



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

Freedom to lead: a study of outstanding primary school leadership in England

Technical annex: literature review

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Introduction

In introducing his most recent annual report, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector said:

Headteachers and principals have more power and autonomy than ever before to raise standards: they are in the driving seat in a way I would never have thought possible when I first became a head. They have the freedom to do what they believe is best. It is important they use these new freedoms to deliver improvements in the education service.

Ofsted, 2011/12, p10

This statement encapsulates both the tremendous opportunities and significant challenges that face today's school leaders.

However, there is increasing evidence that these challenges and opportunities do not necessarily play out evenly across schools and across phases of education. Earley and Higham's recent comprehensive review of the school leadership landscape concluded that

The complexity of the role of headteacher, and leadership in general, has increased with consequent demands on capacity. At this stage the school landscape is complex and uneven and there are signs that potential faultlines could begin to emerge between leaders across phases and across Ofsted categories.

Earley et al. 2012, p.112

The purpose of this brief literature review is to examine in greater detail one of these phases: how primary school leaders are responding to the changing education landscape. This literature review forms the first stage of a research project, commissioned by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) with Ofsted, which aims to provide clear insights on what constitutes outstanding current practice in leading and governing primary schools in England. It will consider how outstanding primary school leaders are taking advantage of the new freedoms available to them and the responsibilities placed upon them, including addressing the challenges and maximising the opportunities to lead a self-improving school system. To provide an informed starting point for the research, this review aims to explore briefly how primary leadership has evolved over time, what characterises highly effective leadership in a primary context, and how successfully primary headteachers and governing bodies are beginning to respond to the recent changes in the education landscape.

A brief history of changes to the primary leadership landscape

The research literature paints a fairly consistent picture that, over the last two decades, leadership in primary schools in England has become more complex as the demands placed on leaders have increased. Southworth (2008) sums up this evolution as

... an intensification of the work; increased accountability and public exposure; and the leadership and management of externally driven changes, as well as internal priorities

(Southworth, 2008, p.416-417).

He contrasts primary leadership in the 1970s and 1980s, during which period the headteacher was pre-eminent and was able to dictate the pace and nature of change, with the period following the introduction of the national curriculum and end of key stage tests and assessments, together with financial delegation, known as Local Management of Schools (LMS), open enrolment and other reforms in 1988 (Education Reform Act, 2008).

Successive education acts from 1988 onwards ushered in a period of centrally driven reform with the introduction of Ofsted inspections and publication of schools' results in 1992, and the literacy and numeracy strategies from 1997. As a result of these changes, leaders in primary schools exercised greater autonomy in matters of finance and management, but had less decision-making capacity in terms of what was taught in their schools. They were subject to much greater scrutiny of the quality of education they provided and the standards they achieved, and had to implement a change agenda the pace and intensity of which was imposed from outside. These changes, Southworth argues, brought with them 'a belief in the importance of leadership' in primary schools, rather than just stable management (Southworth, 2008, p.416).

This tendency towards intensification of leadership roles in primary schools is reinforced by a number of large-scale leadership surveys undertaken over the last decade or so. Earley (2002) found that, following LMS, school leaders (in all phases) were reporting growing complexity in their work and that there were concerns about the level of bureaucracy and the pace of change. PWC (2007) reported that primary headteachers were more likely than their secondary counterparts to say that implementing new initiatives, curriculum planning and finance were very time consuming. This chimes with a Headspace survey carried out in 2005 and also reported in PWC (2007) in which 92% of primary headteachers surveyed said that over the last five years they had spent more time dealing with bureaucracy; 87% said

they spent more time dealing with government initiatives, and 75% said they spent more time on the business management of the school budget. The areas in which they reported spending less time were teaching and contact with students. Earley (2002) concludes that the challenges in recruiting to headteacher posts were driven not just by the well-documented demographic pressures, but also because there was a declining pool of middle leaders that found headship an attractive prospect.

Despite the substantial changes that primary leaders experienced during this period in carrying out their role, the basic structure of senior leadership teams in the primary sector has not evolved dramatically. In 2006 PWC found that in 5% of primary schools the headteacher was the only member of the senior leadership team and in a further 11% of schools the senior leadership team comprised the head and one other full time member of staff. Half of all primary schools had a leadership team of either 3 or 4 full time members of staff suggesting that a headteacher plus one deputy and one or two assistant heads was the most common configuration. By 2012, Earley's analysis of the school workforce census data showed that in primary community, foundation, voluntary aided (VA) and voluntary controlled (VC) schools the average number of headteachers per school was around 1, the average number of deputy heads ranged between around 0.5 to around 0.75 (depending on the type of school) and the average number of assistant heads ranged between around 0.25 and 0.5 (again depending on school type). This analysis suggests that there continue to be a high proportion of primary schools with either 1, 2 or 3 person senior leadership teams. Only primary academies showed a significantly different, and more widely distributed leadership profile. In these schools the average number of assistant headteachers was 4.5, although there was not necessarily a deputy headteacher. Practically, of course, as Southworth (2008) notes, the small size of many primary schools will strongly influence the structure of the leadership team. In many schools, teachers holding posts for teaching and learning responsibilities (TLRs) are part of the leadership team.

