

School leadership in England: Reflections on research activity between 1997 and 2017

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Abstract

This is a theoretical and reflective examination of research into school leadership in England which concludes that activity has been both constrained and limited throughout the last 20 years. A review of school leadership development from 1997 indicates that the main government agencies have identified skills, attributes and behaviours, yet these have not been the consequence of robust empirical research. This outcome is compromised further by the way in which two mainstream academic UK journals, which ostensibly focus on the field of leadership in education, have less than 20 per cent of published papers in the years 2014 and 2015 on school leadership in England. I conclude, based on the samples of outputs examined, that this represents an alarming lack of evidence underpinning our understanding of the demands of school leadership in the rapidly changing nature of education in England. From this discussion, I call for two outcomes: greater opportunity for publication of domestic research within UK journals and national conferences and a determination from major agencies and institutions to support more substantial, detailed and focused research into school leadership.

Introduction

This is a theoretical and reflective examination of the way in which I consider research into school leadership in England has been both constrained and limited throughout the last 20 years. The genesis of this paper lies in the request to provide an overview of the topic as a presentation for a job selection process in 2016 for which I was an applicant. The assessment of research activity presented here was conducted principally by reflecting on the impact of structural reform, led by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), on previous reviews undertaken personally and by reviewing published outputs on the topic between 2014 and 2015 in two UK based peer reviewed journals. The two journals focus on leadership and management in

education and are considered the most relevant to UK researchers in this subject area. Indeed, one of the journals is the product of the British Education Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS), which is the foremost national association in the field. As a part of the review reported here examination was also undertaken of BELMAS conference proceedings and of reports from Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools during the same period.

The review focuses only on school leadership in England, as each of the UK member countries has different regulations or devolved responsibilities resulting in differing school systems. As will be shown more fully below schools in England have gone through radical structural reform, particularly since the beginning of the century, which continues to place increasing demands on their leaders. Despite this, the evidence explored for this report shows limited empirical research into the rapidly changing role of school leaders.

1997 – New Labour and School Reform

The 20-year period explored in this review begins with the election in 1997 of 'New' Labour to government, following previous Conservative governments who had placed an emphasis on the marketisation of public services. In the immediate period beforehand, the role of headteacher in England's schools had undergone a rapid transformation principally because of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). The act introduced, *inter-alia*, the notion of locally managed schools (LMS) whereby the major portion of financial resources (including staffing costs) were devolved from the local authority to the institutional level. The principle, underpinned by a market-led philosophy, was for governing bodies and individual headteachers to take direct control, with some schools becoming Grant Maintained Schools (GMS), directly funded by central government. Schools were thus 'liberated' from local authority control, with the principal impact of the funding devolution being to enhance the decision-making responsibility of each school.

This change in the locus of responsibility and accountability for schools heralded a new era of 'leadership' (Simkins, 2012). Prior to this, he argued, we had witnessed the era of 'administration' from 1944 to the mid-1980s and the era of 'management' from the mid-1980s to 1997. This conclusion seems well founded, given the timeline

whereby a good proportion of the nation's schools did not adopt LMS until 1994, including all those in Greater London and special schools. For most of the twentieth century accountability and decision-making for schools had been at the level of the local authority, the elected councils which are a feature of local democracy in England. As illustrated above, during these times and until the ERA the focus for headship was one of administration and management. Initially after the ERA, and until 1997, the emphasis of headship switched to management, defined as the accountable delivery of processes determined elsewhere (e.g. the National Curriculum). In terms of definition, however, management asks the question 'how can I best accomplish certain things', whereas leadership deals asks 'what are the things I want to accomplish?' (Covey, 1992). The difference is in the locus of decision-making, with the emphasis on school leadership behaviour switching accordingly.

