

# Research into school leadership in England

by

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[final revision – submitted to *EducationalFutures*, May 2017]

## Introduction

The genesis of this paper lies in the request to provide an overview of research into school leadership in England as the presentation topic for a job selection process in 2016 for which I was an applicant. As a consequence of exploring personal experiences and published outputs on the topic I was left with the conclusion that it was probably a better idea to have reconfigured the title to read ‘in what way has research been conducted into school leadership in England over the last twenty years and what do we know as a result’?

The period of twenty years corresponds to the election in 1997 of ‘New’ Labour in England who came to power with an agenda for action seemingly based on the pragmatic ‘Third Way’ to policy making which emphasised an approach “founded on applying evidence of ‘what works’ rather than on ideology“ (Levačić and Glatter, 2001: 12). Despite the claim from the newly appointed Secretary of State for Education and Employment of his belief “that having ready access to the lessons learnt from high quality research can and must vastly improve the quality and sensitivity of the complex and often constrained decisions we, as politicians, have to make” (DfEE, 2000) he very quickly contradicted himself when stating: ‘We know what works and how to spread it’ (Blunkett, 2000).

David Blunkett's arrival in his governmental role succeeded three years of work by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), a non-government departmental body which had been set up in 1994 to raise the standard of teaching. In its subsequent evolution, the TTA had sought to take responsibility for both establishing teacher standards and their continuing development, a role that expanded to include headteacher development. As Levačić and Glatter (2001: 13) suggest, however, there is no evidence that extensive research over the previous twenty years had "any influence on the construction of the [headteacher] standards" that formed the basis for the assessment of candidates for the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) during its first three years of operation (1997–2000).

Prior to this intervention by the TTA the role of headteacher in England's schools had undergone a rapid transformation principally because of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) which had introduced, *inter-alia*, the notion of locally managed schools (LMS) whereby the major portion of financial resources (including staffing costs) were devolved to the institutional level. Although there was evidence of the Conservative government of that time also promoting the principle of a market-led economy, notably through the introduction of Grant Maintained Schools (GMS) which were 'liberated' from local education authority control, the principal impact of the funding devolution was to enhance the decision-making responsibility of each school. This change in the locus of responsibility and accountability for schools heralded a new era of 'leadership' (Simkins, 2012). Prior to this, he argued, we had witnessed the era of 'administration' from 1944 to the mid-1980s and the era of 'management' from the mid-1980s to 1997. This conclusion seems well founded, given the timeline whereby a good proportion of the nation's schools did not adopt LMS until 1994. For most of the

twentieth century accountability and decision-making for schools was at the level of the local education authority (LEA), which was a sub-set of the elected councils which are a feature of local democracy in England. During these times and until ERA the focus for headship was one of administration. Following ERA, and until 1997, the emphasis of headship switched to management, defined as the accountable delivery of processes determined elsewhere (e.g. the National Curriculum). In terms of definition, however, management asks the question ‘how can I best accomplish certain things’, whereas leadership deals asks ‘what are the things I want to accomplish?’ (Covey, 1992). The difference is in the locus of decision-making, with the emphasis on school leadership behaviour switching accordingly. The headteacher standards published in 1997 by the TTA encouraged headteachers to see themselves as being leaders, rather than managers or administrators.

This shift in emphasis, as suggested above, was not developed from research and ran the risk of not successfully addressing key issues that remained in the school system. Legally, for example, the decision-making body in each school were the governors, with the headteacher being expected to have day to day responsibility for school organisation and accountable executive to the governing body. These and other similar issues were overridden it seems in the desire to promote the headteacher, particularly by the TTA, as chief executive in the emerging era of leadership. There is discourse to be found in relevant literature that suggests, however, that leadership effectiveness at the level of the organisation is compounded by environmental factors, making it difficult to identify anything other than modest causal effects to be attributed to an individual leader (e.g. Baron, 1969; Wallace, 2007; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006). Glatter (2014: 355) concludes the weight of external influence produces

“uncomfortable paradoxes and dilemmas for school personnel which involve balancing competing claims, striking bargains and making trade-offs between values in reaching decisions”. In other words, school leadership is not and should not be the exclusive domain of the headteacher.

