New directions in school leadership

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Different approaches to conducting and theorising school leadership have become a major preoccupation within school systems throughout the world. This reflects the importance placed upon school-level education and the belief that leadership issues can play a big part in increasing the effectiveness of pupil’s learning. This paper re-visits some findings from an earlier review and examines them in the light of more recent research both within education and from other fields, where leadership models have come under close scrutiny. The paper will argue that much is to be gained from sharing insights into leadership across different areas of professional activity and illustrate some of the benefits of such an approach.

Keywords: school leadership; school management; leadership models

Introduction

There is little doubt about the importance of schooling and the search for key factors in the success of schools is an international preoccupation (Barber and Mourshed 2007). In such a context it is no surprise that school leadership has become a focus of much attention in countries throughout the world. In this paper we want to review the conclusions of an earlier UK review of school leadership research by Earley et al. (2002) and revisit some of its key themes in the light of more recent research and insights from recent work on leadership in areas other than education.

We consider that in the past there has not been nearly enough cross-fertilisation of ideas from the research on leadership in different fields, and argue that there is much to be gained from looking for new insights beyond the highly specific area of school leadership. A similar argument applies to looking at the international literature and drawing in ideas from countries other than the UK. Thus our aim is to survey a broad set of ideas about leadership in the public and private sectors, as well as within the literature on organisational development and on the culture of the workplace. Along with that work we also want to reflect upon how school leaders can successfully extend their own professional learning in relation to leadership techniques and philosophies, and the use of these in their own specific school settings. Other reviews that followed Earley et al. (2002), such as those by Lambert et al. (2002), MacBeath (2003), Hallinger (2003), Glatter (2004), and Southworth (2004a), also give grounds for asserting that thinking about school leadership in the

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UK is both well developed and well connected with current thinking in other parts of
the world. In this context it is clear that schools in most parts of the world are subject
to many similar forces for change, and that those trying to lead them face similar
challenges and pressures. Common concerns about finding effective methods for
recruiting school leaders appear to have arisen in many different countries (Pounder
and Merrill 2001; d’Arbon et al. 2002; Dorman and d’Arbon 2003; Hartle and
Thomas 2003; Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2007) and likewise accounts of the
pressures on headteachers during rapid reform appear to match those we are
familiar with in the UK (Fullan 1998).

Despite these international similarities in school leadership trends and practices,
there are also interesting insights about the extent to which discernible national
cultural characteristics can apparently introduce unique differences as well. Thus
historical sensitivities concerning the vocabulary of leadership appear to have pushed
the German literature in a different direction (Schratz 2003), the Japanese approach
to classroom learning as a group problem-solving process has set up an alternative
view of the teacher role and the school dynamic (Lambert et al. 2002), and the
Scandinavian approach to political decentralisation has created a very different
climate of governance and accountability within which leadership is exercised (Moos
and Moller 2003). There is we believe also a potentially fruitful field in comparisons
between developments within a devolved United Kingdom with Wales, Northern
Ireland and Scotland all offering significant variations to the most recent trends in
England. Whilst we are writing principally from an English point of view we perceive
great benefit from seeing English school leadership systems being compared with
those in other nations in order to attempt to strip away those assumptions that carry
with them longstanding historical and cultural baggage.

Another useful angle, which combines both the international dimension and the
value of looking at long-term processes, is to look at school leadership through
the prism of international futures studies. Papers by the OECD (OECD 2002a,
2002b) have lifted their gaze above the horizon of short-term concerns, and have
raised interesting issues regarding the role of leadership in schools configured in quite
different ways. Global changes in society and the economy, technological advances
and new assumptions about how we relate to one another all suggest that schools as
we think about them now will undoubtedly have to change in quite radical ways.
Uncertainty about the direction and speed of these changes means that school
leaders, whilst attentive to immediate problems, may also need to prepare for longer-
term radical changes with regard to methods of learning, approaches to knowledge
management and the nature of the world for which pupils may need to be prepared.
It is important that those engaged in developing school leaders, and those who will
be the school leaders in that unforeseen future, should have opportunities to confront
some of these longer-term perspectives as well as responding to any immediate
challenges related to improving their schools as they are currently configured. Taking
a wider view of the connections between public management and private sector
management, we are struck by the way that, during the 1980s, as somewhat
mechanistic models of management control were being imported into the public
sector from a declining industrial and manufacturing sector, so the private sector, in response to great structural changes, was beginning to develop more people-oriented and systems-based approaches to higher management (Pascale and Athos 1986; Garratt 1987; Pedler et al. 1997). Indeed, during the 1990s, alongside the emergence of the ‘new economy’ and the growth of service industries, many private sector management texts were beginning to use the language of learning, knowledge management and developmental processes (Senge 1990; Sadler 2003; Reed 2004; Smith 2004). Public management was also increasingly required to be evidence-based and information-driven (Davies et al. 2000) and the recent application of this ‘what works’ approach to education systems internationally highlights the complex factors behind improving performance (Barber and Mourshed 2007).

