

Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives



National College
for Leadership of Schools
and Children's Services

Schools and academies

10 strong claims about successful school leadership

Professional development

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Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a three-year national research project on the impact of leadership on pupil outcomes, with particular reference to the leadership of the headteacher (DCSF, 2009). It is the sequel to Seven strong claims about successful school leadership (Leithwood et al 2006) and it confirms, qualifies and builds on those original claims.

The research project investigated a national sample of schools which had improved pupil learning outcomes over at least three consecutive years under the leadership of the same headteacher. It included a literature review and surveys completed by the heads and a range of other stakeholders. In addition, 20 case studies of primary and secondary schools were conducted over 2 years.

The research found that leaders of successful schools define success not only in terms of test and examination results, but also in terms of personal and social outcomes, pupil and staff motivation, engagement and wellbeing, the quality of teaching and learning and the school's contribution to the community.

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

10 strong claims

- 1 Headteachers are the main source of leadership in their schools.

- 2 There are eight key dimensions of successful leadership.

- 3 Headteachers' values are key components in their success.

- 4 Successful heads use the same basic leadership practices, but there is no single model for achieving success.

- 5 Differences in context affect the nature, direction and pace of leadership actions.

- 6 Heads contribute to student learning and achievement through a combination and accumulation of strategies and actions.

- 7 There are three broad phases of leadership success.

- 8 Heads grow and secure success by layering leadership strategies and actions.

- 9 Successful heads distribute leadership progressively.

- 10 The successful distribution of leadership depends on the establishment of trust.

Claim 1: Headteachers are the main source of leadership in their schools

Headteachers are perceived to be the main source of leadership by key school staff. Their educational values, reflective strategies and leadership practices shape the internal processes and pedagogies that result in improved pupil outcomes.

The leadership of the head has a direct effect on teachers' expectations and standards. This includes the way they think about, plan and conduct their teaching and learning practices, their self-efficacy, commitment and sense of wellbeing, and their organisational loyalty and trust, all of which indirectly influence pupil outcomes.

Leaders in improving schools diagnose individual and organisational needs and place the needs of pupils first. They then select improvement strategies in well-thought-out combinations and sequences so that these reinforce and support each other. There is a strong link between setting the direction and restructuring the organisation, and between reculturing the organisation and improving school conditions.

Since our previous review (Leithwood et al, 2006), more evidence has been uncovered to support our original finding that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning¹.

Our case study evidence confirms the importance of headteachers to the level of expectations, aspirations and wellbeing of staff, the improvement of teaching and learning conditions, and the wellbeing and achievement of pupils:

I think underestimating the importance of a good head would be wrong. It doesn't matter how the work is delegated, he is still sailing the ship, so to speak.

School business manager

The head is an incredible leader. I don't know what her secret is, except she has good interpersonal skills, good organisational skills. She's forward thinking. She has a way of encouraging self-belief in staff. I don't know what she has for breakfast, but it works!

Primary teacher

If I have any strengths at all, I would say it is in choosing the right people for the school.

Secondary head

¹ Robinson et al (2009); Leithwood & Sun (2009)

When I appoint staff, I don't care about the academic qualifications. We always watch them teach. When I am going around, I look at what they are doing, how they react to children, because if they haven't got a good rapport with the children, they are not going to be able to deliver an effective lesson. And the children are not going to engage with them.

Secondary head

She's in charge and I think everybody knows that. The children know she's the head because she can walk into the hall and it goes silent. She's got this air of authority, which I think the children like. It makes them feel very secure because the head is there.

Primary deputy head

Successful leaders:

- define their values and vision to raise expectations, set direction and build trust
- reshape the conditions for teaching and learning
- restructure parts of the organisation and redesign leadership roles and responsibilities
- enrich the curriculum
- enhance teacher quality
- enhance the quality of teaching and learning
- build collaboration internally
- build strong relationships outside the school community

Although the sequence, timing, order and combination of these strategies varies from school to school, the visions and values are strikingly similar.

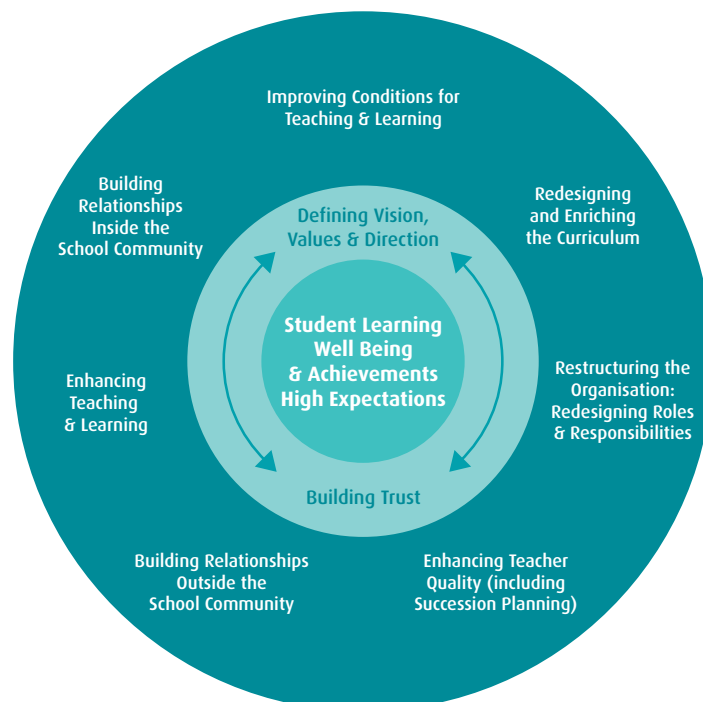
Claim 2: There are eight key dimensions of successful leadership

Our study identifies eight key dimensions of successful leadership, which all centre on student learning, wellbeing and achievement.

In our previous review (Leithwood et al, 2006), we argued that four core leadership practices – setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organisation, and managing the teaching and learning programme – formed part of the repertoire of successful leaders. Our new evidence builds on these core practices.

In Figure 1, the inner circle illustrates the core focus of leaders' attention, the inner ring their core strategies, and the outer ring the actions they take in support of these strategies. The building of trust is an intrinsic part and embedded within each of the core strategies and an essential part of the actions in the outer ring. The eight dimensions are described below.

Figure 1 The dimensions of successful leadership



Defining the vision, values and direction. All the heads had a very strong and clear vision and set of values for their school, which heavily influenced their actions and the actions of others, and established a clear sense of direction and purpose for the school. These were shared widely, clearly understood and supported by all staff. They were a touchstone against which all new developments, policies or initiatives were tested.

I always had a vision of where I knew the school had to be. That was always there, but I did not sit down and think 'this year we are going to do this'. We do have a strategic long-term plan, but until you get some of the key things right, the staff just would not have coped with a more creative curriculum. We did some creative things but it needed to be managed in such a way that people were not overwhelmed and felt quite secure and confident to trial things.

Primary head

Improving conditions for teaching and learning. All the heads identified the need to improve the conditions in which the quality of teaching could be maximised and pupils' learning and performance enhanced. They developed strategies to improve the school buildings and facilities. By changing the physical environment of the schools and improving the classrooms, the heads were confirming the connection between high-quality conditions for teaching and learning, and staff and pupil wellbeing and achievement.