Despite this seeming self-evident scenario, the initial impetus of the TTA to identify headteachers as effective leaders was exacerbated by the creation of the National College for School Leadership in 2000. Credit for this initiative was claimed by Prime Minister, Tony Blair, via an announcement from his office in 1998. The college, according to the Green Paper (Department for Education and Employment, 1998), would run residential development programmes for all stages of headship development and establish close links with leading business schools in order to combine high quality educational content with the best in public and private sector management (House of Commons Select Committee, 1998: paras 59-60). By the end of 2001 NCSL produced a range of proposals for their future work that were published for a period of public consultation. The proposals were for a [School] Leadership Development Framework (National College for School Leadership, 2001a) which was based on the work of their own Think Tank (National College for School Leadership, 2001b), comprised of leading practitioners, researchers and providers in the field of school leadership and management training, development and education.

It is at this point that research from other sources began to be ignored or no longer supported. Prior to this time, it was possible to identify a period where there was a focus on research, both to evaluate and inform policy, along with a lack of emphasis on school leadership as a panacea. Levačić and Glatter (2001), for example, explored

the concept of evidence-informed policy and practice (EIPP) in educational leadership and management and demonstrate the environment contemporary at that juncture to be largely supportive of such enquiry. Interestingly, however, they also wrote at a time when 'leadership' did not feature in their own environment. Both were members of the British Education Management and Administration Society (BEMAS) at that time and were published in the society's journal – Educational Management and Administration (EMA). It is indicative of the above debate that it is only after the interventions of the TTA and the creation of the NCSL that both the society and its journal included 'leadership' in their respective titles (to become BELMAS and EMAL). The era of 'leadership' was clearly upon us and the use of research to inform us took a radical turn.

### **NCSL and other research since 2000**

Soon after their establishment of the NCSL I presented a paper at their inaugural international research conference which reviewed their 'knowledge pool' together with the evidence base they had accumulated through their practitioner research (Male, 2003). Similarly, I presented a paper at an annual convention of the University Council for Education Administration (UCEA) which explored international collaborations in research, preparation and practice (Male, 2007).

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

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

I had similar views on the notion of international research in educational leadership, having been involved in a few projects that allowed me to generate some perspectives

on educational leadership in other cultures and social systems (Male, 2007). The pattern of activity I observed was that most international projects seemed to be based on the principle of researchers investigating and reporting on their own country. To test that tentative conclusion during 2006-7 I reviewed the 24 articles that had appeared in the journal *International Studies in Educational Administration* (published by the Commonwealth Council for Education Administration and Management - CCEAM). Only three of these articles featured studies that involved more than one country, meaning that the clear majority were authored by natives of the country featured. In other words, we were not getting any view of how the evidence accumulated for these studies was significance to us in terms of our subsequent behaviour.

The conclusion I drew at that stage was that whilst the approaches used by both NCSL and international research projects may be informative these could not be considered as exhaustive and ran the risk of being circular. Circularity in research is like the self-fulfilling prophesy in that you end up looking for what you expected to be there, rather than looking to see what might be there.

### **What happened subsequently?**

In preparation for the selection process in which I was a candidate (see above) I looked at into research on school leadership in England within the years of 2014 and 2015. The limitations to this research were because the audience was domestic and the intended presentation was to cover contemporary issues. Consequently, I began by reviewing the range of papers that had been published in two subject relevant peer reviewed journals in the United Kingdom, *Educational Management, Administration*

*and Leadership* (EMAL) and *School Leadership and Management* (SLAM). I then extended my search to research emanating from the succeeding manifestation of the NCSL, the *National College for Teaching and Leadership* (NCTL) before examining reports from the *Office for Standards in Education* (OFSTED). Finally, I looked at the presentations made at the previous two conferences of the *British Educational Leadership and Management Society* (BELMAS). For the record, I did not investigate the British Education Research Association (BERA) conference proceedings or any other source in depth when arriving at my conclusions. What I found, however, was quite alarming.

The review of EMAL (issues 42.1 to 44.1) and SLAM (issues 34.1 to 35.5) revealed a total of 149 published articles on school leadership and management in the period between January 2014 and January 2016. EMAL published 123 articles in total of which 90 were on school leadership, whilst SLAM published 59 articles all of which, by default, were focused on school leadership and management. Meanwhile aspects of school leadership and management were examined by the NCTL, which published four reports during the same period (NCTL: 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015), and OFSTED which issued three reports which included a relevant focus (Ofsted: 2014a, 2014b, 2015). There were 28 papers available from the BELMAS conferences of 2014 and 2015 through their website, of which 12 could be assessed as exploring school leadership and management.

