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Resource

System leadership through extended headship roles

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Abstract

Succession planning and the development of system leadership are 'hot topics' in education at the start of the 21st century. The widely held concern that we might be about to encounter a loss of 'baby boomer' headteachers leaving gaps that would prove difficult to fill has exercised the country's educationalists for the past decade.

At the same time the rapid development of system leadership – experienced headteachers undertaking significant outreach work and often supporting schools who are struggling to raise standards – has become a feature of the educational landscape.

This report explores whether one might support the other, namely, whether development of system leadership might also encourage the development of tomorrow's leaders.

Introduction

System leadership in education is where headteachers accept system-wide roles to support the improvement of other schools as well as their own. It offers to provide a solution for an impending leadership crisis with a generation of 'baby boomer' headteachers about to retire and with insufficient numbers of deputies coming forward to take their place. It was developed as a way of spreading the expertise of fewer headteachers around more schools.

Evidence for the impending crisis can easily be found. For example, in [Leadership succession: an overview](#) (NCSL 2008: 5), recruitment difficulties are highlighted:

Almost one-third of primary and secondary headships are re-advertised because no suitable candidate comes forward. Nearly a quarter of heads are aged over 55, and as they retire over the next five years, the profession will be deprived of a great swathe of experienced leaders. At the same time too few candidates are putting themselves forward for the role.

Retention of existing headteachers through providing fresh challenges to keep them interested in the role is affirmed in [Retaining school leaders](#) (NCSL 2007: 35), which suggests 'a range of factors to consider concerning the retention and engagement of older leaders... These include intellectual challenges and a desire to mentor and coach other leaders'.

[What are we learning about... Attracting talented candidates for headship?](#) (NCSL 2009) lists factors that both attract and deter teachers from seeking promotion to headship. Attractions include job satisfaction from being able to shape a school, to influence children's lives, to make a difference at a strategic level and team working. However, it is asserted that deterrents outweigh these attractions for many potential headteachers. These include stress relating to fears that the role will have a significant adverse effect on work/life balance, having less contact with students, increased administration, external interferences and inspection demands and a lack of confidence about being able to carry out the role. This research study looks at the extent to which system leadership is attracting rather than deterring headteachers to seek to continue the headship role.

System leadership that supports school improvement is now central to the role of an increasingly large minority of headteachers. These school leaders have taken on an increasing amount of outreach work, for example secondary headteachers working as executive heads of feeder primary schools and, since 2006, taking on the role of National Leaders of Education (NLEs). NLEs have been involved in supporting a range of school improvement programmes including through the City Challenge Leadership Strategy and the Gaining Ground programme.

Involvement in system leadership has had a positive impact not just on headteacher motivation, but also in developing senior colleagues and preparing them for future headship. This report considers the system leadership work of four headteachers deemed by Ofsted as 'outstanding'. It considers the impact of such involvement on these headteachers and their schools, and whether they have been kept interested and refreshed, and so retained in post, rather than needing to seek a new headship to provide a fresh challenge. In addition it considers whether their schools have also benefited from, for example, an influx of new ideas, continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities, internal promotions, the retention of key staff and financially.

The report looks at how and why headteachers involved themselves in outreach work in the first place, and whether it served to keep them in post for longer. It considers the role of governors in the process and also whether the leadership opportunities provided for those staff left 'running the school' in the heads' absence provided an additional unexpected and positive outcome – drawing them towards headship having tasted elements of the job and realising it was both doable and enjoyable.

Through a review of the literature and interviews with headteachers, senior and middle leaders and governors, the project focused on the following key research questions:

- Does being involved in outreach work retain heads in headship for longer?
- Does outreach work impact positively on other middle and senior leaders and even encourage them to aspire to headship themselves?
- What motivates serving headteachers to get involved in outreach work in the first place, how has this developed and what systems are in place to ensure their school is well led and managed in their absence?
- What role is played by governors in this process?
- What impact has system leadership involvement had in schools where the current headteacher is an NLE and where the schools have been involved in a wide range of outreach activity over a significant period of time?