As we shall see, the literature of school leadership is, along with the wider field of public management, still integrating a variety of ways of describing what leaders may need to do to bring about change. Perhaps the time has come to recognise the value of a range of models and metaphors for that effective leadership which has to be exercised in so many varied circumstances. This can draw not only on engineering and manufacturing, but also service industries, emerging IT sectors and the knowledge economy, in recognising the workplace itself as a place of learning and seeing leadership as the art of creating the conditions for learning progress. This new ‘learning organisation’ approach makes leadership something teachers potentially know more about than most, rather than an alien territory that has to be learnt about from scratch. So it is worth noting the potential synergies that can be achieved through matching leadership and management styles to the core business of schools, as well as other organisations (Hampden-Turner 1990).

It can be argued that, within the decentralised structures of accountability common to many developed countries, public management systems have much in common whether they relate to education, health or other aspects of public policy:

Educational sectors and institutions are not different from other public sectors and institutions. There is nothing distinctive about education; it can be conceptualised and managed like any other service and institution. (Moos and Moller 2003, 356)

The new forms of public management pose much the same dilemmas in different sectors and in different countries (Peters et al. 2000). This might suggest that school leaders have as much to learn from well-managed networking with other public managers as they do from other school leaders.

It is also true that the variety of models now emerging in the field of school leadership only replicates the proliferation of those being used in the private sectors, with no single model emerging as predominant. However, a recent survey of the broader literature on leadership noted how this continues to be dominated by male Anglo-American writers and is wrapped up in all sorts of association with their culture, lacking for example the very important and often quite distinctive and different female representations of leadership (Abra et al. 2003). Many different authors have noted an apparent and persistent polarisation, over more than 20 years,
between the view that leadership is about that which transforms an organisation (e.g. vision, momentum for change, mobilising organisational members etc.) (Bennis 1994) and the view that it is about the control over resources and direction of operations in transactional leadership (Burns 1978). The persistence of these two strands might, some have argued, be partly about personality preferences (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 1999) or about the need for different styles of leadership to grow out of one another and vary over time (Avolio 1999).

Huczynski and Buchanan’s (2001) widely read international management text notes the way that research and literature on leadership has grown alongside the rapid changes in the global economy and the emergence of new forms of organisation across the world in both public and private sectors. For example the evolution of less hierarchical organisations with flatter structures, team-based working and networked workplaces all encourages new approaches to traditional leadership tasks. In this respect it is interesting to note the extent to which the heavy public pressures on schools have been described as favouring ‘masculine models of leadership’, which under-value crucial ‘softer’ aspects of working with the emotions in the organisation, and handling the finer details of creating a learning culture (Blackmore 1999; Thrupp 2003).

Perhaps, compared with education, the rest of the public sector seems a little more inclined to recognise the importance of management (at all levels) as well as leadership. One text that is widely read in business schools, in describing organisational leadership for twenty-first century leadership, spells out shifts in style and methods for this new environment which emphasise raising quality through the development of staff vision and working to stretch performance – a model which critically sees leadership as encouraged at every level of the organisation (Bennis and Nanus 1985).

Managing people is important whether in relation to managing change or ensuring quality. Day et al. (2000) and others have drawn attention to the implications for schools of the wider findings by the Institute of Personnel and Development that developing and supporting your staff is a prime way to grow your business in any sector (Patterson et al. 1997). It is not surprising therefore that Ofsted has reported standards being raised where a school’s culture is managed so as to create productive working relationships, when policies and procedures ensure good staff management in the recruitment, deployment, training and development of all staff, and when the working environment is a positive and motivating force (Ofsted 2003b). International comparisons do suggest that the recruitment and training of good quality teaching staff distinguishes high-performing education systems (Barber and Mourshed 2007) and, amongst other factors, the recruitment systems and staff support processes used by school leaders can make a difference here. The wider literature generally reinforces the importance of this emphasis on people management and frequently indicates how effective leadership is often enacted through apparently small details of how managers manage, so that leadership and management are not easily disentwined (Smith 2004). Nevertheless the wider literature does
support the idea that, in times of great change, effective leadership is crucial and can make all the difference – as it has so clearly done in many individual schools.

Revisiting some key points from Earley et al.’s (2002) review

Earley et al. (2002) noted the growing evidence of the significance of leadership in achieving the transformational changes required to raise levels of school performance and achieve greater equity in access to good education. There was, they said:

...a general consensus among researchers that effective school leaders all have in common the capacity to envision dynamically a set of coherent and communicable objectives and an associated ability to formulate and implement a clear map of how to reach them. This consensus also suggests that the best school leaders successfully articulate their personal, moral and educational values with total conviction, creating a clear sense of purpose and direction. (Earley et al. 2002, 16)

Earley et al. (2002) also suggested that there were blends of leadership capabilities, which were context driven, and therefore what worked was when effective leaders were successful in taking account of a given situation, and of the nature of the people and the community with whom they were working.

