



National College for
School Leadership

Team talk:

Sharing leadership in primary schools



Many headteachers are looking for ways to broaden the school leadership team. Delegating or distributing leadership tasks does not, however, always bring about learning about leadership. The terms 'delegated' and 'distributed' suggest transfer and division. Shared leadership on the other hand suggests collaborative responsibility. How are some school's management teams working to share leadership?

**Alison Kelly, NCSL Research Associate
Headteacher, Hooe Primary School, Plymouth**

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FULL PRACTITIONER ENQUIRY REPORT

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Introduction

This report explains the findings of a small-scale study undertaken in the autumn of 2001 and spring 2002.

Section 1 sets out the background to the work and my reasons for undertaking it.

Section 2 explores the structure of management teams through the schools I worked with and begins to identify some common strands of thinking about the nature of primary school management and leadership teams today.

Section 3 grows from the focus of the research question: How are schools leading learning through leadership teams? I focus on how the teams studied centred their work on pupil learning and how they achieved this.

Section 4 explores how schools are sharing the leadership function through their leadership teams and also looks at how this can be a forum for learning about leadership.

Section 5 concludes the report.

The report is structured to include illustrative examples from the case study schools and reference to research or literature. It also presents some questions for headteachers, teams or schools who wish to reflect on their practice of leadership team building.

1 Background

The key motivation for undertaking this study was curiosity. I set out to explore just what other school management teams were doing. I knew that most schools had them - I did in my school – but how were they structured and why? Were they focused on leading learning, or was there some other reason for their existence? In my own school I was committed to the members of the management team learning something about leadership. What could I learn about this from other schools?

In undertaking the study I recognise that my own beliefs and values have influenced me. In particular, I believe that:

- leadership is a process and not a status
- we should distribute leadership for the purpose of developing future leaders
- all leaders need time to think and reflect on their leadership by evaluating the contributions of, and taking soundings from, the research community
- leadership is about improving learning for all

The intention of this enquiry is to illuminate some practice in an area given scant attention by the research community and to encourage the generation of knowledge creating opportunities for developing leadership capacity either within or beyond individual schools.

Early on in the enquiry I decided that I was not looking at how primary school management teams were initiated, or giving a historical perspective on how we got to where we are. The focus is on where we are now and how the notion of the management team is being built, developed and broadened to include a wider range of leaders.

Productive leadership depends heavily on its fit with social and organisational context in which it is exercised. So as times change, what works for leaders changes also. (Leithwood et al, 1999)

It strikes me that as leaders we are constantly looking to meet the next challenge of what leadership is required for a kind of school that, as Leithwood suggests, is still in the future.

The schools in the enquiry

It is important to say something about the case study schools here. The schools are all based in one local education authority (LEA). They agreed to be part of the enquiry and were approached following recommendation from the LEA as schools with effective leadership teams. I did not attempt to define 'effective'. Although there was reference to the schools' OFSTED inspection reports, OFSTED inspections focus on the quality of leadership by the headteacher, with usually scant attention to leadership teams.

I contacted headteachers outlining the nature of the enquiry, sometimes to management teams also. Four schools felt able to fully participate in the enquiry involving:

- a semi-structured interview with the headteacher
- an observed routine team meeting exploring the pathways through which they led learning as a team
- a discussion with the team to validate observations and themes from the analysis of data from the observation
- access to management team documentation

During the course of the enquiry, I also interviewed headteachers of schools whose practice came to my attention, or were recommended as a consequence of issues raised in discussion with others. I have referred to these as supporting case study schools.

Each of the schools represents different motives for developing their capacity for shared leadership through teamwork. In all cases this is lead by the headteacher with, in varying degrees, an open agenda for change. This is not to say that some of the headteachers deliberately mislead their staff, but more that some groups had yet to access current thinking about leadership. For some teams there was time to develop, in others the imperative to effect change quickly perhaps did not allow what Fullan (2001) might refer to as 'slow learning in context'.

A brief overview of the participating schools follows. Number on roll and free school meal entitlement (FSM) is at January 2001.

School	Type	Comments
School 1	Urban primary (306) 31% FSM	Needed to raise standards quickly post-OFSTED. Now out of serious weaknesses there is more time to develop shared leadership and reclaim the agenda.
School 2	Urban primary (480) 26% FSM	Strong commitment to self-managing teams. It is now looking to broaden membership to support staff.

School 3	Urban primary (441) 4% FSM	High performing and highly democratic. It needed to develop a climate for change in order to develop its standards and improvement team and the desire to share leadership.
School 4	Urban infant (291) 9% FSM	Building a team where one did not exist before.
Supporting School 1	Suburban primary (373) 5% FSM	High performing, standards orientated. Seeking to develop a more values-driven approach.
Supporting School 2	Suburban primary (301) 10% FSM	Unable to appoint a deputy head it looked for a different leadership structure.
Supporting School 3	Urban primary (92) 30% FSM	For the smallest school in the authority teamwork is essential and involves all the staff.

