

Exploring interactions of the dimensions of agency through the experiences of aspiring school leaders in Scotland, UK

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Abstract

Agency has increasingly become a central concept in educational leadership research, yet its application to those preparing to enter school leadership roles remains underexplored. Drawing on the conceptual framework of the ecological approach to teacher agency, we explored how and in what ways aspiring school leaders in Scotland ($n=21$) experience agency as they undertake a national programme of professional learning designed to support their entry into school leadership—*Into Headship*. Drawing on data gathered from critical incidents ($n=56$) provided by the school leaders and written during their completion of the *Into Headship* programme during 2021–2024, we explored the ways in which the different dimensions of agency were visible and how they interact. We found a strong presence of the cultural and structural aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency and evident interactions between the practical-evaluative, iterative and projective dimensions of agency. We also noted how aspiring school leaders identify and create spaces of agency for others. In the context of educational reform, this research highlights the importance of agency as a key concept, which informs the educational structures created by government and the professional learning programmes and networks, which support aspiring school leaders' practice.

KEYWORDS

agency, critical incidents, professional learning, school leaders

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Agency has increasingly become a central concept in educational leadership research, yet its application to those preparing to enter school leadership roles remains underexplored. Drawing on insights from the written reflections of 22 aspiring school leaders based in Scotland, this study explore agency through the ecological approach.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

We found a strong presence of the cultural and structural aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, and clear interactions between the practical-evaluative, iterative and projective dimensions of agency. Evident in the written reflections of aspiring school leaders was the practice of identifying and creating spaces of agency for others.

INTRODUCTION

Agency has increasingly become a central concept in educational leadership research, yet its application to those preparing to enter school leadership roles remains underexplored. The ecological model of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), which conceptualises agency as a dynamic interplay between individuals and their contextual conditions, has begun to attract scholarly attention in the context of school leadership (Campbell & Kam, 2026; Elomaa et al., 2024; Harvie et al., 2024). However, this body of work remains embryonic and empirical studies that specifically examine aspiring school leaders through this theoretical lens are notably scarce. Furthermore, while existing research has explored individual dimensions of agency, little attention has been paid to how these dimensions interact with and shape one another, a gap that limits a fuller understanding of how agency is achieved in practice. This study responds to both gaps. It builds on and extends an emerging body of literature applying the ecological model of agency to school leadership contexts, while directing specific attention towards a population that has largely been overlooked: aspiring school leaders.

For the purposes of this study, aspiring school leaders refers to teachers who are actively engaged in the process of transitioning towards leadership roles through formal preparation programmes (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). These individuals occupy a distinctive and liminal professional space, navigating the demands of their current teaching roles while simultaneously developing the identities, competencies and dispositions required of school leaders. By foregrounding the interactions between the dimensions of agency, this study contributes novel empirical insights as to how these interactions are visible in the experiences of aspiring school leaders, which can inform the development and enhancement of school leader professional programmes. This has important practical implications for professional development models, which should be designed to enhance school leaders' evaluative capacities. This includes supporting school leaders to exercise their professional judgement such that they are not merely implementers of policy, but active in negotiating, resisting and reshaping the structures around them (Campbell & Kam, 2026).

Understanding agency as a theoretical framework in educational research

Agency is a much-contested concept. In educational research, this matters if it is to be used as a productive theoretical framework. A key challenge lies in the way agency is conceived: whether agency is seen as ‘variable’, ‘capacity’ or a ‘phenomenon’ (Priestley & Biesta, 2026). Cathcart et al. (2026) unpacked these different conceptualisations of agency, including agency as an *ecological*, *emergent* and *relational* phenomenon. This understanding is rooted in Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) theorisation of agency as a:

temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities), and acted out in the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment)

(p. 963)

Here, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) articulate three interrelated dimensions of agency: the iterational, the projective and the practical-evaluative (the chordal triad). Each of these dimensions have a temporal orientation which allows the examination of actions in the present (the practical-evaluative), the past (the iterational) and the future (the projective). Table 1 below illustrates these three dimensions of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The grey boxes show the main characteristics of the iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions. The iterational dimension involves different processes of selective recall from previous experience, including selective attention, recognition of types and categorical location (Table 1). Selective attention refers to the ability of individual to focus on a particular area of their experience or reality and having directed that attention, identify patterns of experience, which may continue to occur in the future (recognition of types) which are also related to other people and contexts through a process of social construction (categorical location). For a school leader, this could mean focusing on a particular experience, for example, curriculum design and considering how their practices and actions have been

TABLE 1 The Chordal Triad of Agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998): Table adapted from Biesta and Tedder (2006, p. 15) in Priestley (2020, p. 5).

Dimension of agency	Past	Present	Future
Iterational: Primary orientation to past Secondary tones—manoeuvre and expectation	Selective attention Recognition of type Categorical location	Manoeuvre among repertoires (present)	Expectation (future) Expectation maintenance
Practical-evaluative: The ‘contextualisation of social experience’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 994) Secondary tones—characterisation and deliberation	Characterisation (past) Anticipatory	Problematisation Decision Execution	Deliberation (future)
Projective: Imaginative generation of different possible trajectories Secondary tones—identification and experimental	Identification (past)	Experimental enactment (present)	Narrative construction Symbolic recomposition Hypothetical resolution