Literature review

There is a wealth of literature material about the predicted crisis in the recruitment and retention of headteachers and proposed strategies to deal with this. There is also a growing body of literature on both leadership sustainability and system leadership. However, as yet, there is very little literature extant on NLEs and the reasons that motivate them to engage in 'outreach work'.

Leadership sustainability as a solution to the crisis in headship recruitment

There is a wide range of literature proposing formal strategies to ease the recruitment crisis. Involvement in system leadership is proposed as one such strategy. For example, Higham Hopkins and Matthews (2009: 19–20) suggest 'System leadership is a concept whose time has come', and argue that it has the potential to resolve the emerging challenges of a declining supply of well qualified school leaders. It involves the 'development of opportunities for deputies and middle leaders to experience aspects of headship at first hand before taking on full headteacher responsibilities', thereby sharing the load with current headteachers at the same time as nurturing the headteachers of the future.

However, it is not just a matter of shifting perceptions about system leadership but also the need to have robust systems to develop capacity from within through succession planning. Hargreaves and Fink (2006: 2) warn of the danger that 'while heroic leaders can achieve great things through investing vast amounts of their time and energy... this energy is rarely inexhaustible and many of these leaders... ultimately burn out'. They go on to discuss how in the corporate world companies 'grow their own leadership instead of importing stars' (2006: 5), and refer to four kinds of succession planning: planned and unplanned continuity and discontinuity. Planned continuity is best where:

'insiders... have been groomed as successors, can work well in schools that are on a clear upward curve of improvement'

(2006: 62).

Business succession literature now rather advocates succession management – creating a culture of leadership development throughout the organisation from which chief executives can more easily be drawn. Liebman and Bauer (1996, cited in Hargreaves & Fink 2006: 72) argue that:

'... one of the best ways to secure successful succession is to stretch and spread leadership across people... to distribute and develop leadership so that successors will emerge more readily and take over more easily.'

This would apply to National Support Schools where NLEs could prepare their successors as they provide capacity building for the time they are out of school.

Therefore [Succession Planning: Key themes for governors](#) (NCSL/NGA 2008: 25) suggests making 'the job attractive and stimulating enough to keep them [heads] engaged, affording them professional development opportunities to gain experience outside the school on secondment or as advisors... enjoy a reasonable work-life balance... sharing leadership responsibilities with other senior leaders' so that headteachers will 'return refreshed reinvigorated and with new ideas to apply in school'. The research also shows that deputies and assistant heads who are given a taste of headship – through secondment or by standing in for their head – are more likely to go on to apply for permanent headship. Creasy et al. (2004: 25) describe a six-part model to support the development of such school leaders within a school setting. [Step 6, Growing leadership talent](#), suggests providing opportunities to 'exercise leadership, giving staff opportunities to take risks and to try out leadership tasks and placing emergent leaders in key roles'. All of this is increasingly possible with the increasing outreach work of NLEs and their schools.

Leadership Succession: An overview (NCSL 2008: 8) reinforces this point by suggesting that:

‘Potential heads need to be given more opportunities to lead and at earlier stages in their careers. Being able to try out the leadership role for size – will give them a taste of what leadership means in its day-to-day reality. Research indicates that those who have tried headship or aspects of it are more likely to believe that they have the ability to do it, and to want to do it. By trying out the role, they also become more confident’.

Emerging Patterns of School Leadership: Current practice and future directions (NCSL 2009: 12) equally goes on to claim:

‘... the increased external demands on headteachers has created a shift in the leadership and management roles of deputy heads... They are taking on more strategic roles and feel comfortable with being the most senior person on site for days and on occasions weeks at a time... [this has had a] knock on effect on the role of assistant heads... now engaged in significant managerial tasks... previously the preserve of deputy heads... [providing] opportunities for personal and professional growth that were simply not possible in the past... and at earlier stages of their careers than would have been possible in the past’.

The following table (in Pont, Nusche & Moorman 2008, vol 1: 85, citing PricewaterhouseCooper’s [2007] work on different models of school leadership in England) effectively sums up benefits and constraints when comparing system leadership with a conventional model of school leadership.