For them, success seemed to be related to personal character traits, but not necessarily in the same combination everywhere. There was, they thought, a consensus that effective school leaders have a vision of where they want a school to go and are successful in communicating to others a clear map of how to reach that goal. The best school leaders were said to articulate their personal, moral and educational values with total conviction, creating a clear sense of purpose and direction. The role of the school leader was recognised as a high-profile one, requiring attention to issues of teaching and learning generally, and to ‘walking the talk’ during frequent movement about the school. This visibility of school leaders has also been taken up by Ofsted which, in commenting on the role of head teachers in school improvement, has said:

The dedication, drive and vision of the headteacher need to be evident to the whole school community. Headteachers must have a clear sense of direction, be tough, and maintain a very high profile. They cannot hide behind a closed door or seek refuge in paperwork, but need to be highly visible throughout the day, so that staff and pupils are reminded of the headteacher’s expectations of them. (Ofsted 2003a, 27)

Earley et al. (2002) also concluded that good school leaders also share their leadership responsibility with other members of staff and seek to foster a mutually supportive and collaborative culture. Their research highlighted that this collaborative approach required greater skill in team-building by school leaders, if they were to develop a more distributed and holistic approach. It also highlighted the need to develop the use of ICT for leadership and management. We shall come back to both these themes later as being, if anything, even more relevant now.
Earley et al. (2002) also found that leadership development programmes needed to give more attention to the management of interpersonal relations, linking the management of staff and the management of vision. Internal communication and keeping staff informed were crucial and heads needed help with developing ease with ICT. Managing the professional development of others was also said to be something they needed to improve.

That earlier review also recommended further research on a number of issues, including: career patterns and burnout, flexible contracts for temporary posts and time out for sabbaticals or secondments, internal systems that manage admin and paperwork well, and case studies on workload management and keeping others informed. Many of those themes have continued as a focus of interest and we shall develop several of them further in the next section of this paper.

### Themes in school leadership

Much that has been written since 2002 – both internationally and in England – seeks at one level to disentangle the progress within the field by attempting to identify straight linear trends – as if management and organisational theory generally had somehow progressed from transactional leadership to transformational leadership. The reality is more muddled, as most of these surveys admit when elaborating on what might be seen as ‘the current wisdom’.

We have noted in this work a tendency to seek to be highly prescriptive – to find the model that’s right for everyone – but then to end up describing a model that in fact encapsulates traces of all the previous models. In general such reviews seem to favour versions of what can be described as ‘transformational management’, but with traces of the previous ‘transactional leadership’ theory retained within that. There is a high emphasis on developing vision and purpose, being goal-driven and aspiring to excellence. Clarity of vision and purpose are high on the leadership agenda (Leithwood and Riehl 2003) but when this is spelled out there is recognition that a complex set of relationships and processes lie behind that (Fullan 2001; Glatter 2004). The OECD, in its comparative study, noted that:

> The debate in England has begun to mature away from a focus on the individual skills and characteristics of good leaders and towards trying to understand the qualities of leaders as a process, the systems of relationship, exchange and organisation that underpin it, and the connections between different approaches to leadership and different possibilities for the way that schools themselves could evolve. (OECD 2002b, 47)

Given that culture is recognised as a key vehicle for leadership, headteachers might be looking for more detail on managing, influencing or shaping culture. Southworth, in his study of a range of primary schools, provides some useful descriptions of learning and teaching cultures at different stages of development. He recognises how, in respect of their non-linear development and dependency on dialogue within networks, these features are similar to those required in knowledge-creating
companies in marketing or IT sectors (Southworth 2004b). This does suggest that it would not be difficult to develop diagnostic tools for identifying positive school cultures in the way that other sectors have done (Schein 1985; Senge 1990; Deal and Kennedy 1992). It is helpful that Ofsted recognises that even where values are explicit they are only powerful if they are well understood and shared in a sense of common purpose and high motivation (Ofsted 2003b). Important as written statements of values may be, it is what they describe as ‘values in action’ that are embedded in specific practices such as the recognition of the achievements or contribution of individual members of staff and the inclusive culture that makes non-teaching staff and classroom assistants feel valued members of the team.