evident in the past and shaped by different school contexts. The practical-evaluative dimension involves problematisation, characterisation and deliberation. Problematisation involves the recognition that a situation or experience is unsettled or unresolved and subsequently, characterisation is where these problematic circumstances can be understood or identified in relation to principles developed from past experience. Deliberation is where individuals make choices in relation to the aspirations, possibilities and experiences available (Table 1). For school leaders, this could include the ways in which they negotiate limited resources, such as suitably qualified staff and the decisions they make as they seek to resolve this problem. Finally, the projective dimension articulates how future possibilities for action can be expanded through negotiation, reconfiguration and imagination of existing practices and experiences. This includes the construction of narratives that identify and locate future possibilities, the recomposition of possible actions and then the selection of a hypothetical solution (Table 1). For school leaders, this could involve the imagination of a new approach to school-wide professional learning with varied outcomes, in response to a challenge or need in their context.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceptualise agency as a chordal triad, where all three dimensions are present. Moreover, they argue that each dimension has its 'own internal chordal structure' (p. 972)—a past, present and future. These secondary tones make visible the ways in which each temporal dimension is evident in the thinking, experiences and practices of individuals in relationship with others and their environment (Table 1). This means that while all three dimensions of agency are always present when agency is achieved, in each unique emergence of agency there may be more or less of one dimension which is resonant, and different secondary tones may be evident and not always harmonious (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Biesta and Tedder (2006) took Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) work further suggesting that agency is '*achieved* in and through the engagement with a particular temporal-relational situation' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 18). This *ecological* view of agency promotes the understanding:

that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

Achievement of agency can fluctuate as the situations change. Here, then is the importance of theorising agency as a phenomenon (Cathcart et al., 2026)—'actors-in-transaction-with-context.... Actors acting by means-of-an-environment rather than simply in an environment' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 18). This temporal-relational view sees agency as an *emergent* phenomenon made possible through the *relational* (material, social, cultural) affordances of the specific environment rather than merely being the quality or capacity of an individual (Priestley et al., 2015; Priestley & Biesta, 2026). Agency is understood as the quality of engagement with contexts for action, which can be enhanced by professional learning and can lead to the emergence of new and hitherto unconsidered or previously rejected practices (Priestley & Biesta, 2026). Rushton and Bird (2024) suggest that space helps us think of agency as a 'messy entanglement of the cultural, material, and relational conditions and qualities of agency made explicit in the ecological approach' (p. 254). Acknowledgement that agency may be more orientated towards the past, future or present, potentially provides spaces for agency (Rushton & Bird, 2024). For example, if agency is orientated towards habitual practices (the past), providing enrichment through increased experiences, could increase the possible manoeuvres and lead to other actions.

Having outlined the ecological approach to agency, we now consider school leadership through this theoretical lens.

School leadership agency through the ecological model

The ecological model of agency has begun to inform an emerging body of empirical work on school leader agency. In a study of Finnish principals, Elomaa et al. (2024) show how leaders' present practices and perceptions of work as demanding or resourceful are deeply informed by their prior experiences and future orientations, closely reflecting the iterational and projective dimensions of the ecological approach to agency. Elomaa et al. (2024) underline the need for school principals to continue to receive professional development and training opportunities in the first years of headship which is focused on the social and relational aspects of leadership, including managing conflict and enabling the whole school community to work towards shared goals. Their research, with a focus on school leaders at the outset of their careers is directly relevant to this current study, which also considers aspiring school leaders.

In a recent study from Scotland, Harvie et al. (2024) provide the most direct application to aspiring leaders, analysing participants in Scotland's *Into Headship* programme through an explicitly ecological lens. Their findings suggest that structured professional learning can enhance participants' capacity to act in ways aligned with their values, highlighting the role of preparation programmes in shaping agency. Extending this work beyond Western contexts, Campbell and Kam (2026) conceptualise principals working in high-accountability systems as active agents who negotiate, resist and reshape structural conditions, with agency understood as contingent, relational and contextually mediated.

These studies suggest the ecological approach to agency is helpful in understanding how school leaders navigate constraints and enact purposeful practices. However, two significant gaps remain. Firstly, the existing literature is largely oriented towards serving or recently appointed leaders. As a result, we know comparatively little about how agency develops during the transitional stage, when individuals are simultaneously preparing for leadership and engaging with new organisational expectations across diverse contexts. Secondly, while the theoretical architecture of the ecological approach is well-established, there is limited research tracing how the iterational, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions interact dynamically in lived experience. This is particularly important in the case of aspiring leaders, whose agency is shaped under conditions of uncertainty and evolving relational trust. This study addresses these gaps by examining how the dimensions of agency interact in the experiences of aspiring school leaders. It is guided by the question: *How and in what ways, are interactions across the dimensions of agency visible in the experiences of aspiring school leaders?*

Here then, we begin by outlining the Scottish policy context and the leadership development infrastructure, including the *Into Headship* programme.

The policy context of Scotland

Scotland's publicly funded school system comprises approximately 2500 primary and secondary schools (Scottish Government, 2023). These schools are funded, supported and held accountable by Scotland's 32 Local Authorities, each of which functions as an education authority with statutory responsibility for provision in its area. The system encompasses considerable geographic and demographic diversity. The densely populated central belt, which includes the major urban centres of Edinburgh and Glasgow, sits alongside the

sparsely populated regions of the Scottish Highlands and the small islands of the archipelagos to the west and north. This geographic spread means that school leaders across Scotland navigate fundamentally different contexts.

In recent years the Scottish Government has pursued curriculum reform through the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), the framework governing learning from early years through to secondary education (3–18 years) (Education Scotland, 2025). At the same time, significant investments have been made in improving pupil achievement and attainment through initiatives such as the National Improvement Framework (Scottish Government, 2026) and the Scottish Attainment Challenge which seeks to address disadvantage through targeted funding mechanisms which directly allocate resources to schools on the basis of deprivation indices (Scottish Government, 2021). This context matters for aspiring school leaders because it means they are undertaking this role during a period of significant national-level uncertainty about curriculum direction — a context that shapes both what they are expected to lead and what resources and guidance are available to support them.