Model	Potential benefits	Potential constraints
<p>Traditional</p> <p>Exclusively teaching staff, with head, deputy and assistant heads</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear structure • Clear accountability • Focus on teaching and learning • Reassurance for parents and wider community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme levels of accountability for heads • Problems with work/life balance for heads • Lack of flexibility • Less time for strategic than operational leadership • Potential isolation for heads
<p>System leadership</p> <p>Range of roles heads undertake beyond the school eg, consultant leader, executive headship, NLEs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased capacity • Increased creativity and innovation • More strategic long-term approach • Improved succession planning • Application at local to national level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constrained by capacity in the school • Challenge to traditional notions of leadership

The development of NLEs as system leaders

Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009: 11–12) outline the emergence of NLEs from 2004 onwards. They go on to provide a blueprint for the kind of headteacher who has developed system leadership over the intervening years: ‘Headteachers of schools that have sustained their own improvement over a number of years... [who] are increasingly taking on roles that put their moral purpose and strategic intent to the task of improving the wider system...’ (2009: 31), who ‘build confidence, capacity and self esteem in the people with whom they work as well as institutional capacity through growing other leaders... [who] distribute huge responsibility and accountability to a range of leaders in the school...’ (2009: 117). They also identified the rise of NLE deputies who were starting to take over as successor heads in their own schools and were also being appointed to the headships of the schools they had supported. This is further exemplified by Pont, Nusche and Hopkins (2008, vol 2.: 136), who describe an NLE head as demonstrating ‘a commitment to distributing leadership through empowerment, trust, sharing, delegation and creating opportunities for development of others’, and go on to make further reference to the power of distributive leadership within a school.

Matthews and Hill (2010: 7) detail the skills and experiences NLEs need to possess to be accredited as key national system leaders. These include being ‘a leader who has worked within and beyond their individual organisations; sharing and harnessing the best resources that the system can offer to bring about improvement in their own and other organisations’.

In [Leadership succession: an overview](#) (NCSL 2008: 9), NLEs are described as ‘working beyond the school in a way that can be invigorating for headteachers and it can therefore have implications for recruitment and retention... successful heads can be encouraged to stay on at school rather than moving to seek out fresh challenges in another school or organisation. As well as presenting opportunities for heads, leading beyond the school has a knock on effect in terms of leadership development elsewhere in the school...’, thus reinforcing the point already made above regarding the value of opportunities given to others within the school to develop their leadership capacities.

It would be tempting to imagine that new roles for headteachers within system leadership might lead to a reduction in responsibilities and a lightening of loads. However, Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008, vol 1: 84) make the point that ‘the principal’s responsibilities in such context are in no way diminished; they are if anything more sophisticated and demanding of expertise’. Such demands, however, are more likely to provide the element of challenge that motivates towards retention rather than resignation or retirement. However, some headteachers may feel, with Hargreaves, that a positive view of system leadership has been ‘... undermined by a standards agenda which forces individual schools to be accountable and compete in a quasi-market’ (Hargreaves, 2007, cited in Ingate, 2010: 21), and therefore echo Ingate’s view that ‘while both collaboration and competition currently prevail, headteachers may feel overburdened with so many conflicting priorities. This, along with post-recession threats to cuts in public spending, could potentially damage the gains made by system leadership over the last few years’ (2010: 21).

There is now, however, a significant accumulation of literature that points to the benefits of system leadership and suggests that more now needs to be done to develop other headteachers as system leaders and to encourage other governors to the view that this kind of 21st-century headship is for the good of their own schools as well as those they commit themselves to supporting. Matthews and Hill (2010: 105) have gone further, and suggested that effective system leadership ‘will ensure that there is a critical mass of flexible, high-quality support to help deliver the aspiration of every school being a good school’, and look forward to future development of the NLE role: ‘NLEs will face new opportunities and challenges as the Conservative Liberal Democrat government develops and implements its plans for school improvement... NLEs will surely constitute a growing and increasingly indispensable part of the school system in the years ahead’ (Matthews & Hill, 2010: 16).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding this very recent, seminal work by Matthews and Hill, there is little else in the way of literature regarding the role and impact of NLEs/National Support Schools, on what motivates them to engage in 'outreach work' and whether their 'stand in' deputies are also encouraged on to headship because of this enhanced role. While there is a considerable amount written on succession planning, there is relatively little on the positive impact of outreach work on the schools providing the support and on the impact involvement in this work has on retaining current headteachers for longer while also growing tomorrow's leaders. What there is focuses predominantly on the impact on the schools receiving support and not on the schools undertaking it.

