Future Leaders: the way forward?

Abstract

The recruitment and retention of senior school leaders is high on the UK government's agenda with much attention currently being given to succession planning. Future Leaders and other fast track leadership development programmes are, in part, a response to this 'crisis' brought about by demographic change – many headteachers are due to retire in the next few years - and by the unappealing nature of headship as a career option (Earley et al, 2002).

This paper considers the origins of the leadership development programme 'Future Leaders' against this policy backcloth before discussing the programme itself and its component parts, drawing upon data collected for the NCSL funded two-year evaluation. The experiences of the first two cohorts will be elaborated on with reference to the various components of the programme. Finally, the future of headship will be discussed with reference to issues of sustainability, wellbeing, recruitment and retention, and whether Future Leaders is the way forward.

Future Leaders: the way forward?

Introduction

In the National College for School Leadership publication, *'What we know about school leadership'* (NCSL, 2007a), one of the sections is entitled 'Leadership development and succession planning have never been more important'. Reference is made to the demographic 'time-bomb' which it is argued needs defusing, and part of the answer to the challenge of filling headship vacancies is to question the time it takes to become a head. This it is argued is too long and the system requires 'more leaders than current approaches to promoting staff are presently able to produce' (ibid, p15). The demographic challenge is compounded by 'negative perceptions of the work and the role of school leaders – especially regarding accountabilities and workload' (ibid). Thus to address this 'crisis' in recruitment, NCSL advised ministers that there needs to be more fast-tracking of those with leadership potential which means 'early identification of talent, and mentoring and coaching these individuals; and providing them with many opportunities to lead – in their own and other schools – to broaden their knowledge of school contexts and types and to increase the number of headteacher role models they can draw on' (ibid). The Future Leaders leadership development programme can be seen as a response to the recruitment challenge, by producing high quality candidates for headship.

It is against this policy backcloth that consideration is given to the Future Leaders programme. Drawing on questionnaire findings, interviews and case studies, the paper outlines the experiences of the various participants. Finally, the future of headship is

discussed with reference to issues of sustainability, recruitment and retention and the question asked, is Future Leaders the way forward?

Background

The Future Leaders programme aims to develop both practising teachers/middle leaders and high quality individuals currently not in the schools teaching system, who would like to become heads, deputy heads and assistant heads in urban schools. The programme was created due to the shortage of teachers taking on senior roles within schools, which is particularly acute in urban areas. It also aims to create a cadre of school leaders who commit their future careers to working in urban complex schools.

The scheme is managed by *Future Leaders* with support from the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), Absolute Return for Kids (ARK), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). The idea is based on the 'New Leaders for New Schools' (NLNS) programme in New York. This is a US non-profit organisation, founded on five core beliefs, that selects and trains individuals, from within education, as well as former educators, to become urban school principals. It calls itself "a movement to transform urban schools nationally and locally" and has financial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Broad Foundation. In 2001 NLNS began to train a cohort of 13 people in New York City and Chicago. Since then, the total number of New Leaders has grown to 427 school leaders in 2007. About one new city partnership has been formed each year – Oakland in 2002, Washington, D.C. in 2003, Memphis in 2004, Baltimore in 2005, Milwaukee in 2006, and both Prince George's County, Maryland and New Orleans in 2007.

In January 2006 a group from NCSL, ARK and SSAT visited New York for a five-day feasibility study. They saw how NLNS worked in New York and Maryland and visited several charter schools. On returning to London, individuals from NCSL, SSAT and ARK planned the Future Leader training programme, using the NLNS model as a starting point. The feasibility report was written and the group met government ministers in early March 2006. Full approval for the scheme was obtained in late March.

The objectives of the Future Leaders Programme are:

- To expand the pool from which headteachers can be found for urban complex schools
- Recruit from non-traditional sources
- Provide a model for culture change by changing attitudes to recruitment of senior staff in schools
- To offer a risk managed innovative approach
- To provide an alternative approach for teachers and those not currently in schools to gain a fast track to senior roles (headships) in a shorter time span.

The programme was offered in London with new cohorts starting in 2006 (20), 2007 (29), and in 2008 it was expanded to Manchester as well as the capital. By 2008 there were just over 100 people on the programme.

The programme

All those involved in the pilot had previously held a teaching position in schools and QTS was required to be part of this fast track leadership development programme. After selection and summer training at the NCSL in Nottingham, the participants undertake a one year full-time residential placement with a host school where the FL joined the senior leadership team. They were mentored by the school head and coached by one of four external coaches, all of whom had been successful heads. Towards the end of the first year, the participants applied for posts as deputy head or assistant head within a secondary school, which they would take up in their second year, during which time they would continue to receive support.