At the end of a data gathering exercise I explored the early findings with a group of headteachers who had no prior involvement in the project. The heads in this focus group represented urban, inner city and suburban schools, average sized or large, infant or primary schools. It included experienced and newly-appointed headteachers. This group also commented on the most useful format for the report.

I am indebted to all these schools, and many other colleagues, with whom I often had a lively debate.

Throughout the report I will refer to the teams I studied as management or leadership teams interchangeably. My discussion with headteachers revealed that there is some support for the notion that language we use can change the way team members perceive their roles.

2 Team structures

In this section I look at:

- some team structures. - how and why they are as they are now
- the catalysts for changing structures
- potential for further team development

I illustrate these aspects using examples from three of the case study schools and two from schools used as supporting case studies. This section concludes with some reflective questions for teams.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when, historically, primary school management teams became more than just the head and deputy. It is possible to track my own anecdotal experiences as a headteacher from a position of *commanding leadership* (I am out on my own 'creating the path' or 'doing the right things', to use John West-Burnham's useful description) stemming from the historically modelled belief that this was the head's role. Then with a wider team *sharing management* (together we will make sure everyone is 'following the path' or 'doing things right'), and now to a way of working I might describe as *shared leadership*, which I explore further in Section 4.

The difference between then and now is not with whom, or how many people were on the team, but to what extent as a headteacher I was willing to both share the power to do things and, to some extent, lose overall control. This factor distinguished the headteachers in Wallace and Huckman's (1999) study of senior management teams in four large primary schools and this has implications for the potential contributions of other team members. It is notable that none of the headteachers I interviewed expressed a concern about losing control or sharing power in order to achieve their desired results.

Structures

Team leadership is not something these schools are working towards at a later stage. It has been built into the fabric of leadership from the start. (Southworth, 1998)

Data from the enquiry revealed a range of reasons why the headteachers interviewed chose to create a new leadership team, or to realign the structures of their existing leadership teams.

They specified that they wanted their team to:

- gain a shared understanding of values
- provide a frame of reference for the whole school
- enable work on the conditions for whole school improvement as well as the standards agenda to move forward

- focus on the needs of the learners
- be more fluid and responsive in policy-making and practice
- share strengths and mediate weaknesses
- make school improvement happen quickly where there is an imperative, eg post-OFSTED serious weaknesses
- to give power to the ‘we’ factor

They also highlighted a number of challenges, tensions and difficulties they encountered in the process of the move towards more distributed leadership:

- changing inherited structures can be disconcerting for established staff
- overcoming the expectation of ‘dead man’s shoes’ as a reason for promotion to the team
- no prior preparation or training available to the team members
- a need for clarity to prevent structures that are too loose or too tight
- teams can be influenced by negative experiences and this can work both to stimulate but also to inhibit development
- use of para-professionals on the team (eg teaching assistants, administrators) can sometimes be problematic
- boundaries of responsibility need to be agreed
- multiple roles and current workload of members are potential inhibitors to change

Evolving teams – case studies

In the first three case studies, I give examples of how some headteachers have changed their team structures for school improvement but from differing starting points: a school in serious weaknesses post-OFSTED; a successful but ‘comfortable’ school; and a school needing re-direction and role clarity. The final case studies illustrate the current position for two more established teams and are included here to show two different structures at work. All represent teams in evolution.

Case Study 1 – A quick fix, initially

Context:

An average-sized primary school (306) with a falling role. Mixed catchment but poor in relation to a high performing neighbouring school.

Original team structure:

The school experienced several changes of leadership before the current head, previously its deputy, took up the headship. The management team was static and staff had to move school for leadership opportunities. At one time 8 out of 14 members of staff were on the senior management team (SMT). It was top heavy and negative

influences were allowed to predominate. The previous head disbanded the SMT altogether.

Catalysts for change:

The new head recognised the need for:

- stability
- role clarity
- raised standards

Challenges for leadership:

- school in serious weaknesses following OFSTED inspection
- reclaiming the agenda for change

Solution/new structure:

The current head inherited a basic team structure of head plus anyone on management points (four people). She has now appointed over half the team herself, introduced a fifth member and a middle management group.

I asked the head what most helped her to overcome the internal and external tensions following the OFSTED inspection. She said:

The structures are the things that have helped me to continue to be a leader of learning. I don't feel I can afford to lose touch with the curriculum and what the tensions are for those in the classroom. I don't get involved in delivery very much but I do want to be the leader of the curriculum in the school. I can't meet with everyone as I used to when I was a deputy head with sole responsibility for the curriculum so I now share that with other members of the team.

What next?

Developing the team's ability to think strategically.

Reclaiming the agenda for change.

Case Study 2 – ‘You don’t have to be ill to get better’

This school is a large primary school (441) in a mixed urban area but with a high proportion of professional families. The school maintains high standards over time.