School Leadership under New Labour

The key driving force towards developing leadership capability in the early stages of this transposition of responsibility and accountability was the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), a non-government departmental body which had been set up in 1994 to raise the standard of teaching. In its subsequent evolution, the TTA had sought to take responsibility for both establishing teacher standards and their continuing development, a role that expanded to include headteacher development by the time New Labour took power in 1997. David Blunkett's arrival in his governmental role of Secretary of State for Education succeeded three years of work by the TTA by which time headteacher standards had been published which encouraged headteachers to see themselves as being leaders, rather than managers or administrators. This was swiftly followed by the introduction of a new training programme in 1997, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), which was underwritten by these standards.

Levačić and Glatter (2001: 13) suggested, however, there was no evidence to be found from the extensive research that had been undertaken over the previous twenty years had "any influence on the construction of the [headteacher] standards". This appears to be the point at which policy became driven by ideology rather than research, despite the protestations of the new government who had come power with an agenda for action seemingly based on the pragmatic 'Third Way' to policy making

which emphasised an approach “founded on applying evidence of ‘what works’ rather than on ideology” (Levačić and Glatter, 2001: 12). David Blunkett’s claim “that having ready access to the lessons learnt from high quality research can and must vastly improve the quality and sensitivity of the complex and often constrained decisions we, as politicians, have to make” (DfEE, 2000) was quickly contradicted by his subsequent statement: ‘We know what works and how to spread it’ (Blunkett, 2000). In other words, the intention to underpin policy with high quality research was replaced with a determination to implant previously formed ideas or strategies. It is in this context I began the review.

Leadership development post 1997

The formation of headteacher standards was not based on evidence previous research in the field, as indicated above by Levačić and Glatter. In my own examination of their genesis, based on my direct involvement in the generation of the NPQH and its training and assessment processes, I concluded that the final decision on the national standards were “largely determined through the interaction of those engaged in the discussion at a national level, with the final decision on their content being taken in camera and without consultation” (Male, 2004: 105). In other words, the government agency considered it knew best the attributes, behaviours and skills needed for headship and did not seem to be minded to engage in further discussion or explore corresponding research. It was a move that mirrored the comments of David Blunkett in terms of ‘we know what works’.

The next significant move in terms of developing school leaders, still heavily focused on headteachers at the time, was the creation of the National College for School Leadership in 2000. Credit for this initiative was claimed by Prime Minister, Tony Blair, via an announcement from his office in 1998. The college, according to the Green Paper (Department for Education and Employment, 1998), would run residential development programmes for all stages of headship development and establish close links with leading business schools to combine high quality educational content with the best in public and private sector management (House of Commons Select Committee, 1998: paras 59-60). By the end of 2001 NCSL produced a range of proposals for their future work that were published for a period of public consultation. The proposals were for a [School] Leadership Development Framework (National

College for School Leadership, 2001a) which was based on the work of their own Think Tank (National College for School Leadership, 2001b), comprised of leading practitioners, researchers and providers in the field of school leadership and management training, development and education.

The leadership development framework (LDF) examined the nature of school leadership and outlined a set of ten propositions that were intended to underwrite future development programmes for all aspects of school leadership, including an extension beyond headship into middle and established leadership positions. This was a significant development as it signalled the beginning of a period when government agencies, and particularly the NCSL, which has been the dominant force in school leadership development in England since its inception, seemingly choosing to rely more heavily on their own ideas than empirical research. The two commissioned reports which informed the NCSL Think Tank were insightful (Collarbone, 2001; Newton, 2001), but the final report was challenged by myself at the time as being based on two fixed points in thinking, the second of which was that school leadership 'must be supported by a National College that leads the discourse around leadership for learning' (NCSL, 2001a). This, I argued, presented "a danger that the college will not hear alternative views and challenges" and would deny the authority of other parties with legitimate interest and concern (Male, 2002: 40). Fifteen years later I consider that prediction to have been reasonably accurate as I explain through the examination of my research undertaken here.