School leadership development infrastructure in Scotland—The *Into Headship* programme

In 2015, *Into Headship* replaced the Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH). The goals of the *Into Headship* programme are to develop the strategic leadership and management competences specified by the Standard for Headship (GTCS, 2021) and to facilitate students' transition into school headship. Therefore, the programme provides the route to achieving the General Teaching Council for Scotland's Standard for Headship, which since August 2020 has been a mandatory requirement for all new permanently appointed headteachers in local authority and grant-aided schools (GTCS, 2021). *Into Headship* is a 60-credit postgraduate certificate programme achieved in partnership between Education Scotland, seven universities across Scotland and the 32 Local Authorities. The programme is fully funded by the Scottish Government for GTCS-registered teachers and typically takes 12 months to complete. It is aimed at teachers who aspire to take up a headteacher post within the next two to three years (although some are already in acting headteachers' roles when they undertake *Into Headship*) and local authorities have oversight of recruitment.

As suggested, the content and learning approach are directly aligned with the GTCS Standard for Headship (GTCS, 2021). *Into Headship* students identify an educational issue that will become their in-school strategic change initiative. They are assessed via written assignments and verified by an experienced headteacher against the GTCS Standards. Additionally, they receive a 360-degree assessment of their emotional and social competences from colleagues, engage with a headteacher mentor identified by the local authority, and undertake four online modules on employment law, education law, health and safety and finance. *Into Headship* students also attend two national conferences organised by Education Scotland.

What is distinctive about *Into Headship* is the underlying assumptions about what leadership preparation should accomplish. Greany et al. (2025), drawing on Shulman's concept of signature pedagogies, analysed *Into Headship* alongside England's National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Interviews with Scottish policymakers and programme designers revealed that *Into Headship* was intentionally designed around a different set of beliefs about headship (Greany et al., 2025). *Into Headship* was never intended to prescribe a particular way to be a headteacher, but rather to help individuals understand the different dimensions of school leadership and, crucially, to understand themselves within that landscape, the balance between who they are and the community they will be working with. In Scotland's approach, aspiring headteachers are asked to critically reflect on their own

leadership practices enabling them to surface and question assumptions and beliefs, and to develop their ways of leading through socially just practices. In terms of the implications for agency, this difference is important as professional experiences form part of the iterational dimension and hence shape the possibilities of considered actions.

The partnership model of universities working closely with the national agency and Local Authorities in the provision of the programme was identified as a significant strength of the programme in the evaluation carried out by Harris (2022). Her evaluation notes that contextualisation and personalisation are also central to the programme, allowing it to respond to a changing policy landscape. The seven universities involved in providing *Into Headship* share the same learning outcomes but draw on a diverse range of approaches to teaching and learning, with content, pedagogical activities and assessments reflecting a shared commitment to encouraging self-reflection and the contextual adaptation of national policy to local conditions. This emphasis on partnership structures, shared values and the ethical and place-based character of Scottish education represents what Greany et al. (2025) identify as *Into Headship's* signature pedagogy, the deep and implicit structures that distinguish it from knowledge-first preparation models. Harris (2022) is unequivocal in her positive assessment of *Into Headship*, yet her evaluation also raised a set of tensions, including the workload demands placed on participants. Acting headteachers faced particular pressures, managing the full weight of school leadership while completing a mandatory qualification that carried potential employment implications if not met.

As mentioned previously, Harvie et al. (2024) provide the most direct empirical test of what school leadership might look like when considered through the lens of agency. Their qualitative study of a single national cohort of *Into Headship* students, drawn from three universities and undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, explicitly adopted Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency to evaluate the impact of the programme. Participants in their study described *Into Headship* as relevant to their day-to-day work rather than as something separate from it, and they spoke about the value of supportive mentors and encouraging colleagues as significant factors in sustaining their engagement and developing their confidence. The *Into Headship* programme's emphasis on self-reflection and values-based professional development was understood by participants as feeding directly into their ongoing practice (Harvie et al., 2024).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Here, we provide an overview of the data collection, ethical considerations and limitations before then outlining our analysis process. Our overarching research question is: *How and in what ways, are interactions across the dimensions of agency visible in the experiences of aspiring school leaders?*

Data collection

School leaders who had completed the *Into Headship* programme at a university in Central Scotland during the period 2015–2024 were invited to contribute to the study on school leader agency. Participation involved providing the research team with written permission to analyse their final assignment, specifically written reflections about three critical incidents they experienced as aspiring school leaders. Their final assignment consists of a 5000-word document divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on implementing their strategic change initiative, while the second asks *Into Headship* students to analyse two or three critical incidents (each of about 800–1000 words) that they identified from their

experiences leading change within their school community. In this context, these written critical incidents require *Into Headship* students to reflect on their leadership and management of the strategic change process, drawing on academic literature, evaluating their practices against the Standard for Headship (GTCS, 2021) and identifying next steps for their own professional learning. Here, critical incidents serve as a powerful methodological tool for stimulating deeper reflection, prompting aspiring school leaders to surface and interrogate the values and principles that sustain the type of leadership they seek to enact.