Original team structure:

4–5 people: head, deputy, Key Stage 1 co-ordinator, plus two others on a rota basis for two terms.

Catalyst for change:

- taking a good school further forward

Challenges for leadership:

- nurturing a climate for change
- learning to accept delegation not total democracy
- putting some pace into change

Solution/new structure:

The head says of the original structure:

The rotating membership meant that you may never see an initiative through and the overly consultative approach meant that everyone liked being fully involved but they never got anywhere – it was like a whirlpool all the time.

The first step was to reduce the SMT to just three people, a small team I could move forward quickly. The staff were really good about this, they could see what I was doing and accepted it. The problem with the structure of the SMT on its own is that it has created barriers between staff.

The next step, which has been the most exciting step, has been to set up the standards and improvement team (SIT).

There are eight of us on that team now. Staff, just teaching staff at the moment, have to apply to be on the team but it includes head, deputy, English co-ordinator, Maths co-ordinator, Science co-ordinator, Foundation, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 representatives (serving for two years).

It's early days but the advantages seen so far are:

- high proportion of staff represented
- large group to trial initiatives
- high initial commitment to projects
- group has status

- focus on teaching and learning not organisational/management issues
- more confidence to ‘buck the trend’, and to question

What next?

Do we need SIT and SMT?

Where SMTs still exist, there is evidence that the composition within such teams is changing. But what if you could proactively change the team structure to suit the skills and talents already existing in the school? One school chose to do just that.

Case Study 3 – Assistant headship: Redefining roles

Context:

Average sized primary school (301) in suburban area. Consistent performance over time.

Original team structure:

Strictly hierarchical: head, deputy, SENCO, Key Stage 1 leader

Catalysts for change:

- unable to appoint successor after promotion of deputy to headship
- concern for reliance on a single leader

Challenges for leadership:

- establish role clarity
- avoid role overload

The head says:

The deputy often had roles that overlapped directly with mine and staff weren't absolutely clear about responsibilities in terms of line management. Sometimes I felt we had two heads. When the deputy was promoted, I thought maybe the role just needs redefining. I wanted my work to be embedded in the curriculum as well as management and therefore to spread some of the management/administration roles more widely. I wanted a more devolved structure.

Solution/new structure

After another staff move the school was left with head plus three other members of the management team. The head says:

After we failed to appoint a deputy, we looked at the people we had in the school and thought why don't we devolve the role? We decided to split it in the following ways –

1. curriculum link role
2. assessment and data analysis
3. inclusion and staff development

I had three people suited to the three roles on offer. If I had different people perhaps I would have shuffled it differently.

Each assistant head takes the role of 'deputy' for one term.

The head would like to undertake an analysis of effectiveness, but sees the emerging advantages are:

- split roles reduce expertise drain if someone leaves
- gives the opportunity for staff in middle management roles to take on a whole school role
- less teaching time is lost over the year than if there was one deputy
- increased leadership development opportunities (the key stage roles were removed from the assistant heads and allocated to others)
- less overloaded roles
- gives the head an insight into all those areas working through a number of different people

Disadvantages:

- legally the situation is not clear
- staff perhaps not as focused on teaching and learning as say a key stage co-ordinator

What next?

The head and assistant heads meet as a team but the head is considering widening this to include the key stage co-ordinators. However, he is aware that groups that are too large can compromise effectiveness. He says:

We also operate focus groups that bring ideas to the SMT. People can't focus on everything, and I don't want them to. We are building powerful planning teams

and I wonder whether we've got too many teams! But the interrelationships between them are strong.

The head is considering changing the name from management to leadership team. He wants something with a bit more bite and manager sounds a bit too administrative. He has used NCSL's principles in the assistant heads' job descriptions. He wants to be able to measure the team's actions against those criteria in the future.

These three schools were working within defined structures, with clear agendas and a high degree of direction from the head. The next case studies show schools where structures are seen as a visible but fluid framework that responds to need. Both value informality and the catalysts for change focus on continuing development, rather than a single problem or situation. In these cases the 'solutions/new structures' have been replaced by 'the way it works'.

Case Study 4 – Structure responds to needs

Context:

This is a large (480+), well-established primary (previously amalgamated infant and junior schools) serving an urban area with approximately 26 per cent free school meals. It is a Beacon School supporting a school in serious weaknesses.

Team structure:

Head, associate head plus five others (3 key-stage co-ordinators and two temporary members).

Catalysts for change:

All initiatives: this is a school that relishes getting the job done in the most effective way.

Challenges for leadership:

- focus on strategic issues
- moulding leadership structures to meet the needs of the time

The way it works:

The head says:

It concerns me that management teams can become too structured, too regular and set in a pattern that can create a 'them and us' situation. We meet when there is a need, in a way, place and time that's suits the job in hand.

Then we have what I call 'all the time management team' because we are meeting all the time, like first thing in the morning and everyone pops in and we chat about what's on for the day.

