design (WG, 2022c). This investment, led by NAEL should include the development, endorsement and delivery of appropriate training for all school and **system leaders** (OECD, 2020).

These recommendations highlight the central role of leadership and specifically **system leadership** in shaping and sustaining curriculum reform and reinforce the need for a coherent, well-supported **system leadership** development strategy across Wales. This absence of a clear definition emphasises the need for further conceptual clarity and research into what **system leadership** means within the Welsh context.

1.4   Context of the education system in Wales

The educational environment in Wales is notably diverse, characterised by a challenging geographical landscape that includes urban, coastal and rural schools (Turner, 2020; WG, 2018). This diversity is further enriched by the provision of bilingual education, promoting

both Welsh and English languages (WG, 2017b, 2024a). There are 1,536 schools in Wales, which includes 1,460 local-authority maintained schools of which 442 are Welsh medium schools, where Welsh is the medium of instruction (WG, 2024b).

The policy changes brought about by devolution have set the stage for significant educational reforms in Wales. Researching **system leadership** in Wales is particularly relevant at this time due to several compelling factors. The educational landscape is undergoing significant reforms, including the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) for pupils aged 3 to 16 years old, (see section 1.4.1 Curriculum development). This reform necessitates strong and effective leadership to ensure its successful implementation and embedding of the curriculum (OECD, 2020).

Leaders in Wales face unique challenges, such as addressing educational inequities, (See section 1.4.5 : Socio-economic status) promoting the Welsh language and culture (see section 1.4.3: the Welsh language) and navigating the complexities of a diverse educational system. These challenges emphasise the necessity of understanding and developing effective **system leadership** practices that can support and enhance educational outcomes across the country. By focusing on these Wales-specific challenges, this study aims to provide valuable insights and practical solutions to help leaders navigate the current educational reforms and drive positive change in the Welsh education system.

A critical component of these reforms is the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b), which represents a significant shift in educational philosophy and practice since devolution. Understanding the development and implementation of this curriculum is essential for comprehending the broader context of educational leadership in Wales. This curriculum aims to create an education system that better reflects Wales' unique cultural, social and linguistic context (Jones and Roderick, 2013; Turner, 2020; WG, 2017b, 2018, WG, 2024a, 2024b). The next section will explore the significant shifts in educational philosophy and practice that have influenced the development and implementation of the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b).

1.4.1 Curriculum development

Following devolution, the Welsh Government gained the authority to shape its own educational policies, leading to significant curriculum changes (Evans, 2021). However, Wales continued to implement the previous national curriculum that had been established for England and Wales in 1988 (UK Parliament). But, in 1995 Cwricwlwm Cymreig was given statutory status in every subject which allowed Wales' national curriculum to reflect the culture, environment, economy and history of Wales (Jones and Roderick, 2013). This paved the way for The Learning Country, (WAG, 2001) a comprehensive education and lifelong learning programme, which spanned a decade aimed to transform education in Wales. Following a further review in 2014 (OECD), Wales continued to maintain the same core national curriculum as England. Additionally, the Welsh Government decided to retain the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and Advanced (A) levels but introduced a more rigorous Welsh Baccalaureate, "with clear pathways for progression through the medium of Welsh" (Jones and Roderick, p.4, 2013) and an additional review aimed to consider the impact of new literacy and numeracy tests on existing curriculum and assessment arrangements (ibid).

For nearly a decade after devolution, in general, the structure of the education system in Wales mirrored that of England, with year groups and exam classes remaining unchanged. However, in 2008, a significant shift occurred with the introduction of the Foundation Phase (WG, 2015a) for children aged three to seven alongside a revised curriculum. This significant shift in primary and nursery schools required leaders to implement a Foundation Phase (WG, 2015a) education grounded in play (WG, 2015a). This replaced the more formal National Curriculum Key Stage 1 and focussed on holistic development through active learning and practical activities, encouraging creativity and a love for learning (Waters, 2016). But this innovative approach posed challenges. An independent report by Siraj (2014) on the Foundation Phase in Wales found the implementation of this new approach to early years education to be inconsistent across Wales, with significant variability in quality across different schools and settings. The report emphasised the need for strong leadership and comprehensive training to ensure the effective adoption and integration of the Foundation Phase principles. This is supported by the research conducted by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) (2011) who found there was a need for

visionary leadership, continuous professional development and effective resource management to successfully implement the Foundation Phase (WG, 2015a) in Wales. The report also highlighted the importance of developing collaboration and open communication among educators and leaders. My research aims to support these efforts by providing insights into effective **system leadership**, crucial for driving sustainable educational change and improvement (OECD, 2014, 2020).

In 2015, due to the mounting evidence of academic underachievement in Wales (see 1.2 Welsh education performance) Professor Graham Donaldson was asked by WG to lead a curriculum review which was part of the reform process of Welsh education. The review (known as Successful Futures, Donaldson, 2025) instigated by the then Minister for Education and Skills, Huw Lewis, lasted nearly a year and took evidence from over 700 people in Wales (Dauncey, 2015). This extensive consultation laid the groundwork for significant legislative reform in Welsh education. The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 (WG, 2024b) sets out the Curriculum for Wales for pupils aged three-sixteen years old, in law and replaces any other previous curriculum in state schools. It is expected that by September 2026, all learners from three to sixteen will be following Curriculum for Wales (ibid).

The education system in Wales is now distinctively different to England, with Wales implementing a new curriculum focused on four core purposes; developing healthy, confident individuals; ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; and ethical, informed citizens (WG, 2024b). The four purposes provide a clear vision and framework for what education in Wales aims to achieve. These purposes are designed to ensure that all learners develop holistically and are well-prepared for life beyond school (ibid). Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) is structured around six areas of learning and experience and includes mandatory elements which include cross-curricular skills of literacy, numeracy and digital competence. The Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) emphasises the essential role of teachers as curriculum-makers, aligning with the principle of subsidiarity which supports the idea that decisions should be made at the most local level possible, empowering teachers to tailor the curriculum to meet the specific needs of their students (ibid). The role of teachers as curriculum designers is central to the vision of the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2022c), as it

leverages their expertise and creativity to create a dynamic and effective educational experience for all learners.

While the importance of leadership in curriculum reform is widely acknowledged, Greany (2022) notes that there is relatively little research exploring the nature and processes of curriculum leadership within schools. This gap in the literature is particularly significant given the scale and ambition of reforms such as the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b). According to the OECD (2020), implementing such a curriculum presents substantial challenges, including building capacity, setting a clear vision and direction and ensuring access to the necessary resources and support. They emphasise that leadership and particularly **system leadership**, is crucial to overcoming these challenges and ensuring successful implementation. Effective **system leaders** are expected to provide coherence across policies and initiatives, build the capacity of education professionals through high-quality professional learning and nurture collaboration and trust among stakeholders. Moreover, they play a vital role in ensuring that schools, especially those with greater needs are adequately supported. In this context, **system leadership** is not only instrumental in sustaining the reform process but also central to realising the curriculum's aims across schools in Wales (OECD, 2020).

Research into **system leadership** is essential for understanding effective strategies for managing and sustaining large-scale educational changes (OECD, 2020). By examining the skills and practices of successful **system leaders**, we can as the OECD suggest (2020) better support teachers and ensure the successful implementation of Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b). In conclusion, the Curriculum for Wales represents a bold and innovative approach to education reform (WG, 2024b). However, its success hinges on effective leadership, comprehensive training and continuous support for educators. By addressing these challenges, Wales can create an education system that reflects its unique cultural, social and linguistic context and prepares its learners for the future (Jones and Roderick, 2013; OECD, 2020; Turner, 2020; WG, 2018, 2024a, 2024b). A critical aspect of addressing these challenges (OECD, 2020) is the establishment of professional standards for teaching, leadership and teaching assistants (WG, 2017c), which aim to support the development of a highly-skilled education workforce capable of implementing these reforms effectively.

1.4.2 Professional standards for teaching, leadership and teaching assistant

In 2017, the Welsh Government introduced the professional standards for teaching, leadership and teaching assistants (WG, 2017c) to support the development of a highly skilled education workforce in Wales, ready to meet the challenges of education reform. The professional standards set clear expectations for effective practice throughout a practitioner's career and are considered well-aligned with the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) and other education reforms (Arad, 2023). This alignment ensures that educators are not only prepared to deliver the curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) but also to engage in continuous professional development and innovation, both essential for successful reform implementation (Arad, 2023; WG, 2017c). However, it is important to note that the current standards do not explicitly include **system leaders**, despite their critical role in shaping, sustaining and leading across the education system. This absence presents a gap in recognising and supporting those who operate beyond individual institutions to influence system-wide improvement.

The professional standards are made up of five dimensions which include Pedagogy, Collaboration, Professional Learning, Innovation and Leadership. These five dimensions aim to enhance the status and value of teachers, teaching assistants and leaders, providing a shared focus on professional development (WG, 2017c). However, despite their positive reception, the implementation of these standards has been inconsistent, (Arad, 2023). The report (ibid) reveals that awareness and engagement with the standards vary significantly among practitioners and leaders. This inconsistency emphasises a critical need for more robust support and guidance to help leaders and practitioners, especially experienced teachers and support staff, to effectively engage with the standards. The report calls for targeted interventions to bridge this gap, suggesting that without such support, the potential benefits of the standards may not be fully realised.

The report (Arad, 2023) also highlights the necessity for further research to identify the most effective strategies for **system leadership**, understand the impact of leadership on student outcomes and ensure the sustainability of leadership practices. Arad (2023) suggest that this research is crucial for developing a deeper understanding of how leadership can be leveraged

to improve educational outcomes and another reason why my research into **system leadership** is important.

A particularly significant aspect of these professional standards is their role in promoting bilingual education and supporting the Welsh Government's initiative to enhance the Welsh language. Given the ongoing efforts to increase the number of Welsh speakers and integrate the language into everyday educational practices, the standards play a vital role in this cultural and educational mission. Therefore, ensuring their effective implementation is not only a matter of professional development but also a key component of preserving and promoting the Welsh language.

1.4.3   The Welsh language

The importance of the Welsh language in the context of Wales and **system leadership** is multifaceted and deeply rooted in cultural, educational and policy frameworks (Jones and Roderick, 2013; OECD, 2020; Turner, 2020; WG, 2017b, 2018, 2021b, 2022b, 2024a). The Welsh language is considered by Welsh Government (2015b) to be a vital part of Wales' cultural identity and heritage. The decline in Welsh speakers from 20.8% in 2001 to 17.8% in 2011 (National statistics for Wales, 2001, 2012) prompted the Welsh Government to take significant measures to reverse this trend. Initiatives like the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WG, 2015b), the Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers (2017b) strategy and the Welsh language and education (Wales) Bill (Senedd Wales, 2024) aim to promote and integrate the Welsh language into everyday life. Enacted in July 2025, the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 (WG, 2025a) aims to ensure all pupils in Wales become confident Welsh speakers by introducing statutory school language categories, Welsh language learning goals and mandatory delivery plans. It also supports the national target of one million Welsh speakers (2017b). These efforts highlight the government's commitment to preserving and revitalising the language, which is seen as central for nurturing a shared national identity and cultural continuity (Senedd Wales, 2024; WG, 2015b, 2017b, 2025a).

In the context of **system leadership**, the role of leaders in promoting the Welsh language is considered essential (WG, 2024b). This includes increasing the number of Welsh-speaking teachers, integrating Welsh language skills into the curriculum and promoting the use of

Welsh in schools and communities (Senedd Wales, 2024; WG, 2017b, WG, 2025a). Leaders must also navigate the complexities of developing a bilingual workforce (WG, 2024f) while ensuring high educational standards. Promoting the Welsh language, in this context becomes a key aspect of **system leadership** as it aligns with the broader goals of educational improvement and cultural preservation (OECD, 2020; Senedd Wales, 2024; WG, 2015b, 2017b).

The Welsh Government's initiatives to promote the Welsh language are not just about increasing the number of speakers but also about embedding the language in all aspects of life, including education, community and the workplace (Senedd Wales 2024; WG, 2017b, 2025a). This holistic approach requires strong leadership to set expectations, lead by example and create a positive atmosphere towards the Welsh language within organisations (Welsh Language Commissioner, (WLC) 2025).

In summary, the Welsh language is integral to Wales' cultural identity (WG, 2015b) and effective leadership is essential to navigate the complexities of developing a bilingual workforce and ensuring the sustainability of these efforts (WLC, 2025). **System leadership** plays a critical role in promoting and integrating the language into everyday life, aligning with the broader goals of educational reform and cultural preservation (OECD, 2020).

1.4.4 Adnodd

To support the development of the Welsh language, the Welsh Government established Adnodd (WG, 2023c), a public body dedicated to providing bilingual educational resources. Adnodd plays a crucial role in ensuring that teachers have access to high-quality materials in both Welsh and English, thereby supporting the development of a bilingual workforce and the successful implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. Its job is commissioning resources to help support the delivery of Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) and any new qualifications ensuring that equality of language is achieved by publishing any resources simultaneously in both Welsh and English. The Welsh Language Act 1993, (WG, 2021b) required public bodies to provide services to the public in Wales, stating that the Welsh and English languages should be treated on a basis of equality (See section 1.4.3: Welsh language). The new 2025 Act, (WG, 2025a) introduced statutory duties for reviewing the Welsh Language Standards. This

hopefully means that leaders will have greater access to resources to support their delivery of Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b). However, there are currently no resources available to support **system leadership** in Wales and therefore my research is timely and could contribute to supporting leaders in this field.

1.4.5 Socio-economic status in Wales

Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility is a crucial indicator of socio-economic status in Wales, presenting several challenges for educational leaders. In January 2024, 20.15% of pupils aged five to fifteen were eligible for FSM (WG, 2024d). The introduction of Universal Primary Free School Meals (WG, 2024e) in September 2024 aimed to reduce the stigma associated with FSM, tackle child poverty and ensure no child goes hungry in school. However, FSM eligibility also highlights broader socio-economic inequalities such as the financial situation in a child's family, necessitating comprehensive support strategies for these children. Addressing the attainment gap for the poorest children in Wales has been noted as a priority for the current Cabinet Secretary for Education, Lynne Neagle (Neagle, 2024a; WG, 2023b) and education leaders will need continued support to further develop a range of skills which include effectively managing resources by utilising grants to reduce the financial burden on families, as well as using data rigorously to evaluate the impact of their work and make informed decisions. This approach aligns with the concept of **system leadership**, which advocates for a holistic strategy that supports individual learners and contributes to the overall improvement of the education system (Higham *et al*., 2009; Hopkins 2009).

In addition to socio-economic challenges, addressing the needs of learners with additional learning needs (ALN) (WG, 2021a) is crucial for creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment. Leaders must be equipped to manage the transition to the new ALN system (WG, 2021) and ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed.

1.4.6 Additional learning needs (ALN)

The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code for Wales (WG, 2011) hopes to ensure that children and young people aged 0 to 25 receive the support they need to thrive. In 2024, 21,319 pupils (4.6%) had Individual Development Plans (IDPs), which are statutory plans created under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (WG,

2021). The most common needs reported were speech, language and communication difficulties, followed by behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. The transition to the ALN system from the old Special Educational Needs (SEN) system aims to be completed by August 2025, phasing out the previous School Action, School Action Plus and Statement provisions. Transitioning from the old SEN system to the new ALN system presents several challenges for leaders including an increased workload while they manage two systems, resource constraints related to funding, staffing and the availability of Welsh language resources (see Adnodd 1.4.4) as well as timely and consistent communication particularly with multi-agency involvement. The importance of **system leadership** in this context cannot be overstated. **System leadership** (Higham *et al*., 2009; Hopkins, 2007, 2009) involves the coordination and collaboration of various stakeholders, including local authorities, community organisations and educational organisations, to achieve common goals. This approach could be seen as essential for managing the complexities associated with the transition to the ALN system.

The role of **system leadership** in building better partnerships and support structures is considered essential (Greany, 2015; Cousin and Gu, 2021). By encouraging collaboration among various stakeholders, **system leadership** helps create a cohesive framework where support is readily available and accessible. This is particularly important for learners with additional needs, who require tailored support to thrive. This approach also aligns with broader educational goals, such as improving attainment and closing the gap for disadvantaged learners, (Neagle, 2024a) thereby contributing to a more equitable and effective education system. Research into **system leadership** could provide valuable insights into how leaders can build these partnerships and support structures effectively.

1.5 Inspection of education and training in Wales

Despite its central role in overseeing education and training in Wales, Estyn, a non-ministerial civil service department independent from, but funded by the Welsh Government, has consistently reported that leadership in schools remains underdeveloped. For over more than a decade, Estyn's annual reports (2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2022a, 2023a) have highlighted persistent concerns about the quality and capacity of school leadership. In 2012, Estyn asserted that the primary focus of school leaders should be to improve learner experiences

and outcomes and crucially, that "it is in the capacity and quality of leadership that the remedy lies" (Estyn, 2012, p.9). However, the following year's report revealed little progress, stating that while strong and visionary leadership is essential for school improvement, "there has not been enough support at a national level in Wales to develop leaders systematically" (Estyn, 2013, p.13). This sustained critique emphasises a systemic gap between the recognised importance of leadership and the national infrastructure required to nurture it effectively.

In her annual report, Keane (Estyn, 2014), the former, **Her** Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI), argued that "the ability of leaders to think beyond their own institutions is a key feature of what continues to be required to improve education and training in Wales" (p.16). This highlights the importance of collaborative and outward-facing leadership in developing systemic progress. However, Keane (Estyn, 2014, p.16) also acknowledged that despite some progress, a culture of "isolationism" (ibid) persists among certain providers, schools and local authorities. This ongoing isolation limits opportunities for schools to learn from each other and improve together, showing why leadership that encourages collaboration is so important.

In his 2017 annual report, Meilyr Rowlands, (former HMCI), emphasised that "successful leadership is the key factor in achieving the best possible outcomes for learners" (p.46), noting that nearly all providers with good or excellent leadership also received good or excellent overall judgements. This assertion places leadership at the forefront of school effectiveness. However, this view contrasts with earlier perspectives from Hill (2013) and Leithwood *et al*. (2008), who argue that while leadership is important, it is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes. Notably, Leithwood *et al*. (2008) revised their stance in 2019, acknowledging that a broader range of factors should be considered when analysing influences on pupil learning. This evolution in thinking suggests that while leadership remains critical, it must be understood within a wider ecosystem of educational influences.

In his 2023 annual report, Owen Evans, **His** Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI), asserts that inspection evidence from 2022-2023, clearly demonstrates that schools with leaders who understood their specific challenges, implemented appropriate actions and rigorously

evaluated their effectiveness were significantly more successful in reducing the adverse effects of poverty on learner outcomes. This aligns with Estyn's definition of school improvement as a process aimed at ensuring all learners, regardless of background or circumstance, receive the highest quality learning experiences and outcomes, thereby achieving "high standards and aspirations for all" (2023b, p.1). Together, these perspectives emphasise the pivotal role of strategic leadership in driving equity and excellence in education.

The 2024 Estyn Annual Report highlights a persistent and systemic challenge in educational leadership across Wales. It reveals that 29% of secondary schools and 13% of all-age schools received recommendations specifically related to leadership, covering critical areas such as role clarity, accountability, strategic direction and improvement planning. This widespread need for leadership development emphasises the urgency of reform. According to Evans (Estyn, 2024), the success of the Welsh Government's School Improvement Programme (Jones, 2024, 2025) will be pivotal in addressing these challenges. A key component of this effort is the newly announced professional learning agency (Neagle, 2024b, 2025), which is expected to play a vital role in enhancing both teaching quality and leadership capacity.

Estyn (2024) further recommends that schools and Local Authorities collaborate more closely to ensure progress, with a focus on high expectations, robust monitoring and subject-specific support. These developments point to the timeliness and relevance of research into **system leadership**, which aims to provide insights into building a more effective, supportive and collaborative educational environment tailored to the Welsh context.

These findings reinforce the critical role of leadership in driving educational reform. Addressing the leadership gaps identified by Estyn is essential for supporting the school improvement journey as defined by Evans (Estyn, 2023a, 2023b, 2024). Research into **system leadership** could contribute valuable evidence to strengthen leadership practices and promote the outward-facing mindset advocated by Estyn in 2014, namely, "the ability of leaders to think beyond their own institutions" (Estyn, 2014, p.16).

Having examined the inspection landscape of education and training in Wales, it is now pertinent to consider the findings of formal leadership reviews. These reviews offer critical evaluative insights into the strengths and limitations of current leadership practices and provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing strategic capacity and coherence across the system.

1.6   Internal leadership reviews

In February 2021, three years after the establishment of NAEL in 2018, the then Minister for Education, Jeremy Miles MS, commissioned a comprehensive review of leadership provision in Wales (Harris *et al*., 2021a). This review, grounded in over 120 hours of stakeholder interviews and responses from 169 senior leaders, emphasised the pivotal role of high-quality leadership in realising the ambitions of the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b). It highlighted the NPQH as a cornerstone of leadership development, while also recommending an external review of the qualification (Waters, 2023) to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness. A critical insight from the review was the need for systemic collaboration. While NAEL was acknowledged as a central actor in Wales' leadership landscape, its limited capacity to develop strategic partnerships was seen as a barrier to progress. This raises concerns about how well leadership initiatives can grow and last when organisations continue to work in isolation. The report called for enhanced cooperation across the system, the development of leadership programmes aligned with the evolving needs of senior leaders and a more robust approach to quality assurance and evidence-informed practice (Harris *et al*., 2021a).

Building on these findings, Miles initiated a second review in 2023 to examine the roles and responsibilities of education partners, particularly the regional consortia. This review aimed to clarify organisational roles and it also sought to address systemic inefficiencies and ensure that school improvement strategies were responsive to local contexts and pressures. The review's emphasis on clarity and coherence reflects a broader policy trend towards reducing system fragmentation (Jones, 2024). This subsequent report by Jones reinforced the need for stronger local partnerships, clearer national priorities and a simplified funding model. It advocated for embedding school-to-school and cluster collaboration as the foundation of school improvement, addressing inconsistencies in professional learning and enhancing support for post-pandemic recovery (Estyn, 2022a) following the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-

2022 (Public Health Wales, 2022). Importantly, it called for greater accessibility to national and regional networks to ensure equitable support for all schools. These recommendations reflect a shift towards a more distributed model of leadership, where local agency is balanced with national coherence.

Miles (2024) issued a written statement launching phase two of the review, aimed at developing a cohesive, future-proof strategy for school improvement. This phase is particularly significant as it seeks to tailor support to the diverse needs of schools across Wales, thereby promoting equity and excellence in education (Neagle 2024a). However, the success of this strategy depends on how well it balances local autonomy with national guidance.

The cumulative findings of the Harris *et al*. (2021a) and Jones (2024, 2025) reviews, point to a paradigm shift in leadership towards a more integrated, evidence-based and system-wide approach. Leaders must not only adapt to these changes but also develop a deep understanding of **system leadership** and its implications for practice. This calls for a rethinking of leadership development frameworks to ensure they are fit for purpose in a complex and evolving policy environment.

This shift was further emphasised by Neagle's (2024b) statement, which cited the growing number of organisations involved in leadership development as a source of fragmentation. Her decision to dissolve NAEL and consolidate its functions with those of the regional consortia into a new national body marks a significant restructuring. This new entity will be tasked with designing and delivering professional learning and leadership support at a national level. This development not only signals a major policy shift but also raises important questions about coherence, continuity and the future of leadership development in Wales.

In Wales, where reforms increasingly call for integrated approaches to school improvement, there is a growing recognition of the potential role of **system leadership** in driving essential progress. This research contributes to understanding how such leadership can be developed and embedded in practice.

1.7 The potential of system leadership to educational reform in Wales

Despite longstanding recognition of its importance, there has been a persistent lack of targeted investment in leadership development programmes in Wales that explicitly address the demands of **system leadership** (Reynolds, 2008; Egan, 2016). This gap is particularly concerning given the scale and ambition of current educational reforms (Jones 2024, 2025; Miles, 2024; Neagle, 2024b, 2025; WG, 2017b, 2017c, 2021, 2023c, 2024b). As this chapter argues, leadership, especially **system leadership**, is not a peripheral concern but a central lever for driving sustainable reform and improving learner outcomes across the Welsh education system.

System leadership, as conceptualised by Higham *et al*. 2009 and Hopkins, 2008, 2009 suggests through collaboration, shared accountability and capacity-building across schools and organisation improvements can be achieved. In the Welsh context, this approach is especially relevant (Jones, 2024, 2025; Miles, 2024). The system faces unique challenges, including regional variation in school performance and persistent attainment gaps (Estyn 2022b, 2023b) and the need to implement wide-ranging reforms such as the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b). **System leadership** has the potential to address these challenges by supporting coherence across policy and practice and by enabling leaders to work beyond organisational boundaries to build collective capacity (Daugherty and Jones, 2002; Estyn, 2012; Harris *et al*., 2021b; Jones, 2024, 2025 and Miles, 2024).

System leaders could be uniquely positioned to lead on equity-focused initiatives. They could develop strategies to support disadvantaged learners, close attainment gaps and create inclusive environments that meet the needs of all pupils, including those with additional learning needs (Neagle, 2024a; WG, 2021, 2023b, 2024e). Their role is also critical in advancing national priorities such as Cymraeg 2050 (WG, 2017b, WLC, 2025), by embedding bilingualism into leadership practice and ensuring that Welsh-medium education is supported by confident, competent leaders.

However, while the rhetoric around **system leadership** is growing (WG, 2025b), its practical application remains underdeveloped. There is a lack of clarity and consensus in Wales about what **system leadership** entails, how it should be enacted and how its impact should be

measured. This ambiguity risks diluting its potential and undermining reform efforts. As Davies *et al.* (2024) caution, without clarity and coherence, aspirational policy intentions may fail to translate into meaningful change.

Therefore, a more robust and context-specific understanding of **system leadership** is urgently needed. This includes not only defining the concept in the Welsh context but also embedding it into leadership development frameworks and professional learning pathways. The most recent OECD (2020) report calls for the development of **system leaders** in Wales, yet it stops short of offering a clear operational definition or implementation strategy. This lack of specificity emphasises the importance of research that can bridge the gap between policy and practice. This study contributes to that effort. By examining how **system leadership** is understood, it aims to inform both policy and practice. The insights generated can help shape leadership development programmes that are aligned with the realities of the Welsh system and responsive to its evolving needs. Furthermore, evaluating the effectiveness of these reforms through Estyn inspections and thematic reviews, WG qualifications data and international benchmarks such as PISA could provide critical feedback, highlighting areas of strength and identifying where further support is needed.

Ultimately, **system leadership** should be regarded not as an option but as an essential mechanism for realising the WG's educational ambitions. Without it, the risk remains that reforms will be fragmented, unevenly implemented and less impactful . With it, Wales has the opportunity to build a more coherent, equitable and high-performing education system that benefits all learners.

Therefore my research questions are, in the context of the Welsh education system:
1)   What is understood by the term **educational system leader**?
2)   What is understood by the term **educational system leadership**?

Chapter 2: Literature Review – Framing System Leadership

Introduction

This chapter provides the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the study by critically reviewing literature on **system leadership** in education. It builds on Chapter 1's contextual overview of Welsh education reform and the emergence of **system leadership** as a national policy priority. The chapter addresses the study's two research questions from the perspective of the existing literature:

- What is understood by the term **educational system leader**?
- What is understood by the term **educational system leadership**?

Chapter synopsis

The chapter begins by outlining the methodology used to conduct the literature review, including the databases searched, inclusion and exclusion criteria and the rationale for incorporating both peer-reviewed and grey literature. Given the limited empirical research on **system leadership** in Wales, the review draws on a broad evidence base, including international case studies and policy reports, to build a comprehensive understanding of the field.

The review is structured into several key sections. It first explores definitions and models of educational leadership, highlighting the diversity of perspectives and the conceptual ambiguity that persists in the literature. It then examines how education systems are defined and understood, with particular attention to the sociocultural and policy contexts that shape leadership practices. A central focus of the chapter is the evolution of **system leadership** in England, which is included as a comparator due to its shared educational history with Wales and its contrasting policy trajectory since devolution. England's emphasis on formalised **system leadership** roles, such as National Leaders of Education (NLEs) and Multi-Academy Trust (MATs) Chief Executive Officers (CEO), offers a useful counterpoint to Wales' more informal collaborative and context-sensitive approach (A Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) is a single legal entity that oversees and supports a group of academies (schools), enabling them to collaborate, share resources and operate under unified governance and leadership). This comparison helps to illuminate the distinctiveness of the Welsh model and the challenges it

faces in developing a coherent and sustainable **system leadership** strategy. The chapter also reviews selected international practices, including those in Finland, Singapore, Ontario and Australia, to identify transferable insights and cautionary lessons. These examples are not presented as templates but as lenses through which to consider how **system leadership** might be adapted to the Welsh context.

To consolidate these insights, the chapter includes a comparative summary (Section 2.10) that synthesises the key similarities and differences in how **system leadership** is enacted across England, Wales and international systems. This summary highlights recurring themes such as leadership focus, the degree of centralisation and the role of collaboration, offering a valuable framework for understanding the contextual factors that shape leadership development and practice.

Finally, the chapter contrasts traditional within-school leadership with **system leadership**, using a Venn diagram to illustrate their overlapping and divergent characteristics. This section underscores the need to distinguish between leadership that is confined to a single institution and leadership that operates across organisational boundaries to support system-wide improvement. Throughout, the chapter identifies conceptual tensions and gaps in the literature, particularly in the Welsh context and argues for a more contextually grounded and operationally useful understanding of **system leadership** that can inform both policy and practice.

Terminology and definitions

The key terms used in the research include *'educational system leader'*, *'educational system leadership'*, *'educational leadership', 'education system'* and *'educational systems'*. These definitions also provide a framework for understanding the literature reviewed.

2.1 Literature search methodology

This section outlines the methodology undertaken to scope the literature on **educational system leadership**. The literature search aimed to address the research questions:

• What is understood by the term **educational system leader**?

- What is understood by the term **educational system leadership**?

Databases and search strategy

This review draws on both academic literature and grey literature such as government policies and organisational reports to reflect the evolving nature of Welsh education. Given the limited empirical research in Wales, grey literature offers essential insights into leadership practice and policy intent. Including these sources ensures a fuller understanding of how **system leadership** is conceptualised and enacted, particularly in a devolved system undergoing significant reform. While empirical research on **educational system leadership** in Wales remains limited, it is essential to engage critically with the available evidence, however sparse, as it provides valuable insights into emerging practices and helps ground theoretical discussions in real-world contexts. To identify relevant literature I used a range of data bases and websites to explore definitions and existing research including EBSCOhost, Research Gate and Google Scholar, to focus on the situation in Wales I used the relevant education sections of the Welsh Government (WG) website and other websites of educational organisations in Wales, such as Estyn (The education and training inspectorate for Wales) and Hwb (the official digital learning platform provided by the WG). To provide an international perspective, in addition to literature published in academic books and journals, I also considered reviews carried out by the OECD.

EBSCOhost

My initial search for scholarly (peer-reviewed) articles from the last 10 years using the phrase '**educational system leadership'** yielded 3,325 results. I purposely chose to use the last ten years of literature to ensure that my review reflected the most current research, policy developments and educational practices relevant to today's context. However, many of the articles identified were international and not written in English and a significant portion related to other systems, such as clinical learning environments and food ecosystems. I refined the search to include only articles written in English with 'educational leadership' as the subject, resulting in 943 articles. Further narrowing to articles explicitly mentioning **'educational system leadership'** in the title or abstract yielded 69 articles, but many of the articles were addressing systemic issues in Universities and colleges and I specifically wanted to understand how the term **system leadership** was practiced in schools. To address the

limited results, I broadened the scope to include peer-reviewed articles from the beginning of devolution in Wales (1998) and looked specifically for empirical research that referred to the school system in Wales. Despite this, the search still produced limited literature about **educational system leadership** in schools in Wales. Due to the limited amount of literature specifically focused on **system leadership** in Wales, it was important for me to draw on research from other countries. This broader perspective allowed me to explore how **system leadership** is conceptualised and enacted in different educational contexts, offering valuable insights that could inform and enrich the Welsh experience.

Research gate

I searched for keywords such as *'system leadership'* and *'system leaders'*. The search produced several articles, but they were not always peer-reviewed and included opinion-based pieces rather than research. When I encountered opinion-based pieces, I did not discard them outright but evaluated them critically. I assessed their relevance, the credibility of the author and how well they were situated within the wider discourse. However, I was mindful to ensure that the foundation of my review rested on robust findings and credible data.

Google Scholar and other websites

I searched Google Scholar for literature that discussed **system leadership** as a concept even if the term **'system leadership'** had not explicitly been mentioned in the title. This search yielded an extremely high number of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, research papers, academic theses and dissertations, scholarly books, book chapters and conference papers presented at academic conferences. However, a very high number of the sources were not relevant to the concept of **system leadership** as the topics discussed were more broadly related to education 'within' the system for example 'measuring leadership effectiveness in complex socio-technical systems'. There was a wide scope of sources, but I needed to ascertain whether or not they had been written based on empirical studies, as I wanted my research to be based on robust findings. So I selected a range of sources from the list and conducted a thorough review of each source to verify their basis as deriving from empirically based research.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The OECD has, for many years, carried out reviews on education systems including Wales (OECD, 2014, 2017, 2020). I accessed the OECD website to search for relevant publications and reports and interrogated these to draw out references to **system leaders** and **system leadership**. The inclusion of national reports published by the OECD is justified on the basis that they offer both thematic and system-level insights into educational policy and leadership. These reports provided a valuable source of comparative evidence, particularly in areas where literature specific to the Welsh context was limited. My review of these documents yielded a combination of statistical data, policy analysis and illustrative case studies, which collectively contributed to a broader understanding of **system leadership**. It is acknowledged, however, that such reports reflect the policy landscape at specific points in history and their findings have been interpreted with due consideration of their historical and contextual framing.

Education organisations in Wales (e.g. Estyn)

I accessed various websites, including the WG, Estyn, HWB and NAEL, to gather reports and reviews on the Welsh education system. This was crucial for my literature review, as these sources provide credible and authoritative, context-specific information that enhances the reliability of my work. These reports are not only relevant to my area of study but also offer empirical data and evidence-based findings that inform my arguments. They frequently include discussions on policy implications and practical recommendations, deepening my understanding of key themes and issues. Importantly, these sources also reflect the underlying structures and priorities of the education system. The voices and perspectives presented within them help shape the system itself, making it essential to engage critically with what is being said in order to fully understand the context in which my research is situated.

Snowballing method

I used the bibliographies of published research commonly referred to as the snowballing method (Gray, 2019) to identify additional relevant literature by tracing references and citations from initial sources. This approach enabled me to broaden the scope of my review by uncovering influential and highly cited works that may not have surfaced through database

searches alone. It also allowed me to map the intellectual landscape of the field and understand how key studies are interconnected. Importantly, I adopted a critical stance throughout this process, while referenced sources often served as useful leads, I did not include them automatically. Each was evaluated on its own merits, with particular attention to methodological rigour, relevance and the credibility of the evidence presented. This ensured that the literature included in my review was grounded in robust findings and credible data, thereby enhancing both the depth and the analytical integrity of the study.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

I included a diverse range of sources including peer-reviewed articles, research reports and book chapters that explicitly addressed **educational system leadership, system leaders** and related concepts such as self-improving, school-led systems in Wales, England and international contexts. To ensure a comprehensive and balanced perspective, I incorporated both peer-reviewed and grey literature, including international reviews and Wales-specific reports. As noted by Cohen *et al.* (2018), grey literature can offer valuable insights in educational research, particularly where formal publications may be limited; however, they also stress the importance of critically appraising such sources for credibility and potential bias. This inclusive approach enabled me to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives while maintaining analytical rigour. I systematically excluded any materials that did not directly engage with **educational system leadership** or its associated themes, thereby ensuring the relevance and focus of the review.

Limitations

The search yielded limited literature specific to Wales, acknowledging a significant gap in empirical research on **educational system leadership** within this context. Additionally, the reliance on English language sources may have inadvertently excluded relevant literature in other languages, further limiting the scope of available research.

Conclusion

The literature search methodology was comprehensive, involving multiple databases and search strategies to capture a wide range of relevant literature. Despite the limitations, the search provided a foundation for understanding **educational system leadership** and

identifying gaps in the existing research. It is important to note that while there are relatively few empirical studies that focus specifically on **system leadership**, this literature review examines the studies that have been conducted, providing a comprehensive overview of the existing research. By doing so, it not only consolidates the current knowledge but also identifies the gaps that persist in the field, thereby emphasising the urgent need for further empirical investigation.

Since embarking on this Professional Educational Doctorate in 2017, I have observed a notable absence of empirical research on **educational system leadership** in Wales. Despite this gap, I have reviewed the available literature and present below the key insights and findings.

2.2 Leadership in educational improvement

To understand how **educational system leadership** contributes to school improvement in Wales, it is first necessary to clarify the foundational concepts of educational leadership and the education system. For the purpose of this study, educational leadership is defined as the strategic and relational practices that influence teaching and learning outcomes (Bush, 2011). It encompasses a range of models, including transformational, authentic and distributed, each one shaped by context, culture and organisational needs (Cambridge Institute for Sustainable Leadership (CISL), 2017). Similarly, an education system is understood as a network of interconnected organisations, policies and actors, including schools, government bodies and regulatory frameworks working collectively to deliver education (ibid).

While this review does not attempt to cover all dimensions of educational leadership, it draws on research from Wales (post-devolution), England and international contexts to synthesise what constitutes effective leadership. Leithwood *et al*. (2019) contend that leadership is second only to classroom teaching in its influence on student learning. In contrast, the Welsh Government (WG, 2017a) places leadership at the forefront of efforts to raise educational standards, identifying "inspirational leaders working collaboratively to raise standards" (p.28) as a fundamental catalyst for system-wide reform. This policy emphasis is reinforced by Estyn (2017, 2024), which identifies leadership as central to improving school quality and learner outcomes. Munby (2019) highlights the vulnerability of school leaders in England, where

leadership quality is closely tied to school performance. The evidence demonstrates that leadership is not only influential but also high-stakes.

The literature consistently highlights the relational and distributed nature of effective leadership. Leithwood *et al.* (2008, 2019) describe leadership as a catalyst for improvement, particularly when distributed across teams. Earley (2022) defines educational leaders as those who create environments where all can flourish, while Day and Sammons (2016) and Robinson *et al.* (2009) emphasise the indirect yet powerful influence of leadership on student achievement. Fullan (2010) reinforces this, arguing that the pace and quality of educational change are largely driven by a leader's capacity to lead systemic transformation. Bush *et al.* (2019) further affirm that leadership focused on learning is essential for positive outcomes.

Hitt and Tucker's (2016) systematic review of 56 studies offers a synthesised framework of five leadership domains that influence student achievement: establishing vision, building relationships, developing people, leading instruction and managing the organisation. This framework (ibid) provides a practical lens through which leadership practices can be understood and applied, aligning closely with the aims of my research. Complementing this, Liebowitz and Porter's (2019) meta-analysis of 51 studies demonstrates that principal behaviours are positively associated with student achievement (effect sizes: 0.08–0.16), teacher well-being (0.34–0.38), instructional practices (0.35) and organisational health (0.72–0.81). While these findings are largely based on observational data, they offer compelling evidence of leadership's multifaceted impact, though further causal research is needed.

In the Welsh context, the Independent Review of Leadership (Harris *et al.*, 2021b) employed a robust, mixed-methods approach, including over 120 hours of interviews and focus groups, a national survey of 169 senior leaders and document analysis, to assess leadership provision. The findings highlighted the centrality of leadership in improving teaching and learning and the value of international comparisons in identifying best practices and areas for development. Harris and Jones (2023) synthesise these insights by asserting that leadership is the key driver of organisational performance across all sectors and that effective school leaders prioritise learning above all else. Leithwood *et al.* (2019) similarly conclude that

leadership improves teaching and learning "indirectly and most powerfully" by shaping the conditions in which teachers and students thrive (p.8).

Taken together, these perspectives affirm that leadership is not only a critical lever for school improvement but also a complex, context-sensitive practice. A clear, evidence-informed understanding of educational leadership is therefore essential for advancing **system leadership** in Wales.

2.3 Definitions of educational leadership

Bush (2011) argues that there is no single definition of leadership, as it draws from various established disciplines including sociology, political science, economics and general management (2011). This complexity is further compounded by Preedy *et al*. (2012), who suggest that the role of leadership is influenced by the environment, characterised by economic, social and political pressures (2012, introduction). Day and Sammons (2014) add to this by noting that the concepts of leadership, management and administration overlap and have different emphases in various contexts and countries over time. The CISL, (2017) emphasises the complexity of defining leadership by highlighting a range of interpretations, including adaptive, charismatic and ethical leadership, which makes it difficult to establish a single, universally accepted definition of educational leadership. Despite this, understanding the literature is crucial.

The literature on leadership reveals a wide array of definitions, underpinned by a proliferation of theoretical models and conceptual frameworks. Day and Sammons (2013) reference a comprehensive review by Louis *et al*. (2010), which identified 21 distinct leadership approaches, each characterised by a qualifying adjective; examples include teacher leadership, democratic leadership and transformational leadership. This trend, often referred to as leadership by adjective, has drawn critical attention. Leithwood *et al*. (2004) cautioned against the unchecked expansion of such typologies over twenty years ago, advocating for a more critical and discerning engagement with the literature. More recently, Hadziahmetovic *et al*. (2023), in a research review of leadership styles, analysed 90 peer-reviewed articles published between 2016 and 2022. Their study categorised leadership styles and examined the use of traits and descriptors in defining leadership, highlighting the continued growth of

adjectival classifications such as transformational, ethical and servant leadership. In their large-scale study of 180 schools in 43 districts in North America, Day and Sammons (2013) identified transformational leadership and pedagogical/instructional leadership as the two main theories. Harris and Jones (2021) emphasise the importance of collective leadership practice in developing professional learning and realising the new curriculum in Wales (WG, 2024b).

Greatbatch and Tate (2018), in alignment with findings from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS, 2013), observe that distributed and instructional leadership are increasingly prevalent in contemporary school leadership practices. Day and Sammons (2013) further argue that distributed leadership serves as an effective mechanism for cultivating leadership capacity within schools, although its implementation can be hindered by cultural and societal expectations. Harris *et al*. (2022) reinforce this perspective, highlighting that distributed leadership encourages shared responsibility and collaboration, thereby creating diverse opportunities for individuals to lead, develop professionally and contribute to a culture of collective growth. Leithwood *et al*. (2008, 2019) contend that school leadership exerts greater influence when it is broadly distributed. In their 2019 revision, they refined this claim to emphasise the positive impact of distributed leadership on both school effectiveness and student outcomes. Importantly, the 2019 publication revisited their earlier work not to conduct a new literature review, but to assess the validity and relevance of their original assertions. West-Burnham (2020) adds that distributed leadership can mean different things in different schools, contributing to the complexity of understanding educational leadership but Harris and Jones (2023) argue that the way leadership distribution occurs within an organisation is more important than the fact that leadership is distributed and Harris *et al.* (2022) further highlight concerns regarding its conceptual ambiguity, noting that the term is often loosely defined and inconsistently applied.

Bush *et al*. (2019) propose several models of school leadership, such as "managerial, moral and authentic leadership (p.13), arguing that these models are not standalone but partial, implying that effective leaders use different approaches at different times. Leithwood *et al.* (2019) claim that successful leaders draw on a "common repertoire of basic leadership practices" (p.27), suggesting that popular leadership approaches are used more frequently.

Barber *et al.* (2010) also report that successful leaders follow a "common playbook of practices" (p.22) supporting Day and Sammons (2013) who identified 21 approaches including teacher leadership, democratic leadership and transformational leadership.

While distributed and instructional leadership have maintained a position of dominance in the field of the educational leadership discourse, emerging styles are beginning to challenge their primacy. Munby (2019) expands the leadership taxonomy by discussing lateral, inclusive, authentic and servant leadership, yet these additions often lack the empirical scrutiny afforded to more established models. Notably, contingent leadership, defined by Bush *et al*. (2019) as a reflexive, context-responsive approach, offers a well-founded case as it foregrounds the complexity and variability of school environments, positioning adaptability as a core leadership competency. This emphasis on contextual responsiveness resonates with Leithwood *et al*.'s (2019) assertion that effective leadership is inseparable from the conditions in which it operates and aligns with earlier findings by Barber *et al*. (2010). However, the field still requires a more critical interrogation of how these styles intersect, overlap or potentially conflict in practice.

In conclusion, the literature on educational leadership is vast and varied with no single definition or approach universally accepted. The complexity of leadership is influenced by various factors including context, culture and the specific needs of the school. Effective leadership appears to be a blend of different styles and approaches, tailored to the unique circumstances of each educational setting (CISL, 2017; Bush *et al*., 2019; Leithwood *et al*., 2019; Munby, 2019). Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of how different leadership styles impact educational outcomes and to develop more nuanced models of leadership that can adapt to the evolving demands of the educational landscape.

2.4 Definitions of education systems

The concept of an education system is not consistently defined across the literature, with relatively few sources offering a comprehensive explanation. For the purposes of this review, attention is given to literature that explicitly references 'system(s)' within an educational context. Burton (2021) characterises a system as a collection of interrelated entities working collaboratively to achieve specific outcomes. In the education domain, this encompasses a

network of interconnected organisations, policies and actors including schools, government agencies and regulatory frameworks working together to deliver education (CISL, 2017). The UK Government (2023) further conceptualises a system as a configuration of interconnected elements that collectively generate patterns of behaviour over time. In the Welsh context, the term 'system' is employed in a variety of education constructs, such as system-level, system-wide, system-leader, system-leadership, school-system, education-system and system(s)-thinking, reflecting its embeddedness in both policy and practice.