None of the research literature appears to have considered the impact that outreach work has had on retaining (or otherwise) headteachers in post, or whether it has encouraged senior leaders in these schools to move on to headship having tasted aspects of headship while 'holding the fort', although it is probably still too early to know if the experiences of these 'caretaker' senior leaders, acting up when their NLE head is involved in system leadership work beyond the school, encourages more senior staff to become headteachers of the future. It is hoped that the interviews carried out for this present research study, albeit restricted in scope and timescale, will contribute in some small way towards redressing that balance.

Methodology

This study followed a qualitative research methodology, and was conducted by a secondary headteacher with experience of significant involvement in outreach work as an NLE, using a semi-structured interview approach. The interview style allowed for further probing and a more detailed level of response, supported by a set of open-ended questions that allowed comparisons to be made between interviewees' responses.

The questions were trialled before the interviews were undertaken. This helped to refine and refocus the questions, and enabled the use of a group interview approach for interviews with senior and middle leaders where this was possible.

The research focused on four highly successful secondary schools where the serving head was an NLE, had been in post for around 10 years and was involved in extensive outreach work as a nationally recognised system leader. On average they were out of school at least a day a week, with backfill leadership arrangements in place.

In two of the schools, face-to-face interviews were undertaken with the headteacher, the chair of governors, between two and three senior leaders and between one and three middle leaders, each in a group. In the other two schools telephone interviews were undertaken for the same groupings of staff and governors – but on a one-to-one basis.

The following questions provided the structure for the interviews and were sent in advance to participants.

Headteachers

- What kind of outreach work are you involved with/how much time do you spend out of school?
- How did you get involved in this work and why do you continue to do this?
- What impact, if any, has this had on your decision to stay in headship for longer?
- What has been the impact on senior and middle leadership? What backfill arrangements are there in the school?

Senior and middle leaders

- What impact has there been with your headteacher involved in outreach work?
- What arrangements are there for backfill?
- How has this impacted on your own work and role?
- How has this impacted on your desire to become a head?

Chairs of governors

- Was the decision to allow the head to undertake work beyond the school an easy one to take?
- Why was this agreed?
- What are the arrangements in place to cover for the head in his/her absence?
- What do you think has been the impact on the school and on the head?

The research was undertaken between January and March 2010. The findings detail the interviewees' experiences as they recounted them and are reported anonymously. The research focused on the perceptions and no external verification of their responses through triangulation was sought.

Main findings

Headteacher perspectives

School A: A very large mixed London 11–19 multi-ethnic community comprehensive with below national average free school meals

The headteacher was in his second headship with 19 years of headship experience in total. He had been involved in outreach work since 2004 and became involved almost by chance through contacts he already had. He made a point of mentioning the school's specialisms as he felt they had facilitated the development of outreach work.

Since 2004 he had worked for about a day a week supporting a range of headteachers and other senior staff in challenging urban schools. His own school had been growing in size over this time, adding first a Year 7 and now a post-16 level. As a result, restructuring the senior team to provide backfill was simply a continuance of the normal policy of building capacity internally.

His senior team had increased from seven to eleven members as a result of expansion and outreach demands. His approach was very much focused on distributed leadership with clearly defined roles and delegated responsibilities:

“We grow our own leaders here, from the strong middle leaders in the school already; this is just part of the culture... I am less hands on now as a result [of this work]... I am not bogged down in day-to-day dealing with minor incidents of misbehaviour. I have no worries for the school; they can get on and develop without me always here... though you need to ensure good systems that work effectively.”