The biggest changes have been a new school building, new facilities, especially in certain departments. In terms of my department that has been fantastic. As with anything there have been problems, you are moving from a school that has been up for 50 years and you are used to certain things. Staff have to readjust to the new school. It has been a settling-in process, but I think that has been the biggest change. I think that has been a positive change.

Secondary head of department

Restructuring the organisation: redesigning roles and responsibilities. The heads purposefully and progressively redesigned their organisational structures, redesigned roles and distributed leadership in ways that promoted greater staff engagement and ownership which, in turn, provided greater opportunities for student learning.

While the exact nature and timing varied from school to school, there was a consistent pattern of changing the hierarchy. This included:

- redefining senior leadership functions
- changing from a horizontal to a vertical pastoral structure
- using teaching and learning responsibilities (TLRs), advanced skills teachers (ASTs) and support staff more widely

Roles, responsibilities and accountabilities were made clear to all staff and were allocated according to ability. There was also recognition of people's individual strengths and organisational needs.

So there was the reshaping of the senior management team and we started to look at accountabilities a lot more. The job descriptions were revised to reflect the national standards far more closely. The first thing was that the senior management team was extended to incorporate all the core subjects.

Secondary deputy head

Enhancing teaching and learning. All the schools were continually looking for new ways to improve teaching, learning and achievement. The heads provided a safe environment for teachers to try new models and alternative approaches that might be more effective. Staff responded positively to the opportunity. It affected the way they saw themselves as professionals and improved their sense of self-efficacy. This, in turn, had a positive impact on the way they interacted with pupils and other members of staff.

I think the head gives you the freedom to experiment, obviously not to go completely overboard and mess it all up, but he's very positive, very supportive, and he will listen to you. Then obviously he has an overview of that, but he allows you to get on with your role.

Secondary head of department

I have been trying to change the mindset of every teacher to say that every teacher is a manager and a leader. Everybody is, within their own classroom.

Primary head

Redesigning and enriching the curriculum. All the heads focused on redesigning and enriching the curriculum as a way of deepening and extending engagement and improving achievement. Academic attainment was not in competition with personal and social development: the two complemented one another. The heads adapted the curriculum to broaden learning opportunities and improve access for all children, with the emphasis on ‘stage not age’ learning. Many of these changes were in line with government initiatives. In primary schools there was particular emphasis on greater flexibility and continuity between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, while in secondary schools the focus was on personalised learning and providing different pathways towards vocational qualifications.

Each student is doing a personal curriculum, something that we have tailored for them to help them get the best out of the school while they are pursuing their various curriculum options.

Secondary head of department

A number of the schools had introduced more emotional support into the curriculum through personal health and social education (PHSE) programmes. Building creativity and self-esteem featured heavily in the curriculum, as did a focus on developing key skills for life. There was major emphasis on enjoyment of learning, and recognition that when pupils enjoy learning, they are more effective learners.

The big thing about the school is the PHSE curriculum. It is very caring, and throughout the school we are teaching the children right from nursery to be caring and respectful of each other and to share things, to respect each other’s differences and to look out for each other. And when visitors come to the school they notice how polite the children are – even the very, very young children.

Primary teacher

There was also emphasis on providing a broad range of extracurricular activities, including at lunch time and in after-school clubs, as well as activities during school holidays.

Enhancing teacher quality (including succession planning).

Heads provided a rich variety of professional learning and development opportunities for staff as part of their twin drive to raise standards and sustain motivation and commitment. They placed a high premium on internally led professional development and learning, but teachers and support staff were also encouraged to take part in a wide range of in-service

training (Inset), and were given the opportunity to train for external qualifications. This combination of external and internal continuing professional development (CPD) was used to maximise potential and develop staff in diverse areas.

We do get quite a lot of in-house training. That is important because going out on various days out and courses to learn specific things is fine for one member of staff and then obviously you have the opportunity of extending your knowledge from that single day to your department, but as a teacher working in a particular area, sometimes you can’t always extend that to people beyond your particular area simply because you don’t have time to do it. So we tend to have more people coming in so that the whole school can benefit from the same things.

Secondary teacher

Succession planning was a feature of all the schools, while targeted recruitment was a feature in those which acted as Training Schools for pre service teaching students.

Previously [the head] would interview until he got the right person. Recently – I’m talking about 18 months ago – he started talking about appointing somebody from within the school as the new leadership in such and such a department, and training them up ourselves rather than taking people who come in from elsewhere.

Secondary head of department

Building relationships inside the school community. Heads developed and sustained positive relationships with staff at all levels, making them feel valued and involved. They demonstrated concern for the professional and personal wellbeing of staff. The relationship between heads and senior leadership teams (SLTs) in particular was one of trust and mutual respect. They engendered loyalty from parents, staff and pupils.

He walks round the school all the time. He’ll go into lessons, he’ll cover, he leads assembly, he goes in both staff rooms and he knows the children, he knows the parents. He’s got an open-door policy in terms of staff and parents. He’s got a good relationship with the governors.

Primary deputy head

Building relationships outside the school community. For all heads, building and improving the reputation of the school and engaging with the wider community were essential to achieving long-term success. They and their SLTs had developed positive relationships with community leaders and had built a web of links across the school to other organisations and individuals. Strong links with key stakeholders in the local community benefited the school.

We are certainly a well-known school. We have good relationships in terms of staff training, and quite a number of our staff go to other schools to do Inset [days]. Likewise staff come here. We are one of the schools in the authority that is on the up at the minute, and I think that when you go to other schools – and we hear parents talk about other schools – they are saying things are happening at this school. We went on learning walks at half-term with other schools, and they have been here to do the walk as well. I think we have a good status. I think the head is well known in the authority and well respected. We have a particularly good relationship with two geographically close schools, and I think our relationship with those schools is good but competitive.

Secondary assistant head

The heads achieved improved performance, not only through the strategies they used but also through the core values and personal qualities they demonstrated in their daily interactions. As Figure 1 illustrates, they placed pupil care, learning and achievement at the heart of all their decisions.

Claim 3: Headteachers' values are key components in their success

In our previous review (Leithwood et al, 2006), we argued that variation in the effectiveness of leaders is often explained by a small number of personal traits; indeed, research points to evidence of an association between leaders' personal qualities and leadership success². Our claim is that the most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are flexible rather than dogmatic within a system of core values. They are persistent in their high expectations of others, and they are emotionally resilient and optimistic. Such traits help explain why successful leaders facing daunting conditions are often able to push forward against the odds. Our research confirms this. Data from across the case studies provides rich illustrations of these core values.

Successful heads share certain attributes and hold common core values:

- a strong sense of moral responsibility and a belief in equal opportunities
- a belief that every pupil deserves the same opportunities to succeed
- respect and value for all people in and connected with the school
- a passion for learning and achievement
- a commitment to pupils and staff

Successful heads see pupil achievement as having behavioural, academic, personal, social and emotional dimensions:

- Setting high expectations for staff and students is central to developing teaching and learning programmes.
- Care and trust feature highly in achievement-focused cultures that aim to improve student outcomes.
- Introducing a whole-school approach to pupil behaviour management is considered a positive step towards improving student outcomes.

