School Leadership: Concepts and Evidence

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A review of the literature
carried out for NCSL by
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NCSL

National College for School Leadership

Contents

1. Introduction

This is a shortened version of the final report of desk research on school leadership commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). This paper aims to provide a summary synthesis of the most important sources in a form which is intended to be accessible for practitioners and policy-makers. The report includes theoretical literature, to show how leadership has been conceptualised, and empirical literature, to demonstrate whether and how the research evidence supports these concepts of school leadership. The report also summarises the key implications of the desk research for leadership development.

2. Definitions of School Leadership

Cuban (1988, p.190) says that "there are more than 350 definitions of leadership but no clear and unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders".

2.1 Leadership as influence

A central element in many definitions of leadership is that there is a process of influence. Yukl (2002, p.3) explains this influence process:

> **"Most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation."**

Yukl's use of 'person' or 'group' serves to emphasise that leadership may be exercised by teams as well as individuals. This view is reinforced by Harris (2002) and Leithwood (2001) who both advocate distributed leadership as an alternative to traditional top-down leadership models.

2.2 Leadership and values

Leadership may be understood as 'influence' but this notion is neutral in that it does not explain or recommend what goals or actions should be sought through this process. However, certain alternative constructs of leadership focus on the need for leadership to be grounded in firm personal and professional values. Wasserberg argues that these core values should be:

- schools are concerned with learning and all members of the school community are learners.
- every member of the school community is valued as an individual.
- the school exists to serve its pupils and the local community.
- learning is about the development of the whole person and happens in and out of classrooms.
- people prosper with trust, encouragement and praise. (Wasserberg 1999, p.155).

The values adopted by many school leaders can be illustrated by Day, Harris and Hadfield's (2001) study of 12 schools in England and Wales which focused on heads who were deemed effective by Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) criteria and 'peer reputation'. The researchers interviewed teachers, parents, governors and students as well as the principals. They conclude that "good leaders are informed by and communicate clear sets of personal and educational values which represent their moral purposes for the school" (p.53).

2.3 Leadership and vision

Vision is increasingly regarded as an important component of leadership. Beare, Caldwell and Millikan (1989), for example, say that "outstanding leaders have a vision of their schools - a mental picture of a preferred future - which is shared with all in the school community" (p.99). They articulate four emerging generalisations about vision:

1. Outstanding leaders have a vision for their organisations.

2. Vision must be communicated in a way which secures commitment among members of the organisation.

3. Communication of vision requires communication of meaning.

4. Attention should be given to institutionalising vision if leadership is to be successful.

These generalisations are supported by some empirical evidence. Southworth (1997) summarises the findings of several research projects and commentaries on leadership in primary schools:

• Nias et al's (1992) study shows that primary heads "provided a vision for the staff and the school" (p.46).

• Southworth (1993) suggests that heads are motivated to work hard "because their leadership is the pursuit of their individual visions" (p.47).

• Alexander, Rose and Woodhead (1992) say that primary heads should provide a "vision of what their schools should become" (p.48).

These projects show the high level of support for the notion of visionary leadership but, in practice, it remains highly problematic . "Inspiring a shared vision is the leadership practice with which [heads] felt most uncomfortable," (Kouzes and Posner 1996, p.24). Fullan (1992) is even more critical, suggesting that visionary leaders may damage rather than improve their schools:

> **"The current emphasis on vision in leadership can be misleading. Vision can blind leaders in a number of ways . . . The high-powered, charismatic principal who 'radically transforms the school' in four or five years can . . . be blinding and misleading as a role model . . . Principals are blinded by their own vision when they feel they must manipulate the teachers and the school culture to conform to it,"**
>
> **(Fullan 1992, p.19)**

The research by Bolam et al (1993) for the School Management Task Force illustrates a number of problems about the development and articulation of 'vision' in English and Welsh schools. Their study of 12 self-selected 'effective' schools shows that most heads were able to describe "some sort of vision" but they were "neither surprising nor striking nor controversial. They are closely in line with what one might expect of the British system of education," (p.35).

Begley's (1994) four level analysis helps to understand the concept of vision. The 'vision derived goals' aspect serves to illustrate the approach (see Table 1):

Table 1: The Principal as Visionary (Begley 1994).

Level	Vision Derived Goals
Basic	Possesses a set of goals derived from Ministry and Board expectations.
Intermediate	Develops school goals consistent with the principal's articulated vision.
Advanced	Works with the teaching staff to develop school goals which reflect their collaborative vision.
Expert	Collaborates with representative members of the school community to develop goals which reflect a collaboratively developed vision statement.

Table 1 shows that 'vision' may operate at different levels. The shift from 'basic' to 'expert' provides a useful way of categorising the extent to which leaders are able to develop a distinctive vision, widely regarded as one hallmark of successful leadership.

