

NCSL research findings

Issue 4, August 2003

Introduction

This is the fourth quarterly review of NCSL's research outputs. The review summarises findings from commissioned research, the Research Associate Programme and Leading Edge series, as well as highlighting the wider themes which relate to these individual studies. This edition refers to the outputs produced in summer 2003.

1 Commissioned research – literature reviews

A series of literature reviews has been commissioned by NCSL as part of its commitment to build a knowledge base on which to develop programmes and other development activities.



Leadership and Management in Special Schools

Mel Ainscow, Sam Fox and Judy Coupe O'Kane, University of Manchester

This review was carried out by members of a research team at the University of Manchester, supported by a group of headteachers who work in successful special schools in different parts of England. It focuses on the challenges and dilemmas facing leaders in special schools and addresses the question:

What forms of leadership practice can enable special schools to provide high-quality education in existing circumstances, whilst at the same time developing new roles in relation to the implementation of the national reform agenda?

The report includes short summaries of 15 texts, including some from central government and a synopsis outlining key themes. The study provides a systematic and critical analysis of what is known about leadership and management in special schools.

The emerging themes and issues which the team report include:

- There is surprisingly little specialised literature available and that which does exist is often slight in relation to the evidence they present, as well as diverse in respect of the themes addressed. Consequently, there is insufficient theoretical and empirical attention paid to leadership and management in special schools.
- Arguably the most noteworthy text on management and leadership in special schools was an edited book in 1984 (Bowers, 1984) and many of the themes in that book remain alive today.

- Much of the literature reviewed focuses on the development of the curriculum in the special school. Several writers note the tensions caused by the national curriculum and requirements for targets and assessment. Some writers regard the way forward for leadership in special schools to be that of developing the curriculum.
- The issue of inclusion is a key challenge for leaders in special education although this is also true for all educational leaders.
- Given the paucity of the specialised literature practitioners need to make use of the more general literature.
- Much of the general literature, particularly that concerned with school improvement, places emphasis on the importance of social relations. Indeed, leaders may structure staff working relationships in one of three ways: competitively, individualistically, or co-operatively.
- Contemporary thinking advocates the use of co-operative teams. This is particularly important in special schools where there is a need for partnerships between professionals from different disciplines, including those from social services and health departments.
- An important source in relation to the future of special schools is provided by a North American study (Reihl, 2000) which focuses on the role of the principal and concludes that they need to do three things: foster new meanings about diversity; promote inclusive practices within schools; build connections between schools and communities.
- Distributed leadership is seen as an important and valuable idea for special educators.
- Relationships, developing new meanings and distributing leadership point to leaders and managers in special schools needing to be sensitive and skilled in respect not only of leadership, but also culture. Culture creation and sustenance are vital responsibilities.

Looking to the future the authors suggest that leaders in English special schools face many of the same challenges and pressures of those of their mainstream counterparts. At the same time they have the added problems created by specific changes in the nature of the populations they serve and the uncertainties that arise from the inclusion agenda.

Indeed, leaders of special schools face a number of dilemmas and challenges. They often have outstanding facilities and resources, not least in ICT, so why, given these strengths, should parents see the mainstream as a positive option? At the same time, to ensure the continuation of their current financial arrangements, special schools need to maintain their pupil numbers. So what incentive is there to put more effort into strengthening mainstream provision?

The authors conclude that there is a need for much more systematic empirical work in relation to the issues and questions they highlight. There is also room for collaborative action learning activities that involve practitioners themselves. The time is ripe for research which builds on the interesting initiatives that are already taking place around the country.

[Download a copy of this literature review from the NCSL website](#)



Deputy and Assistant Headship: Building leadership potential

Alma Harris, Daniel Muijs and Megan Crawford, The Leadership Policy and Development Unit, University of Warwick

This review provides NCSL with a synthesis of the literature pertaining to deputy and assistant headteachers in secondary, primary and special schools. The literature in both cases is substantially smaller than that relating to headteachers. The review maps the existing empirical base and highlights key themes and challenges relating to this important leadership group.