The key stage leaders come with their issues before a meeting and ask for mine because the need is to keep it phase specific. I see the agenda and the minutes.

We come together as a management team when there are issues across the phases, for example concerning strategic management, target setting, school improvement planning.

I don't have a lot of no-point meetings.

I like to think we have a fluid structure. You need a structure of meetings that can be moulded to the needs of the time, that's proactive not just circumstantial.

What next?

How you grow new staff into leadership?

Case Study 5 – Thinking long term: A task for the SMT

Context:

A large (373) suburban primary school with good results, steadily improving over time.

Team structure:

Head, deputy and assistant head (the deputy and assistant head are key stage leaders as well). Between them they have oversight of the major areas for development (literacy, numeracy, foundation stage, assessment, inclusion).

Catalysts for change:

- refocusing the role of the head as a leading professional
- involving a wider range of leaders

Challenges for leadership:

- looking to the future, today
- being proactive in a reactive climate

The way it works:

The SMT make time for two sorts of meetings: strategy meetings and management meetings.

Strategy meetings are:

- crystal ball gazing/horizon-scanning
- not minuted and no formal agenda
- informal chats where everyone brings ideas
- a forum for considering new directions
- regular – about twice a term

- anticipating change and the school's response to it

The head argues that although other members of staff can engage in such meetings, it is this group that are best placed to undertake this. He considers this as a key role for the deputy head particularly.

By contrast, the SMT has broadened for the management meetings to include any other teachers who must make a commitment to the group for one year, and the administrator who is a full member.

Management meetings:

- occur once a month
- are agenda driven (agreed before meeting 70% curriculum, 30% management, eg pupil discipline, issues)
- are time limited
- have conclusions presented to the whole staff

Of the management team the head says:

We are in a marathon race but we are not going to run ahead with the people at the front, we are running just a little bit faster than say the people at the back, they are just having to keep up with us but we are not going to lose them. I could move ahead quite quickly and take some others with me but our principal philosophy is about support.

What next?

Recognising and developing leaders at the middle management level with school-focused tasks and a recognition of their input, not only output.

These case studies begin to support the assertion that primary schools have the potential to become genuine heterarchical organisations reconfiguring structures according to the task in hand (Day et al 1998).

What we are currently witnessing in many future-focused organisations is the attempt to create structures of management and leadership which are characterised by more acceptance of temporariness than of longevity, by possibility rather than unlikeliness, and integration rather than exclusion. (Day et al, 1998)

Reflective questions for teams

- What sort of management/leadership team does your school need? Consider what you want its function to be?
- How well do you know your current team and its potential to meet the desired function?
- Day (1998) suggests that leadership structures should be linked to the school development plan. What might be the consequences of designing a team in this way?
- Does size matter? Will the team be large enough to provide an overview of the whole school, and small enough to enable in-depth debate?
- What code of practice or statement of shared values/beliefs will guide your work as a team?
- Do current job descriptions enable the team to fulfil its functions? Day (1998) warns against role definitions and job descriptions that are too general and are 'couched in eternal terms' defining areas of responsibility rather than tasks to be managed.

For further questions see Wallace and Huckman's (1999) 'Twenty questions for SMT designers' in *Senior Management Teams in Primary Schools* (p206).

3 Leading learning

Working on a structure to fit the team's function is only one aspect that might contribute to an effective school.

Stoll and Mortimore (1997) refer to a set of complimentary factors for school effectiveness (the final picture) and improvement (facilitating conditions). The facilitating conditions include:

Participatory leadership

- headteacher as motivator and guide
- teacher involvement in leadership roles
- teachers as change agents

Teamwork

- teacher involvement and empowerment
- opportunities for collaboration and collegiality

Emphasis on teaching and learning

- a focus central to teachers' and pupils' concerns
- teachers learning and practising new strategies

Learning for all

- teachers as continuing learners
- coaching and mentoring
- peer observation and feedback
- critical friends

I set out next to explore how the members of leadership teams in the study were focusing on learning and affecting classroom practice. This section describes some of the pathways and behaviours observed. However there were searching issues for some heads in this respect, including:

- whether to put the 'teacher' back into 'headteacher' and if so how?
- if not, how do headteachers stay in touch with learning and maintain credibility with colleagues?

Identifying pathways to effects

I observed each case study team in one meeting and analysed the contribution each member made in terms of their stated actions in response to the items discussed. I attempted to categorise these activities using as initial prompts five critical friendship

roles (MacBeath et al 1999 in MacBeath and Myers 1999), and tried to ask 'How are these people leading learning with, or through, others?'

I set up the grid for the analysis using the following roles:

1. adviser
2. organiser
3. motivator
4. facilitator
5. networker

and added

6. mentor
7. coach
8. other

Although these roles and skills outlined by MacBeath and Myers (1999) are helpful, I interpreted the facilitator role in a particular way.

