

The Changing Face of Leadership and School Improvement in English Primary

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Resumo

O sistema educativo inglês enfrentou muitas mudanças nos últimos 30 anos. Este artigo analisa o impacto dessas mudanças na liderança das escolas e na melhoria da escola e os desafios a enfrentar no futuro.

Palavras-chave:

Sistema educativo, liderança.

Abstract

The English education system has faced many changes over the last 30 years. This article looks at the impact of these changes on school system leadership and school improvement and the challenges facing education in the future.

Key concepts:

Education system, leadership.

Introduction

The 21st Century English education system could be said to be bipolar. On the one hand, one could walk into a classroom in a typical primary school today and believe that, aside from technological advances, nothing has significantly changed in the last 50 years. The classrooms look the same, there is still one teacher standing at the front of 30 pupils with possibly one teaching assistant working with a small group of children. Desks are still commonly grouped or in rows, walls are adorned with colourful examples of pupils' 'best' work and the school day consists of hour long lessons punctuated by a morning break and lunch hour. You would still hear the earnest chatter of pupils collaboratively discussing the task set; the teacher periodically stopping the work to ensure understanding and the bell ringing to mark the end of a lesson. However, walk to the Headteacher's office and much has changed.

A brief history of English education

Prior to 2000, school leadership was predominantly driven by a Headteacher/Deputy Headteacher team, who answered to the Local Government. Local Governments were responsible for overseeing all that concerned education from safeguarding, special needs provision,

continuous professional development (CPD) of staff and school improvement. Budgets for a town's schools were held by the Local Government and human resources services were dealt with centrally too. In 1988, with the introduction of the National Curriculum, some of these central services were devolved to the schools, although the remits of school improvement and CPD still sat firmly with the Local Government.

During the 1990s and early 2000s much research was being conducted by leading educators to examine the characteristics of the most effective education system on a global scale. Findings including "demanding standards, low tolerance of failure, clear expectations, collaboration between schools and teachers" (Schleicher, 2012), "systems which set high standards, monitor whether they are being achieved, provide excellent teachers; ensure well-trained, well-selected principals and ensure that the education structure is dynamic and responsive to changing needs" (Barber et al 2012) and the view that "education systems cannot simply educate for the present: leading systems look at what skills will be needed in the future and how to (build) them" (Pearson, 2012) were key features of an evolving system leadership structure in England.

The building blocks of world-class education systems

Standards & Accountability	Human Capital	Structure & Organisation
<i>Globally benchmarked education standards</i>	<i>Recruit great people and train them well</i>	<i>Effective, enabling central department and agencies</i>
<i>Good transparent school performance data and accountability</i>	<i>Continuous improvement of teaching and learning skills and knowledge</i>	<i>Capacity to manage change and to engage communities at every level</i>
<i>Every child matters, in order to challenge inequality</i>	<i>Great leadership at school level</i>	<i>Operational responsibility and budgets devolved to schools</i>

McKinsey, 2007 and 2010; Tucker 2011

In 2008 The Department for Children, Schools and Families published a paper which stated, “Student results will not improve without good school leadership. In England, we know from our inspection data that for every 100 schools that have good leadership and management, 93 will have good standards of achievement. For every 100 schools that do not have good leadership and management, only 1 will have good standards of achievement. There is not a single example of a school turning around its performance in the absence of good leadership. It

is almost impossible, in England’s system at least, to have good results without good leadership and management.”

Additionally, in 2009 Vivianne Robinson and colleagues completed an impressive “Best evidence synthesis” study of ‘School leadership and student outcomes: identifying what works and why’. They found five key leadership behaviours, one of which was twice as powerful as the other four:

Highly effective Headteachers:

- Establish goals and expectations
- Resource strategically
- Plan, coordinate and evaluate teaching and learning
- **Promote and participate in teaching and learning**
- Ensure an orderly and supportive environment

The one factor that was twice as powerful as any others is number four: the degree to which the Headteacher participated as a learner in helping teachers figure out how to make improvements. Significantly, the new reality of school leaders was a focus on engaging with the outside, indeed making the outside part and parcel of the inside.

The findings in these studies were further reinforced by the publication of “10 Strong claims about successful school leadership” (NCSL, 2009), a three-year national research project on the impact of leadership on pupil outcomes. The study built on the findings of a 2006 study by Leithwood et al and focused on the influence of the Headteacher in successful schools. The research found that leaders of successful schools define success not only in terms of test and examination results, but also in terms of personal and social outcomes, pupil and staff motivation, engagement and wellbeing, the quality of

teaching and learning and the school’s contribution to the community. Also, successful heads improve pupil outcomes through who they are – their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences – as well as what they do in terms of the strategies they select and the ways in which they adapt their leadership practices to their unique context.