Role and responsibilities

- Role tensions exist for deputy or assistant heads as the responsibilities often overlap with those of the headteacher. In some cases, deputies are expected to fulfil all the responsibilities of the headteacher and to deputise fully when the headteacher is away from the school.
- Within most schools assistant and deputy headteachers are given particular areas of responsibility such as discipline, staff development, data management or attendance. The main role is considered to be one of ensuring stability and order in the school. They view the role as having a maintenance rather than a developmental or leadership function.
- The leadership potential of assistant and deputy headteachers in many schools is not being fully released or exploited. The leadership capabilities of deputy and assistant headteachers are not being developed in the role.

Preparation for headship

- The experience of being a deputy or assistant headteacher is not always helpful preparation for headship because of the lack of direct leadership experience some encounter in this role.
- The absence of targeted professional training and leadership development for assistant or deputy headteachers is considered to be a major drawback in preparing for headship.

Contemporary changes in role

- There is increased pressure on assistant and deputy headteachers within schools to meet the many demands and requirements imposed externally upon schools and generated internally within schools.

- This expanded set of responsibilities inevitably places an additional demand on the time of deputy and assistant headteachers. In most cases, extra time has not been allocated and more 'personal' time is being taken to complete the tasks required.
- In primary schools there is a particular tension between the teaching and management roles of the deputy and a great pressure upon the time available to fulfil both roles.
- The influence and involvement of the assistant or deputy headteacher in leadership and development activities differs considerably across schools.
- In some schools, assistant and deputy headteachers remain a central part of the discussion and decision-making process while in others the decisions are still made by the headteacher with little real consultation.
- Where assistant and deputy heads build up strong relationships with headteachers the possibility for broadening leadership responsibilities and extending responsibility for developing the school is increased.

Professional development

- Assistant and deputy headteachers often experience a lack of professional support in their role. The support of the headteacher and other members of the leadership team is a key contributor to feeling valued and motivated in the role.
- Where deputy and assistant headteachers are given leadership responsibilities within the school, higher levels of job satisfaction follow.
- There are currently limited opportunities for formal leadership training for assistant and deputy headteachers. This is felt to be a major drawback in preparing for headship and becoming more effective in the role.

Gender issues

- There are more men who are deputy headteachers, assistant headteachers and headteachers in the UK. There is evidence to suggest that women are less likely to seek promotion to headship than men irrespective of experience or capability.
- The responsibilities allocated to men and women in deputy or assistant headship positions differ considerably. Women are more likely to deal with pastoral matters and men with discipline and curriculum matters.
- Women feel under more pressure to prove themselves than men in roles as assistant and deputy headteachers. This is even more strongly the case for women from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Ethnicity

- Being a school leader from an ethnic minority group presents significant personal and professional challenges.
- Assistant and deputy headteachers from ethnic minority groups have reported feeling that they have to work harder and are allowed to fail less than their white peers.
- Black teachers are less likely to be encouraged to apply for promotion to senior roles than their white counterparts and are more likely to be made to teach subjects for which they were not qualified.
- Ethnic minority teachers are less satisfied with teaching as a career than their white counterparts and are more likely to be working outside teaching in five years time.

Distributed leadership

- A distributed form of leadership suggests an emergent leadership role for deputy and assistant headteachers where they are centrally involved in building culture and leading change within the school.
- An emergent leadership role for an assistant or deputy headteacher would necessitate communicating and developing vision, promoting shared understanding amongst staff and working as a change agent (understanding change processes, initiating programmes and encouraging participation).
- An emergent leadership role will entail more responsibility for planning and co-ordinating change within the school and it is important that assistant and deputy headteachers are fully prepared for the demands of this leadership role.

Implications for future professional development and training

There is a need for specialist training for those who see assistant and deputy headship as a career choice rather than a step towards headship. People skills, communication skills, knowledge of leadership theory, techniques for improving curriculum and instruction and working with teams are considered by deputy and assistant headteachers to be important elements in any future professional development programmes.

To attract deputies and assistant headteachers of ethnic minority backgrounds, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the difficulties that they face and specific introductory and support programmes for those who are considering such a career move.

More research into the particular development needs of these groups is required to ensure that future provision is relevant, appropriate and ultimately effective.