The issues addressed in this section of the paper provide the basis for a working definition of school leadership.

> **"Leadership is a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. Successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share the vision. The philosophy, structures and activities of the school are geared towards the achievement of this shared vision."**
>
> **(Bush and Glover 2002)**

2.4 Leadership and management

The concept of leadership overlaps with management. Cuban (1988) provides one of the clearest distinctions between these terms:

> **"By leadership, I mean influencing others' actions in achieving desirable ends. Leaders are people who shape the goals, motivations, and actions of others. Frequently they initiate change to reach existing and new goals . . . Leadership . . . takes . . . much ingenuity, energy and skill."**
>
> **(p.xx)**

> **"Managing is maintaining efficiently and effectively current organisational arrangements. While managing well often exhibits leadership skills, the overall function is toward maintenance rather than change. I prize both managing and leading and attach no special value to either since different settings and times call for varied responses."**
>
> **(p.xx)**

While a clear vision is essential to establish the nature and direction of change, it is equally important to ensure that innovations are implemented efficiently and that the school's residual functions are carried out effectively. Both leadership and management are necessary for successful schools:

> **"Leading and managing are distinct, but both are important. Organisations which are over managed but under led eventually lose any sense of spirit or purpose. Poorly managed organisations with strong charismatic leaders may soar temporarily only to crash shortly thereafter. The challenge of modern organisations requires the objective perspective of the manager as well as the flashes of vision and commitment wise leadership provides."**
>
> **(Bolman and Deal 1997, pp.xiii-xiv).**

The dichotomy in Britain and elsewhere is that, while leadership is often preferred, for example by setting up a National College for School Leadership, governments are encouraging a technical-rational, or management, approach through their stress on performance and public accountability (Glatter 1999, Levacic et al 1999).

3. A Typology for Leadership

The vast literature on leadership has inevitably generated a plethora of alternative, and competing, models. Some writers have sought to cluster these various conceptions into a number of broad themes or 'types'. In this section, we review eight of these broad theories, using a typology adapted from Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999).

3.1 Instructional leadership

> **"Instructional leadership . . . typically assumes that the critical focus for attention by leaders is the behaviour of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students,"**
>
> **(Leithwood et al 1999, p.8).**

Sheppard (1996) claims that there are 'narrow' and 'broad' conceptions of instructional leadership where the latter also involves variables, such as school culture, which may have important consequences for teacher behaviour. Southworth (2002, p.78) says that "instructional leadership is likely to be more effective when it is conceptualised as 'broad' rather than 'narrow'" because it increases the scope for other leaders to play a role as well as the principal and because it recognises how social organisations operate. He adds that "instructional leadership . . . is strongly concerned with teaching and learning, including the professional learning of teachers as well as student growth," (2002, p.79).

Leithwood (1994, p.499) claims that "instructional leadership images are no longer adequate" because they are "heavily classroom focused" and do not address "second order changes . . . [such as] organisation building," (p.501). He adds that the instructional leadership image "is now showing all the signs of a dying paradigm," (p.502).

Despite these comments, instructional leadership is a very important dimension because it targets the school's central activities, teaching and learning. It also has the specific endorsement of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL 2001). "School leadership must be instructionally focused" (p.5) is one of the 10 'propositions' in the NCSL Leadership Development Framework. However, this paradigm underestimates other aspects of school life, such as socialisation, student welfare and self esteem. The model also gives insufficient prominence to how leaders exert their influence on teaching and learning and may overestimate leaders' preparedness to adopt instructional leadership behaviours.

3.2 Transformational leadership

Gunter (2001, p.69) says that transformational leadership is about building a unified common interest between leaders and followers. Transformational approaches are often contrasted with transactional leadership:

> **"Transactional leadership is leadership in which relationships with teachers are based upon an exchange for some valued resource. To the teacher, interaction between administrators and teachers is usually episodic, short-lived and limited to the exchange transaction. Transformational leadership is more potent and complex and occurs when one or more teachers engage with others in such a way that administrators and teachers raise one another to higher levels of commitment and dedication, motivation and morality. Through the transforming process, the motives of the leader and follower merge,"**
>
> **(Miller and Miller 2001, p.182).**

Leithwood (1994) conceptualises transformational leadership along eight dimensions:

* building school vision
* establishing school goals
* providing intellectual stimulation
* offering individualised support
* modelling best practices and important organisational values
* demonstrating high performance expectations
* creating a productive school culture
* developing structures to foster participation in school decisions

Leithwood's (1994) research suggests that there is some empirical support for the transformational leadership model. He reports on seven quantitative studies and concludes that:

> **"Transformational leadership practices, considered as a composite construct, had significant direct and indirect effects on progress with school-restructuring initiatives and teacher-perceived student outcomes,"**
>
> **(p.506)**

The transformational model is comprehensive in that it provides a normative approach to school leadership which focuses primarily on the process by which leaders seek to influence school outcomes rather than on the nature or direction of those outcomes. It has been criticised as being a vehicle for control over teachers (Chirichello 1999) and for having the potential to become 'despotic' because of its strong, heroic and charismatic features (Allix 2000).