The 10 key findings (strong claims) were:

1. Headteachers are the main source of leadership in their schools.
2. There are eight key dimensions of successful leadership.
3. Headteachers’ values are key components in their success.
4. Successful heads use the same basic leadership practices, but there is no single model for achieving success.
5. Differences in context affect the nature, direction and pace of leadership actions.
6. Heads contribute to student learning and achievement through a combination and accumulation of strategies and actions.
7. There are three broad phases of leadership success.
8. Heads grow and secure success by layering leadership strategies and actions.
9. Successful heads distribute leadership progressively.
10. The successful distribution of leadership depends on the establishment of trust.

2010 was a significant year for the country and education. The Conservative Party won the general election and took power after 13 years of leadership from the Labour Party. It was a time of great change in many areas of life in the UK.

The new Secretary of State, Michael Gove, introduced a new education agenda stopping many of the initiatives of the previous government. This included curriculum, assessment, funding and the use of incentives and accountability to increase the number of Academies and Free schools which were autonomous and directly funded by central government and not local government. Further to this, schools were encouraged to group together in Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) as a way of supporting each other and changing the fortunes of weaker schools.

The national picture of the time for education could be exemplified like this:

Philosophical shift

From	To
State action	Decentralisation
Targets and accountability to the centre	Data transparency creating local accountability
Regulation as best guarantor of fairness	Autonomy and trust as best guarantor of fairness
Specific programmes to tackle issues	Accountability and incentives set to create improvement
Identification of best practice and guidance	Deregulation and reducing bureaucracy
Centralised planning of the system	A system led and developed by the system itself (Systems leadership), Academies and Free Schools

The evolution of ‘System Leadership’

There was now a clear acceptance of the impact of leadership on school improvement and a government “White paper” in 2010 led the way for the dramatic increase in what is known as “System leadership”. The Secretary of State outlined his vision:

“At the heart of this Government’s vision for education is a determination to give school leaders more power and control. Not just to drive improvement in their own schools - but to drive improvement across the whole education system.

This policy is driven, like all our education policy, by our guiding moral purpose – the need to raise attainment for all children and close the gap between the richest and poorest.” (M. Gove 2010).

The National College for School Leadership viewed System Leaders as:

“System leaders are leaders who build leadership capacity within their own schools at the same time as working beyond their schools on behalf of all children in their locality. They care almost as much about children in other schools as they care about those in their own. They view their role as being one of ‘educational leadership’, rather than ‘institutional leadership’. They are moved to make a difference – and to do so across a local system and in partnership with others. System leaders are those who are in the front line, wrestling with the complexities of local context, asking better and deeper questions of themselves, of others and of ‘the system’.” (Leading networks leading change, Kotter, 2012).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also acknowledged the model:

“One of school leaders’ new roles is increasingly to work with other schools and other school leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust. System leaders, as they are being called, care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. Crucially they are willing to shoulder system leadership roles because they believe that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way.”

A number of leaders went through a robust application process to be designated in a range of system leadership roles. These built on system leadership which was already developing. These were:

National Leaders of Education (NLEs)

These are Headteachers of successful schools. Their schools become National Support Schools (NSS). The NLE and NSS have to fulfil a set of criteria:

- Be judged to be an outstanding serving Headteacher with at least three years’ experience and expect to remain at current school for at least two years
- Be judged to be an outstanding school

- Show consistently high levels of pupil performance or continued improvement over the last three years. In addition, be above current floor standards
- Have demonstrated the capacity to provide significant and successful support to underperforming schools
- Have evidence of providing such support

NLEs can be deployed anywhere within England into schools where there may be identified problems and weaknesses. These issues are identified through the Ofsted inspection system, through other monitoring or self-evaluation by a school. The NLE is not expected to be the expert in everything so will usually deploy staff from their own school who have specific areas of expertise. As of January 1st 2018 there are 1298 NLEs across the country.