[Download a copy of this literature review from the NCSL website](#)



The Role and Purpose of Middle Leaders in Schools

Nigel Bennett, Wendy Newton, Christine Wise, Philip Woods and Anastasia Economou, Centre for Educational Policy and Management

This review found that most of the research focused on secondary rather than primary schools, although it raised important issues relevant to both sectors. There was no significant research on pastoral leadership. The research tended to be small scale; case studies or 'snapshot' surveys. Only three sets of papers reported on more substantial research; two concerned with secondary schooling in England and one with secondary schooling in Canada.

The following points emerge consistently from the research reviewed:

- Middle leaders (subject leaders, middle managers, heads of department, curriculum co-ordinators) play a crucial role in developing and maintaining the nature and quality of pupils' learning experience, but the ways in which they do this are strongly influenced by the circumstances in which they work.
- There is a very strong rhetoric of collegiality in how middle leaders describe the culture of their departments or responsibility areas, and the ways they try to discharge their responsibilities. However, this is sometimes more aspired to than real, and it may sometimes be a substitute term for professional autonomy.
- Middle leaders show great resistance to the idea of monitoring the quality of their colleagues' work, especially by observing them in the classroom. Observation is seen as a challenge to professional norms of equality and privacy, and sometimes as an abrogation of trust. Subject leaders who managed to introduce some sort of classroom observation procedure did so as a collaborative learning activity for the entire department rather than as a management activity for the subject leader.
- Subject leaders' authority comes not from their position but their competence as teachers and their subject knowledge. Some primary subject co-ordinators doubted if they had sufficient subject knowledge, which made it difficult for them to monitor colleagues' work. However, high professional competence did not appear to carry with it the perceived right to advise other teachers on practice.
- Subject knowledge provides an important part of professional identity for both subject leaders and their colleagues. This can make the subject department a major barrier to large-scale change.
- Senior staff look to middle leaders to become involved in the wider whole-school context, but many are reluctant to do so, preferring to see themselves as departmental advocates. This is exacerbated by the tendency of secondary schools, in particular, to operate within hierarchical structures, which act as a constraint on the degree to which subject leaders can act collegially.
- Very little empirical work was found that examined:
 - the influence of middle leadership on teaching and learning
 - the effectiveness of middle leaders' professional development

[Download a copy of this literature review from the NCSL website](#)

2 Research Associate Programme

The Research Associate Programme provides school leaders with an opportunity to undertake study and engage in enquiry which impacts on practice.

There are six studies to summarise here. It is important to note that these are summaries of summaries. Research associates produce a summary report and full report which are available from the NCSL website (www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates).



Special Leadership?

What are the implications for the leadership of special schools of potential changes to the special school system?

Nick Burnett, Headteacher, Addington School, Wokingham

The focus of this research was to identify the implications for the leadership of special schools and the potential changes to the special school system. The report concentrates on two issues: the special school of the future and the special school leader of the future.

The **special school of the future** should be multi-dimensional, operating as training and assessment centres for teachers and support staff; supporting other professionals who work with individuals with special needs; enabling greater access for pupils to mainstream schools; operating as assessment centres for pupils and support centres for parents; information centres; managing dual placements; and developing partnerships and service level agreements.

These functions could create the following model:

A main site located near to mainstream sites for all age groups that the special school is serving; satellite classes within mainstream schools; opportunities for team teaching in the satellite classes.

The **special school leader of the future** needs to creatively abandon the old ways, manage change and restructuring productively and have the professional courage to move the school forward. Four areas in particular were marked out as central to leadership in the future: change, partnership, ICT and innovation.

[Download a copy of this report from the NCSL website](#)



It's All in the Mix

Leadership teams in secondary schools - what do they do, and how do they judge their success?

Diane E Edwards, Headteacher, Freeborough Community College, East Cleveland

This study looked at leadership in seven successful secondary schools and was guided by four questions:

1. How are leadership groups composed and what do members do?
2. How do they work with stakeholders?
3. What are the main characteristics of the leadership styles?
4. How do teams get feedback on the success of their work?