The OECD (2018) describe Wales' education system as one in "which all learners have an equal opportunity to reach their full potential, can strengthen individuals' and societies' capacity to contribute to economic growth and social cohesion" (p.56). The Welsh education system has a three-tier model (WG, 2017a) as described in Figure 2.1 below.

Welsh Government's three-tier model

Tier 1

Welsh Government
- Planning and policy making – through evidence-based collaboration.
- Managing models of accountability within the democratic process.
- Engaging with all tiers and supporting capacity-building for system improvement.

Tier 2

Four regional consortia, local authorities, diocesan authorities, Estyn, Qualifications Wales, Education Workforce Council (EWC), examination boards and higher education
- Using their knowledge of schools and research to facilitate and support the sharing of best practice and collaboration to improve learner outcomes, within a self-improving school system.

Tier 3

Schools
- Working together to provide the range of experiences for children, young people and professionals to enhance their learning and well-being.

Figure 2.1 How the Welsh Government have divided the education system into three tiers (WG, 2017a, p.10)

It is WG's intention that the agents within the three tiers work together, both vertically and horizontally towards embedding the culture and principles of the self-improving school system (Jones, 2024, 2025; Miles, 2024; Neagle, 2024b; WG, 2017, 2020, 2023b).

Wales has been on its most recent education reform journey since 2014 (OECD, 2014, 2017), with a commitment from actors at all levels to achieve system-wide improvement (OECD, 2018). Fullan (2005) emphasised that the key to future success lies in increasing system thinking in action. He asserted that **system leaders** have a dual role: to make system coherence more evident and accessible and to nurture interactions, both horizontally and vertically, that promote system thinking in others. This concurs with the WG tier system (Fig 2.1).

Fullan (2005) provides an early and influential perspective on **system leadership**, arguing that conceptual understanding must be translated into action, "the reality test is to put it into practice" (p.85). He emphasises that effective **system leaders** must not only think systemically but must also develop cross-system networks that enable learning across regions, states and countries. Building on this, Barber *et al.* (2010) highlight the importance of leadership continuity, noting that smooth transitions are essential to ensure that change is not fragmented but evolutionary in nature. Vexler (2017) adds further nuance by stressing that systems thinkers focus on the interactions between parts of a system rather than the parts themselves, an insight that reinforces the need for relational and contextual awareness. More recently, Burton (2021) supports this view by advocating for a holistic approach to systems thinking, where the entire system is considered when addressing problems or initiating change. This progression reflects a growing recognition that sustainable system improvement depends not only on conceptual clarity but also on the deliberate cultivation of collaborative, adaptive leadership practices over time.

The most successful systems actively develop of the next generation of **system leadership** from within, ensuring continuity of purpose and vision in sustaining the system's pedagogy and improvement (Barber *et al.,* 2010). However, they also acknowledge that system improvement varies for each school, organisation, jurisdiction and country, recognising that improvement journeys start at different points and face different expectations and operate in different social and political contexts. This is another indicator that context matters (Preedy *et al.,* 2012; Egan, 2016; CISL, 2017; Cousin, 2019; Hofsmarken, 2021; Harris 2020, 2023; Evans, 2021). Barber *et al.*, (2010) further state that educators in moderately performing systems can learn more from similar systems rather than from the world's best-performing

ones (ibid). Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) concur, suggesting that helping another school can provide insights into what to do next. Harris and Jones (2020) challenge the notion of 'world-class' practices, arguing that it is not possible to claim that a practice is universally good, best, or effective in all settings, occasions and with all students (2020, p.xv). They support this by emphasising the importance of contextual conditions and cultural settings.

Huber *et al.* (2008) discovered in their study of the English approach to **system leadership** that successful school improvement necessitates collaboration across the entire education system. They argue that **system leaders** must view their school as an integral part of a larger ecosystem, which encompasses parents, the community, other schools, the Ministry and various organisations dedicated to supporting school improvement. According to their findings, sustained improvement in schools is unattainable unless the entire system progresses collectively.

A paper by the Department of Education New South Wales, Australia (School Leadership Institute, 2020) states that leadership development is central to whole system improvement and pivotal to growing the capabilities of leaders and the system itself. They add that **system leadership** is a shared commitment to improving teaching and learning within and across the system (ibid). Cousin (2019) builds on Harris' critique (2010), agreeing that whole system reform hinges on building collective capacity but also emphasising that shifting policy and governance environments significantly shape how this capacity is developed and enacted. Together, their work highlights not only the persistent shortcomings of past initiatives but also the complexity of implementing reform in dynamic and often fragmented systems.

From the limited literature (reviewed) specific to educational systems, it is broadly understood that an education system can include schools and other education settings, government, Ministers, policy and processes (WG, 2017a; Cousin, 2019). This comprehensive view highlights the complexity and interconnectedness of educational reform and the necessity of a holistic approach to achieve sustained improvement (Burton, 2021; Constantinides, 2021; Harris, 2020;).

2.5 Leadership and context

In their comprehensive study of 20 top-performing school systems world-wide and including only England from the UK, Barber *et al*. (2010) conducted interviews with over 200 **system leaders** and their staff, supplemented by visits to observe all 20 systems in action. Their findings highlight the critical importance of context in leadership, asserting that leaders must first understand the context before determining the appropriate leadership approach. Barber *et al*. (2010) identify four "contextual attributes" (p.21) that leaders consider when making decisions:

(i)   the desired pace of change,

(ii)   whether this pace is firmly established,

(iii)   the gap between achievers and non-achievers and

(iv)   the perceived trustworthiness and sustainability of the choice.

This suggests a structured process in leadership decision-making that is highly dependent on context. Whilst Barber *et al*.'s framework is useful, for leaders in Wales, the challenge is to interpret such models through a Welsh lens, asking not just 'what works?' but 'what works here and why?' This means grounding leadership decisions in local values, policy and community needs.

Barber *et al.* (2010) argue that leadership must be responsive to context to drive sustainable organisational improvement. They extend this argument by asserting that performance improvement is contingent upon a nuanced understanding of socio-economic, political and cultural conditions. These contextual dimensions are not peripheral but central to the success of change initiatives, as echoed by CISL (2017), Cousin (2019), Egan (2016), Evans (2021) and Preedy *et al*. (2012), who collectively highlight the interplay between leadership agency and systemic constraints. Leithwood *et al* (2019) reinforce the importance of contextual responsiveness by challenging universalist models of leadership and emphasising the situated nature of effective practice. Hofsmarken (2021) further supports this view, suggesting that leadership is not merely about strategic direction but also about navigating complex, socially embedded dynamics that vary across settings.

CISL's (2017) literature review on leadership and leadership development emphasises the importance of socio-economic and political contexts, drawing on examples from China, Egypt, India, Kenya and Mexico to argue that leadership is deeply embedded in cultural norms and values. This position foregrounds the contextual specificity of leadership practices. However, Harris and Jones (2020), referencing Schleicher (2018), present a counterpoint by suggesting that culture may not be a decisive factor in large-scale education reform. They cite cases such as Mexico, Germany, Colombia and Peru, where systemic improvements occurred despite diverse cultural contexts. This tension invites deeper scrutiny into whether cultural sensitivity is a prerequisite for reform success or whether scalable change is more dependent on policy coherence, governance capacity and implementation strategies.

Deal and Peterson (1990) highlight the reciprocal relationship between leadership and culture, arguing that each shapes and is shaped by the other. Hargreaves *et al*. (2008) build on this by illustrating how culture plays a central role in **system leadership**, using Finland as an example where leadership is enacted through inspiration, support and the cultivation of collective commitment. Barber *et al*. (2010) and Schleicher (2018) take a contrasting view, arguing that effective school system interventions follow a common pattern, largely independent of geography, time or culture. While Barber *et al*. (2010) acknowledge the relevance of context, they position it as a secondary consideration to getting the fundamentals right, a stance that risks oversimplifying the complex interplay between leadership and local conditions. Day and Sammons (2013) offer a more nuanced perspective, suggesting that effective headteachers make context-sensitive judgments to create the conditions necessary for high-quality teaching and learning. CISL's (2017) international review echoes the importance of cultural context, finding that cultural norms significantly influence perceptions of 'good' leadership, with many countries favouring charismatic, values-based approaches. Leithwood *et al*. (2019) further this argument by introducing the concept of "personal leadership resources" (p.37–38), such as emotional intelligence, resilience, as critical to leadership effectiveness and call for further research into how these resources interact with cultural and systemic factors.

Cousin's (2019) work on **system leadership** in England is unique and provides an in-depth exploration of the nature and practice of **system leadership,** based on a longitudinal study

that lasted eight-years (as described 2.6.1). One of the standout features of Cousin's study is the emphasis on the importance of context in **system leadership** which is supported by (Preedy *et al.,* 2012; Egan, 2016; CISL, 2017; Hofsmarken, 2021; Harris 2020; Harris and Jones, 2023; Evans, 2021), noting that **system leaders** need to adapt their approach based on the history and context of the school, including its development phase, staff confidence, student behaviour and attainment and wider contextual constraints. West-Burnham (2020) emphasises that leadership is sensitive to context, arguing that certain leadership behaviours are more effective in achieving desired outcomes. Despite the complexity of defining leadership, it is clear that context, culture, behaviour and traits influence leadership effectiveness (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008; 2019; Barber *et al.*, 2010; West-Burnham, 2020).

2.6 Definitions of educational system leadership

Given that **system leadership** has not been as extensively explored as other leadership approaches, it presents a unique opportunity for further research and analysis. However, it is important to review the studies that have been conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of **system leadership** and its implications. Greany and Kamp (2022, p.167), citing Harris *et al*. (2021, p.2), describe *system leadership* as a "slippery concept", one that is difficult to pin down due to its inherent ambiguity. This complexity is further heightened by the fact that the term '*system*' (see 2.4 Definitions of education systems) itself can refer to a range of structures, including an education system, a local authority or a network of schools, each carrying different implications for leadership roles and responsibilities. While this breadth could suggest a wider research base, this study intentionally narrows its focus to **system leadership** within Wales and considers evidence from England post-devolution (1998) alongside some international evidence. This allows for a more precise and meaningful analysis of **system leadership** practices and their implications for self-improving school systems within the Welsh educational context.

2.6.1 Advocacy for system leadership

Hopkins (2007, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2016, 2021, 2024) and colleagues (Higham *et al.,* 2009; Hopkins *et al.,* 2008) have been leading advocates for **system leadership** for nearly two decades. Their work has consistently positioned **system leadership** as a transformative force in educational reform. In an early articulation, Hopkins and Higham (2007) observed that "the

concept of **system leadership** is one that has recently caught the educational imagination" (p.147), signalling its emergence as a key policy and practice concern. In '*Every School a Great School'* (Hopkins, 2007), **system leadership** is framed as central to achieving system-wide change, while *'System Leadership in Practice'* (Higham *et al.*, 2009) charts the growing interest in the concept and its practical application across the UK. Higham *et al.* (2009) also highlight the UK Government's endorsement of **system leadership** in 2005, particularly through the work of the NCSL (UK Government, 2008), which sought to formalise and scale the role of **system leaders**. This alignment between policy and practice is echoed by Hargreaves *et al.* (2008), who argue that **system leadership** is most effective when political and educational leaders co-construct a shared moral purpose for education. In his OECD chapter Realising the Potential of **System Leadership**, Hopkins (2008) asserts that "**system leadership** is the key driver in ensuring that every student reaches their potential" (p.21), describing it as "a new and emerging practice" developing within local and national networks (p.254). This contribution formed part of a landmark OECD study on improving school leadership, one of the most comprehensive international efforts to date, to examine **system leadership** in depth.

Cruddas (2025) defines **system leadership** as the act of influencing and shaping the school system, rather than merely operating within its confines. She argues that leaders often fall into a compliance mindset, waiting for government policies to dictate the context, then typically resisting and ultimately complying with these directives. This, Cruddas (2025) describes as acting 'in' the system (p.1) as opposed to acting 'on' (ibid) the system, which involves thinking differently and proactively shaping the educational landscape. She emphasises that true leadership should be seen as the ability to influence and transform the system itself.

Empirical studies

Cousin's (2019) work on **system leadership** provides an in-depth contemporary exploration of the nature and practice of **system leadership**, based on an eight-year empirical study conducted in England from 2009 to 2017. This long-term approach allows for a deep and nuanced understanding of **system leadership**, capturing its evolution and impact over a significant period. Cousin's study draws on various data sources, including policy documents,

interviews with policy leaders and headteacher **system leaders** and performance data from respondents' schools. This multi-source data collection provides a rich and comprehensive view of **system leadership** in practice. Cousin (2019) employs a conceptual framework to describe the roles of **system leaders**, plotting them along axes of "decentralized versus centralized" (sic) and "directive leadership versus distributed leadership" (p.99). This framework helps to categorise and understand the different types of **system leaders**, such as the protector, the collaborator, the hero-head and the auditor. This theoretical contribution is significant in advancing the understanding of **system leadership** beyond practical applications.

Greany and Higham (2018), following an in-depth analysis involving 47 school case studies of the self-improving school-led system (SISS) in England, a survey of almost 700 school leaders and an analysis of national Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) results over a ten-year period, found **system leaders** to be pivotal in school improvement and sharing best practice within the SISS. These included NLEs and Local Leaders of Education (LLE) as well as teaching schools (TS). These leaders are tasked with supporting other schools, spreading effective practices and leading new alliances such as Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) and MATs "non-profit companies that are wholly funded and overseen by national – rather than local – government" (Greany and Kamp, 2022, p. 59).

However, Greany and Kamp (2018) highlight several challenges faced by **system leaders**, including the tension between maintaining their own school's performance and fulfilling external responsibilities. A persistent concern is the potential decline in their own school's outcomes due to the demands of supporting others (Munby, 2019). Additionally, school leaders in England must navigate hierarchical pressures from Ofsted inspections and national examinations, the competitive landscape shaped by parental choice and the complex power dynamics inherent in partnerships and collaborations across the education system. These multifaceted challenges place considerable strain on **system leaders'** capacity to lead and drive improvement effectively. Furthermore, Greany and Kamp (2022) suggest that policymakers have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the school-to-school support model undertaken by NLE, instead favouring the more permanent and "structured solution" (p. 168) offered by MATs.

Constantinides (2021), in his research of multi-perspective case studies using a sample of five MATs and collecting data from 31 interviews with various school and MAT leaders, found that leadership at the executive level is central to efforts for school and MAT transformation, with **system leadership** being multifaceted and understood through the multiple layers of the organisational structure of MATs. The study identifies four major domains of executive leadership practice (Executive leadership is the highest level of organisational leadership and usually means leading more than one school such as a MAT): setting strategic directions, developing people and organisational capacity, establishing organisational infrastructure to support school improvement and providing instructional guidance. Constantinides (2021) found key contextual dimensions such as personal and professional qualities, accountability demands, organisational conditions and financial resources, significantly influence executive leadership approaches. The research highlighted the complexity of **system leadership** and the importance of understanding the interactions between various levels of the educational ecosystem. He argues the need for a holistic understanding of **system leadership** to establish, manage and sustain school and MAT-wide improvement. Courtney and McGinity (2020) also consider **system leadership** within the context of MATs. Their paper draws on interview and observation data from case study research. They present a theoretical and empirical analysis, arguing that **system leadership** functions as a mechanism for depoliticisation. By revealing the political implications of **system leadership** and multi-academisation, they encourage policymakers, practitioners and scholars to critically examine the power dynamics and decision-making processes within MATs.

Muijs (2015a, 2015b), through in-depth analysis of school-to-school partnerships, provides robust evidence that collaboration between high and low-performing schools can lead to improvements in pupil attainment and overall school performance. However, persistent challenges such as institutional size, geographical distance and resource limitations must be acknowledged. This evidence is particularly significant to my research into **system leadership**, as it reinforces the premise that strategic collaboration across schools is a key lever for system-wide improvement. It also highlights the necessity for **system leaders** to develop structures and capacities that mitigate contextual barriers and enable sustainable, equitable collaboration.

Cruddas (2025) considering **system leadership** in practice, examines four case studies in England, describing them as system interventions where leaders collaborate to act on, rather than just within, local, regional and national systems. These leaders mobilised collective leadership, characterised by professional generosity and reciprocity to create conditions for broader system improvement. They developed a shared understanding of issues and worked collaboratively to devise solutions beyond the capacity of individuals or single institutions. However, Cousin states (2019) empirical studies have found a lack of consensus about what constitutes effective **system leadership** and competing theories of action, often unarticulated, resulting in inconsistencies in how **system leadership** is experienced by those supported.

Senge *et al*. (2015) provide a foundational understanding of the capabilities required for **system leadership** but fall short of offering empirical evidence or a clear definition. Their work not only highlights the potential of **system leadership** but identifies the need for more concrete examples and research to validate their claims. Kamp (2017) addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence through case studies and employing Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (ANT is a framework that views both human and non-human entities as interconnected actors whose relationships dynamically shape social and organisational outcomes) to offer a nuanced understanding of the interactions and influences that shape **system leadership**. However, Kamp's (2017) work is limited to specific contexts (Victoria, Australia and England) and further research is needed to generalise these findings to other settings.

Despite extensive advocacy for **system leadership**, there is a notable lack of empirical research to substantiate its effectiveness. This lack of empirical evidence limits the ability to fully understand the impact and effectiveness of **system leadership**. Dimmock (2016) highlights the persistent lack of clarity in defining **system leadership**, an issue that hinders the development of a unified understanding and practical application. Cousin (2019) reinforces this view, arguing that **system leadership** is "under-theorized and open to differing interpretations" (p.99). The concept of **system leadership** remains somewhat ambiguous and open to differing interpretations.

The literature on **system leadership** reveals several critical gaps that warrant further exploration. Armstrong (2015) highlights the scarcity of independent empirical research on inter-school collaboration and emphasises the need for further studies. Despite strong alignment between policy and professional intent, Cousin (2019) argues that **system leadership** has yet to achieve the anticipated improvements in student outcomes and while Hopkins (2007, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2016, 2024) and colleagues (Dimmock, 2016; Fullan, 2005; Greany, 2015, Greany and Kamp, 2018; Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2021; Harris *et al.,* 2021b; Higham *et al.,* 2009, 2016; Senge *et al.,* 2015) have significantly contributed to the discourse on **system leadership**, Cousin (2019) advocates for further exploration and critical examination of **system leadership** practices and policies.

Dimmock, (2016), Cousin (2019) and Harris (2020) all emphasise the need for clarity and further research in defining and understanding **system leadership**. Harris' distinction between **system leader** and **system leadership** highlights the conceptual confusion in the field, while Cousin's comprehensive exploration following an eight-year study emphasises the "under-theorized" (2019, p.99) (sic) nature of **system leadership** and the varying interpretations that exist.

The OECD's (2014, 2020) recommendation for Wales to develop **system leadership** as a driver of education reform further emphasises the importance of this leadership concept. However, the lack of empirical research to evaluate its effectiveness and progression highlights a significant gap that needs to be addressed. In conclusion, while the existing literature provides valuable insights into the potential and challenges of **system leadership**, it also reveals critical gaps that need to be addressed through further empirical research and theoretical development.

2.7   Evolution and definition of system leadership in England

I am focusing on England because, unlike the devolved nations, the literature consistently highlights that the term **system leadership** gained prominence in the early 2000s in England, coinciding with the UK government's devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, marking a pivotal shift in how educational leadership and policy were conceptualised in the English context. In fact, Hopkins (2021) claims credit for developing the concept during

his tenure as Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State (2002-2005). In 2006, NCSL (UK Government, 2008) argued that a different kind of leadership was needed in response to the new and varied accountabilities faced by headteachers at that time. This new form of leadership, they suggested, focuses the energies of school leaders not just on leading within their own schools but also beyond their schools on behalf of the wider system within their locality and beyond.

Hopkins (2009) notes that school leadership in England had changed considerably over the previous 20 years, with schools becoming less competitive and more collaborative. This shift, he believes, saw the emergence of the role of the **system leader**. He defines a **system leader** as someone in a leadership capacity who is as concerned about the progress of another school, college, or children's centre as they are about their own. In 2007, Hopkins described **system leaders** as those who reach beyond their own schools to create networks and collaboratives, which not only add richness and excellence to student learning but also act as agents of educational transformation.

Higham *et al*. (2009) argue that a **system leader** in England can have multiple roles, including supporting less successful schools, being a national leader, influencing leadership provision, contributing to educational policy and helping develop better career paths for talented school leaders. Cousin's (2019) study endorses this and states that Chief Executives of MATs were included in the list. Higham *et al*. (2009) conclude that headteachers and principals in England are shouldering wider system roles to share capacity and intelligence for the benefit of the entire system.

Huber *et al*.'s (2008) early report on **system leadership** in England recognises Hopkins as a proponent of the concept of **system leadership** in England and acknowledges that there appears to be an emerging cadre of headteachers who care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. Hatcher argued in 2008 that schools, rather than the government, should spearhead the next phase of reform to truly harness the expertise of educators, describing **system leaders** as headteachers who are committed to the success of other schools in addition to their own. These leaders take on various roles, such as leading educational improvement partnerships, executive headship and acting as change agents.

Extending this perspective, Earley (2022) argues that a school cannot truly be a great school unless it is also a "system player and change agent, actively contributing to and sustaining knowledge and understanding of education and school systems at local, national and international levels" (p.68). This broader role positions schools not only as centres of learning but as dynamic contributors to the evolution and improvement of the wider educational landscape in England.

2.7.1 Policy and Practice

Hopkins (2009) also notes that changes in education reform in England were supported by mitigating the competitive environment and placing greater emphasis on the professionalism of school leaders. This was evident when the NCSL was established in 2000 (UK Government, 2008). Efforts to formalise **system leadership** roles were made in 2005 when the Blair Labour Government introduced NLEs. The NCSL (UK Government, 2008) was tasked with accrediting NLEs to work for local authorities to support less successful schools.

Cousin and Gu (2021) and Greany (2015) highlight the importance of **system leadership** in driving school improvement, noting that successful school systems often rely on strong governance and executive leadership across partnerships. Cousin and Gu (2022) state that "government-incentivized collaborations" (sic) (p.192) requiring new models of leadership proliferated in England during the New Labour era and suggest that the most successful English school improvement programme in terms of impact and sustainability has been the London Challenge. Greany (2015) describes it as the most successful initiative of its kind, combining both top-down and bottom-up factors to achieve impressive improvements in school performance.

Cousin and Gu (2022) state the Conservative/liberal Democrat Coalition UK Government (Department of Education UK, 2015) committed to double the number of NLEs, develop a national network of Teaching Schools (modelled on hospital teaching schools) and extend the suite of **system leadership** roles to include National Leaders of Governance and Specialist Leaders of Education as part of a plan for schools to take a central role in developing the 'Self-Improving School System' (SISS) in England. However, accreditation as an NLEs or a Teaching School has remained closely tied to a school's Ofsted status or grade, despite revisions to the

criteria (Cousin and Gu, 2022). Greany and Higham (2018) state in their report that school **system leaders**, including NLE, Teaching School Alliance leaders and academy CEO, often face conflicting and unreasonable demands from central government. These demands create significant pressure and stress, making it challenging for them to balance their roles effectively. Additionally, these leaders are perceived by their peers to be an increasingly "co-opted elite" (2018, p.13), working as part of the managerial state. This perception, they say can lead to a range of personal and organisational benefits for the leaders, but it also creates a sense of detachment from the broader educational community.

Interviewees, (Greany and Higham, 2022) including Regional Schools Commissioners and representatives from Ofsted, expressed concerns about the designated **system leadership** model. They highlighted issues such as the importance placed on the Ofsted Outstanding grade and the influence it can accord to certain leaders who are more charismatic and more authoritarian. **System leaders** identified benefits from their roles but also faced challenges, including significant pressure to make short-term improvements in other schools (Munby, 2019). Greany and Higham (2018) state this pressure can lead to a focus on immediate results rather than long-term, sustainable improvements. Furthermore, **system leaders** feared that their own schools might drop in performance as a result of their external work and they added this fear creates a dilemma for leaders (ibid).

While the UK Government (2008) and the NCSL advocated for **system leadership** in the early **2000s**, there appears to be a disconnect between policy and practice. Higham *et al.* (2009) noted the positive advocacy by the UK Government in 2005, but the practical implementation and outcomes of these policies remain unclear. This disconnect highlights the need for further research to evaluate the practical implications of **system leadership** policies (Cousin, 2009).

2.7.2   Collaboration and system leadership

The evolution of **system leadership** in England has been shaped by both policy initiatives and scholarly critique. Hatcher (2008) critiques the centralised, top-down approach to educational reform, arguing that it fails to address persistent issues such as poor pupil performance and the equality gap. Instead, he advocates for a model in which schools lead change through networks and **system leaders**, positioning headteachers as agents of collective improvement across multiple schools. Hopkins (2009) supports this view, suggesting that the establishment

of the NCSL (UK Government, 2008) developed a more collaborative culture among school leaders, enabling deeper engagement across schools and driving system-wide transformation.

Building on this, Kamp (2017) conceptualises **system leadership** as the navigation of complex networks composed of diverse actors with competing goals. Kamp (2017) highlights the tension between top-down mandates and the aspiration for bottom-up innovation, noting the challenges of developing authentic collaboration in a competitive and hierarchical system. Day and Sammons (2013) offer a more nuanced perspective, suggesting that effective headteachers make context-sensitive judgments to create the conditions necessary for high-quality teaching and learning. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2019), drawing on research from five Canadian school networks, argue that competition can be constructive when paired with effective collaboration, as mutual benefit can emerge even among rivals.

Despite these developments, Cousin (2019), following an eight-year empirical study, argues that the concept of **system leadership** remains fluid and has been reshaped by successive governments for differing purposes. This complexity is further explored by Greany and Higham (2018), who caution that the pressure on **system leaders** to deliver rapid improvements in other schools can lead to short-termism, potentially undermining sustainable progress. They also highlight the personal cost to leaders whose own schools may suffer as a result of their external commitments. Constantinides (2021) adds that networks play a vital role in enabling knowledge transfer and innovation, reinforcing the importance of collaborative infrastructure in **system leadership.**

In conclusion, while **system leadership** in England has evolved towards a more collaborative and distributed model, it remains shaped by political agendas and structural tensions (Cousin, 2019) . The literature suggests that although **system leadership** holds promise for innovation and improvement, its success depends on coherent policy support, sustained investment in leadership development and a deeper understanding of the relational dynamics within and across schools (Armstrong, 2015; Greany and Higham 2018). Further research is needed to ensure that **system leadership** practices are not only impactful but also sustainable and contextually responsive.

2.7.3 Learning from England

Recent developments in England offer valuable contrasts for Wales, particularly in the areas of evidence-informed practice and multi-school leadership structures. Greany and Brown (2017) identify four key enablers of evidence-informed practice: teacher capacity, a culture of evidence use, professional learning environments and supportive structures. These align closely with Welsh priorities, especially around leadership development and reducing within-school variation (WSV) (Reynolds, 2007). However, Greany and Brown (2017) also highlight significant risks. Many schools lack robust systems for evaluating impact or engaging in deep inquiry, often constrained by accountability pressures. This resonates with concerns in Wales about performativity and the need to prioritise meaningful professional learning over compliance-driven approaches. Greany (2021) further explores the rise of Multi-School Organisations (MSOs), such as MATs, which centralise leadership and reduce local autonomy. While these structures can support shared improvement strategies, they also risk undermining democratic accountability and professional agency. In contrast, Wales has maintained a strong emphasis on collaboration, subsidiarity and local responsiveness, principles that may be challenged by adopting overly centralised models.

Nonetheless, Wales could draw useful lessons from England's experience. Establishing a shared language around **system leadership**, developing '*bilingual'* resources and strengthening professional networks could support the development of a more coherent and sustainable leadership model. However, it is essential that Wales retains its commitment to collaborative, context-sensitive leadership, avoiding the hierarchical tendencies observed in some MAT structures.

Implications for Wales:

- Build leadership capacity for evidence use, including inquiry and evaluation.
- Strengthen collaborative networks while maintaining local responsiveness.
- Align accountability with deep professional learning and evidence use.
- Embed evidence-informed practice in strategies to reduce WSV.

The education landscape is constantly evolving. For **system leadership** to be effective, leaders must remain informed about emerging trends, challenges and opportunities. This context

reinforces the relevance of this research, which seeks to deepen understanding of **system leadership** and its enactment in Wales, ultimately contributing to a more coherent and equitable education system.

2.8   International practice

Below I provide a brief overview of international practices in **system leadership**, highlighting key findings and variations across different educational contexts. Due to the constraints of this thesis, a comprehensive analysis is not possible. Instead, this summary aims to capture the essence of how **system leadership** is implemented and its impact on school improvement globally, drawing on notable studies and examples from various countries.

The international practice of **system leadership** reveals a diverse landscape with varying degrees of implementation and success. Hopkins (2007; 2008) and Cousin (2019) define **system leaders** as headteachers or principals who extend their influence beyond their own schools. However, Gurr and Drysdale (2018) found that in Victoria, Australia, principals did not typically operate as **system leaders** due to limited cross-school influence, with regional directors playing a more significant role. They also noted that effective school leadership is crucial for impactful **system leadership**. This is an important distinction, whereas **system leaders** were once primarily defined as principals operating beyond their own schools (Hopkins, 2009 and Higham *et al*., 2009), we now see the emergence of Directors of Education leading regional systems, a shift that aligns with findings by Gurr and Drysdale (2018), who challenge the universality of **system leadership** by showing that in contexts like Victoria, Australia, regional directors often hold greater influence than school principals. This suggests that the context and structure of educational systems play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of **system leadership.**

The concept of **system leadership** has gained prominence internationally, yet remains under-theorised and inconsistently enacted. Hopkins *et al*. (2008), in a study spanning 22 countries, highlighted the emergent nature of **system leadership** and the limited documentation of its practical application. Their work emphasised the need for greater conceptual clarity and empirical grounding. Building on this, Barber *et al*. (2010) examined 20 high-performing education systems, emphasising that sustained improvement depends on leaders who

understand their specific contexts and implement interventions that are historically, culturally, politically and structurally informed. They also stressed the importance of cultivating future **system leaders** from within, ensuring continuity of vision and purpose.

While these contributions offer valuable insights, they also reveal the complexity of implementing **system leadership** effectively. Pont and Hopkins (2008) argue that distributed leadership is a necessary condition for developing **system leaders**, particularly headteachers who operate beyond their own organisations. This view is extended by Greany and Kamp (2022), who contend that **system leadership** not only builds on distributed leadership but transcends it. They describe it as an ecological practice that involves navigating tensions, engaging in collective sense-making and developing networks that extend across institutional boundaries. Such leadership, they argue, requires sophisticated, widely distributed skills that can be developed over time.

Together, these perspectives suggest that while **system leadership** holds significant potential for driving educational improvement, its success depends on more than structural reform. It requires a deep understanding of context, a commitment to collaboration and a strategic investment in leadership development. However, the literature also points to a persistent gap between theory and practice, reinforcing the need for further empirical research to evaluate how **system leadership** is enacted and sustained in diverse educational settings.

In Austria (Stoll 2008), Finland (Hargreaves *et al*., 2008) and Victoria (Matthews *et al.,* 2008), **system leadership** approaches focus on developing the entire education system. Austria's multi-level approach involves leaders at various levels, including Ministers, working collaboratively. Finland's distributed leadership develops open lateral leadership and sustainable leadership succession, while Victoria's state-wide approach aims to build leadership capacity across the system.

Day *et al.* (2008) observed that in Flemish Belgium, **system leadership** was underdeveloped due to limited autonomy within the education system. This contrasts with the New South Wales Government (2020), which defines **system leadership** as developing collaborative networks, driving sustained improvement and developing leadership capabilities.

Critically, while distributed leadership is crucial for developing collaboration and shared responsibility, it may not fully address the complexities of system-wide leadership. Greany and Kamp's (2022) perspective that **system leadership** sits above distributed leadership suggests a need for a more integrated approach that combines the strengths of both models. However, the practical implementation of such an integrated approach can be challenging, particularly in systems with entrenched hierarchical structures and limited autonomy similar to Flemish Belgium (Day *et al*., 2008).

Greany and Kamp (2022) provide a global perspective on inter-school networks and their leadership, focusing on evidence from Aotearoa New Zealand, Chile, England and Singapore. Their core empirical evidence comes from case studies in England and New Zealand, while evidence from Singapore and Chile is derived from literature and expert advice. They use four theoretical lenses; educational effectiveness, governance theory, complexity theory and Actor-Network theory, to explore the complexity of networks at different levels, from individual schools to national systems. Greany and Kamp (ibid) state that understanding a school's capacity to improve involves self-evaluation and addressing improvement priorities, with networks supporting these processes through peer evaluations and resource sharing. Greany and Kamp (2022) critique the focus on single-school leadership, advocating for distributed and **system leadership** to address the complexities of network leadership.

The approaches in Austria (Stoll, 2008) Finland (Hargreaves *et al*. 2008) and Victoria (Matthews *et al*. 2008) illustrate the benefits of a systemic, multi-level approach to leadership, but also point to the challenges of achieving genuine collaboration and distributed leadership in hierarchical and competitive environments. The underdeveloped state of **system leadership** in Flemish Belgium, as noted by Day *et al*., 2008, further emphasises the importance of autonomy and supportive structures for successful implementation. However, there is a lack of research confirming these practices and their impact, indicating a need for further study.

Harris (2020) offers a comprehensive review of international literature on **system leaders** and **system leadership**, highlighting the diverse interpretations and practices across national

contexts. In Singapore, for instance, **system leadership** is not merely a conceptual ideal but a structured, institutionalised approach to driving system-wide change. School leaders are systematically prepared from the outset to assume responsibilities at multiple levels, including within the Ministry of Education. Leadership roles are deliberately rotated to cultivate a cadre of leaders with a system-wide perspective. While Harris (2020) presents this model as exemplary, developing trust and collaboration, it also raises critical questions about the transferability of such practices to less centralised or differently governed systems, such as Wales. But while Singapore's approach ensures a consistent standard of leadership and creates a sense of national responsibility, it may limit individual autonomy and personal choice in career progression. Toh *et al*. (2014) explores the concept of ecological leadership in the context of Singapore's education system. It involves case studies of schools in Singapore to illustrate the application of ecological leadership in diffusing innovations. The study emphasises the need for ecological leaders to embody systems-thinking and East-Asian collectivist beliefs to benefit other schools and align efforts across subsystems. It also discusses the interplay of constituent influences within the ecological context and proposes the SCALE (Systems thinking, Convergence, Alignment, Leveraging resources, Emergence) framework to guide ecological leadership practices. This framework focuses on developing leadership capabilities that are essential for sustaining and scaling innovations in education. But the paper (Toh *et al*., 2014) argues that traditional **system leadership** is insufficient for achieving deep, systemic education reform which again demands for further research into this area.

Harris' review (2020) also notes that in Ontario, Canada, **system leadership** has played a significant role in the province's educational reform process, particularly since 2007. The focus has been on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for young people, especially those who are most disadvantaged but while Ontario's approach to **system leadership** has been effective in many ways, particularly in building leadership capacity and improving educational outcomes, there are significant challenges related to the well-being of principals and the sustainability of reforms.

In Scotland, Harris (2020) found that **system leadership** has been significantly influenced by the establishment and work of the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) (2014-

2018). This initiative was recommended by the Donaldson Report (2010). One of SCEL's notable initiatives was the Fellows programme, (similar to the later version of Associates established in Wales, (see 1.1.1 for details). This programme selected experienced and well-regarded headteachers based on clear criteria and interviews for their positions as **system leaders**. The Fellows were critical in delivering SCEL's mission, which aimed to support teachers and practitioners in making a difference to the outcomes for children and young people through access to innovative and quality leadership programmes and services. However, Harris (2020) found that while Scotland's approach to **system leadership** through SCEL had many strengths, including innovative leadership programmes and the successful Fellows programme, the transition to government control in 2017-18 and the cessation of key initiatives like the Fellows programme presented significant challenges and Harris (2020) suggests these changes raise questions about the sustainability and long-term impact of **system leadership** practices in Scotland.

Gorman *et al.* (2025) a tri-nations research team is currently exploring **system leadership** in Wales, Scotland and Ireland and their initial findings are revealing a fragmented understanding of the term, reflecting divergent policy priorities and governance structures. They have found that **system leadership** is sometimes explicitly referenced as a lever for large-scale improvement, while in other instances, it is implied through collaboration and collective capacity building. They argue that the lack of empirical studies on **system leadership** and the complexity of translating its promise into practical reality is critical.

While various regions and countries have adopted different approaches to **system leadership**, the overarching goal remains the same, to develop a more dynamic, responsive and collaborative education system. The challenge lies in effectively integrating distributed and **system leadership** to navigate the complexities of educational networks and drive sustained improvement. Although the international practice of **system leadership** demonstrates its potential to drive school improvement, the diverse implementations and varying degrees of success highlight the need for further empirical research to understand its evolution and effectiveness across different educational contexts.

Internationally, **system leadership** is recognised as a critical lever for educational improvement, yet its interpretation and implementation vary widely across contexts. Countries like England have adopted policy-driven models with formalised roles such as NLEs, while others like Finland and Singapore emphasise distributed leadership and structured career pathways (Hargreaves *et al*., 2008; Harris 2020; Hopkins, 2007). Despite these differences, common themes emerge: the importance of collaboration, trust and a shared moral purpose (Hargreaves *et al*., 2008; Pont, 2021). However, tensions persist between centralised control and local autonomy and between short-term accountability and long-term capacity building (Greany & Kamp, 2022; Constantinides, 2021). Notably, the literature reveals a persistent gap in empirical evidence, emphasising the need for further research into how **system leadership** can be effectively developed and sustained across diverse education systems (Barber *et al*., 2010; Harris *et al*., 2021b; Hopkins *et al*., 2008).

2.9   Wales: A devolved nation

In the context of Welsh education, **system leadership** has been a focal point of significant reforms and initiatives (see Chapter 1- The Welsh Context). Following devolution in 1998, Wales gained increased powers over education, leading to distinct policies tailored to its needs (Rees, 2012). Despite these efforts, there has been a persistent need to improve educational attainment and widen opportunities (Bradshaw *et al*., 2009; Ingram *et al*., 2023; Reynolds, 2008; Sizmur *et al*., 2018; WG, 2023a). The Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) represents a significant shift in educational philosophy, emphasising the role of teachers as curriculum-makers and the importance of bilingual education (WG, 2017b).

NAEL, established in 2018, aimed to develop leadership capacity across the Welsh education system. It supported the development of **system leaders** through its Associate role (see 1.1.1 for more detail) who could drive educational reforms and improve outcomes. However, in 2024, Lynne Neagle, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, (2024b, 2025) announced the closure of NAEL and the consolidation of its functions into a new entity. This move aims to streamline and improve the leadership support system but also brings challenges that need to be carefully managed.

2.10 Comparative summary of system leadership in England, Wales and selected international practice

Having explored the evolution and application of **system leadership** in England, Wales and selected international contexts, it is useful to synthesise the key differences and similarities across these systems. While each context is shaped by its own policy environment, cultural values and structural arrangements, several recurring themes emerge, particularly around the focus of leadership, the degree of centralisation and the role of collaboration. The following table (2.1) summarises the key differences and similarities in **system leadership** across England, Wales and selected international contexts.

Table 2.1 A comparison of how England, Wales and selected International contexts enact system leadership

Feature	England	Wales	International Context
Leadership Focus	Collaboration through MATS but Individual school performance and accountability	Collaborative leadership across schools and sectors	Varies across the countries but often includes collaborative and distributed leadership, performance driven
Policy Approach	Increasingly centrally structured through MATs, policy-led but uneven implementation	Promoted through NAEL and consortia. Locally delivered, co-constructed	Varies but can be policy-led, board-led or community-driven
Leadership Roles in Collaboration	Formalised roles (e.g. NLEs, Teaching Schools) CEO-led in MATs	Often informal, peer-elected and context-sensitive but can also be formalised through regional positions	Varies across the countries and includes formalised roles or emergent leadership

Accountability	Strong accountability frameworks (e.g. Ofsted, performance tables)	Balancing autonomy with accountability (national priorities and Estyn inspections)	Varies from strong accountability (publicly accountable) to more flexible approaches and evolving frameworks
System Infrastructure	Established national infrastructure for leadership development	Emerging, with recent restructuring (e.g. NAEL dissolution)	Varies from established systems (strong central office) to emerging frameworks
Professional Learning	Emphasis on school-led improvement	Focus on inquiry and evaluation, collaboration and reducing WSV	Emerging focus on quality improvement
Cultural Orientation	Competitive, hierarchical and performance-driven	Community-based, bilingual and equity-focused	Varies across the countries but examples include community-based, collectivist, or competitive orientations

This comparative overview highlights the distinct approaches to **system leadership** across England, Wales and selected international contexts. Wales emphasises collaborative, context-sensitive leadership, often enacted through informal, peer-led roles and supported by regionally delivered initiatives. In contrast, England's model is more centralised and performance-driven, with formalised roles embedded in structures like MATs and Teaching Schools. Internationally, practices vary widely, but many systems share a focus on distributed leadership and quality improvement, shaped by local governance and cultural values. The table emphasises the importance of aligning leadership development with system

infrastructure, accountability frameworks and cultural orientation to ensure coherence and sustainability in educational reform.

2.11 Traditional within-school leadership versus system leadership

Taking the evidence from this chapter, this section compares and contrasts **system leadership** with traditional 'within-school' leadership. It highlights the differences in focus, scope, structure and roles and shares the common attributes between the two leadership approaches. A Venn diagram below (Fig 2.2) is used to visually represent the similarities and differences.
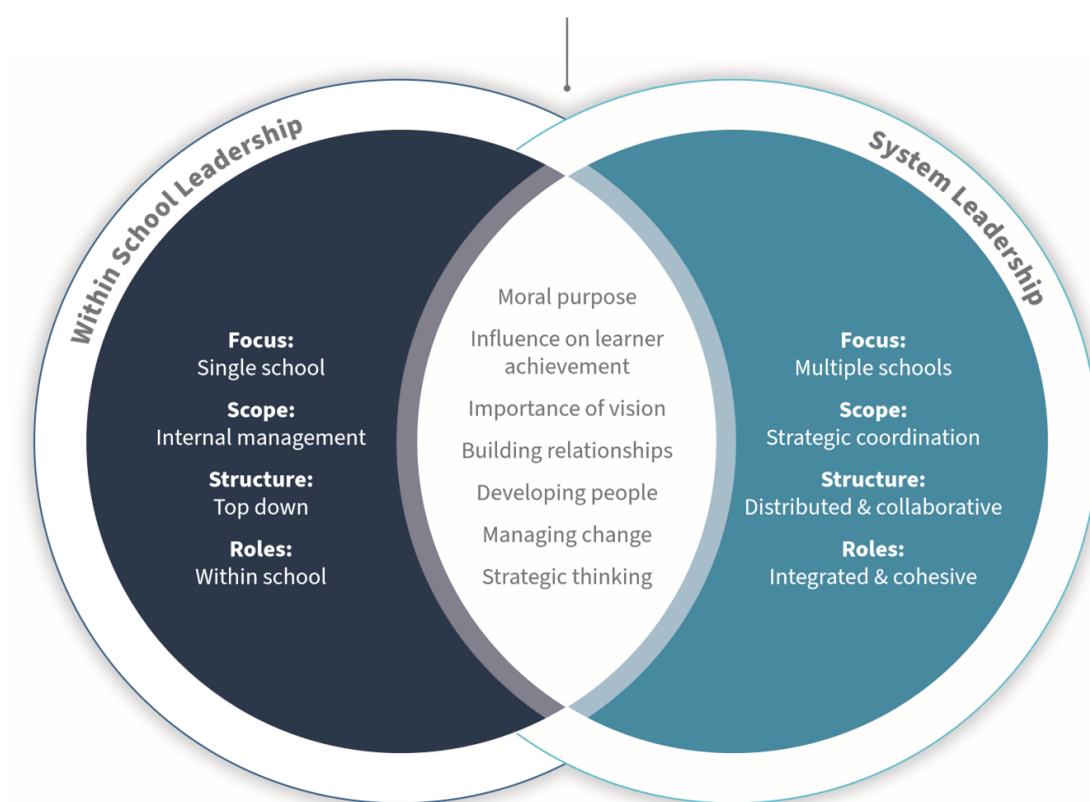
Figure 2.2 shows how traditional within-school leadership compares and contrasts to system leadership

Within-school leadership

The distinction between **system leadership** and traditional within-school leadership is both significant and nuanced. Within-school leadership typically focuses on the internal dynamics of a single school, where the headteacher or principal is primarily concerned with the day-to-day management (Bush, 2011), instructional leadership (Greatbatch and Tate, 2018) and distributed leadership (Greany and Kamp, 2022) and the overall performance of their school

(Day and Sammons, 2013; Greatbatch and Tate, 2018; Harris, 2008). This form of leadership is characterised by a hierarchical structure, where decisions are made at the top and disseminated down through the ranks (Hatcher, 2008).

System leadership practices

System leadership, on the other hand, extends beyond the confines of a single school (Higham *et al*., 2009; Hopkins 2007). It involves a broader, more strategic vision that encompasses multiple schools (Greany and Higham, 2018; Cousin, 2019; Courtney and McGinity, 2020; Constantinides, 2021) or even entire education systems (Hargreaves *et al*., 2008; Harris 2020; Matthews *et al*., 2008; Stoll, 2008;). **System leaders** are tasked with developing collaboration and building networks (Huber *et al*., 2008; Hopkins, 2009; Muijs, 2015a, 2015b; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2019) that transcend individual school boundaries. Their role is to create a cohesive and integrated approach to educational improvement, where the success of one school is seen as interconnected with the success of others (Harris, 2020; Constantinides, 2021; Burton, 2021; UK Government, 2023).