Local Leaders of Education (LLEs)

These are Headteachers of good schools who need to fulfil these criteria:

- Be judged to be a good serving Headteacher with at least three years’ experience and expect to remain at current school for at least two years
- Be accountable for one or more schools which meet the criteria

- Be judged to be a good school
- Show consistently high levels of pupil performance or continued improvement over the last three years. In addition, be above current floor standards
- Have demonstrated the experience and capacity to provide support to schools in challenging circumstances
- Be able to commit to the minimum time expectation

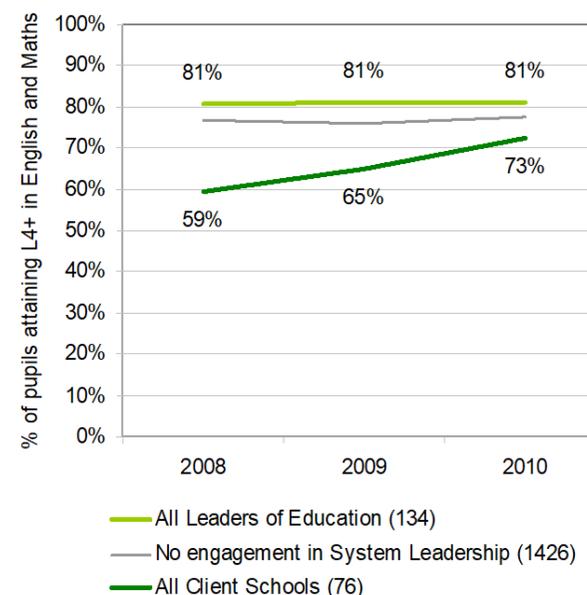
The difference between NLEs and LLEs are:

NLE	LLE
Likely to provide intensive support for schools: eg. through interim/executive headship; trusts, federations or academy sponsorship	More likely to support schools around the floor or needing to maximise progress (satisfactory schools needing to move to good)
Available for deployment outside own local authority and brokered into an appropriate client school with the support from a National College broker	Historically more likely to work within their own local authority as part of a networked “team” being called on directly by the LA to support a particular school
Accesses additional support for the client school through the attached National Support School	Can “swap” their contracted days with other members of their staff to buddy up with the partner school’s equivalent staff member in a more informal

	way
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National and Local Leaders of Education supported primary schools that generally performed below average. The effectiveness of NLE and LLE support was monitored closely for the first few years and data indicated that the performance of these schools improved more rapidly than that of unsupported schools, resulting in a narrowing of the gap.

Schools average % of pupils attaining Level 4+ in English and maths by engagement type.



Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs)

These were a new category of System Leaders. They were not Headteachers but outstanding teachers usually with middle or senior leadership positions within their school:

- New designation acknowledging the important role of middle and senior leaders in supporting their peers;
- Excellent professionals in leadership positions below the Headteacher, with the capacity, capability and commitment to work beyond their own school;

- Outstanding in a particular area, for example: a subject specialism; inclusion; ITT mentoring; performance management; behaviour; school business management;
- Designated and brokered by teaching schools, but may be from any school.

Teaching Schools

The 2010 Education Act led the way to the development and growth of a network of Teaching School Alliances across the country. As David Hargreaves commented:

“For England’s school leaders the coalition government’s white paper The Importance of Teaching strikes a startling new note. The improvement of schools, they are now told, rests primarily with them...The aim should be to create a self-improving school system, built on the premise that teachers learn best from one another and should be more in control of their professional and institutional development than they have been in recent years.

I argue that the government’s offer to the profession to lead the construction of a self-improving school system is an exciting one that should be taken up with enthusiasm.”

Teaching Schools were schools which were designated based on the

following criteria:

- **a clear track-record** of successful collaboration with other schools
- **Ofsted outstanding** for overall effectiveness, teaching and learning and leadership and management
- **consistently high levels** of pupil performance or continued improvement
- **an outstanding Headteacher** with at least three years headship experience, and outstanding senior and middle leaders with capacity to support others.

A Teaching School Alliance was formed with the designated school as the ‘lead school’ and then a number of partner schools who both provided training and support to other schools within and outside of the alliance or received this training and support.