The head provides a 'can-do' culture and one of the things I've learned from him is that there are no problems, only solutions.

Secondary assistant head

It's a culture whereby people are free to make suggestions [and] encouraged to think of ways to take the school forward. I can't think of instances where staff are turned down. So, in terms of boosting staff confidence, it's an open culture.

Primary teacher

We all feel as though we matter, that we count and that our opinions count. And we're all part of it, so we're kind of carried along with it, not pulled by it.

Primary teacher

It's about being collaborative [and] about wanting to raise achievement. It's about being successful, being committed to being successful, supporting one another. Those are the cultural norms underpinning a lot of what happens inside the school.

Secondary head

² Day & Leithwood (2007)

Claim 4: Successful heads use the same basic leadership practices, but there is no single model for achieving success

Since our previous review (Leithwood et al, 2006), other studies³ have identified significantly larger effects for instructional leadership (ie, that relating to teaching and learning) than for transformational leadership (ie, leadership that is focused on developing teachers). The new evidence in our study is that successful heads draw equally on elements of both instructional and transformational leadership. They work intuitively and from experience, tailoring their leadership strategies to their particular school context.

Their ability to respond to their context and to recognise, acknowledge, understand and attend to the needs and motivations of others defines their level of success.

The heads in this study deployed the same strategic leadership approaches as one another, but the combinations, sequence and timing of the approaches varied according to their context.

In our 2006 review (ibid), we found that it is the way in which leaders apply leadership practices, rather than the actual practices themselves, that demonstrates their ability to respond to the context in which they work. New evidence of how these core leadership practices are used sensitively according to context relates not only to school turnaround scenarios (typically schools serving highly diverse student populations⁴) but also to highly accountable policy contexts⁵. Studies forming part of a five-year study of leadership and learning in the US⁶ indicate that student poverty, diversity and school phase (primary or secondary) can significantly moderate the positive effects of school leadership on pupil achievement⁷ (see Claim 5).

Our case studies reveal that heads use a combination of leadership strategies according to:

- their judgements about the conditions for teaching and learning in the school
- the confidence, experience and competence of their staff
- the behaviour, aspirations and attainment levels of the pupils
- the experience of the heads themselves

High expectations are essential here and not allowing that to slip, and that belief that every child can achieve, is really important in this context. And I think just being very organised and efficient and keeping on top of things, dealing with things very quickly so nothing gets out of hand.

Primary deputy head

I'm keen on empowering or at least ensuring that more of the curriculum teachers have the skills to lead the department, which means getting people to take the Leading from the Middle course through the National College because we are not strong on that and need to improve that capacity. They come to their role with a lot of enthusiasm and ability but they do not always have the skills to manage the department [or knowledge of] the ways [in which] people need to be managed.

Secondary head

Change has, at the moment, been initiated by me. I've made a lot of changes. I might have made some of these too quickly, but the situation was so desperate that I had to.

Primary head

³ Robinson et al (2009)

⁴ Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki & Giles (2005)

⁵ Day & Leithwood (2007)

⁶ Louis, Leithwood et al (2009)

⁷ For example, Gordon & Louis (2009); Wahlstrom & Louis (2008)

Claim 5: Differences in context affect the nature, direction and pace of leadership actions

Leadership differences by improvement groupings

Splitting our national sample of highly effective and improving schools into three distinctive improvement groups – low start, moderate start and high start⁸ – revealed important relationships between school contexts and school improvement profiles. These are evidenced in significant differences in certain leadership practices between each group of schools.

Schools that had improved from a low start had experienced the most changes in pupil behaviour, attendance, motivation and engagement.

Heads in schools in disadvantaged circumstances tended to be less experienced than heads in schools in more favourable contexts, and their tenure was often shorter than those in schools in more advantaged contexts.

There is strong evidence that schools in the low-start group had made greater improvements in changing the school's culture and climate, addressing teaching and learning and using performance data during the previous three years, which are all important precursors and facilitators for raising academic achievement, especially in highly disadvantaged contexts.

Leadership differences by socio-economic context

There are relationships between the socio-economic circumstances of schools and the amount of change in leadership practice.

Whilst our evidence confirms that most successful heads draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices, the case studies confirm that the selection and combination of practices used depends on context, with a greater number of leadership practices required to effect change in more disadvantaged schools.

Substantial improvements in pupil behaviour, attendance, attitude and motivation are important precursors and facilitators for improvement in students' academic achievement, especially in schools in highly disadvantaged contexts.

Successful heads in disadvantaged contexts, therefore, make greater efforts to effect improvement across a range of areas – especially pupil behaviour, motivation and engagement, and school culture – because they know that improvements in only one or two areas are unlikely to be enough to secure sustained gains in pupil outcomes.

Heads in disadvantaged contexts especially seek to make specific improvements in teaching and assessment and use performance data to monitor the effectiveness of changes made.

Leadership differences by experience and time in post

Successful heads employ different improvement strategies depending on their experience and time in post and their perception of the need for change in their school.

During the first three years of leadership, heads are more active in initiating changes to effect improvement across a wide range of areas.

Our previous review (Leithwood et al, 2006) found that school leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions. Since then, a new line of evidence has appeared which suggests that attention should be given to a full array of leadership practices (transformational and instructional), with both teacher leaders and heads sharing responsibility for those aspects of leadership that influence pedagogy⁹ (see Claim 6). Several recent studies of such shared leadership have reported significant improvements in pupil learning¹⁰. In addition, our research demonstrates that the success of leadership practices is dependent on leaders' values and interpersonal qualities and that these in turn are affected by their professional and organisational context.

The different school settings, contexts and improvement strategies are well documented in the full research report¹¹, but here are three illustrations from our study:

I want kids to feel confident. I want the children here to see beyond this neighbourhood, not in a derogatory way, because I think they should be proud of where they come from, but I want them to see there is life beyond and that they can do anything they want if they've got the experiences and the choices to choose from.

Primary teacher

⁸ These subgroups of schools were identified based on analyses of attainment and value-added trends: i) improving from low to moderate or from low to high in attainment, and highly effective in value added; ii) improving from moderate to higher moderate or high in attainment and highly effective in value added; and iii) stable high attainment and highly effective in value added. Proportionally, more schools responding to the survey were in the low to moderate/high group, ie those that had made rapid recent improvement over three years (2003-05). Overall, nearly two-thirds (65.6%, n=105), of primary schools in the low group, compared with under 1 in 10 (8%, n=10) of the high-start group were in free school meal (FSM) bands 3 and 4. For secondary survey responses, the pattern was broadly similar, with around a half (50.3%, n=84) of the low-start group being from high-disadvantage contexts (FSM bands 3 and 4), while only around 1 in 20 (5.2%, n=6) of the low-start group were from high-disadvantage contexts.