The evaluation

A team from the Institute of Education and Create Consultants were commissioned by NCSL to evaluate the first two years of the pilot programme. In the first year the evaluation focused on:

> The assessment process that identifies the participants
> > i. How robust is the recruitment process?
> > ii. Is it successful in identifying those participants who best meet the criteria for participation on the programme?
> > iii. Does it prepare participants for the programme?

> The FL programme
> > iv. How far is the programme achieving its aims and objectives?
> > v. To what extent is the programme meeting the needs of the participants?
> > vi. To what extent do the participants feel prepared for Year Two of the programme?

The main focus of the second year of the evaluation was two-fold:

> i. to assess the impact of the programme as pilot participants (FL1) moved to senior leadership positions in secondary schools

> ii. to monitor the development of the programme with the second cohort of participants (FL2).

Four main phases of the programme can be identified:

- Phase 1: Recruitment, assessment and selection
- Phase 2: Training - foundation and on-going
- Phase 3: Experience for a year in the host school
- Phase 4: Employment as a senior leader

The evaluation looked at all the phases and included undertaking school visits to gather information about the FLs' experiences in the host schools. Methods for collecting data for the evaluation included a questionnaire survey, interviews (both face-to-face and telephone) of FLs and other key stakeholders, and attending/observing events.

Formative evaluation reports were provided to the project's Steering Group and the final report, covering the first two years, was delivered in October 2008.

Each of the phases of the programme is considered in turn with less attention given to phase 3 as this is examined in detail elsewhere in this special issue.

Phases of the programme

Phase 1: Recruitment, assessment and selection

The initial cohort of 20 participants involved in the pilot were drawn from a pool of 190 potential candidates. The application and selection process was quite complex and included several stages - an application form, an essay question, online exercises (a picture story exercise and a personal values questionnaire), interviews and participation in an assessment centre. For the candidates who successfully completed the initial stages these were followed by an initial 'behavioural event' interview. The behavioural event interview got applicants to think about whether they really could be a leader in a complex urban school. Feedback was given on the interview and its usefulness as a preparation for the assessment day. During the assessment day which involved over 40 applicants, they were exposed to a variety of tasks and undertook a number of activities including role plays, case studies, a coaching video lesson and a reflective interview conducted by a London headteacher.

As part of the evaluation, questionnaire responses were received from 45% of the 190 applicants to the programme (a higher percentage was returned from those who were offered a place and a lower percentage from those who only reached the first stage of the assessment process). The main reasons given for applicants' initial attraction to Future Leaders were: the focus on urban challenging schools (60%); the fact that it was an 'innovative programme' (45%); 'the speed of getting to senior leadership' (37%); and the programme's 'strong mission and beliefs' (32%). The fact that it was London-based was an attraction for 26%, while 18% cited the opportunity to get back into teaching at a senior level as a reason for applying.

When asked what attracted them to urban education, a number of key themes emerged including the 'challenge' of working in these settings. Alongside the challenge there was also a strong commitment to social justice and equity and providing opportunities for disadvantaged children. Another strong theme was that they themselves had come from such a background and understood the importance of education as a way out of disadvantage. A further reason was a 'service' orientation – that is, that they felt a duty or sense of responsibility towards children in urban schools.

The majority of candidates were positive about all the aspects of the assessment day, although one or two who were not offered a place reacted against it. The one aspect that some candidates thought might enhance the selection process would be the opportunity to interact in some way with some 'real students', or to demonstrate their teaching ability. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who had gone through the whole process and had been selected tended to be the most positive about the organisation and value of it. Interestingly, half of all those who did not make the final selection said they would consider applying again.

The process of selecting candidates for the second cohort was changed in the light of feedback. In 2007, the selection process was streamlined and in future it will include the observation of the applicants teaching a lesson.

Phase 2: Foundation and on-going training

The foundation training includes two weekend sessions in the summer term followed by a two-week residential in the summer holidays. Participants greatly enjoyed the intensity and pace. They described it as 'very impressive', 'refreshingly challenging' and 'inspirational and aspirational'. The training was very good for bonding the group together and working with the coaches. They particularly liked hearing headteachers talk about their experience of headship: 'So it wasn't theory, it was really happening in school'.

The training experience included a trip to schools in New York or Boston led by principals from NLNS, which the participants valued greatly. A person from the resident school, usually the head, also went on the trip and participants greatly valued the time for discussion. However, a few of the heads were less impressed than the FLs with what they saw in the schools.