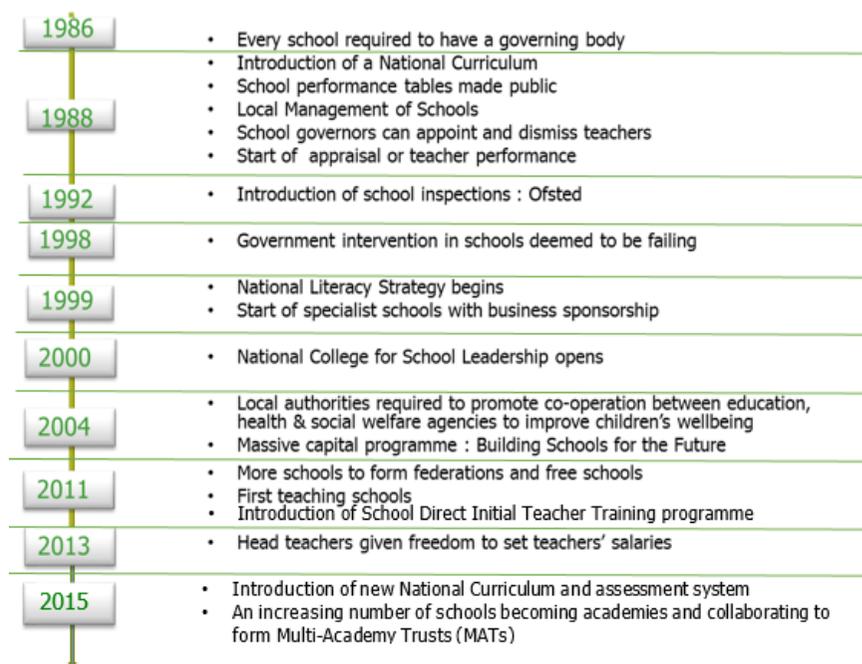
As well as offering training and support for their **alliance**, Teaching Schools were tasked with **identifying and co-ordinating** expertise from their alliance, using the best leaders and teachers to:

1. play a lead role in training **new entrants** to the profession (Initial Teacher Training)
2. lead **peer-to-peer learning (Continuous Professional Development)**

3. spot and nurture **leadership potential (Succession Planning)**
4. provide **support** for other schools (NLE, LLE, SLE, Lead teachers)
5. designate broker Specialist Leaders of Education (**SLEs**)
6. engage in **research and development (R and D)**

These were known as ‘The Big 6’. Teaching Schools were often led by the Headteacher or Deputy Head of the lead school.

A 25 year journey towards school autonomy



The present system

This system of “School to School Support” is now firmly embedded in England. The use of “System leaders” has been hugely positive in helping and supporting schools and in developing individuals and leadership teams. It can be viewed as a “win-win situation” because:

- National evidence that both supported school, and the school

providing support raise standards, or maintain already high standards;

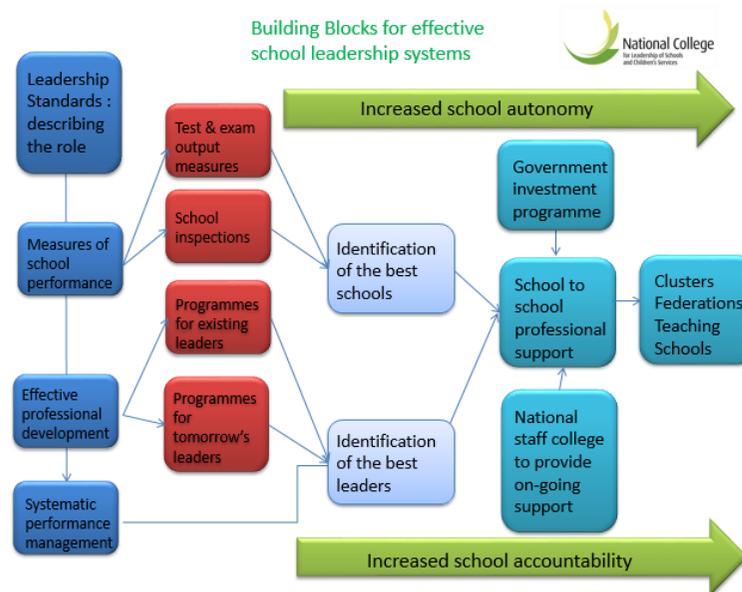
- Providing support can be some of the best personal CPD available as it requires you to reflect on your own practice, and observe both good and bad practice in other schools;
- Supports succession planning activities, and enables staff to “step up” and “step out” of their school, in structured and supported manner;
- Develops, supports, and enables individuals to practise coaching, facilitation and mentoring skills;
- Enables staff to work in greater numbers of schools, in differing contexts, and with different structures, thus enabling them to broaden their experience;
- Gives individuals the opportunity to celebrate their success and their achievements.

However, there can be difficulties faced by both schools in the support network:

- Some schools feel they are being “done to” when the deployment of a System Leader has been forced upon them and they don’t

agree it is necessary;

- On occasions, the System Leader may identify different issues to the ones the school thought they had;
- The supporting school has to be very mindful of their capacity to support as a school and also for individual teachers. They need to be closely monitoring the impact on their own schools. They have to ensure that they are maintaining their own high standards and are not asking too much of key leaders;
- Financial arrangements need to be clear and professional.