⁹ Marks & Printy (2003); Robinson et al (2009)

¹⁰ Wahlstrom & Louis (2008)

¹¹ See DCSF (2009)

We've changed the heads of department and made them curriculum leaders. We had to say to people, you're not managing a department, you're leading a team of people, and this team of people is going to get us good results and develop the youngsters. So it was a different way of thinking about leadership. It permeates the way people look at themselves within their roles – that they're not simply doing jobs, but carrying out leadership roles. I think that's really made a change.

Secondary head

The most significant change has been the introduction of a behaviour for learning strategy. We were aware that the pupils' behaviour was getting in the way of their learning. So the introduction of this has helped. The classrooms and corridors are much quieter as a result. But I think also, a by-product of that is that the success culture has been growing.

Secondary head of department

Claim 6: Heads contribute to student learning and achievement through a combination and accumulation of strategies and actions

Our research shows that successful leaders contribute to improved pupil learning and achievement through a combination of strategies. It provides new quantitative evidence of the way in which leadership activities lead to improvement in aspects of school work, which in turn leads to improvement in school conditions and in pupil outcomes.

Research suggests that within-school variation in pupil outcomes is often considerably greater than the variation between schools. Highly effective and improving schools tend to reduce within-school variation by building common goals and being consistent in their approach¹². Although most school-level variables have small effects on pupil outcomes when examined independently¹³, the combination of their impact tends to be stronger¹⁴.

Our quantitative surveys of headteachers and key staff identified key dimensions of leadership and school and classroom processes that contributed to an improvement in pupil outcomes over three years, including in the average GCSE results for secondary schools and in maths and English test scores for primary schools. Headteachers' accounts in these surveys showed that pupil learning and achievement are affected by a combination of leadership strategies which, taken together, address school culture and staff development, and focus on enhancing the processes of teaching and learning.

We constructed a number of statistical models that demonstrated how these inter-related dimensions and processes predict institutional change. The case study evidence also revealed how and why different strategies and actions were adopted, showing how leadership practices develop and shape change over different phases of school development.

Among the most powerful variables were:

- influencing pupil outcomes and improvements in school conditions, such as an emphasis on raising academic standards
- assessment for learning
- collaborative teacher cultures
- monitoring of pupil and school performance
- coherence of teaching programmes
- the provision of extra-curricular activities

Leaders' trust in teachers makes a significant contribution to the willingness of teachers to collaborate, and is associated with distributed leadership.

The influence of variables on pupils' learning and behaviour is indirect, but there is clear evidence of their effects on retention and attendance of staff, improvements in pupil attendance and behaviour, and increases in pupil motivation, engagement and sense of responsibility for learning, all of which are themselves the result of leadership values, strategies and actions.

Appendix 1 presents an explanation of the relationship between leadership practices and changes in secondary pupil outcomes over three years and is the result of detailed analysis of the quantitative evidence gathered from successful heads in secondary schools. In all cases, examination results had improved over at least three consecutive years under their leadership, and their performance was identified as highly effective in value-added analysis of school results. The same analysis was carried out with survey results for primary heads and with key staff.

The results are significant because they show the complexity of the leadership strategies used by these successful heads over time and their contribution to improving pupil outcomes over three school years.

While all the links between the different dimensions are significant, some are stronger than others. The strength of these connections indicates which features of leadership practice are most closely linked. The analysis shows that the school processes directly connected with headteachers' leadership strategies are the ones that also connect most closely with improvements in aspects of teaching and learning and staff involvement in leadership; these in turn help to predict improvement in school conditions, and so improvement in pupil outcomes.

¹² As suggested by recent research on high-reliability schools by Stringfield, Reynolds & Shaffer (2008)

¹³ Creemers & Reezigt (1996)

¹⁴ Sammons (2007)

The analysis provides new empirical data that shows that it is the combination and accumulation of actions and strategies over time that results in school improvement: the headteachers' leadership directly both creates and influences improvements in the school organisation and in the teaching and learning environment, which in turn improves pupil outcomes.

The findings complement the qualitative case study analyses, which show clearly that successful headteachers select leadership strategies according to their context. Of particular note are:

- the role played by heads' trust in teachers, both in relation to the SLT and broader staff leadership
- the important link between redesigning the organisation and setting directions
- the way redesigning the organisation predicts improvement in school conditions

- the way leadership strategies to develop people link with the teacher collaborative culture, and with high academic standards and positive learner motivation and a learning culture
- the positive associations between improvement in school conditions for teaching and learning and better outcomes in terms of pupil behaviour, pupil attendance, and learner motivation and learning culture

All of these various statistical connections are examined¹⁵ and explained in more depth in the case studies .

The most frequently cited strategies used to improve student outcomes are shown in Table 1. There were broad similarities in strategies and actions cited by primary and secondary heads, although a change in school culture was cited more often by secondary heads.

Table 1
Most frequently cited actions or strategies leading to improved pupil outcomes

Primary heads	%	Secondary heads	%
Encouraging the use of data and research	28	Encouraging the use of data and research	34
Improved assessment procedures	28	Teaching policies and practices	28
Teaching policies and practices	26	Change in school culture	21
Changes to pupil target-setting	20	Providing and allocating resources	20
Strategic allocation of resources	20	Improved assessment procedures	19
Providing and allocating resources	19	Monitoring of departments and teachers	16
Promoting leadership development and CPD	16	Promoting leadership development and CPD	15

¹⁵ See DCSF (2009)

It is difficult to summarise the complexity of combinations and levels of leadership strategies that directly and indirectly affect school success in improving pupil outcomes. The following excerpts from our case studies do, however, give a flavour:

It's a shared vision. We in the senior management team know where we're going and we put a lot of effort into continuing professional development, looking at the training needs of staff, sharing that information. All senior managers, on a rolling programme, monitor their subject areas. We reflect on what we're doing, not just by ourselves. We involve staff in evaluations. We'll evaluate any new resources, any intervention strategies are evaluated and, if they're not effective, we discontinue them. If they're effective, we increase them.

Secondary deputy head

The head will steer the school in lots of different ways. He's very sure of where he wants it to go, so he's quite clear in his objectives, but he's also very collegiate in that he'll ask 'What do you think?' and 'How could your department and your key stage add to this?', 'What do you want to do?', 'What do you need training in?' or 'How do you want to develop?'

Primary teacher

We try to give people shared responsibilities and accountabilities. That happened through the introduction of teaching and learning responsibilities. Middle leaders are now very much responsible for their areas and there are very clear lines of accountability. So, it's almost as if they are units within the school, and my best leaders have been deployed to line managing the departments which are not doing so well.

Secondary head

Everybody is a leader of something. If you give people the ownership then they will do a good job. If I had to, I would say that my role is monitoring and evaluating what is going on in whatever way it is done, and if something isn't working, then that would be the time to find out why it wasn't.

Primary head

Claim 7: There are three broad phases of leadership success

Successful heads prioritise combinations of strategies and manage these within and across three broad phases of success.

Heads identified a number of broad phases in their leadership trajectories. While the number of phases differed, they could be classified under three broad headings – early (foundational), middle (developmental) and later (enrichment).