The international models which refer to ‘instructional leadership’ seem to have the advantage of being focused on the educational context. The retention of the American term instructional in this context (rather than transactional or relational) risked emphasising a top-down (‘just tell them’) approach, which, whilst appropriate in some contexts, is far from the only transactional approach advocated in other sectors. The use of ‘learning centred’ approaches, a preferred term in UK circles, similarly recognises the business that schools are in and the need for the leader to engage with improving what happens in the classroom. Day et al. (2000) are not alone in drawing attention to the fruitful work of Sergiovanni (1998), on pedagogical leadership, which describes a process of investment in capacity building within schools. This includes developing the social and academic relationships within the school in ways which extend the intellectual and professional capital of the teachers. The notion of investing in straightforward staff development is thus extended to the idea of the leader consciously working on several sets of relationships within the school to help both pupils and teachers to learn how to learn – an investment that potentially can pay off not only in terms of improved performance within the school, but also with the development of an important pupil capacity for lifelong learning. The recognition that this is often done indirectly, through subject heads and other middle leaders, has added to ideas about distributed leadership and working with and through a wider team of leaders within the school. The emergence, and greater recognition of, new teacher leadership roles amongst teachers themselves and the increased formalisation of middle manager roles in larger schools has led to a considerable expansion of views about how far leadership can be shared (Frost and Harris 2003). Again such an approach draws on the wider management literature about how, in order to achieve real transformation, leaders have to avoid others feeling that they have nothing to contribute because they are only informal leaders. There is now widespread recognition that achieving step changes within an organisation requires energising and mobilising the leadership capacity of the majority of people within it (Senge 1990).

The literature continues to retain traces of situational leadership models and contingency theory, with reminders that the context is crucial. Ofsted highlights how schools in different contexts need to be managed differently (Ofsted 2003a). Similarly Mick Brookes, of NAHT, writes that:
The role of the head is intricately complex and depends upon balancing the demands of external pressures, internal priorities and personal and professional needs. Just as there are ways in which some pupils learn best – but not all pupils, and not all of the time – so there are ways in which schools can be led – but not one way. (Brookes in the Foreword to Day et al. 2000, ix)

The contextual awareness which is then needed, for knowing how to respond as a leader, will depend on skills in reading the context. What, in this sense, is understood by context has developed as well. American studies of instructional leadership in the mid-1980s pointed to the socioeconomic status of the school’s community and the relative size of the school as influencing the dynamics of learning (Hallinger and Murphy 1986). A range of international studies in the 1990s has been summarised as showing that leaders also need to have a good grasp of where the school is on the ‘school improvement journey’, and to be able to diagnose the status of the collaborative processes within the school needed for a ‘learning approach’ to such improvement (Hallinger 2003, 340). Southworth also notes that the school context is not simple: it is multi-layered and changeable over time. He draws attention to short-term features (such as levels of staff sickness or a key staff absence) which have to be taken into account along with cyclical factors such as the stages of the school year, pupil development over specific periods of time etc. – all this alongside the overall culture and character of the school or parts of it. He argues that the ‘capacity to recognise and decipher the peculiar blend of contexts’ is what enables a leader to be truly effective with any given issue (Southworth 2004b).

The challenge to translate visions into practice, whilst addressing the variety of contexts, is taken up in the recent writing about ‘values-led contingency leadership’. This holds on to the idea of leaders being values-driven but implementing that approach in ways which are sensitive to the specific situation. Day et al. (2000) and others argue that, in the midst of this complexity, effective heads are those who have a clear sense of their own values within a people-centred model of leadership which is able to retain consistency and direction, whilst still responding flexibly to differing contexts.

This approach to leadership may recognise complexity in ways that make it seem more realistic to headteachers, but it might not go far enough in offering them help with diagnosing the particular context and matching styles of intervention to specific situations. It is striking that Ofsted inspections show ‘aspects of leadership as generally better than aspects of management’ and identify adequacy of accommodation and of learning resources as less well handled than the reflection of school aims and values (Ofsted 2003a). Models of leadership which emphasise vision and purpose over more mundane management of the context will not help hard-pressed headteachers in such situations.

Generalised injunctions about leaders ‘developing a repertoire of techniques’ may leave them with the risk of appearing to be a ‘chameleon’ when trying to be all things to everybody. Holding on to a core approach and being clear about values is important if trust is not to be undermined by uncertainty about where the leader stands – and we shall return to issues of trust.
Some questions raised by the literature