Graduates of the *Into Headship* programme from one University were contacted via Local Authority and institutional networks and mailing lists during May–June 2025 and only those who had graduated (rather than current students) were eligible to participate. Of those eligible, 40 school leaders elected to participate and of these, all completed the programme during the period 2021–2024. Initial screening of the 40 assignments was undertaken independently by authors one and three and subsequently through joint discussions to determine which assignments should be included in further phases of data analysis. The following inclusion criteria were applied: aspiring school leaders who had graduated from the *Into Headship* programme from a specific University in Central Scotland during the period 2019–2024 who provided consent for their written assignments to be considered as part of this research. Decisions to include or exclude assignments were primarily focused on the extent to which at least two of the three critical incidents provided sufficient material to support further phases of analysis. This resulted in the inclusion of a total of 21 assignments: 14 of which included 3 critical incidents and 7 which included 2 critical incidents, a total of 56 examples of reflective writing. Of the 21 assignments, three were completed in 2021/21, eight in 2022/23 and 10 in 2023/24 by *Into Headship* students working in Local Authority-maintained schools across Scotland. Each critical incident was between 800 and 950 words in length. As demographic data was decoupled from the written reflections (apart from year of participation) no further, specific information about the demographics of the school leaders we report on here is available.

Limitations

The data collected represents the experiences of those aspiring school leaders who elected to share their assignments and whose written reflections were sufficiently detailed to enable analysis, rather than being generalisable across communities of school leaders working in schools across Scotland. Given that participation was voluntary with no incentives, it is possible that those who chose to participate have a particular set of experiences as aspiring school leaders. While our approach to draw on materials already created by aspiring school leaders was informed by a desire not to place additional demands of time and expertise on a profession already experiencing demanding and complex workloads, we recognise that interviews or focus groups with school leaders may have provided further insights.

Ethical considerations

An Institutional Ethics Committee (GUEP 2025 22191 16083) provided approval of the research prior to the commencement of data collection and voluntary, informed consent was given by participants in writing. Data were managed consistent with the United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation and were anonymised before analysis. During phases of research design, data collection and analysis, our approach was consistent with the British Educational Research Association guidelines for ethical research (BERA, 2024). For example, in the design of the research, we were cognisant of our responsibilities as researchers to

minimise any potential harm arising from participation in research, including electing to use existing materials rather than making further requests of school leaders' time and expertise. As part of the recruitment strategy, the research team drew on both institutional and Local Authority professional networks, which we had at least partly developed through our dual roles as researchers, tutors and/or programme leader for the *Into Headship* programme. Therefore, it was important as part of the recruitment process to explicitly state that both the decision to participate (or not) would have no bearing on current or future professional relationships (BERA, 2024 paragraph 19).

Data analysis

Data analysis focused on 56 critical incidents, each 800–950 words in length, written by 21 school leaders (who each contributed two or three critical incidents). These critical incidents were explored through iterative thematic analysis undertaken by all three authors, which took place over a series of six phases after Braun and Clarke (2021). This process is summarised in Table 2.

Data familiarisation included the creation of the dataset to be analysed by identifying and compiling the 56 critical incidents. This phase involved all three authors initially separately reviewing critical incidents and then discussing reasons for inclusion and exclusion. Phases of data coding, generation of initial themes and review of themes involved the review and categorisation of the data independently by all authors to begin to identify patterns of meaning. These phases of review produced individual coding of the data, which the authors shared, discussed and refined iteratively through regular meetings and ongoing individual analysis and refinement. This process of analysis involved a hybrid process of inductive and deductive coding and theme generation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It brought together deductive analysis informed by ideas from published literature focused on

TABLE 2 An overview of the data analysis process.

Phase	Processes
Data familiarisation	All critical incidents reviewed and 56 identified by applying the inclusion criteria. All three authors involved in reviewing critical incidents and familiarising themselves with the entire data set, noting points of interest and discussion.
Data coding	All three authors reviewed the 56 critical incidents and individually, manually identified codes by annotating and highlighting the texts. These codes were then discussed as a group.
Initial generation of themes	Initial themes were generated through group discussion of the codes across the three authors and through engagement with literature to consider where dimensions of agency were evident. Iterative phases of collaborative writing and individual reflection enabled the grouping of codes into themes with shared patterns of meaning.
Review of themes	Themes were reviewed through group discussion and individual reflection, which included continuing to draw on published literature with a focus on school leadership and agency through the ecological approach.
Refinement and naming of themes	Three themes were considered, refined and named by all three authors.
Writing and review	Through a process of collaborative writing, the themes were finalised and this included reflection on responses received through the peer review process.

the ecological approach to teacher agency (e.g. Priestley et al., 2015; Rushton & Bird, 2024) and school leader agency (e.g. Harvie et al., 2024; Madrid Miranda et al., 2024). For example, we considered which dimensions of agency (e.g. practical-evaluative, iterative and projective) were present (Priestley et al., 2015) and in what ways these dimensions could be understood to interact as part of a 'messy entanglement' (Rushton & Bird, 2024). Data analysis also took an inductive approach, with the coding process involving consideration of each critical incident individually, then as part of pair or trio provided by a single participant, and finally across the data set as a whole. As part of this approach to coding, we understood our roles as researchers as organising and interpreting the data points such that we can develop patterns of information, meaning or themes. As a further part of the deductive, analytical process, we drew on our professional lives and experiences as university-based teacher educators and education researchers and considered how these shaped our engagement with the data.

Final phases of data analysis, including defining themes and developing a narrative in relation to the literature, took place as part of a collaborative writing process. This process further refined the form and nature of themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017), including through continued critical engagement with existing agency and school leadership literatures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We present three main themes, which focus on the visibility of and interactions between different dimensions of teacher agency as articulated by Priestley et al. (2015) in the context of school leadership in Scotland (Table 3).