NCSL and other research since 2000

Soon after their establishment of the NCSL I presented a paper at their inaugural international research conference which reviewed their 'knowledge pool' together with the evidence base they had accumulated through their practitioner research (Male, 2003).

In the early days of their existence the NCSL had published a series of 31 invited essays from noted national and international practitioners, academics and theorists to form a 'Knowledge Pool'. I concluded these were mainly commentaries on aspects of leadership and management which had been informed by relevant literature and theory bases, with few examples of contributions that were the direct result of empirical

research. The college had added a further 49 contributions through the Research Publications section of their web-site by the time I undertook the review in 2002, of which the largest body of contributors to this field were practitioners, particularly from serving headteachers who had been seconded from their substantial post (usually for 20 days, although some early recipients of the associate status were given longer periods up to a total of 100 days). There were 19 practitioner reports, mainly single authored, although one report was co-authored and one was a joint effort by four contributors. The focus of the reports tended to be empirical investigations into school-based activities that have been with the largest 'n' of data subjects being 25 and the largest number of schools investigated in any one report being 15. One report, by co-authors, was the further analysis of data accumulated through a survey conducted in 1999 that involved many respondent headteachers (1405). Of the remaining 30 publications, eight reported on the series of Leading Edge Seminars run by the college, seven were Think Pieces (commissioned or invited), eight were literature reviews (again, commissioned), one was an evaluation of an in-house programme and one was a report on a practitioner seminar (involving representatives from LEAs, HEIs and industry as well as school-based personnel). There were five further reports that could be described as using traditional research methods of which three used multiple respondents (50, 20 and 19), one used secondary data sources and one was a single school case study investigating leadership and inclusion. As I suggested at the time building an evidence base in this way was highly reliant on conventional wisdom and small-scale interpretive research.

The conclusion I drew at that stage was that whilst the approaches used by the NCSL publications and research projects may be informative these could not be considered as exhaustive and ran the risk of being circular i.e. they were mainly validating their own previously stated conclusions.

What happened subsequently?

In preparation for the selection process in which I was a candidate (see above) I revisited the topic of research on school leadership in England, but this time focused only on the examination of publications within the years of 2014 and 2015. There are obvious limitations in this regard, but the choice was made as the audience was domestic and the intended presentation was required to cover contemporary issues.

Initially I selected the range of papers in two subject relevant peer reviewed journals published in the UK, *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership* (EMAL) and *School Leadership and Management* (SLAM). These two journals are generally considered as the leading outlet for domestic researchers of leadership in education and both are ranked in Scopus. EMAL, the publication from BELMAS, had a CiteScore of 1.2 in 2016 and a ranking of 244 in 933 published journals on education. SLAM is ranked lower at 431, with a CiteScore of 0.74.

I then extended my search to research emanating from the succeeding manifestation of the NCSL, the *National College for Teaching and Leadership* (NCTL) before examining reports from the *Office for Standards in Education* (OFSTED). Finally, I looked at the presentations made at the previous two conferences of the *British Educational Leadership and Management Society* (BELMAS). For the record, I did not investigate the British Education Research Association (BERA) conference proceedings or any other source in depth when arriving at my conclusions, a decision that meant I did not explore the contents of other potentially rich sources which examined research in this field (e.g. Brooks, 2011; Gunter, 2016). What I found, however, was quite alarming.

The review of EMAL (issues 42.1 to 44.1) and SLAM (issues 34.1 to 35.5) revealed a total of 149 published articles on school leadership and management in the period between January 2014 and December 2015. EMAL published 123 articles in total of which 90 were on school leadership, whilst SLAM published 59 articles all of which, by default, were focused on school leadership and management. Meanwhile aspects of school leadership and management were examined by the NCTL, which published four reports during the same period (NCTL: 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015), and OFSTED which issued three reports which included a relevant focus (Ofsted: 2014a, 2014b, 2015). There were 28 papers available from the BELMAS conferences of 2014 and 2015 through their website, of which 12 could be assessed as exploring school leadership and management.