It might be perceived that with the introduction of the national literacy and numeracy strategies, followed by the Primary National Strategy, Excellence and Enjoyment and Every Child Matters, the late 1990s and early 2000s characterised a period in which the government's change agenda was mainly focused on primary schools. But this would be to ignore the opportunities taken up by many secondary schools to detach themselves from local authorities by becoming grant maintained schools, as allowed by the 1988 Act, which sowed the seeds of autonomy, City Technology Colleges, specialist schools and eventually academies. Excellence in Cities and the Leadership Incentive Grant also had much more of a secondary than a primary focus. In 2002, all secondary schools were able to obtain specialist status.

It is true that London Challenge (2003-2009) focused on secondary schools, but by the end of the decade, large numbers of primary schools were working together in

threes, around the nucleus of a good or outstanding school, to support mutual improvement. A number of education researchers and writers have commented that the most recent changes to the education leadership landscape, characterised by the increasing autonomy of schools as a result of academisation and more diverse forms of executive and system leadership, have been taken up most strongly by secondary schools, although primary school academies are beginning to proliferate.

Hill and Matthews (2010) state

... over the last 15 years there has been proportionally less investment in partnership and system leaders in primary schools. There has not, for example, been the equivalent of a specialist schools system from the primary sector. There has been some support for federations but relatively speaking it has been at the margins. The main support for primary schools has come through the National Strategies, which are being wound down¹

Hill and Matthews, 2010, p. 107

Similarly, NCTL's report of a seminar on the new landscape for schools and school leadership commented "Politicians have largely concentrated on secondary-school reform. Reform of the primary sector presents far greater structural, professional and cultural challenges" (National College, 2012, p 7) and concludes "the key challenge is to establish an approach which engages primary schools in the kind of collaboration that makes a difference. (National College, 2012, p.9)

The core data certainly seems to corroborate this view. To take the current government's flagship policy, a significantly lower proportion of primary schools have opted to become academies than secondary schools. Based on the Department's February 2012 academies data, 6% of primary schools are currently academies compared with around half of secondary schools. Earley et al. (2012) assert that:

Primary schools have consistently been reported as the least ready to take advantage of policy initiatives, particularly in terms of social and material capacity. Primary schools also tend to report deeper and more frequent challenges with the current landscape.

Earley et al., 2012, p.110

Earley's wide-ranging survey data backs up this assertion. Although overall 84% of headteachers and middle senior leaders and 86% of governors felt their school had the confidence to manage current policy changes, primary leaders tended to be less enthusiastic about key aspects of the reform agenda than their secondary colleagues. In particular 72% of primary leaders felt the changing role of the local authority would impact negatively on their school compared with 49% of secondary

¹ and were discontinued in 2010

leaders. Only 49% of primary school leaders were positive about the potential to become more autonomous, compared with 68% of secondary school leaders, and 88% of primary schools had no intention of becoming an academy compared with 45% of secondary schools. Overall primary schools were more likely than secondary schools to be represented in the 12% of school leaders who were “sceptical about policy and de-motivated by its potential impacts.” (Earley et al. 2012, p.63)

However, while it is true to say that primary school leaders as a whole have not embraced the current change agenda with the same alacrity as their secondary colleagues, this masks the extent to which a significant minority of primary leaders have implemented radical new forms of structural collaboration and governance, and the growing number of primary leaders and governors that are currently working in a system leadership capacity. These growing trends are explored further in the final section of this review, but before doing so it is important to understand what the literature identifies as the fundamental characteristics of effective leadership in the primary sector.

The characteristics of effective leadership in primary schools

There is a vast and growing body of evidence, from this country and around the world, on what makes an effective school leader. It is beyond the scope of this short literature review to do justice to the wealth of material that has been published on this subject. Instead the focus of this section is to try and tease out whether there are distinctive leadership characteristics which are particularly important in the primary phase.

Of course, it is important to recognise that there will be a core of skills, characteristics and attributes that are common to effective leadership in any type or phase or school. In seven strong claims about school leadership, Leithwood (2008) argues that there is strong evidence that not only is school leadership second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning but that *almost all* successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices. These basic leadership practices fall into four categories – building vision and setting directions; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organisations; and managing the teaching and learning programme. It is then *the way in which these practices are applied*, rather than the practice themselves, which enables school leaders to respond successfully and sensitively to context. The study also concludes that a small handful of personal traits explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.

The ways in which these basic leadership practices are put into effect are elucidated in further research. Successful leaders (Pont et al, 2008, Day et al, 2010 and Barber et al, 2010)

- Have high expectations, are emotionally resilient, optimistic , flexible and willing to learn from others
- Define a vision which raises expectations and acts as a basis for developing a strategy, building trust and applying management processes (e.g. data tracking) to realise their aims
- Reshape the conditions for teaching and learning by improving the physical learning environment and ensuring that effective behaviour management avoids classroom teaching being disrupted
- Redesign leadership roles and responsibilities to promote a focus on and commitment to improved teaching and learning and student outcomes
- Enrich the curriculum in order to deepen pupil engagement and improve achievement

- Enhance the quality of teaching and learning by focusing more on instructional leadership, coaching and developing teachers, using data and building consistency of practice across the school
- Draw on a repertoire of effective practices – including assessment for learning, coaching, target setting, performance monitoring and leadership and teacher development – to improve performance
- Build collaboration internally through providing a rich variety of shared professional learning and development opportunities for staff as part of a twin drive to raise standards and sustain motivation
- Work with other schools in order to learn from them and contribute to broader system improvement.