Throughout the critical incidents analysed, there are a handful of examples where all three dimensions of agency: the practical-evaluative, the iterative and the projective are evident in the reflective writing of these aspiring school leaders. Across our first thematic finding, we consider the strong presence of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, especially the cultural and structural aspects evident in many of the examples analysed. We also explore a second theme, namely how the iterative and projective dimensions of agency are frequently articulated or surfaced in combination with the cultural and structural aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension, a reflection of the 'messy entanglement' of relations and resources when school leaders achieve agency (Rushton & Bird, 2024). Distinct from cases where all dimensions were present, in Theme 3 we identified instances in which a focus on the practical-evaluative dimension of agency revealed how school leaders achieved agency by creating spaces for others to act. Table 3 illustrates these three themes with codes and indicative quotes.

We examine the implications of these findings for how agency is understood and conceptualised across its dimensions within professional learning for aspiring school leaders and for practice.

The strong presence of the cultural and structural aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency

At the core of much of the critical incidents were examples of aspiring school leaders grappling with both school structures—relationships with staff, power dynamics, trust and confidence as leader and in others and cultures—shared ideas and vision regarding the goal of the strategic change and the wider purposes of education. These were frequently surfaced because each aspiring school leader was tasked with leading a strategic change initiative in their setting, which necessarily was grounded in their own professional beliefs as leaders

TABLE 3 Dimensions of agency identified in aspiring school leaders' critical incidents.

Theme	Codes	Indicative quote
The strong presence of the cultural and structural aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency.	Trust, vision, beliefs, goals, impact, ideas, relationships, collaboration, consensus, disagreement, change, belonging.	Reflecting on my feelings and evaluating the situation, I became aware of my insecurity as a new and temporary leader. I felt uncomfortable in persuading the staff to be part of curriculum development due to their existing workloads...I realised that I had not taken the lead and engaged in collaborative efforts with my colleagues when identifying and aligning priorities... By agreeing the nursery's priorities together, I could have ensured a vision which cultivated a shared consensus... Staff need to understand the goals of developing vocabulary and the impact it will have on our pupils before they will see the purpose of being involved in a working party. (Participant 12, Critical Incident 2)
Exploring the interactions between the practical-evaluative and the iterational and projective dimensions of agency.	Time, reflection, urgency, change, direction, short-term, long-term, shared understanding, professional experiences.	It is interesting to reflect on what prevented me from identifying shortcomings with the initiative sooner. I would suggest that engagement with outside agencies...allowed me to be seduced into thinking that because I and others were excited by the project, it was the right initiative at the right time. This acted as a barrier to my seeing the need to engage with those in the school communities as well as those beyond...I had been caught up in the everyday running of two schools in a new educational system and a new country, and I had not made time to look ahead... Now I need to step back and think about how to lead my schools towards a long-term horizon, not just to navigate the current bumps on the path. This requires me to make clear to staff what I expect of them and by when, so that we have room to look at our long-term aims and vision. (Participant 11, Critical Incident 1)
Aspiring school leaders identify and create spaces of agency for others.	Learning materials, professional learning, mentoring, coaching, discussion, freedom, development, growth, change, exchange.	As my colleague gained proficiency with the task, I deliberately stepped back from the instructional role to that of a coach (Lumby & English, 2010). I began to use open-ended discussion prompts, to guide them to make their own decisions (GTCS, 2021, 2.2.4; Mintzberg, 1994). This freedom allowed my colleague to create learning materials that were far superior to anything that I could have produced. (Participant 33, Critical Incident 3)

and educators. This required aspiring school leaders to share their thinking and vision and identify structures of engagement to take the strategic change initiative forward. For example, Participant 7 reflected that their lack of communication with a wider staff group, both about the vision for the strategic change and the data which underpinned it, initially limited collaboration and participation and this was resolved by the aspiring school leader creating a structure (staff meeting) with trust (sharing the data)—here the shared vision can be built through deliberation with others:

I was able to further reflect at that time that the vision I had for the school came primarily from the SLT [Senior Leadership Team] as we were gathering the data and staff were unable to collaborate effectively as we hadn't shared this information. This sharing of information became key, and I incorporated the HWB [Health and Wellbeing] data within a shared staff meeting.

(Participant 7, Critical Incident 1)

In the second example of an interaction with a teacher, Participant 7 describes an example of where a more experienced teacher had a strongly held divergent perspective regarding pedagogy and that she noted in her journal that this teacher 'needs to see the vision in practice' (Critical Incident 1). Reflecting on their own reactions to these examples of teacher interaction, she shared how her beliefs as a teacher had changed as a result of this mixed response, which included resistance:

This has shown me that in teams there needs to be mixed voices as they view things differently and enable improvements. I previously held the opinion that a shared vision means all staff think the same. However, I have realised that 'appreciating resistance' (Fullan, 2002, p.75) increases legitimacy.

(Participant 7, Critical Incident 1).

Participant 7 then described how they took forward this learning in their practice as a school leader, through creating opportunities for shared deliberation and discussion where all voices are heard, which is a fundamental condition for agency to be achieved.

These incidents prompted me to hold a full staff discussion on our current practices, using areas of conflict to plan different approaches alongside staff and truly listening to all opinions.

(Participant 7, Critical Incident 1).