Differences between within-school leadership and system leadership practices

Focus

Within-school leadership typically centres on the internal dynamics of a single school. Hatcher (2008) and Bush (2011) argue that headteachers or principals are primarily concerned with day-to-day management and overall performance within their schools. This form of leadership is characterised by a hierarchical structure where decisions are made at the top and disseminated down through the ranks (Greany and Higham 2018). In contrast, **system leadership** extends beyond the confines of a single school to encompass multiple schools or entire educational systems (Hopkins, 2007; Higham *et al*., 2009; Muijs (2015a, 2015b) and Greany and Higham (2018) highlight that **system leaders** are pivotal in school improvement and sharing best practice. This broader focus involves developing collaboration and building networks that transcend individual school boundaries.

Scope

The scope of within-school leadership is limited to the internal management and instructional leadership within one school (Bush, 2011). Day and Sammons (2013) and Greatbatch and Tate (2018) emphasise that traditional leaders focus on creating conditions for improved learner outcomes within their schools. On the other hand, **system leadership** involves a broader, more strategic vision that includes developing collaboration and building networks across multiple schools. Greany and Higham (2018) and Constantinides (2021) note that **system leaders** support other schools, spread effective practices and lead new alliances, such as Teaching School Alliances and MATs.

Structure

Hatcher (2008) and Bush (2011) describe within school leadership as being internally focused and top-down. In contrast, **system leadership** emphasises a more distributed and collaborative approach. Muijs (2015a, 2015b) and Greany and Higham (2018) highlight that **system leaders** work across various schools and educational settings, developing a more collaborative and integrated approach to educational improvement.

Roles

Within-school leaders are responsible for the management and improvement of their individual schools. Day and Sammons (2013) and Greatbatch and Tate (2018) emphasise that within-school leaders focus on creating conditions for improved learner outcomes within their schools. In contrast, **system leaders** take on broader roles and responsibilities. Hatcher (2008) and Muijs (2015a, 2015b) note that **system leaders** are involved in supporting other schools, spreading effective practices and leading new alliances.

Similarities between within-school leadership and system leadership practices

Moral purpose

Both traditional within-school leadership and **system leadership** are driven by a strong moral purpose. Hatcher (2008) and Muijs (2015a, 2015b) highlight that **system leadership** is driven by a commitment to improving educational outcomes across multiple schools. Greany and Higham (2018) emphasise that **system leaders** are seen as agents of educational

transformation who work towards the moral purpose of ensuring that every student reaches their potential. Similarly, traditional within-school leadership embodies a moral purpose focused on the internal dynamics and improvement of a single school. Fullan (2005) argues that moral purpose is a driving force behind effective leadership and is essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable educational reform.

Influence on student achievement

Both traditional and **system leadership** have a significant impact on student achievement. Traditional within-school leaders influence student outcomes through direct management and instructional leadership within their schools. Day and Sammons (2013) and Greatbatch and Tate (2018) emphasise that traditional leaders focus on creating conditions for improved learner outcomes within their schools while **system leaders**, on the other hand, influence student achievement by developing collaboration and building networks across multiple schools. Muijs (2015a, 2015b) and Greany and Higham (2018) highlight that **system leaders** are pivotal in school improvement and sharing best practices within the self-improving school-led system.

Importance of vision

Both within-school and **system leadership** need to establish a clear vision for their schools or systems. This vision guides their actions and decisions, helping to align efforts towards common goals. Harris and Jones (2023) assert that effective school leaders focus on leadership for learning first and everything else second. Leithwood *et al.* (2008, 2019) emphasise that school leadership has a greater influence when it is widely distributed, underscoring the importance of **system leadership**. Fullan (2005, 2025) and Hopkins (2007) both highlight the significance of **system leadership** in educational reform, with Fullan (2005) emphasising the application of system-thinking into action.

Building relationships

Building relationships are equally essential to the success of both within-school leadership and **system leadership** involving teachers, staff and students. Bush (2011) describes traditional leadership as being internally focused and top-down. **System leaders** extend this relationship-building to include other schools, educational entities and stakeholders across

the system. Hatcher (2008) and Muijs (2015a, 2015b) emphasise the importance of building networks and developing collaboration between multiple schools and educational entities.

Developing people

Both types of leadership involve developing the skills and capacities of others. Within-school leaders focus on developing their staff within a single school and Day and Sammons (2013) and Greatbatch and Tate (2018) emphasise that traditional leaders focus on creating conditions for improved learner outcomes within their schools. **System leaders** work on developing leadership capacities across multiple schools or the entire education system (Barber *et al*., 2010).

Managing change

Traditional within-school and **system leadership** are responsible for managing change within their respective contexts. They need to be adaptable and responsive to the evolving needs of their schools or systems, ensuring that improvements are sustainable and effective. Harris, 2008; Harris and Jones, 2023 and Leithwood *et al*., 2008, 2019 all emphasise the importance of distributed leadership in developing collaboration and managing change.

Strategic thinking

Within-school and **system leadership** engage in strategic thinking to achieve their goals. Day and Sammons (2013) and Greatbatch and Tate (2018) emphasise that traditional leaders focus on creating conditions for improved learner outcomes within their schools. **System leaders** develop strategies that benefit multiple schools or the entire education system. Greany and Higham (2018) and Constantinides (2021) highlight that **system leaders** are tasked with creating a cohesive and integrated approach to educational improvement.

While the literature provides valuable insights into both the differences and similarities between within-school leadership and **system leadership**, it also reveals several critical gaps and areas for further exploration. Despite extensive advocacy for **system leadership**, there is a notable lack of empirical research to substantiate its effectiveness. Cousin (2019) argues that **system leadership** is '"under-theorized and open to differing interpretations" (p.99) (sic), highlighting the need for more empirical research to fully understand its impact and

effectiveness. Additionally, the pressure on **system leaders** to make short-term improvements in other schools can lead to a focus on immediate results rather than sustainable, long-term improvements. Greany and Higham (2018) note that this pressure creates a dilemma for leaders who fear that their own schools might drop in performance as a result of their external work.

Therefore, while traditional within-school leadership focuses on the internal management and improvement of a single school, **system leadership** involves a broader, strategic approach that encompasses multiple schools and emphasises collaboration and network-building. The moral purpose in **system leadership** is to improve educational outcomes across multiple schools, ensuring that every learner reaches their potential. Both types of leadership share common goals, influence on learner achievement, the importance of vision, relationship-building, developing people, managing change and strategic thinking. However, further empirical research is needed to fully understand the impact and effectiveness of **system leadership** and to address the challenges and pressures faced by all leaders.

The Welsh education reform journey is well underway, but for it to progress further, Wales must develop a better understanding of **system leadership**. This understanding is crucial to ensure that educational leadership development impacts school improvement, as recommended by Jones, (2024, 2025) Miles (2024) and the OECD (2014 2017 2020). Alternatively, the research may challenge the OECD's recommendations, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach to educational reform.

Currently no empirical research has been conducted and published in Wales into **system leaders** and **system leadership.**

My research asks two questions, which are located in the Welsh context:

1.   What is understood by the term **educational system leader**?
2.   What is understood by the term **educational system leadership**?

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

Chapter synopsis

This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken to explore how the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership** are understood within the context of Welsh education. Building on the literature review in Chapter 2, which identified a significant gap in empirical research, particularly in Wales, this chapter explains how the study was designed to address that gap through a qualitative, interpretivist lens.

The chapter begins by presenting the research design and theoretical underpinnings, including the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions that shaped the research. It then describes the sampling strategies used to identify participants with relevant expertise and experience, followed by a detailed account of the data collection tools: an online questionnaire and follow-up semi-structured interviews.

Given my professional background and leadership role within the Welsh education system, the chapter also includes a critical reflection on positionality and the steps taken to mitigate potential bias. Ethical considerations are discussed in line with institutional guidelines and best practices in educational research.

Finally, the chapter introduces the analytical methods used to interpret the data, including Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis and Rogoff's (1995, 2003) sociocultural framework. These approaches enabled a nuanced understanding of how **system leadership** is conceptualised and enacted in practice, providing a foundation for the findings presented in Chapter 5.

3.1 Research design

Aims and objectives of the research

The aim of this chapter is to outline and justify the methodological approach adopted to explore the research questions:

- What is understood by the term **educational system leader**?
- What is understood by the term **educational system leadership**?

To achieve this, the chapter sets out the research design, theoretical framework and data collection methods used to investigate how these terms are interpreted by senior educational leaders in Wales and internationally. It also explains how the research was shaped by the socio-political context of Welsh education reform and the researcher's own positionality.

The specific objectives of this chapter are to:

- Justify the use of a qualitative, interpretivist methodology grounded in sociocultural theory.
- Explain the rationale for using purposive and convenience sampling to gather data from experienced educational leaders.
- Describe the design and implementation of the online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.
- Detail the ethical considerations and reflexive practices employed to ensure research integrity.
- Present the analytical framework used to interpret the data, including Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis and Rogoff's three planes of sociocultural analysis.

In light of the observed gap in the academic discourse, this research seeks to contribute to the current repository of Welsh educational evidence. Specifically, it endeavours to enhance the understanding of the terms **educational system leadership** and **educational system leader** within the context of Wales.

3.2 Theoretical approach

This research sits within the social sciences. It seeks to gain an understanding of terms being used within a social and political system from the perspective of those within the educational system. I therefore adopt a methodology that enables a deeper understanding of what is understood by the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership**.

3.2.1 Ontology

My research is qualitative and uses a belief system grounded in socio-constructivism. It is situated in the paradigm, in which individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2007). The participants, who are all involved in educational leadership were asked to provide their views about the terms which I subsequently analysed and

interpreted. It is therefore subjective as it relies on individuals' views of the situation but as the researcher, I look for the "complexity of views rather than narrowing the meanings into a few categories" (ibid p.20). The knowledge is constructed in a process of social interchange and is based on language (Flick, 2014). I considered the different ways people make sense of their world (Cohen *et al.,* 2018) and I considered the participant's perceptions which are reinforced by their interactions with others and which are being produced and re-produced as they are continuously creating their "social reality" through their everyday actions and beliefs (Denscombe, 2010, p.119). The educational leaders draw on their own experiences, these subjective meanings are "negotiated socially and historically and they are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual's lives" (Creswell, 2007, p.20).

Whilst it may be considered that "cultures consist of the shared values and beliefs in the organization" (*sic*) (Fullan, 2005, p.57) it is thought "leaders are assumed to have their own values and objectives which necessarily influence their interpretations of events" (Bush, 2011, p.197). This is important as the leaders who answered the online questionnaire and contributed to the semi-structured interviews have their own values and interpretations. The research included the evidence of multiple realities which includes quotes and actual words from the different participants in the research, these offer different views and perspectives on what is understood by the terms **educational system leader** and **system leadership**. A limitation of this approach is the multiple realities which are constructed, cannot be verified to see if they accurately represent a world existing independently of the ideas. However, Pring (2015) argues it is not that there are multiple realities, but that there are different ways in which reality is conceived and those differences may well reflect different practical interests and different traditions. I have adopted Pring's (2015) ideas in guiding my understanding of how I interpret the data as my approach to collecting the views and opinions considered the different geographical backgrounds, leadership experience and leadership roles. Realities are mediated by our senses and it is through the interaction of language that we interpret the realities of the phenomena (Scotland, 2012). It is therefore through individual responses and my interaction with the data that the meaning is interpreted.

3.2.2 Epistemology

As the researcher, my epistemological stance is based on how I acquire knowledge. I am interested in how others interpret the terms and I do this through the interpretivist approach which recognises "the social world does not have the tangible, material qualities that allow to be measured" (Denscombe, 2010, p.121). Participants shared their own views, opinions and experiences in response to the RQ. I focused on how the participants made sense of the world and how they created their social world through their actions and interpretations of the world (Denscombe, 2010). I acknowledge that my personal background influences how I interpret phenomena (see Reflexivity 3.2.4 for further details) and that my interpretations are inevitably shaped by this perspective, "there cannot be any neutral, pure, mind upon which to consider phenomena" (Rapley, 2018, p.5). My reflexivity impacts on me as the researcher and my position upon the research process. Creswell, (2007) states researchers "position themselves" p.21) in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural and historical experiences.

My epistemological stance is concerned with how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated. Denscombe (2010) and Scotland, (2012) state as the researcher I can never entirely step outside my existing knowledge to see things first hand but the best I can do is offer a second-hand account which provides my own analysis of a first-hand reality. Through asking the RQ I asked the senior leaders to share their knowledge, which is socio-constructed by them and interpreted by me as the researcher. Creswell (2007) argues this process brings the relationship between the researcher and the researched closer. Pring (2015) agrees by saying "reality" (p.61) research can never be independent of the person researching it. Cohen *et al.* (2018,) also support this view, stating that understanding of individuals' interpretations of the world around them must come from within, rather than external observation. To mitigate against my position influencing the data (see Reflexivity 3.2.4 for further details) and to ensure its accuracy and validity, I share the data with the participants for verification (Bryman, 2012; Mears, 2017).

In interpretivist research, knowledge is understood to be inherently embedded within social interactions and relationships. Thomas (2017, p.152) refers to this as "situated knowledge", highlighting the idea that understanding is shaped by context. Within this framework, the

researcher plays a pivotal role, not as a detached observer, but as an active participant in uncovering and interpreting this context-dependent knowledge. However, Flick (2014) warns that researchers risk "actively co-constructing the situation which they want to study" (p.542). Given my role in the research, I must remain conscious of not actively constructing meaning, but rather focus on interpreting the knowledge that is shared with me.

3.2.3 Axiology

Creswell (2007) asserts that all researchers inevitably bring their own values into the research process. Interpretivists, as Scotland (2012) notes, recognise that the notion of entirely "value-free knowledge is not possible" (p.12). I acknowledge that I bring my own values to the research by selecting a study relevant to my interests and professional context, by designing it to collect data from educational leaders in Wales and internationally and by interpreting the data through a lens shaped by my positionality and personal values (see Reflexivity 3.2.4 for further details). The focus of study becomes not just the field setting, but also the researcher's role within it (Cohen *et al.,* 2018). The interpretations are "clearly influenced by the values which researchers bring to the situation" Pring (2015, p.62). Pring (2015) also claims it limits the validity, however, he adds when language, attributions and emotions have a history and are located in a particular social and cultural tradition, they are also given to "evolve through interactions between people within those traditions and between the tradition's themselves" (p.68). In response to this, caution must be given against preconceptions, prior assumptions, preferences and biases which are external to the research (Cohen *et al.,* 2018). When reality is totally created or constructed through negotiation of meanings it leaves the researcher vulnerable (Pring, 2015) and therefore my own reflexivity was observed throughout.

3.2.4 Reflexivity

As the author of this thesis, I brought a unique and multifaceted perspective to my research on **educational system leadership**, shaped by my background, experiences, beliefs and values (Bryman, 2012), all of which influenced the lens through which I viewed and approached the study.

Influence of positionality on qualitative inquiry

Qualitative research is inherently shaped by the researcher's personal and professional perspectives, influencing everything from data collection to the communication of findings (Bryman, 2012). It is not a neutral process but an ethical one that demands thoughtful reflection (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). I recognised that my own values, biases and experiences informed this study (Creswell, 2007). As Denscombe (2010) argues, complete objectivity is unattainable in social research because researchers are embedded in the world they investigate. My positionality, shaped by my ontological and epistemological assumptions (see 3.2.1 and 3.2.2), guided both my approach to inquiry and my interpretation of the findings (Holmes, 2020).

I shared a historical and cultural background with many of the participants (who were known to me), which inevitably shaped my interpretations (Gray, 2018; Bryman, 2012). My leadership journey spanned over 30 years in education, including roles as deputy headteacher, headteacher, school inspector and Assistant Director of NAEL. At the time of the research, I was serving as Chief Executive of NAEL, a senior leadership role within the Welsh education system. These experiences provided valuable insight into educational leadership but also introduced potential biases. I recognised that my reflections, perceptions and experiences could influence both the data and its interpretation (Gray, 2018; Bryman, 2012). This influence was acknowledged as a limitation in my ethics submission (see Ethics 3.5; Appendix 9) and further discussed in section 6.7.2.

This research holds both professional and policy relevance for me. As noted by the OECD (2014) that "**system leadership** should be a prime driver to improving education in Wales" (p.8). My aim was to deepen understanding of this concept and contribute to its development. While my background enriched the study, it also required a commitment to reflexivity and transparency to ensure the integrity of the research process.

Interactions with participants

At the time of data collection, I held a senior educational leadership position. This positional authority may have influenced how participants responded, potentially leading them to offer answers they believed aligned with my views or expectations rather than their genuine opinions. Piedmont (2014) refers to this phenomenon as "social desirability bias" (pp. 6036–

6037), where participants may have perceived me as an expert, thereby shaping their responses accordingly. This dynamic introduced a potential source of bias into the data collection process, particularly during the online semi-structured interviews and I acknowledged this as a limitation of my research (see 6.7.2 for further detail).

Throughout the research process, I remained mindful and self-aware of these dynamics, consistently reflecting on how my professional role might influence participant interactions and data interpretation. Denscombe (2010) emphasises the importance of engaging with differing views, even those that challenge the researcher's assumptions and cautions against disregarding opposing ideas. I was aware that I chose to interview headteachers who were known to me and had I interviewed other headteachers, there was the possibility of dissenting voices. Transparency was central to my approach; I actively reflected on my relationships with participants and the research project itself (Bryman, 2012) by keeping a journal and making regular notes about how my own thoughts and opinions could influence my thinking. In interpreting and writing up the findings, I acknowledged the influence of my own cultural, social, gendered, class-based and political perspectives (Creswell, 2007) and took deliberate steps to differentiate between participants' authentic voices and my own interpretations (Gray, 2018) by using verbatim comments.

Diverse perspectives

I engaged with diverse perspectives by incorporating a range of viewpoints during both data collection (see section 3.4 Research Tools) and analysis (see Chapter 4: Method of Data Analysis). This included input from participants with varied backgrounds and experiences, gathered through the online questionnaire and follow-up interviews with headteachers from different geographical regions across Wales (see 3.4.2 Convenience Sampling). By considering multiple perspectives, (through the online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews) I aimed to reduce the influence of my own biases and provide a balanced interpretation of the data (see Chapter 4: Method of Data Analysis).

Reflexive practices

To address potential biases arising from my professional background and leadership roles, I employed several strategies to ensure research integrity. I regularly reflected on my assumptions and maintained a reflexive journal to document my thoughts, decisions and

feelings throughout the research process. This practice helped me remain aware of how my positionality shaped the research (Bryman, 2012; Lutz & Paretti, 2019). The journal served as a comprehensive record, supporting transparency and encouraging critical thinking about my methods and interactions.

To validate my findings and ensure that participants' perspectives were accurately represented, I conducted member-checking or "respondent validity" (Bryman, 2012, p.391; Mears, 2017). This involved sharing my interpretations and findings with participants to confirm their accuracy. This process helped mitigate the risk of misrepresentation and ensured that the data reflected participants' genuine views rather than my own biases.

Transparency and ethical reflection

I explicitly acknowledged my positionality and its potential influence on the research in my ethics application (see Appendix 9 – University Ethics Approval). Ethical approval was granted by the University's Ethics Committee on 23rd March 2021. I was transparent about my background and the potential power dynamics associated with my role as Chief Executive of NAEL at the time of data collection. By using a reflexive journal and discussing these issues with my supervisors, I aimed to mitigate bias and ensure the credibility of the research.

Rigorous reflexive thematic analysis

I used Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step reflexive thematic analysis to ensure a rigorous and comprehensive review of the data. This iterative approach supported a thorough and reflective analysis, enabling the development of rich and credible insights (Gray, 2018). I ensured that my interpretations were transparent and supported by verbatim participant quotes, enhancing the authenticity and reliability of the findings (see Chapter 4: Method of Data Analysis).

By employing these strategies, I aimed to mitigate the influence of my positionality and uphold the credibility and integrity of the research, providing a clear and honest account of the findings (see Chapter 5: Findings).

3.3 Theoretical position

Educational research is supported by a plethora of social science theories, but this research is situated mainly in sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 1990, 1995, 2003). It explores the notion or concept of the **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership** and considers the sense that participants make of both policy and practice related to the education system in Wales. Rogoff (2003) describes human development as a cultural process and this theory emphasises the interaction between developing people (and specifically in the context of this research), educational leaders and the culture and context in which they work and live and how they learn from and interact with each other.

Sociocultural theory proposes that the human mind operates through mediation and we employ "symbolic tools or signs" (Lantolf, 1999, p.1) to facilitate our interactions with both others and ourselves, ultimately transforming these relationships. Lantolf indicates further, these tools are "created by human culture"' (p.1) and they might change and adapt over time. This concurs with Rogoff (1990) that "development is assumed to proceed throughout the life span" of individuals and that "re-organisation of thinking in adulthood includes taking on new intellectual challenges" (p.4). This concept is explored through my research to understand how the role of an **educational system leader** is developed and enacted and how they interact with others through **system leadership** approaches.

My research also concurs with Vygotsky's theory (Kozulin *et al.,* 2003) that human cognition and learning is social and cultural rather than an individual phenomenon. Similarly, Rogoff (1990) and Kozulin *et al*. (2003) highlight Vygotsky's view that sociocultural forces such as peers and the community shape interactions between individuals and their environment. Rogoff (1990) argues all human activity is embedded in context and this is supported by the theorist Bronfenbrenner (1975, 1979) and Aubrey and Riley (2016) who propose that "multiple contexts impact development" (p.119). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of the environment is structured in such a way that it identifies a system of relationships within the immediate and broader environments, claiming the development of a person is influenced by the environment and the interaction between the two.

Social learning theorist, Bandura (Aubrey and Riley, 2016) also shares the belief that "people learn from one another, through observation, replication and modelling" (p.119) and that human behaviour is learned. Bennis (1999) also states that leaders are not born and that with practice you can become a great leader. This argument would support the socio-constructivist theory that knowledge always undergoes construction and transformation in use (Lave, 2009). My research explores the idea of **system leadership** and recognises the sociocultural context in which this idea resides.

To better understand the "interplay between the various influencing factors" (Johnston *et al.,* 2020, p.49) and how the "human activity is embedded in context" (Rogoff, 1990, p.27), I used Rogoff's three planes of sociocultural analysis (1995, 2003) (i) personal plane, (ii) interpersonal plane and (iii) community plane.

When applying the sociocultural theory to this research, it was appropriate to consider the *role* of the **system leader** and the **system leadership** *approach* through Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes. It proved instrumental in enhancing my comprehension of how the culture and context within which **system leaders** apply their leadership practices are influenced by a multitude of factors rather than a single element.

Rogoff (2003) argues these planes are inseparable and claims "no aspect exists or can be studied in isolation from the others" (p.58). This means the developmental process of the *role* of a **system leader** and the *approach* of **system leadership** has to be considered in each plane alongside the others. Rogoff (1995) states "foregrounding one plane of focus still involves the participation of the backgrounded planes of focus" (p.1) which means considering the relationship between all three planes. Johnston *et al.* (2020) state "relationships and interactions are central to the planes and are core aspects of sociocultural theory" (2020). This approach is subjective and personal and the research relies on the participants describing what they understand by the terms **educational system leader and system leadership**. The use of the three planes re-enforces Johnston *et al.'s* (2020) position that relationships are integral to the sociocultural theory. The use of Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes in the analysis of the data are described more fully in Chapter 4: Method of Data Analysis.

I situated my study within the qualitative design as I wanted to gather the views and opinions of individuals working in a senior educational leadership role (Gray, 2018) and I collected the data through online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

3.4 Research tools

My sample includes senior education professionals. I have used the three-tier model (Figure 2.1) to identify the groups for the sample. These include; WG officers, policy influencers and academics (national and International) who are advisers to WG and sit in the first tier. Educational leaders from tier two, which include; regional consortia, local and diocesan authorities, ESTYN, Education Workforce Council, Qualifications Wales and Higher Education and from the third tier; educational practitioners who are senior leaders from the school, youth work and further education sector. I chose these groups as they are significant to the research questions and have the "particular characteristics" required to answer the RQ (Denscombe, 2010, p.176 and p.182). The requirements included being in a senior educational leader position and/or being an influencer in education, for example, somebody who advises and has power to affect decisions, opinions or behaviours of those in WG. I have used two sampling frames to gather my data; a purposeful sample to ask the RQ through an online questionnaire and a convenience sample for the follow-up semi-structured interviews.

3.4.1 Purposive sampling frame

For the online questionnaire, I selected individuals from the WG three-tier model (Figure 2.1) who "can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study" (Creswell, 2007, p.125). I thought critically about the population of interest, carefully selecting sample cases based on this consideration (Silverman, 2020), choosing a sample or "group" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.223) aligned with obtaining the necessary information, with a focus on experienced educationalists, particularly leaders (practitioners and influencers). Choosing the right "sample selection will have a profound impact on the ultimate quality of the research" (Gray, 2014, p.208) and because they provide important information. I considered carefully who would offer the "best perspectives on the phenomenon of interest" (ibid, p.215) and then invited them to take part in the questionnaire. As Thomas (2017) suggests, I simply involved the "kind of person" (p.142) I considered to be of interest whose background met the criteria, which was a senior educational leader, an educational academic or senior educational adviser with knowledge and experience with the

ability to answer the RQ. This is not a sample which is representative of a population (Thomas, 2017). I have particularly selected a sample which simply represents itself (ibid) and what Cohen *et al.* (2018) refer to as a "*group* of participants" (p.223). I purposely selected participants for the questionnaire and "hand-picked" (ibid, p.217) them to be included on the basis that they had the knowledge and understanding to answer the RQ. I chose a "group of participants" (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p.223) who would allow me to explore the research rather than generalise from it.

Reflecting on my positionality, (see reflexivity, section 3.2.4) I made the deliberate decision to include participants who were known to me through my professional position as an experienced senior educational leader in Wales (see 6.7.2. section on limitations). Gray (2018) insists that as the researcher I exercise a "degree of judgement" (p.215) of who might provide the "best perspective" (ibid) but a disadvantage might be that I omitted other individuals who might offer a differing perspective who might offer "interesting contrasts" (Gray, 2018, p.215) (see section 6.7.2 limitations). For this research I deliberately selected the individuals whom I believed would have the capability to answer the RQ. This does mean through choosing a purposive sample I neglected to include some participants from the wider population, but my purposely selected sample allowed me to ensure I had responses that were informed by their views and experiences. I sent the questionnaire link to 72 educational professionals.

I asked:

- Twenty four academics and policy influencers/Advisers (national and international)
- Twenty three middle tier professionals including local authority, regional, ESTYN etc
- Twenty five senior leaders, who were experienced practicing professionals

A sampling error would occur if I had asked selected participants who did not meet the criteria and were not experienced educational leaders as then they would not be able to answer the questionnaire but I had designed the questionnaire in such a way which identified "ineligible respondents" (Gray 2018, p.229). The first question (following the language preference and consent question) asked them to give their role in education. There was still a risk of selecting

the wrong participants due to "elements of human judgement involved in determining sample size" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.213) this could mean their responses might not offer the kinds of answers I was seeking because they may have lacked the required knowledge and experience to do so. Although some of the respondents decided not to answer all the questions, I was satisfied with the responses given to the questionnaire.

A limitation of having a small sample suggests that it provides less breadth to the research however, it does "provide greater depth" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.218) and as this research required the participants to offer their views and experiences through online questionnaires and interviews it offered the opportunity to generate robust, rich and deep levels of understanding' (Gray, 2018) through two data gathering processes.

Access to the sample is a key issue (Cohen *et al.,* 2018) which is why I chose purposive sampling for the online questionnaire and a combination of convenience and purposive for the follow-up semi-structure interviews. This is supported by Creswell (2007) who states researchers might use more than one sampling strategy in a single study.

3.4.2 Convenience sampling frame

Qualitative sampling is "emergent, in that sampling strategies and the goals of the research are based on ongoing reflections, data analysis […] and often further sampling" (Gray, 2018, p.208). As part of the research design, I planned to conduct follow-up interviews with up to four respondents, which would generate "robust, rich and deep levels of understanding" (Gray, 2018, p.229). The participants were identified through the online questionnaire, where respondents volunteered their e-mail addresses. Flick (2014) states the researcher must make a "sampling decision [which is] about covering as wide a field as possible and of doing analyses which are as deep as possible" (p.175).

I decided to delve deeper to gain a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the interviewee's experiences, thoughts and perspectives. The respondents who supplied their e-mails formed a convenience sample, as it provided "easily accessible subjects" (Gray, 2018) and the respondents were "easy to access under the given conditions" (p.221), they also had the "necessary knowledge and experience to answer the questions" (Flick, 2014, p.175). Whilst it is recognised that the convenience sample is the most cost effective and time efficient, a limitation is that it has the lowest credibility. However, I have mitigated this risk

by purposively choosing who to interview from the convenience sample. This supports Flick's (2014) statement above, that "sampling decisions cannot be made in isolation" (p.178). The data collection and data analysis processes supported this. Cohen *et al.* (2018) also refer to the convenience sample as an "opportunity sample" (p.217) and the online questionnaire request to the respondents to volunteer their emails, was indeed an "opportunity" (ibid) for me to select a sample for a follow-up interview for a more in-depth conversation about the anonymised data from the online questionnaire. This type of sample certainly met my needs as the researcher and it is "deliberately and unashamedly selective and biased" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.219). It also identified a sample that I could "acquire in-depth information from and those who are in a position to give it" (ibid).

Silverman (2020) states you can select your interviewees purposively based on the groups which your research addresses and although the respondents identified themselves through offering their emails, (which meets the convenience sample criteria) I also identified the interviewees through their emails as they contained their names. Gray (2018) also supports this approach and I ensured that I exercised "a degree of judgement" (p.215) when choosing who to interview as I selected from the list of emails, those who I felt would offer (due to their experience) the more insightful responses, opinions, views and explanations. Silverman (2018) refers to the researcher in qualitative research as "manipulative" (p.67) as consideration is given to the analysis, theory and sampling activities "interactively" (ibid) during the research. Flick (2014) Silverman (2018) and Gray (2018) all agree that the researcher makes informed decisions about whom to include in the sample based on "substantial criteria" (Flick 2014, p.168). My primary criteria included those who were practicing educational leaders with the knowledge and experience to offer contextual responses. I chose experienced headteachers from different parts of Wales to cross-reference and validate information provided through the questionnaire. My reflexivity (see section 3.2.4) was observed when choosing the interviewees as I was making a deliberate choice and I needed to be aware of my assumptions (Cohen *et al.,* 2018).

Given that the study involved two sampling strategies and two rounds of data collection, it was essential to monitor for "data saturation" (Silverman, 2018, pp. 67–68) and avoid conducting interviews or gathering data merely for the sake of volume. I was mindful to conclude data collection once it became evident that no new insights were emerging. I chose

to interview only four participants and found the data collected to be sufficiently rich and informative. While Silverman (2018) notes that a limitation of qualitative research is that researchers "often do not know when the study will stop yielding new theoretical insights" (p. 68), this did not present a limitation in my study.

3.4.3 Online questionnaire

I chose to survey my sample of senior educational leaders using an online questionnaire. A questionnaire is considered the "most popular data gathering tool" (Gray, 2018, p.342) and one which allows you to ask participants to respond to the same set of questions in a pre-determined order. This was important because I wanted to capture the views, perceptions and experiences of the senior educational leaders in a systematic way and the questionnaire offered the flexibility for me to do that. It is a "versatile tool" (Thomas, 2017, p.141) and it allowed me to include various types of questions such as open-ended questions, Likert, drop down boxes and questions which asked for short-written responses. These are considered "constrained responses" (Tymms, 2017, p.224) and meant that the respondent was restricted to either word count or a specific number of sentences. I used open-ended questions as prompts to stimulate the participants to respond. The "semi-structured questionnaire sets the agenda but does not pre-suppose the nature of the response" (Coe *et al.*, 2018, p.475). However, Coe *et al.* (2018) argue too many open-ended questions can result in two things; firstly, there is too much data which is difficult and time consuming to analyse and secondly, the respondents might not complete the questionnaire if they find it too time consuming. I needed to consider this when I was designing the questionnaire.

Design process

I began by listing questions I needed answers to regarding the RQ. I was mindful of ethical considerations, avoiding unnecessary questions and only asking those I intended to use later (Tymms, 2017). I was also aware that if the questionnaire was too long then it could affect the response rate and its length was important (Tymms, 2017). I went through four iterations of designing my questions and it was only when I formatted them into the questionnaire that I actually appreciated how they would appear to the respondent. I had to make sure that the questions were "fit for purpose" (Denscombe, 2010, p.112) and that they met the requirements of the RQ.

I used a web-based online tool for the questionnaire called Qualtrics. This questionnaire software tool is supported financially by University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) and is the recommended questionnaire tool by the university. I received Qualtrics training when I was designing the questionnaire and received follow-up support during the design stages and throughout the piloting.

Written and informed consent

It was important that informed consent (included in the body of the questionnaire) was obtained from the participant before they started answering the questionnaire (Denscombe, 2010). The initial question determined whether the participant preferred to complete the questionnaire in English or Welsh. This distinction is essential because I specifically selected Welsh-speaking participants for the study.

This is followed by the "Participant Information Sheet" (Appendix 4) which explains the purpose of the research, what they are committing to if they proceeded to answer and what the outcome of the study would be. It explains the amount of time that was required of them and also it included a statement which expressed that there would be no adverse effect if they chose not to proceed (Denscombe, 2010). This was very important as my positionality (see reflexivity, section 3.2.4) exerted a "power relationship" (Denscombe, 2010, p.71) (see also 6.7.2 limitations) on some of the selected participants who were Associates of NAEL (at the time of the data collection). It was important they were aware that there would not be any detriment to their professional relationship with me or the organisation should they decide not to participate. There was also a statement which explained they could withdraw their data at any time up until the questionnaire was completed.

The participant information sheet (Appendix 4) was short but informative and consent was sought from them by asking them to click either on the:

Yes, I'm happy to proceed

Or

No, I do not wish to proceed

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) was divided into three sections (i) context (ii) first RQ (iii) second RQ and I kept questions brief and direct so they were readily understood (Tymms, 2017)

Section A was constructed to gather information about the respondents. It contained four short questions. This section was designed to "ease them in" (Thomas, 2017, p.224). The first two questions were *open questions* and designed to allow the respondents to give single or multiple word answers. The second question was a *drop-down box* with *multiple choice*, offering the respondent a choice of five answers.

The final question in this section was *multiple choice*, where the respondents clicked on the answer most relevant to them. The design of the questions in *Section A* re-enforced what Thomas (2017) states, questionnaires should be kept short, "be clear, precise and collect necessary detail" (p.217).

The data collected in this section gave context to the roles of those who volunteered to answer the questionnaire giving me an understanding of the types of roles the respondents had in the education system, what kinds of experience they had as senior educational leaders and whether they worked in Wales or other parts of the world.

Section B was about the respondents understanding of the term **educational system leader** and asked two *open questions*. Both questions required a "constrained response" (Tymms, 2017, p.225) which were limited to 150 words for the first question and a limit of five sentences was set for the second question. I wanted to limit their responses to ensure that they provided straightforward and focused responses, concise without unnecessary elaboration. I also hoped they would be more inclined to move to the next question without delaying on the previous one. The first question asked what does the term **educational system leader** mean to you?

Section C was about the respondents understanding of the term **educational system leadership** and had three questions. The first question asked was an *open question* requesting a "constrained response" (Tymms, 2017, p.225) limiting the answer to no more than 150 words. The second question is a *Likert-type scale* "to gauge the respondents' feelings" (Tymms, 2017, p.225) to gain a structured and quantifiable understanding of what their thoughts and opinions were. My scale offered five points and included the option for

respondents to click neutral which allowed them to say they were unsure (Tymms, 2017). The final question was an *open question* but once again limiting the answers to no more than five sentences.

The closed questions, multiple choice and drop-down boxes provided "data that was quick to code and analyse" (Coe *et al.,* 2018, p. 476). These questions were easy for the respondents to answer and were factual answers. The Likert-type question was again simple for them to answer but required them to consider how they felt about the question.

All the other questions were *open,* but all text boxes provided space for the answers and gave instructions for limiting their word count or number of sentences and therefore guided them to provide short answers. This allowed the participants to "write a free account in their own terms to explain and qualify their responses" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.476). Even though the respondents were limited in the number of words they could use, this type of open question presents a limitation to qualitative research as the amount of data it produces is difficult to "code, classify and analyse" (*ibid*).

There were no "double-think" questions (Tymms, 2017, p.227) which might have potentially confused the respondent. Also, if the respondent wasn't comfortable in answering any of the questions, then they were given the ability to skip the question, which allowed them to move swiftly to the next question or section. Before clicking the submit button at the end of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to provide their email address if they were interested in participating in an online interview to discuss the anonymised responses from the questionnaire.

After developing and designing the questionnaire, Qualtrics allows you to preview it as it would appear on a computer or hand-held device, "one way of improving the rate of response to a questionnaire is by making it as attractive as possible" (Gray, 2018, p.359). Qualtrics allows you to change the font, size and add a graphic. I made sure the questionnaire was equally as attractive and accessible on a hand-held device as it was on a computer. Making sure there was ample spacing between each question and that the font was large enough to read.

Pilot

Once I was satisfied with my questions and the design, I piloted the questionnaire with a sample of professional doctoral students. The sample included both English and Welsh medium participants. I asked them to consider;

- the content of the participation sheet
- the time it took for them to complete
- whether questions made sense
- were there any grammatical errors
- the mobility through the questionnaire
- whether the instructions were clear

Feedback from the pilot provided me with information to improve the quality of the questionnaire and it gave me confidence that I had designed a successful questionnaire. There were no grammatical errors identified in English but there were a few in the Welsh version, mostly related to grammatical mutations that occur in the Welsh language.

One of the respondents indicated "you would have needed to have heard of the terms I think to answer the questions" (anonymous), I addressed this limitation through purposively selecting my target sample, explaining the purpose of the research in the Participation Information Sheet (PIS) and explained that the named respondent had been invited as they have a role as an experienced education professional.

Distribution

After compiling my target sample list and making the small amendments to my questionnaire I emailed each person individually from my student email account on Sunday 28th February, 2022 and I gave a response time of two weeks, with the closing date on 14th March 2022. I later extended the response time to five weeks. This extension was due to individuals contacting me to say they hadn't had time to complete in the time frame but still wanted to respond. This was also due to external pressures of the global pandemic Covid-19 (Public Health Wales, (PBH) 2022). The questionnaire was closed on April 4th 2022 when I downloaded the data ready to analyse. The first round of analysis was to identify the lines of

enquiry to explore further with the respondents who had supplied their email addresses for follow-up interviews.

According to Cohen *et al.* (2018) the response rate to answering an online questionnaire is considered higher when comparing to other forms of questionnaires and the "data are of a higher quality, richer, fuller responses with greater depth and reflection by participants" (ibid, p.362) but Tymms (2017) argues "for online questionnaires and other formats, the ways to increase response rates have not been so thoroughly investigated" (p.229). In my experience, the use of online questionnaires have increased during Covid-19 due to face to face restrictions but this was also on the increase before Covid -19. "The level of sophistication of mobile devices and their optimization for all kinds of research is advancing at breakneck speed" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.361) and "they are becoming the predominant mode of conducting questionnaires" (*ibid*). According to Cohen *et al.* (2018) there are several advantages for using online questionnaires, I consider these (Table 3.1) along with the limitations (Table 3.2) below:

Table 3.1   Advantages of using an online questionnaire

Advantage	Explanation
Cost-effective	The web-based questionnaire (Qualtrics) is funded through the university, allowing free access for students and no cost to respondents. Participants, being educational professionals, had no issues accessing technology.
Increased efficiency	Using a web-based tool increases efficiency for both the researcher and respondents. The questionnaire can be piloted, modified and distributed quickly. Respondents can access it via a link in their inbox.
Speedy distribution	The questionnaire reaches all participants simultaneously and can be returned without relying on postal services.

Automatic data processing	Data is processed automatically and can be easily downloaded in Microsoft Excel or Word format. Microsoft Word was chosen for text-based data.
Greater reach	A web-based questionnaire can reach a larger population, but the priority was reaching participants distanced by geographical location.
Flexible completion	Respondents can complete the questionnaire at their convenience and in multiple sittings before submission.
Ease of data entry	The structured questions allow respondents to move through the questionnaire with ease.
Environmentally friendly	Online questionnaires eliminate the need for paper, printing and posting.
Attractive design	Different font sizes and colors can be used to make the questionnaire visually appealing. Fonts and spacing were varied for readability on both phones and computers.
Flexible design	The questionnaire design allowed for a variety of question styles (e.g., Likert-type, open questions, drop-down boxes) and the option to skip questions.
Accuracy	Online questionnaires help minimise human error during data entry and processing, leading to more complete and accurate responses
Exportability	Data can be exported or imported into software. The data was exported to Microsoft Word for easier text analysis.
Greater honesty and authenticity	The anonymity provided by the online format encourages more open and genuine responses from participant

Table 3.2 Limitations of using an online questionnaire

Limitations	Mitigation
The questionnaire could be ignored by the respondent or even deleted.	I sent reminders and follow-up emails to encourage participation.
It could be seen as junk mail or spam.	I sent personalised emails explaining the purpose and importance of the questionnaire.
It is easy for respondents to 'dropout' (p.363) or send incomplete questionnaires.	I designed the questionnaire to be engaging and concise and followed up with non-respondents.
This can be seen as an impersonal approach and there is no opportunity for 'in-depth probes' (p.363)	I conducted follow-up interviews to gather more detailed information.
There could be design issues, such as the need for 'technical expertise' (p.363) to ensure questionnaires are well constructed.	I sought support from technical experts at the University to ensure the questionnaire was well-designed.
Response rates can be low when using online questionnaires especially if the questionnaire is too long or complicated.	Use a combination of question types and provide the option to skip questions.

Cohen *et al*. (2018, p.362-p.363)

Qualitative questionnaires which "tot up similar responses to the same question might in fact give a distorted picture" (Pring, 2015, p.70) of how the different participants understood the term(s) or felt about the term. The follow-up interviews allowed me to interrogate the responses to the questionnaire further. Gathering additional data using semi-structured interviews contributes to the construction of the kind of "thick descriptions" upon which qualitative research depends (Gray, 2018, p.173).

3.4.4 Semi-structured interviews

In qualitative research the adoption of strategies and data collection methods tends to be highly flexible and Gray (2018) insists "it is not the case of adopting one strategy rather than another" (p.164), but often combining of several strategies and methods within a research design. He states, interviews can be used as the main method of collecting data or in "conjunction with other types of data gathering techniques" (p.177). I have used semi-structured interviews as an additional data collection method following the online

questionnaires as they can be used to "cast further explanatory insight into questionnaire data" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.506). They also "lead to enriched understanding or fresh insights" (Mears, 2017, p.184). The semi-structured interview also provides "purposeful interactions in which an investigation attempts to learn what another person knows about a topic, to discover and record what that person has experienced" (Mears, 2018, p.183). In the online questionnaire, I asked the participants for their views on the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership** but the interview allowed me to "develop a fuller picture from the interviewee's point of view" (Flick, 2014, p.208). The interview also allowed me to probe further "to more depth, detail and illustration" (ibid, p.218). Interviews are also recognised for "eliciting rich data on people's views, attitudes and the meanings that underpin their lives and behaviours" (Gray, 2018, p.378). I obtained "depth of coverage" (Denscombe, 2010, p.102) through asking open-ended questions which allowed me the flexibility to explore topics thoroughly to clarify misunderstandings and assess the extent of the respondent's knowledge (Cohen *et al.*, 2018) and to explore another person's viewpoint on a situation or event to understand its meaning and share in its significance (Mears, 2017). Another reason for carrying out the follow-up interviews was words can have different meanings in different contexts and I had already identified that the respondents in the online questionnaire were using the terms **system leader** and **system leadership** interchangeably. I wanted to ensure when I interviewed, I listened for "expressions that challenged" (Mears, 2017, p.186) what I was thinking as it allowed me to explore further. I was aware through this method that I was "extracting information and co-constructing knowledge" (Cohen, *et al.*, 2018, p.506).

Design process

I chose the **semi-structured** interview as it "provides the best of both worlds as far as interviews are concerned" (Thomas, 2017, p.206). The design included a set of prepared questions on areas which I wanted to explore further and an opportunity for the interviewees to be spontaneous in their answers. It allowed them to "formulate in a dialogue their own conceptions of their lived world" (Kvale, 1996, p.11). The objective was to explore "subjective meanings" (Gray, 2018, p.381) through the interviewee giving their views and opinions so that I could analyse and interpret their answers, to respond to the RQ.

Following the online questionnaire, I considered which areas required further investigation, following step one, familiarisation, of the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). I designed the questions in a logical way to follow the sequence of the online questionnaire, starting with Question 12 (Q12) through to Questions 17 (Q17). All questions were open-ended, prompting respondents to provide descriptive and contextual answers. Some of the more complex questions were broken down into multiple parts to make it easier for the respondent to address each aspect separately. I avoided using leading language which might result in bias responses. I also designed a prompt sheet (Appendix 5) to help support me with probing further "which lead them to more depth, detail and illustration" (Flick, 2014, p.208).