Of the 149 articles on school leadership and management in the UK based peer reviewed journals EMAL and SLAM, just 28 are from domestic researchers or contributors, a proportion just under 20 per cent. The other articles came from overseas – a total of 33 countries, including 19 papers from South Africa, 14 from the

USA, 10 from Australia, 6 from Cyprus and 5 from Greece. A similar pattern of outputs could be seen from the previous two BELMAS conferences where just 12 papers available through the website come from UK researchers or contributors, with the remainder coming from Austria, Israel, Cyprus, South Africa, Trinidad & Tobago, Russia, Nigeria, Uganda and the USA. On a related note, it is unfortunate to see that that much more was presented, judging by the number of abstracts included in the conference proceedings, but these are not available as full papers.

The most common topics in the peer reviewed journals were: leadership styles and approaches (31 in total; 3 from the UK), school system restructuring (17; 11), leadership for learning (7; 1), emotional aspects of leadership, including Emotional Intelligence (6; 2), leadership preparation and development (5; 0), distributed leadership (5; 1) and women in leadership (5; 0). Looking just at the papers relating to school leadership and management in the UK presented in the previous two BELMAS conferences five were on aspects of school system restructuring, whilst the rest were single papers on distributed leadership, gender imbalance, leadership in primary schools, resilient leaders, leadership for social justice, evidence-based decision making and ethical labour practices. Few of these papers had anything resembling a substantial evidence base in terms of empirical research with the largest sample reported in the BELMAS being 49 headteachers who responded to a questionnaire, whilst most reported small-scale case studies.

The outputs from the NCTL reports were more substantial both in depth and the evidence bases used, although one study was just an analysis of data accumulated through the National Governor Database. In addition, there were three other reports on *Effectively Managing Headteacher Performance* (January 2014), *Outstanding Primary School Leadership in England* (June 2014) and *New Pathways into Headship* (June 2015). The study of headteacher performance used a mixed-method approach in 4 phases which included a scoping exercise, 13 interviews with experts, an online survey of 1069 governors and 147 headteachers and 20 case study schools. The report in outstanding leadership in primary schools was based on 19 case studies which used qualitative research. Finally, the study on new pathways into headship again used a mixed-methods approach which included secondary data analysis, two questionnaire surveys and 15 case study visits.

Meanwhile the contribution from OFSTED to understanding school leadership and management was published firstly during this period in the report entitled *Raising Standards through High Quality Leadership of Teaching* (April 2014) which was based on a single case study school and later within their annual reports of 2014 and 2015. The 2014 report confined its comments to their consideration that 23 per cent of secondary schools have weak leadership compared with 16 percent of primary schools, that there were geographical gaps, differences between good and bad leadership and some cases of exceptional leadership. The 2015 report was a little fuller with five paragraphs on middle leadership and four paragraphs on headteachers and governors, but in both years, there was no feedback that was helpful to the development of school leadership.

Consequently, I concluded that this exploration of these examples of research into school leadership demonstrates an alarming lack of evidence based on substantial empirical research. This is not to say we have never had some good quality and substantial evidence on school leadership as there have been some excellent contributions over the years and many being made now. A very quick search of SCOPUS, for example, shows over 150 papers published on school leadership in the UK 2014 and 2015, whilst a similar search on ResearchGate also shows there to be many publications during the same period. My major point, however, is that there is seemingly no systematic way in which research is being undertaken in the field of school leadership and management in England and little attempt to support such foci through government bodies, national associations or even institutions. My conclusions are that there is:

- A paucity of current research into school leadership and management in England;
- Over reliance on anecdotal evidence and small-scale research;
- The use of questionable methodologies in terms of drawing conclusions;
- Inadequate focus on key issues facing school leaders in the current era.