The importance of the cultural and structural aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency was also visible in the following reflection from Participant 14, which explored why staff are over-reliant on senior colleagues to manage complex situations:

Within my journal, I had noted down a few similar incidents which I believed also to be 'critical'. This interrupted my thinking at the time with me questioning and reflecting upon why do staff feel unable to deal with situation themselves without immediately seeking management?... it then led me to question whether or not my 'shared vision' of creating a truly inclusive ethos was indeed espoused or enacted?...This incident became 'critical' as it highlighted to me the need for an emotional and inclusive wellbeing approach from all staff in order to create my shared vision and lead my SCI [Strategic Change Initiative] effectively across the whole school.

(Participant 14, Critical Incident 1).

This example above illustrates how presenting situations and the judgements made become part of experiences shaping professional histories and identities (the iterational). These incidents, identified as critical by these aspiring leaders and more orientated towards the practical-evaluative dimension, show the achievement of agency through engagement with current structures and cultures that organise school life. Consequently, the affordances and constraints on their agency are closely tied to how they understand and navigate these organisational conditions. The centrality of cultural and structural aspects may be interpreted as reflecting professionals who have not yet developed a more complex and diverse repertoire, which would enable them to draw more fully on the other two dimensions of agency and extend their future imaginings as leaders. Varpanen et al. (2022) suggests that futures thinking (probable, possible and preferred futures) can help elaborate the iterative and projective dimensions of the ecological agency model. Probable futures can be mapped onto the iterative dimension (the implementation of habits/known schemas), while the possible and preferable form part of the projective dimension. Our findings above show that participants achievement of agency is orientated towards the practical-evaluative. Support and education for aspiring school leaders can enable them to question practices, policies and the everyday of teaching and school, while creating spaces for agency, which enable them to imagine differently and move beyond the probable towards the possible and preferred.

Exploring interactions between the practical-evaluative and the iterational and projective dimensions of agency

In a different critical incident, we noted the visibility of the practical-evaluative and iterational dimension and the ways in which these two dimensions interacted. In describing this, the aspiring school leader outlined how they had to:

...pause and reflect on what Mongon and Chapman (2011) discuss as 'professional', the knowledge of school policies and procedures, and 'social', the knowledge of working with people and getting the best out of them, intelligence and the conflict between transformational and servant leadership due to the staff perceptions of and ability to manage this...My 'professional intelligence' told me that practice was at fault and not aligned with school vision, but my 'social intelligence' that the staff needed support to understand what was going wrong and to improve their understanding and practice.

(Participant 17, Critical Incident 1).

Here, Participant 17 draws on both their 'professional knowledge' (or professional histories as articulated in the iterational dimension) and their 'social knowledge' (or cultural and structural aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension) to explore the issues and identify ways forward. By having a cultural and structural understanding of their context, their staff and school vision and drawing on strong iterational tones, Participant 17 was able to surface their past and previous professional histories in reflecting on how to effectively respond to a particular leadership concern.

The interaction between the cultural and structural aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension and the iterational dimension was also visible in a critical incident authored by Participant 9, who shared an example of drafting a framework for learning with staff. Here, Participant 9 underlines the importance of a shared or lack of shared vision in creating the conditions for agency:

During a meeting with all teachers, I asked them to look over the collated information from a previous session. I had thought that this took account of all the comments, concerns and ideas that had been raised and was a good starting point. However, staff did not seem clear about the purpose of this framework which surprised me since I had believed that there was a clear and shared vision from our previous discussions. I felt that the feedback was negative and that staff were critical about the framework.

(Participant 9, Critical Incident 1).

When reflecting on why staff did not have a shared understanding of the purpose of the framework, Participant 9 identified that they had not created the framework in an authentically collaborative way and that this decision, based on their own professional history, had created a structure, which constrained the agency of others:

It would have been better to take time and create the framework more collaboratively. This links with the ideas put forward by Earl and Timperley (2009) who talk about the need for more time and more thinking when solutions seem murky. I had been keen to create something tangible, however looking back don't think I spent enough time thinking and working through what the solution would actually look like before creating the draft framework. I feel that I need to continue to work on my ability to tolerate uncertainty and live in dissonance (Earl & Timperley, 2009) as I often feel the need to jump to a solution too quickly.

(Participant 9, Critical Incident 1).

In this example, this aspiring school leader is drawing on their own understanding of their professional history, including their ability to 'tolerate uncertainty and live in dissonance' when making sense of the constraints to agency that they have experienced. This deliberation and challenging of their past patterns of action, draws on characterisation or what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) would describe as the past secondary tone of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, to problematise and make sense of the constraints.

When analysing the critical incidents of aspiring school leaders, we observed that the projective dimension was not as clearly visible as the practical-evaluative. Where it was present, and like the iterational dimension, it was frequently discussed in the context of working and leading in an uncertain and ambiguous context. For example, in their second critical incident, Participant 9 articulated the challenges of working with uncertainty in terms of what might be achieved, drawing on both their professional and personal histories (iterational dimension) in terms of their perfectionist traits and also imagining future possibilities (projective dimension) where they have more flexibility in their thinking:

I was struggling to compromise and can see traits of the perfectionist in myself (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011), feeling like it would be a failure if we could not address all identified areas next year. I decided to pull together the information as best I could then consider options. However, strategic leaders often need to live with the ambiguity of knowing what they want to achieve but not being able to move towards it as quickly as they would like and I realised that I needed to carefully consider the best way forward and be flexible in my thinking (Leithwood et al., 2020).

(Participant 9, Critical Incident 2).