The training continued with weekly afternoon sessions, which were generally deemed to be of high quality and brought people together. However, some participants found them hard to attend because of the demands of their role in school.

Phase 3: Experience in the host school (Residency)

The initial experience of the FLs in their resident schools was generally perceived to have been good ('very welcoming', 'very positive') and shaped by the headteacher and the school's culture. Two FLs used the phrase 'hit the ground running' to explain their initial experiences (one stated that because of the training received she was able to do this successfully) and another noted that the first days were awful as she felt completely out of her 'comfort zone'.

Nomenclature was important too and FLs were introduced as Associate Heads, Associate Deputies, Trainee Deputies or Assistant Heads. FL had suggested that they were referred to as Associate Deputy Heads but clearly schools had their own preferences.

The reactions from senior staff to the FLs was very positive with comments like 'brilliant', 'fantastic', 'very welcoming and supportive' quite common. Where there was any qualification it was usually with reference to a single SLT member whose reaction had been problematic. Three FL cited such difficulties where the deputy saw the FL 'as a challenge' or was 'less accepting' but in most cases this had been resolved once the FL had demonstrated their worth. One spoke of an age divide that had been reflected in the team's reaction to her arrival.

> *The reaction of the senior staff has been funny. The deputies, all older and more experienced, have taken me under their wing but not in a patronising way – so they've reacted very well, they've been encouraging and kind. I share an office with one of them. The Assistant Heads are all younger (early 30s), they're very career minded and have worked for (the head) for many years – most came with*

him from his previous school in (name of LA). I sense a little bit more hostility from them – 'who does she think she is, and so on!

Perhaps this comment sums up the situation best:

It's been fine. I thought it might be more difficult than it has been but they've all accepted me so no problem at all.

Reactions from staff, like their senior colleagues, had generally been positive and very welcoming. In one case there was a degree of wariness from a head of department (in the same subject area as the FL) but this had been resolved. FLs spoke of how well the head had prepared the ground and how they (the FLs) had been very careful to act professionally and prove their worth. For example, there was a fight in the playground, which the FL and the deputy had dealt with. Later, staff told the FL that they had been watching her and were impressed with how she had followed it up. Credibility was also earned with staff through good classroom practices.

A central part of the residency was the mentoring provided by the head. Each participant as part of their support during their period in the host school, had an external coach and mentoring from the head. Headteachers were expected to meet with the FLs on a regular basis but this was not always happening. How useful the sessions with the head were, proved to be varied. Nearly half of the FLs used positive phrases like very useful ('it makes all the difference') or 'it's essential' or 'it's been incredibly constructive' but for one the jury was still out ('call me back in the year!'). Clearly the role of the headteacher is crucially important and will affect the success of the scheme. A challenge for the FL scheme is to increase the stock of 'good' placement schools.

Each participant was also assigned to a coach, who was independent of the school and who had been a headteacher. For cohorts one and two there were four coaches working with the participants. The coach was the key link between the skills taught in the Foundation courses and the integration of these skills into practice by the residents. The coach supported their personal and professional development and gave feedback on the FL's progress. Coaches regularly visited the participants in their schools and generally had a one-to-one session with them. They also talked to the heads about the FL's performance and whether there were any issues which needed to be addressed. Overall, the coaches were seen very positively by the participants and had given useful feedback and support during their entry into school and in their ongoing involvement with their schools. Participants appreciated the availability of someone with headship experience to talk things through with and bounce ideas off. During the second year participants while they valued the support they wanted more 'pressure' from the coaches.

The second cohort of FLs have also had structured support from a deputy acting in the role of 'professional tutor' (PT). This has been very successful in about a third of cases. However, problems centred around the professional tutor not having time or the inclination to do the role, not having the skills or not understanding what was needed. In some cases the FLs met rarely with their PT, did not receive any professional tutoring or have anything other than line management meetings.

When asked how well they thought they had done in school the majority of FLs were positive about their achievements (e.g. 'good feedback so far', 'glowing praise from the

head') but several included caveats and qualifications (e.g. 'doing well but it's an easy place to do a good job', 'OK but just OK', 'hard to say – fine', 'so far so good').

When FLs were asked what had been the most difficult thing so far the answers were wide-ranging. In some cases they reflected the particular FL's circumstances (e.g. split site school, being a single parent, doing two jobs, lesson planning, heavy teaching load) but reference was also made to time management, workload/work-life balance, fitting into the school's ethos, dealing with staff, and the challenge of getting a job for next September. Also two FLs made reference to the difficulty of moving from a middle manager/leader role to one of senior leadership.