Facilitation here was about smoothing the path, assisting the progress or speeding up an initiative so that it really did happen.

After the observation and interview with the head, I tried to tease out the key features that expressed the ways in which these teams led learning in their schools. I grouped the data and used collective descriptors to feed back to the teams on a further visit. I used this also to validate my observations with the team members.

Features of teamwork

Collectively, the teams in the case study schools presented the following features in their leadership of learning.

They:

- were highly facilitative as individuals and as a group
- encouraged internal and external networking
- kept a fluid or responsive structure
- narrated developments
- focused on their purpose but especially on learning

- were values driven
- were supported in their leadership as individuals

Other strong features were:

- clearly distributed management functions
- deliberate focus on understanding what teamwork meant to the group, including aims and values
- encouraged interdependence

All the roles were observed with facilitator, adviser, mentor and organiser roles collectively observed most frequently, followed by coach and networker. The role of motivator was least used. In one team nobody acted as a motivator, and in another nobody acted as networker, but this could have been affected by the team's agenda, working context, or school-wide relationships.

The headteachers most frequently played the role of adviser, mentor and motivator.

Looking at the responses I could not categorise the various 'other' roles I observed. These were frequently where members challenged, asked questions or checked out understanding.

In the previous section examples were given of how some schools have kept a fluid and responsive structure. I now want to give examples of some of the other features and illustrate what these terms meant in practice.

On being highly facilitative

These schools:

- looked for a variety of pathways with the intention of making improvements happen through others
- supported all personnel with training focused on the learning needs of pupils
- set up coaching and mentoring situations where strengths were shared and weaknesses mediated eg using ASTs
- advocated shared learning – team teaching and feedback from courses
- recognised the importance of communication and access – a right and a responsibility
- trialling together and giving feedback at all levels
- have patience and allow others to succeed

Internal and external networking

Case Study 6 – Networking

Networks are important for the next two schools in different circumstances.

Context:

The first school is large primary (480+) serving an urban area with approximately 26 per cent free school meals. It is a Beacon School with two advanced skills teachers (ASTs).

The second school is an average sized primary school (301) with a falling role. The catchment is mixed but poor in relation to a high performing neighbouring school (not the one above). It is no longer in serious weaknesses.

The structures and procedures of both schools rely heavily on efficient networks, particularly strong were the networks of support between the management/leadership team members themselves.

Meetings in the first school have been channelled away from information giving as other methods are employed to brief staff. There is a strong commitment to taking the responsibility for finding out basic information. Phase teams have delegated organisational authority. Beacon status allows the school to network with other schools, particularly through its ASTs.

The management teams in both schools have a high emphasis on bridging phases. In both teams I observed:

- relationships between members were strong and respectful
- humour was balanced with rigour, focus and pace

In the second school, internal networks are reinforced not from a ‘SMT down’ approach but using a middle management group to further commitment to, and understanding of, key areas for development and for keeping track of progress.

Narrated developments

Communication through networking was sometimes supported by the feature of *narrated developments*. This was particularly prevalent in the schools with clear improvement plans and other supporting documentation where developments could be tracked over time. These documents also served as evidence of achievement and for evaluation purposes.

In these schools, there was continual checking out and asking “Where are we now?” The next steps were planned at both a task and whole school level. There was a sense of knowing not only what was happening at a key stage level but the impact of this on the big picture of school improvement. In a busy school it was important not to lose sight of

the stories that were near to conclusion, and for members of the team to contribute to the narrative of more than one development.

Values and principles

Case Study 7 – Embedding values and guiding principles, building confidence

Context:

In broadening the remit of the management team to become a school improvement team the head decided to ensure that everyone involved were clear about the role they would play in the group and the principles to which they would commit. In one of their first meetings the group discussed and agreed the following guiding principles that I was later to see in practice:

- quality of teaching and learning
- teamwork is about shared values, trust and respect
- openness
- confidentiality
- challenge
- honesty
- professionalism
- drive
- high expectations
- leading by example
- will work as a team

Other procedural details were also decided, eg who would take minutes? This meeting concluded with the team agreeing that moving forward means doing things differently.

Observing the team at work nine months later this initial meeting clearly set the tone for things to come.

As a team member commented, “When we go to a full staff meeting there are eight of us singing from the same song sheet”. The way the team functions gives members “confidence in what you feel with evidence for it”.

Shared values and principles gave the team:

- a willingness to try new initiatives but within a values framework
- confidence to ‘buck the trend’ and to question
- confidence to lead by example in a climate of change
- a recognition that it is important to work on the conditions for improvement as well as the improvements themselves

Supported leadership

Case Study 8 – Supported leadership

Context:

Large (291) urban infant school. 48 per cent of pupils are from outside of the catchment area.

The headteacher had eight months from appointment to prepare for an OFSTED inspection. She says, “There hadn’t been a management team before I came”. When OFSTED declared that the school was “poised to move forward” the headteacher continued to develop and support her staff in their leadership roles, working towards a school leadership group meeting for identified purposes.