This generation of imaginative possibilities for themselves as a leader, grappling with ideas of progress, ambiguity and strategy, resonates with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998,

p. 973) idea of the projective dimension of agency, including 'the ways in which people understand their own relationships to past, future and present, make a difference to their actions: changing conceptions of agentic possibility in relation to structural contexts profoundly influence how actors in different periods and places see their worlds as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose and effort.' Furthermore, consistent with Varpanen et al. (2022), this vision of the future shared by Participant 9 was initially based on probable thinking (for example, feeling like it would be a failure) and so rooted in the iterative dimension of agency. However, with the interruption from literature and evidence from their setting, the projective dimension becomes more possible, even moving to preferred futures (Varpanen et al., 2022).

As well as aspiring school leaders understanding their own relationships over time, we also found examples where aspiring school leaders articulated their relationships to communities and places and here all three dimensions of agency were frequently visible. For example, Participant 5 who was working in a rural school setting articulated the ways in which small staff numbers could be both a material constraint to agency (for example a lack of capacity) or a material and cultural enabler of agency if understood as creating greater possibilities for curriculum making as part of community partnership:

I contemplated how improvement and strategic change might look different or have different implications in small, rural school settings...successful school partnerships can event, '...strengthen local identity and sense of commonly held purpose' (Harmon & Schafft, 2009, p. 5). This resonated with me as my school is an important part of the small, village community.'

(Participant 5, Critical Incident 1).

Drawing on professional reading which developed their professional history (iterational dimension) this aspiring school leader was able to reframe their understanding of the value of rural schools and education through community partnership, which provided them with a new and different understanding of the material and structural resources (practical-evaluative dimension) available to them in the future as a school leader (projective dimension):

It became apparent from this reading that wider collaboration with others was key to improving outcomes for learners in any school. Therefore, it appeared critical to me that as a leader, I should consider the partners available in my small school's wider community.

(Participant 5, Critical Incident 1).

In the following section and drawing on Rushton and Bird (2024), we consider further this critical incident provided by Participant 5, exploring how in this and other examples, aspiring school leaders can identify and create spaces of agency for others in their school communities.

What is noticeable throughout Theme 2 is a pattern that appears complementary to Theme 1: the capacity of aspiring leaders to configure the iterational (past-oriented) and projective (future-oriented) dimensions within the practical-evaluative (present-oriented) dimension of agency. In this sense, agency is not enacted through discrete temporal orientations but through their configuration of different dimensions, with varied tones and emphasis, as described by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). The practical-evaluative dimension becomes a site of mediation, where past experiences and future possibilities are more visibly brought to bear on present contingencies, reflecting a more complex and temporally embedded articulation of agency than in the earlier examples.

Aspiring school leaders identify and create spaces of agency for others

In several of the critical incidents analysed, we identified how particular configurations of the dimensions of agency created opportunities for aspiring school leaders to recognise and enact spaces of agency. This finding is consistent with previous research on secondary school teachers in England (Rushton & Bird, 2024) and teacher educators in the Netherlands (Smit et al., 2025), which similarly highlights how agency emerges through the dynamic interplay of temporal dimensions. The spaces of agency we identified in the critical incidents were frequently founded on enabling shared ideas and visions of a clear purpose or goal (cultural aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension) and providing structures for participation such as shared professional learning time or creating a collaborative working party (structural and material aspects of the practical-evaluative dimension).

Aspiring school leaders were also sometimes able to anticipate or predict the positive future impact of structures such as shared professional learning or clear communication processes (projective dimension). When creating spaces of agency, aspiring school leaders were able to draw on the professional histories of themselves and others (iterational dimension) and identifying and connecting these as resources or conditions through which to achieve agency. Many of these features were visible in the first critical incident provided by Participant 5. To begin with, the aspiring school leader had a clear belief that in their role they were responsible for 'ensuring a culture of collaboration and professional learning [which] happens both within and beyond the school' (Critical Incident 1). Given that belief (cultural aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension), Participant 5 drew on the partnerships available to them (material aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension) to create a working group (structural aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension) which drew on the professional expertise of colleagues (iterational dimension) to collaboratively build capacity:

To help conduct my SCI [Strategic Change Initiative], I decided to invite any interested teaching colleagues in the four nearby cluster schools to take part, and three teachers said that they would, along with one retired supply teacher of considerable teaching experience and a learning assistant. Additionally, I asked another Learning Assistants (LAs) in my school, who was a former Montessori school teacher. Her experience could be valuable to the group given that Montessori educational principals value play as an important part of learning (Lillard & Vu, 2017). Finally, I contacted the Principal Teacher (PT) of Play for the Local Authority and asked her if she would take part in the focus group and she was very keen. In the end, I managed to create a good-sized working group, all of whom brought with them a variety of knowledge and experience.

(Participant 5, Critical Incident 1)

When implementing the partnership and creating this space of agency, Participant 5 identified further material barriers to agency (e.g. geographic distance) and corresponding material enablers (e.g. use of technology to support collaboration):

I also understood that the rurality of our schools might be a barrier for collegial working and, as suggested by Pettersson and Ström (2020), the use of technology might be of benefit. Therefore, when organising the first meeting of the focus group, I ensured that staff could attend remotely via Microsoft Teams or in person, and both methods were used.

(Participant 5, Critical Incident 1)

In this example, Participant 5 was able to not only identify the cultural, structural and material enablers and resources, but also able to leverage them such that they not only were able to achieve agency but also to provide the conditions and create a space of agency for this group of staff which enabled the achievement of agency across a wider group:

The mix of experienced teachers, experts and learning assistants that I invited to join the group could [understood as] improving or enhancing the school environment with the right combination of skills and expertise. I was also able to set the right conditions for the group to thrive by bringing them together to work in partnership either in person or remotely.