Of the 149 articles on school leadership and management in the peer reviewed journals (EMAL and SLAM) just 28 are from domestic researchers or contributors, a proportion just under 20 per cent. The other articles came from overseas – a total of

33 countries, including 19 papers from South Africa, 14 from the USA, 10 from Australia, 6 from Cyprus and 5 from Greece. A similar pattern of outputs could be seen from the previous two BELMAS conferences where just 12 papers available through the website come from UK researchers or contributors, with the remainder coming from Austria, Israel, Cyprus, South Africa, Trinidad & Tobago, Russia, Nigeria, Uganda and the USA. On a separate issue it is unfortunate to see that that much more was presented, judging by the number of abstracts included in the conference proceedings, but these are not available as full papers.

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

The outputs from the NCTL reports were more substantial both in depth and the evidence bases used, although one study was just an analysis of data accumulated

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

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

Consequently, I concluded that this exploration of research into school leadership demonstrates an alarming lack of evidence based on substantial empirical research.

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

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

## **Discussion**

The starting point for this enquiry was to see whether we could learn from what had happened so we could identify how best to support and develop school leadership and management in England. What has been found is that research, wherever it has taken place, has a had minimal (if any effect) on policy that informs practice. Research in education, it is suggested, “ought to have at the broadest level a desire to make things better in education, explicitly in the case of our concerns here, to improve education policy, including conceptualisation and enactment” (Lingard, 2013: 116). Such research can be in two dimensions, he argued, to include either research *off/for* policy which would allow for determination of good practice and for subsequent dissemination. Considering the work of the NCSL and the international field, further witnessed from the examination of published outputs in 2014 and 2015, it seems the

field has not moved on in any discernible fashion since New Labour come to power in 1997. Given that the criticism of the TTA inspired move to developing headteachers as leaders also claimed a lack of attention to a body of research that was evident at the time, we appear to have arrived at a situation where we do not know why we do things as we do or can justify why this is the best way to do things. Seemingly we are no better off than the situation described by Lingard (2013: 118) where “policy is linked to politics and framed by the political intentions of governments, politicians and ministers and thus is linked to ideology, but always mediated by other factors, including at times research evidence”. In this instance, however, we are seemingly also devoid of any good quality data that is independent in nature.

## **Implications**

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

Commons Library, 2015). The same act will also for government to allow for intervention into underperforming schools and to constrain the local authority from doing so in certain circumstances.

At the time of writing there were over 7000 schools that had become academies, free schools or university technical colleges, with primary schools being in the majority for the first time (Department for Education, 2017). Whilst this still does not represent the major portion of maintained schools, with 75 percent remaining in local authority control, it does signal the direction of travel for school governance and management. For schools that are independent of the local authority the curriculum is negotiable, as are terms and conditions of staff working within them. Alongside this structural shift the government is pursuing a policy of school self-improvement and placing the locus of power with schools for teacher accreditation and development. OFSTED, it seems, is the only remaining structural part of the central government system beyond individual schools or cluster of schools. The common response, it seems, is for schools who have chosen this route to collaborate and federate. The evolving process is incoherent, however, and includes an eclectic mix of Regional School Commissioners, multi-academy trusts (MATs), Teaching School Alliances and soft federations. The consequence is that the driving force for determination of school aims, objectives and processes in England appears to be with semi-independent clusters of institutions, funded directly by government.

Whether you agree or not that this is an appropriate direction of travel for the national school system, the implications for school leaders are multiple and pressing. Now, perhaps more than ever, is the time for substantive research into school leadership

practice and behaviour, both of those working under new governance structures or those leaders who have become isolated within the remaining maintained school system. A demand or recommendation for such research requires at least two outcomes – greater opportunity for publication of domestic research within UK journals and national conferences and a determination from major agencies and institutions to support more substantial, detailed and focused research. The publication data and discussion above suggests, however, that domestic research outputs are few in number, small-scale and atomised. Given the changing nature of the English school system now would be a good time for all concerned to review how such research is conducted and published in the future.

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