In the **early phase**, heads prioritised:

- improving the physical environment of the school to create more positive, supportive conditions for teaching and learning, and for teachers and pupils
- setting, communicating and implementing school-wide standards for pupil behaviour
- restructuring the senior leadership team, and its roles and responsibilities
- implementing performance management systems for all staff: there were differences in timing and emphasis between sectors, but in general this had the effect of distributing leadership more and led to the development of a set of organisational values

In the **middle phase**, heads prioritised:

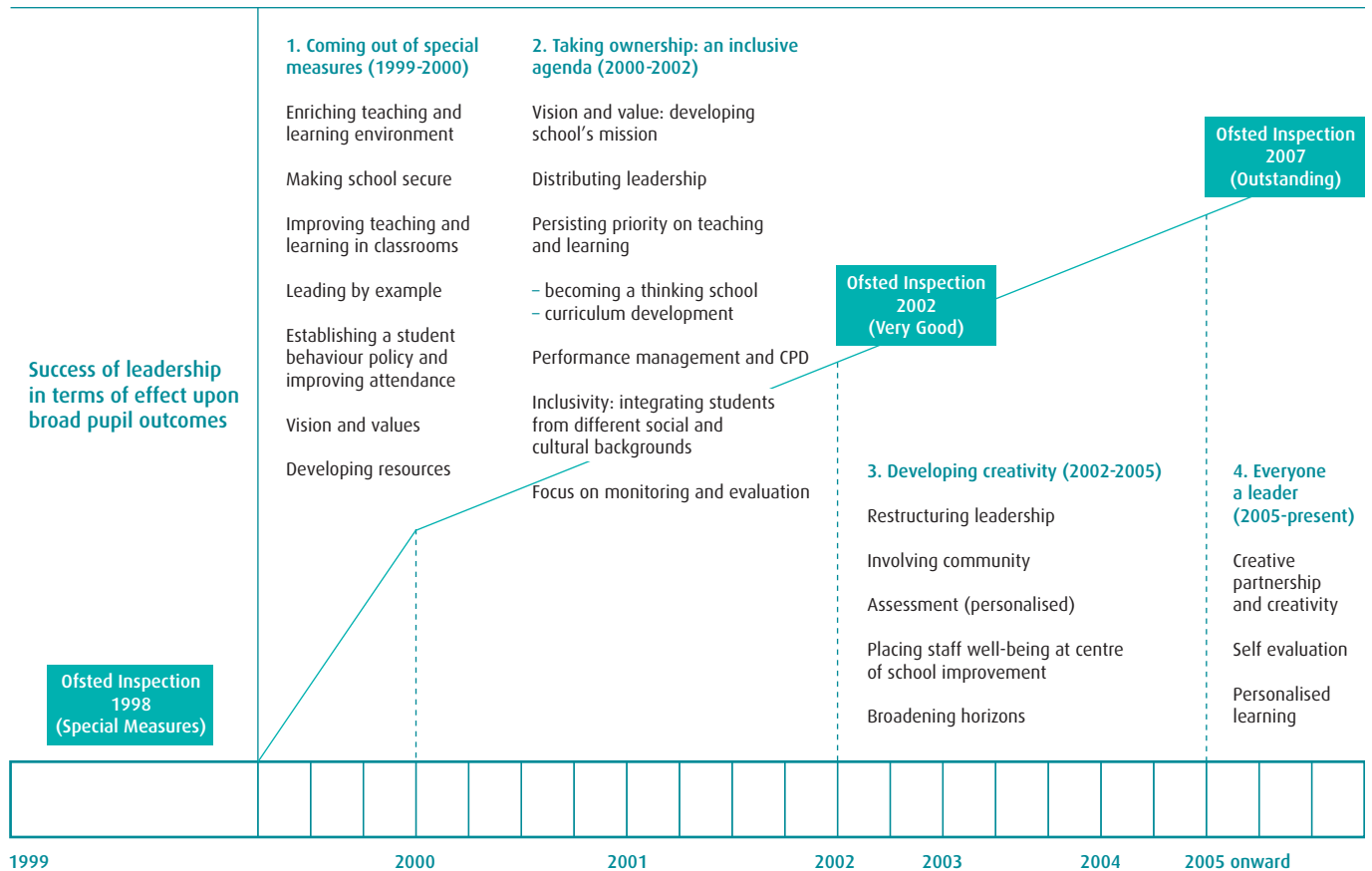
- the wider distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities
- a more regular and focused use of data to inform decision-making about pupil progress and achievement; learning objectives and target-setting were important practices in all case study schools

In the **later phase**, heads' key strategies related to personalising and enriching the curriculum, as well as wider distribution of leadership.

In schools in more challenging contexts, greater attention and efforts were made in the early phase to establish, maintain and sustain school-wide policies for pupil behaviour, improvements to the physical environment and improvements in the quality of teaching and learning than in other schools.

Figure 2 illustrates these three phases, the combinations of strategies used and the impact these had on the quality of one school.

Figure 2
Example of phases of leadership success in a primary school in very challenging circumstances



Our claim is illustrated, also, by extracts from secondary school case studies where the first phase was described as getting the staffing right, the second provided a greater focus on curriculum development, and the third was characterised by curriculum innovation and change.

Phase 1: Getting the staffing right

One thing I noticed that we all suffered from was [problems with the] retention and recruitment of teachers so we decided to grow our own. We applied to the ... Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), and the Open University to get permission to run our own school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) and to get validations for our postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) award. I think we're now into the 10th or 11th year of our teacher training and many of my staff and the staff in other schools are home-grown teachers and that was a major staging post in the development not only of my school but of other schools in its on-the-job teacher

training and teaching in the inner city. This is different to teaching in the leafy suburbs because there are so many challenges, which requires a special type of on-the-job training. We've had the Open University, Ofsted and the TDA commend us for our work. And it's recruiting teachers across the ethnic divide which is important and that's been a major success for our schools, for two reasons, one we were able to train our own teachers to teach in the way we want them to teach, and two by making some of our staff mentors and subject leaders and professional tutors for these students.

Secondary head

Phase 2: Increased focus on the curriculum

At the beginning I had a five-year plan, but looking back, everything was actually working towards the final goal. Every phase focused on making the next phase work. So to start with, I focused on the staffing and getting that right but other things moved on incrementally at the same time. Then the focus shifted to the curriculum. It's not like you can focus on one thing and forget everything else.

Secondary head

Now we've got...individual learning plans (ILPs), which are now linking the home and the school together. We ask for parents' comments and all our gifted and talented children now have an ILP, all the children on action have an ILP.

Primary head

If a girl comes here with a language other than English and it's examinable at GCSE and A-level, I'm going to encourage her to do it, and we have found that has had a spin-off effect on the achievement in the rest of the curriculum because many of these girls got As both at GCSE and AS- and A-level and that continues. So it's little things like that really, building on the strengths that the pupils come to school with that we've capitalised on and at the same time trying to fill in the gaps.

Secondary head

There have been a lot of things that I think together have moved. A more tailored curriculum, we have been moving towards a more personalised curriculum as well. Whole-school efforts, getting coursework finished – various things like that.