Most of the FLs had no doubts that they had become more effective leaders because of the programme and the vast majority said they had no regrets about joining the programme but some were anxious about getting a job after the placement. In this fast-track programme FLs are required to give up their posts rather than be seconded from them as is the case with other schemes. Most of the participants said that FL was really exciting and they had no regrets on joining the scheme.

Phase 4: Employment as a senior leader

Towards the end of their residency year the FLs apply for substantive posts as deputies or assistant heads. The destinations of the first cohort varied in terms of their postings, and this was even more evident for the second cohort. The post obtained had a huge influence on their future plans and expectations for reaching headship.

The table below compares the posts of the two groups:

Destination posts of cohorts 1 and 2 at the end of their one-year residency

Post	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Permanent deputy headship	13	8
Temporary deputy headship	3	3
Permanent assistant headship	3	6
Temporary assistant headship	0	6
Extension of residency period	0	4
Other (e.g. consultancy)	0	1
No post by September	0	1
Totals	*19*	*29*

The 13 people from cohort 1 in permanent deputy posts expected to gain a headship for 2009/10. Of the 29 members of the second cohort, just under one-half (14) obtained permanent posts. Of these, eight were at deputy head level and six at assistant head level. Four of those who secured substantive posts did so within their residency schools. In fact, over one-third (11) of cohort 2 continued working in their residency school in some capacity during the following school year.

On balance, it appears that in both cohorts there was a mix of ability and experience among those selected, which led to a broader range of outcomes than might be expected. Overall, people in cohort 2 were less successful in obtaining substantive posts following the residency, due to a number of factors. The coaches and some heads

expressed the view that the selection process for this group was not as robust as for the first cohort, and that this led to some unsuitable people being accepted onto the course. There were some older candidates who struggled to find suitable positions. Most, however, are expected to achieve headship eventually, if not within four years.

Perceived impact

The FLs perceived their impact to be on a range of aspects of school activity such as behaviour, attendance, student voice, raising the attainment levels of teaching groups, sustaining the performance of departments, undertaking professional development with colleagues, analysis of exam data, and creating a thoughtful reflective approach among the staff. Nine of cohort 1 were said by the heads to have had 'high impact', five 'medium to high impact', two had 'some impact' and only one was seen as having 'no impact'. Both cohorts were asked what they perceived to be the factors that hindered the impact they were having in their schools. The following factors were noted:

- Not being given enough responsibility during the residency
- Distraction with job applications
- The managerial leadership style of the head who did not delegate or build capacity
- Schools not knowing what to do with the FL in terms of role and responsibility
- Not feeling fully accepted by the SLT or other teachers
- Allocated teaching in areas where they had no experience
- SLT who did not share the same vision/goals as the *Future Leaders* mission
- Lack of self-confidence.

There was common agreement across the various participants about the benefits of the programme which were seen as the training, the coaching, the networking and support from the other FLs, the vision of the programme, and the reflection and adaptation by the *Future Leaders* organisation. Residency school heads made positive reference to the external perspectives, different ways of working, extra capacity and the introduction of new ideas that the FLs brought into the schools. Some heads noted that the impact the FLs were having was in some cases considerable and they welcomed many of their attributes and abilities.

Whilst the first year of the pilot scheme was seen by all those involved as a considerable success, the responses to the second year were more mixed. The scheme depends for its success on a complex interplay of three major components: the residency school (and specifically the head and professional tutor); the FL themselves; and the support offered by the coaches and the *Future Leaders* organisation. In most cases during the first year of the pilot this worked very well. In the second year the evaluators found that the picture was patchier and that some FLs were not significantly benefiting from their placements.

The future of headship

At the beginning of this paper reference was made to the now well known 'demographic time-bomb' and the future challenge to national education systems in England and

elsewhere of filling headship vacancies. John Howson's 2007 report to the headteacher associations on senior staff vacancies found that 35% of primary, 19% of secondary and 33% of special school headships remained unfilled after the initial advertisement for the post (Howson, 2007). He notes that 'what was once a problem facing a small number of schools, mainly in the primary sector, is now one that can challenge almost any school, anywhere in the country' (p56). The report also notes that a significant proportion of headship vacancies (31% of primary and 40% of secondary) are being advertised because headteachers are retiring before the age of 60. Those heads retiring early will be doing so for a number of reasons but it is known that a number take early retirement because of ill-health (in 2007, 6% of primary and 2% of secondary). With the current shortage of applicants for headships – and Howson's survey notes that the average number for all heads was marginally higher in 2007 but lower for deputy head posts – can the system afford to 'lose' such large numbers of school leaders through voluntary early retirement?