The head says:

I had a lot of building up to do after OFSTED. We brought in an external trainer and this was the beginning of the team beginning to grow up and move on.

In the process of beginning to share the responsibilities of leadership the head asked a pertinent question:

Am I delegating or dumping? There are staff with clearly more expertise in some areas than me. Sometimes you think you are trying to protect them but really it can be motivating for someone to realise that you believe they can take on a leadership role.

In this school there has been a sustained learning-centred focus that is supported by coaching, mentoring and giving feedback. Interdependence is emerging and encouraged with considered routes for consultation rather than the previous completely democratic approach. Knowledge is shared to support increasing delegation. Staff prefer to, and effectively learn from, each other.

Focus on learning

A characteristic of all the case study schools is that through a combination of features they *make things happen*. They are *focused on their purpose but especially on learning*. For all of them there were different reasons to put pace into their actions, whether they were responding to OFSTED or simply getting the job done.

However, in respect of this focus there are clearly some tensions here for headteachers.

Several headteachers commented that they wanted to “be embedded in the curriculum, not separate from it”, were “not happy with the deputy head having responsibility for the curriculum”, felt “distanced from the children”, “not in classrooms enough” and “it’s bad that I don’t see children at work”.

Two headteachers, whilst acknowledging this tension, felt less guilty about it. For one headteacher it was a matter of recognising the strengths, or ‘territory’ as he termed it, of team members or professionals, including him.

Another headteacher confessed, “I cannot say I would give a good example in the classroom – hand on heart. I know good teaching when I see it, and I know poor teaching when I see it as well! I have come to terms with the fact that I am not a head teacher. I’ve given my deputy the role of curriculum coordinator...but I have an overall view of that. I want to be the strategic director.”

The National College for School Leadership’s (NCSL) material on learning-centred leadership (www.ncsl.org.uk/leadingedge) clearly advocates (in its section about impact on learning) that all leaders should teach. However, featuring as a characteristic of ‘establishing’ a culture of learning centred leadership does this imply that all leaders should teach children, or that all leaders should teach at some point in the process? There may be another way for headteachers to consider this dilemma: that the adults in the school could be regarded as ‘students’ or ‘learners’ too. Heads might then consider to what extent are they leading the professional learning of, or teaching, the adults in the school.

Most headteachers in the enquiry felt they maintained credibility with colleagues by:

- working with curriculum-focused people
- knowing their own and others’ strengths
- engaging in professional dialogue

- having a working knowledge of curricular issues
- playing a leading role in leading learning but not necessarily teaching classes

and some were

- teaching

In contrast to those headteachers who felt that they needed to teach to retain credibility with their teacher colleagues, other team members, whilst acknowledging that headteachers needed to be aware of, and to keep informed of, curricular issues, did not expect them to have to prove it by regularly taking classes.

I did not pursue the respondents definitions of phrases such as wanting to be ‘embedded in the curriculum’ or ‘curriculum focused’. An exploration of this in the future may illuminate to what extent leadership teams are really ‘learning focused’, as against ‘teaching focused’ or ‘curriculum focused’. John West-Burnham (1997) argues for “a closer linkage between the language of leadership and the language of learning, in contrast to the vocabularies of management and the curriculum” and through this potentially “change conceptualisations and so behaviour”.

Reflective questions

As a headteacher consider:

- What does it mean to be embedded in the curriculum or a leader of learning?
- Whose learning are you leading?
- Are we mandating the chief executive or leading professional? What will the school of the future need?

As a team consider:

- To what extent are our team meetings concerned with quality in the classroom?
- Are we finding out about how pupils learn as well as the progress they are making?
- Would it be helpful to seek an external evaluation of the way we are leading learning as a team?

4 Learning leading

This section arises from one of the original intentions of this enquiry: to look at how we build and develop the capacity for leadership in our schools using the management or leadership team as a starting point.

As long ago as 1988, Roland Barth contended that schools needed more leadership than the headteacher has time for. He proposed:

- all teachers have leadership tendencies
- schools badly need teacher leadership
- teacher leadership has not been forthcoming, and
- headteacher leadership has been too pivotal

This suggests that the leadership structure of primary schools has considerable potential for development Day et al (1998).

Shared, distributed or delegated leadership?

John West-Burnham argues that:

there has been a tendency to express leadership as ‘super-management’... the model of headship is one of omnicompetence: the skilled classroom practitioner plus curriculum leader, plus technical expert, plus all the manifestations associated with being the figurehead. It is no wonder that so many headteachers seek early retirement or suffer a range of work related illnesses. The job as historically constituted is almost impossible.

It is perhaps a reaction to that increasing agenda that headteachers have looked for ways of sharing their headship role to make it more manageable, as well as a recognition of the needs of future school leaders to learn about leadership. However, it is important to consider what we might mean by shared leadership and to distinguish this from sharing the job of headship.