Secondary head

Each student is doing a personal curriculum, something that we have tailored for them to help them get the best out of the school while they are pursuing their various curriculum options.

Secondary head

We introduced an accelerated curriculum, so we have some Year 11 [pupils] now who have five top-grade GCSEs. We have one young woman with seven. So that was a dramatic change of attack. We knew the history and the geography departments were not performing well, so we made them go for humanities and early entry, so the children do a humanities course in Year 9, Year 10 with early entry, and that has worked up to a point.

Secondary head

The next difference that I made, alongside this I feel, was to do with the curriculum. When we first started, when I arrived, the curriculum was very simple in that it was mainly a GCSE programme for Key Stage 4. Key Stage 3 is much more governed and driven by the DfES sort of requirements, but with Key Stage 4 we began to be very creative with it, purely because we recognised the needs of the students.

Secondary head

Phase 3: Curriculum innovation and change

So we're at that stage where we have revised our curriculum provision for Year 7 and it is going to be competency-based. It has a cross-curricular approach, a cross-discipline approach. And the starting point is how do we deliver these competencies that we want the children to develop rather than how to teach in history, how to teach in geography. So we're starting with this level of competency and it is about creating learners who can work in the 21st century.

Secondary assistant head

I think the most exciting new initiative at the moment is the opening minds curriculum that we've just started in Year 7. That's going exceptionally well.

Secondary teacher

We're adapting the curriculum once again. We're trying to ensure that we've got a far more vocational offer, looking at more vocationally oriented qualifications. We're also trying to ensure that we deliver qualifications when they're appropriate to young people so there's a lot more been driven down into Year 9 now, in the belief that if a young person gets an accredited qualification earlier on in their life then they might actually value education because they don't see themselves as just coming through a sort of sausage factory.

Secondary head of department

Claim 8: Heads grow and secure success by layering leadership strategies and actions

Effective heads make judgements, according to their context, about the timing, selection, relevance, application and continuation of strategies that create the right conditions for effective teaching, learning and pupil achievement within and across broad development phases.

Figure 3 illustrates the way in which one secondary head built on strategies over time, laying the fundamental framework for success and moving through distinct phases in their approach.

Some strategies did not continue through each phase, an example being restructuring, which was a particular feature of the early phase. Others grew in importance and formed significant foundations on which other strategies could be built. For example, growing confidence in using data, which began in phase 2, was a necessary step on the way to developing a complex personalised curriculum in phases 3 and 4. The two strategies then continued to develop in tandem. It was clear that by the later phase, a range of strategic actions were being implemented simultaneously. Some had a higher priority than others, but it was the combination of actions, along with gradual broadening and deepening of strategies, that enabled the later strategies to succeed and made it possible for the head's leadership to have such a powerful impact on pupil outcomes.

So I've learnt that here about distributive leadership but I don't think the head would have done that in the early days, and if I was a new head in a school I wouldn't do it straightaway. I would want to know everything that was going on and I think it might be a phase of your leadership when distributive leadership comes in. As a new head you don't know how good your deputy or the senior leaders are. You'd want to be more involved initially until you felt you could let the reins go.

Primary head

In the beginning there was a lot of telling. It was not democratic. I was doing most of the decision-making. Also, I was doing a lot of the lesson observations and then, alongside me, the senior leadership team, when I felt they were ready. Now things have changed. Middle leaders in the second phase and now teachers and pupils participate in the decision-making and responsibilities are distributed across the school.

Primary head

Now, it's more of a focus on the creative and the enjoyment of speaking and listening. We've got a specialist teacher that comes in, we've got drama, and just linking the creative partnerships to get them involved in school. We've still got the focus of impacting it on writing, a very clear focus, but it's 'How can we inspire children?' I feel that's the phase the school's at now.

Primary deputy head

It was actually a period of a lot of struggles, the pupils were not always responsive...and some staff were very anti this as well. In this period a lot of those staff moved on, for a variety of reasons we lost a lot of staff. It allowed a lot of doors to be opened because you could employ staff who were in tune with the ethos that the new head wanted to implement now.

Secondary senior teacher

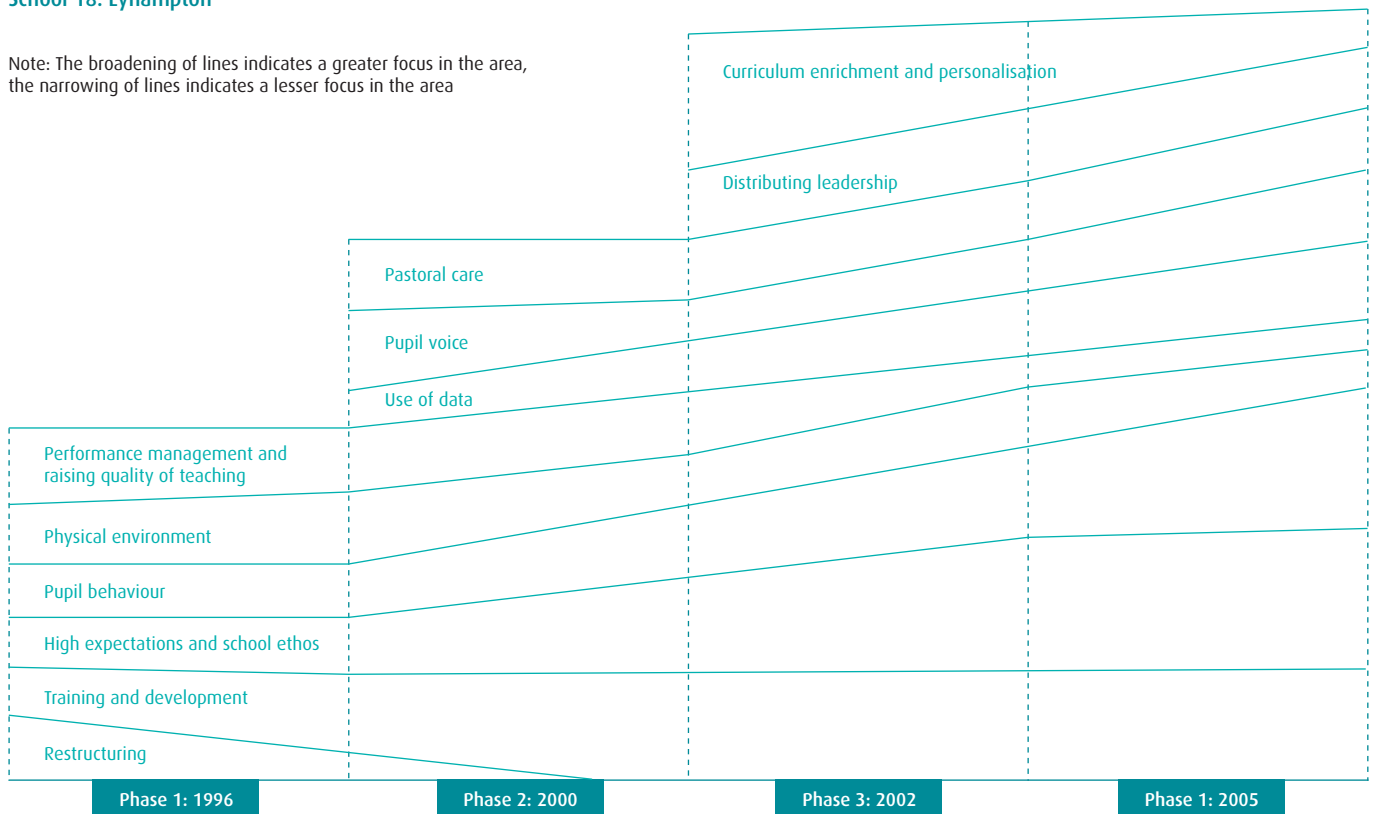
The new staffing structure that we went through as well, I think that's helped to add more direction. Rather than having a number of small departments I think everything is under more manageable umbrellas and we've got fewer people but more direction at middle management role, rather than spread between a lot of heads of small departments.