It is partly for this reason that growing attention has been given to the welfare and wellbeing of school leaders (Earley, 2006). Are heads leaving their posts because of ill-health caused by excessive workload and stress or is it that the job has become less 'do-able' and that the satisfactions obtained earlier from 'the best job in education' are now missing? As John Dunford, the general secretary of one of the headteacher associations, has recently noted, 'school leadership is a rewarding job but government micro-management and increasingly job vulnerability are discouraging good candidates from taking on these roles' (cited in Slade, 2007). Are heads leaving their posts early for similar reasons or to take up the myriad opportunities now available to them as educational consultants, where they can earn equivalent salaries without the high stakes accountability pressures increasingly associated with headship (see Earley and Weindling, 2006)?

Why heads leave or remain in headship is an important but relatively unexplored area. The key question is why heads leave the job *before retirement* and Bottery (2006) found that most love the job and would only consider early retirement if they saw themselves as no longer having an impact, were no longer effective, or if they were too ill to continue. Yet as noted above, it is known nationally that up to 40% of heads retire or leave headship before they have to. Wellbeing, welfare and workload – the three Ws – are crucial. The NCSL has recently undertaken research into the working life of headteachers with the aim of gaining an understanding of the nature of the job, workload, work-life balance and wellbeing (Nightingale, 2007; NCSL, 2007b). The final report of the project, entitled *'A Life in the Day of a Headteacher'* identifies some of the practices and strategies that heads use to help them survive the many demands made on them.

As Fidler and Atton (2004) have argued, the future of headship must be one where the job is seen as more attractive and more manageable than currently it is. They suggest the following need consideration:

1. Better preparation before headship
2. Reducing the demands of the job
3. Support and development in the job
4. Recognition of the limited length of effective headship.

The NCSL argue for the importance of succession planning and are questioning the time it takes for a teacher to become a headteacher (typically 20 years as the average age of new heads is 43, a figure that has not changed in over 25 years – see Earley and Weindling, 2004; Slade, 2007). The College also argues that the demographic challenge is compounded by negative perceptions of the work and role of school leaders. Their advice to ministers therefore included:

- the need for local solutions (and there are currently 12 'leadership succession' pilot projects running in schools and Local Authorities to develop the pools of leadership talent);
- a campaign to 'talk up' headship (since the overwhelming majority of heads are very positive about their work)
- giving opportunities for existing school leaders to gain self-confidence to do the job of headship; and
- more fast tracking for those with leadership potential (NCSL, 2007a).

In the future greater consideration will also need to be given to new models of headship such as co-leadership, executive and federated heads (NCSL, 2006; DfES/PwC, 2007). Distributed leadership is also seen as helping to reduce the load on the chief executive at the top of the organisational apex. So demanding is the role of the head today that they must surround themselves with good people; a move is needed from an emphasis on the individual headteacher to one of inter-dependence. However, distributed and shared leadership does not however prevent 'the stopping of the buck' remaining with the headteacher.

The development of school leaders and future heads through fast-track leadership schemes such as Future Leaders is likely to continue. Currently the Future Leaders programme has scaled up to a total of 100 participants, with three cohorts in London, one in Manchester and plans to involve the Black County in 2009. Also as other innovative programmes such as 'Teach First' and 'London Challenge' spread to other urban centres (Birmingham and Manchester) is the same likely to happen with Future Leaders? Obviously a lot will depend on the success of the scheme – and evidence from the evaluation is very positive – but also, crucially, support from politicians and political parties. Will Future Leaders change the mindset of the gatekeepers, such as the governors, so that they will be prepared to take the 'risk' of employing a non-traditional candidate? Will the future see a greater acceptance of different models of headship as well as different routes to the top job and different kinds of people filling them?

Headteachers of state schools in England no longer need QTS and there are a very small number of bursars and school business managers who now possess NPQH, the qualification for headship. How long before the first one becomes a headteacher? Indeed the publication of the PricewaterhouseCoopers' report on models of school leadership is probably best known for its suggestion that people other than teachers be permitted to take up headship posts (DfES/PwC, 2007). The future therefore looks positive for the FL scheme, an initiative it will be recalled that had its origins in the USA with New Leaders for New Schools. Some of the FL participants talk of belonging to or having signed up to 'the movement'; it appears as though the movement is beginning to take off.

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