This allowed me to have a structure to support the areas where I wanted to gather further information but with the freedom to follow up on points of interest where necessary. Having the prepared questions and the prompt sheet enabled me to stay focussed if the interviewee went off track. Using the combination of structure and flexibility, Thomas (2017) argues, is "the most common arrangement in most small-scale research"(p.206). I prepared my questions in advance but Thomas (*2017*) states this is not always necessary and you can have a list of areas you want to cover and use the list as a reminder. He claims further "the hallmark of the semi-structured interview" is, if you want to probe further you can, you just "prolong the discussion point" (ibid, p.207).

I was aware, when interviewing, the interaction between people can result in an "element of unpredictability" (Mears, 2017, p.187) and so I needed to be prepared. It was important to ask different types of questions to the interviewees so that I enabled them to share their subjective knowledge with me (Flick, 2014) and asking open questions which allowed for the interviewees to offer their views, experiences and opinions (Appendix 2 for a copy of the questions).

As the respondents volunteered their email, I chose my sample from this list of names which meant it was a convenience sample as it provided "easily accessible subjects" (Gray, 2018, p.221). I wanted to choose respondents who were keen to speak and share ideas (Creswell, 2007) I was confident all the respondents met that criterion but I received too many emails and couldn't interview everyone due to time constraints and the excessive amount of data it would generate for me to analyse. I was also aware of "data saturation" (Gray, 2018, p.384). I needed to conduct the interviews with as many as necessary to gain the information sought

(Kvale, 1996). I wanted to include representatives which allowed me to gain "deep levels of understanding" (Gray, 2018 p.229). The sample chosen were purposefully identified to help "inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study" (Creswell, 2007, p.125).

Process

I contacted all respondents who provided emails to thank them for completing the questionnaire and to explain that, due to the high number of replies, it would not be possible to interview everyone. Seven headteachers volunteered their email and I purposefully chose four headteachers from the list for interview, due to their relevance, experience and regional diversity. I selected them from different parts of Wales to understand whether a geographical location could influence individuals' beliefs, practices and attitudes, it allowed me to explore how (if at all) regional influences might shape their perspectives. All were practising headteachers, with three serving as NAEL Associates. I knew they would "offer more in depth" (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p.643) information about the role of the **system leader** and answer my follow-up questions. The fourth respondent (again was known to me) and had been engaging with the work of NAEL and was also working beyond her school with various partners. I felt she would also offer a deeper insight during the follow-up questions. The remaining three headteachers were not selected as the sample of four already provided sufficient diversity and depth for the study's qualitative aims. A reserve list of equally qualified headteachers was prepared to ensure flexibility and continuity. Headteachers were chosen over policymakers because the research aimed to explore how **system leadership** is enacted in practice. (I was aware that interviewing other participants might provide a different perspective, but I wanted to understand from a practitioner perspective. As practitioners, headteachers directly influence teaching, learning and school improvement, (Estyn, 2017, Leithwood *et al.*, 2019) offering grounded, context-rich insights into leadership behaviours and challenges. This aligns with the study's interpretivist approach (Thomas, 2017), which values the perspectives of those embedded in the system.

I then reached out to the selected sample of four headteachers, reminding them of the research purpose and outlining the interview process. Interviews were conducted online (via Microsoft Teams, the university's preferred platform) due to the Covid-19 pandemic, geographical considerations and environmental and cost benefits. A backup plan was in place

to reschedule if technical issues arose. Participants received a timetable to choose a suitable interview slot (each lasting up to an hour) and an interview schedule outlining potential questions. I noted that the order and content of questions might change depending on the conversation (Gray, 2018) and follow-up questions could be added.

The schedule also covered confidentiality, anonymity and consent. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, indicated by accepting the calendar invite and remaining in the meeting once recording began. I also took notes to support quotation selection and follow-up questions (Gray, 2018).

Conducting the interview

No technological issues occurred during the interviews and all participants consented to being recorded. Establishing rapport early was essential to build trust (Gray, 2018) (All interviewees were professionally known to me, as they have a professional educational relationship directly with me), aligning with Mears' (2017) view of interviews as collaborative exchanges. I was mindful of my positionality throughout (see reflexivity, section3.2.4), using pre-designed open questions to maintain focus and ensure the interviewees did not stray from the research topic (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). To reduce bias, I ensured questions were directly aligned with the research focus (Gray, 2018) and shared them in advance, allowing participants (busy headteachers during a global pandemic) time to prepare. This also supported consistency in tone and delivery (Gray, 2018) and helped avoid leading questions. All interviews lasted under an hour, with one shortened due to a late start (interviewee was late arriving).

I maintained a neutral tone and avoided judgement (Cohen *et al.*, 2018), using open-ended prompts and non-verbal cues to encourage elaboration (ibid): What types of roles are these? What are your thoughts on that? I summarised or rephrased responses to ensure clarity and challenge assumptions (Mears, 2017). Follow-up questions were used selectively (Flick, 2014): Are there any other roles that somebody would have in offering that influence? (SL3) What kind of knowledge should that person have? (SL3) and member checks were conducted, which are essential to enhance reliability (Mears, 2017): I suppose what you're saying is…(SL2) I think what you've said is… (SL2).

Data saturation was monitored throughout the process. After each interview, I reviewed the transcript, made notes and reflected on emerging themes. This iterative analysis helped

identify when no new insights were being generated (Gray, 2018; Mears, 2017). I was consciously aware of recurring perspectives and used this to determine when saturation had been reached. The use of consistent, focused questions and careful probing ensured that data collection remained aligned with the research objectives.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and stored securely. Audio recordings and transcripts were saved as Microsoft Word documents on Microsoft OneDrive, (the university's approved cloud-based storage platform). OneDrive provides encryption both in transit and at rest and access was restricted to my university credentials, ensuring compliance with institutional data protection policies and ethical standards. Using audio recordings allowed for multiple reviews and accurate data capture. As Gray (2018) notes, interviewer skill is key to eliciting depth, so I prepared thoroughly and allowed participants time to do the same. Each interview required approximately eight hours, including preparation, transcription and analysis (see Chapter 4). This aligns with Mears' (2017) and Creswell's (2007) emphasis on the time-intensive nature of qualitative interviews. Transcripts were shared with participants for respondent validation (Bryman, 2012; Mears,2017). While interviews offer rich data, they also risk bias and distortion (Cohen *et al.,* 2018) and I was aware that care must be taken not to overemphasise selected quotes at the expense of broader analysis (Mears, 2017).

3.5 Ethics

I took care to ensure that the research was carried out in accordance with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice and Research Data Management Policy and adhered to the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2024). Ethics approval was granted prior to research commencement (23rd March, 2021) and can be seen in Appendix 9.

I carried out each interview in the time specified and agreed with the interviewee. I was respectful and courteous and I was a good listener throughout (Creswell, 2007) I demonstrated this by nodding my head, not interrupting and allowing the interviewee to speak freely.

I ensured voluntary informed consent before conducting the interview by explaining in the interview schedule (Appendix 3) and again on the day of the interview that by joining the Microsoft Teams meeting and staying on line they agreed to the interview and to it being

recorded. I re-assured the interviewees of confidentiality and anonymity (Cohen *et al.,* 2018) through the interview schedule, verbally at the end of the interview and in the gratitude email, thanking them for their contribution. I explained confidentiality involved knowing the respondent's identity (I knew all four of the interviewees professionally) but I would take measures to protect and keep their identity private. I did this by removing names of organisations, local authorities and other words that could identify them from the transcripts. I also explained that when I was reporting on the data it would be anonymised using codes for example, interviewee one was known as **system leader** one (SL1).

I also explained that the audio recordings would be stored until transcribed and following transcription they would be destroyed. The transcriptions would be stored on Microsoft One Drive until they had been analysed, the thesis was submitted to the university and then all data would be destroyed in accordance with the university's ethics policy.

Chapter 4: Method of Data Analysis

Chapter synopsis

In chapter four, method of data analysis, I describe the purpose and focus of the research method used to answer my RQ and I give a detailed account of Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis which is the qualitative method I used to identify, analyse and interpret the data. I give an account of how I familiarised myself with the data and prepared and organised the two data sets which included online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. I provide a detailed explanation of how I analysed and coded the data including an exhaustive account of how I generated the themes. I explain the process I conducted to refine and define the names of the themes and finally, a brief explanation of the approach I took to write up the findings.

4.1 Purpose and focus of the research method

I have used qualitative research methods to collect data about what is understood by the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership**. I have taken an interpretive approach to analyse the data. My intent was "to make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2007, p.21) and to do this I understood the "data are socially situated, context-related, context-dependent and context-rich" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.288). This aligns with the socio-cultural theory underpinning the research in which human development is understood to be shaped by the culture in which it takes place (Rogoff, 2003). I am aware of my own positionality (see section 3.2.4 reflexivity) and reflected on this throughout the data analysis process by ensuring I carefully considered the "subjective accounts" (Cohen *et al.,* 2018, p.289) and reflected on the "situations through the eyes of the participants" (*ibid*) and although I was mindful not to influence the analysis with my own thoughts and experiences with expectations of what I thought the data would say, I conceded that due to my own educational context it was difficult not to bring my own background and views to the research (See section 6.7.2 limitations). Of course, I recognise that another researcher might have arrived at a different conclusion. Gibbs (2007) argues "the produce of research inevitably reflects some of the background, milieu and predictions of the researcher" (p.91) and Braun and Clarke (2022) agree that "no matter what your social and political location, reflecting on, interrogating and *owning* the values that inform your research remains

key" (p.14). Throughout the research I reflected on my position and considered my assumptions and biases by checking what the participants had said, but the research findings are my interpretation based on my leadership experiences. I took my time to consider the evidence collected by reading through the data sets on multiple occasions.

I recognised that when data resonated with me that I often reflected on it through the lens of my own role. Braun and Clarke (2022) state "an inductive orientation is never *'pure'* because of what we bring to the data analytic process, as theoretically embedded and socially positioned researchers" (p.56). For example, when the respondents talked about informal and formal roles, I thought about my previous role as a headteacher working with other leaders across the regional consortia and my more formal role when I worked as an Estyn peer inspector (see reflexivity 3.2.4 and limitations 6.7.2).

Gray (2018, p.164) states qualitative data is open to "multiple interpretations" and Cohen *et al.* (2018) say there is no right or wrong way to analyse and present qualitative data but it should be "fit for purpose" and "focus on in-depth, context-specific, rich, subjective data and meanings by the participants in the situation" (ibid, p.643). However, Gray (2018) emphasises it can cause a problem as "the challenges of qualitative research is that there are no widely accepted rules about how qualitative data should be analysed, other than generally inductive and involves the coding of data" (p.684).

My approach to analysing the data was not to consider any pre-conceived ideas and for the themes to "emerge from the data themselves – they are data driven" (Gray, 2018, p.692) but as Braun and Clarke (2022) argue "we bring with us all sorts of perspectives, theoretical and otherwise, to our meaning-making" (p.56) stating "engagement with data is never purely inductive" (*ibid*). However, considering my reflexivity (see section 3.2.4), I aimed to start with an inductive orientation as I was interested in the "experiences, perspectives and meanings of the participants" *(*Braun and Clark, 2022, p.56*)*. Braun and Clark (2022) also state, an inductive orientation is "where the analysis is located within and coding and theme development are driven by the data content" (p.10). According to Saldaña (2021, p.40) you "learn as you go" when coding inductively and this was definitely the approach I took when analysing the data from the questionnaires.

According to Gibbs (2007), "a good reflexive research report will demonstrate clearly how it is grounded in the data collected and interpreted" (p.97). Thematic Analysis (TA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), is particularly well-suited for identifying, analysing and

interpreting patterns within qualitative data. It involves a systematic process of coding to generate meaningful themes. Given that reflexivity requires critical reflection on the researcher's role throughout the research process, Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that reflexive TA is especially appropriate, as it "fully captures the values of the qualitative paradigm, which then informs research practice" (p.5). This approach enabled me to explore and understand "the participants' lives through what they say" (Gibbs, 2007, p.229) and to interpret their "accounts of social phenomena or social practices substantiated by illustrative quotations" (ibid).

Adopting this method allowed me as the researcher to be situated in the research as the "storyteller" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.6). I used Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps to reflexive thematic analysis to support this process and Figure 4.1 shows how the steps flow into each other and how easy it is to move back and forth through the steps.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps to reflexive thematic analysis

Familiarisation

Data coding

Initial theme generation

Theme develpment review

Theme refining, defining and naming

Wrtiting up
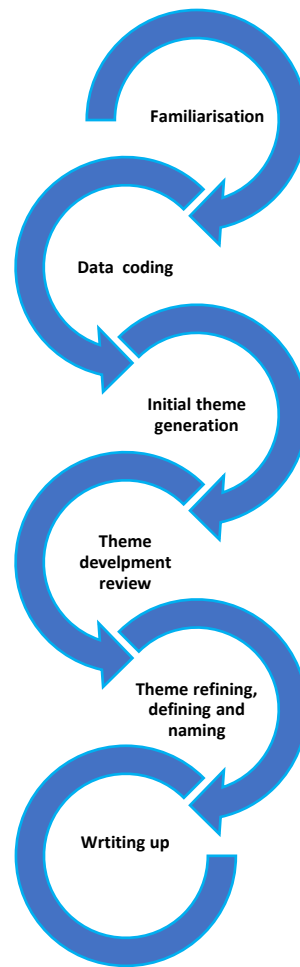
Figure 4.1 illustrating Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps to thematic analysis

Clarke and Braun (2016) highlight the flexibility of TA, noting it can be applied to both large and small datasets and is suitable for various qualitative data types, from interviews to emerging methods like qualitative surveys. This adaptability made TA particularly appropriate for analysing my online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke (2022) and Guest *et al*. (2014) further emphasise that TA is both "transparent and credible" due to its systematic and iterative nature (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.9; Guest *et al*., 2014, p.14). The process allowed me to move fluidly between stages of analysis across both data sets. However, as Guest *et al*. (2014) caution, this rigour can be time-consuming and may risk overlooking more nuanced insights. It certainly was time consuming.

I needed to be reflexive in my approach so using the six-step analysis approach (Figure 4.1 above) set out by Braun and Clarke (2022, p.6) allowed me to work through the various stages weaving in and out as I went through the phases of the two data collections.

(i)   Data Set Familiarisation

(ii)   Data Coding

(iii)   Initial Theme Generation

(iv)   Theme Development and Review

(v)   Theme Refining, Defining and Naming

(vi)   Writing up

Online questionnaires

I used Qualtrics for the online questionnaire and sent them to 72 participants. The questionnaires were completed by 37 participants. The date for submitting the completed questionnaire was extended as participants had requested extra time.

Four of the online questionnaire items required open-text responses. After the submission deadline, I exported all responses and saved them as a Microsoft Word document on OneDrive. I then separated the answers to the four open-text questions into individual documents, which I labelled Q12, Q13, Q15 and Q17 for ease of reference and analysis.

Semi-structured interview

Of the 25 online questionnaire respondents who provided their email addresses for follow-up, I selected four headteachers for semi-structured interviews. My aim was to gain deeper insight into leadership practice from a practitioner's perspective in relation to the research questions. I informed those not selected and expressed my appreciation for their time. The selected participants were contacted to arrange suitable interview times, with consideration given to the fact that it was the end of term, a particularly demanding period, especially in the ongoing context of Covid-19 (PHW, 2022).

4.2 Familiarisation - preparing and organising the data

Online Questionnaires – phase one

The familiarisation of the online questionnaires started by reading through each data set carefully. I created a document in Microsoft Word for each open text questions. I read

through all the answers with care more than once. As I read the answers, I made notes about aspects of the answers that I wanted to explore further (during the follow-up interviews) to answer my RQ. I highlighted terms and phrases and I looked at every word in the sentence (verbs, adjectives, idioms, phrases etc). Sometimes, the words and phrases had been mentioned on multiple occasions and sometimes I highlighted them because they were isolated ideas. I then printed the four documents (Q12, Q13, Q15 and Q17) which gave me hard copies so I could flick back and forth, read, re-read, highlight and scribble notes in the margin (Figure 4.2).

Familiarising with data set (questionnaires)
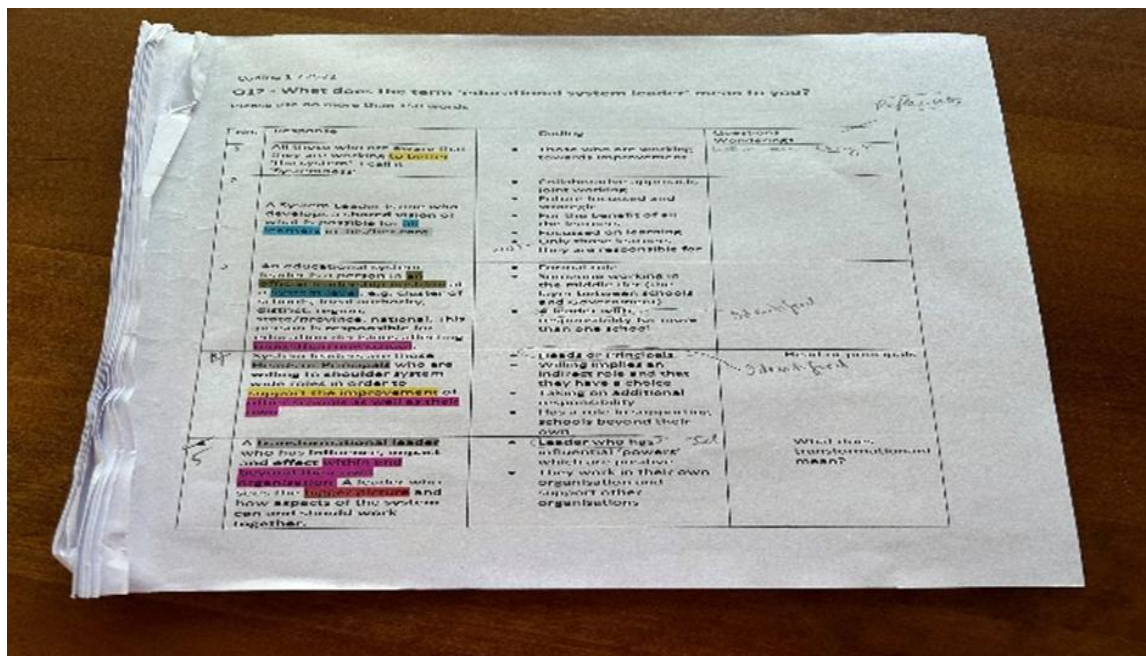
Figure 4.2 example of familiarising with data set

It also meant I could read them away from the screen. I then read these documents, read them again and made further annotations. I also printed hard copies of the data and cut up the answers to all the questions (Q12, Q13, Q15 and Q17) (Figure 4.3) into sentence strips and mixed them up to see if I was finding any themes in the data that I wanted to ask further questions about for example, some of the answers referred to *experience* and I wanted to know what was understood by this.

Figure 4.3 data set cut into sentences

Some of the answers were longer than one sentence because I had permitted responses to three of the questions to be up to 150 words each and to one question up to five sentences. By cutting the text into individual sentences it allowed me to consider how some of the words and phrases might be similar to or contradict each other and I started to group some of the similar thoughts and ideas together, this was a different process to the one I had carried out using Microsoft Word with the highlighters as I could group ideas together.

Again, I was aware I was drifting into coding which is the second step of Braun and Clarke's process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). They state the researcher can start to "identify shared patterned meaning across a dataset" early in the process and "clusters of codes that seem to share a core idea or concept" (*ibid p.35)* which can help to answer the RQ.

Although coding was not my intention at this point, I was still trying to understand what further questions I needed to ask during the semi-structured interview, to answer the RQ. As I read through the individual sentences, I started to place them in groups and decided on headings.

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Cutting the sentences up made me look at them in a different order and contributed to the rigour that was needed to avoid my own positionality (see section 3.2.4 reflexivity) influencing the decisions. I aimed to ensure that my initial thoughts and interview questions did not reflect personal "preconceptions and prejudices" Gibbs (2007, p.52). Gibbs (2007) adds carrying out "line-by-line coding" (p.52) forces you to pay close attention to what the respondent is actually saying and that it helps ensure you construct the code using the experience of the words captured by the respondent rather than your own. This was important as I was aware of my own position throughout the process.

Cutting the data into individual sentences allowed me to view responses from new angles and helped maintain analytical rigour by minimising the influence of my own positionality (see section 3.2.4 reflexivity). I was mindful to ensure that neither my initial interpretations nor the interview questions reflected personal bias or assumptions, as cautioned by Gibbs (2007). Line-by-line coding, as Gibbs notes, compels close attention to participants' actual words, ensuring that codes are grounded in their experiences rather than shaped by the researcher's perspective. This was particularly important given my active role in the research process.

I stopped with phase one of familiarisation of the online questionnaires when I had decided on the areas and topics that I needed to explore further through the semi-structured interviews. I created questions as part of the preparation for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix 2).

Familiarisation with semi-structured interviews – phase one

Each of the four interviews was recorded via Microsoft Teams, which also provided automated transcription through WebVTT. This significantly reduced transcription time. I exported the transcripts to Microsoft Word for editing, where I removed time codes and anonymised identifying details such as names of organisations and local authorities, in line with ethical guidance (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Vaughan, 2017). Each transcript was labelled SL1 to SL4 to maintain anonymity. I used Word's annotation tools to highlight key sections and cross-checked the transcripts against the original audio using the read aloud function to ensure accuracy, particularly for Welsh language terms and grammatical errors of which a number needed correcting (Table 4.1 below).

Table 4.1 Corrected terms in transcript

The original transcript	Corrected transcript
Their (SL1)	They're
It may not. Even (SL1)	it may not even
We need the poor (SL1)	Winnie the Pooh
Parrot Shoot (SL1)	Parachute
TN (SL1) Asked in (SL2) Arrest (SL3)	ESTYN (the Welsh Inspectorate body)
TATAs (SL2)	TAs
Kelly din in (SL2)	Ceredigion
Powers (SL2)	Powys

Transcription offers both benefits and drawbacks in qualitative analysis. While it provides a detailed, verbatim record (Cohen *et al*., 2018), it can also strip away contextual nuance and is time-consuming. Although I used WebVTT to generate initial transcripts, adapting each to a readable format still took around five hours. I reviewed transcripts multiple times, checking for clarity, correcting errors, especially in Welsh terms and ensuring punctuation reflected intonation (see Table 4.1). This process enhanced data reliability (Gibbs, 2007) and deepened my familiarity with the material. To protect anonymity, I removed identifying details (Cohen *et al*., 2018; Vaughan, 2017) and labelled transcripts SL1–SL4. I chose not to include non-verbal cues or filler words, as they added little analytical value. Participants received interview questions in advance to support thoughtful responses, though this may have led to more prepared than spontaneous answers.

This intensive preparation marked the start of Braun and Clarke's (2022) familiarisation phase for the interviews. As Cohen *et al.* (2018) note, qualitative analysis is complex and Silverman (2020) advises beginning early. I revisited both data sets (Online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) repeatedly, especially after interviews, to ensure a thorough understanding. Though the process was emotionally taxing, Braun and Clarke (2022) acknowledge such highs and lows are part of qualitative work. It took six months before I felt ready to begin coding.

After reading more about the coding process I realised I had been conducting coding at the same time as familiarising through an approach called "zigzagging" (Rivas, 2012, p.369). Rivas refers to an iterative approach to collecting and analysing data where you use the first set of data gathered (online questionnaire) to code and to inform a further data gathering attempt (semi-structured interviews). Each time moving back and forth from one data set to the other refining the coding until I had met saturation. Bryman (2012) refers to saturation as the "point when emerging concepts have been fully explored" (p.717). I had indeed come to a point where I was ready to move to coding.

My familiarisation process led me to creating Microsoft Word documents for eight data sets:

- Four open text answers from the questionnaire which I labelled Q12, Q13, Q15 and Q17
- Four sets of interview answers which I labelled SL1, SL2, SL3 and SL4

4.3 Coding

Phase one

During my first iteration of analysis of the semi-structured interview data, I looked at the raw data, line by line and drew out words or phrases that stood out in relation to the RQ. I decided not to use a computer-based coding process as I wanted to have the "creativity, flexibility and ease of access that is important at the early stages of analysis" (Gibbs, 2007, p.40) and which supported my development of thinking about the text and its interpretations. Using Microsoft Word at this stage allowed me to highlight, cut, copy and paste easily. "Coding is the ascription of a category label to a piece of data, decided in advance or in response to the data that have been collected" (Cohen *et al,* 2018, p.668). I produced a template for a codebook which is described by DeCuir-Gunby *et al.* (2011) as a "set of codes, definitions and examples used as a guide to help analyse interview data" (p.138).

 My analysis of the second data set followed a more deductive approach, as I had designed the interview questions to align directly with the research aims. Braun and Clarke (2022) note that complete inductiveness is rarely possible in thematic analysis due to the researcher's social positioning, which I acknowledged throughout (see section 3.2.4 reflexivity). I

documented my reflections and decision-making in a reflexive journal and created a codebook template (see Figure 4.4), similar to that used for the questionnaire data.

Although I did not begin with predefined codes, I expected to generate them inductively from the raw data. I remained mindful of how my positionality might shape interpretation, noting this in both the codebook and my journal. As I worked through the transcripts, I continuously questioned my coding choices. When a participant's response stood out as a potential quotation for the findings, I copied it into the third column of the codebook and highlighted it in red for easy reference (see Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4 Analysis of interview responses

I wanted to consider using these examples in the findings and report writing which would add to the transparency, validity and reliability of the research and supports the research actually took place (Denscombe, 2010).

Brewer (2000) notes that using quotations can enhance reliability, but overly long excerpts risk shifting the burden of analysis to the reader, while overly short ones may lose context. I was mindful of this balance, selecting quotes that were both relevant and meaningful to the research questions. Bryman (2012) reinforces this caution, warning against extracting text "out of context" (p.578), particularly from interview transcripts. My aim was to include quotations that directly supported the analysis and contributed to answering the research questions.

I read through each sentence and made the text **bold** of any word or phrase in the body of the sentence that stood out and sometimes I used the Microsoft Word tool to highlight words

or phrases. Sometimes the word was a noun for example *'accountability'* or a verb *'influence'* (SL2). I went through all the data sets doing this.

I then looked at the words in bold and decided on a code to assign to them for example

Accountability *– Answerable to others*

Influence *– Impact*

I systematically coded each document by assigning labels to bolded words or phrases and adding explanations in the final column. I also included illustrative examples in red text, which deepened my engagement with the data. Braun and Clarke (2022,) describe this process as developing "deep familiarity with the content" (p.43) and encouraging critical reflection. The task was intensive, as I frequently paused to question my coding decisions. Throughout, I remained mindful of my reflexivity (see section 3.2.4 reflexivity), recognising that coding is inherently interpretive and shaped by the researcher's perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2022). They further note that "meaning-making is never purely inductive, as we inevitably bring theoretical and personal perspectives to the analysis" (ibid, p.56).

Given that the interview data (SL1–SL4) was generated in response to structured questions, my approach leaned more deductively. However, as Rivas (2012) suggests, combining inductive and deductive coding can be beneficial. Through discussions with my supervisors, I came to understand that what I had produced was not a formal codebook, but rather a key part of the broader analytic process. As Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise, there is no single "correct" (p.56) way to code, what matters is the openness and rigour of the approach. I started another iteration of analysis.

Phase two - Coding

I produced another table with three headings which included the raw data, codes and explanation (Figure 4.5). I read about codes again and reminded myself that a code according to Braun and Clark (2022, p.52) is the "smallest unit of analysis". My codes were just one word or short phrases that "captured specified and particular meanings within the data set" (ibid) that were of particular relevance to my RQ.

Coding table

Figure 4.5 coding table

I started this process with Q12 and worked my way through numerically to Q17 and did the same with SL1 through to SL4. Sometimes the codes were taken from the text themselves other times more descriptive for example;

Informal – informal (literal)

Gather data – measurable (descriptive)

Using a deliberate and systematic approach to the raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2022), I identified words and phrases relevant to my research questions and recorded them as codes in the middle column of my table. Supporting quotations were added in red in the final column, along with notes on my reflexivity (see section 3.2.4 reflexivity). For instance, when a participant mentioned Estyn, I noted my prior experience as a peer inspector to acknowledge potential bias. Although this iteration largely reproduced earlier codes, it helped refine my thinking. I questioned whether I had reached coding saturation, where no new insights emerge (Rivas, 2012) but I felt at this point, more could be drawn from the data. As Gibbs (2007) suggests, writing about the data is both a record-keeping and creative process and I was indeed engaging with it "carefully and comprehensively" (p.145).

Phase three - coding

For the next iteration I looked through the eight data sets again but this time I started in reverse order and looked at SL4 first. I produced spider diagrams answering the question, What? Who? Why? Where? (Figure 4.6)

Figure 4.6 Spider diagram which shows connections: What is the role?

As I went through the data and added additional titles as some of the data did not fit into the questions above, for example context, reflexive and roles (Figure 4.7 below). According to Braun and Clarke (2022), thematic analysis is a method for "developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative data set" (p.4) with theme development as its core analytic aim. Reaching this stage required a thorough and systematic coding process.

Spider diagram connecting all the words to do with roles together

Figure 4.7 spider diagram connecting all the words to do with roles together

Using a spider diagram (figure 4.7), I began the third phase of the analysis by grouping data according to each question and according to each individual data set. Once I had created the separate diagrams, I started to look for similarities and differences and started to combine the data into clusters for example roles included informal roles, formal roles, directed roles and indirect roles. Once I had collated all the information from the diagrams into one data set, I thought I was ready to produce a codebook.

Gibbs (2007) cautions against relying solely on participants' own terms when coding, referring to these as "descriptive codes" (p.42). I recognised that I had initially done this. However, Rivas (2012) argues that while descriptive or literal codes are acceptable, themes should ultimately be more abstract and interpretive. Gibbs (2007) also notes that simply listing codes does not constitute analysis, though he later acknowledges that constructing a codebook is itself an analytic process that contributes to building a "conceptual framework" (p.44). DeCuir-Gunby *et al.* (2011) support this view, emphasising that coding is a critical part of

interview data analysis. Similarly, Cohen *et al*. (2018) highlight that a single excerpt can be assigned multiple codes depending on its richness and complexity, something reflected in my use of spider diagrams to explore overlapping meanings.

When I was looking at the spider diagrams, I repeatedly asked myself whether it was answering the RQ and I looked to see where one answer might meet more than one code, for example *communications* might sit in *Roles and Responsibilities* but could also be included in *Relationships* and *Collaboration.* I moved back and forth from the explanation to the code and back to the raw data to see if it all made sense, "the process of data analysis is recursive, non-linear, messy and reflexive" (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p.644). It did feel very messy! This took a lot of time and I did become anxious. Braun and Clarke (2022) state, the analysis process can be "daunting, overwhelming, can feel stuck through worry or indecision" (p.92) that was certainly how I was feeling at this point. They also state, it is "normal" to feel this way (p.93). I constantly reflected as I went through each iteration of the process and I realised that the process was not linear (Cohen *et al.,* 2018). I was aware of my own positionality (see section 3.2.4 reflexivity) and how my own "values, knowledge, assumptions and experiences might inform or influence the data" (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p.645). This made me question the process. I spent a lot of time re-looking at the codes and questioning whether I had captured the right things and selected the right terms. I was critically reflecting on my role as a researcher and the ways that I was carrying out the process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). I decided to leave the analysis for a while and go back and read about the theories of coding.

Phase four - coding

In the next iteration, I created a Microsoft Word document that served as a working codebook (finally) . Unlike earlier iterations, I excluded raw data and instead used three columns: one for codes derived from the spider diagrams, one for descriptions and one for examples. I copied relevant descriptions from across the eight data sets into the appropriate sections and included supporting examples, noting their original locations. This marked a clearer step toward developing a structured codebook. A summary of this version is shown in Figure 4.8.

Codebook with description and examples

Figure 4.8 Codebook including descriptions and examples

I knew there would be "unexpected twists and turns" Braun and Clark (2022, p.78) as part of the process but I hadn't realised how much time everything would take. I was aware that "excellent coding doesn't automatically lead to an easy process of theme development" (ibid) but I wanted it to be as sound as possible.

My approach to the coding analysis was iterative and robust and I believe that I have been rigorous and logical throughout the process (Gray, 2018) and that I have given the data meaning. Biggam (2021) states "valid research is research that has been done using methods appropriate to your needs" (p.171) and adds that "validity also adds weight to the claim of reliability" (ibid).

4.4 Initial theme generation

As I found myself moving between codes and looking for shared meaning, I realised I was in the 3rd phase of Braun and Clarke's (2022) TA which is "Initial theme generation" (p.7). This stage meant I was looking at all the codes.

I started "clustering together the potentially connected codes (into candidate themes) and exploring those initial meaning patterns" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.79) for example all the codes that were related to '*roles and responsibilities'* of the **system leader** were clustered together. I used pen and paper to collect all the codes and used the thematic map to collate them "thematic maps are working documents to help *you* figure out patterns of meaning and possible connections, inter-connections and disconnects" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.86). I was aware of Braun and Clarke's (2022) advice to keep five things in mind in the early stages of theme development (p.88)

1. Your initial (and indeed final) themes do not have to capture *everything* in the dataset
2. Each theme should have a central organising concept
3. The themes at this stage are provisional, tentative; they are candidate themes
4. There is no right or wrong answer to how many themes you should have
5. Avoid a 'question and answer' orientation in the way you engage with codes and data

In carrying out my thematic analysis I generated "themes/interpret patterned meanings *and* tell the reader how it addresses my research question" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.90). I was reflexive during this part of the analysis to make sure that I interpreted the data and captured what was said by the respondents. I asked myself each time a theme was created, is this answering my RQ? Once again, this part of the analysis took much longer than I had anticipated and I recognised that if I rushed it I would miss some of the deeper analysis required. Braun and Clarke (2022) state "you should aim to give yourself twice as much time for theme development as you expect you might need" (p.76). I used different approaches to record the themes as seen in Figure 4.9.

Thematic map showing the different themes
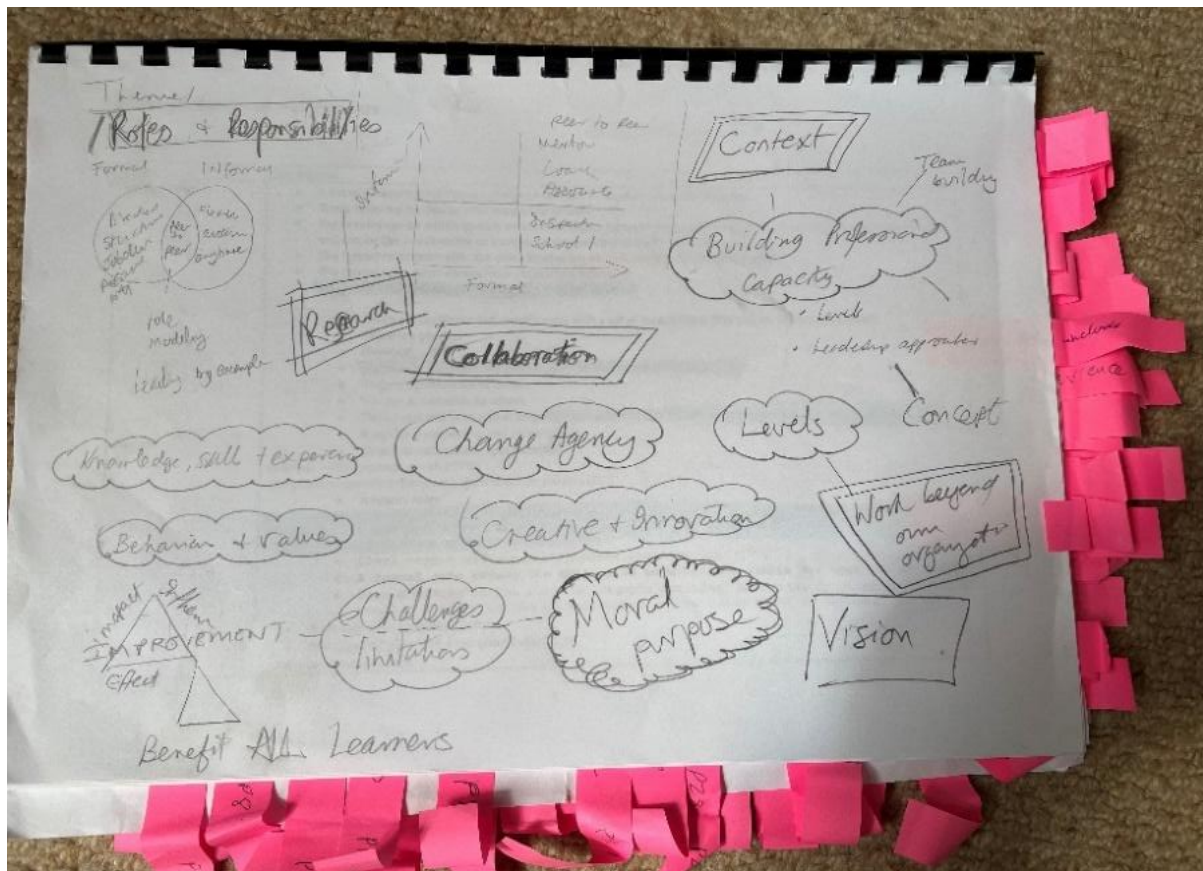
Figure 4.9 Thematic map showing the different themes

Once I was satisfied with my list of candidate themes, I reflected on Rogoff's (1990, 1995, 2003) analytic framework (see Chapter 3: Methodology) and considered my data and my candidate themes in light of Rogoff's three planes; Personal, Interpersonal and Community. For phase one of this process I initially made lists of how the candidate themes sat in the different planes see (Table 4.2 below)

Table 4.2 Example of how the candidate themes sat in the different planes

Candidate themes	Personal	Interpersonal	Community
Credible	X		
Experienced	X		
Peer to peer		X	
Professional Trust		X	
Values	X	X	
Equity			X

Change Agency		X	X
Moral purpose	X	X	X

I placed the words and phrases under the headings which I felt they were most associated with. For example, being *credible*, was a personal attribute so I placed it in the **personal** column. I noticed early on that some of the themes sat in more than one plane. For example, being principled and having *values* was a personal attribute so I placed it in the **personal** column, but I also believed that your *values* influence how you interact and build relationships with others, so I placed *values* in the second column **interpersonal** too.

As I progressed through the list and I added more candidate themes to more than one of the planes, it made me consider what this could look like as a diagram. I moved to phase two of this analysis and decided to place the three planes into a Venn diagram (Figure 4.10) as this would allow me to see how the data overlapped using the three planes.

Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes of analysis shown in a Venn diagram
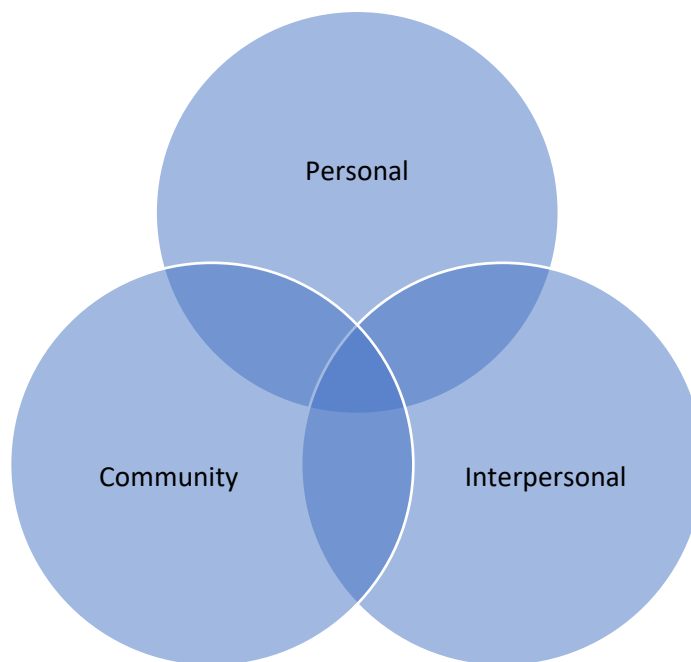
Figure 4.10 Rogoff's three planes shown as a Venn diagram

During the second phase, I then carried out an exercise using Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes (now a Venn diagram) to consider the themes. When I re-visited the "Candidate themes" Braun and Clarke (2022, p.87) it was clear by using this framework I could see where

the candidate themes were starting to answer my RQ. I continued to do this for all of the themes as shown in Figure 4.11 below.

Figure 4.11 showing Rogoff's three planes and the candidate themes

However, in doing this I realised my candidate themes were not "abstract or interpretive" (Rivas, 2012, p.371) and there were far too many themes, which lead me to review and refine my process. Rivas also states you should "avoid trying to force data into the categories!" (ibid) and I was aware I was at risk of doing that with Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes and indeed the Venn diagram that I had produced. I needed to reduce the themes but also consider what concepts were immersed in the data that were "unusual, unexpected and distinct" (Rivas, 2012, p.375). I considered those themes that did not fit or sit naturally in the planes for example research evidence and limitations or risks and I placed those outside of the Venn diagram as seen in Figure 4.12.

Diagram showing themes which sit outside of the Venn diagram
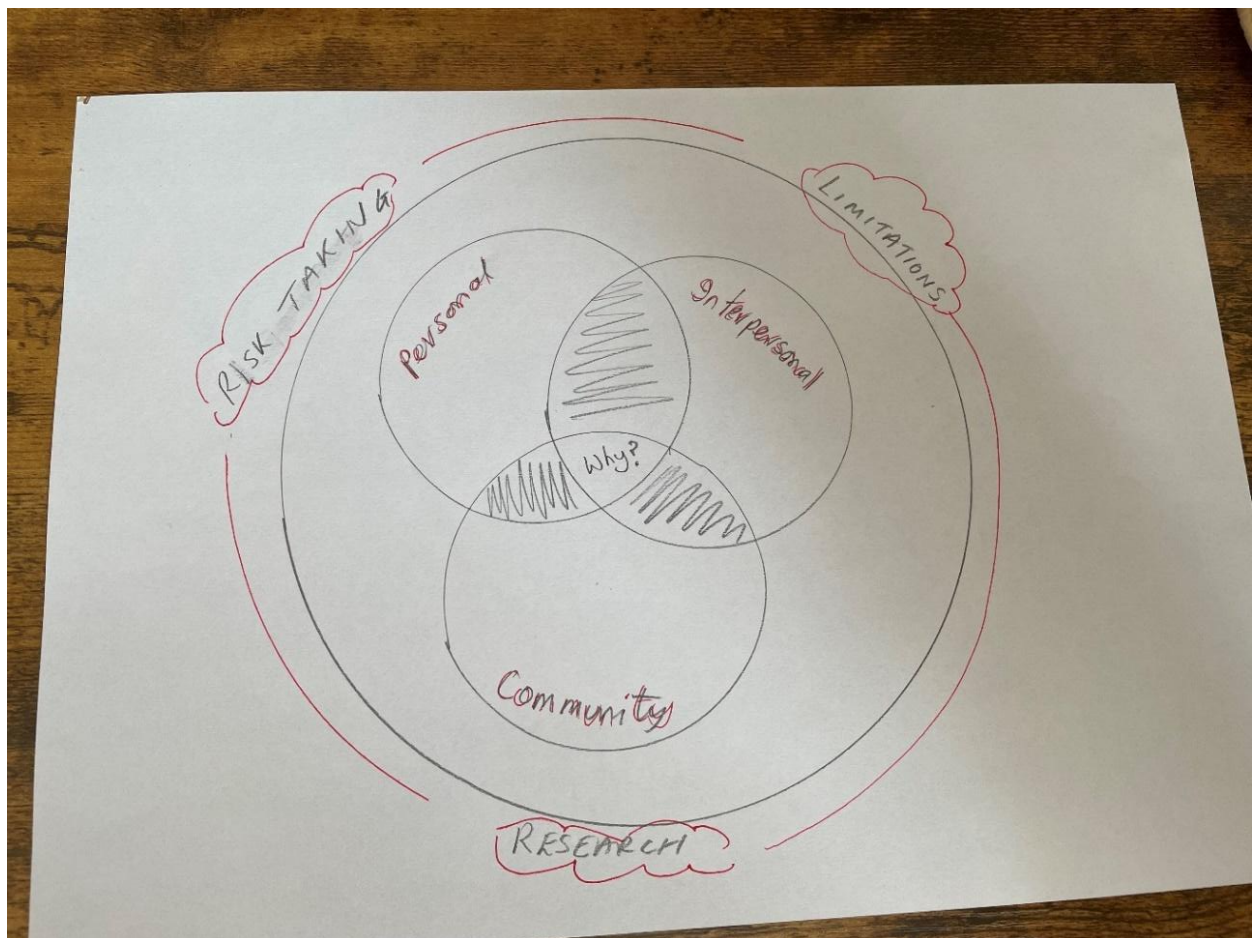
Figure 4.12 showing themes which sit outside of the Venn diagram

I also realised that a Venn diagram did not present the best way to analyse the qualitative data as Rivas (2012) had stated, I was trying to 'force' data into certain themes. Some of the themes did not sit naturally within the planes (Figure 4.12).

4.5 Theme development review: Asking myself are these the right themes?

I reviewed and reviewed again using Rogoff's planes (1995, 2003) to help understand the theme development. Braun and Clarke (2022) state "you need to decide if you feel your analysis fulfils the criteria" (p.103). I went backwards and forwards and used Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes in different ways to challenge my thinking and to make sure that I considered carefully the ways in which I was interpreting the candidate themes.