Secondary teacher

Figure 3
An Illustration of the Use of Layered Leadership Strategies in One Secondary School

School 18: Eyhampton

Note: The broadening of lines indicates a greater focus in the area, the narrowing of lines indicates a lesser focus in the area



Claim 9: Successful heads distribute leadership progressively

There is a connection between the increased distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities and the improvement of pupil outcomes.

In our previous review (Leithwood et al, 2006), we argued that school leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed. In the three years since then, we have accumulated a great deal more evidence about distributed leadership, the majority of which can be found in two sources¹⁶. The new evidence indicates that:

- leadership distribution is common in schools but patterns of distribution vary
- the distribution of leadership responsibility and power varies according to local context

Our research identified that the distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities was a developing feature in all schools and was initiated and nurtured by heads over time. Furthermore, the head's lines of success in Appendix 1 indicate likely links between increased distribution of leadership, improved Ofsted judgements and improved pupil outcomes.

Primary and secondary heads in the case studies were quick to distribute leadership by sharing new roles and responsibilities across the senior leadership team in the early or middle phase of their tenure. Over half of these heads noted, however, that beyond this small group of staff, they had been more autocratic in the early phase, working to build trust and confidence between themselves and a range of staff before moving towards a broader distribution of leadership roles, responsibilities and accountabilities in the middle and later phases of their leadership.

¹⁶ A text edited by Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss (2008) and a summary of research evidence on distributed leadership by Harris (2009)

This presents a pattern of progressive and selective leadership distribution over time, determined by four factors:

- the head’s judgement of what was right for the school at different phases of its development
- the head’s judgement about the readiness and ability of staff to lead
- the extent to which trust had been established
- the head’s own training, experience and capabilities

The layering of leadership strategies over time means that there will be a focus in some phases on particular combinations and, within these, differences in intensity of application. Such layering of strategies was shown in the case study data to be fundamental to leadership success:

I give them additional responsibilities, and as time goes by, the responsibilities change. One of the things I’m keen to do every year is to reflect on everybody’s responsibilities and change them so no one will have the same responsibility forever, because I think that is deskilling. It means you haven’t tested your management skills in a different area.

Primary head

We’ve always had good relationships, but I think that relationships develop over time and it’s not something that’s going to happen overnight because there’s got to be trust on both sides. They’ve got to trust me and I’ve got to trust them, but it is something that you can foster. It’s dependent on time, commitment, a degree of frankness and openness, but also a sense of being prepared to be challenged – and that’s not always easy, especially if you’re feeling a bit tentative or vulnerable.

Primary head

For the first five years of leadership here, I was more autocratic because I needed things to be done. I kept people in the loop but didn’t involve colleagues. The next five years I started to delegate leadership across the senior leadership team and middle managers.

Secondary head

In the early stages, when you have a very young staff that are quite inexperienced, you take far more of a direct leadership role. As the staff become more experienced, you are able to [delegate] a lot of stuff to them, to take control of and to work with. So, there are phases of distribution, depending on the staff.

Primary head

Claim 10: The successful distribution of leadership depends on the establishment of trust

Trust is essential for the progressive and effective distribution of leadership. It is closely associated with a positive school ethos, improved conditions for teaching and learning, an enhanced sense of teacher autonomy in the classroom and sustained improvement in pupil behaviour, engagement and outcomes.

Previous research has established strong links between school improvement and trust between head and teacher, teacher and teacher and school professionals and parents¹⁷. Research has also claimed that trust in leaders both determines organisational performance and is a product of organisational performance¹⁸. Our research confirms and extends these findings.

The distribution of leadership over time by heads in this research was a clear expression of the importance they placed on gaining the trust of others and extending trust to them. The heads played an active and instrumental role in the distribution of leadership and this increased the commitment and self-efficacy of staff.

For these heads, effective distributed leadership depended upon five key factors of trust:

- **values and attitudes:** beliefs that people cared for their students and would work hard for their benefit if they were allowed to pursue objectives they were committed to
- **disposition to trust:** experience of benefits derived from previous trusting relationships
- **trustworthiness:** the extent to which others trusted them
- **repeated acts of trust:** enabling the increasing distribution of leadership roles, responsibilities and accountabilities and broadening of stakeholder participation
- **building and reinforcing individual relational and organisation trust:** through interactions, structures and strategies that demonstrated consistency in values and vision and resulted in success

Recent research finds a significant relationship between a co-ordinated form of leadership distribution described as planned alignment and teachers’ academic optimism¹⁹. Planned alignment involves members of a leadership group planning their actions together, periodically reviewing the impact these actions and revising them accordingly. Academic optimism is a composite of teacher trust, teacher efficacy and organisational good citizenship, all of which are associated with student achievement.

Building and sustaining trust and trustworthiness played a key part in the longer term success of the case study schools. Having trust made it more feasible to achieve changes over a range of aspirations, expectations and practices and heads were prepared to take informed risks as a result.

¹⁷ Bryk & Schneider (2002)

¹⁸ Louis (2007:4)

¹⁹ Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon & Yashkina (2007); Woolfolk Hoy, Hoy, Kurz (2008)

And things kind of developed and sparked something else off, so the environment was definitely the key thing. Then, when it was the first Inset day and I talked to the staff, I talked a lot about my beliefs and my expectations and I suppose I felt that trust was a huge part of a successful school. I acknowledged that I'd just come out of the classroom as well and [I knew] what it was like in the classroom.

Primary head

Traditionally people see monitoring as something that happens to them by people who are above them. Because the culture here is so 'everyone has been here a long time and knows everyone' the monitoring is slightly easier because you don't feel threatened. There is a trust there. People recognise what your expertise is. So when you say 'this would be even better if...' they know that you know what you're talking about. We are trying to be self-monitoring. And that's to do with the self-evaluation process.

Secondary teacher

The culture and ethos of the school I think is one of its huge strengths and it's about giving ownership to all of the staff in the school, everyone having responsibility and feeling that they are a vital part and they are going to take a vital part in decision-making. So how I lead is by giving that power to other staff to make their decisions.

Secondary head

I think there's trust and very much allowing my staff to take a free rein over my department. So rather than it coming from the top, it's actually the other way. I've shared my vision with them, whereas in some places they're not very directed from the top about what they should be doing. Communication is the key thing, having that link and having that open door with senior members of staff is a crucial thing. So, they're approachable in terms of any ideas or queries or questions you've got.