The preponderance of transformational leadership models has been explained, in the international context, as a reflection of the attention to the secondary school sector in North America (Hallinger 2003). It may similarly relate, in the UK context, to the significance of structural change and the reform agenda of the 1990s (Glatter 2004). Whether the styles of leadership required to achieve structural change, during a period of organisational turmoil, are the same as those required for regular delivery of dependable performance and effectiveness (Leithwood et al. 1999) is something we shall return to, but the relevance of secondary school examples to the whole sector is also something that needs raising. We have been struck by the possibility that some of the more visionary texts in school leadership may appear to lack relevance for primary school heads working in very different circumstances. There is still a debate about how far the primary school head is able to retain his/her role as a ‘leading professional’ with sufficient familiarity with curriculum detail and new approaches to provide a role model for teachers (Acker 1990; Woods 1993; Pollard et al. 1994). Southworth found considerable variety in style based on the different sizes of primary schools. He pointed out that whilst there was considerable recognition of the tensions involved for a head in a small school, when they were involved in quite a bit of classroom teaching, there was less debate about the dilemma for heads in larger primary schools, where the problem could be keeping in touch with teaching practice in ways which enabled the head to have clear insights into the finer details of school performance. This valuable survey of small, medium-sized and large primary schools has confirmed that there might be much to be learnt from differentiating according to size of school (Southworth 2004b). Day et al. have also suggested that this issue of school size impacting on the head’s role is wider than just in primary schools and that the school leadership literature does not do nearly enough to differentiate according to size (Day et al. 2000). This issue may be worth pursuing in relation to research that shows significant relationships between school size and school effectiveness (Spielhofer et al. 2002), for example in relation to the extent to which such differences can be associated with the impact of different leadership approaches. An interesting study of leadership in a number of smaller secondary schools appears to confirm this as a fruitful direction for further investigation (Kimber 2003). Recent studies of leadership in schools (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Leithwood et al. 2006) tend to focus on new models, pilot projects and unusual schools, rather than the full range of ‘average’ or ‘good’ schools. Such accounts tend to synthesise case studies of particular models, which can then be presented descriptively even whilst acknowledging that there has been little opportunity to evaluate these over any length of time (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2007).

We noted that much of the literature seems to assume that the headteacher is in charge of the school’s destiny and when the context is talked about it usually refers to the staff, pupils and history of the school. Yet the reality is that, in some respects, many headteachers are more like branch managers than CEOs. They are handed down expectations, targets, new initiatives and resources – all of which may or may
not be manageable in the context which includes the nature of the neighbourhood and the culture of the wider society. We noted that in other sectors such managers would be seen as needing help with managing the boundaries – ‘managing outwards’ and even ‘managing upwards’. This might underline Ofsted’s finding that there was a high correlation between good leadership by headteachers and the effectiveness of governing bodies in fulfilling their responsibilities (Ofsted 2003a). At the very least one could see this as demonstrating shared ownership of vision and clarity regarding roles and responsibilities, but it might suggest successful heads do not just ‘manage downwards’. In the new public policy context there might be a new dimension in respect of ‘managing partnerships’ as schools get more involved with working with employers and local businesses, developing links with local community groups or other users of the premises, and working in partnership with other schools.

One review questions whether the current models of leadership value a deliberative or reflective style which weighs up responses, rather than providing immediate reactions all the time (Glatter 2004). It seems counter-cultural at the moment to advocate quieter lower profile styles, but there is encouragement for this in the wider literature (Eraut 2000; Mintzberg et al. 2002) and in research on educational leadership (Fullan 2001; Bennett et al. 2003; Glatter 2004). Leadership here might be about listening to what is being said, reading the environment correctly, drawing out the strengths of others and pursuing organic change rather than provoking conflict. There may too be something important here about how heads manage themselves. The values-led contingency leadership places an emphasis on the leader’s capacity to read the emotions involved in situations, to respond sensitively and to reflect on his/her own style and its impact (Day et al. 2000). The use of Emotional Intelligence models, increasingly taken up in private sector management, would encourage a more self-aware approach (Goleman 1998; Goleman et al. 2003) and might do something to help to deal with the high stress levels, which often seem to be induced by the idea of the school leader always having to have the immediate right response in any given situation.

This links with the way that some of the literature conjures up a picture of the perfect leader, without recognising that leaders too are learning as they go along and will, inevitably, make mistakes and need to develop and adjust their leadership approach over time. The Learning Organisation approach to management is more open to the idea that making mistakes is likely and that modelling owning up and learning from mistakes may be a very powerful tool in reducing the defensiveness of others around you (Pedler et al. 1997). School heads, like other effective leaders, need to be aware of personality differences and to be able to look at their own strengths and weaknesses and the way that their own personality influences their preferred leadership styles and their relationships with their colleagues, students, parents, and other key school stakeholders. Recognising one’s own imperfections and idiosyncrasies can help to deal with the trust and integrity issues mentioned above and may help deputies and others to realise that you do not have to be perfect to be a head. Southworth notes:
Until relatively recently we have been fascinated with leaders rather than leadership. There has been a tendency to portray leaders as charismatic, heroic figures, or as individuals with a set of personal characteristics which few saints could emulate. (Southworth 2004a, 5)

Such an approach has perhaps both put off potential heads, because it puts an emphasis on personal charisma rather than skills that can be developed, and over-emphasised leadership strategies at the expense of highly developed management skills.