In seeking to identify the characteristics of effective leadership in the primary phase, the evidence in *Seven Strong Claims* suggests that leadership behaviours and practices themselves are unlikely to be very different, but the way in which these are applied in a specific primary context will be important. From their review of the literature and practice across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries Pont et al. (2008) summarise what is distinctive about primary leadership before highlighting that with the exception of a very few OECD countries the majority of school leaders work in primary schools. They state:

Primary schools tend to be smaller and involve different leadership challenges than large secondary schools. Small primary schools provide more opportunities for principals to spend time in the classroom and closely monitor teachers, whereas leaders in large secondary schools tend to influence teaching more indirectly and may rely on teacher leaders or department heads to engage in curricular issues...In many primary schools, principals are also classroom teachers, which may lead them to envisage their leadership in a more collegial and participative way.

Pont et al (2008) vol 1. P27

Day et al (2009) identify a number of ways in which the application of successful leadership practices differ in primary schools compared to secondary schools. One of the key conclusions of the research was that the leadership of the Senior Leadership Team has a more direct influence on teaching and learning standards in primary schools than in secondary schools.

The research argues that school leaders improve teaching and learning most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation and commitment; that there are associations between the increased distribution of leadership roles and responsibility and the continuing improvement of pupil outcomes; and that trust is a prerequisite for the effective distribution of leadership. In this context it is an interesting finding that

effective leadership in a primary school environment is perceived as more collaborative than in a secondary school environment. Effective primary leaders were more likely than their secondary counterparts to report that they shared decision making with key stage managers, with teachers and with pupils, and importantly this view was reflected by their staff. This perception of increased collaboration and shared-decision making at multiple layers in the school is likely, as the research points out, to be influenced by the fact that leadership and management structures in primary schools tend to be less layered and less formal than in secondary schools. Earley and Higham (2012) also reported that primary school respondents were more likely to report the adoption of a flatter leadership structure than other schools: primary headteachers referred to the successful sharing of leadership roles across the school and the willingness of all staff to take on additional responsibility even where there was no formal recognition of this in terms of pay or status.

It is interesting to compare the characteristics identified by Matthews of twelve outstanding secondary schools (2009a) which excelled against the odds, compared with his 20 outstanding primary schools (2009c).

Twenty outstanding primary schools	Twelve outstanding secondary schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They provide affection, stability and a purposeful and structured experience. • They build – and often rebuild – children’s self-belief. • They teach children the things they really need to know and show them how to learn for themselves and with others. • They give them opportunities, responsibility and trust in an environment which is both stimulating and humanising. • They listen to their pupils, value their views and reflect and act on what they say. • They build bridges with parents, families and communities, working in partnership with other professionals. • They ensure their pupils progress as fast as possible and achieve as much as possible (outperforming both similar schools and many with fewer challenges). • In short, they put the child at the centre of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They excel at what they do, not just occasionally but for a high proportion of the time. • They prove constantly that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement, that speaking English as an additional language can support academic success and that schools really can be learning communities. • They put students first, invest in their staff and nurture their communities. • They have strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently and never relaxed. • They fulfil individual potential through providing outstanding teaching, rich opportunities for learning, and encouragement and support for each student. • They are highly inclusive, having complete regard for the educational progress, personal development and well-being of every student.

Twenty outstanding primary schools	Twelve outstanding secondary schools
<p>everything they do, and high aspirations, expectations and achievement underpin the schools' work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their achievements do not happen by chance, but by highly reflective, carefully planned and implemented strategies which serve these schools well in meeting the many challenges which obstruct the path to success. • They operate with a very high degree of internal consistency. • They are constantly looking for ways to improve further. • They have outstanding and well-distributed leadership.

Unsurprisingly, and reassuringly, there is a lot of commonality between these two lists. For leaders in challenging schools at any phase the absolute belief that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement, the high aspirations for all pupils, the clear articulation of their vision and values, and the consistency with which these are applied are critical components of success. However, there are also some subtle differences between the two lists, and not just of language. What comes through very strongly in the descriptions of outstanding primary schools that excel against the odds is their particular focus on building children's self-belief, giving them responsibility, listening carefully to what they have to say, and building strong bridges to parents and communities. In short, there is an immediacy of contact with children and parents in primary schools which is likely to have a strong influence on the way in which the most effective leaders lead.