Secondary head of department

I don't think that anyone learns – whether they are a child or an adult – they might do what is expected of them but you don't learn very much if you are frightened. What you have got to have is a climate of trust. For teachers it is professional trust. I don't pretend always to get things right, quite often I get things wrong. So, you have to give credit and praise where it is due, and you've got to be prepared to say 'How can you make it better?', 'Have you tried such and such?'

Primary head

People seem to know what they are doing and I have worked in schools before where everything is laid out for you – 'you do [it] like this, this and this' – and it was very different amongst the staff. There is something about being trusted I think. I think it is high accountability: low trust; high trust: low accountability. I think it's the second one. People feel that they can get on with their jobs and they are trusted.

Primary teacher

[The head] obviously trusts my decision-making in that kind of area. It's a significant thing for a member of staff to come into the school. The fact that he'd trust me to make that decision and not cock it up completely, is good. So, I think he's become increasingly able to do that kind of thing. And I think it's because we've become more successful, and probably the people within the structures are the right people to do that, but obviously that acknowledgement of what's happening is, in general, quite positive because we've become quite successful.

Secondary head of department

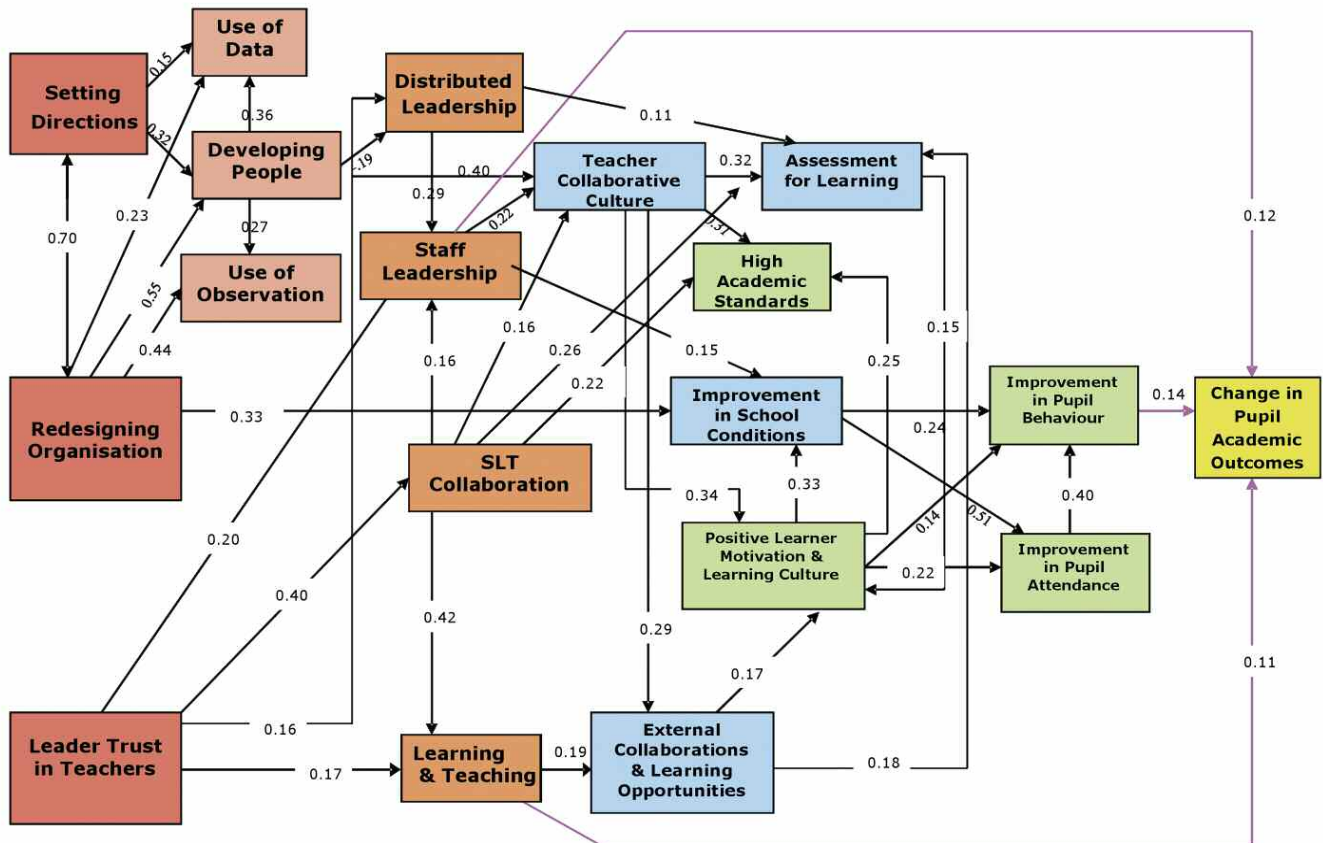
Conclusions

- The head is the main source of leadership in a school and plays the lead role in promoting change for improvement. Strategies that improve pupils' measurable attainments represent an essential layer of successful leaders' work and strategies that build and sustain a range of other personal and social wellbeing outcomes represent another essential layer (claim 1). Successful heads use their practical knowledge and intuition and draw from a repertoire of leadership strategies (claim 2).
 - Schools that achieve and sustain improvement in pupils' academic performance and wellbeing are led by heads who have strong ethical values and moral purpose. Heads nurture success in schools through sustained articulation, communication and the application of core values with a range of internal and external stakeholders, using high levels of intellectual and interpersonal qualities and skills (claim 3).
 - Successful heads use the same basic leadership practices, but there is no single model for achieving success. Differences in experience and context affect the nature, direction and pace of leadership actions (claims 4 and 5).
 - Heads achieve success by progressively layering combinations of strategies and actions to fit their purpose. These are applied over broad phases of school improvement, with consideration given to individuals' professional experience and ability and to internal and external policy environments (claims 6, 7 and 8).
 - Trust and trustworthiness among staff, pupils and the community are key elements in the progressive distribution of leadership. Building trust requires high levels of diagnostic skill, the possession of high levels of emotional and intellectual qualities, and an ability to combine positional power with personal and social influence (claims 9 and 10).
- Our research demonstrates conclusively that there is no single, best-fit leadership approach: successful leadership is context sensitive.**
- It also shows that improving the cognitive, emotional and practical capacities of heads to achieve effectiveness and broader success requires training and development programmes that pay attention to:**
- the challenges of the particular personal, organisational and policy contexts in which heads work or are likely to work
 - the development of clear sets of values, interpersonal qualities, diagnostic skills and judgemental capacities

Appendix 1

Figure A1

Example of leadership practices and changes in secondary pupil outcomes over three years: a structural equation model (N=309)



The path analysis above shows the processes that link effective leadership at difference levels with improved school outcomes. The lines between the boxes show how they all link together, with the figures indicating the significance of the link. A detailed explanation of the methods and results is provided in the final report of the project²⁰.

²⁰ See DCSF (2009)

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