This notion of an over-idealised version of leadership is linked with our perception that many of the studies of leadership are based on successful heads – particularly those heads who have turned round failing schools. These studies might show up very different skills from those needed to maintain the success of a high-performing school, or to help a moderately successful school to become really excellent (Hallinger 2003). There is a similar tendency in the private sector to paint a picture of senior management based on trail-blazers or company rescuers, whereas most leadership is not necessarily like that. There can seem to be traces of trait theory within some of these accounts of transformational leadership – especially when these talk about ‘heroic leadership’ and ‘superleaders’ and emphasise the personal characteristics of the leader as being highly influential (Sadler 2003). Collins (2001) similarly notes that education can learn from the fact that it is not actually the larger-than-life celebrity leaders who transform most private sector companies, so much as leaders who have strong resolve, ‘quiet calm determination’ and who rely ‘principally on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate’.

**Key points for further research**

*Leadership or management?*

There is, in Ofsted’s summary of inspections, a striking summary of the continuum of the skills by which the strategy and vision of leaders has to be enacted in their management of people and tasks (Ofsted 2003a, 15–16). Perhaps the polarisation of transformational leadership models as against transactional ones has not helped to establish an integrated view of the range of skills required. Huczynski and Buchanan in their wider review of organisational leadership note that, right from the 1970s, it was recognised that all managers had a leadership role and all leaders are required to understand and attend to the implementation of vision and the achievement of objectives, with a good grasp of how to work with and through people, systems and structures (Huczynski and Buchanan 2001).

We would share with others some caution over the dichotomy between management and leadership (Glatter 2004) and recognise that some of the literature, however much it uses transformational language, is in fact describing a more mixed and complex set of skills. Mick Brookes, of the NAHT, whilst noting the risk that management, without leadership, may be over-tolerant of imperfections, urges some
caution concerning the tendency to decry the management skills that good leaders need:

While management without leadership is an option, leadership without manage-
ment is not. Successful schools have taken an imposed agenda and made it fit their
organisation. How to incorporate new ideas without either drowning teachers in
additional work or simply paying lip service to change has been one of the tensions
of the past decade. (Brookes in the Foreword to Day et al. 2000, x)

As an example of this, Southworth, in studying a range of primary schools, was able
to identify lists of initiatives that highlight both the attention to learning and the way
that systems, policies and organisational structures can contribute to improving
learning (Southworth 2004b, 62–63). Such techniques require considerable manage-
ment skills to complement the vision and strategy of leadership. It would probably
help aspiring headteachers and new headteachers to have clearer examples of the
micro-skills involved in managing and maintaining a vision in practice, through
managing people, resource management and the management of operations.

**Trust**

There is an emerging theme about trust in the context of school leadership. MacBeath
(2003) identifies six recent international reviews of school leadership which identify trust as a crucial theme. This observation resonates with a wider
public debate about trust – particularly in the arena of trust in business and trust in
traditional professional figures such as doctors (Duffy 2003; Hutton and Davies
2003). But in this respect the evidence is that, compared with other public figures,
teachers and school heads retain public confidence more than most professionals
(Worcester 2003).

In the context of school leadership, trust probably has a different connotation.
There is an increasing need for school leaders to communicate beyond their specific
school boundaries and gain support for what they are doing within the community,
amongst partners, funders, local employers, parents and other schools. But most of
the references to trust in the literature on school leadership have more to do with the
need for internal trust (amongst teachers in the school and between teachers and
leaders). Such trust is needed if there is to be enough confidence to allow the
vulnerability and exposure that involves sharing and working on weaknesses and
engaging with problems in raising teaching standards. Ofsted has a powerful example
of a teacher moving from a school where to ask for help was a sign of weakness to one
where access to the head was encouraged in a spirit of mutual learning. They
comment:

The head teacher had created a climate where it was safe to try out new ideas and to
learn from mistakes. The professional trust he placed in his staff was returned in
their trust in the senior management team and in their loyalty to the school. (Ofsted
2003b, 6)
This is an example of the vulnerability required for real learning, but several studies describe the sector as characterised by low trust, competitiveness and poor morale – hardly the seedbed for the improvement initiatives required to raise the general level of performance in the classroom. Bottery (2003) argues that much recent UK public policy has been predicated on a lack of trust in professionals, so that in many settings there is sense of being under surveillance and under pressure to meet a narrow range of externally defined targets. This analysis of course fits well with O’Neill’s (2005) account of the UK’s move from tending to be a ‘high trust’ society to tending to become a ‘low trust’ society. Bottery (2002) also describes many schools as afflicted with a culture of unhappiness based on mistrust, but he argues that trust in this instance is a much richer concept than the calculated management tool which he sees many texts as advocating. The Secretary of State described the need to ‘break out of this vicious spiral’ of mistrust (DfES 2001) and others have suggested that leaders will need to show reciprocal understanding (Moos and Moller 2003), responsiveness and support for staff (Seashore Louis 2003), using dialogue and demonstrating respect (Schratz 2003).