Successful leadership groups were characterised by:

- team-building skills of the head
- a search for new learning and deep reflection
- open and frank conversations
- quality time allocated to the group
- working with middle leaders and governors
- the headteacher's clear views about what leadership should look like
- evaluation of the corporate and individual performances of members of the leadership group

The lessons to be learned from the studied schools were reported as:

- time for review, reflection and discussion of day-to-day and strategic issues by the leadership group is vital and contributes to the overall success of the school
- clear job descriptions and the allocation of responsibilities are more important than the type of hierarchy that exists in the group
- relationships based on openness and rigorous debate is key

Formal methods of evaluation and judging the success of groups were not found to be consistent across the studied schools. However, all the heads engaged in some evaluation of the group's work.

[Download a copy of this report from the NCSL website](#)



Pulling Together

Transforming schools through a collaborative learning network

Merrill Haeusler, Director, The South East England Virtual Education Action Zone (SEEVEAZ)

This study focused on two issues:

1. What are the essential characteristics for successful collaboration within a learning network?
2. Does effective collaboration lead to sustainable school improvement?

The study suggests there are five axioms which are essential for effective collaboration:

- collaboration succeeds when participants are willing and committed to share in an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect and support, giving and receiving as equals
- leadership of any collaboration is a key factor to success
- members of a network must be actively engaged in decision making and proactively embrace the opportunities it offers
- collaboration is sustained when members benefit personally and professionally and can identify a positive impact on their school, teachers and students
- effective collaboration in a climate conducive to change leads to sustained school improvement

The research also concludes that there are a number of challenges to effective collaboration. They include engaging reluctant leaders, incorporating network initiatives into school priorities,

ensuring effective communication between all members, involving heads new to the network, meeting the needs of individuals and maintaining school identity.

[Download a copy of this report from the NCSL website](#)



One-to-One Leadership Coaching in Schools

**Darren Holmes, Headteacher, Jesmond Road Primary School,
Hartlepool**

This study drew on interviews with 10 heads of primary schools who use a coaching style of leadership. The report examines how and with what effect headteachers take it on themselves to act as a coach to their colleagues in schools and to facilitate a coaching approach within the school.

Much of the coaching reported by the 10 heads was ad hoc. It had greatest impact when it was part of the ecology of the school; the heads had a clear view of their competencies as coaches, engendered trust and responsibility in those they coached, were clear about the intended results and used coaching as a tool in the transformation process, allied to the overall aims and values of the school.

Effective coaching appears to involve coaching from a position of professional strength, being self-aware and appreciating colleagues' strengths and learning needs.

[Download a copy of this report from the NCSL website](#)



It's Good to Talk An enquiry into the value of mentoring as an aspect of professional development for new headteachers

Chris Luck, Headteacher, Eastfield Primary School, Enfield

Using telephone interviews with 27 mentors and mentees in 10 LEAs, this study aimed to evaluate effective mentoring. The main findings emerging from the enquiry were:

- all mentees could describe how being mentored had helped them to become more effective
- mentoring is strong in developing problem solving and leadership skills, as well as increasing confidence
- all the schemes studied used mentoring in the first year of headship, but there is a case for this continuing into the second year as well
- NPQH was having a positive impact on new heads, increasing their confidence and awareness of development needs
- matching mentors to mentees is important but difficult – most mentees would choose a mentor who has experience of their schools' settings
- mentors benefit from the process as well as mentees. As such it may be important that mentors are drawn from the ranks of serving heads to double the benefits

- confidentiality is critical and a simple mentoring contract would help this element to be explicitly addressed
- there is little evidence of systematic efforts to evaluate mentoring schemes

[Download a copy of this report from the NCSL website](#)



Talent Spotting Recognising and developing leadership potential

Susan Tranter, Deputy Headteacher, Matthew Arnold School, Oxford

This study looked at practices in the civil service and commercial sector to address issues of recruitment, retention and promotion towards leadership positions.

The report begins with a review of the Fast Track teaching programme before looking at the assessment of talent in a private company. This large multinational company has a Top Talent programme for staff who have been in post for two years and is open to all with first class degrees.

The civil service seeks to help the new generation of leaders develop self-knowledge and personal effectiveness through a better understanding of issues surrounding leadership and organisational change.