(Participant 5, Critical Incident 1)

Participant 5 was also able to deliberate (secondary tone of the practical-evaluative dimension) and look to the future in terms of their own agency as a school leader, drawing on this experience of leadership of building an effective professional learning community.

Leading in this way also allowed me to develop my own personal growth by flourishing in challenging conditions (a single teacher school). I responded to the challenge and developed my own leadership by guiding the strategic vision within a “polyculture” of relationships and partners, thus building the whole learning community.

(Participant 5, Critical Incident 1)

Through this deliberation with others and their own self-reflexivity, Participant 5 has reflected on their characterisation of leadership in rural school settings and achieved agency through this process of decision-making, gaining ‘the capacity to make considered decisions that may challenge received patterns of action’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 994).

Looking across these three themes, we reflect on the value of teaching leadership through the writing of critical incidents, considering what it is about this exercise that supports the development of agentic leadership in aspiring school leaders. Through enabling school leaders to reflect on their past actions and decision-making in an educational context, this requires school leaders to subject ‘their own agentic orientations to imaginative recomposition and critical judgement, actors can loosen themselves from past patterns of interactions and reframe their relationships to existing constraints’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1010). Therefore, aspiring school leaders can make a difference to their practices of leadership (their ideas, sayings and actions) by being aware of their ‘own relationships to past, future and present’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 973). Understanding the writing of critical incidents through the dimensions of agency, we can see that this exercise itself enables aspiring school leaders to achieve agency themselves, while simultaneously developing their understanding of how to create the conditions where other staff within their community can achieve agency. This finding is consistent with previous research on teachers and teacher educators, which highlights that the use of critical incidents moves teachers to an active professional positioning (Yu, 2018). Furthermore, reflection through critical incidents enables both the development of individual professional identity as well as practice within a community (Badia et al., 2021).

As educators, we continue to consider how to more explicitly frame critical incidents in our teaching, perhaps through dialogue, to further support aspiring school leaders to understand the possibilities of this aspect of teaching and learning. We also note that while there are examples of the projective dimension of agency within the data analysed, this is less visible when compared to the practical-evaluative dimension. This is important to note as the design of the written task focused on reflecting on critical incidents has an explicit

emphasis on identifying past and future learning as a school leader. So, is the projective element perhaps particularly challenging for aspiring school leaders who are perhaps less familiar with leading in contexts with ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty, volatility? Varpanen et al. (2022) suggest that pedagogical approaches which explicitly ask leaders to, 'imagine several possible futures, might help in cultivating the capacity for a more radical imagination' (p.9) and hence broaden aspiring leaders' evaluative responses underpinned by professional judgements. In our ongoing work, we continue to explore what support might need to be developed to enable aspiring school leaders to deliberate with others and self-reflexively such that the projective dimension is made more visible.

CONCLUSION

We considered the experiences of aspiring school leaders through their written critical incidents, which were created as part of the participants' completion of Scotland's national school leader preparation programme, *Into Headship* during the period 2021–2024. We suggest that this sample of aspiring school leaders across four cohorts is broadly reflective of those working across Scotland in recent years. Grounded in the ecological approach to teacher agency, this study has explored how the different dimensions of agency—the iterative, the practical-evaluative and the projective—and the aspects within these dimensions are made visible and relate to one another. We found a strong presence of the cultural and structural aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, and evident interactions between the practical-evaluative, iterative and projective dimensions of agency. We also noted how aspiring school leaders identify and create spaces of agency for others.

At a time of educational review and reform across the different educational and school systems of the United Kingdom, we argue that policy makers and programme designers should continue to consider the different possibilities and opportunities for school leaders to identify, move between and create spaces of agency for others. This research suggests that policymakers and programme designers should prioritise the intentional design of professional learning that enables school leaders to foster teachers' professional growth and development. In particular, professional learning should include structured opportunities for critical reflection, such as the use of critical incidents. We contend that written critical incidents are a foundational approach to make visible aspiring school leader agency and identify how agency can be enhanced. This is aligned with previous research, such as Yu (2018), where the activation of individual agency is supported through structured reflection, and Badia et al. (2021), who note the community and dialogical dimensions of reflection, which generate insights about self and practice. Professional learning for school leaders should continue to be designed and implemented so that it enables them to surface, develop and strengthen their repertoires as leaders. This will then support leaders to extend their ideas and imaginings of what might be possible and desirable in the future.

In this research, we have extended the use of the ecological approach to teacher agency as a heuristic to consider the experiences of school leaders, particularly aspiring school leaders. We have also presented further empirical insights as to how the different dimensions of agency interact across the experiences of aspiring school leaders as they participate in structured and specific professional learning. This extends our understanding of agency within school leadership development and provides a fine-grained account of agency as a relational and emergent phenomenon in this context. Given that much research to date, which has considered the ecological approach to agency, has considered teachers' experiences rather than those of school leaders, this research makes an important and original contribution. Future research could consider school leaders' experiences

when they hold a substantive post, navigating the full complexity of the role without the scaffolding and without the support of a professional learning programme such as *Into Headship*. Such research could consider to what extent the agency which aspiring school leaders achieve during their initial or preparatory years is sustained and developed during the transition into substantive leadership and/or the ways in which dimensions of agency interact as part of this different phase of school leadership. Future research could also consider the different professional profiles and previous experiences, which aspiring school leaders bring to their roles, and the extent to which those with more diverse, varied and sustained professional experiences are better equipped as they begin their practice as a school leader.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

R.M.M.: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. A.P.: Conceptualisation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. E.A.C.R.: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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The data used in this research are not publicly available.

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DISCLOSURE

No artificial intelligence tools were used at any stage in the production of this manuscript.

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