Limitations of the analytical framework

I realised that using a Venn diagram was restrictive beyond the initial identification of the first three themes and although the diagram allowed me to see that the themes overlapped, I was unable to demonstrate the complexity of the relationships and nuances between the themes using the intersections and overlap sections. I had previously used spider diagrams and thematic maps to help with the coding and candidate theme process and felt that considering other ways of identifying the themes should be considered as seen in Figure 4.13.

Theme development 1

Figure 4.13 illustrating the different ways of analysing the candidate themes

The theme development process challenged me. I realised Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes only assisted me to define the first three themes and that I needed to think about other ways of considering the themes (Figure 4.14).

Theme development 2
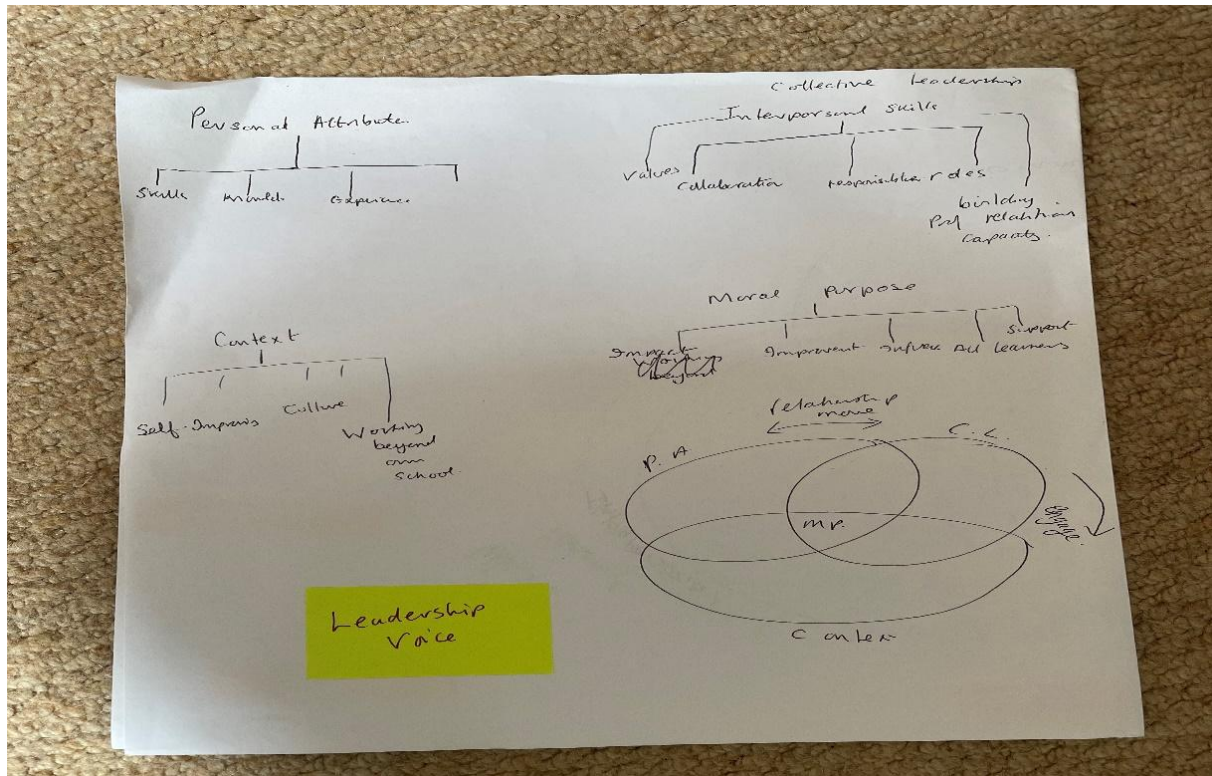
Figure 4.14 showing an example of theme development

This stage of analysis was time-consuming, often requiring me to pause and reflect on the meaning of words, whether at my desk or while out walking the dog, I found myself questioning whether I had interpreted them accurately. Braun and Clarke (2022, p.104) describe this kind of "going backwards" as a vital part of the thematic analysis process, reflecting a commitment to quality rather than failure. I revisited the codebook (Figure 4.8) and returned to the raw data to verify that each example aligned with its assigned code. This helped ensure that my interpretation of the candidate themes was thorough.

While Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes provided a useful analytical framework for organising the themes, I was careful not to force data into predefined categories, as Rivas (2012) cautions. I recognised that some themes extended beyond Rogoff's model but were still essential to answering the research questions (see Figure 4.13). By moving back and forth through the data, I felt I was, as Braun and Clarke (2022, p.104) suggest, "producing a quality analysis".

4.6 Refining, defining and naming themes

As I entered phase five of Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis, I was reminded that "themes are your ultimate analytic purpose" (p.4), making the naming process a critical step. I aimed to select names that were not only "informative, concise and catchy" (ibid, p.111) but also "abstract or interpretive" as Rivas (2012, p.371) advises. I explored various options, often returning to early ideas and experienced the pressure that Braun and Clarke (2022) describe as the need to "get it right" or find the "perfect" (p.122) label. I avoided single-word themes, which often fail to convey the underlying pattern of meaning and instead chose labels that reflected the analytical focus of the research.

This process was time-intensive. Saldaña (2021) notes that identifying themes is as demanding as coding and requires equal reflection on participants' meanings. I reviewed each theme against the codebook (Figure 4.8) and raw data, writing short descriptions and sharing them with peers to ensure clarity. The theme names evolved multiple times, but I was committed to ensuring they aligned with the research questions and the candidate themes they emerged from.

I decided on seven themes which were integral to the RQ. "Themes that help answer the RQ of interest is one of the core criteria for their place in the analysis" (Saldaña, 2021, p.258).

The seven themes are:

1. Personal attributes
2. Collective leadership
3. Growing leaders
4. Educational leadership
5. The right thing
6. Challenges
7. How do we know?

4.7 Writing up

Braun and Clarke's (2022) final step of the TA is the writing up (Figure 4.15). They state the "analysis is in the writing around your data" (p.118) however, they maintain there is no "interpretation" (p.132) in the findings section which is why I wanted keep the sections separate. I wrote the findings chapter separate to my discussion chapter so that I could describe how the themes "developed through situated analytic practice" (Braun and Clarke,2022, p.128). I continued to be reflexive in the discussion chapter by ensuring that I was interpreting the data rather than giving my own views and I ensured this by using direct quotes that were relevant and particularly insightful to support and strengthen my RQ and I situated the work in the theory within the research. Braun and Clarke (2022) state "data do not speak for themselves, which is why interpretation matters" (p.131). This is why I have written the discussion chapter separately to the findings chapter.

Diagram demonstrating how I moved through the six steps of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022)

Familiarisation	Data Coding	Initial theme generation	Theme development review	Theme refining	writing up
• read and re-read online questionnaires • highlight words • cut up sentences • identify questions for semi-structured interviews • read transcripts from interviews • edit and amend transcripts • listen to audio and re-read transcripts • prepare raw text (interviews) for coding • re-visit questionnaire data and prepare raw text for coding	• highlight words and phrases • read one sentence at a time • created tables to assign tags and labels • used spider diagrams, thematic maps • stayed reflexive throughout • code using one or two words • Highlight personal examples in red • highlight negative comments in green • Produced a codebook	• clustering codes together to create candidate themes • used thematic maps • Rogoff's three planes of analysis • used a Venn diagram to understand how the planes are connected	• recognised the limitations of Rogoff's planes as an analytical framework • used various other theme development processes • re-read the codebook to check candidate themes • re-visted the raw data to make sure that I had captured the right codes • check if I was answering the RQs	• iterative process of naming and re-naming the themes • decided on seven themes • checking descriptions with peers • re-visit was I answering the RQ	• write findings chapter and describe the themes • write discussion chapter and combine the themes with the lit review • write conclusion chapter which shares how the themes have influenced the design of a model which can be used in practice

Figure 4.15 illustrating how I moved through Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps to thematic analysis

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Presenting the analysis

This chapter presents my research findings on what is understood by the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership**. I used two qualitative data collection methods, an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews (set out in Chapter 3: Methodology), to explore these concepts. The data analysis process (see Chapter 4: Method of Data Analysis) resulted in seven key themes, which highlight particularly important information that address my research questions.

The seven themes are:

1. Personal attributes
2. Collective leadership
3. Growing leaders
4. Educational landscape
5. The right thing
6. Challenges
7. How do we know?

I have devised a key to locate the quotes in the evidence (Table 5.1)

Table 5.1 Key to identify where the quotes are located

Description	Key
Semi-structured Interview respondent number Page	SL1, SL2, SL3, SL4 p. e.g. SL1 p.4
Questionnaire Number Respondent Number	Q R e.g. Q13R17

In the following section, I set out the initial findings from both the online questionnaire and the interviews and describe the characteristics of the respondents. I describe the operational matters and the response rate.

5.2 Summary of responses to the online questionnaires

Response rate

The questionnaires were conducted online during the Global pandemic Covid-19 (PHW, 2022) (February-April 2022). Schools were still experiencing partial closures during this time.

Online questionnaires were sent to **72** participants in total. I used the WG three tier model (Figure 2.1) to identify participants. The Table 5.2 below sets out how many participants received the questionnaire and under which tier.

Table 5.2 Welsh Government three tier model

Tier one	Tier two	Tier three
Policy influencers and academics (national and international)	Including, Estyn, local authorities, higher education, regional consortia	Headteachers and senior leaders in further education and the youth work sector
24 participants	23 participants	25 participants

- A total of 52 participants gave consent to answer the questionnaire
- However, 15 started but did not complete the questionnaire (of those who did not complete, five had chosen the Welsh language option)
- A total of 37 participants completed the questionnaire (more than half of those who received it)
- All 37 participants completed the questionnaire in English (although Welsh was an option, nobody chose to complete using the Welsh language option)
- At least 14 respondents skipped a minimum of one question
- Of those who completed the questionnaire, 25 participants provided emails for follow-up interviews

- Only three participants said 'no' to supplying emails and nine did not agree or disagree and did not supply their email address

Summary of section A (context)

The purpose of Section A was to understand the context of those respondents who replied to the online questionnaire.

The online questionnaire was completed by **51%** of those individuals receiving the link (37 participants in total). All responses were in the English language. Of those who completed the questionnaire, over half of the participants, **68%** (25 participants in total) provided emails giving consent for follow-up interviews.

Responses given to section A of the online questionnaire

The first open question (Q5) asked *what role the participant had in education*?

Thirty six participants gave answers which ranged from professor, government official, director of education and headteacher. A few gave multiple roles for example professor, advisor and policy maker. Most of those who answered the questionnaire gave headteacher as their job title. The second largest group to answer were professors followed by advisors. Those who noted advisor, also said what kind of advisor they were for example (i) advisor to system and school leaders, government advisor, policy advisor and professional advisor.

The second open question (Q6) asked whether the participants had held any other senior leadership roles in education. From the 34 who answered this question, 5 respondents said no, they had not held other senior educational leadership roles. Two respondents said yes but gave no example of the role they had held. From those who did answer, headteacher was the most common answer followed by advisor and then deputy headteacher. For those who offered advisor there were multiple descriptions for example policy advisor, challenge advisor, advisory role and chief Advisor. In answer to Q6, the respondents were more likely to give adjectives to describe their senior leadership role for example, chief, head of, strategic, assistant, executive, deputy, support, development, second level, principal (lecturer) and senior to describe their role.

Thirty six respondents answered the question which asked how long they had been a leader in education. From those who answered; three of the respondents had less than 10 years' experience as a leader and 17 had been a leader between 10-20 years, 16 stated that they had been a leader for more than 20 years and 8 of those for more than 30 years. Table 5.3 presents the data depicting the length of service as educational leaders for the surveyed respondents.

Table 5.3 Length of service as a leader in education

Length of service as a leader in education	Number of respondents
Less than 5 years	2
5-10 years	1
10-20 years	17
20-30 years	8
More than 30 years	8
Total	36

In response to the question regarding their workplace, all **37** respondents provided answers. Figure 5.1 illustrates the distribution of their geographical workplace locations. A significant majority of 25 mentioned Wales as their place of work. Within this group, 14 indicated they worked in South Wales, while 5 reported working in West Wales, 3 in North Wales and 1 in East Wales.

The distribution of geographical workplace locations
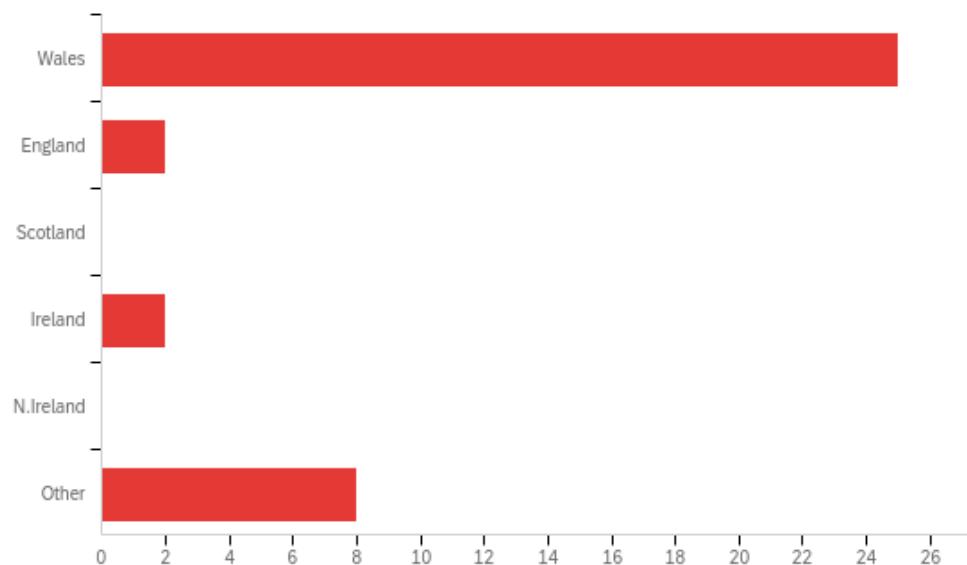
Figure 5.1 The distribution of respondents' workplace geographical locations

Eight of the respondents did not work in the UK and gave their place of work as Canada, Australia, Chile, New Zealand, globally, internationally or other. Three of the respondents who ticked other also included Wales and England in their list of places where they worked.

Conclusion

I was greatly satisfied with the respondent base as the sampling process yielded a substantial number of responses. The questionnaire was speculative by nature as I was asking the respondents to use their existing knowledge and expertise to answer the questions. I was particularly satisfied that the responses were from highly experienced leaders occupying diverse roles within the field of education. This breadth of participation enriches the depth of insights gathered in my research, providing a comprehensive perspective on the topic. Additionally, the significant representation of experienced leaders underpins the relevance and applicability of my findings, as they are rooted in the expertise of those with substantial

experience in educational leadership. These factors collectively enhance the credibility and robustness of my research outcomes, offering valuable insights to both academics and practitioners in the field of educational leadership.

5.3 Summary of responses to the semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews explored questionnaire responses in greater depth to address the RQ, this is explained fully in Chapter 3: Methodology. Asking follow-up questions allowed me to elicit more detail and information and to encourage respondents to expand on their answers providing richer and contextualised answers.

All interviewees gave descriptive responses to explain their answers to the questions and included contextualised answers. All four of the respondents used idioms or phrases (see full list Appendix 6) in response to the interview questions. They used these to describe and convey their thoughts on various aspects of **educational system leadership** when offering examples and anecdotes for example, "all singing all dancing" (SL1) "rather than same old, same old" (SL2) "font of all knowledge" (SL3), "flip things on its head" (SL4). My analysis involved making inferences by considering these expressions within the broader context of the conversations that transpired during the interviews. I found them interesting as the questionnaires did not yield the same number of idioms during the written responses. I have used one phrase "The right thing" (SL1 p.12) as the title to one of the themes.

Operational matters

A total of 68% (25 participants) provided e-mails voluntarily to participate in the semi-structured interviews. As explained in Chapter 3: Methodology 3.4.3, I purposively sampled four headteachers for the interviews. I used their emails to identify who I would include in the semi-structured interviews. Each one of the four came from Wales and were representative of West Wales (1) South Wales (2) and East Wales (1). All four came from different local authorities. Three of the respondents were Associates of NAEL and the fourth headteacher was known to me in a professional capacity.

The interviews were no longer than an hour each and were held online using Microsoft Teams, the duration of the interviews were 56 minutes, 46 minutes, 40 minutes and 29 minutes. The shortest interview was due to the interviewee joining later than arranged due to unforeseen

circumstances at the school and I had agreed they would not be online after 5pm. All the interviews were recorded and a sample copy of the transcribed interviews are available (Appendix 7). The interview process is detailed in Chapter 3: Methodology; 3.4.3.

I remained reflexive throughout the interviews and was aware when the respondents made reference to my place of work or my role at NAEL or their role as Associates and I reflected on this throughout. I made sure I stayed in active listening mode and did not influence the response further by agreeing or disagreeing with the comments. Below are two examples from the respondents who included references to NAEL in a positive way. (No negative comments were shared during the data collection process).

> You know, I certainly feel far more able to do that **system leadership** role from being with the **Academy**…(SL2)

> the Academy has really opened my eyes (SL4)

All four respondents spoke freely and I did not limit their responses in anyway. All identifiable text was replaced with **XXX**. A sample of the transcribed scripts are available to read (Appendix 7).

Below is the list of terms and acronyms (Table 5.4) used by the respondents in their interviews. Any acronym or term used was clarified for understanding when the transcription was sent to the respondent for member-checking (Bryman, 2012).

Table 5.4 List of terms and acronyms used in the interviews

Term in full	Acronym/Term
Improvement Partner	IP
School Improvement Partner	SIP
Et cetera	Etc
Initial Teacher Education	ITE
Religious Sex Education	RSE
National Professional Enquiry Project	NPEP
Education and training and inspectorate for Wales	Estyn
National Improvement Evaluation Resource	NIER

British Council funded project	Erasmus Project
Professional Headship Induction Programme	PHIP
Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers	LPSH
Digital platform Wales	HWB
School improvement Adviser	SIA
Area of Learning Experience	AOLE
Teaching Assistants	TAs
Higher Learning Teaching Assistant	HLTA
National Professional Qualification for Headship	NPQH
Human Resources	HR
Whole of Wales	Pan Wales
British Airways	BA
Specialist Teaching Facility	STF

During the interviews, the respondents generally talked freely and without prompts, but when I needed to delve a little deeper or steer the respondent back to the question, I would ask a further question.

I would also repeat an answer to make sure that I had heard it correctly. Here are some examples of how I did that:

> Before we go on to talk about experience, I just want to ask a question, it's linking back into that informal and formal role, which is the first question I asked and what you've just said about experience and credibility in the role. Do you think in your opinion? (My response to SL2)

Prompt but **clarifying** what the respondent said:

> I suppose what you're saying is, as long as you've got the skills and the knowledge and the credibility you can do the informal part not having had to have had a formal role, but what I think you've said is that once you're in that informal role, it can lead to a formal role, so you don't have to do one to do

the other, but as long as you've got that confidence and credibility and experience, I think you're saying you can apply the skills in a formal role? (My response to SL2) (My response to SL2)

5.4 Analysis and theme development

A detailed description of the data analysis process is set out in Chapter 4: Method of Data Analysis. The data set consisted of the responses to the questionnaire (sample in Appendix 8) as well as the transcripts (sample in Appendix 7) from the interviews.

As part of the coding process I used Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes of sociocultural analysis to support my understanding of the data. Framing the analysis through Rogoff's approach supported me to understand the complexity of the data and how the codes could sit in different planes. The Table 5.5 below is an example of how I applied the codes to each plane.

Table 5.5 Examples of how the codes sit in different planes

Codes	Personal Plane	Interpersonal Plane	Community Plane
Values	X	X	
Working beyond own organisation			X
Collaboration		X	
Context			X
Moral purpose	X	X	X
Change agency		X	

Following the coding exercise, I used Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis process to support the identification of seven themes from the data. I generated the themes below to represent the concepts, ideas and topics in the data. I avoided using terms or phrases that were already used or repeated in the data other than "*The right thing*" which is a direct quote from the respondent SL1 p.12. I wanted to have an overarching theme which captured the meaning of multiple data.

5.4.1 Theme overview

Below is a summary description of the seven themes I have generated through the analysis of the data sets.

(i) **Personal attributes:**

refers to the qualities, traits and characteristics that individuals possess. They play a significant role in shaping an individual's behaviour and can encompass a variety of qualities, including communication skills, leadership qualities, values, creativity, teamwork and collaboration. The theme supports the first RQ: what is a **system leader**?

(ii) **Collective leadership:**

refers to the approach that emphasises the collaborative efforts of leaders working together. It considers the collective efforts and shared responsibilities working in partnership or networks towards a common goal or mutual purpose. The theme supports the second RQ: what is **system leadership**?

(iii) **Growing Leaders:**

refers to the development, empowerment and mentoring of individuals to become effective and influential leaders in various aspects of education with particular emphasis on professional capabilities. It acknowledges that leadership excellence is a product of honed skills, experiential learning and a commitment to personal and career development growth. This theme contributes to answering both RQ.

(iv) **Educational landscape:**

refers to the context, environment and conditions of the education system. This can include various elements from enacting change and addressing inequalities to considering local and bespoke factors. Context matters and considering the nuances of the Welsh system is important. This theme is linked to the purpose of delivering **system leadership** in the education system in Wales.

(v) **The right thing:**

The title for this theme is a direct quote from one of the respondents (SL1) who described working as a **system leader** to support others as "the right thing to do" (SL p.12). The theme conveys a fundamental concept related to ethics, morality and values. It refers to the act of making choices and taking actions that are

considered morally, ethically and educationally responsible. It is about making the right choices. This theme is linked to the purpose of both being a **system leader** and delivering **system leadership** in the education system in Wales.

(vi) Challenges:

refers to the difficulties or problems that leaders may encounter when trying to implement a particular practice or approach for example **system leadership**. They can include logistical difficulties like geographical location, resistance from individuals and lack of trust from external bodies. This theme supports the second RQ what is **system leadership** and the implications of its success in Wales.

(vii) How do we know?:

the theme refers to the knowledge required to keep up to date and current with the practice of being a system leader. It is about assessing the impact of the practice on learner outcomes and also understanding how the practice of system leadership impacts the wider policy and educational landscape in Wales if at all. It considers the role that research and other evidence collection processes might play in answering both RQ.

Below I give a detailed description of each theme using examples from the data to exemplify aspects of the theme. I have consolidated both sets of data when discussing how the data aligns with the themes.

5.4.2 Theme description

(i) Personal attributes

Many of the answers given in Section B of the questionnaire address the first research question (RQ) What is understood by the term **educational system leader**? (Q12) and contributes to the first key theme **personal attributes**.

In response to Q12 of the questionnaire, **28** respondents replied by providing a variety of words and phrases which are listed below in Table 5.6 to describe a **system leader**.

Table 5.6 Characteristics describing a system leader

Characteristics used to describe system leaders
Aware
Official
Transformational
Influencer
Impactful
Effective
Active
Open
Transparent
Committed
Collaborative
Credibility
Skilled
Expert
Generous with time
Advisory
Coaches, Mentors
Constructive
Optimistic
Authentic
Innovative
Future Focussed
Seek 'change at scale'
Experienced
Well informed
Successful
Respected
Willing to share

Distributed leadership
Accountable
Formal role/Informal

These words were of interest to me because they caught my attention and indicated to me that the respondent(s) thought they were particularly important. The phrases described what characteristics and attributes **system leaders** might have, which also represent the type of behaviour they might display. Table 5.7 below also describes the type of activities the **system leader** might enact in that role, this does assimilate into the term **system leadership** (second RQ), but it appears from the responses that the two terms are interchangeable in the minds of the respondents.

Table 5.7 phrases used to describe what a system leader does in practice

Phrases used to describe what a system leader does in practice
Better 'the system'
Develops a shared vision
An official leadership position
Responsible for education decisions
Support the improvement
Agent of change and improvement
Actively contribute to the education system
Building professional capacity
Actively works to develop others
Uses skills, knowledge and experience to support the development and improvement of education. Uses skills, experience and knowledge to effectively support and develop others
Share their own knowledge
Work with a range of professionals
Coach, support, Mentor
Create the conditions for improvement
Invests time

Know the organisation's context
Takes responsibility
School based practitioner
Must have impact in the classroom
Builds trust and relationships
Highly successful
Recognised for leading
They have a strong moral imperative
Proven track record and possess and demonstrate a range of leadership skills

Overall, the analysis has indicated the theme **personal attributes** represents a diverse set of capabilities, attributes, contributions, actions, values, traits, skills, knowledge, experience, roles and responsibilities which contribute to being a **system leader**. The answers to the questionnaire and the interview refer to the 'person' acting as a **system leader** but also when describing what the **system leader** does, they talk about **system leadership**, which demonstrates that both terms are used interchangeably by the respondents. In Q13 the respondents also used a range of words to describe the **what** or **how** of the role. Table 5.8 shows a list of words used by the respondents to describe the actions of a **system leader**.

Table 5.8 A list of words describing the actions of a system leader.

Share, facilitate, engage, improve, provide direction, co-develop, co-establish, provide supportive culture, enable, inspire, confident broker, design, evaluate, endorse, actively advocate, influence, motivate, support, model, encourage, innovate, create, be accountable, inspire, promote, develop, question, challenge, champion, assess, advise, persuade.

Furthermore, in response to Q13, the respondents referred to various **values** to describe the **system leader** as set out in Table 5.9 below.

Table 5.9 List of values attributed to the role of the system leader in response to Q13

Mutual-respect, trust, care, supportive, credibility, drive, integrity, commitment, build effective teams, accountable, brave, creative, innovative, selfless.

During the interviews all four respondents referred to **values** (Table 5.10) they thought a **system leader** should have and or display. Although a question was not directly asked about values during the semi-structured interviews the respondents included these in their answers.

Table 5.10 Values of a system leader and applied during system leadership

SL1	SL2	SL3	SL4
• Credibility • Moral purpose • Trust	• Honesty • Inclusiveness • Tolerance • Professionalism • Credibility • Trustworthy • Flexibility • Innovation	• Moral purpose	• Integrity • Credibility • Innovative

Two of the respondents included the value *"moral purpose"* (SL1 and SL3). In Q15 of the questionnaire the responses included adjectives which describe the characteristics of a **system leader**: self-aware, reflective, team building, championing and conscious.

All four interviewees also said that **knowledge, understanding and experience** was important. There is some conflict between respondents about experience and whether the length of service is important or not, but the idea that the leader needs to be credible is common amongst the respondents. Below are some references by the respondents about experience, knowledge and understanding.

> and in terms of **knowledge** I would say that everybody needs a strong knowledge of curriculum, a strong knowledge of leadership and what leadership means and how people lead the sort of science behind leadership (SL1 p.6).

> I guess there's got to be some sort of **credibility** attached to that. If you've been able to move a school forward and I think just because you've been a head for 25 years doesn't mean that you're an effective educational leader (SL1 p.7).

> They need to have **walked the talk**, you know and not just there because, UM, uh, they've been in the school the longest (SL4 p.11).

In the sense that they **pretend to know that they are a font of all knowledge,** but they're not really and when you unpick it, you can see, well**,** you can see where the weaknesses are and [how] they come across as being negative (SL4 p.15).

I have noted a list of words (Table 5.11) that the interviewees included in their answers when describing what kinds of skills, knowledge and experiences they believed a **system leader** should have.

Table 5.11 Skills, knowledge and experiences of a system leader

SL1	SL2	SL3	SL4
- People skills - Emotional intelligence - Empathy - Understand people - Role modelling - Creative - Innovative - Inspiring - Empowering people	- Personal skills - Ability to listen - Reflect - Flexible - Aware - Communication - Mentoring - Coaching - Empathy - Supportive - Build a relationship - Influential - Give advice	- Passionate - Innovative - Full of ideas	- Advocate for change - Self-awareness - Self-worth - Understanding others - Good listener - Good interpersonal skills - Patience - Compassionate - Problem solver - Communication - Learn from mistakes - Coaching - Facilitating - Praising - Evaluating

Innovation, creativity and inspiration were skills also mentioned both in the questionnaire and the interview responses.

> To **promote, inspire** and **develop** leadership at all levels (Q13R14).
>
> Head teachers must see themselves in a **system leadership** role and act accordingly, enabling others within **system leadership** to help them to **innovate** and reshape their work. (Q17R24).

Whilst not many of the respondents expanded their answers during the interviews on being **innovative**, **creative** and **inspiring,** there was some references by two of the respondents (SL2 and SL4) and there are references in other answers for example in the values section above.

> We want to make sure that every school has the same opportunity through **system leadership.** They shouldn't be disadvantaged because of their language or because of and **inspiring** others. I think you gotta (sic) be abreast of **research** and **ideas** (SL2 p.27).
>
> it's crucial because if we are **building leadership capacity**, uh, for all staff at **all levels** and then we have to learn from each other and we do that through our **network** and our good practice, being **innovative and creative (**SL4 p.20).

Overall, respondents to both the questionnaire and the interviews indicated that **system leaders** had a diverse set of **personal attributes** which included behaviours, traits and capabilities. They referred to the wide range of **skills, knowledge and experiences** deemed crucial to the role and which led to different **behaviours** and an extensive list of activities. All the respondents agreed that being **credible** in the role was important. The data also highlighted how **system leaders** held certain **values** which attributed to their enactment of the role. **Innovation, creativity** and **inspiration** were also identified as important qualities, but the data also highlighted the potential limitations to the role when lacking these specific qualities. The data also revealed how the respondents saw the interchangeable usage of the terms **system leader** and **system leadership.**

(ii)   Collective Leadership

The descriptive overview below provides the evidence for the theme **Collective Leadership**. Respondents used words like, collaboration, networking, co-working, sharing and working

towards a mutual purpose to describe how **system leadership** is enacted. The theme describes how leaders work together for the benefit of others. The answers given to the questionnaire and during the interviews support this theme and emphasises the role of supporting others not just in their own organisations, but working beyond one's own organisation to help and support others. Collaboration and making professional connections and working with peers is a significant element of this theme. The responses regarding networking highlighted the importance of both formal and informal relationships.

They emphasised the need for professional trust and non-judgemental attitudes. These interactions are driven by a collective *"mutual benefit"* (SL4 p.4). The influence of those working together was considered to enact change in the system for the better.

Of the 37 respondents who answered Q12 of the questionnaire, 24 indicated that the role involved working beyond their own organisation. Below are examples of what the respondents said:

> ***A leader who operates outside of their organisation's employment contract*** *to influence and support the aspirations of the broader education community, be that locally, regionally, nationally or internationally.* ***System leadership*** *goes beyond school leadership to impact on others for the good of the students in Wales and beyond (Q12R12).*
>
> *A* ***system leader*** *is* ***where you see your role greater than just your own school*** *(Q12R25).*
>
> *This person is* ***responsible*** *for education decisions* ***affecting more than one school*** *(Q12R3).*
>
> *A professional who sees their purpose as* ***contributing to the wider education system*** *rather than merely the school, institution or organisation they lead (Q12R6).*
>
> *Someone who looks to have an* ***impact beyond their own organisation level,*** *who engages with different tiers within the system, to influence wider strategic direction (Q12R17).*

This was also mentioned in response to Q15 – which asked the second RQ, what is **system leadership**? for example;

> *a purposeful, collaborative approach to education* ***within, across*** *and* ***between*** *schools, Institutions/organisations and government (Q15R4).*

*It means a shared commitment to developing collaborative professionalism to enable impact upon the learning of children **across the 'system'** - that being Wales, region, local levels (Q15R7).*

***System leadership** is **wider than school to school improvement** and operates to support improvement across significant parts of the education system and provides **national leadership** in specific areas (Q15R12).*

Respondents to the questionnaire also said that it was about working with peers to enact change in the system and collaborate with each other to be creative and innovative.

Peer supported learning is a very powerful way of influencing positive change in a system (Q17R22).

Leaders at all levels in Wales need support and guidance, this should come from their **peers through effective system leadership** (Q17R17).

Respondents from both the questionnaires and the interviews referenced collaboration as a fundamental element of leaders working together.

Collaboration is one of the keys to reform and **interdependence** is vital (Q17R24).

It means leaders who impact upon the wider profession through **collaboration,** networks of professional practice and seeing the bigger picture (Q17R10).

Educational **system leadership** is the requirement for leaders in different organisations within the education sector to look beyond the influence that they can have at their own level to impact wider system change through **collaboration** (Q15R13).

I think proper and useful **collaborative** work is **nonjudgmental** (SL1 p.4).

It's **people working with somebody else** in a **trust relationship** I suppose to **better or improve their organisation**. It's **essentially a collaborative role** where you're **working with the school,** you **form a relationship** with that school and where you **develop a partnership to improve** that particular school (SL2 p.5).

I think that the new professional standards have helped, because there's an element in there to do with **collaboration** and cluster working is much stronger now (SL3 p.14).

Respondents' views on networks varied when they spoke about formal and informal networks.

There's some of the networks that I've created **just through meeting people on courses,** so that we've found that we've had a **common interest** and **network** and **arranged visits** to each other's schools and things like that (SL3 p.3).

It's **people working with somebody else** in a **trust relationship** I suppose to **better or improve their organisation**. It's **essentially a collaborative role** where you're **working with the school,** you **form a relationship** with that school and where you **develop a partnership to improve** that particular school (SL2 p.5).

If you're going to **work together effectively**, there needs to be a **level of professional trust** and I guess a **mutual benefit** for everybody in some way (SL1 p.4).

This means avoiding territorial behaviours, seeing possibilities and **building alliances** *(Q17R24).*

Respondents also made reference to **collective leadership** leading to change.

Someone who is able to **collaborate** with others to influence positive educational **change** on a broad level (Q12R17).

Several of the respondents also used the word **'levels'** when describing the term **system leader** in response to Q12 and gave examples of what this meant. The responses help identify the position the **system leader** holds in the education system when carrying out the role.

*In an official leadership position at a **system level,** e.g. cluster of schools, local authority, district, region, state/province, national (Q12R3).*

*They offer a relevant and meaningful narrative which is understood at **all leadership levels** (Q12R20).*

***System leaders** can operate at **regional and national levels** so as to affect change (Q12R24).*

*It means a leader who **influences at difference levels** in the system (Q12R28).*

Also, in response to Q12, respondents used the words and phrases below to describe a **system leader** (Table 5.12)

Table 5.12 List of words describing actions and effect

Words or Phrases
Collaborate/collaborative
Network

Work together/working together
Sharing/shared
Influence/influencing
Impact
Effect/effectively/effectiveness
Affect/affecting
Improvement
Moral
Success/successful
Skills
Knowledge
Experience
Formal
Informally
Indirectly/Directly
Direction

They stood out because they were repeated and/or they felt important because they emphasised a particular point. They describe **how** and **why** a **system leader** might engage or interact with others. The words describe how the leader might work to influence and why that is important. They emphasise the importance of working together to achieve better outcomes.

All interviewees stated that a **system leader** could be both a formal and informal role and gave illustrative answers to support this. Some of the answers suggested the role was formal when supporting another school as a "challenge advisors or [other] formal roles might well be things like the Academy" (SL2 p.1) and also formal cluster partnerships**.** The informal role included role modelling, leading by example and networking. However, they also stated that the *system leadership* role was more successful when the role was more informal and lead by their peers. There were a wide range of responses from all four respondents who gave

examples and brought context to the answers. They gave examples of both the formal and informal roles of the **system leader** and also referred to how the two overlap.

> The best support that I've had was from somebody sort of in more of an **informal capacity**, but in quite a direct way**.** But I think over the years the sort of more **formal** support that I've had hasn't always hit the spot (SL1 p.3).
>
> Informal links […]you know you're **developing** this because you're **working for schools outside of your organisation** and that's a more **informal relationship** because you're you know I'd like to say **elected by your peers** […] that then leads into other roles, for instance linking in with the **local authority** (SL2 p.2).

It was also noted in the questionnaire answers that the role could be informal and this was influential.

> There is a significant **informal** approach to **system leadership** which can be more **influential**. Informal **system leaders** don't have authority in other institutions but are able to **influence thinking and practice effectively** (Q15R15).

Overall, the theme **collective leadership** promotes the idea that leaders can achieve more by working together rather than acting in isolation and **collaboration** is key. The respondents identified that they should **work with peers**, both **informally** and **formally** and actively participate in **networks.** They highlight that working **beyond one's own organisation** is of high importance in extending their influence beyond their immediate responsibilities and that taking collective responsibility can help to address larger issues of mutual benefit. They propose that working with **peers** is central to the success of the role and can lead to innovative solutions and more effective decision-making. **Professional trust** between peers is seen to be essential towards the success of the role.

(iii)   Growing Leadership

All the respondents during the semi-structured interviews shared they agreed that **building leadership capacity** was an important element of the success of the transformation of the education system in Wales. They all agreed this happens at different levels of the educational system and the role of a **system leader** should be to support this. This theme exemplifies how professional learning, professional development, training and improving leadership skills are considered to contribute to improving the system. This theme has included a multifaceted approach to growing **system leaders** and **system leadership** which includes formal and

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informal approaches, coaching and mentoring skills and using their experience to pass on to others. The interviewees are all in agreement a core purpose of a **system leader** is to grow other leaders and build capacity in the education system which contributes to the self-improving system that continually enhances educational outcomes and practices. This is supported by respondents to the questionnaire too.

> it's crucial because if we are **building leadership capacity**, uh, for all staff at **all levels** and then we have to learn from each other and we do that through our **network** and our good practice, being **innovative and creative** (SL4 p.20).

> **Education system leadership** is integral to leading learning, encouraging enquiry and **building capacity** not only in schools but in the organisations that support them (Q17R4).

> We need to **build capacity** within the system to develop leaders who are able to implement positive change. This is not just important at the moment to drive the changes required for the new curriculum, but needed more broadly to ensure that the system becomes **self -improving** and equitable for all (Q17R14).

Another respondent states building a 'culture' of support and sharing is important.

> I do think we do need to build, I think it's not necessarily capacity, but it's about **building the culture** that there is an expectation that we are all supporting one another and in other schools and sharing (SL3 p.16).

One respondent also refers to experienced leaders who are in a position to support and develop other leaders.

> And the importance of **developing leaders** comes from having people in the system who can share their **leadership experiences** to make that person a bit better (SL2 p.34).

Many of the respondents to the questionnaire used words like development, improvements, building capacity and self-improving.

> It enables the **development** and the **improvement** of the whole system through **building capacity** within settings to become **self-improving** and **enabling improvement** with **minimum intervention** (Q15R5).

> **Leadership across the system** developed to **support leaders at all levels** to secure **excellent outcomes for all pupils across the system** (Q15R19).

Educational **system leadership** envisions **a model of professional-led school improvement** in that principals are more likely to be **influenced by colleagues** than they are by policy makers (Q15R21).

An educational **system leader** also recognises the importance of **building professional capacity** in the system and **actively works to develop other** leaders, within their school/organisation and beyond, where opportunities arise (Q12R6).

They have a proven track record of securing school improvement and give generously of their time to **support others to improve their practice** through coaching, mentoring and advice (Q12R16).

ensure that the system becomes **self -improving** and equitable for all (Q17R14).

Therefore, **system leaders/ship** can be key to sharing good practice, expertise and resources to strengthen, **build capacity** and help transformation (Q17R10).

One respondent to Q15 made reference to the "*momentum of change*" (Q15R4) being affected by the lack of capacity in the system. This quote stressed the importance of having enough quality leaders in the system to enact change and bring about improvement for the better.

It is about **building capacity** within the system so that the **momentum of change is not lost** *(Q15R4).*

However, I wanted to seek clarification to some of the responses which were unclear, especially around the idea that **system leaders** should be trained so I asked further follow-up questions during the semi-structured interview. Three of the respondents during the interview agreed that having training was an important element but there were other considerations too for example SL2 p.29 stated that "*knowledge, values and skills*" were important and communicating well was of importance to "*build up trust*" (SL2 p.30). Respondents also said having formal training like coaching, mentoring or **system leadership** training was beneficial as this could lead to impact in an informal way as stated below.

This can be both formal (through a designated **system leader** role, such as National Leader of Education as in England) or informally through offering **to coach or mentor** a new Headteacher for example (Q12R28).

An educational **system leader** is someone who is capable of working with others effectively to **coach**, **support and mentor** others to create the

conditions for improvement without doing the improvement work directly themselves (Q12R7).

I think it's very important and if we are developing **system leaders** then I think there is a certain, for want of a better word, menu, that I think would be really good for our **system leaders** to have and one of them is that the Academy **system leader training** and uh and the other one is **coaching** (SL4 p.24).

One respondent during the interviews disagreed with the idea of formal training and suggested it was a *"mindset"* (SL3 p.18) but then added they thought the best place to be trained was in a school.

The answers given by the respondents (Q17) as to why they think **system leadership** is important to the transformation of education in Wales provided many descriptions which include capacity building, training and professional development. The multifaceted reasons collectively highlight the pivotal role of **system leadership** in driving transformation and innovation within the Welsh education system.

Education system leadership is integral to leading learning, **encouraging enquiry** and **building capacity** not only in schools but in the organisations that support them (Q17R4).

Educational **system leadership** is very important because it enables individuals and groups of staff in settings to work beyond their own setting, sharing their practice and seeing the practice of others. It allows for the cross fertilisation of a setting and **enables joint practice growth.** It allows for critical reflection on one's own practice which in turn enables **further improvement of oneself**. It **enables joint knowledge creation** and opportunities for action based research (Q17R5).

Every organization (sic) is different – has different strengths and needs and at a different stage in their journey to excellence. Resources, time, capacity, funding, knowledge and expertise for example can be in short supply in some organisations. Therefore, **system leaders/ship** can be key to **sharing good practice**, expertise and resources to strengthen, **build capacity** and **help transformation**. Important at any time but more so in today's current climate of great educational reform (Q17R10).

Educational **system leadership** can help to overcome these issues with organisations **learning from one another** and learning from their communities and other industries in a way that is suitable to the people in their organisation (Q17R12).

For the reform agenda to be effective, all partners in the system need to both believe in it and act to contribute fully. This means avoiding territorial behaviours, seeing possibilities and **building alliances** (Q17R24).

Overall, the **Growing Leadership** theme exhibits the high importance of **building leadership capacity** within the education system and is proposed by the respondents as paramount to the success and development of the transformation of education in Wales. Learning from one another and sharing good practice was noted as important. The respondents identified that professionals should continuously enhance their skills and competencies to contribute to creating a **self-improving** education system. Whilst **coaching** and **mentoring** were noted as valuable, it was also mentioned **training** should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all solution. Any formal support must be complemented by on-the-job learning.

(iv) Educational landscape

The answers given by the respondents to support the theme Educational Landscape includes references to the transformation of education in Wales, change management as well as the importance of understanding the context of individual organisations and how **educational system leaders** and **educational system leadership** contribute to the national educational landscape. The respondents emphasised leadership needs to be adaptive to the various contexts and that **system leadership** drives change.

Q16 asked, in the transformation of the education system in Wales, how important, if at all, is **educational system leadership**? This was a Likert-type question which offered five answers so that I could understand how the respondents felt about the importance of the approach.

5-Very Important

4-Important

3-Neutral

2-Not very important

1-Not very important at all

There were **28** responses in total**; 25** answered very important and **3** answered important.

None of the respondents noted that it was not important.

The high response rate from those stating **educational system leadership** is *'very important'* or *'important'* affirms the consensus on the critical role of **system leadership** in the transformation of education in Wales (OECD, 2014, 2017, 2020) and that *"Effective **system leadership** is, therefore, **absolutely crucial** to the reform of education in Wales" (Q17R8).* No further questions were asked during the follow-up interviews as most of the respondents confirmed the importance of the role in driving positive change and shaping the future of education in Wales. Not one single respondent in this study noted that it was not important in the transformation of the education system in Wales.

> Without these systems and structures any attempt to **build and support individual system leaders** will be 'piece meal' and somewhat incoherent. The more the entire system is 'hard wired' for 'collaborative school improvement' at every level, the more that improvement will be accelerated. **Without this infrastructure, any attempt to introduce / consolidate the role and function of system leaders in Wales will not be sustainable.** One of the most important is how **system leaders** are trained and deployed, the way in which schools are reviewed and the role **system leadership** plays in this. In England we tried to move to a position where a school could only be considered 'outstanding' in an inspection, if they had demonstrated how they had helped another school to achieve (regardless of their own excellent performance). We didn't manage to achieve this but I still think it's important - considerations like this help to **shift culture and mind set** and that's essential (Q17R26).

According to the respondents there are multifaceted reasons why the transformation's success could be affected. Working at a local, national and international level is one of them.

> I think **cross-region is really important**. You might be aware of what's going on locally, but you need to see it wider I think **cross-region** is really important. Yeah and **internationally,** you know we need to be mindful of that really as well [...] and that will be the only way that we are successful as a nation (SL3 p.21).

One respondent referred to why transformation might not work if **system leadership** was underdeveloped. SL3 p.19 used words like "silos*", "*stumbling blocks*"* and "unsatisfactory" when felt work is kept locally and not shared wider.

Included in this theme is the important idea that **system leaders** can enact change. Eight out of 29 respondents made reference to **change** in Q13. This demonstrates that to move towards

an improved education system then certain things need to be done differently and this is empowered by individuals leading the way through **system leadership**.

> Crucially they are willing to shoulder **system leadership** roles in the belief that to **change the larger system** you have to engage with it in a meaningful way (Q13R4).

> The purpose of **system leaders** should be […] its influence as a **driver for change** and improvement to share and facilitate the sharing of best practice across the system (Q13R6).