There are studies that highlight the persistence and long-term nature of the work leaders have to do to win and sustain the confidence of all their staff (Blase and Blase 1998; Leithwood et al. 1999; Lambert et al. 2002). In this sense trust is part of the social capital within a school that can be seen as critical to how far colleagues can allow one another scope to experiment or take initiatives (Hargreaves 2003). Just as a good manager protects and builds up physical capital to make the best of its potential, so good leaders consciously develop trust within the school. This calls for a combination of individualised initiatives by the leader with each member of staff, together with a holistic approach to the culture of the work group as a whole. Southworth refers to modelling as an important tool for headteachers. He says that teachers watch their leaders closely:

...in order to check whether the leaders’ actions are consistent over time and to test whether their leaders do as they say, because teachers do not follow leaders who cannot ‘walk the talk’. (Southworth 2004a, 3)

Consistency and integrity are critical in any learning environment – for teachers in the classroom as for heads with their staff. These issues are important for all managers and in every workplace, but trust, confidence-building and developing open cultures seem particularly pertinent areas for development within school leadership.

**Distributed leadership**

A positive learning environment and a culture of trust is not built or sustained by one person alone and the detailed attention to teaching practice will (in most schools) only be achieved by a leadership team. Just as there is a wider recognition that all managers in any organisation have a leadership role (Huczynski and Buchanan 2001) so the literature on schools has taken further the thinking about how leaders need to
inspire and bring all the staff into the process of mutual support, coaching and mentoring if they are to achieve effective school improvement. The enthusiasm and knowledge of newly qualified teachers and the experience and practical wisdom of mature teachers can all be brought to bear on this process of feedback, reflection and improvement. The literature highlights some examples of this happening, re-states the importance of skills in team-building and points to the importance of leaders modelling the coaching and supporting skills, which they expect of others (Harris 2003). In a survey of research findings, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) argue that much of a headteacher’s influence on pupil performance is achieved indirectly through not simply promoting a vision and goals for the school, but also ensuring the resources and processes are in place to allow teachers to teach well. They suggest that an additional powerful force is the potential for change available when teachers are enabled to support, coordinate, mentor and coach one another.

There is some literature on the specific skills of subject heads, and on the role of deputy heads in primary schools working in tandem with heads of different styles. One might have thought that the move towards more distributed leadership and the development of senior management teams and deputy heads in many schools might prepare them for headship, but this may not be so. It is significant that one of the findings of Southworth’s research in a range of primary schools was that operating as a head or deputy head in a medium-sized school did not necessarily prepare heads for the complexity and shift in role involved in being a head in a larger school (Southworth 2004b, 92–93). This inevitably raises questions about the transferability of leadership skills as well as about the development opportunities and support systems that might need to be in place for such transitions to occur more satisfactorily.

It is noteworthy that, until recently, there has been little research on the role of subject heads in larger schools in contributing to the school improvement agenda. Since a more strategic role for subject heads was not defined until 1998 their role has been dependent on a combination of local and historical features (Turner 2003) and on the size and nature of their particular subject (Busher and Harris 2000). Leadership development should therefore focus on work with subject heads grouped according to their subject and on ensuring the headteachers take seriously and support the learning and development of their subject leaders, giving them opportunities to develop leadership within the school.

Given the commitment to developing collective leadership in schools, there may need to be further thought about leadership as a function, rather than a role, and some disentangling of what all this might be asking from hard-pressed teachers if the concept of ‘teacher leadership’ is to be seriously developed. This more extended version of distributed leadership, in which every teacher is seen as having a leadership function, begins to blur into ideas about the school culture being the force for improvement. It may be possible to mediate these improvements through mechanisms drawn from Total Quality Management and the Learning Organisation approach (Lambert et al. 2002). This would require great clarity about roles and processes from heads, since new vision and cultural changes in schools are often
brought about by attention to the details of organisational processes, structures and internal policies (Southworth 2004b).

**Information management and ICT**

It is striking that much of the comment on ICT relates to its use for teaching purposes and the confidence heads need to provide support and guidance for teachers developing new uses of ICT in the classroom. There are some observations too about whether school leaders feel as confident as they should about using computer-based learning methods for their own development. No doubt all these strands are connected. Confidence (or lack of it) with ICT applications tends to cut across a variety of aspects of anyone’s work.

But we were struck that, in an environment where leaders are being encouraged to adopt evidence-based management and where ministers have spoken about the data-rich environment of schools (Milliband 2003), there is less evidence of engagement with information management as such. We were struck that in other parts of the public sector (such as health, criminal justice and social services) the use of ICT systems to generate important management data was often accompanied by considerable attention to development and training on management interpretation, analysis and presentation of information.