A further distinctive contextual factor which is likely to influence leadership in primary schools is the size of the school. 96.5 % of primary schools in England have fewer than 500 pupils compared with just 10% of secondary schools.² There is a significant body of literature, mainly originating from the US, which investigates the specific opportunities and challenges associated with leading "small" schools, often defined as those with fewer than 500 pupils, and the leadership characteristics which are most likely to lead to success in these environments. Some of the leadership lessons from these studies may apply to leadership in a primary context in England. But schools of 500 pupils are relatively large in this country; the Department for Education defines a small school as 'one having 100 or fewer children of statutory

² Based on Schools, pupils and their characteristics, DfE SFR, January 2011

school age³ and the average school has around 220. Hill (2010) reported that 4239 primary schools at that point had fewer than 150 pupils and 75 had fewer than 50 (Hill (2010) p38). In contrast, a spike in the primary-aged population is putting pressure on school places in many parts of the country and growing numbers of primary schools having over 1000 pupils are reported to be emerging.⁴

Mohr (2000) argues that small schools cannot be run as miniature large schools. Some of the challenges that she identifies in successfully leading a small school include:

- **Small schools can more easily be blown off track by a single event than large schools** – effective small school leaders learn to view all problems as school-wide and not just isolated occurrences. Therefore every solution is geared to a systematic, coherent culture.
- **Teachers and principals can be unprepared for the new demands** – distributed leadership can be hugely empowering but can put significant demands on teachers, and principals can find themselves caught between the demands of the school community and the demands of the outside community. The role of the good principal is to help smooth out the tensions between a top-down system and a flattened system, and replace bureaucratic responses with democratic responses.
- **Not realising that small schools are like families, and like families can be dysfunctional** – members of a small school develop relationships that they describe as being “like a family”. But that closeness can lead to “endless, paralysing conversations”. The good leader has to be prepared to deal with contentious issues up front and focus on real conflict resolution.
- **Too little focus on instruction** – leaders can fall into the trap of saying “when the rest of the work is done we will focus on instruction” but the moment when everything is under control never arrives. There has to be a constant balance between tending to the school’s maintenance and focusing on instruction.

Stevens (2008) reviewed the literature on successful leadership in small school environments and identified a number of factors which enabled leaders to both overcome the challenges listed above and exploit the essential *difference* of small schools. He found that:

- Successful small schools create strong relationships between students and teachers as well as structures to support them.

³ <http://www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege/index/professional-development/small-school-definition.htm>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17273218>

- Teachers in successful small schools are given adequate time to plan together and make productive use of this time by critiquing and improving each other's instructional practices.
- Small schools need to distribute leadership and allow teachers to play an active role in decision making and school management
- Strong principal leadership is important in establishing a vision, developing key school structures and acting as a catalyst in helping teacher communities engage in structured and sustained collective work on instructional improvement
- There is an emphasis on pushing all students towards high academic achievement to move small schools beyond being simply nurturing environments to places where students can develop their full intellectual potential and promise.

Stevens' own research into effective leadership practices in ten small schools in Chicago found that just because a school is small it does not necessarily follow that they will be able to make the deep changes to their environment which impact positively on pupil learning. He concludes that there is an important difference between changing the degree of collegiality found in schools, which small size seems to improve, and transforming how teachers work together and with their students. The former requires only that relationships become more familiar, while the latter requires schools to create new routines for monitoring and attending to the development of teachers and students. It is only when small schools are able to change how adults work together, with teachers working collectively to improve instruction, that student achievement improves. This requires robust and deep principal leadership for monitoring, organizing, and sustaining collective work, while teacher leadership helped to make collective work more relevant for the staff engaged in it. Both forms of leadership were necessary for small schools to have strong student achievement.

How primary leaders are successfully responding to the changing landscape

Earley et al (2012) states that for school leaders to navigate the numerous national policy changes they need to “both harness internal capacity and develop effective partnerships” (Earley et al, 2012, p. 112). This last section of the review therefore explores how primary leaders are successfully responding to the changing landscape through these two lenses. In terms of *harnessing internal capacity* the review will focus in particular on the role of the primary school leader in curriculum innovation, changing internal leadership structures and creating the conditions for joint practice development within schools. In terms of *developing effective partnerships* the review will focus on the different aspects of system leadership including the creation of non-formal partnerships between schools, mechanisms for school-to-school support and structural approaches to the collaborative leadership of schools.

Harnessing internal capacity

Curriculum innovation

The next few years are likely to herald a period of renewed curriculum change in primary schools. The Cambridge Primary Review (2009) whilst acknowledging the need for a national curriculum and identifying some significant gains, particularly in science, concluded that the current primary curriculum is “overcrowded, unmanageable and in certain respects inappropriately conceived” (Alexander, 2009, part 2, p.3). In 2011 the government commissioned an independent review of the primary and secondary curriculum and has since published proposals for a revised primary national curriculum and programmes of study to be implemented from September 2014. The core principles of the revised curriculum include higher ambitions in English, mathematics and science combined with less prescriptive and detailed programmes of study in other subjects to give schools more freedom to determine what and how they teach. In parallel for many of those primary schools becoming academies or opening as free schools, the opportunity to introduce a more innovative curriculum is one of the attractions.