> Have credibility, drive, integrity and commitment. Ability to collaborate, be trustworthy and build effective teams that have the capacity to **bring about change** and improvement (Q13R13).

> They will influence and guide others (at all levels) elsewhere in the education system to take a leadership role themselves in **bringing about change** (Q13R19).

> They are **agents of change**. I think they are expected to share their work because it is recognised as something new or effective. They model their work which is based on or reflects research and has a tangibility about it, a relevance. They are trusted and **do not accept the status quo**. They seek answers (Q13R21).

> To bring about **lateral change** and to build leadership capacity within and across the system (Q13R29).

Change was also mentioned by other respondents in other questions.

> **System leaders** can operate at regional and national levels so as to **affect change.** Collaboration is key in successful **system leadership** with genuine sharing of expertise and knowledge driving change and improvement (Q12R24).

> **Educational system leadership** is the requirement for leaders in different organisations within the education sector to look beyond the influence that they can have at their own level to impact wider **system change** through collaboration (Q15R13).

> The **changes ahead** will need all leaders to share what they are interpreting as the **change** in our system. The issue will be how to distil these interpretations into a strategy/direction that all schools can follow. I mentioned leaders being responsible for more than their own school, I think that would clarify interpretation of transforming **change** in our schools and remove some of the ambiguity (Q17R18).

In relation to this theme, understanding the importance of **context** and being adaptable to the organisation's needs is crucial. Responses to the questionnaire included:

The individual needs to invest time in getting to know the organisation's **context** and **build trust** and relationships to identify strengths and areas for improvement (Q12R13).

Someone in this role would follow high level guidance and be responsible for large scale implementation based on, for example, perceived best practices. This would most likely be **context** based (Q12R21).

An **educational system leader** understands the importance of **context,** culture and ethos in individual schools and believes the learning from every school strengthens leadership in the system (Q13R9).

Ensure the **system leader** has thorough knowledge of the **context** of an organisation. All organisations are different and are at different stages in their journey. Be open to suggestions and support as well as offer it. Be accountable and hold others to account (Q13R13).

The role would be significantly different in different **contexts** (Q13R22).

Educational system leadership is about **system leaders** working within the system ensuring that research and professional learning is kept close to practice and is based on the **context, culture and ethos** of individual schools. It is about developing the agency and autonomy of teachers and school leaders to lead teaching, learning and assessment according to their own **context** and recognising this diversity of **context** (Q15R6).

System leadership encompasses a range of practices **fit for context** at a given time (Q15R8).

In answer to the follow-up question, *why is context important?* interviewees used phrases like *"tailored to the needs"* (SL2 p.26) and *"bespoke support"* (SL1 p.13). They all emphasised how important it was to consider the individual needs of the organisation and to *"adapt your style and your way of working"* (SL2 p.31).

> **Context** is really important because **every school is uniquely different** (SL2 p.32).

However, one respondent raises caution when considering the context as it states that certain factors affecting the community should not be used as an excuse.

> ***Context*** *is everything and we can't go away from their context. But there's a health warning. Yeah, it's not an excuse, it is a reason but not an excuse and we have to be mindful that some of our schools don't use the, UM, the deprivation*

as an excuse because you can still have high aspirations for those children and you can still have high expectations (SL4 p.26).

The overall theme, **Educational Landscape** exemplifies the importance of the role of **system leadership** in the educational transformation of Wales. However, the significance of this transformation is intricately linked to the context within which it occurs where leaders need to be adaptive, build trust and understand the unique characteristics, culture and ethos of each educational setting. The **system leaders** play a pivotal role in shaping the direction and success of the change process. Moreover, the ability to bring about change and act as a change agent is equally crucial in the context of educational transformation. Change agents serve as catalysts for progress, driving innovation and pushing boundaries within the educational landscape. They play a fundamental role in navigating the complexities of the transformation journey and ensuring its successful implementation. One respondent cautioned against solely prioritising context, emphasising that it should not be seen as an excuse for not promoting aspirations or implementation of change.

(v)   The right thing

The title for this theme is a direct quote from one of the interviewees *"but ultimately that's the right thing to do"* (SL1 p.12) and I think it conveys the fundamental concept that is related to the ethical purpose of doing the best for all the learners in the system. It is the **why** of the role, the purpose of being an educational leader not just a **system leader.** They also said supporting the leaders themselves to develop was right and just. The answers also included descriptions of what the **system leader** might do and how they might achieve it through **system leadership**. The interviewees offered perspectives and experiences which added depth, richness and validity to the research when answering the follow-up questions. These answers gave me an insight into **what** the purpose of the **system leader** was and **why** it was important to **system leadership**.

Q13 asked *What is the **purpose** of an **educational system leader**?* **29** respondents completed an open text box where answers and responses were given in a very descriptive way.

> The purpose of **system leaders** should be; to contribute to **improving outcomes for all learners** to support **professional learning in schools** through a relevant and focussed offer that encourages and expects collaboration

between schools a commitment to leading pedagogy and recognising its influence as a driver for change and improvement to share and facilitate the sharing of best practice across the system (Q13R6).

Respondents to the questionnaire used idioms to describe the purpose of the **system leader**, that they should "**raise the bar"** and "**shoulder the system"** (Q13R4) and that their purpose was to "**narrow the gap"** (Q13R29).

Several of the respondents to the questionnaire referred to **improvement of the system** and **improving outcomes for all learners**. Overall, the respondents offered a wide range of examples to describe how **system leaders** influence others. Some are formal actions and others are more informal. During the interviews respondents offered contextual examples to reinforce their opinion.

> You are i**nfluencing** what other people think because, if you ask the correct questions, if you share resources or ideas then you are **influencing** the practice of that school and maybe hopefully positively and not negatively (SL2 p.9).

> I've recently helped a school and I think the thing that I did the most was giving to that headteacher was the **confidence** (SL3 p.8).

> So to **bring about change** in another establishment and the i**mpact** there then would be seen by a much wider audience (SL4 p.9).

Respondents to the questionnaire also used the words **improve** and **improving** or making the system better.

> All those who are aware that they are working to **better the system** (Q12R1).

> They are willing to share their expertise and work with others so as to **improve overall outcomes** for students (Q12R24).

> **System leaders** are those Heads or Principals who are willing to shoulder system wide roles to support the **improvement of other schools as well as their own** (Q12R4).

> To me **'educational system leader'** means anybody within education that can lead at any level with a selfless approach to improve the systems they are involved in and producing **better opportunities and outcomes for all** (Q12R16).

> The purpose of an **educational system leader** is to: create the conditions to bring about improvement and enable self; inspire and promote confidence in others so that they understand that **improvement lies within**; broker and develop effective support for improvement; and develop others and build effective capacity (Q13R7).

To share successful strategies for school **improvement beyond their own organisation.** To contribute to the growth and **development of the leadership qualities and capabilities of others**. To celebrate the achievements of others and build confidence. To build strong professional networks to support improvement in leadership (Q13R16).

To question and challenge current policy and procedures across the whole educational system with the aim of **improvement for all** (Q13R20).

Several of the respondents in the questionnaire and during the interviews offered opinions and views regarding equity and moral purpose emphasising the **why** of the role.

You need to be really clear about your focus as well and I think if you've got really strong values in terms of the children deserve the absolute best …but ultimately that's **the right thing to do** and I think. Those values, qualities and behaviours are the most important bit for the educational leader. They have a strong **moral imperative** to support and partner with other leaders for the benefit of all learners (SL1 p.12).

Moral purpose to support all learners and schools. Where you look to continually **Improve and develop**. Where you work as a wider learning organisation (Q13R26).

To create an 'outward looking' education system where the improvement of opportunity for all children and young people is **everyone's responsibility.** To strengthen the practices, systems and structures whereby schools (in particular) can take responsibility for their own improvement. To model **'collective moral purpose'** (Q13R29).

Educational system leaders are highly successful leaders who are recognised for leading measurable improvements in learning, teaching and leadership within and importantly beyond their own organisation. They have a **strong moral imperative** to support and partner with other leaders for the **benefit of all learners** (Q12R16).

The four interviewees all gave an overview of what being equitable and moral meant to them. This included referring to supporting learners, staff, families (SL1 p.18) and also the fairness of opportunity to develop and build leadership capacity in others (SL4 p.18). One of the respondents referenced *"the right thing to do"* (SL1 p.12) which is the title of this theme. I chose this as a title because it felt like *"the right thing"* exemplified the moral and ethical purpose of educational leadership. All of the respondents refer to the moral purpose being an essential element of being an **educational system leader** and wanting to help all learners not just those in their organisation.

I think you need to go back to your own **core values,** about why you're doing it. Is it because you want to make a difference to every child, either in your local

authority? Your consortia? in Wales? Or because if you only want to do it for your own pupils then there's not much point in doing it really, so it's about that you know that it's about having a **passion and a desire to change things for the whole country**, rather than just one particular area (SL2 p.24).

Questionnaire respondents support this and make references to the equitable approach required so all learners benefit equally.

It is about working together towards a **common good** rather than being in competition (Q15R6).

It is essential that current educational change in Wales operates in a coherent, **equitable** way (Q17R16).

Education system leaders have an important role to play in providing a supportive culture and enabling infrastructure to develop the capacity of the education workforce to improve students' learning, **equity** and well-being (Q13R3).

To enable **equity** across the education system. To share and be open to the ideas of others.

How leaders of organisations can work together to develop a common and shared vision and language of learning to achieve better outcomes for all, in relation to education, wellbeing and **equity** (Q15R3).

We need to build capacity within the system to develop leaders who are able to implement positive change. This is not just important at the moment to drive the changes required for the new curriculum, but needed more broadly to ensure that the system becomes **self- improving** and **equitable** for all (Q17R14).

Overall, this theme '**The right thing'** is a principle that not only sets out the essential benefits for all learners but also stresses the importance of supporting all leaders in their role. Working towards a *"common good"* (Q15R6) serves as a strong moral imperative that should be embraced by every educational leader. It should not be seen as an option, but everyone's responsibility to work collectively for the greater good of all those working in the education system.

The respondents state having a collective ethical purpose encourages leaders to focus on equity for all. In this way, we promote a society where every individual has the chance to

thrive and contribute to the betterment of their community. Therefore, the idea of doing "**The right thing"** (SL1p.12) becomes a guiding principle that underpins the actions and decisions in both education and leadership, reinforcing the value of a shared commitment to the *"common good"* (Q15R6) and equity for all.

(vi)   Challenges

This theme addresses the barriers, limitations and difficulties associated with the concept, role and purpose of a **system leader** and the **system leadership** approach in Wales. It also references the challenges facing the successful transformation of education in Wales. Education presents complex issues and the respondents have expressed their personal experiences and perceptions in answering the questions and have provided answers that challenge the concept. These answers relate to their understanding of the role itself, implementation of policy and the limitations which lead to success. This theme encompasses a broad range of issues and these include policy development where the need for a clear vision and trust among all stakeholders is crucial and establishing the "right conditions" (Q15R5) for effective educational policy is essential. Another challenge is that it can be elusive as it requires a coherent understanding of the terms **educational system leader** and **system leadership** along with a clear purpose of roles and responsibilities. The lack of vision and direction and risk of falling into *"mediocre practice"* (Q17R13) can hinder progress in education.

The respondents note the need for current and up-to-date research to lead and influence practice is essential. All of the challenges in this theme are also supported by the lack of leadership development (Theme - **Growing Leaders**) which contributes to the capacity needed to successfully deliver educational initiatives. These multifaceted challenges contribute to the complexity of educational leadership and the importance of addressing them strategically to promote positive change in the education system.

Only **26** participants of the **37**, responded to the question which asked why **educational system leadership** was important to the successful transformation of education in Wales.

One respondent stated:

> **System leadership** is **a relatively new and emerging practice** that embraces a variety of responsibilities that are developing either locally or within discrete Local/State/Regional networks or policy driven initiatives that when taken together have the **potential** to contribute to system transformation (Q17R2).

The word "potential" (Q17R2) also implies that this is not happening now. This could be considered contentious as Higham *et al.* (2009, preface) had stated that they "have become increasingly intrigued over the past decade with the concept of **system leadership**" in England so during the semi-structured interviews I sought clarification from the interviewees about whether this was only "new and emergent" (Q17R2) in Wales. There was a difference of opinion between the respondents. Three of the respondents suggested that it might just have been called something different and one implied that it was a new way of working. "There's always been that **system leadership**, just perhaps hasn't been called that" (SL1 p.17).

SL3 believe it hasn't existed before and agrees with the statement that it is '*new and emergent' (SL3 p.16)*.

> You know, when things change all the time and I think that **system leadership**, it is new and emergent and there wasn't an expectation of us supporting others before and there is now (SL3 p.16).

However,

> The term has often been used (over many years in different contexts) but **difficult to sustain.** It has been applied to formal roles (such as "Education Adviser", "**Systems Leader**" or even "Advisory Teacher"), designated to work across a number of institutions. Policy change often leads to formal system leader roles ending (Q15R15).

This indicates there may be limitations to growing **system leadership** in the long term, especially in the formal way due to changes in policy direction.

A few respondents to the questionnaire argued the success of educational transformation in Wales is reliant on a clear vision and without this it will fail.

> Without **a well-communicated and coherent vision,** change will be slow or fail across the system. **Leadership and change management skills** are inter-linked. If there is no change then what are you leading? (Q17R9).

Because currently I feel there is a **lack of consistent vision** and join up between the key players within the educational system (Q17R3).

Other respondents talk about the necessity for collaboration (as mentioned in the theme **Collective Leadership**) and unless better use of networks and partnerships are utilised then the educational transformation will be unsuccessful. They also talk about **trust** between professionals, not just between peers but across the educational tiers (Figure 2.1) being an important feature.

> If we accept that the education system in Wales is moving from a culture of prescription and high stakes accountability to one of **greater trust**, professionalism and teacher efficacy, then this cannot happen without support and collaboration (Q17R4).

> **Education system leaders** need to develop **mutual respect and trust** with the education workforce and the communities served (Q13R3).

> Where we work together to benefit all learners, teachers and schools. To give support to one another. Where we are trusted to have the skills to work and develop as a learning organisation. Working collaboratively to benefit wider than your own school. **The education system working effectively and efficiently** (Q15R22).

However, the conditions for this to thrive seem to be impacted by views that include too many initiatives, pressures, accountability measures, *"territorial behaviours"* (Q17R24) including regional and local interpretations of policy (Q17R16) and a lack of national coherence in leadership development.

> **National policy** can have some leverage through financial incentives, through legislation or through accountability systems such as Estyn but all of these are limited. If a reform is **too top-down** it may well be **resented** or **resisted** and will not have sufficient impact unless the majority of its workforce feels positive about the reform and feels enabled to implement the reform with some confidence. If the reform is **too bottom-up** it will lead to **mixed outcomes**. Decisions made at individual school level will not, on their own, aggregate up to whole system improvement without positive influence from those who lead across groups of schools. **Effective system leadership** is, therefore, **absolutely crucial** to the reform of education in Wales (Q17R8).

> Educational organisations have been under **consistent pressure** for many years in terms of their performance and are ranked against other organisations as if education is a **competition** that has to be won. This has led to organisations being very insular through the years and not open to outside support. It has

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also felt like policy makers have been pushing 'one size fits all' policies to force improvement (Q17R12).

but there is a **danger** in a relatively small country that **mediocre practice** is shared across school boundaries unless there is a shared understanding of excellent practice (Q17R13).

without system leadership **change will be ad hoc and random**, or not happen at all (Q17R15).

It is essential that current educational change in Wales operates in a coherent, equitable way. A major barrier to uptake and implementation is **the variety of approaches** within Wales - including regional and local interpretations of policy. A central government directed approach would not match the values underpinning the National Mission and new curriculum so **coherence** needs to be achieved through a 'hearts and minds' approach. **System leaders** can be instrumental in achieving this (Q17R16).

If Wales is to develop its own curriculum and ALN system, this will only be possible if all parts of the system treat every learner as their own. Pupils in one school can benefit from the policies and practice of others. **Leaders at all levels** in Wales need **support and guidance,** this should come from their **peers** through effective **system leadership** (Q17R17).

It is important but in some areas is **not done well** – for example, within one strand of educational support every Headteacher is seen as a **system leader**. This is **not ensuring strength in system leadership** (Q17R20).

Without **system leadership** then the capacity to innovate and change things is **limited** (Q17R25).

The **challenges** also include providing the right environment for change to happen and respondents have stated that unless this is equitable across Wales then transformation will be slow or unsuccessful.

It is about **creating the right conditions, climate and culture for improvement** in whatever part of the education system in Wales it is being used in. The use of **relevant practitioners** is very important and a key component of success (Q15R5).

This section includes the reflection by one respondent who errs on the side of caution when discussing research and insists the **system leader** themselves must be led by research and enquiry to influence their own practice.

There is also a potential for **research informed insights** that **may not** follow the expected results, hence unless the **system leader** is connected to such work, they may not be promoting the best solutions (Q17R19).

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Overall, the theme **'Challenges'** stresses the importance of acknowledging there are barriers and limitations to developing the role of a **system leader** and **system leadership.** These can stem from policy changes that lack vision and coherence, the absence of a clear strategy and a deficit of professional trust. Additionally, individual leaders may resist new policy initiatives due to the relentless pressure of performance and ranking. It is essential to recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and concerns persist about the sharing of mediocre practices unless there is a shared understanding of excellent practices.

One of the major challenges in Wales, lies in the lack of capacity to innovate and effect change, exacerbated by regional and local interpretations of policies. Creating the right environment for change to occur is a significant obstacle, as is addressing the issue of inequitable opportunities for leaders across Wales. Furthermore, the teaching profession may not be sufficiently research-informed to make informed decisions, highlighting the need for professional development and ongoing learning.

Finally, an important question that arises from these challenges is whether the concept of **system leaders** and **system leadership** is fully developed enough to address these complex issues effectively. There is a pressing need to refine and enhance the approach to educational leadership to navigate the multifaceted challenges facing the education system in Wales.

(vii)   How do we know?

This theme is important as it describes why the respondents feel that evidence and research is essential to informing policy, which leads to the enactment and agency of the **system leader** and the **system leadership** approach. This theme emphasises the need for education professionals to consider both national and international evidence when informing policy decisions. Additionally, it highlights the essential role of leaders in engaging with practice-based research to ensure informed decision making. Current and relevant research may add validation to the efficiency and effectiveness of the practice and avoid unintended negative consequences. The data includes descriptive answers from both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews.

For schools to be successful, they must be scaffolded by a system that listens to their needs, facilitates these needs and **links practice and enquiry to relevant national and international research** (Q17R6).

System leadership converts **well researched national policy** with effective implementation and practice (Q15R13).

OECD reports continue to focus on strong system-wide leadership as a tool for whole system improvement (Q17R17).

The **research evidence from UK and international education systems** suggests that collaborative system leadership is a key attribute of educational success (Q17R21).

Respondents also state that the **system leaders** themselves are integral to applying evidence informed practice in their roles.

It enables **joint knowledge creation** and opportunities for **action based research** (Q17R5).

Educational system leadership is about **system leaders** working within the system ensuring that **research and professional learning** is **kept close to practice** and is based on the context, culture and ethos of individual schools (Q15R6).

Education system leadership is integral to leading learning, **encouraging enquiry** and building capacity not only in schools but in the organisations that support them (Q17R4).

The model their work is based on or **reflects research** and has a tangibility about it, a relevance. They are trusted and do not accept the status quo. They seek answers (Q13R21).

Use of evidence and research to inform and evaluate decisions, plans and implementation (Q15R5).

While no question was directly asked in the follow-up section about research and evidence, one respondent described a **system leader** as someone who "reads widely and considers the educational research to impact their role" (SL3 p.10). Another respondent describes the **system leader** as someone who is "abreast of research and ideas" (SL2 p.27).

Overall, this theme 'How do we know?' emphasises that research (both nationally and internationally) plays a pivotal role in the area of **educational system leaders** and **system leadership**. It is through research that leaders can gain valuable insights into educational best practices, emerging trends and the needs of their communities which leads to improved informed decision-making and effective leadership. The link between research and practice is essential in this context. Research findings can be directly applied to educational practices and policies, ensuring leaders are equipped with the most up-to-date and effective methods to drive improvements within the system. Evidence-informed practice goes hand in hand with research, emphasising the importance of grounding decisions and actions in reliable data and research findings. **System leaders** who incorporate evidence-informed practices are better positioned to drive positive change within their education systems. Close-to-practice research is also crucial for the success of **system leadership**. It provides leaders with insights and data that are directly relevant to their specific context and challenges, enabling them to tailor their strategies for maximum impact.

In conclusion, the seven themes identified: **Personal attributes, Collective leadership**, **Growing leaders, Educational landscape, The right thing, Challenges and How do we know?** collectively offer a nuanced and interconnected understanding of **educational system leadership** within the Welsh context. These themes do not exist in isolation; rather, they operate dynamically, with each one foregrounded or backgrounded depending on the context, as conceptualised through Rogoff's (1995, 2003) sociocultural framework. Together, they reveal that **system leadership** is not merely a role or set of responsibilities, but a complex, values-driven practice shaped by relationships, context and moral purpose. The findings also highlight the tensions and opportunities inherent in enacting **system leadership**, particularly in a devolved and evolving policy landscape. These insights provide a rich foundation for the following chapter, which will interpret the significance of these findings in relation to the existing literature and explore their implications for leadership development, policy and practice in Wales.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Chapter synopsis

This chapter interprets and synthesises the research findings presented earlier, offering a cohesive overview of the data, analysis and outcomes. It explores the significance of the findings in relation to the research questions and literature reviewed in Chapter 2. I explain how the seven themes identified in Chapter 5 inform both RQ, leading to the development of five principles of **system leadership** and eight essential aspects. I also present the resulting framework for **system leadership** (see 6.5 the Ellis model of system leadership in action) and reflect on the methodology, highlighting its strengths and limitations.

Seven themes

(i)   Personal attributes

(ii)   Collective leadership

(iii)   Growing leaders

(iv)   Educational landscape

(v)   The right thing

(vi)   Challenges

(vii)   How do we know?

Research questions

(i)   What is understood by the term **educational system leaders**?

(ii)   What is understood by the term **educational system leadership**?

The study had the overall aim of gaining an understanding of what senior educational leaders understood by these terms. I did this to inform my understanding of how Wales could contribute to realising its objective in ensuring that Wales develops its leaders as **system leaders** (Miles, 2024; OECD, 2014, 2020). While grounded in the Welsh context, this research offers transferable insights into **system leadership** by demonstrating how collaborative structures and leadership practices can be leveraged to drive equity and improvement across diverse educational systems beyond Wales too.

The overall findings and analysis were presented in Chapter 5: Findings. Throughout the research I ensured that I paid appropriate attention to all the ethical considerations (see Ethics 3.5). I also considered my positionality throughout and have outlined how I did this more thoroughly in Chapter 3: Methodology (see 3.2.4 reflexivity).

6.1 Interpretation of the findings

Summary

Using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps to reflexive thematic analysis (see Chapter 3: Methodology), I familiarised myself with both data sets (online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews) and interpreted the data to produce a codebook (see Figure 4.9). Using the codebook supported me to identify "candidate themes" (Braun and Clark, 2022, p.79). To deepen the analysis I then applied Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes as an analytical framework, which helped me identify the first three themes. These themes are presented in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Rogoff's planes showing grouped candidate themes

Personal plane (theme: Personal attributes	Interpersonal plane (theme: Collective leadership)	Community plane (theme: Educational landscape
Attributes	Collaborative	Context
Behaviours	Networking	Culture
Traits	Peer-to-peer	Conditions of the system
Values	Shared responsibilities	Enacting change

The Personal plane, which I named *Personal attributes*, encompasses the values, behaviours and traits that characterise a **system leader.** These include honesty, professionalism and inclusiveness, which are essential for building trust and credibility. The Interpersonal Plane, represented by the theme *Collective leadership*, captures the collaborative nature of **system leadership**, including peer-to-peer engagement and shared responsibilities. The Community Plane, which I named *Educational landscape*, reflects the broader systemic context, such as culture, conditions and the capacity for change that enables or constrains leadership.

These three themes are not discrete or static. Rather, they are interconnected and dynamic. When one theme is foregrounded in a particular context, the others remain present in the background, continuing to influence the leadership process as illustrated in the diagram below (Figure 6.1).

Diagram illustrating Rogoff's theory (1995, 2003) how one theme is foregrounded, others remain active in the background

- Backgrounded theme
- Community plane

Educational landscape

Collective leadership

- Backgounded theme
- Interpersonal plane

Personal attributes

- Foregrounded theme
- Personal plane
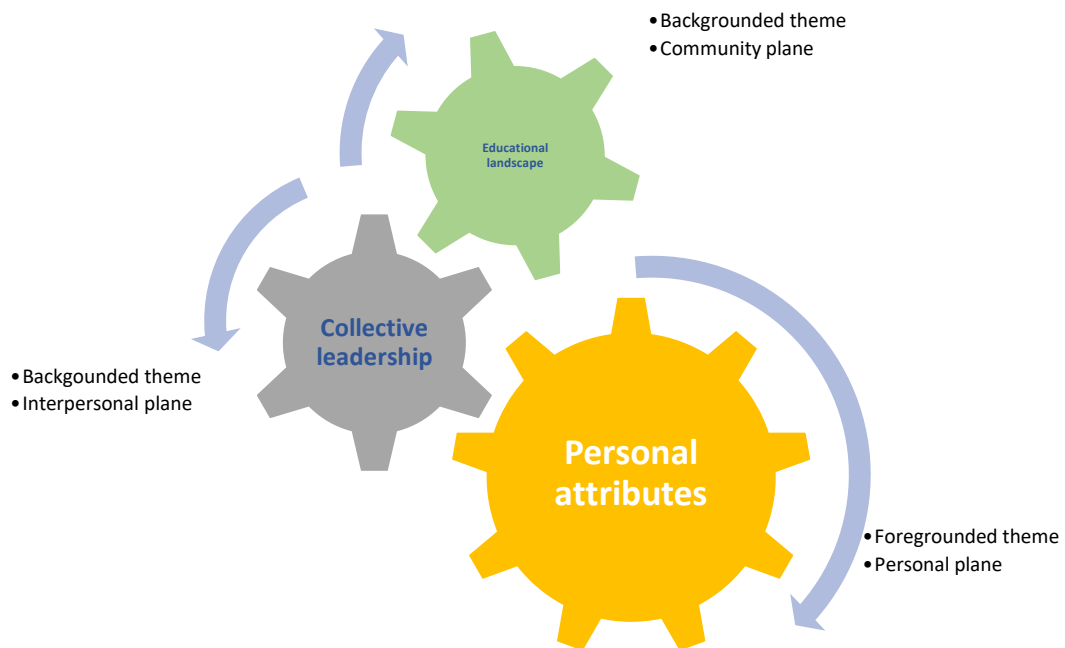
Figure 6.1 showing foregrounding and backgrounding of themes

This conceptualisation aligns with Rogoff's theory (1995, 2003), which asserts that no aspect of development exists in isolation. Instead, each contributes to the overall understanding of **system leadership**, depending on the context and focus of the moment.

In addition to the three themes aligned with Rogoff's (1995,2003) analytical framework, four further themes emerged from the data. These themes: ***The right thing***, ***Growing leaders***, ***Challenges*** and ***How do we know?*** do not sit neatly within one of Rogoff's planes (ibid) but are nonetheless deeply interconnected with the others.

The theme ***The right thing*** (SL1 p.12) captures the moral and ethical foundation of **system leadership**. It reflects a commitment to equity, fairness and doing what is best for learners (Q13R26). This theme is not only central to the role of a **system leader** but also underpins all

other themes. It is the "moral compass" (Mowatt, 2019, p.48) that guides decision-making and action.

Growing leaders emerged as another significant theme, highlighting the importance of leadership development, professional learning and capacity building. This theme speaks to both the personal development of the leader and their role in supporting others. The themes ***Challenges*** and ***How do we know?*** address the complexities and uncertainties of **system leadership**. ***Challenges*** refers to the barriers and tensions leaders face, while ***How do we know?*** reflects the need for evidence, evaluation and reflective practice.

These seven themes, three aligned with Rogoff's (1995, 2003) planes and four additional but interconnected themes, form a cohesive framework for understanding **system leadership**. They are not isolated concepts but operate in a networked and interdependent structure. When one theme is brought to the forefront, the others remain active and influential in the background (Rogoff, 1995, 2003). Below I demonstrate how the themes are connected in Figure 6.2.

Diagram illustrating the interrelatedness of all seven themes

Figure 6.2 Interconnection of all seven themes

This interconnectedness reinforces the idea that **system leadership** is a holistic and dynamic process. It is ethically driven, relationally enacted and contextually responsive. Each theme

contributes to a deeper understanding of how **system leaders** operate and the conditions that support or hinder their work.

6.2 Why system leadership has not gained traction in Wales

Conceptual ambiguity

My research concurs with Harris (2020) who suggest that the term **system leadership** remains inconsistently defined and insufficiently conceptualised within the Welsh context. There is limited consensus among policymakers and practitioners, which undermines the coherence and strategic alignment of leadership development initiatives. Although the concept appears in Welsh policy documents (Miles, 2024; OECD, 2014, 2020; Williams, 2018) and WG websites (WG, 2025b), it remains under-theorised and inconsistently applied. The lack of clarity around what **system leadership** entails, how it should be enacted and how its impact should be measured, risks undermining its potential and weakening reform efforts.

Policy instability and fragmentation

Over the past 25 years, Wales has experienced six First Ministers and nine Education Ministers, each introducing new priorities. This frequent turnover, while reflective of evolving political leadership, has contributed to a lack of policy cohesion. Reynolds and McKimm (2021) argue that no other system has undergone more leadership and management changes since 1998, potentially hindering coherent development.

Neagle's (2024b) decision to dissolve the NAEL and merge its functions with regional consortia into a new national body marks a significant restructuring. While this aims to centralise professional learning and leadership support, there are challenges about continuity and coherence for leadership development. Moreover, policy changes often result in the discontinuation of formal **system leader** roles (Q15R15), limiting long-term growth (Q17R9).

Cultural and structural barriers

Despite some progress, a culture of isolationism continues to persist among some schools, providers and local authorities, limiting opportunities for collaboration and shared learning (Estyn, 2014; Harris *et al*., 2021a). In the absence of a coherent and consistent system-wide strategy, leadership development remains fragmented. A significant barrier is the variation in regional and local interpretations of policy, which contributes to enduring disparities in school

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performance and pupil attainment across Wales (Estyn, 2022b, 2023b), "a major barrier to uptake and implementation is the variety of approaches within Wales, including regional and local interpretations of policy" (Q17R16).

These challenges are compounded by the demands of implementing wide-ranging reforms, such as the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b). While a centrally directed approach might offer greater coherence, it risks undermining the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy that underpin both the National Mission (WG, 2017a, 2020, 2023b) and the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b). As one respondent noted, "**System leaders** can be instrumental in achieving this national approach" (Q17R16). Additional challenges include a prevailing culture of competition, where **system leadership** is sometimes misconstrued as rivalry rather than collaboration. As one interviewee observed, "There was a perceived competition" (SL3, p.12), while another remarked, "Schools were very protective of what was unique because they didn't want to share" (SL4, p.4).

Gaps in professional standards

Current professional standards (WG, 2017c) in Wales do not explicitly recognise **system leaders**, despite their critical role in shaping and sustaining system-wide improvement. This omission represents a significant gap in acknowledging and supporting those who lead beyond individual institutions (see 1.4.2 Professional standards for teaching and leadership). The Arad (2023) report also highlights inconsistent awareness and engagement with the standards among practitioners and leaders.

Lack of empirical research

There is a notable absence of empirical research on **system leadership** in Wales (Harris, 2020). Despite widespread advocacy (Miles, 2024; OECD, 2014, 2020; Williams, 2018, WG, 2025b), the lack of evidence limits understanding of its effectiveness and impact. This gap constrains the ability to design informed policies and evaluate leadership practices.

In summary, while **system leadership** holds considerable promise for driving collaborative improvement across the Welsh education system, its potential remains largely unrealised. My research addresses a critical gap in Welsh education by clarifying barriers to **system leadership**. It offers timely insights (see 6.4: applying my research in a real-world setting:

Implications for **system leadership** in the Welsh context) to inform policy and practice, supporting leadership development aligned with the National Mission (WG, 2017b; 2020; 2023b) and Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) and promoting a more coherent, collaborative and evidence-informed approach to system-wide improvement.

6.3 Significance of the findings in the context of my research questions

RQ1 - What is understood by the term **educational system leader?**

RQ2 – What is understood by the term **educational system leadership?**

As you will see from my explanation below, it is impossible to discuss the two RQ in isolation as my data demonstrates they are connected and the respondents used the terms interchangeably. This phenomenon has also been reported by Harris (2020) in her review of the international evidence. I have also demonstrated that in talking about the foregrounded theme (in **bold**), it is unworkable without the connections with the other themes in the background (Rogoff, 1995, 2003) I have put these in *italics* throughout this chapter.

6.3.1 The Seven Themes

(i)   The right thing

Ethical Purpose

The theme, **The right thing**, is integral to all of the themes. From my research, this theme contributes to my understanding of the purpose of why being a **system leader** is important and why **system leadership** is essential. It conveys the fundamental concept of ensuring that any choices or actions taken are considered morally, ethically and are educationally responsible. Fullan (2005) states, "a sense of moral purpose is fueled (sic) by a focus on value-added high expectations for all, raising capability, pulling together and ongoing hunger for improvement" (p.59). It is the moral purpose of the role, "ultimately that's the right thing to do"(SL1 p.12). This concurs with Hopkins and Higham's (2007) research which found that **system leaders** "translate their vision or moral purpose into operational principles that have tangible outcomes" (p.159) and they place moral purpose at the centre of their model of **system leadership** in practice. It is a fundamental principle of **system leadership** "to model collective moral purpose" (Q13R29) and is inextricably linked to all seven themes. Fullan

(2003) states that "the best leaders have a multilevel moral imperative, personal humility and intense professional will" (p.77).

The values, ethics and morality of the **system leader** is paramount to successfully enacting the role in order that all learners have the opportunity to be their best selves (theme : *Personal attributes*). Mowat (2019) states "**systems leadership** is no leadership at all without a moral compass" (p.48). The moral or ethical purpose is driven by the value of wanting to help others, not just the pupils, learners or leaders in their own organisation but those in other organisations too, "a **system leader** is where you see your role greater than just your own school" (Q12R25). Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society (Fullan, 2003). My research supports the concept that if leaders benefit from this ethical leadership approach then learners will inevitably benefit. Ultimately, **The right thing** is about achieving the four purposes of Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) ensuring that all our children and young people can become:

- Ambitious capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives

- Healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society

- Enterprising creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work

- Ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world

Working beyond individual organisations

It is about helping others (beyond individual organisations) to improve themselves, which supports working towards a "self-improving system" (WG, 2017a, p.35). It is a commitment on behalf of **system leaders** to help others by ensuring that the impact is better than before. The **system leaders** "have a strong moral imperative to support and partner with other leaders for the benefit of all learners" (Q12R16). Woods *et al*. (2021) state "post pandemic it is essential that time and space is given to innovation in creating an expansive social justice agenda which works for the enhancement of voice, respect and educational development for all" (p.4). This theme is fundamental to the research findings and it is the ultimate reason and

purpose of the **system leader** to work for the benefit of all learners not just those in their own organisation, it is social justice, it is the "moral imperative" (Fullan, 2003, p.47).

(ii)   Personal Attributes

Values

The theme, **Personal Attributes**, addresses both research questions. The data shows that an **educational system leader** possesses specific qualities, values and behaviours that shape their leadership (Q17R9), aligning with Higham and Hopkins' (2007) view that "**system leaders** share a characteristic set of behaviours and skills" (p.159). These attributes influence decision-making and develop trust, as leaders act ethically and model values-driven leadership, "you need to be aware of your own values and have that skill set of reading others and knowing their values" (SL4 p.14). This relational approach helps align teams and sustain a shared vision, with honesty and trust-building seen as essential, "you've got to be honest, to build up trust with the people that you're working with" (SL2 p.24).

Trust

My data shows that trust is central to **system leadership**, built through credibility and authentic engagement, "able to talk to people, build up a relationship, build up trust and credibility" (SL2, p.15). This supports Fullan's (2003) view that moral purpose and trust enable leaders to "go the extra mile" (p.62) and Hart's (2022) emphasis on trust as essential for school improvement. **System leaders** in this study are principled decision-makers, reinforcing this moral dimension.

The CISL (2017) framework echoes these findings, highlighting traits like systemic thinking, empathy and long-term vision. These qualities help leaders inspire others and adopt a values-driven culture, "I think the thing that I did the most, was giving to that headteacher, confidence" (SL3, p.7). Empathy also strengthens relationships and team cohesion, enabling leaders to navigate complexity and "make the right decisions" (SL1, p.8). Shared values further reinforce trust, collaboration and a unified vision.

Visionary

Vision emerges as a defining trait of **system leadership**. Leaders are seen as forward-thinking, aligning their goals with broader aims like the "national mission" (WG, 2017b, 2020, 2023b) and demonstrating the "energy and vision" needed for strategic leadership (Barber *et al*., 2010, p.92). They grasp the "bigger picture" (Q12R5), set long-term goals and prioritise effectively (Q15R1). As Woods and MacFarlane (2022) note, a school's success depends on a shared vision grounded in values and ethos.

Vision is also enacted. Leaders build networks, "we created a little network together" (SL3, p.2) and lead with clarity and accountability, "everybody who works in the school [is] accountable and responsible" (SL4, p.22). Their vision nurtures trust, resilience and innovation "be brave, it doesn't matter if it goes wrong" (SL2, p.28). Finally, vision is communicated, **system leaders** articulate goals clearly, engage in dialogue and collaborate beyond their teams, ensuring alignment and sustained progress.

Credible

My study indicates **system leaders** are understood to be credible and well respected and usually very experienced educationalists that have a successful performance record, they "*have credibility, drive, integrity and commitment*" (Q13R13). Clearly from the data, the **system leader** needs to have proven themselves "*so you know they have a track record in that particular position as a leader*" (SL4 p.10). It is not enough to have experience on its own, "*just because you've been a head for 25 years doesn't mean that you're an effective educational leader*" (SL1 p.7). This can also be seen as a barrier as the research indicates not all leaders can develop into being a **system leader** (theme-*Challenges*). Greany and Kamp (2022) agree and state that leading a single school is not necessarily good preparation for leading across a network. Rogoff (2003) clarifies that experience alone does not give you the credibility but the "*recognition*" (p.143) which is highly important especially when they participate in additional activities beyond their own organisation.

Formal and Informal roles

My research shows that **system leadership** operates through both formal and informal roles. Formal roles, such as "inspector" or "challenge advisor" (SL1, SL4), are typically local, directive

and supported by middle-tier agencies (Figure 2.1), but can lack autonomy and trust, limiting impact (SL1, SL2, SL3). These roles often involve administrative tasks and rigid structures.

In contrast, informal roles are peer-elected (SL2), grounded in dialogue (SL3) and characterised by influence through modelling, mentoring and collaboration (Q12R7, Q12R28). These leaders act without formal authority, relying on trust and mutual benefit (SL1, Q13R4). As Hart (2022) notes, trust stems from character, competence and accountability. Informal leadership allows for flexibility and innovation, encouraging support and confidence-building (Q13R7). This aligns with Barber *et al*. (2010), who found high-performing schools favour peer-led innovation. Fullan (2003) Greany (2015) and Hopkins (2007, 2016) argue for balancing top-down and lateral development to build networked systems. Ultimately, both roles require accountability and adaptability. Leaders who navigate both effectively using strong interpersonal skills, are best positioned to drive system-wide improvement and address both research questions.

(iii) Collective Leadership

Mutual benefit

Findings from this study, particularly under theme two, **Collective leadership**, inform my understanding of the second research question. The data suggests that **educational system leadership** is defined by how leaders collaborate beyond their own institutions to support broader school improvement, "working collaboratively to benefit wider than your own school" (Q15R22). This aligns with Fullan and Munby's (2016) assertion that "system-wide school collaboration is the key" (p.4) and its primary aim is to "improve outcomes" (p.5). **System leadership** is characterised by experienced leaders sharing responsibility and working toward a shared purpose, "the collective efforts of experienced leaders working in partnership with shared responsibilities, working towards a common goal or with a mutual purpose" (Q15R6). As one participant noted that "if you're going to work together effectively, there needs to be a level of professional trust and I guess a mutual benefit for everybody in some way" (SL1 p.4). This emphasis on trust is echoed by Pont (2021), who states that "trust and professionalism are at the core" (p.55).

Partnerships

My research supports the view that school and system improvement is a shared responsibility, led through partnerships and networks rather than by individuals alone (Kamp, 2017, OECD, 2016). Effective **system leaders**, as described by Senge *et al*. (2015), build trust-based relationships and collaborative networks. Hopkins (2007) emphasises their role in developing cross-system connections to promote broader system-thinking and change. However, Higham and Hopkins (2007) caution that mere participation in networks is insufficient and deep, purposeful engagement is needed to drive transformation. Farrar (2021) reinforces this, highlighting the importance of a strong partnership identity, a shared learning focus and accountable, trust-based relationships. Greany and Kamp, (2022) also state that networks play a key role in facilitating peer evaluations and resource sharing. My data echoes these findings, showing that **system leadership** is most impactful when it prioritises the success of all learners, not just those within one's own setting (theme – *the right thing*).

Collaboration

My research argues that working in collaboration is an essential element of **system leadership** "collaboration is one of the keys to reform" (Q17R24). Fullan states that collaboration

> occurs when two or more individuals **share meaningful** responsibility for producing a choice. **Sharing** means allocating responsibility in rough proportion to each party's choice-making capacity. **Meaningful** implies that the act of sharing the load is important to the outcome: that is, one or the other collaborator could not accomplish the task on a consistent basis without the contribution of the other (Fullan, 2003, p.68).

My findings indicate that educational leaders must coordinate their efforts to address complex systemic reforms in Wales, particularly the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (WG, 2021a), the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b) and the priorities outlined in Our National Mission (WG, 2023b). Collaboration among leaders takes both informal and formal forms. Informally, leaders often initiate peer-led seminars to share practice, "six of our schools might do a little seminar and share what each of us is doing" (SL3, p.2). This culture of collaboration is reinforced by the Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (WG, 2017c), which promote cluster working, "the new professional standards have helped and cluster working is much stronger

now" (SL3, p.14). More formal collaboration occurs through structured partnerships and national networks, such as consortia-led roles, "there's a clear role set out by each consortium [it is] essentially a collaborative role" (SL2, p.5). These partnerships align local and national priorities, requiring leaders to navigate a multi-tiered governance system, as one interviewee noted:

> you understand what the WG priorities are [and that] schools are responsible to the local authority but that responsibility is delegated to the consortia (SL2, p.14)

System leadership involves a shared responsibility for the overall success and performance of the entire education system but at the same time ensures that no single individual bears the entire burden of leadership.

> The purpose of **system leaders** should be; to contribute to improving outcomes for all learners to support professional learning in schools through a relevant and focussed offer that encourages and expects **collaboration** between schools a commitment to leading pedagogy and recognising its influence as a driver for change and improvement to share and facilitate the sharing of best practice across the system (Q13R6).

Peer-to-peer

Peer-to-peer collaboration emerges from my findings as a key strength of **system leadership** in Wales. Leaders value support and guidance from their peers, recognising that such relationships develop trust, credibility and shared learning, "leaders at all levels in Wales need support and guidance, this should come from their peers" (Q17R17). This collaboration spans both formal roles, such as peer inspectors and NPQH mentors and informal networks initiated by leaders themselves. These relationships are built on mutual trust and shared purpose "you talk to people, build up a relationship, build up trust" (SL2, p.15).

Fullan (2005) supports this, noting that people find meaning and well-being through connection and collective problem-solving. Godfrey (2022) adds that peer review serves both evaluative and developmental functions, enhancing professional practice. Informal networks, often self-initiated, offer autonomy and flexibility, "we created a little network together […] we set that up amongst ourselves" (SL3, p.2). These collaborations enable leaders to exchange ideas, stay informed and build professional communities.

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Peer-to-peer work also contributes to emotional well-being, offering a nonjudgmental space to share challenges and successes, "proper and useful collaborative work is nonjudgmental" (SL1, p.4). It supports continuous professional development (theme: *Growing Leaders*) and contributes to both learning organisations within schools and a broader learning system across schools (Kools and Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2018). As one respondent noted that "peer supported learning is a very powerful way of influencing positive change in a system" (Q17R22). Ultimately, peer collaboration helps address both research questions by enabling leaders to drive reform through lateral, trust-based partnerships.

(iv) Growing Leaders

Building leadership capacity

The theme of '**Growing leaders**' is central to both research questions, highlighting its importance in building a strong, future-ready educational workforce. Leaders emphasise the need to "build capacity and have the best possible staff" (SL4, p.18), recognising that leadership development is a system-wide responsibility. This involves identifying and nurturing leadership potential at all levels, from schools to national bodies, to expand overall capacity, "Good **system leaders** nurture others productively" (Q12R26). **System leaders** often engage in informal professional development by benchmarking themselves against peers and adapting their skills to context (Hopkins and Higham, 2007). They translate moral purpose into practical action, developing leadership through professional learning communities and cross-school collaboration. As Harris and Jones (2021) note, leadership of professional learning is not a role but a "collective practice" (p.49).