When asked why he undertook outreach work he was very clear on the wide range of benefits, particularly in terms of his own CPD and motivation:

“I have a strong belief in Fullan's ‘moral purpose’, working to support one's own community is how it should be... I also get stimulated doing this work, it's very good for me, it keeps me excited and makes me reflect about my own school. Having been a head for 19 years I couldn't keep doing the same things year on year... This is my continuous professional development, my performance management objectives are around this kind of thing.”

But he also talked about the wider benefits to staff and to the school:

“It's also very good for my staff to be given opportunities and responsibilities; if people are out [doing outreach work] this frees space for others to step up inside the school, [and] this is all for the good. It also encourages and emboldens others [from inside the school] to do similar work – for example one of my deputies has become a leading light on the use of Middle Leaders of Education and he is also out of school developing others... The school gets known which is also a good thing and as for ideas you can keep ahead of the game.”

When asked if this work had kept him in the role of headship for longer – or had the opposite effect – he was again very clear as to the positive retention benefits:

“This has become part and parcel of the work we do as heads – heads' roles have changed and become much more strategic... I've grown and my school has grown too. I might have gone for another headship in a more challenging school had I not been involved. Governors have retained me here by allowing me this new role.”

School B: A large mixed London 11–19 foundation, multi-ethnic comprehensive school with higher than national average free school meals

The headteacher was in her first headship and had been 13 years as head at the school. She had become increasingly involved in outreach work over this time, from small beginnings working with her local higher education training provider but becoming increasingly involved as a consultant leader in a City Challenge area, supporting a number of schools in challenging circumstances often with startling success. She now had a high profile role heading up the operational aspects for a City Challenge area and this took her out of school for at least one day a week. Meanwhile a number of other senior and middle leaders in the school were also involved running school improvement initiatives hosted by the school and working hands on in schools needing support. She, in common with the head of School A, mentioned the important role of the school's specialisms in developing networking, partnership and fulfilling requests for outreach support.

Her senior team had grown in size from seven to eleven, concomitant with an increase in student numbers. She was concerned with the development of middle leaders with a view to adding to and replacing senior leaders through a philosophy of 'growing your own'. Linked with this was a philosophy of distributed leadership, empowering 'Excellent self-starters who don't need managing'. She felt that this allowed her a wider outreach focus, for example there was now an associate head who had overall responsibility for the school in her absence which, as a result, reduced her required involvement in day-to-day operational matters.

When asked whether this outreach work was keeping her in headship longer she reflected:

"It has kept me in this headship, and in headship for longer... I might have moved on to another school after five or six years otherwise."

As far as other benefits to staff and the school were concerned, she felt:

"It has also helped my professional development hugely which I have fed back into my own school... There have been lots of opportunities for others too who might [otherwise] have left... Fresh work can be frenetic [we don't turn opportunities away] but it also gives energy and dynamism which offset any disruption which might be caused with colleagues out of school."

School C: A large mixed 11–16 faith school with low free school meals situated in a large town in southern England

The headteacher here was in her first headship and had been a head for 14 years. She began her involvement in outreach work by being personally recommended to mentor new headteachers within the diocese. In common with the view expressed by the head of School A, she articulated a sense of “moral purpose to support those in our wider family”.

She had also been involved in consultancy for schools through National College and SSAT (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust) programmes, and had undertaken three executive headships for schools in special measures. This outreach work required her to be out of school for anything between a day a week to full time, and in her absence her own very successful school was well led by an excellent long-term deputy and a range of other ‘home-grown’ leaders, encouraged to ‘step up to the plate from within’, which resulted in several moving on to headship positions themselves.

Her own role within this philosophy of distributed leadership had been to develop:

“More of a helicopter view... and not get drawn into the minutiae of the day-to-day running [of the school]. I don’t see parents and I don’t deal with day-to-day discipline. I don’t teach but I do take assemblies and do some cover too.”

When asked if the outreach work had retained her in headship for longer, she felt that her dedication to her own school would have made it difficult to leave anyway. However, she added:

“This kind of work keeps me fresh. I don’t want to go back to basics and do what heads did traditionally; I think there is a better use of my time than that. I want to have wider experiences and influence on more schools too.”