Brundrett and Duncan (2010) clearly articulate what it takes to lead curriculum innovation effectively in primary schools. They found that to be successful, curriculum change needs to take place at a number of inter-related levels: content, pedagogy, recruitment, leadership structures and infrastructure. To achieve this, headteachers needed to set out a clear vision, informed by clearly held values and by children’s wishes about the kind of curriculum they wanted for their school, so that children were genuinely enfranchised in the decision making process. As important

as setting out a coherent vision for change was the process through which others were empowered to take charge of different aspects of the change process. Headteachers needed to make accurate judgements about who could drive the change forward in a way that would take the rest of the staff with them, create an environment in which staff were able to be creative and make mistakes, and ensure that strong feedback channels were in place to maintain communication. Finally the structures and systems to monitor the impact of curriculum innovation on children's learning had to be robust, and senior leaders had to be able to step back and view the changes dispassionately.

Brundrett and Duncan's (2010) four-stage model of Researching, Ethos Building, Trialling and Implementation of curriculum change emphasises the importance of giving status to middle leaders for driving the change process, providing high quality continuing professional development to teachers so that they are supported through the change process, working with other schools to build on successful practice, embarking on evolutionary and dynamic change which starts with small steps and changes, and constantly reviewing, modifying and adapting in light of clear evaluation.

These findings chime well with Ofsted's 2010 survey on creative approaches to learning that raise standards. The survey found that:

... confident leaders set out a whole-school agenda to disseminate and embed creative approaches to learning. Their persuasive commitment led to well directed professional development for staff, high expectations, rigorous monitoring of outcomes for pupils, discriminating use of partnerships, engagement with the local community and cost-effective investment in technology and teaching resources

Ofsted 2010, p 4

As a result teachers felt confident in deploying the new approaches which could be achieved within the framework set out by the national curriculum.

Changing internal leadership structures

A key challenge for primary leaders identified in the research literature is the sustainability of leadership roles as the demands placed on primary schools become more complex. During a period in which greater autonomy is devolved to schools and traditional forms of support, for example from local authorities, are being reshaped or reduced, the question of sustainability is likely to remain acute.

The research suggests that decision-making in primary schools is already significantly shared with middle leaders and teachers, and that leadership structures

tend to be relatively flat and non-hierarchical. However, the literature also points to new forms of distributed leadership which are likely to be pertinent in the primary context. Cottrell (2009) charts the progress of workforce reform in primary schools and concludes that the increased roles for adults other than teachers in schools led to the challenging of traditional hierarchies and the creation of new “executive leadership” positions in school. The role of the primary headteacher was, in consequence, becoming more focused on guiding, monitoring, mentoring and coaching an increased number of senior staff, with greater levels of distributed accountability. However, Cottrell also concluded that although many primary schools had successfully reconceptualised the staffing structure of their school, there was further to go in remodelling traditional views of headship. In particular he found that primary schools have been more successful in distributing responsibility for the leadership of teaching and learning than they have in redistributing responsibility for key bureaucratic, administrative and financial tasks from the headteacher to a wider leadership team.

These findings are strongly echoed in Southworth (2008). He argues that a key factor in the future capacity of primary leaders to effectively lead teaching and learning will be the appointment of school business managers (SBMs) in place of some existing administrative and clerical staff to broaden out the scope and complexity of tasks that can be delegated, and the creation of advanced school business managers (ASBMs) who would form part of the senior leadership team and take on the delegated leadership of functions relating to finance, human resources, operations and facilities. Such a shift would inject stronger professional experience into key functions such as financial management leading to greater efficiencies; free up a considerable proportion of headteacher time from operational matters, thereby making headteacher roles in primary schools more sustainable and more attractive; and significantly strengthen and reshape senior leadership teams.

Creating the conditions for joint practice development

Barber and Mourshed (2007) argue that three things matter in terms of creating a high-performing education system:

- a) Getting the right people to become teachers
- b) Developing them into effective instructors
- c) Ensuring the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child

The second of these priorities speaks to the critical role that leadership teams play in creating the conditions for teachers to learn and develop as professionals.

Schleicher (2012) draws on good practice from across the OECD to argue that improving the “technical core” of teaching “requires the development of educational

ecosystems that support the creation, accumulation and diffusion of this professional knowledge” (Schleicher 2012, p.45). However, OECD data shows that teachers report relatively few opportunities for direct professional collaboration to enhance student learning. A number of east Asian education systems provide interesting exceptions to this. For example in Japan all teachers take part in regular “lesson studies” in their schools which means that they work together in a disciplined way to improve the quality of their teaching. Similarly in Shanghai teachers are involved in subject-based “teaching-study groups” to improve teaching at the grassroots level on a day-to-day basis.