My findings show that **Growing leaders** is a multifaceted process focused on professional learning and development. It equips leaders with the knowledge and competencies needed to navigate complex educational reforms. Harris (2020) argues that **system leadership** requires advanced practices that transcend individual settings. This collective capacity-building enables schools to become self-improving with minimal external intervention (Q15R5).

System leaders also invest in their own growth, valuing continuous learning and staying informed about research and emerging trends, "research and professional learning is kept

close to practice and is based on the context, culture and ethos of individual schools" (Q15R6). They understand that supporting others enhances their own leadership, "The more you share actually, the better that you get yourselves" (SL3, p.10). Ultimately, growing leaders is not just about individual development, it is about cultivating a culture of shared leadership that strengthens the entire system.

Role models

The theme of '**Growing leaders'** is central to building leadership capacity across the education system. My findings show that **system leaders** are committed to developing others by sharing expertise, modelling effective practice and creating opportunities for professional growth, "sharing good practice, expertise and resources to strengthen, build capacity and help transformation" (Q17R10).

Fullan (2005) argues that a leader's success is measured not only by outcomes but by the number of capable leaders they empower. **System leaders** promote a culture of learning by inspiring leadership at all levels (Q13R14), offering mentorship, coaching and collaborative learning opportunities. These experiences, both formal and informal, enable leaders to exchange ideas and grow professionally, "you take from their ideas" (SL2, p.26). While some believe **system leadership** can be developed through training (SL2, p.30), others view it as a mindset (SL3, p.18). My data suggests both are valid and that some leaders possess innate attributes, but leadership capacity is enhanced through structured programmes (e.g. Estyn peer inspector training, NAEL Associate roles) and informal networks of like-minded peers (Q12R21).

Credibility and integrity are essential to effective **system leadership.** Leaders are respected when they have a proven track record, "they need some credibility [and] a track record in that particular position" (SL4, p.10). This aligns with the importance of the themes *personal attributes* and *collective leadership*, where trust and collaboration underpin success. Woods and Macfarlane (2022) reinforce this by highlighting that outstanding schools actively nurture leadership and teaching talent through a culture of coaching, mentoring, role modelling and diverse leadership opportunities. This approach ensures that leadership development is embedded in the school culture and sustained over time. In conclusion, '**Growing leaders'** supports system-wide improvement by nurturing leadership development, succession

planning and a culture of role modelling. Leaders must invest in their own growth while enabling others to lead, strengthening the system as a whole.

(v)   Educational Landscape

The theme **'Educational landscape'** aligns with the third analytical plane, "Community", (Rogoff, 1990, 2003) and supports both research questions. It explores the broader context in which **system leadership** operates in Wales, focusing on how leaders contribute to national reform efforts and system transformation. As Greany (2018) notes, **system leaders** must "operate at the interface between policy and practice" (p.67) and engage practitioners in achieving collective priorities.

My findings suggest that delivering national priorities is a shared responsibility, not confined to a single leader or organisation, "the provision offered to learners is the responsibility of a number of bodies at national and local level" (Q17R17). This reflects the principle of collective leadership, where collaboration across levels is essential.

Effective **system leaders** influence the culture and conditions necessary for change by shaping and communicating the evolving educational landscape. Fullan (2005) emphasises that leaders must engage across levels to co-construct and critique strategies, ensuring alignment and coherence. Similarly, the OECD (2014) highlights that system-wide leadership is a tool for whole system improvement. In summary, this theme emphasises the importance of context-aware, collaborative leadership in navigating, shaping and influencing the Welsh education system.

Influencers

Strong **system leaders** shape educational improvement beyond their own settings. They see themselves as contributors to the wider system, actively challenging and shaping policy and practice, they "question and challenge current policy and procedures across the whole educational system with the aim of improvement for all" (Q13R20). They also act as trusted advisers, ensuring that decisions at national and local levels reflect the needs of educators and learners.

Cousin (2019) found that **system leaders** in England hold influential positions, often advising ministers and sitting on regional headteacher boards, giving them direct access to decision-

making. My findings echo this, showing that **system leaders** influence others through guidance, critique and advocacy. Their role extends beyond their own schools, "to influence and effect continuous improvement beyond your school and influence policy debate from a practitioner's perspective" *(Q13R12).* Influence is not just about authority, it is about credibility, collaboration and the ability to shape thinking and practice across the system.

Working at all levels

My data indicates that improving the system and making it better than it was before is the prime purpose of the **system leader**, it is a "selfless approach to improve the systems they are involved in and producing better opportunities and outcomes for all" (Q12R15). They *"initiate something better than before"* (Q12R21), it is "The right thing" *(SL1.p.12).*

Fullan (2003) states, "sticking to one's neck of the woods guarantees that the moral imperative will never exist in more than a very small percentage of schools" (p.47). My research claims **system leaders** understand that they must work beyond their organisations to support the wider system.

A **system leader** engages with different tiers (Figure 2.1) within the system, to influence wider strategic direction ensuring that "*every child has the same opportunity*" (SL2 p.27) (theme: *The right thing*). A strong **system leader** goes "*beyond school leadership to impact on others for the good of the students in Wales and beyond*" (Q12R12). They have an ethical imperative to support all learners not just those in their direct care.

Culture and context

The theme '**Educational landscape'** explores how cultural and contextual factors shape **system leadership** in Wales. Culture, as Rogoff (2003) explains, is not static but co-constructed through shared activity and inherited skills, "people contribute to the creation of cultural processes and cultural processes contribute to the creation of people" (p.51). Leaders develop through participation in these cultural activities, which themselves evolve through human involvement (ibid, p.52). My findings reflect this, showing that effective **system leaders** actively cultivate cultures of leadership development within their organisations. Hart (2022) stresses the importance of understanding a school's culture and climate to drive

improvement, while Billington (2021) emphasises that trust is the foundation of a strong leadership culture.

Context is equally vital and Leithwood *et al*. (2019) identify both structural and behavioural factors such as geography, language, assumptions and inequalities as key to enabling **system leadership.** My data supports this, "they shouldn't be disadvantaged because of their language or status or size" (SL2, p.27). Effective leaders tailor their approaches to meet the specific needs of their communities. Fullan (2003) argues that leaders must "help change context" by introducing new elements that positively influence behaviour (p.1), recognising that "context is social, not individual" (p.2).

System leaders also create environments that support socio-cultural engagement and high-level professional learning, "there should be a core entitlement for everybody, but then there needs to be bespoke support" (SL1, p.13). They balance local needs with national priorities, addressing inequalities through context-responsive leadership, "we do ensure that funding goes to the schools that have got the highest level of need" (SL3, p.13). This aligns with Greany and Higham's (2018) observation that **system leaders** often operate at the intersection of policy and practice, navigating tensions between school-level autonomy and system-wide accountability. Greany (2021) warns that overly centralised leadership structures, such as those seen in some English MATs, can erode professional agency and democratic accountability, these are risks that Wales must actively avoid. Instead, the Ellis model of **system leadership** in action (See Figure 6.5) as reflected in this research, emphasises trust, collaboration and subsidiarity. These principles are essential for developing a coherent and equitable system, especially in a devolved context where policy implementation relies heavily on the professional judgement and moral purpose of leaders working across diverse communities.

In summary, **system leaders** influence and are influenced by the cultural and contextual conditions in which they work. Drawing on Rogoff's (2003) sociocultural perspective, they participate in and shape evolving educational practices, developing inclusive, responsive and equitable leadership across the system

The role of the **system leader** is "to drive educational change so as to improve outcomes for students" (Q13R25). This aligns with the concept of the **system leader** as a '*change agent'* (Earley, p.68, 2022; Harris, 2020, p.10; Hopkins and Higham, 2007, p.156), a proactive and influential individual who drives positive change within the system by identifying opportunities, building support, implementing strategies and overcoming challenges. Extending this perspective, Earley (2022) argues that a school cannot truly be a great school unless it is also a "system player and *change agent*, actively contributing to and sustaining knowledge and understanding of education and school systems at local, national and international levels" (p.68). This broader view positions schools not only as centres of learning but as dynamic contributors to the evolution and improvement of the wider educational landscape.

My data supports this view. Respondents described **system leaders** as individuals who "share their work because it is recognised as something new or effective," who "model best practice," and who "challenge the system" (Q13R21). They are "trusted," "seek answers," and "do not accept the status quo" (Q13R21). These leaders are seen as catalysts for progress, driving innovation and pushing boundaries within the education system. They play a fundamental role in navigating the complexities of reform and ensuring its successful implementation.

In summary, the **system leader** as a *change agent* is not merely a facilitator of reform but a key driver of sustainable, system-wide transformation. Their ability to develop a thriving culture, advocate for change and respond to context is essential to the success of educational reform in Wales.

(vi) Challenges

Definition

This theme contributes to both RQ, by examining the implications of **system leadership** within the Welsh education system. While my research supports the concept of **system leadership**, it also reveals ambiguity around its definition and implementation, "I understand that **system leader** and **system leadership** can be interchangeable but meanings can overlap" (Q15R9). Harris (2020) similarly recommends greater clarity around the definition, purpose,

responsibilities and accountability of **system leaders**. Without this clarity, confusion and inconsistency can delay implementation.

Although a precise definition may be elusive due to the complexity of the concept, my findings suggest that further exploration is needed to understand how **system leadership** is enacted and whether it remains an "emerging practice" (SL3, p.16). Higham and Hopkins (2007) raised similar concerns, which remain relevant in Wales today. Varying interpretations across regions also present challenges. Respondents note that **system leadership** is still new and evolving, "there wasn't an expectation of us supporting others before and there is now" (SL3, p.16) and that "a major barrier to uptake and implementation is the variety of approaches within Wales, including regional and local interpretations of policy" (Q17R16).

This lack of shared understanding can lead to scepticism and resistance, 'if they don't really understand what **system leadership is** [then] their mindset's gonna block off that influence" (SL2, p.12). Yet, despite these challenges, the importance of **system leadership** is clear, "effective **system leadership** is [...] absolutely crucial to the reform of education in Wales" (Q17R8).

In summary, while **system leadership** presents significant potential for driving educational improvement, its success relies on a shared understanding of its purpose and practice, as well as sustained critical reflection on its evolving role within the Welsh educational landscape. My research (see figure 6.5: the Ellis model of **system leadership** in action) contributes to that discourse by offering original insights into how **system leadership** is conceptualised and enacted in practice, that may inform both national policy and broader international debates on educational leadership.

Competition

Other **Challenges** to the concept of a **system leader** and **system leadership** is the culture of competition, where **system leadership** may inadvertently lead to a misunderstanding of the purpose and create *rivalry* rather than genuine cooperation, "there was a perceived competition*(SL3 p.12) and "*schools were very protective of what it was that was unique because they didn't want to share" (SL4 p.4). In England, competition is still perceived as a barrier, as only those leaders who have received Ofsted "outstanding grade" are selected to be a **system leader** (Harris 2020, p.14). One respondent states **system leadership** should be

seen as "Working towards a common good rather than being in competition*"(Q15R6) and this links in with the ethical purpose of the role *"The right thing" (SL1 p.12)*. However, Hargreaves and O'Connor (2019) argue in the literature that competition can be a good thing and say when effective collaboration takes place "everybody benefitted […] even when competitors" (p.138).

Top-down versus bottom-up

A persistent tension in educational reform lies in the interplay between top-down mandates and bottom-up innovation. Fullan (2005) identified this nearly two decades ago and my research confirms that concerns about top-down dominance remain, particularly where government maintains an instructional stance (SL4, p.9). This imbalance continues to constrain grassroots innovation and collaborative reform. Kamp (2017) highlights the difficulty of nurturing authentic collaboration in systems shaped by hierarchical control and competition. Greany (2018) describes this tension as "contentious and complex" (p.67), arguing that **system leaders** must navigate the space between policy and practice, mobilising practitioners toward shared goals despite being state-funded and regulated.

Hopkins (2016)and Greany (2015) both argue that neither top-down nor bottom-up change is sufficient alone, instead, they must operate in "creative tension" (Hopkins, 2016, p.91). Pont (2021) calls for a shift from directive policymaking to one rooted in trust and professional autonomy, requiring redefined leadership roles. Higham *et al.* (2009) support devolving decision-making to schools but emphasise the need for a "new professionalism" to address inequality and raise outcomes (p.8). Hatcher (2008) advocates for system-led reform through collaborative leadership and networks, while Toh *et al*. (2014) propose ecological leadership as a more adaptive model. They reject binary thinking, suggesting instead a "centralized-decentralized" (sic) paradigm (p.99) where leadership is distributed across layers and actors to enable integrated, responsive change. In summary, schools must be supported by a system that listens, facilitates and connects practice with research, "schools must be scaffolded by a system that listens to their needs […] and links practice and enquiry to relevant national and international research" (Q17R6).

Resistance

The successful implementation of **system leadership** relies on broad acceptance and endorsement across the education system. As one respondent noted, top-down reforms risk being "resented or resisted […] unless the majority of its workforce feels positive about the reform" (Q17R8). Resistance may arise from embedded structures, cultures or individuals, making it essential to "avoid territorial behaviours" (Q17R24). While Higham and Hopkins (2007) proposed strategies to address these challenges in England, Harris (2020) acknowledges that such "tensions exist" today.

Wales must learn from past mistakes in other systems. For example, in England, **system leadership** has been narrowly defined, restricted to headteachers rated 'outstanding' by OFSTED, leading to perceptions of a "co-opted elite" (Greany & Higham, 2018, p.13). This exclusivity has limited broader engagement and undermined the collaborative ethos of **system leadership**. In Wales, inconsistent regional and local interpretations of policy further complicate implementation, "a major barrier to uptake and implementation is the variety of approaches within Wales" (Q17R16). In summary, for **system leadership** to be effective, it must be clearly defined, inclusive and supported by a coherent, system-wide approach that supports trust, collaboration and shared ownership.

Title versus Action

A key limitation identified in my research is that not all leaders within the system are suited to the role of **system leader**. Holding a leadership title or having years of experience does not automatically equate to effectiveness, "just because you've been a head for 25 years doesn't mean that you're an effective educational leader" (SL1, p.7); "we all know that there are people who it's not for" (SL2, p.21). Fullan (2003) similarly argues that experience alone does not guarantee quality leadership. Higham and Hopkins (2007) note that while some leaders may demonstrate exemplary qualities, they are "not necessarily **system leaders**" (p.160). MacGregor *et al*. (2023) reinforce this, stating that "**system leadership** is determined not by title, but by action" (p.364). This is echoed in my data, where participants challenge the assumption that formal roles equate to **system leadership**, "all of the challenge advisers were called **system leaders** [but] I don't think they have the knowledge, skills and experience" (SL1, p.17).

This disconnect between title and capability can undermine the credibility of the **system leadership** model, leading to scepticism and disengagement. Effective **system leadership** requires specific *personal attributes* and competencies, not just positional authority. As Hopkins (2016) asserts, leadership is "as close to a silver bullet as we have" for school improvement, yet he also warns that leadership quality in Wales remains "too variable" (p.108) and often "episodic and not sustained" (p.98).

My findings support this concern, indicating that Wales continues to face challenges in developing and sustaining the leadership capacity required for effective **system leadership**. A more rigorous, evidence-informed approach to identifying and developing **system leaders** is essential to ensure credibility, consistency and long-term impact.

Geographical location

My research also states the geographical locations can be a barrier to successful

development of **system leadership**;

> I think that's a stumbling block really where there are stronger regions than others and also different ways of working… yes I think it's critical that they share…people need to share definitely, otherwise you will have pockets of brilliance it is unsatisfactory (SL3 p.20).

This is seen as a barrier to ensuring equity of access to leaders and learners and which is unethical practice. There is a strong perception that the role is competitive and that this can exacerbate the need for a culture of collaboration. The very nature of Wales with its diverse urban, rural and coastal communities (Turner, 2020) creates geographical challenges with unfair access to resources.

Innovation deficit

My final challenge or barrier is the opportunity for **system leaders** to be innovative and creative. This will be stifled if it is not given the attention and time and space to flourish, *"without **system leadership** then the capacity to innovate and change things is limited"'* (Q17R25). Barber *et al.* (2010) state schools that move from great to excellent use interventions which focus on "introducing peer-based learning through school-based and system-wide interaction, as well as supporting system-sponsored innovation and

experimentation" (p.20), they state further that "peer-led creativity and innovation inside schools becomes the core driver for raising performance" (*ibid*).

(vii)   How do we know?

Research

This theme highlights the critical role of research and evidence in supporting **system leadership** and contributes to both RQ. My findings show that **system leaders** must remain informed about current educational policies and priorities to lead effectively (SL3, p.10). They are expected to model evidence-informed practice, using research to guide their own decisions and to support the professional growth of others, as discussed in the theme '*Growing leaders'*.

System leaders promote a culture of continuous improvement by engaging in research and reflective practice, "you gotta be abreast of research and ideas, from projects in schools or through HEIs and academics" (SL2, p.27). This engagement ensures that leadership remains contextually relevant and responsive, "**system leaders** working within the system ensuring that research and professional learning is kept close to practice [and] based on the context, culture and ethos of individual schools" (Q15R6). Hopkins (2016) supports this, noting that "collaborative forms of enquiry" are essential to building high-performing schools and systems (p.96). My data confirms that personalised enquiry enhances decision-making and aligns leadership with the specific needs of learners, teachers and leaders. As one respondent noted that "**system leadership** has developed [and] now we have a common language to describe it" (SL4, p.21), though further research is needed to fully understand the role (SL3, p.16).

Effective **system leaders** are curious, reflective and committed to professional learning, "definitely somebody who is keen to read widely and look at the educational research" (SL3, p.10). Research supports innovation and evidence-based decision-making, helping leaders balance new approaches with established practices. As one participant explained, "there should be a core entitlement for everybody, but then there needs to be bespoke support" (SL1, p.13).

Ultimately, an evidence-informed profession ensures that decisions, policies and actions are grounded in credible information. This leads to more efficient resource use, improved

leadership quality and better outcomes for learners. This study fills a recognised gap in the literature, offering new insights that strengthen the field's knowledge base:

What is understood by **educational system leaders** and **educational system leadership**.

6.4 Practical implications

My research presents the empirical evidence to support the understanding of **system leadership** within the education profession. I have extrapolated key data from my findings to generate a model, the Ellis model of **system leadership** in action (see figure 6.5) that support the concept of **system leadership**.

I mapped the themes reported above into *five core principles* (see figure 6.3)

- ethical purpose
- values-driven leadership
- credibility
- professional trust
- vision

and *eight essential aspects* (see figure 6.4)

- collaboration

- capacity-building

- social justice

- working beyond own organisation

- research

- innovation

- challenging the status quo

- contributing to the culture of a self-improving system

The eight core principals and eight essential aspects serve as key drivers of system-wide educational improvement in Wales.

My research indicates that the role of a **system leader** is multifaceted and that the **system leadership** approach is wide-ranging and diverse. I have explained below how I think my research contributes in practical terms to addressing the critical gap indicated by the two RQ and how it could be highly impactful in supporting the current reforms in Wales.

6.4.1 The core principles of a system leader

Through the analysis of the data and theme description I have extracted what people have said and I have created '*principles*' which align to the role of being a **system leader**. I have identified five core principles in total which are directly related to my data and which underpin the role of a **system leader.** In Table 6.2 I set out how the principles link directly to the individual themes.

Table 6.2 Shows the principles that directly correlate with the themes generated from the data

Principle	Theme description
Ethical purpose	The right thing
Values driven leadership	Personal attributes
Credibility	Personal attributes
Professional trust	Personal attributes
Visionary	Personal attributes

Description of core principles aligned to the role of a system leader

I explain below what each principle means. I give a description of how the **system leader** role is grounded in the five core principles. The principles provide a framework to support the development of a **system leader** in practice.

Ethical Purpose (theme-the right thing)

Ethical purpose is central to **system leadership**, grounded in a strong moral compass and a commitment to values such as fairness, justice and compassion. As Mowatt (2019) states, "**systems leadership** is no leadership at all without a moral compass" (p.48) highlighting that ethical leadership is foundational, not optional. Leaders with ethical purpose act with integrity and aim to serve a greater good. Earley (2022) reinforces this, noting that effective leaders influence others through a deep sense of moral purpose and social justice. Fullan's (2025) latest work positions moral purpose and social justice at the heart of **system leadership**, aligning closely with the Welsh Government's emphasis on equity and collective responsibility (Eagan 2016, 2025; Jones, 2025; Neagle, 2024a, 2024b). My findings support this view, with leaders demonstrating a commitment to doing "the right thing" (SL, p.12) even in challenging

circumstances. This moral grounding builds trust and develops collective commitment across the system.

Values-Driven Leadership (theme-Personal attributes)

Values-driven leadership is grounded in core principles that guide decision-making and behaviour. As one participant noted, these include "honesty, inclusiveness, tolerance [and] professionalism" (SL2, p.24). Leaders who prioritise values such as integrity, respect and empathy nurtures trust, cohesion and a shared purpose. By modelling authenticity and ethical conduct, they inspire confidence and promote sustainable success. When these values are embedded in daily practice and strategy, they become a unifying and transformative force for **system leadership**.

Credibility (theme-Personal attributes)

Credibility is the quality of being trusted, believed and respected by others. In leadership, credibility is essential for building strong relationships, inspiring confidence and gaining followership. Leaders who possess credibility are perceived as honest, competent and reliable, with a track record of delivering on promises and upholding ethical standards. They demonstrate consistency between their words and actions, earning the trust and respect of their peers, colleagues and stakeholders. **System leaders** are credible leaders who effectively communicate their vision, values and expectations, inspiring others to get behind common goals and objectives.

Professional trust (theme-Personal attributes)

Professional trust refers to the confidence and reliance that individuals place in their colleagues, leaders and organisations within a professional context. It is built on a foundation of integrity, competence, transparency and mutual respect. Trustworthy leaders develop an environment where team members feel safe to express their ideas, take risks and collaborate openly. They prioritise accountability, fairness and inclusivity, creating a culture of psychological safety and empowerment. By nurturing professional trust, **system leaders** cultivate strong relationships, enhance teamwork and drive organisational success.

A visionary leader articulates a bold, future-focused vision and inspires others to pursue it. They think creatively, anticipate challenges and challenge the status quo through innovation and collaboration. By developing a shared purpose and commitment, visionary leadership drives transformation and long-term success which is key to building a self-improving system in Wales. **System leaders** adopt a long-term, system-wide perspective, making decisions that benefit both present and future learners.

These principles recognise the personal attributes and characteristics of an effective **system leader** and the framework (see Figure 6.3 below) could be used to develop current and future **system leaders** in Wales.

The five core principles of a system leader

Ethical purpose	Values driven leadership	Visionary
Professional trust	Credibility	
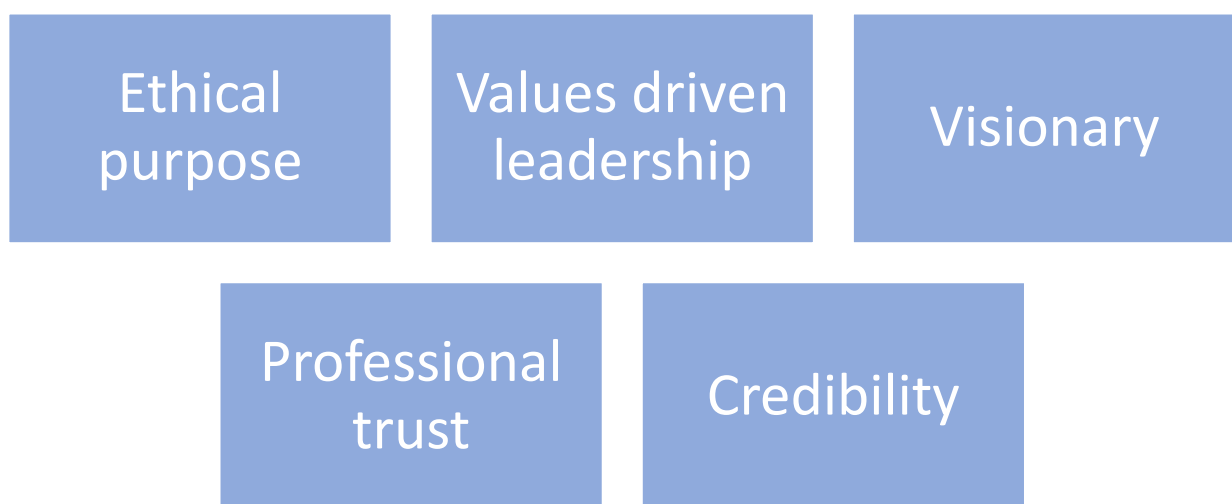
Figure 6.3 shows the five principles of a system leader

6.4.2 The essential aspects of system leadership

In addition to the core principles outlined above, my data reveals eight essential aspects of **system leadership**, identified through thematic analysis. These aspects, detailed in Table 6.3, are grounded in the data and closely aligned with the core principles presented in Table 6.2 and Figure 6.3. Together, they offer a robust framework that underpins the concept of **system leadership** and its practical application.

Aspects	Themes
Actively work beyond own organisation	Collective leadership Growing leaders
Develop educational leadership capacity in self and others	Personal attributes Growing leaders
Model social justice	The right thing
Conduct collaborative leadership practices (peer-to-peer)	Collective leadership
Contribute to the culture of a self-improving system	Educational landscape
Engage consciously in research and enquiry	How do we know?
Participate intentionally in innovation and creativity	How do we know? Challenges
Challenge the status quo	Challenges Educational landscape

Description of essential aspects aligned to the concept of system leadership

I explain below what each aspect means and I give a description of how **system leadership** is grounded in the eight aspects. These aspects provide a framework that contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the **system leadership** concept.

Actively working beyond own organisation – (theme-collective leadership)

System leadership often involves working beyond the boundaries of one's own organisation, whether through formal roles such as advisory posts, inspections or strategic positions or through collaborative partnerships, networks and clusters. These roles may be formally structured or emerge informally in response to specific needs. By engaging across organisational and system levels: locally, nationally and internationally, leaders contribute to strengthening the wider Welsh education system. As Brown *et al*. (2022) note, nurturing

informal relationships within and across schools is vital to system-wide improvement. This multifaceted engagement requires collaboration with professionals and academics across the three-tier system (WG, 2017a), (Figure 2.1) embracing diverse responsibilities and cross-functional opportunities.

Developing educational leadership capacity in self and others (themes-Personal attributes and Growing leaders)

This aspect of **system leadership** aims to develop educational leadership capacity in self and others and requires a continuous process of educational professional growth. It involves developing and deepening essential leadership skills and competencies such as communication, decision-making and emotional intelligence, while also nurturing the leadership potential of others through mentoring, coaching and professional development opportunities. By investing in leadership development, individuals and organisations can build a strong and resilient leadership pipeline capable of contributing to the Welsh educational landscape and beyond.

Model social justice

Model social justice involves exhibiting the principle of ethical purpose. This aspect of **system leadership** demonstrates fairness, equity and inclusivity in leadership practices and decision-making. It requires recognising and addressing educational systemic inequities, advocating for the disadvantaged and placing the learner at the centre of everything they do,

> To help schools give learners the best possible learning experiences and outcomes, whatever their background or circumstance, to achieve high standards and aspirations for all (Estyn, 2023, p.1).

Conducting collaborative leadership practice (peer-to-peer)

Collaborative leadership centres on peer-to-peer working, shared decision-making and collective problem-solving. It enables leaders to harness group intelligence, be innovative, share resources and improve outcomes. This approach builds mutual trust and accountability, shifting the focus from individual authority to collective capacity, key to sustaining system-wide improvement. As Fullan (2003) explains, collaboration requires meaningful shared responsibility, where each party's contribution is essential to success.

Contribute to the culture of a self-improving system

Establishing a culture of self-improvement within a system requires visionary leadership, strategic planning and effective implementation strategies to drive change at all levels. This aspect of **system leadership** involves those close to practice identifying areas for improvement through rigorous evaluation processes, setting ambitious goals and mobilising stakeholders to support transformative initiatives. This includes cultivating an environment where autonomy and accountability are seen as essential factors for improvement. By creating such a culture, the system will not only adapt more effectively to change but also create the conditions for all to thrive, resulting in better outcomes for all.

Engage consciously in research and enquiry

Engaging in research and enquiry is a vital aspect of **system leadership** because it embeds evidence-informed practice at the heart of decision-making. It involves a deliberate and ongoing commitment to critical reflection, systematic enquiry and the use of data to evaluate the impact of interventions. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of leadership practices but also ensures that decisions are grounded in what works, ultimately improving outcomes for learners. By modelling a culture of enquiry, **system leaders** ensure collective learning and continuous improvement across the system which is key to sustaining innovation and building a self-improving education system.

Participating intentionally in innovation and creativity

Participating intentionally in innovation and creativity involves actively seeking out opportunities to generate new ideas, experiment with new and different approaches and challenge the existing practices and policies. This aspect of **system leadership** requires taking risks and embracing a culture of innovation where creativity is encouraged, failure is seen as a learning opportunity and experimentation is celebrated.

Challenging the educational status quo

Challenging the educational status quo is a defining trait of **system leadership**. It demands a bold vision and the courage to question entrenched practices, structures and assumptions that may limit learning. By developing curiosity, critical thinking and openness to new ideas, **system leaders** drive innovation and continuous improvement. This mindset not only inspires

others to confront challenges and overcome barriers but also creates the conditions for meaningful, system-wide change which is essential for building a dynamic and responsive education system. These eight aspects recognise the actions and practice of effective **system leadership** and the framework (See Figure 6.4 below) could be used to develop **system leadership** in Wales.

The eight essential aspects of system leadership

Actively work beyond own organisation	Develop educational leadership capacity in self and others	Model social justice
Conduct collaborative leadership practices (peer-to-peer)	Positively contribute to the culture of a self-improving system	Engage consciously in research and enquiry
Participate intentionally in innovation and creativity	Challenge the status quo	
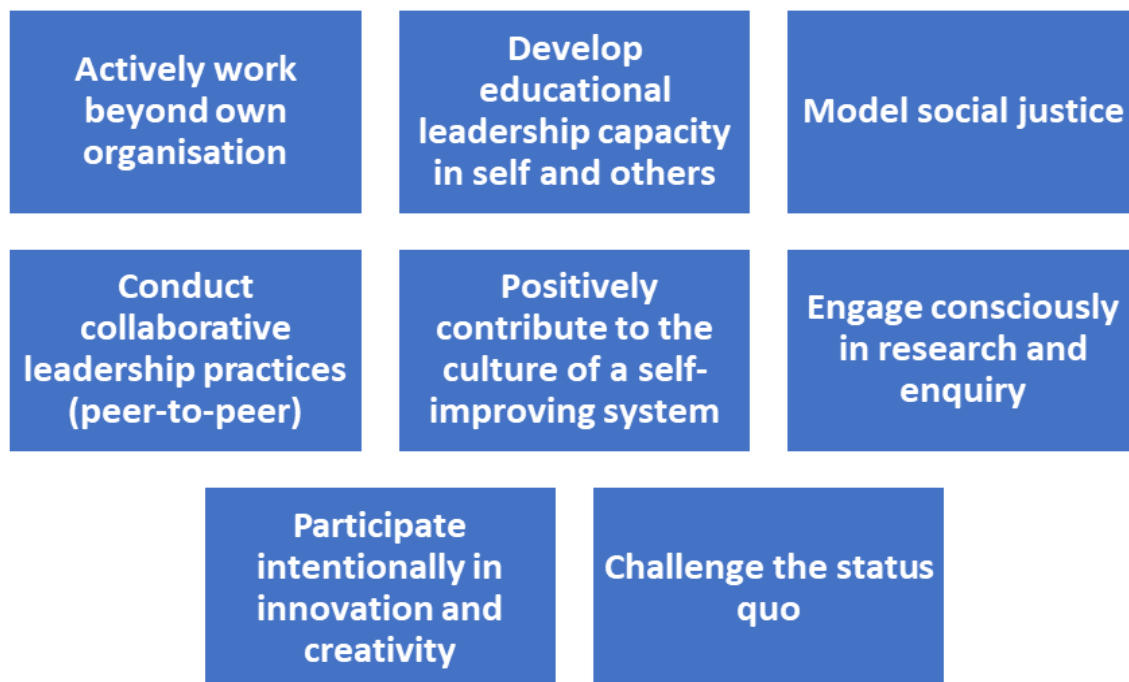
Figure 6.4 shows the eight essential aspects of system leadership

6.5 Applying my research in real-world settings: Implications for system leadership in the Welsh context.

Recommendations

The evolving educational landscape in Wales, characterised by ambitious reform agendas such as the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2024b), the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) transformation (WG, 2021a) and the Cymraeg 2050 strategy (WG, 2017a) necessitates a re-examination of leadership paradigms. **System leadership,** as conceptualised through the Ellis Model of **system leadership** in action below (Figure 6.5), offers a compelling framework for addressing these complex, multi-layered challenges. The Ellis Model of **System Leadership**

operationalises Fullan's (2025) call for system-wide leadership by embedding ethical purpose, collaboration and evidence-informed practice at every level of the Welsh education system. Drawing on the empirical and theoretical foundations laid out in Chapters 1 and 2 and the findings of this research in Chapter 5, this section critically explores the implications for **system leadership** in the Welsh context.

The Ellis Model of System Leadership
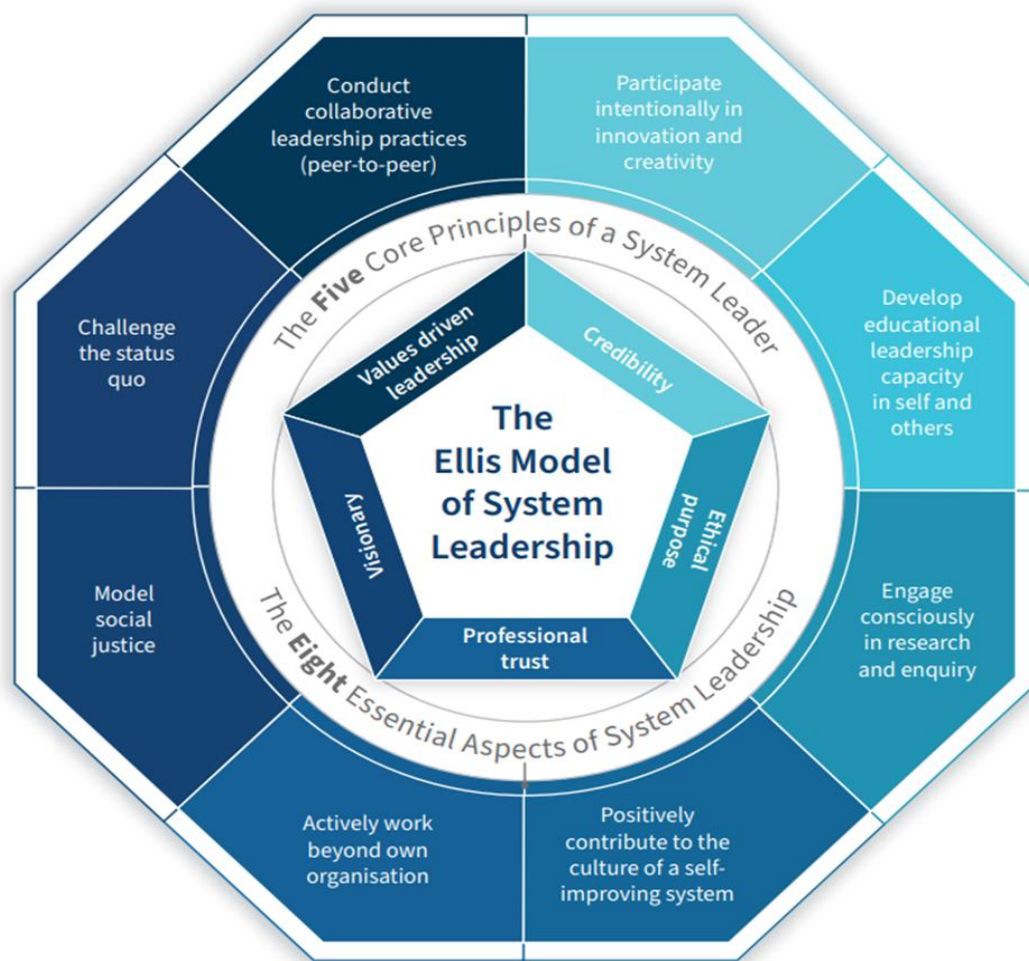
Figure 6.5 shows the five principles and eight aspects combined in a model of system leadership in action

Establishing conceptual clarity and coherence

A recurring theme in this research is the persistent ambiguity surrounding the term **system leadership** in Welsh education (Harris, 2020). Despite its presence in policy documents, (Miles, 2024; OECD, 2014, 2020; Williams, 2018) and WG websites (WG, 2025b) the concept remains under-theorised and inconsistently applied (Cousin, 2019). The Ellis Model of **system**

leadership in action (Figure 6.5) addresses this by offering a contextually grounded definition, underpinned by five core principles and eight interdependent essential aspects. This holistic framework provides conceptual clarity and can serve as a national reference point to unify understanding and expectations across all tiers of the Welsh education system (Figure 2.1) enhancing coherence and reducing fragmentation (Jones, 2024, 2025; Miles, 2024; WG, 2017, 2020, 2023b).

Translating policy into practice

Since devolution, Welsh education has experienced policy turbulence, often resulting in a gap between policy intent and implementation. The Ellis Model of **System Leadership** (Figure 6.5) offers a developmental but not prescriptive approach that aligns with the Welsh Government's vision for a self-improving system (Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2018). It provides a practical tool for embedding leadership behaviours that support reform. Integrating the model into leadership development, professional standards and inspection frameworks can ensure alignment with national priorities and resilience to political shifts.

Expanding the scope and influence of leadership

The Venn diagram (Figure 2.2) illustrates the relationship between within-school and system leadership. While the former focuses on internal improvement, the latter extends influence across institutions and policy domains. **System leaders** promote collaboration, build networks (Huber *et al*., 2008; Muijs, 2015a, 2015b; Greany & Kamp, 2022) and drive system-wide improvement. The Ellis Model (Figure 6.5) encapsulates these expectations. However, strong within-school leadership remains foundational (Bush, 2011; Bush *et al*., 2019; Leithwood *et al*., 2019), as it cultivates the strategic thinking, moral purpose (Fullan, 2005, 2025; Greany & Higham, 2018) and relational skills (Senge *et al*., 2015; Brown *et al*., 2022) needed for broader **system leadership.** Wales must invest in identifying and developing leaders capable of operating at this strategic level.

Advancing equity and inclusion

Strong and inclusive leadership is a key factor in mitigating the impact of poverty on educational attainment (Estyn, 2023a). **System leadership**, therefore, is uniquely placed to drive equity by aligning moral purpose with collective responsibility. The Ellis Model's (Figure

6.5) emphasis on these principles resonates with national priorities to close attainment gaps (Egan, 2016, 2025; Neagle, 2024b), support ALN learners (WG, 2021a) and promote bilingualism (WG, 2024a; WLC, 2025). Recent reflections from Wales reinforce this imperative, highlighting that despite longstanding policy commitments, the link between poverty and lower educational outcomes remains persistent (Egan, 2025). Breaking this link requires **system leaders** to act as agents, developing inclusive cultures, building relational trust and co-constructing solutions with communities. This aligns with the Welsh Government's socio-economic duty (WG, 2020) and Estyn's findings that effective leaders prioritise equity, engage families and evaluate impact rigorously (Estyn, 2023a). To realise this potential, **system leaders** must be empowered through targeted professional learning and supported by policy levers that enable them to address socio-economic and cultural disparities with confidence and coherence.

Strengthening collaboration and reducing isolation

Estyn reports (2012, 2013,2014, 2022b) and internal reviews (Harris *et al*., 2021a; Jones, 2024, 2025) highlight a culture of isolation in some Welsh schools and authorities. The Ellis Model (Figure 6.5), with its focus on relationship-building and shared vision, promotes a collaborative culture essential for reform. Embedding **system leadership** into improvement strategies, funding models and accountability frameworks can incentivise collaboration and break down isolated ways of working(Jones, 2025).

Informing the design of the new national body

The creation of a new national body for professional learning and leadership support (Neagle, 2024b, 2025) presents a timely opportunity (Estyn, 2024). The Ellis Model (Figure 6.5) could shape its design and remit, ensuring it is evidence-informed, practitioner-responsive and aligned with reform. This model offers a promising framework that policymakers and stakeholders may wish to explore in the context of leadership and system reform.

Operationalising system leadership through the Ellis Model (Figure 6.5)

The five core principles (Figure 6.3) and eight essential aspects (Figure 6.4) when combined into the Ellis model of **system leadership** in action (Figure 6.5) offer a powerful mechanism for embedding **system leadership**. As the OECD (2014) asserts, "developing leaders as **system**

leaders is essential for driving educational reform" (p.8). The Ellis Model (Figure 6.5) supports a genuinely school-led system by enabling leaders to act locally and nationally, creating a two-way link between policy and practice (Miles, 2024).

Like Hopkins and Higham's (2007) model in England, the Ellis Model (Figure 6.5) is grounded in empirical data but differs in its developmental orientation and adaptability across sectors. As Fullan (2005) notes, the true test of **system leadership** lies in its enactment and the Ellis Model provides the means to achieve this. But while the model offers a promising foundation for leadership development and system improvement, it is not intended as a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, it is presented for consideration, use and critical reflection. Policymakers and stakeholders may find value in exploring its potential, with the understanding that any model must be tested, adapted and contextualised to meet the specific needs and dynamics of different educational systems.

6.6 Theoretical implications: Sociocultural foundations of system leadership

This study is grounded in sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 1990, 1995, 2003), which views human development as inherently social, cultural and context-dependent. It provided a critical lens for analysing how **system leaders'** personal attributes and inter-relationships are shaped by and contribute to, the educational communities in which they operate. The findings affirm that leadership development is embedded in context (Rogoff, 1990), socially constructed (Kozulin *et al*., 2003; Rogoff, 2003) and relational in nature (Bandura, 2016; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 1995, 2003)

Using Rogoff's (1995, 2003) three planes of sociocultural analysis; personal, interpersonal and community, I identified how **system leaders** evolve over time, engage in reciprocal support "open to suggestions and support as well as offer it" Q13R13 and participate in collaborative practices that are socially situated (Johnston *et al*., 2020). These planes are interconnected; when one is foregrounded, the others remain active in the background (Rogoff, 1995, 2003). The themes of *personal attributes, growing leaders, collective leadership and educational landscape* reflect these interdependencies. For example, collaborative leadership practices, such as partnerships and networks, are not isolated behaviours but emerge from and contribute to the broader educational culture.

This theoretical framing advances the understanding of **system leadership** as a dynamic, relational and contextually embedded process. It highlights the importance of cultivating leadership through social interaction and shared cultural practices, rather than through isolated individual traits. The Ellis Model (Figure 6.5), grounded in these principles, offers a framework for conceptualising and operationalising **system leadership** in Wales.

To strengthen the theoretical foundations of **system leadership**, further research is recommended, particularly into how sociocultural learning processes shape leadership development across systems (see Section 7.2).

6.7 Methodological reflection

My research is firmly grounded in educational practice and shaped by the social contexts in which leaders operate. By adopting an interpretive approach (see Chapter 3: Methodology), I was able to explore how participants understood the research questions and to interpret their experiences and perspectives, consistent with Denscombe's (2010) view of social reality as constructed through action and interpretation.

I recognise that my own positionality, as a senior leader within Welsh education, inevitably influenced the research process. Throughout the study, I remained reflexive about potential bias, using a research journal, regular supervision and participant validation to ensure transparency and critical distance (see 3.2.4 reflexivity).

I selected a qualitative, interpretivist methodology to capture the complexity of educational leadership in context. While this approach generated rich and nuanced data, I encountered challenges such as conducting interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic (NHW, 2022) and mitigating selection bias. I addressed these issues through transparent reporting and by ensuring a range of voices were included in the study.

Ethical considerations were central at every stage, with informed consent, confidentiality and data protection rigorously maintained. I was particularly attentive to power dynamics, especially given my dual role as researcher and senior educational leader.

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, I employed member checking and maintained a clear audit trail of decisions and interpretations. This process reaffirmed my belief that educational leadership is inseparable from its social and cultural context, as knowledge is socially

constructed through interaction and shared experience (Creswell, 2007). Conducting this research has reinforced the importance of ongoing reflexivity and ethical awareness in producing meaningful and credible findings in the field of educational leadership.

6.7.1 Strengths of the research design

A key strength of my research design (see Chapter 3: Methodology) was the use of online questionnaires distributed through purposive sampling. This approach enhanced accessibility, allowing participants to respond from any location and at their own convenience; removing geographical barriers and reducing costs. The flexibility of this method contributed to a strong response rate: 51% of recipients completed the questionnaire (37 participants), including international respondents. Notably, 68% (25 participants) provided their email addresses, consenting to follow-up interviews.

For the second phase, I conducted four semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams. While the sample size was small, this proved advantageous, enabling in-depth exploration of individual perspectives. The participants were known to me, which helped establish trust and encouraged candid, insightful responses. The online format also saved time and resources and the built-in recording and transcription features supported efficient data handling.

Both tools; questionnaires and online interviews, offered convenience, flexibility and environmental benefits. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (NHW, 2022), these digital methods ensured continuity in data collection and contributed to the richness and reliability of the evidence gathered.

6.7.2 Limitations of the research design

Positionality

A limitation of the research is my own positionality (see 3.2.4 reflexivity). Since starting the Educational Doctorate in 2017, I have undertaken three different senior educational roles in Wales. I was in the position of Chief Executive Officer at NAEL, when I conducted the data gathering exercise and being in a position of power might have influenced the responses of the participants. I was aware that my position exerted a "power relationship" (Denscombe, 2010,p.69) especially during the interviews as all of the four selected participants were known to me.