School D: A very large mixed 11–19 foundation comprehensive city school in the southern half of the country with lower than average free school meals

The headteacher was in his tenth year and his first headship. He cited the start of his involvement in outreach as “mere chance”. It started almost from the outset as his school began expanding due to local population growth and at the same time the acquisition of specialisms drew him and his school into networking and partnerships. This then dictated the development of a distributed leadership approach:

“I had my eyes opened to what was new out there... In order to ensure sufficient support for our own school at all times we were forced to look... at our own leadership structures as we grew and took on more outreach work. Excellent heads of school [at deputy head level] run the school very well in my absence – and in my presence! They have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and that makes all the difference.”

Now, as executive principal, he was in the school for approximately half the week, being involved as a nationally known system leader working for a range of organisations, including the then Department for Children, Schools and Families, in extensive and successful outreach work provided not just by the head but by a range of other staff from the school, including 15 advanced skills teachers (ASTs).

When asked if this kind of work, with the additional pressures it inevitably brought, might make him seek alternative roles, or even a different kind of headship, the answer was an unequivocal:

“No, I don’t need another job as I am in another job already! This headship bears no resemblance to the role of 10 years ago. This is so interesting I am not even looking. What’s key for me is that I am not doing the same things again and again year on year.”

Senior leader perspectives

Characteristic of the four schools was the depth of experience and significant expertise of the senior teams, tasked with running these successful schools when the headteacher was involved in outreach work. Without exception all the senior leaders interviewed commented very positively on the outreach work undertaken by the headteacher and also by other members of staff, not really seeing any drawbacks but identifying significant benefits for the school in general and the headteacher and themselves in particular.

Strong and clear school systems, experienced and capable senior leaders with clearly defined roles and responsibilities and the authority to act in the head's absence, the identification and development of staff into middle leadership roles and beyond were cited in all four schools as ingredients of success, allowing the leadership of the schools to be effective in the heads' absence.

"... the head is like the conductor of the orchestra, she doesn't need to play every instrument... Her being out [of school] has provided opportunities for others to develop."

"It's given us... a taste of what it's like [to be a head]."

However, the positives were not just for the senior leaders themselves. Financial benefits and the introduction of new ideas to the school were also cited:

"Outreach work brings resources into the school. It also allows others to gain experience and provides a higher profile for the school, we also know about what is happening nationally and this gives us a head start on new initiatives."

When asked if there were any perceived drawbacks to the extensive involvement in outreach work, views varied. One school couldn't think of any such drawbacks; others thought the downsides were more perceived than actual. Several, however, voiced the need to explain to staff about the emerging role of the 21st-century head who was not always in school and only concerned with day-to-day operational issues.

"The hero head no longer spends his/her time sorting out behaviour... It's about system leadership, new ideas and teamwork now."

When asked if having tasted elements of it, senior leaders would now like to go on to headship themselves, interviewees in each school, and across the sample, divided sharply into two camps. With some it was a resounding "yes", and others a definite "no", not because they had been put off the work through their extended experiences, but because they were nearing the end of their teaching career and being a deputy was where they were and had always wanted to be, and satisfaction could still be gained from the present leadership role.

"I have responsibility here that many heads have. So in that way I am less motivated to move on to headship... I enjoy working with X [the head], it's great fun. If X was to leave well maybe that would be different and I might go for headship then!"

However, for others, the opportunities provided had motivated them to consider and even, in one case, become a head. As one senior leader interviewed, who had just been appointed to headship, attested:

"... this work helps you know if you want to be a head and has given me the drive and excitement for what I think will be one of the best jobs available."

Middle leader perspectives

Unlike the senior leaders interviewed, middle leaders taking part in this research varied in experience, from some longstanding members of staff to staff newer to the role. Additionally, their views about whether they wanted to progress further in their career and ultimately become a head also varied.