Sebba et al. (2012) dates the coining of the phrase “joint practice development” to Fielding et al’s 2005 study on *Factors influencing the transfer of good practice*. There it is described as the process of learning new ways of working through mutual engagement that opens up and shares practices with others. Fielding et al. (2005) sets out clearly the actions that leaders need to take, and the conditions they must create, in order to foster a culture in which joint practice development takes hold. The research argued that heads and senior leaders affect the transfer of practice through:

- **Setting the tone of the school** by consistently stressing mutual professional learning as a priority; building staff confidence and tackling defensiveness; practising what they preach by openly encouraging those who are engaging in mutual professional learning; and creating a protective as well as exciting environment where mistakes can be made and learnt from.
- **Distributing leadership** by actively devolving some of the driving of practice transfer to middle leaders and creating the flexibility in the system so that anyone can initiate joint practice development. This was seen by senior leaders as more than just symbolic as it is often teachers who have the clearest view of what might contribute to pupils’ learning.
- **Building networks**, both formal and informal and within and beyond their school. The development of trusting and open relationships was key to this.
- **Coordinating and facilitating practice transfer** by releasing teachers’ time, bidding for funding, observing teaching practice, brokering partnerships between teachers and mobilising teaching staff.

These leadership practices are a critical component within schools of developing learning organisations. Such organisations are also adept at identifying and developing leadership qualities, as much through providing leadership opportunities within the school or partnerships of schools as by sending staff on leadership courses (Matthews et al. 2010). Increasingly the locus for joint practice development is being found not just within but also between schools, as set out in the next section.

Developing effective partnerships

Non-formal partnerships

Hargreaves (2011) – leading a self improving school system – argues that if the education system is to rise to the challenge, set out in the government’s *Importance of Teaching* white paper (2010), of creating a self-improving system in which schools and not government drive the improvement agenda then teaching schools and their strategic alliances will have a critical part to play. Latest data shows that primary schools are well represented among the first three cohorts of teaching schools.

Hargreaves’ (2011) maturity model for a self improving school system proposes a framework for teaching school alliances to judge the strength of their partnership working and to progressively deepen the impact of their partnership by moving from “beginning” through “developing and embedding” to “leading.” Front and centre in the maturity model is the role of joint practice development (JPD). Hargreaves (2011) argues:

It will not be enough for teaching schools to continue the drive to the practice model of professional development. Their challenging task is to raise professional development to a new level through the exemplary use and dissemination of joint practice development within a strategic alliance

Hargreaves 2011, p.11

Tregenza et al’s (2012) early emerging research on effective joint practice development in five teaching school alliances (three of which were led wholly or in partnership by primary schools) provides clear indications for primary leaders on the key aspects of successfully leading joint practice development across a group of schools. The research found that where joint practice development was most successful:

- Leadership from senior managers in the form of support, protected time and clear messages about the priority given to JPD, gives it status and contributes to its overall effectiveness.
- Leaders enabled participants to engage with research evidence and discussions in order to identify priorities and development.
- The senior leaders across the alliance need to ensure JPD alignment with the strategic priorities of the alliance, and that progress is monitored and evaluated. Assuring quality and maintaining the focus of the learning, while balancing that with the need to support peer learning and trust requires sensitive handling in order to maintain stakeholder ownership.

- Leaders need to set a clear budget and cost out elements such as supply cover, input from lead specialists and time for engaging in research activity.
- Baselines can be created to enable participants to measure effective progress and assessments are planned to measure impact.

Of course, teaching school alliances are not the only form of collaborative learning partnership in which primary schools are engaged. Indeed a feature of the current education landscape is the multiple, overlapping partnerships which schools sustain for different purposes. For example Lock (2011) describes how a small group of rural primary schools, clustering together, was able to prioritise time to support each other's strategic thinking, draw more systematically on external perspectives and enable staff to work together in year groups to support subject leadership, moderation, and newly qualified teacher (NQT) support which was seen to be particularly beneficial in small schools where there was rarely more than one teacher per year group. Isos (2012) draws attention to emerging school partnerships, governed by schools, which engage all schools in a local area in pooling improvement resources to fund school to school support and providing strategic and peer challenge within the partnership.

School to school support

Hopkins and Higham (2007) elaborate the concept of system leadership and illustrate its potential power as a catalyst for systemic reform. This has arguably become even more critical now in the context of a self-improving school system. They set out an emerging taxonomy of five system leader roles – these are:

- a) Leading a successful educational improvement partnership between several schools – eg on curriculum, 14-19, behaviour
- b) Leading and improving a school in extremely challenging circumstances
- c) Partnering another school facing difficulties and improving it – eg exec heads
- d) Acting as a community leader shaping networks to support children's welfare and potential
- e) Working as a change agent or expert leader (consultant leader, school improvement partner (SIP), national leader of education (NLE))

The previous section explored some of the characteristics of leading a successful improvement partnership in the context of teaching school alliances and a range of different forms of primary networks. Here the focus is on how leaders take on system leadership roles by providing school to school support – in the taxonomy above

either partnering another school facing difficulties and improving it or acting as a change agent or expert leader.