Merely delegating or distributing leadership tasks does not, I would argue, always bring about learning about leadership. It may be true that “getting in the shoes and being the walker”, as one head commented, is a powerful way to learn but perhaps we have to ask whether we are delegating, or distributing, headship tasks or leadership here?

The term distributed leadership to me implies a sharing out of tasks or roles to enable a central purpose to be achieved. Delegated leadership implies the passing over of a responsibility of either leadership or tasks of headship. Delegation, John West-Burnham (1997) argues, is an inappropriate model for an organisation that has to change rapidly and that is primarily concerned with learning. One headteacher in the study consciously asked the question “Am I delegating or dumping when I am doing this?” The terms ‘delegated’ and ‘distributed’ suggest transfer and division. Shared leadership on the

other hand suggests collaborative responsibility, a genuine willingness for others to participate in, and learn from, leadership experience and to surrender power rather than delegate aspects of it.

So, what are the conditions that enables learning about leadership? Learning about leadership presents challenges. The headteachers in the study highlighted some of the potential barriers to learning about leadership through conventional routes, eg courses, delegated responsibility.

Practical barriers to learning about leadership include:

- time – away from the classroom in particular
- funding – management/leadership training can be costly
- workload – eg when learning about leadership/management via Masters courses with assignment commitments
- locality and access – many major providers work from large city bases, eg London. Access from South West participants is likely to be costly in terms of time and funding

In response to this, the schools in the enquiry had begun to explore a variety of ways of learning about leadership.

Whilst the schools in this study acknowledge that recognised courses, such as the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and OFSTED School Self Evaluation, may be valid opportunities to learn about leadership and management, they also suggested the following routes through which leadership might also be learned:

- distributing leadership functions – with a sense of ‘growing into leadership’
- implementation/project leadership
- specific posts – AST, deputy headship, assistant headship
- sharing learning/knowledge together – peer networks, paired observations, shadowing, rotation, ‘from each other’
- ‘getting in the shoes and being the walker’
- talking about leadership issues formally and informally, within and beyond the school

The conditions for building leadership capacity

Some headteachers in the study referred to the need for teachers to explore and understand the difference between leadership, management and administration. One head suggested that the structure of her original team did not provide the incentive for members to learn about leadership. She says:

There had been no real management training...people were on the team for a year and then didn't really know. It was more to do with organisation and agendas and minutes were not really kept.

Lambert (1998) describes leadership capacity building as broad-based, skilful participation in the work of leadership. An example of this is found in the following case study school.

Case Study 9 – Leadership learning opportunities: Assistant headship

Context:

Average sized primary school in suburban area.

After failing to appoint a deputy head, the school decided to create three assistant head posts utilising the skills within the school. Each person takes on the deputy head role for one term.

To prepare for this the head made a point of talking to colleagues, especially those in very small schools and 'borrowed' aspects of practice to create a different approach.

Leadership learning benefits:

Each person:

- shares their strengths and learns from the strengths of others
- has the opportunity to learn from experience (getting in the shoes and being the walker) a broad range of issues, previously only accessible to the deputy head
- deputises for the head – internally and externally where required – and talks about leadership issues beyond the school
- leads learning from the classroom

Indicators of success?

The head says:

The superficial indicators are all strong. You keep looking for holes when you think something will have fallen between two remits, which hasn't happened and...I don't find liaison difficult because our discussions are more focused and it doesn't get wrapped up with other things.

The governors said to me 'Don't you need a full time deputy?' I said, well, that's interesting because it's the antithesis really, of what I'm trying to do. What would a full-time deputy do that is not class-based?

Framework for building leadership capacity

Linda Lambert, in her book 'Building Leadership Capacity in Schools' (1998) outlines two critical conditions for building leadership capacity:

1. breadth of involvement
2. understandings of the skilfulness involved

However, she asserts, this is more than knowledge of an innovation. Therefore, it is not enough simply to experience a role or 'walk in the shoes'. It is perhaps also about leaders understanding what they need to learn about leadership within a shared conceptual framework for building leadership capacity. Lambert offers such a framework based on the five following assumptions.

1. **Leadership is not a trait theory** – leadership and leader are not the same. Leadership can mean reciprocal learning processes that enable participants to construct and negotiate meanings leading to shared purpose of schooling.
2. **Leadership is about learning** that leads to constructive change. Learning is among participants and therefore occurs collectively. Learning has direction towards a shared purpose.
3. **Everyone has the potential and right to work as a leader** – leading is skilled and complicated work that every member of the school community can learn.
4. **Leading is a shared endeavour**, the foundation for the democratisation of schools. School change is a collective endeavour. The learning journey must be shared; otherwise shared purpose and action are never achieved.
5. **Leadership requires the redistribution of power and authority** – principals need to explicitly release authority, and staff need to learn how to enhance personal power and informal authority.