Comparisons are made between the three approaches, with respective strengths and challenges noted. It is stated that organisations have their own ways of recognising talent. In the private company and the civil service schemes there is clarity of purpose. For the private company there are clear market performance criteria that underpin the activity. The civil service recognises the need for cultural change and has established a set of competencies that match this goal. What both organisations share is the ability to plan strategically a person's career within the context of a large organisation, but is this possible in teaching? How do we achieve clarity?

[Download a copy of this report from the NCSL website](#)

3 Leading Edge series

The Leading Edge series is designed to tackle issues at the leading edge of leadership development. Forward-thinking school leaders are challenged to articulate what they do and how they do it.

Leadership across the public sector: report on remote leadership

This report is from the Cross Sector Leadership Forum (10 June 2003) which includes representatives from health, defence and police sectors, who NCSL has made links with. The paper reports current thinking about leading geographically dispersed teams and organisations. It has some interesting insights for leaders of school federations or multiple site schools.

Remote leadership or virtual management is becoming increasingly common. The distance between leader and team creates a specific context with its own challenges which are:

- two-way trust is both more important and harder to build
- the contact time between team members and the leader is reduced and it is harder to build effective relationships
- the leader must make more judgements based on less information – they cannot ‘see’ how hard the team are working
- the leader becomes the symbol of the organisation and represents the corporate identity and culture
- more time is spent travelling – remote leaders are often very tired people
- both leader and team members can feel isolated
- the team is likely to be more diverse

Some leadership and management competencies are particularly important in the remote setting:

- emotional intelligence – reading people quickly and accurately and matching the style of leadership to the needs of the follower
- relinquishing control and allowing the team to both get on with the job and self organise in doing so
- understanding and embracing diversity
- integrity and reliability – doing what they say they will and being an anchor for the team
- effective communications across all media
- wants to develop team and encourages autonomy
- able to stand back and see the bigger picture
- being competent and comfortable with the available technology
- effective time managers
- results oriented
- a propensity to trust

The fundamentals of leadership are generic; what changes is the context. Remote leadership, like strategic leadership is actually just leadership but in a particular environment. Above all remote leaders must make the most of those special moments of interaction they do get with their team.

[Download a copy of this report from the Defence Leadership Centre website](#)



The Heart of the Matter: A practical guide to what middle leaders can do to improve learning in secondary schools

This publication is a record of what effective middle leaders tell us about their work in secondary schools. It emerges from a series of seminars held in autumn 2002 and spring 2003. It confirms a shift of role from managers of resources to leaders of people. It demands the development of a strong relationship between middle and senior leaders and explores how those in senior positions can support, challenge and enable middle leaders to have maximum impact on the quality of learning in schools.

Eight areas are highlighted as important fields of activity, each being accompanied with practical steps to take. These are differentiated between what middle and senior leaders need to do to make a difference. The eight areas are:

1. focus on learning and teaching
2. generate positive relationships
3. provide a clear vision and high expectations
4. improve the environment
5. provide time and opportunities for collaboration
6. distribute leadership and build teams
7. engage the community
8. evaluate and innovate

[Download a copy of this publication from the NCSL website](#)

4 Reflections and discussion

Running through and across many of the studies reported here are five sets of issues I wish to highlight by way of stimulating reflection and analysis.

i Leading special schools

It seems we know less than we should about leading special schools today or for tomorrow. They are under researched in terms of how they are led and managed and there may be too little attention being paid to how they might move forward into the future. According to the team of researchers at the University of Manchester there is a case for bringing together groups leaders in special schools in order to discover with them what successful leadership looks like, what challenges their sector faces, how they are addressing these challenges and what visions for the future they hold.

ii Distributed leadership

The belief in the importance of middle leaders is currently strong among practitioners, scholars and policy-makers alike. It is also endorsed and promoted by the College. Yet there is a lack of empirical knowledge about what distributed leadership looks like in action inside many schools.

There is plainly a case for finding out what distributed means for heads of department in secondary and special schools and subject and key stage leaders in primary schools. One important part of this work might be to explore whether there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality.