The contemporary policy climate within which schools have to operate also raises questions about the validity of the transformational model. The English system increasingly requires school leaders to adhere to government prescriptions which affect aims, curriculum content and pedagogy, as well as values. There is "a more centralised, more directed, and more controlled educational system [that] has dramatically reduced the possibility of realising a genuinely transformational education and leadership," (Bottery 2001, p.215).

3.3 Moral leadership

Moral leadership assumes that the critical focus of leadership ought to be on the values and ethics of leaders themselves. Authority and influence are to be derived from defensible conceptions of what is right or good (Leithwood et al 1999, p.10). Sergiovanni (1984, p.10) says that "excellent schools have central zones composed of values and beliefs that take on sacred or cultural characteristics."

Gold et al's (2002) research in English primary, secondary and special schools provides some evidence about the nature of the values held and articulated by heads regarded as 'outstanding' by OfSTED inspectors. These heads demonstrated the following values and beliefs through their words and deeds:

- inclusivity
- equal opportunities
- equity or justice
- high expectations
- engagement with stakeholders
- co-operation
- teamwork
- commitment
- understanding

3.4 Participative leadership

"Participative leadership . . . assumes that the decision-making processes of the group ought to be the central focus of the group," (Leithwood et al 1999, p.12). This is a normative model which is based on three criteria:

- participation will increase school effectiveness.
- participation is justified by democratic principles.
- in the context of site-based management, leadership is potentially available to any legitimate stakeholder, (Leithwood et al 1999, p.12).

Sergiovanni (1984, p.13) also points to the importance of a participative approach. This will succeed in 'bonding' staff together and in easing the pressures on school principals. *"The burdens of leadership will be less if leadership functions and roles are shared and if the concept of leadership density were to emerge as a viable replacement for principal leadership"* (original author's emphasis).

Participative leadership is an attractive notion underpinned by democratic ideals. It has been popular in the literature for many years but evidence of its successful implementation in schools is sparse. Referring to English primary schools, Webb and Vulliamy (1996, p.313) argue that the policy framework introduced in the 1990s leads to "a growing tension between collegial and top-down management strategies".

Despite this evidence, there is a continuing focus on participative and distributed leadership. Harris (2002) argues that democratic leadership styles are inevitable in the complex and rapidly changing world inhabited by schools in the 21st century, despite the current emphasis on individual leaders.

3.5 Managerial leadership

The notion of 'managerial leadership' may appear to be a contradiction, particularly in the light of the distinctions outlined earlier in this report. Nevertheless, it merits separate consideration because it serves to demonstrate that a narrow view of 'management' is often adopted:

> **"Managerial leadership assumes that the focus of leaders ought to be on functions, tasks and behaviours and that if these functions are carried out competently the work of others in the organisation will be facilitated. Most approaches to managerial leadership also assume that the behaviour of organisational members is largely rational. Authority and influence are allocated to formal positions in proportion to the status of those positions in the organisational hierarchy,"**
>
> **(Leithwood et al 1999, p.14)**

This definition is remarkably close to that adopted earlier by Bush (1995) in respect to just one of his six models of management, 'formal models'.

The reduction in the scope of 'management' has arisen, in part, because governments in many countries, including the United Kingdom, have adopted this limited perspective in advancing their reform programmes (Levacic et al 1999). If heads are simply expected to implement external policy decisions, they are engaged in a process of managerial leadership sometimes described as 'managerialism'.

Leithwood et al (1999, p.14) claim that leaders need to adopt a 'bifocal' perspective, management and leadership. Leithwood (1994) adds that "distinctions between management and leadership cannot be made in terms of overt behaviour . . . most of the overt practices of transformational leaders look quite managerial" (p.515).

3.6 Postmodern leadership

This is a relatively recent model of leadership. Keough and Tobin (2001, p.2) provide a definition as a starting point for linking postmodern leadership to educational policy: "current postmodern culture celebrates the multiplicity of subjective truths as defined by experience and revels in the loss of absolute authority".

Keough and Tobin (p.11-13) identify several key features of postmodernism:

- language does not reflect reality
- reality does not exist; there are multiple realities
- any situation is open to multiple interpretations
- situations must be understood at local level with particular attention to diversity

The most useful point to emerge from this analysis is that leaders should respect, and give attention to, the diverse and individual perspectives of stakeholders. They should also avoid reliance on the hierarchy because this concept has little meaning in such a fluid organisation.