There is a concern to develop ‘intelligent accountability’ (Milliband 2004) so that data can be central to management processes, reflecting the information management needs of the school at local level. This may require some attention not just to how leaders themselves manage and use information, but also how they seek to develop an information-based culture within the wider school.

**Managing outwards**

Given the points made earlier, and the range of initiatives around partnership and relations with the local community, we wonder how well equipped most leaders feel about this wider role (Glatter 1989). The notion of ‘extended schools’ both challenges conventional measures of a leader's success (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2007) and opens up questions about who the ‘customers’ of the school are (Cabinet Office 2006). There may be lessons to be learnt here from the experience of senior and middle managers in other parts of the public sector which have seen the development of increased partnerships and greater engagement with private sector contractors. In education, as a number of government initiatives move from being pilots to becoming more generally part of the national scene, leaders might need greater help with these enhanced roles.

Ofsted makes an interesting point that skills in accessing and using well the special funds, which have been made available under various social inclusion initiatives, may have important consequences for achieving improved attainment by pupils from minority ethnic groups (Ofsted 2003a). But they point out that this is not merely an
internal matter since it has been found that good practice in enhancing achievement of Black Caribbean pupils requires specific leadership focused upon ensuring a school ethos which gains the confidence of parents and the local community as well as pupils. Given the proliferation of other youth and children’s services with which schools are required to link (Milliband 2004), these may be significant examples of how the ability to manage across boundaries is important to achievement within the school. There are also some striking examples of shared management, either of individual schools (Glatter and Harvey 2006; Grubb and Flesser 2006) or by groups of heads working together (Grace 2002; Thrupp 2003; National College of School Leadership 2006), which are fruitful areas for exploring these important collaborative skills amongst leaders.

Managing in uncertainty

The OECD reminds us that managing in uncertainty is as much an aspect of school leadership as it is in the volatile climate of business leadership (OECD 2002b) and there will always be a number of dilemmas, which do not necessarily have an obvious, or only one, answer (Day et al. 2000). There is undoubtedly a need for leaders who can cope with ambiguity, manage their own stress levels and maintain a sense of direction. We were struck by one image of leadership, from the private sector, as being about an ability to ‘surf the chaos’ (Pascale et al. 2000 cited in Glatter 2004). MacBeath refers to there being no easy solutions to some of the ‘wicked dilemmas’ that face school leaders – an echo of the ‘wicked issues’ theme across many areas of public policy (MacBeath 2003).

Hallinger, in reviewing the international literature, was struck by the fact that coping with uncertainty was generally described as a leadership trait, with little research on whether this was a skill that could be learned (Jackson 2000; Hallinger 2003). Certainly Leithwood and Riehl, in their review of recent research, draw attention to the importance of modelling for staff how to manage uncertainty, cope with ambiguity and deal with stress (Leithwood and Riehl 2003).

Conclusion: developing leadership

At a time when there is anxiety in the UK about both recruiting school leaders and holding on to experienced leaders (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2007), it is surely worth re-examining the types of leadership development that will provide effective support for both current and future school leaders. An emerging model of leadership, in which leadership is construed as a rounded process of thinking, behaving, articulating and relating in particular (and consistent) ways, requires a process of leadership development which engages with all stages of the learning process rather than being a purely cerebral and conceptual approach (Burgoyne and Reynolds 1997). Indeed it can be argued that learning to learn, and learning to learn on the job, are the most important attributes of a successful school leader (Revans 1983).
This suggests a balance of theoretical and experiential learning (Abra et al. 2003) and work on leaders’ critical and reflective thinking capacities (Day et al. 2000). Such an approach might effectively incorporate techniques such as Action Learning Sets, Quality Circles, learning networks or mentoring in favour of, or at least as a supplement to, more conventional short INSET courses. Techniques of networking have been developing in respect of innovation in teaching techniques, so one might expect that the headteachers of the future will have greater experience of the value of learning networks (Hargeaves 2003). It requires considerable trust within learning groups if there is to be the openness and risk-taking required, but such an experience can be a powerful model of just the kinds of high-trust learning environment that leaders then need to re-create in their schools (Lambert et al. 2002). If leadership is seen as a function of interactions within a system, then leadership development is a much more complex process than just the development of individuals. It requires a systemic approach, which might be closer to organisational development, with attention focused on working with the leader to enable the whole system to learn together. A better understanding of leadership within and through organisational systems would, as we said in our introduction, be fruitful not just for schools but also for developing leadership across the public sector and in business and commerce.

It is heartening that in the school sector, at least, education now views leadership development as a key issue both to resource and to nurture. Nevertheless there is still much to be learnt both about the skills of effective school leadership and about the best approach to helping aspiring school leaders to equip themselves for the challenges that they face. School leaders have much in common with those leading in other sectors and a continuation of recent attempts to foster the cross-fertilisation of ideas, techniques and case studies has much to commend it.

References