In mapping the extent to which school leaders were adopting system leader roles, Hopkins and Higham (2007) found a more extensive range of activity than originally anticipated. Their mapping identified over 3000 system leaders operating across the country, of which some 70% were drawn from the primary, infant, junior or nursery sectors. Similarly Hill and Matthews (2010) report that the primary sector has become a particular focus for the roll-out of national leaders of education (NLEs), with 215 primary NLEs recruited by May 2010 and 249 primary schools benefitting from NLE support since the start of the programme. This data suggests that the concept of system leadership, embodied in schools supporting the improvement of other schools, has taken root in the primary sector, although the huge scale of the primary sector means there is still much further to go. Local leaders of education (LLEs) are also increasingly being used in parallel with NLEs to support progress in the primary sector.

Encouraged by the success of national and local leaders of education, the Government has supported the designation of national leaders of governance (NLGs): governors of good or outstanding schools that show evidence of being able to support and challenge the governing bodies of other schools.⁵ A third cohort of NLGs was recruited in spring 2013.

The conditions which lead to success in schools leading schools are summarised as commissioning, capacity, capability and commitment (Hill and Matthews, 2010). Commissioning is the process whereby the relationship with the NLE and the school receiving support is brokered. It needs to be carried out swiftly, decisively and with care. Capacity refers to the ability of the NLE and their school to take on a significant outreach commitment. This means not only having outstanding leadership, which is shared but also sufficient outstanding teaching and support staff, particularly in core subject areas. Capability captures the strategies and processes that NLEs need to support another school successfully. Hill and Matthews (2010) argue that successful NLEs have strategies for:

- working alongside headteachers and other leaders in situ
- replacing a departed headteacher
- assessing priorities and finding the most appropriate solutions
- communicating with different and often challenging stakeholders
- identifying and implementing the right actions to raise standards

⁵ <http://www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege/docinfo?id=159340&filename=national-leaders-of-governance-eligibility-criteria.pdf>

- understanding how to deal with typical challenges in poorly performing schools
- modelling, communicating and implementing vision and aspirations and bringing the provider and client schools together

and have systems for:

- restoring calm and acceptable behaviour, using clear sanctions and rewards
- securing the safety and wellbeing of pupils and staff
- ensuring consistently effective teaching
- ensuring rigorous assessment of progress and intervention where it is insufficient
- establishing the responsibilities and accountabilities of leaders at all levels, and ensuring these are met
- bringing about consistency and reliability in all aspects of the school's work

Finally the commitment of successful NLEs is evident in their tenacity, resilience, vision of what is possible, urgency and humility.

Structural approaches to collaborative leadership

The “hard end” of system leadership is where a single headteacher takes on leadership of more than one school, often with shared governance and accountability arrangements across the schools in the group. Evidence on how many federations or other hard groupings of schools currently exist is not systematically collected. However research suggests (Hill, 2010 and Chapman et al, 2009) that primary schools are under-represented among federations in comparison to secondary schools. This is despite the fact that federation, or other groupings of primary schools under a single leader could help to address a range of challenges in the primary sector including recruiting headteachers, leadership capacity within primary schools and the manageability of the role of the teaching headteacher, and achieving economies of scale across small, often rural, schools (Hill 2010). Hill argues:

While the challenge in the secondary sector is to steer and channel the growth of chains, the challenge in the primary sector is different. We need to create structures and frameworks that provide primary schools with the critical mass necessary to develop strategic leadership, create new career structures, support professional and curriculum development, address school performance and realise economies of scale.

Hill, 2010, p 49

This is an area in which England can learn lessons from other countries in which federations of primary schools are far more common. In the Netherlands, for

example, around 80% of primary schools are federated, and the average size of a primary federation is 11 schools. The federations share a single board, the schools within the federation are led by principals who may lead single or multiple schools, and the federation may choose to employ an educational professional as a “superintendent” responsible for the strategic overview and operational management across all the schools in the federation (Collins et al, 2005). Some of the benefits associated with the Dutch model include principals having more time to manage their schools and being freed up from administrative burdens, economies of scale, mobility of staffing, support and advice from within the group of schools, and a feeling of community across a wider group of schools and pupils. However, there are challenges too, not least getting the balance right in meeting the different needs of all the schools in the federation and building a shared vision and consensus among principals who were accustomed to managing their own school and teachers who felt that new governance arrangements were too distant (Collins et al, 2005).

Primary school representation in federations and other forms of structural collaboration is increasing in England. Research suggests that there are nonetheless a range of interesting models emerging in a variety of different primary contexts. Well documented examples include the First Federation in Devon and the Best Start Federation in Hackney (Matthews et al. 2011). A federation of primary schools in Swindon is both running support services previously provided by the local authority and is in demand by other local authorities further west.

It is perhaps striking that a higher proportion of primary convertor academies said that they would use academy status to introduce new forms of governance than their secondary counterparts and more leaders in converting primary academies, compared with leaders in converting secondary academies, indicated that academy status would bring more leadership development opportunities for senior and middle leaders to step up to the next level of leadership externally. This may suggest that primary schools view academy status as an opportunity to deepen their relationships with other schools, for example by becoming part of a cluster (PWC, 2011).