3.7 Interpersonal leadership

"Interpersonal intelligence is the authentic range of intuitive behaviours derived from sophisticated self-awareness, which facilitates effective engagement with others,"

(West-Burnham 2001, p.2)

West-Burnham (2001) stresses the importance of collaboration and interpersonal relationships, a theme taken up by Tuohy and Coghlan (1997):

"Much of the teachers' day is taken up in an intensity of relationships. Understanding the changing nature of relationships with young students, the changing context of their lives, and developing appropriate and effective responses to both their personal and academic needs requires constant reflection and adjustment,"

(p.67)

These pressures are even more evident in the work of school leaders and suggests a requirement for high level personal and interpersonal skills (Johnston and Pickersgill 1992).

3.8 Contingent leadership

All the models of leadership examined hitherto are partial. They provide valid and helpful insights into one particular aspect of leadership. Some focus on the process by which influence is exerted while others emphasise one or more dimensions of leadership.

The contingent model provides an alternative approach, recognising the diverse nature of school contexts and the advantages of adapting leadership styles to the particular situation rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' stance:

"This approach assumes that what is important is how leaders respond to the unique organisational circumstances or problems . . . there are wide variations in the contexts for leadership and that, to be effective, these contexts require different leadership responses . . . individuals providing leadership, typically those in formal positions of authority, are capable of mastering a large repertoire of leadership practices. Their influence will depend, in large measure, on such mastery,"

(Leithwood et al 1999, p.15)

Bolman and Deal's (1984) 'conceptual pluralism' provides a similar approach to this issue. An eclectic stance is required where leaders adapt their styles to the context in which they are operating. Leadership requires effective diagnosis of problems, followed by adopting the most appropriate response to the issue (Morgan 1986, Bush 1995).

4. Conclusion

4.1 Comparing the models

Leadership can be understood as a process of influence based on clear values and beliefs, leading to a 'vision' for the school. The vision is articulated by leaders who seek to gain the commitment of staff and stakeholders to the dream of a better future for the school, its students and stakeholders.

The eight models adapted from Leithwood et al (1999), and summarised in this report, show that concepts of school leadership are complex and diverse. They provide clear normative frameworks by which leadership can be understood but relatively weak empirical support for these constructs. They are also artificial distinctions in that most successful leaders are likely to embody most or all of these approaches in their work.

The eight models provide a starting point for a normative assessment of school leadership in the 21st century:

- Managerial leadership has been discredited as limited and technicist but it is an essential component of successful leadership, ensuring the implementation of the school's vision and strategy.

- Instructional leadership is vital to ensure a continuing focus on teaching and learning but this stresses the direction rather than the process of influence.

- Transformational leadership has the potential to develop higher levels of motivation and commitment amongst stakeholders but could also be regarded as manipulative.

- Moral leadership is similar to the transformational model but with a stronger emphasis on values and beliefs.

- Participative leadership emphasises the importance of team work but does not constitute a distinctive approach to leadership.

- Postmodern leadership focuses on individual interpretation of events.

- The interpersonal model emphasises the need for good relationships between staff, students and other stakeholders.

- The contingent model outlines an approach that recognises the significance of situational leadership, with heads and other senior staff adapting their approach to the unique circumstances of their schools.

An integrated model needs to start with a contingent approach because a specific vision for the school, a hallmark of the transformational model, cannot be independent of this context. Transformational leadership then provides the basis for articulating and working towards this vision. Instructional leadership is compatible with a transformational approach because it indicates, in broad terms, what the main priority of any learning organisation ought to be. Managerial leadership remains important because it is necessary to ensure effective implementation of policies arising from the outcomes of the transformational process.

4.2 Implications for leadership development

The leadership models featured in this report provide powerful normative explanations of leadership behaviour in schools. There is also some empirical evidence to support most of these concepts. The insights from these models provide helpful guidelines for those devising and implementing leadership development programmes:

- Given the significance of instructional leadership, these programmes should have **a clear focus on learning**, the main purpose of schools, and on the teaching required to promote effective learning. This inevitably means helping leaders at all levels to monitor and evaluate teaching and learning and to implement strategies such as classroom observation as part of the evaluation process.

- The continuing endorsement of transformational leadership in the literature, and in formal policy statements, suggests a need for programmes to develop the portfolio of skills required to 'transform' schools. These include **developing an explicit vision** for the school which inspires teachers and other stakeholders to work towards a better future.

- To avoid the problems that may be associated with transformational leadership, including the potential for manipulation of followers, it is important for leaders to develop **a participative, or team, approach** which enables staff and others to contribute to the process of visioning rather than simply accepting the leader's personal vision.

- Training should include **management as well as leadership** to ensure effective implementation of the vision.

- The contingency model suggests a requirement for leaders to develop **a portfolio of leadership styles**. They need to be able to carry out effective situational analysis to show that they are able to adapt their approaches to the specific context.

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