Typical of comments about the benefits and drawbacks of outreach work (especially in respect to the head and other senior staff being out of school) was the following indication of an effective distributed and systematic leadership approach:

“We all know who to go to and there are good systems in place. We work together as a team very well.”

However, this view was not universally supported:

“Z is an incredibly good head and very good at communicating but when the head isn’t here we sometimes have to wait for decisions.”

What was consistent, however, was their knowledge of the outreach work the head and the school were undertaking, and their view of its importance and benefits to them as individuals through a positive impact on their teaching.

“We have met with staff outside the school because of the head’s networking. This is giving us opportunities... makes me realise the value of and importance of working with other schools.”

“I have learned a lot from seeing teachers in a different context and trying to help them.”

Particularly for experienced leaders, the opportunity to work with staff in other schools was highly motivating.

“It has been a privilege to go in and suggest [to staff in other schools] a few simple systems... you can see the impact... [the head of department] began to believe in herself and change – I could see a complete transformation in her... It sharpened my practice too, it makes you rethink what you do.”

A number of middle leaders clearly felt they were part of an ‘outreach culture’ which had been established in their school and which they were now committed to. They were able to articulate the wider reasons for their school undertaking such work and to justify what might otherwise have been seen as an intrusion into the smooth running of the school. Reasons ranged from moral purpose to responsibility for the next generation of leaders (internal and external) to regenerating the school itself:

“It’s the moral purpose – for us to help others. We have built capacity and it doesn’t impact [negatively] on our students. If we felt it did we wouldn’t do it.”

“The head leads a culture of change where we look out beyond ourselves and challenge the way we work... we learn from others no matter what.”

When asked if they wanted to be headteachers as a result of these experiences, views varied from a definite “I don’t want to be a head” to “I am not looking elsewhere as the job is so satisfying here”. In these examples and others there was a sense that as the traditional role of middle (and even senior) leaders in school was enhanced, that this might be keeping staff in those roles and almost ‘preventing’ them from moving on and moving up. However, a more commonly held view was that a focus on headship by middle leaders was looking too far ahead, but the rich variety of experiences offered as a result of the school’s involvement in outreach work had stimulated an interest in possible deputy headship – a role seen as achievable and desirable.

“Staff development is amazing here... I’ve been here only 18 months and already I’ve been promoted. Three senior leaders have gone on to headship. I don’t have an aspiration to be a head but I may become a deputy – one step at a time.”

Governor perspectives

The governors interviewed were all longstanding chairs of governors who knew the school very well, and had a close working relationship with their headteacher. In all cases they were very positive about the headteacher being involved in outreach work, both for the sake of the headteacher and for the benefits it brought to the school. They confirmed that other governors had agreed to this outward-looking role as well and felt similarly positive about the benefits of the work.

“It’s been good for the head, developing her and bringing things back into school... It’s also been a good way of keeping talented people...”

The chairs of governors not only had a good understanding of how their schools were led and managed but could also articulate why outreach did not disrupt the smooth running of their schools. At the same time they saw how it encouraged the development of leaders from within and even helped as a retention policy.

“... in the head’s absence we trust Y [the deputy]. There are very clear lines of responsibility. It also contributes to middle leaders’ career development and job satisfaction, there are avenues for them here and this is good for retention.”

“It has given some of those just below headship a real flavour of what the job [of head] really is.”

Governors recognised the retention benefits accruing from involvement in outreach work, both in the retention of senior staff who might have gone on to headship elsewhere, to the headteachers themselves, and to the school as a whole:

“All the governing body are aware and supportive of outreach and there are structures in place to support this. Our school gains as well as other schools. It is tremendously effective... I also think we stand to keep X [the head] because of this... I can’t see X going back to traditional ways of headship which are more inward looking.”

However, they also reflected on the need to educate not only staff but also the wider school community as to this new model of headship:

“Parents have been used to having access to the head – they want to see the principal – but we need to get people used to different kinds of headship. However, this is a problem worth overcoming!”