What is the situation for schools, leaders, teachers and pupils in English primary schools in 2018 and is there a sustainable impact of the self-improving system?

There is no doubt that the growth of leaders at all levels within the primary school system has had a major impact on increasing leadership capacity within and across schools. This, together with increasing collaboration between schools either through Teaching School Alliances, Multi Academy Trusts or more informal collaborations has enabled the school-led approach to school improvement to actually happen and to be effective.

The system leaders are working incredibly hard and are driven by a moral purpose that they are working for all children in the system and not just those in their own schools. The development of the middle tier of leadership within schools has been vital in providing the leadership capacity in schools which enables senior leaders to work in the wider system.

The growth of high quality middle leaders (subject and phase leaders) has been a really exciting development. They are increasingly undertaking leadership roles such as monitoring, observation, data analysis and performance management. Their development is backed

up by a wide range of national and local leadership programmes together with bespoke coaching and mentoring. Teaching School Alliances will often design and deliver these programmes alongside an array of organisations and individual consultants who design and deliver specific leadership support and challenge.

Middle leaders are now “the engine room” of a primary school often driving improvement and standards in a subject or within a year group.

So leadership in English schools is stronger than it has ever been and the quality of teaching, learning and improvement is also at a very high level. Collaboration between schools is continuing to improve and system leaders are having a definite impact.

Nevertheless, in spite of all of this, it could be said that the education system in England is at a crisis point. Recruitment and retention of teachers is becoming increasingly difficult and the number of teachers and pupils with mental health issues is a growing concern.

Five of the factors effecting schools are:

- Financial restrictions on the use of school budgets due to the highest ever number of pupils in schools, reduced real time budgets

and changing finance systems making schools individually responsible for paying any increases in salaries and national insurance. These financial limitations are resulting in staff redundancies, particularly for teaching assistants; bigger class sizes; less resources; building maintenance issues and reduced training opportunities.

- Teacher workload, mental health and well-being are increasingly highlighted as key issues in the struggle to retain staff and also to recruit new staff. In January 2018, the number of confirmed trainee teachers for September 2018 was down by 40% compared to the same time last year.
- The perception of the impact of the accountability system in England through the public scrutiny of comparative data and information, and the inspection system through Ofsted are thought by many school leaders and teachers to be key factors in teacher stress and mental health issues. Furthermore, the narrowing of the curriculum to a dominant focus on English and maths and an increased workload is negatively impacting on retention and recruitment.
- Testing of pupils in a narrow range of subjects from the age of six and then using this information for making judgements about schools is seen as another key factor in narrowing the curriculum.

Furthermore, testing usually focuses assessment on knowledge rather than skills and this again is narrowing the curriculum and many teachers argue that it is not preparing children for their futures in society and work. The impact of testing on children's wellbeing and mental health has also become a major area of concern.

- Political uncertainty within the country and in education. Brexit has led to a genuine lack of understanding as to where we will be in fifteen months' time. Changes in Central Government at ministerial level has led to successive politicians having a range of "ideas" which are implemented for a short while and then disappear. The previous Secretary of State had started to build confidence among teachers and the teacher unions but she was replaced at the start of 2018.

Conclusion

The last 30 years has seen some great changes to school leadership and school improvement and we are now in a place where, if the 'school-led system' was genuinely allowed to be a 'school-led system', system leadership and collaboration between MATs, Teaching School Alliances and individual schools could create a culture of sustained school improvement and improved outcomes for pupils.

However, this opportunity could be lost if the Central Government do not start to listen to pupils, parents, teachers and leaders and act now to safeguard the future of English Education.

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Curricular notes

William Jerman was a primary Headteacher in West London for 28 years. He was a National Leader of Education and his school was the lead school in a Teaching School Alliance.He was seconded to work for the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) with a focus on leadership, system leaders, school improvement and teacher recruitment. He was also worked on international programmes for NCTL. Since 2015, he has been working as an Education and Leadership Consultant in South West England providing support and challenge for schools in school improvement, leadership, closing attainment gaps and school governance.

Sarah Jerman was an early years teacher in Germany and the South West of England. Her leadership roles included Vice Principal of a large primary school and a moderator for the local authority. Sarah is now the Director of three Teaching Schools, two in the South West of England and one in SW London, positions she has held since 2015.