Lambert (1998)

How then are our future leaders learning about leadership? None of the headteachers in the study suggested replacing people in their teams. They all talked of improving these people, either as in the previous case study by identifying, revealing and developing teachers' talents, or by, as one headteacher in the study referred to it as 'growing your own leaders'.

The question is 'How do we unlock that leadership talent?' One way may be through the leadership team.

Learning as a team

Senge (2000) says:

In a school that learns people who have traditionally been suspicious of one another recognise their common stake in the future... and the things they learn from one another

and

Team learning is a discipline of practices designed, over time, to get the people of a team thinking and acting together. The team members do not need to look alike... (they need to) learn to be effective in concert.

Fullan (2001) encourages us to identify learning opportunities in context, as training is a limited strategy. Learning in context can be customised to the group and he advocates enquiry-based approaches as an investment. Some that might be relevant to team learning include:

- study groups
- action research
- support groups
- mentoring
- intervisitation
- peer coaching

This learning in context is based on the premise that 'what is gained as a group must be shared as a group'. Elmore (2000) in Fullan (2001) remind principals that in their turn "leaders must lead by modelling the values and behaviour...and learning they expect of others".

"Ultimately, your leadership in a culture of change will be judged as effective or ineffective not by who you are as a leader but by what leadership you produce in others" (Fullan, 2001)

Reflective questions

- Are leadership and leader the same thing?
- How is leadership capacity different from shared decision making?
- Is the goal that every teacher becomes a leader?
- Some teachers don't see themselves as leaders. How do I work with them?
- Learning from experience: Am I delegating, dumping or providing a leadership learning opportunity?
- Are we distributing leadership or headship?
- How can we unlock the leadership talent that may be in our school?

5 Conclusion

In this limited enquiry, I have attempted to illuminate aspects of leadership practice in primary school management teams. I have posed a series of reflective questions that may enable schools to consider how to unlock their leadership learning potential themselves as leaders and future leaders.

“Leaders are consummate learners who attend to the learning of both adults and children – including themselves. Not all leadership will look the same. Some leaders will chair committees and facilitate groups whilst others will focus their energies on peer coaching, team teaching, collaborative action research and demonstrating reflective practice.” (Lambeth, 1998)

I have integrated sections of writing from the research community that have helped to guide and shape my thinking.

The examples from the case study schools support the notion that “although central government initiatives may have contributed to diminishing the leading professional role, many heads hold onto their professional culture and educational values through their leadership”.(Southworth, 1998)

This enquiry highlights a paradox – that in order to provide lasting effects in the learning lives of the learners in a school community we may have to accept temporariness, or an acceptance of continually changing structures and practice, as a feature of development. Forms need to change to fit their functions.

The headteachers in this study are grounded in their values about leadership. The catalysts for structuring and evolving their teams are derived not from a fad or a new initiative but by values and context. In contrast, the tensions they describe are around people and relationships. This suggests that leadership learning experiences should be focused around collaborative enquiry in which the medium is the message. Action learning, for example, is about learning from action and taking action from learning. Successful action learning sets create strong bonds of trust, friendship and support. Ultimately, we are seeking to affect the learning *and* behaviours of others – re-engineering their perceptions and practice of leadership.

Senge (2000) refers to team members learning to be a team that is effective in concert, thinking and acting together. In order to further her understanding of teamwork, team leadership and team learning in education Hall (2001) is drawn to the ways in which musicians work to produce “an equal music” which “seems at best difficult, and at worst impossible to achieve”. Synergy, she says, is “usually taken to be the creation of something that is more than the sum of its parts”. She highlights the importance of the leader’s role in creating the conditions for successful teamwork but also suggests that management teams in education might aspire to a different interpretation of synergy, one in which team learning, team talking and team thinking lead to increased team effectiveness and task achievement.

Linda Lambert offers seven essential actions for building leadership capacity that brings many of these themes together:

1. hire personnel with the capacity to do leadership work
2. get to know one another – trusting environments, authentic relationships, good communications
3. assess staff and capacity for leadership – the skills of leadership are learned in many ways, learning that is embedded in the work itself is far more powerful than decontextualised training
4. develop a culture of inquiry
5. organise the school community for leadership work – structures, groups and roles that serve the infrastructure for the self-renewing processes of a culture of inquiry
6. implement your plans for building leadership capacity
7. develop district policies and practices that support leadership capacity building

Lambert (1998)

Alternatively, John MacBeath provides seven steps to learning schools, but these might well apply to teams, or even learning communities:

1. promote a learning climate
2. identify the green shoots of growth
3. identify barriers to change
4. share leadership
5. create intelligence from within
6. use critical friends
7. build resilient networks

MacBeath (2000)

In undertaking this enquiry as a Research Associate, NCSL engaged me in such learning community.

“So there is no final word on what is good leadership. We are simply trying to hit a moving target, maybe even get a little ahead of it.” (Leithwood et al, 1999)

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