Examples of the different models of structural collaboration between primary schools can be seen in a number of recent research publications. Hill (2010) identifies management partnerships which involve small schools sharing an executive headteacher; hard federations emerging often as a response to recruitment difficulties or because a school is placed in special measures; hard clusters of primary schools which bring together all schools in an area through a formal structural arrangement to support each other on leadership or curriculum development; and finally cross phase partnerships including secondary –primary federations and all-through 3-19 schools. In terms of the most recent developments, Hill et al (2011) and Dunford et al (forthcoming) identify a number of high-performing

primary schools which are using their status as an academy or free school to sponsor and lead a growing chain of primary schools, often on a geographical basis under the aegis of an executive headteacher and a multi-academy trust.

These emerging models of structural collaboration are changing the way that leadership functions in the schools involved. Hill (2010) reports that many primary federations have developed an executive leadership model in which an executive headteacher takes ultimate responsibility for all the schools in the group, but works with a head of teaching and learning in each school who manages the school on a day to day basis. This model creates the leadership capacity to think and plan strategically and strengthens the operation of leadership teams, proving a broader base for organising development and support. Furthermore these new models of leadership are leading to a number of benefits in the primary schools where they have been adopted. These include (Hill, 2010 and Percy, 2006):

- Developing a clear teaching and learning model across all the schools in the group that is reinforced through the sharing of senior leaders and key staff,
- Strengthening governance by establishing smaller, more strategic governing bodies with more tightly defined roles, and enabling governors to share learning across schools
- Improving professional development for staff through joint INSET days, curriculum planning and teachers working together across schools,
- Improving professional development for leaders, by providing opportunities for deputies to move into more strategic roles and for headteachers to exercise their leadership across a wider group of schools
- Providing greater opportunities for pupils to interact with a wider group and learn from each other
- Making better use of resources, by achieving economies of scale and sharing specialist staff

Although not phase specific, we also know from research an increasing amount about the distinctive skills and qualities needed to successfully lead across two or more schools. Hill (2012), summarises these succinctly as:

- Operate at a strategic level, including the ability to think and plan ahead
- Communicate effectively with staff, parents and pupils about the ambitions and strategies for the schools
- Be even-handed between schools and balance their different interests and challenges
- Stay focused on performance, including the performance of schools providing support

- Deploy staff and resources efficiently across schools according to need and maximise economies of scale
- Practise interpersonal skills, persuade through vision and model collaborative behaviours
- Lead in a clear but open way by working closely with chairs of governors and empowering senior and middle leaders
- Coach and mentor heads and emerging leaders
- Understand the different contexts of schools, identify their distinctive problems and the strategies needed at different points in their improvement journeys
- Continue to be a leader of learning and foster staff development
- Develop personal resilience, being able to work under pressure and manage the demands of staff, parents and external agencies

Hill 2012, adapted from National College 2010

Leadership, governance and the performance agenda

No study of primary schools in England can ignore the assessment and accountability agenda that has accompanied increasing levels of autonomy and freedom. The most effective primary schools have shown that it is possible to achieve very high outcomes for pupils by tracking the progress of individual pupils meticulously and gauging expectations and learning activities to their needs. Assessment for learning (Wiliam and Black) is widely practised in such schools, with much research evidence supporting the efficacy of formative assessment (see for example Hattie 2010). An interesting alternative to this orthodoxy is explored in the 'Learning without Limits' philosophy (Swan, Peacock and Hart, 2012) which makes no prior assumptions about children's ability and expands freedom to learn within a school-wide culture of learning.

Primary schools are very sensitive to the expectations of the school inspection framework which forms the basis of external accountability mechanism of inspection. The inspection of phonics teaching is an example of the power of the framework to influence practice in schools. Changes to the inspection system in September 2012 replaced the judgement of 'satisfactory' with 'requires improvement'. Early signs⁶ are that this measure has already begun to make a contribution to school improvement with many previously satisfactory or inadequate schools inspected since September emerging as 'good' schools. Ofsted published comparative statistics showing that "children living in different parts of the country have widely varying chances of attending a good or better primary school"⁷. Ofsted has also strengthened the

⁶ Ofsted source

⁷ Ofsted (2012) *The Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills: Schools (31-33)*, TSO

inspection of governing bodies with a particular focus on their role in performance management.

Conclusion

This brief review of the literature has drawn attention to the increasing complexity of primary leadership roles and has raised questions about the capacity of primary leaders to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the new education landscape and sustainability of leadership roles within the sector. It has found evidence to suggest that the current education reform agenda has been more strongly rooted in secondary schools than primary schools, but that nonetheless a significant minority of pioneer primary schools are leading the way in finding new models of leadership.

The research evidence points to a core of effective leadership practice which holds good across all phases and types of education, but also describes how effective primary leaders mould these leadership practices to the distinctive school contexts found predominantly in the primary phase. Some of these specific attributes of primary leadership include greater opportunities for shared decision-making, flatter and less hierarchical structures, closeness to pupils, parents and communities and the small size of many schools which can enable a transformation in how adults in the school work together.

Looking forward, the evidence from those primary leaders who have embraced the opportunities and found ways to address the challenges of the new education landscape point to emerging good practice in remodelling leadership teams, curriculum innovation, joint practice development within and across schools and various forms of system leadership. It is these themes that will form a focus for the next phase of research.

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