For example, the review of the literature suggests that middle leaders are reluctant to monitor learning and teaching in colleagues' classrooms. Moreover, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's (HMCI) annual report states:

The contribution made by **middle managers** continues to improve and is now good or better in almost two thirds of schools having a full inspection. Nevertheless, there are still considerable variations in the quality of subject management within schools and the effectiveness of the management of whole-school aspects, such as special educational needs, ICT or assessment...

There are features commonly associated with the good management of subjects.
Effective middle managers:

- make sure that the teachers in their teams play a full part in the management of the subject by delegating tasks to them
- have the ability to sustain their own motivation and that of other staff
- ensure that the development and implementation of subject policies and practices reflect those of the school, with development planning setting appropriate expectations in relation to pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching
- analyse attainment data to identify and help underachieving pupils and have effective approaches to assessing, recording and reporting on pupils' achievement.

Some aspects of middle management do not receive a sufficiently high priority, even by otherwise effective managers. Often, heads of department fail to develop joint working

with colleagues leading other subjects or aspects. In particular, they sometimes fail to liaise closely with the special educational needs co-ordinator to ensure that individual education plans are used to set subject-specific targets or to match provision to pupils' needs. In addition, middle managers and some senior managers place too low a priority on establishing the training needs of subject staff, leading staff development and ensuring the efficient induction of all new staff.

(HMCI, Ofsted, 2003)

These observations suggest that we need to know more about how effective middle leaders influence what happens inside the classrooms of their departmental colleagues, liaise with other departments and play a part in developing their teams as groups and as individuals.

NCSL is currently conducting a number of empirical studies into distributed leadership in schools through its Leading from the Middle programme evaluations and the Esmeé Fairbairn funded research into Learning-centred Leadership in Secondary Schools. These projects, which will be completed during 2003 – 04, will improve our knowledge and understanding of distributed leadership in action and enable us to explore in depth the issues highlighted by the evidence reported here.

Moreover, it should not be ignored that the work of middle leaders is central to recruiting, retaining and talent spotting future senior leaders.

iii The roles of deputies and assistant headteachers

Related to distributed leadership is the work of deputies and assistant heads. There are many questions to raise from what has been reported in this quarterly review and from what we hear is going on across the English education system. These questions include:

- Are deputy heads disappearing in primary and secondary schools?
- Are deputy heads being replaced by one or more assistant heads?
- What are the roles of deputies and assistant heads in leadership teams?
- How do leadership teams impact on the work of deputies and assistant heads?
- Do we need to rethink the role of deputies?

Also, given the advancement of distributed leadership what is the role of deputy heads? It has long been a concern in the primary sector that too many deputies are underpowered and perform only a limited role. If middle leadership is to gain a strong place in these schools then there may well need to be much rethinking about leadership at all levels and the roles of leaders as individuals and team members. Consequently, such rethinking may involve much restructuring and re-culturing in schools in order to create the conditions for leadership to blossom and flourish.

iv Leadership development

Following on from the previous points is an issue about leadership development in schools. It seems there is a lack of development opportunities for deputy heads inside and outside schools. NCSL is presently in the process of developing provision for established leaders (ie deputies and assistant heads). However, there appears to be a commensurate need for leadership development work inside schools.

Several of the reports reviewed here suggest that there is a case for heads and deputies to ensure there is more on-the-job learning – for themselves and for others. Perhaps the attention highlighted here on coaching and mentoring implies that deputies and leadership teams should

ensure mentoring and coaching opportunities for colleagues and that they take a lead in providing them? If members of leadership teams, and deputies in particular, become coaches and mentors to colleagues we know that this will simultaneously benefit them too.

Furthermore, given active forms of middle leadership in the school, then maybe heads and deputies need to do two things at once; ensure the leadership team is itself a top team and become leaders and managers of talent across the school.

v Collaboration and networks of leaders

Finally, if heads and other leaders are to engage in learning networks and school collaboratives this might mean there is more remote leadership than formerly.

If we encourage leaders to visit other schools and systems, to learn more powerfully from one another and to develop innovative practices in strategic alliances with others then three things follow. First, distributed leadership becomes essential. Second, leadership development and capacity building is equally necessary. Third, the skills of leaders/heads may need to change to take account of their new contexts and for some this may mean exercising more 'remote' leadership.

Professor Geoff Southworth

Director, Research Group, National College for School Leadership