Discussion

The starting point for this enquiry was to see whether we could learn from what had happened, so we could identify how best to support and develop school leadership and management in England. What has been found is that research, wherever it has

taken place, has had a minimal (if any effect) on policy that informs practice. Research in education, it is suggested, “ought to have at the broadest level a desire to make things better in education, explicitly in the case of our concerns here, to improve education policy, including conceptualisation and enactment” (Lingard, 2013: 116). Such research can be in two dimensions, he argued, to include either research *of/for* policy which would allow for determination of good practice and for subsequent dissemination. Considering the work of the NCSL, further witnessed from the examination of published outputs in 2014 and 2015, it seems the field has not moved on in any discernible fashion since New Labour came to power in 1997. Given that the criticism of the TTA inspired move to developing headteachers as leaders also claimed a lack of attention to a body of research that was evident at the time, we appear to have arrived at a situation where we do not know why we do things as we do or can justify why this is the best way to do things. Seemingly we are no better off than the situation described by Lingard (2013: 118) where “policy is linked to politics and framed by the political intentions of governments, politicians and ministers and thus is linked to ideology, but always mediated by other factors, including at times research evidence”. In this instance, however, we are seemingly also devoid of any good quality data that is independent in nature.

Implications

The last conclusion is a significant one at a time when the school system in England is undergoing radical change. Because of the policies of the previous Coalition and the current Conservative governments we have seen schools being encouraged to become independent of local authorities. Whilst most schools (mainly primaries) are still to seek such a status it is probably fair to say we no longer have a national system of schools in England. The power and control of the local authority system has been decimated, not only by the favouring of academies and free schools, but also by reductions in funding which have seen services reduced to the bare minimum allowed under the legislation. In addition, the process of separating schools from the local authority has been speeded up through the Academies Act of 2011, which allowed the Secretary of State for Education to order failing schools to become academies and enhanced with the Education and Adoption Bill of 2015-16 which will also allow the conversion of ‘coasting schools’ to academies (House of Commons Library, 2015).

The same act will also allow intervention into underperforming schools and to constrain the local authority from doing so in certain circumstances.

At the time of writing there were nearly 8000 schools that had either become or were in the process of academisation, with primary schools being in the majority for the first time (Department for Education, 2017). Whilst this still does not represent the major portion of maintained schools, with 66 percent remaining in local authority control, it does signal the direction of travel for school governance and management and the government's ambition remains that all schools will become academies (Department for Education, 2016). A dual system of maintained schools and academies therefore remains in place, and in which the future for many local authority schools is yet to be determined. The intermediate governance structure that has been established for independent state schools (i.e. academies, free schools, studio schools, university technical colleges and multi-academy trusts) consists of eight Regional School Commissioners (RSC) who work in conjunction with elected Headteacher Boards. From 2106 the post of National Commissioner was created and during 2017 a total of 33 sub-regional school improvement boards (SRIB) were being established. Membership of each SRIB includes the RSC together with local authority directors of children's services, representatives of diocesan boards of education and Teaching School Council (NCTL, 2017). Alongside this structural shift the government is thus pursuing a policy of school self-improvement and placing the locus of power with schools for teacher accreditation and development. OFSTED, it seems, is the only remaining structural part of the central government system beyond individual schools or cluster of schools.

Whether you agree or not that this is an appropriate direction of travel for the national school system, the implications for school leaders are multiple and pressing. Now, perhaps more than ever, is the time for substantive research into school leadership practice and behaviour, both of those working under new governance structures or those leaders who have become isolated within the remaining maintained school system. A demand or recommendation for such research requires at least two outcomes – greater opportunity for the publication of domestic research within UK journals and national conferences, and a determination from major agencies and institutions to support more substantial, detailed and focused research. The publication data examined in this paper and the above discussion suggests, however,

that domestic research outputs on leadership in education are few in number, small-scale and atomised. Given the changing nature of the English school system now would be a good time for all concerned to review how such research is conducted and published in the future.

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