Participants were known to me

From the 25 survey respondents who provided their email addresses, only seven were practising headteachers. Of these, I selected four participants, one from East, two from West and one from South Wales, each representing different local authorities. I chose these four because their extensive practical experience was a strong fit for what I needed to explore in my research, ensuring that the data collected would be both relevant and valuable for answering my research questions. All four were practising headteachers, which was the primary criterion for selection. Three were NAEL Associates and while I did not know them personally beyond their Associate role, I acknowledged this as a professionally distant working relationship. The fourth participant had previously collaborated with me on a leadership project five years earlier, though our contact since then had been minimal.

Although these participants offered rich, practice-based insights, the small sample size and the composition of the group introduce important limitations. The decision to interview only four participants was intentional, allowing for in-depth exploration of their experiences and perspectives (Cohen *et al*., 2018; Gray, 2018). However, this also meant that the breadth of perspectives was limited. All four participants were either directly or indirectly connected to NAEL, which may have led to a degree of alignment with the organisation's values and strategic direction. This raises the possibility of selection bias, as the sample may not fully represent the diversity of views across the Welsh education system. Had I included headteachers or leaders who were not NAEL Associates, or who were more critical of national leadership structures, the findings may have revealed alternative or dissenting perspectives on **system leadership**, including scepticism about its purpose, implementation or impact.

This narrow focus, could have resulted in a biased understanding of the concept **of system leadership**. While I took steps to mitigate bias, such as providing interview questions in advance, using open-ended prompts and applying Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2022), I recognise that my positionality and the sample composition may have influenced what participants chose to share or withhold. I was transparent with participants about their role in the research and assured them that their decision to participate or not, would not affect their professional relationship with me or the organisation. Nonetheless, future research would benefit from a broader and more diverse sample, including voices from

outside NAEL and from different tiers of the system, to ensure a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of **system leadership** in Wales.

Positionality when interpretating the data

My positionality and professional background might also have influenced the interpretation of the data (see 3.2.4 reflexivity). This could have led to a subjective analysis, affecting the validity of the conclusions. I found my positionality especially difficult at the analysis stage as my own views were influencing my thinking (Pring, 2015) but I made sure I interpreted the data carefully by going through it meticulously using a very robust iterative process including multiple iterations of coding and theme development (see Chapter 3: Methodology). Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process, with me critically reflecting on my own positionality and potential biases. All transcriptions (sample in Appendix 7) were member checked to ensure accuracy and validity of the data. Due to my sociocultural history and positionality I was aware I needed to record the opinions and views of the participants as captured in the questionnaires and audio recordings. When using examples of the data in my analysis I used direct quotes so as to avoid using my opinion or view. When choosing which quotes to include I made sure that they supported my statements, were not taken out of context and added unique contextualised perspectives to my research. I remained open and transparent during the research and I reflected on my positionality throughout. This reflection enhanced the credibility and validity of my findings (Bryman, 2012; Mears, 2017).

Small sample size for interviews

My research involved a limited number of interviews (see Chapter 3: Methodology for details), which may not have provided a comprehensive understanding of the broader perspectives on **system leadership**. The interviews focused on four headteachers (the remaining three headteachers were not selected as the purposive sample of four already provided sufficient diversity and depth for the study's qualitative aims) which potentially overlooked the views of a wider audience who might perceive **system leadership** less positively. This narrow focus could have resulted in my research having a biased understanding of the concept. This small sample size could limit the generalisability of the findings but my intention was to explore the research rather than generalise from it (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). My choice to only interview four allowed for a more in-depth exploration of their experiences, thoughts and perspectives

which contributed to robust, rich and deep levels of understanding. Conducting interviews with a smaller, carefully selected group provided deep insights and was more manageable in terms of time and resources. It allowed for detailed and focused conversations, which lead to rich data. The interviews allowed me to probe further "which lead them to more depth, detail and illustration" (Flick, 2014,p.28). I used a purposeful sample, (see section 3.4.1) which was effective as the participants were easily accessible and importantly had the necessary knowledge and experience to contribute to the interview. I wanted to include representatives which allowed me to gain "deep levels of understanding" (Gray, 2018 p.229). This method ensured that the selected participants could provide valuable insight to the research. Interviewing just headteachers provided valuable insights into the practical, day-to-day challenges and successes within schools. Headteachers are directly involved in the implementation of policies and offered unique perspectives on how these policies impact students and staff. They also shared firsthand experiences and examples that highlighted the effectiveness and shortcomings of certain educational strategies, one respondent stated, "a major barrier to uptake and implementation is the variety of approaches within Wales, including regional and local interpretations of policy" (Q17R16). While the interviews primarily focused on headteachers from different geographical locations, I also combined qualitative interviews with an online questionnaire which I sent to a broader audience (both from Wales and internationally) of educational leaders, advisers and policy influencers through my online questionnaire. This broader inclusion helped me capture perspectives from a more diverse group who offered a more comprehensive understanding of **system leadership**, including potential criticisms and alternative viewpoints.

Conclusion

This chapter consolidates and extends the foundational ideas from Chapters 1 and 2 by integrating them with the empirical findings of Chapter 5. It reinforces the argument that **system leadership** in Wales is a distinct and necessary response to national reform, yet remains poorly understood. By examining how it is enacted in practice, Chapter 6 highlights its role in building collective capacity and driving system-wide improvement. While the term appears frequently in professional discourse, its meaning and implementation vary. In response, the Ellis Model of **System Leadership** (see figure 6.5) (developed from the data) offers a clear, contextually grounded framework. It provides a practical, values-driven

approach tailored to the Welsh education system, bridging the gap between policy and practice and offering a timely tool for embedding **system leadership** into leadership development and reform.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Overview

The aim of my study was to explore how the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership** are understood. To achieve this, I gathered perspectives from those influencing Welsh educational policy, educational partners in the middle tier and senior leaders at practitioner level (see Figure 2.1). Data collection involved online questionnaires completed by senior educational leaders, middle tier members, national and international policy makers and influencers, yielding a 51% (37) response rate . Follow-up semi-structured interviews with four headteachers provided additional depth for analysis.

I adopted an interpretive approach and conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), further informed by Rogoff's three planes of analysis (1995, 2003), which led to the identification of seven key themes. My thesis outlines the original contributions of this research to the field and offers recommendations for future study, highlighting two specific areas of new knowledge.

(i)   Five core principles of a **system leader**

(ii)   Eight essential aspects of **system leadership**

When the five core principles and eight essential aspects come together, they create a model to support the concept of **system leadership** (Figure 6.5 – the Ellis model of **system leadership** in action)

Seven Themes

1. The right thing
2. Personal attributes
3. Collective leadership
4. Growing Leaders
5. Educational landscape
6. Challenges
7. How do we know?

These seven themes contributed to answering both the research questions. All seven themes are inextricably linked and cannot be discussed in isolation of each other (Rogoff, 2003).

My research demonstrates that there is currently no universally agreed or clear-cut definition for either the term **system leader** or **system leadership** within the Welsh education context. Both terms are often used interchangeably by practitioners and policymakers, which contributes to conceptual ambiguity and confusion. This lack of clarity makes it difficult to distinguish between an individual acting as a system leader (in a specific role) and the broader, collective practice of **system leadership** across the education system. To address this, I have undertaken a detailed thematic analysis of the data and through this process, identified five core principles that underpin the role of a **system leader**. These principles provide a more robust, contextually grounded framework for understanding and enacting **system leadership** in Wales, helping to avoid miscommunication and misinterpretation.

Five core principles of a system leader

- Ethical purpose
- Values driven leadership
- Credibility
- Professional trust
- Visionary

In addition, my research identifies eight essential aspects of **system leadership**. These aspects articulate what **system leadership** looks like in practice:

Eight essential aspects of system leadership

- Actively work beyond own organisation
- Develop educational leadership capacity in self and others
- Model social justice
- Conduct collaborative leadership practices (peer-to-peer)
- Contribute to the culture of a self-improving system
- Engage consciously in research and enquiry
- Participate intentionally in innovation and creativity

- Challenge the status quo

When both the principles and the aspects are combined it creates a model of **system leadership** in action (see Figure 6.5)

The core principles of a **system leader** and the eight essential aspects of **system leadership** should not be seen as separate entities but as connected parts of a whole. The approach to developing this model must be addressed holistically (Rogoff, 2003).

System leadership is a term which has crept back into the discourse of education in Wales recently (Miles, 2024; WG, 2025b). The wider education system plays a pivotal role in facilitating understanding and acceptance of this term and my Ellis model of **system leadership** in action (Figure 6.5) plays a crucial role in supporting this to happen. This should be done through providing comprehensive training programmes, workshops and professional learning opportunities which ensures that educationalists grasp the principles, methodologies and benefits of **system leadership** so that those enacting the role can be more effective and efficient in their role.

While I disagree with SL3 that **system leadership** is "new and emergent" (SL3 p.16) I do think it is an evolving concept and continuous learning is vital for staying adaptive and effective, "***System leadership*** *has developed but it wasn't always called **system leadership** – but now we have a common language to describe it*" (SL4 p.21). My **Ellis model of system leadership in action** supports this (Figure 6.5).

7.2 Suggestions for further research

There is no doubt from the review of literature that there is a wide-ranging amount of academic writing and opinion pieces in relation to **system leaders** and **system leadership**, Harris *et al.* (2021b) recognise this but say that research interest in this area "has waned over the past decade" (p.16). It is also recognised that much of the evidence is placed in international literature with quite a bit in England but very little in Wales and despite the more recent contribution of Gorman *et al*. (2025), Harris (2020, 2023) and Harris *et al.* (2021b) there is still no published evidence of any contemporary empirical study of **system leadership** in Wales.

There is therefore a need to address this with a sustained model of study into the practice of **system leadershi**p to grow further understanding of the role, which could lead to school and system improvement. Using my **Ellis model of system leadership in action** (Figure 6.5) as a framework for further study, my recommendations for extended research are as follows -

- Through a pilot study, explore the use of a protype framework to support the **Ellis model of system leadership in action** in developing a strategic approach to **system leadership.**

- Conduct a study into understanding what is the current landscape of **system leadership** in Wales (taking into consideration the formal/directed role and the informal and self-directed role)? What is the variation of the role across Wales? (creating a typology and common language)

- Conduct a study to understand how are **system leaders** identified, trained and prepared for a formal **system leader** role? How is the capacity renewed within the schools from which **system leaders** work? What support do they receive to conduct the role over time?

- Conduct a study into how are **system leaders** being deployed to enact **system leadership** and what is the impact?

- Conduct a longitudinal study by interviewing more than four, of those currently identified as working in **system leadership** roles in Wales with a focus on what extent is the **system leadership** role effective in achieving a self-improving system? And how is the effectiveness of the role measured? What is their impact over time?

7.3 Positioning myself

I conducted this research with the purpose of supporting my knowledge and understanding of the terms **educational system leader** and **educational system leadership** so I could be better informed as a senior leader in an educational role in Wales. I understand my research contributes not only to my own personal understanding of the terms but it also contributes to my professional knowledge. The research contributes to the current research repository of Welsh evidence to support the education system in Wales.

7.4 Contributions to knowledge

In this chapter, I have given an overview of my findings and provided the relevance of my study to the current educational landscape within Wales and I have made recommendations regarding further research that could now be undertaken to build upon my findings. I have commented on the main contributions I feel my work has made to the existing body of knowledge in this field through describing the **Ellis model of system leadership in action** (Figure 6.5).

Through my data collection and analysis, this study builds not only on the previous literature but also identifies the shortcomings in the literature and certainly identifies the lack of empirical evidence. Harris *et al.* (2021b) concur with this and strongly advise that there is need for further robust empirical studies that demonstrate its sustained impact on school and system improvement. By exploring my themes in depth, the findings offer valuable insights into understanding what is understood by the terms; **system leader** and **system leadership**. I offer an empirically derived **model of system leadership in action** (Figure 6.5), which contributes to the field. This research helps to understand the contribution that the role of a **system leader** can make to the current reform in Wales and thereby contributes to the discourse in this field more widely. The outcomes of this study not only add nuance to the existing literature in this area, but also opens the door to further exploration as Harris *et al.* (2021b) report and concur with Cousin (2019) that there is "very little theory building" (p.9) for this concept. This research holds the potential to shape future studies and inform practical applications, ultimately contributing to the ongoing development of education in Wales and the evidence base to support it.

7.5 Education in Wales: The current situation

Since beginning this Professional Education Doctorate in 2017, I have witnessed three different Education Ministers in Wales: Kirsty Williams MS (2016–2021), Jeremy Miles MS (2021–2024) and currently Lynne Neagle MS (2024–present). Each Minister has brought their own distinct priorities to the role, shaping the evolving educational landscape. Notably, a written statement by Jeremy Miles MS in January 2024 reaffirmed the importance of **system leadership,** stating the need to:

> Promote a culture that supports a genuinely school-led system and facilitate school leaders to act as **system leaders** nationally and locally, thus creating a more direct two-way link between national and local action (WG, 2024a, n.p.).

This statement forms part of a broader national review of roles and responsibilities within the middle tier (see Figure 2.1) (Jones, 2024, 2025). While the terms **system leader** and **system leadership** are increasingly present in professional discourse, there remains a lack of clarity and shared understanding of what these terms truly mean (Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2021; Harris *et al*., 2021b; Greany and Kamp 2022) especially within the Welsh context.

This conceptual ambiguity is particularly pertinent in light of recent structural reforms. In 2025, Neagle MS (2024b) announced the dissolution of NAEL and the creation of a new national body for professional learning and leadership support. This move, part of a broader re-centralisation of school improvement functions, reflects a significant shift in the governance and delivery of professional learning and leadership development in Wales (Neagle, 2025).

Considering this landscape, the findings of my study are both timely and significant. The Ellis Model of **System Leadership** in Action (Figure 6.5) offers a practical and conceptual framework for policymakers and stakeholders to consider. It contributes to the theoretical development of **system leadership** while also offering actionable insights. Furthermore, the study makes recommendations for future research and highlights the importance of leadership capacity-building and social justice, both of which are essential to cultivating a genuinely self-improving education system in Wales.

In summary, as Wales continues its ambitious journey of educational reform, the imperative for a clear, contextually grounded understanding of **system leadership** has never been greater. As Fullan (2025) powerfully asserts, moral purpose is not just an abstract idea it involves a determined effort to both improve achievement for every student and to address and reduce inequalities, ensuring that those who have traditionally been left behind are fully supported. Embedding this moral purpose at the heart of **system leadership** ensures that efforts to build capacity, encourage collaboration and drive improvement are not only strategic but also deeply ethical and inclusive. By drawing on the literature, the knowledge and experience of national and international educational leaders and the lived realities of Welsh educators, this

research provides a coherent approach to **system leadership**, one that is capable of meeting the unique challenges and aspirations of the Welsh education system and ultimately of securing better outcomes for all learners.

*There is **always** more to learn…(Rogoff, 2003, p.369)*

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Appendices

1. Questions for the online questionnaire
2. Questions for the semi-structured interviews
3. A copy of the interview schedule
4. Participant information sheet
5. Prompt sheet
6. Idioms and phrases
7. Sample of transcripts
8. Sample of responses to questionnaire
9. University ethics approval (email)

The questionnaire has three sections.

Section A is about you.

Section B is about your understanding of the term '*educational system **leaders**'*.

Section C is about your understanding of the term '*educational system **leadership**'*.

You will be invited at the end of the questionnaire to indicate whether you would like to take part in a further online interview to discuss the anonymised answers in more detail.

When answering the questions in sections B and C, I'm particularly interested whether there are any traits, skills, behaviours, values, competencies or knowledge which you feel are of particular importance.

Section A: About You

Please complete the following questions inserting text or using the drop down menus.

1. What is your role in education? **(text box)**
2. Have you held any other senior leadership roles in education? **(textbox)**
   (drop down box)
   Less than 5 years
   5-10 years
   10-20 years
   20-30 years
   More than 30 years

3. Where do you work?
   Wales (drop down box)

          North
          Mid
          West
          South
          East
   England
   Scotland
   Ireland
   Other …..(please state where)

Section B: Questions about the term: Educational System Leader

Please complete the following questions inserting text.

4. What does the term '*educational system leader*' mean to you? **(text box) Please use no more than 150 words)**

5. What do you think is the purpose of an '*educational system leader*'? **(Text box)** **Please use no more than 5 sentences**

Section C: Questions about the term: Educational System Leadership

Please complete the following questions inserting text or ticking the box.

6. What does the term '*educational system leadership'* mean to you? **(Text box)** **Please use no more than 150 words)**

7. In the transformation of the education system in Wales, how important, if at all, is '*educational system leadership'*?

   a) **Please use the scale to note your views**
      (**4**- Very important, **3**- Important **2**- Some importance **1**- Not important at all)
   b) **Please explain the reasons for your answer to question 8a**? **(text box –** **please use no more than 5 sentences)**

   You have now completed the questionnaire. Thank you.

   I am conducting a series of follow up interviews, online, to discuss the anonymised responses from the questionnaire.

   If you would be interested in taking part in an online-interview to discuss in more detail please tick the relevant box:
      Yes (drop down box to supply email) then go to end of survey and **Submit**
      No (go to end of survey)

      Submit

   Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire

Questions for Online Interviews

Selected respondents will be Headteachers, practitioners from the third tier (4 in total) selected from those who responded to the questionnaire.

Q.12 What does the term 'Educational System Leader' mean to you?

> The term (above) has been described by the respondents to the questionnaire as someone who is …. **Working beyond their organisation (mentioned 17 times) sometimes in a formal role and sometimes in an informal role**.
>
> Also words taken into consideration were direct, indirect, direction
>
> *Q- What types of roles are these? In the formal sense and the informal?*

> Respondents described the role as collaborative (other terms were working together, sharing, networking, collective)
>
> *Q- What does this mean? How does is it work in practice? Are they structured, supported networks?*

> The Educational System Leaders have been described as influencers. (12 mentions)
>
> Q- What does this mean?
>
> What impact can we expect from an Educational System Leader's role?

> Respondents stated that the Educational System Leader, should have Skills, Knowledge and Experience.
>
> Q-What are the skills required?
>
> Q-What kind of knowledge should they have?
>
> Q- what kinds of experience?
>
> Q-How do we measure experience?
>
> Q-Is it quantifiable?
>
> Q-What about values, qualities and behaviours?

Q13. What is the purpose of an Educational System Leader?

(i) Answers to this question were substantially stating that the purpose was linked to the 'moral' purpose of wanting to improve learning and well-being of all students.

Q. How do Educational System Leaders ensure equity?

(ii) Innovation, creativity and inspiring others was also noted.

Q. How do the Educational System Leaders do that?

Q15. What does the term Educational System Leadership mean to you?

NO Questions

Q.16 In the transformation of the education system in Wales, how important, if at all, is 'Educational System Leadership'?

Q.17 Explain your reasons why

Q. One respondent remarked that Educational System Leadership is 'new and emergent' do you agree? Why?

Respondents throughout the questionnaire make reference to the importance of 'building capacity'

Q. In what ways do the Educational System Leaders play a part in this?

Q. One respondent stated, the most important factor for sustaining 'Educational System Leadership' is how system leaders are trained and deployed.

Q. What are your views on this?

Linked to all the questions.

Q. How important is Context to the role of Educational System Leadership and the success of the transformation of Education in Wales?

A copy of the interview schedule

Dear XXX,

Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in my Educational Doctorate interview on **12th July** at **4pm.** The interview will last no longer than 45 minutes in total.

These semi-structured interviews are a follow-up to the questionnaire you kindly responded to.

I would like to record the interview so that it will be easier for me to transcript. You will be asked for consent at the beginning of the interview. By clicking the agree button and remaining online you will be giving your consent. All audio recordings will be deleted once the thesis is completed and any direct quotes will be checked with you before submitting, once again for consent and accuracy. All information used will be anonymised using codes.

You can withdraw your consent up to the data analysis process, which should be finished by the end of August. Therefore, please can you let me know if you are unhappy to proceed no later than August 31st 2022.

I have listed below the questions I would like to discuss with you on the day. (The questions you need to answer are in blue). Please remember that they are your views I am collecting and that there are no wrong answers.

 Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions ahead of the interview.

Diolch eto!! For agreeing to be interviewed.

Cofion

Tegwen

> The term 'Educational System Leader' has been described by the respondents to the questionnaire as someone who is …. **Working beyond their organisation (mentioned 17 times) sometimes in a formal role and sometimes in an informal role**.
>
> Also words taken into consideration were direct, indirect, direction

Q1- *What types of roles are these? In the formal sense and the informal? (Please provide examples)*

> Respondents described the role as collaborative (other terms were working together, sharing, networking, collective)

Q2- *What does this mean? How does is it work in practice? Are they structured, supported networks? (Please provide an example where possible)*

> The Educational System Leaders have been described as influencers. (12 mentions)

Q3a- What does this mean?

Q3b - What impact can we expect from an Educational System Leader's role?

> Respondents stated that the Educational System Leader, should have Skills, Knowledge and Experience.

Q4a-What are the skills required?

Q4b-What kind of knowledge should they have?

Q4c- what kinds of experience?

Q4d-How do we measure experience?

Q4e-Is it quantifiable?

Q4f -What about values, qualities and behaviours?

> *What is the purpose of an Educational System Leader?*
>
> (i) Answers to this question were substantially stating that the purpose was linked to the 'moral' purpose of wanting to improve learning and well-being of all students.

Q5a How do Educational System Leaders ensure equity?

> (ii) Answers to this question included being Innovative, creative and inspiring others

Q5b How do the Educational System Leaders do that?

> *In response to the question….. In the transformation of the education system in Wales, how important, if at all, is 'Educational System Leadership'? all respondents answered positively*
>
> *Explain your reasons why………*

Q6.a One respondent remarked that Educational System Leadership is 'new and emergent' do you agree? Why?

> Respondents throughout the questionnaire make reference to the importance of 'building capacity'

Q6b. In what ways do the Educational System Leaders play a part in this?

Q6c. One respondent stated, the most important factor for sustaining 'Educational System Leadership' is how system leaders are trained and deployed.

Q6d. What are your views on this?

Q.7 How important is Context to the role of Educational System Leadership and the success of the transformation of Education in Wales?

What is understood by the term educational system leader and educational system leadership?

Participant Information Sheet

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study which forms part of a Doctorate in Education. I have a dual role as a student researcher and as a public servant, being employed by the National Academy for Educational Leadership as its Chief Executive. Before you decide whether to participate you need to understand the purpose of the research project and what it will require of you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. If there is anything you do not understand then please email me at 1708429@student.uwtsd.ac.uk

Who is organising the research?

Tegwen Ellis is the researcher. This research informs her Doctorate in Education. Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained unless agreed otherwise by respondents.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the research is to understand what is known and understood by the terms 'educational system leader' and 'educational system leadership' to contribute to Wales developing 'its leaders as system leaders which are the prime drivers for educational reform in Wales' (OECD, 2014, p8). The study also contributes to better understanding of how to develop and support 'school and system leadership for curriculum design' (OECD, 2020, P16).

Why you have been invited to take part?

You have been invited because of your role as an experienced education professional.

Method

- The method for collecting the data is an online questionnaire using Qualtrics.
- The questionnaire responses are anonymous.
- If you consent to taking the questionnaire you will be asked a series of questions that ask for written responses of a few sentences or a few words.
- It should take you about 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire .
- You can skip questions if you wish.
- You can withdraw from the research up until the questionnaire answers have been submitted.
- At the end of the questionnaire, you will be offered a follow-up interview and if you agree you will be asked to supply an email address.
- All data will be anonymously analysed and reported and no names or identifiers will be used even if they are provided as part of the responses to the questionnaire.
- Consent will be sought for any direct quotations from individuals which might be used in the thesis.

What will be the outcome of the research?

Once the thesis is completed, a summary will be shared with policy makers at Welsh Government level and with the National Academy for Educational Leadership for the purpose of developing the leadership approach across Wales as set out by the OECD (2014, 2020).

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to participate. There is no detriment to you or your professional relationships if you choose not to take part. You will have the opportunity to withdraw any data up until your questionnaire is completed.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

The researcher (Tegwen Ellis) will adhere to the Data Protection policy of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD), BERA ethical guidelines as well as the Data Protection Policy of the National Academy for Educational Leadership.

Who has reviewed this research project?

The research project has been reviewed and permission granted to take place by the ethics committee of University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

Contacts for further information

If you have any concerns or complaints about this research or the conduct of the individual conducting the study, then please email: jane.waters-davies@uwtsd.ac.uk or susan.jones@uwtsd.ac.uk

Appendix 5

Prompt sheet

Prompts for online Semi-structured Interviews -Probes and follow -up

Prompts

Need more information or examples

Can you explain further…?

Can you share an example?

Can you confirm what you mean?

Can you provide any further details?

Can you describe….?

Clarification

Can I confirm

Is this what you said?

Can I clarify

Is this what I heard?

… so what does this mean?...

Have I heard you correctly….

Moving the interview on

Thank you…let's move on

We'll move on then…

Idioms and Phrases

Question 12 – First RQ – Educational System Leader

Willing to shoulder (Q12.4)

Bigger picture (Q12.5)

Seeing the bigger picture (Q12.6) (Q12.10)

Broad level (Q12.17)

…the system warts and all (Q12.20)

Question 13 – What is the purpose of an Educational System Leader?

Raise the bar (Q13.4)

Shoulder system (Q13.4)

Voice of practice (Q13.18)

Narrow the gap (Q13.29)

SL1	SL2	SL3	SL4
• People need to buy into what you buy into • Buying into it • It's tricky (5 times) • A pair of eyes on this • All singing and all dancing • Bring people along with you • Taking one person's word • Make your stamp	• Look for nuggets • We magpie all the time • On the back foot • Hang your hat • Broad church • Huge demise • Barking at the complete wrong tree • You don't plough on • Rather than same old same old • Soft skills • Are odds	• Accelerating progress • Asymmetric week • Sounding board • Your own road • Picked it out of thin air • Champion equity • Pioneer process • Font of all knowledge • Picked up things and run with them • Working in silos • Stumbling block • Pockets of brilliance • Building capacity • Spin off • Your own road	• Buy-in • Sounding board • Critical friend • Buying in • Mirror something • Sector leading • getting to grips • Comfort zone • Pushing the boundaries • Comfort zone • Critical friend • Devil's advocate • Knock on effect • Flip thins on its head • Top down approach • Everybody's buying in • Think tank

			- Walked the talk - Sitting tenant - Through the ranks - Track record - Wise owls - Font of all knowledge - Eeyore's - They are 90 miles an hour - Burn yourself out - Tick box listening - Buy into - Work life balance - Sales person - Speed bumps - Kept abreast - Bring something to the table - Think outside the box - Face to face - Common language - Drive it - Like the geese - Build capacity - Menu - Blinkered - Letting go of the reigns - Off on a tangent - Parachute something in

Sample of recorded transcripts

So let's let's look

00:03:14.862 --> 00:03:18.637
at the first question. All my
questions come from the

00:03:18.637 --> 00:03:23.111
narrative. The open text box of
the survey that I sent out. And

00:03:23.111 --> 00:03:27.096
as you can see that first one is
in response to the term

00:03:27.096 --> 00:03:31.430
educational system leader and
what it means to you. And there

00:03:31.430 --> 00:03:32.760
were 17.

00:03:32.700 --> 00:03:36.243
Of the respondents said it was
about working beyond the

00:03:36.243 --> 00:03:40.293
organization and sometimes in a
formal role and sometimes in an

00:03:40.293 --> 00:03:43.711
informal role. So I was
wondering and what your views

00:03:43.711 --> 00:03:47.634
were about? What kind of roles
these these are in that formal

00:03:47.634 --> 00:03:49.470
sense and the informal sense.

00:03:50.460 --> 00:03:53.970
SL1 -I think there's lots of roles
depending on.

00:03:54.710 --> 00:03:57.020
How much you want to undertake
them really?

00:03:58.420 --> 00:04:01.440
I mean I, I wrote down a few
notes here about what sort of so

00:04:01.440 --> 00:04:03.390
formal roles might well be

things like.

00:04:04.110 --> 00:04:05.440
The Academy.

00:04:05.580 --> 00:04:08.851
There's a clear focus on what
you're doing. You know that you

00:04:08.851 --> 00:04:11.912
could have you got a particular
role. It's quite a formal

00:04:11.912 --> 00:04:15.184
process about what's expected of
you. In many ways, isn't it?

00:04:15.184 --> 00:04:18.509
I'll come on to informality from
that as well, but afterwards,

00:04:18.509 --> 00:04:20.040
but certainly that one there.

00:04:20.740 --> 00:04:24.642
Certainly the role I'm going to
now as an improvement partner is

00:04:24.642 --> 00:04:28.485
certainly a. You know, this is
certainly a a system leader role

00:04:28.485 --> 00:04:31.907
with a very clear outline of
what's expected of me. What

00:04:31.907 --> 00:04:35.330
schools can expect, what our
role is in supporting them.

00:04:36.800 --> 00:04:39.876
You know there's a quite clear
document from Welsh government

00:04:39.876 --> 00:04:42.904
about what's expected in the
accountability. The name of the

00:04:42.904 --> 00:04:44.790
document. I've got it here
somewhere.

00:04:46.300 --> 00:04:49.139
The role of the local authority
and the consortium, what and

00:04:49.139 --> 00:04:51.420
what we do there. So that's

quite a formal role.

00:04:53.370 --> 00:04:56.960
You're taking on as a ==mentor== for
the PQH candidates.

00:04:58.480 --> 00:05:01.916
See, that's a very clear ==formal
role== because you know you got

00:05:01.916 --> 00:05:05.131
clear guidelines on what you
should be helping them with,

00:05:05.131 --> 00:05:08.567
what you should be developing
with them, and speaking to them

00:05:08.567 --> 00:05:10.840
about. I suppose being a peer
inspector.

00:05:12.020 --> 00:05:15.766
He's a role with his assistant
leader role, and again, you've

00:05:15.766 --> 00:05:19.512
got a very ==clearly defined role==
there within the structure of

00:05:19.512 --> 00:05:21.989
Austin and the whole inspection
process.

00:05:24.270 --> 00:05:29.250
I think then you get into more
informal links that that then.

00:05:30.220 --> 00:05:33.054
Sustain that, so I was thinking
then about sort of roles that

00:05:33.054 --> 00:05:34.700
you know. If you're a ==cluster
lead.==

00:05:36.940 --> 00:05:39.824
You know you're developing this
because you're working for

00:05:39.824 --> 00:05:42.562
schools ==outside of your
organization,== and that's a more

00:05:42.562 --> 00:05:44.860
==informal relationship== because
you're you know.

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00:05:46.270 --> 00:05:49.694
I'd like to say elected by your
peers, but often you know you

00:05:49.694 --> 00:05:52.953
don't sit down quick enough
before you get selected as the

00:05:52.953 --> 00:05:56.212
cluster lead and and that then
leads into other roles, for

00:05:56.212 --> 00:05:57.542
instance.

00:05:57.580 --> 00:06:01.410
Linking in with the local
authority so you know my role as

00:06:01.410 --> 00:06:05.306
chair of the Fed. You know the
primary federation in RCT is

00:06:05.306 --> 00:06:09.137
sort of semi formal. I wouldn't
say you know it's a formal

00:06:09.137 --> 00:06:11.020
rather sense that you know I.

00:06:11.880 --> 00:06:15.969
You know, I I liaise between
heads and the director, but it's

00:06:15.969 --> 00:06:20.125
not a very formal role that it's
got a clear protocol or clear

00:06:20.125 --> 00:06:23.819
guidelines there, so you know
that that comes from that

00:06:23.819 --> 00:06:27.316
cluster we've always had
informal relationships with

00:06:27.316 --> 00:06:30.944
other head teachers who were
mentoring either formally

00:06:30.944 --> 00:06:35.100
through an induction process or
informally, in the sense that.

00:06:36.070 --> 00:06:39.866
You know you you tend to go to a
certain head teacher for advice,
```

00:06:39.866 --> 00:06:43.432
particularly in the first few
years of leadership. And I, you

00:06:43.432 --> 00:06:46.999
know, I, I used the head teacher
my cluster a lot to get, you

00:06:46.999 --> 00:06:48.840
know it wasn't my ==formal mentor==.

00:06:49.850 --> 00:06:52.948
Well, actually I get more advice
because it was more pertinent to

00:06:52.948 --> 00:06:55.718
what was relating relating to
our particular cluster. So I

00:06:55.718 --> 00:06:57.080
think there's that one there.

Sample of responses to questionnaire (Question 13)

Q13 - What do you think is the purpose of an 'educational system leader'?

Please use no more than 5 sentences
(29 respondents)

No	Response	Coding	Questions and Wonderings
1	To engage at all levels to improve the 'system'. and to make one's own contribution to improve the performance of the system	- Work with and get involved with every part of the system to help it improve 'the big picture' - A personal role to help influence the Performance of the system	What do we mean by performance of the system? **Engage Improve Contribute Perform**
2	System Leaders provide clearly articulated direction; they stay the course until they achieve the results that ALL students are growing and achieving; System leaders never give up - they have **sufficient energy**, to stay the course of assessment practices that improve instruction in every classroom.	- They are strategic - They are committed - They offer sustained energy - They work for the good of all learners (not just their own)	What do we mean by improve? **Provide direction Stay the course Sustained energy**
3	Education system leaders should work collaboratively in partnership with the education workforce to co-develop an overall vision for educational improvement and desired outcomes, co-establish a linked coherent strategy with actions, resources and outputs to support the priority outcomes. Education system leaders have an	- Working with others from education equally - Future focussed and strategic - To improve education - Work together - To support - To provide support and	**Collaborative Co-develop Co-establish Support Develop mutual respect trustworthy**

	important role to play in providing a supportive culture and enabling infrastructure to develop the capacity of the education workforce to improve students' learning, equity and well-being. Education system leaders need to develop mutual respect and trust with the education workforce and the communities served.	• enable others to develop • To be respected and credible and trusted by education workforce and the communities • They are concerned with equity	
4	System leaders' care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. They measure their success in terms of improving student learning and increasing achievement, and strive to both raise the bar and narrow the gap(s). **Crucially they are willing to shoulder system leadership roles in the belief that to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way.**	• They care about everyone not just the learners in their care. • They want everyone to be successful • They are focussed on student outcomes • They are concerned with equity • They are conscious of the need to take responsibility • They get involved to make change • They realise that they have a role to play in contributing to change	**Caring** **Self-less** **Consciences** **Moral Purpose**
5	To improve the educational outcomes for all and to improve the quality of teaching and learning within their own organisation and across the system.	• Raising standards for all • improving teaching • moral purpose for all not just their own organisation	**Improving** **Morally Purpose**
6	The purpose of system leaders should be; to contribute to improving outcomes for all	• raising standards of all • contribute to the professional	**Contribute** **Improve** **Support** **Encourage**

	learners to support professional learning in schools through a relevant and focussed offer that encourages and expects collaboration between schools a **commitment** to **leading pedagogy** and recognising its influence as a driver for change and improvement to **share** and **facilitate** the **sharing** of best practice across the system	learning of others • supports schools to collaborate and work together as part of PL • committed to leading others • a focus on pedagogy • sharing and facilitating best practice with others across the system	**Collaborate** **Committed** **Lead** **Influence** **Driver for change** **Share** **Facilitate**
7	The purpose of an educational system leader is to: create the conditions to bring about improvement and **enable self**; **inspire and promote confidence** in others so that they understand that improvement lies within; **broker and develop** effective support for improvement; and develop others and **build effective capacity.**	• create the conditions for change • support others to be self-improving • develop others so that they understand this • inspire others, be supportive, develop confidence in others • develop leadership capacity	**Create** **Enable** **Inspire** **Promote** **Improve** **Broker** **Develop** **Support** **Build capacity**
8	To improve their own and others **knowledge, skills and understanding** about what constitutes effective **teaching and learning.** To be part of and contribute to networks of professional practice.	• To recognise the value of PL for themselves and others • To improve the understanding of what good teaching and learning is. • To work in collaboration with others and share practice	**Improve self and others** **Contribute** **Networks** **Professional practice**
9	An educational system leader understands the importance of context, culture and ethos in	• The context, culture and ethos of individual	**Value PL** **Keen awareness** **Support others** **Eager**

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		schools is important to understanding what is required to improve.	**Design Facilitate Evaluate Network Collaborate Active advocate**
	individual schools and <mark>believes the learning from every school strengthens leadership in the system.</mark> They have a keen awareness of the leadership learning needs of <mark>all school leaders</mark> at various stages of leadership, and they are particularly keen to <mark>support</mark> those newly appointed to the role. System leaders believe in the **value of quality professional** learning to develop themselves **personally and professionally.** They are **eager** to be involved in the **design, facilitation, evaluation and endorsement of quality leadership learning**. They believe that the system, <mark>comprised of educational stakeholders, the Department of Education, schools and practitioners should work together</mark> towards common goals and they **actively advocate** for and work on this.	• They believe that everyone has something to contribute to the system • They are aware of others' leadership • They want to help other leaders • They value PL on a personal and professional level • They are eager to be involved • They believe in networking with all edcuators • They are play an active role in advocacy	
10	<mark>To enable equity across the education system</mark>. To **share and be open to the ideas of others**. To <mark>build relationships with others</mark> who <mark>impact</mark> upon education – communities, businesses, HEIs, national policy etc.	• They believe in equity for all • They learn from others and are open to learning • They collaborate and build networks with those that influence education	**Enable Share Open minded**
11	Their overall purpose is to <mark>improve</mark> the <mark>education of children and young people</mark> across a broad locality or state or country. They do this through their <mark>positive leadership influence</mark> on other	• Improve or better education for all. • They are influence others which improves the overall system	**Improve influence**

		• They are role models	
12	To influence and effect continuous improvement beyond your school. To feed into, and influence **policy** debate from a practitioner's perspective. To **motivate** and **support the development of other and future leaders in education**. To **model best practice** and **personal learning** for an evidence-informed profession.	• Sustained effort to improve others beyond your own organisation • to use the voice of practice to influence policy • to invest time and PL to develop other leaders • to be at the centre of developing others	**Influence Motivate Support and develop others Model best practice**
13	Have **credibility, drive, integrity and commitment**. Ability to collaborate, be **trustworthy** and **build effective teams** that have the **capacity t**o bring about change and improvement. Ensure the system leader has thorough knowledge of the context of an organisation. All organisations are different and are at different stages in their journey. **Be open to suggestions** and **support** as well as offer it. Be **accountable** and **hold others to account.**	• They have a moral purpose to help others • They are highly respected by the system • They develop leadership capacity • They understand the importance of context • They are have an open mind and are continuously learning • They understand the two way accountability process	Credible Drive Integrity Collaborative Trustworthy
14	To **share best practice** and experience. To encourage **innovation and creativity**. To **inspire** other leaders and potential leaders.	• They are good role models • They take risks, they are creative and innovative • They inspire others to develop their	Share Encourage Innovate Creative Inspire

		leadership ability	
15	To **promote,** inspire and develop leadership at all levels. To be **brave** in their approach to try new things and make mistakes for the purpose of being **creative and innovative**. To have the **selfless drive** to not only improve the educational organisation they work in but to help improve all educational organisations through collaboration.	• They are dynamic and inspirational developing all leaders • They are courageous and take risks • They are creative and innovative • They have a moral purpose to help all learners and teachers • They work with others and collaborate to achieve the best for all	**Promote** **Inspire** **Develop** **Brave** **(risk takers)** **Creative** **Innovative** **Selfless** **Improve** **collaboration**
16	To achieve outstanding educational outcomes for all learners. To share successful strategies for school improvement beyond their own organisation. To contribute to the growth and development of the leadership qualities and capabilities of others. To **celebrate the achievements of others** and build confidence. To **build strong professional networks** to support improvement in leadership.	• Moral purpose to help every learner • Involved in supporting leadership development of others • Celebrate the achievements of others • Build confidence in others (and the sector) • Build strong relationships and networks to support leadership	**Achieve** **Share** **Contribute** **Celebrate** **Build confidence** **Support**
17	**Ensure** positive changes in education which benefit children's learning and well-being. Work with others to **ensur**e **knowledge** is moved around the system to benefit all. **Ensure** greater	• A moral purpose to help all children • Facilitates knowledges so that all benefit • Engages and collaborates	Works with others Positive changes Ensures Connectivity cohesive

	connectivity within the education system leading to a more **cohesive** approach.	with other parts of the system to bring about coherence	
18	several purposes - **sharing insights and experiences** across a range of schools and settings, **challenging practice and expectation**s, **championing** the interests of all learners and practitioners, providing the **voice of practice** to the middle tier and government, providing intelligent challenge to government and policy.	• Sharing and modelling practice • Questioning • Championing • being a conduit between practice and policy	**Sharing Challenging Championing Voice of practice Providing**
19	No single institution has a monopoly on best practice. Educational system leaders will be informed of where examples of best practice exist. They will **assess critically** the potential for transforming practice in other parts of the education system they are able to influence. They will influence and guide others (at all levels) elsewhere in the education system to take a **leadership role themselves in bringing about change.**	• They are a voice of influence • They support others in developing themselves to be self-improving	Influence Assess critically Bring about change Self-improving
20	To support other educational settings in raising standards and improving provision. **To question and challenge current policy** and procedures across the whole educational system with the aim of improvement for all. **To support other leaders in individual settings to develop their own leadership**. To **advise** the wider system so that decisions at government (national or local) level are in the best interests of educational	• A moral purpose to help others • Involved in raising standards • involved in leadership development provision • offer critique to policy • support others to develop themselves	**Support Raise standards Improve Support Develop Advise Share recognise**

	professionals and their learners. **To share and recognise best practice across the system**.	• offer advice to Policy	
21	They are **agents of change.** I think they are expected to share their work because it is recognised as something new or effective. The **model their work** which is based on or reflects research and has a tangibility about it, a relevance. They are **trusted** and **do not accept the status quo**. They **seek answers.**	• Active leaders • Network with others and model best practice • They are well respected • They challenge the system	Agents of change Share Model Trusted Seek answers
22	They would be **aware of a range** of approaches and **advocate** the ones determined by the educational system or establishment that they work for. They would have **demonstrated expertise and knowledge** of the system as it operates in their field or area. They could have a **role as a persuader** - based on their educational perspective. The role would be significantly different in different contexts, for example HE has considerable autonomy when compared to schooling.	• They are knowledgeable • They advocate and model leadership approaches • They are influencers • They are aware of the context influences	**Aware Advocate Demonstrate Persuader**
23	To **build strength** within the system, develop new leaders effectively.	• To develop leadership capacity	Build leadership capacity develop
24	To use the **experience** they have gained at institutional level for the benefit of the wider education system.	• They are knowledgeable and experienced • they work for all	Experience
25	The main purpose of an educational system leader is to drive educational change so as to improve outcomes for students. Secondly system leadership is also	• They have a responsibility to improve standards for learners • They are role models	Drive Improve Empowering Share Enhance transfer

	a means of empowering experienced school leaders to share expertise with others Thirdly a good system leader will enhance the **transfer of policy to practice** if that policy is mediated by a system leader sharing on the ground examples with others.	• They facilitate on behalf of Government turning policy into practice	
26	Where you support the development and improvement of others, wider than your own school, or LA. Importance of collaboration and sharing of good/interesting practice. **Moral purpose t**o support all learners and schools. Where you look to continually improve and develop. Where you work as a wider learning organisation.	• Moral purpose of supporting all learners • Conscience and self-improving • Centred on own's PL • Strong working with others ethos	**Develop Improve Collaborating Sharing Moral purpose**
27	Much as above: Improved outcomes for all Seeing and embracing the future Positive demeanour towards **development of all engaged** Confronting **low ambition,** lethargy and waste **Hard work towards goals**	• Moral purpose of all • Pragmatic • Confronts low ambition and effort • Conscientious	Future positive Develop Confronting Hard working
28	To bring about **lateral change** and to **build leadership capacity** within and acrpss the system.	• Develops all leaders • Concerned with later leadership as well as vertical	**Builds**
29	To help the whole system to improve. To **narrow the gap** between those education organisations that are improving and those that are not To create an **'outward looking' education system** where the improvement of opportunity for all children and young people is everyone's	• Moral purpose to help everyone • Concerned with equity • Future focussed • Concerned with a self-improving system	Outward looking Strengthen Responsibility Model Collective moral purpose

responsibility To strengthen the practices, systems and structures whereby schools (in particular) can take responsibility for their own improvement To model 'collective moral purpose'			

From: Postgrad Research <pgresearch@uwtsd.ac.uk>
Sent: 23 March 2021 14:19
To: Tegwen Rosemary Ellis (1708429)
<1708429@student.uwtsd.ac.uk>
Cc: PGR Athrofa <PGRAthrofa@uwtsd.ac.uk>; Alex Southern <A.Southern@uwtsd.ac.uk>; Jan Barnes
<janine.barnes@uwtsd.ac.uk>; Jane Waters-Davies <jane.waters-davies@uwtsd.ac.uk>
Subject: EC857 PG2 Ethics Form Approved: ELLIS, TEGWEN ROSEMARY (1708429)

Dear Tegwen Rosemary Ellis,

I am pleased to confirm that the submission of the Ethical Approval on your research 'What is understood by the term System Leadership?' has been **APPROVED** by the University's Ethics Committee.

Please ensure that you are aware of and use, the University's Research Data Management Policy and the extensive resources on the University's Research Data Management web pages (http://uwtsd.ac.uk/library/research-data-management/).

Please do not hesitate to contact the office should you require any further information on this matter.

Kind Regards

Steve Davies

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