Summary of perspectives

There was a large measure of agreement among all groups interviewed – headteachers, senior leaders, middle leaders and governors. The benefits of outreach work, as interviewees saw them, can be summed up as follows:

- it fulfils a moral purpose of headship
- it offers an enhanced role for all staff
- it provides a sense of supporting other schools and that support being worthwhile
- it offers wider networking opportunities which can impact on practice
- it is facilitated by distributed leadership
- it develops clearer systems and structures to support increased staffing flexibility
- it contributes to professional development by offering enhanced leadership and CPD opportunities at all levels
- it brings fresh knowledge and additional resources into the school
- it retains staff through in-house career development opportunities and enhanced job satisfaction
- it demonstrates new models of headship
- it provides a fresh motivational perspective to headship

Conclusions

The review of the literature undertaken provided a useful backdrop for the interviews carried out for this research. It provided clear evidence for a number of the elements now seen as central to the notion of system leadership. For example, 'growing your own' is now seen not just as a response to the dearth of suitable applicants for many posts but rather as a way of transmitting and reinforcing a successful culture within a school. Such a culture ensures a focus on distributed leadership and uses 'acting up' as a means of training the headteachers of tomorrow and of enabling current headteachers to engage in outreach work. Such work not only combats 'burn-out' but also actually refreshes the headteachers themselves and, in turn, the schools they represent.

It was clear then that the role of a 21st-century head in some schools is changing significantly and that these heads are playing a vital role in supporting the improvement and development of schools beyond their own. Exploring the impact of these heads and their schools was beyond the scope of this study but has been documented elsewhere (Higham et al. 2009), but it can be argued that it creates a 'win-win' situation for the headteachers themselves, their staff and the wider school community.

Headteachers themselves felt refreshed and fulfilled in this wider system leadership role. They all agreed this had kept them, if not in the role as head for longer, certainly in their own school for longer than might otherwise have been the case. This meant that, not only did their school have the obvious benefits of their expert leadership for longer, the school was in a stronger position because of this to provide very important leadership support for the wider system.

Additionally the headteachers did not seem to be emotionally or physically pulled in two directions and were perfectly 'relaxed' in the knowledge that they left their own school in very safe hands. Without this confidence and trust in those left 'holding the fort', the model of extended leadership would not be as successful as it clearly was in these schools. The headteachers felt they could be away from 'their desk', sometimes for long periods of time, and their school would continue to become even more successful. However, what was also clear was that the heads were still 'on call' and remained central to the success of their schools. Through outreach work they were bringing in resources and new ideas and further developing staff in their schools. The 'win-win' in this was that as well as improving other schools elsewhere, the heads and their staff were improving their own institutions.

It was also clear that 'trying on' some of the roles of senior leadership did not deter middle leadership from aspiring to deputy headship but rather the reverse. The picture was less clear, however, for those already in senior leadership roles about whether they wanted to become headteachers. Although views on this were mixed, none said that interim headship responsibilities put them off the job; more that they enjoyed it, found it fulfilled them but had always known headship was not for them. Others having tried it were encouraged to dare to believe they might become headteachers.

Another positive consequence was the impact this model of school leadership and system improvement was having on the retention of good staff in the schools concerned. Providing opportunities for internal promotion at the same time as involving others in outreach was seen as a tremendous developmental 'plus' for senior and middle leaders. All concerned in the research, without exception, cited this as an unexpected and positive outcome.

What was also clear from the research was the importance of having strong and experienced senior leaders who were (in the words of one headteacher) “self starters who didn’t need managing” and who were capable of leading the school to ensure the school itself did not suffer from the headteacher’s outreach role. Additionally, many mentioned the importance of strong systems in the school, clear roles and responsibilities and good channels of communication. Of course, in successful schools, these features would be likely to be present anyway. However, the ‘win-win’ benefit was that outreach appeared to ensure the further development of skills and motivation of senior and middle leaders and made even more overt already strong systems and structures. In addition, where the head had been explicit about the benefits of outreach work, this resulted in staff and governors being positive (and not resentful as might have been the case) about energy being directed to providing support beyond the school.

In each of these schools it was clear that, while outreach work was developing, the schools had continued to improve using standard measures such as examination results, acquisition of additional specialisms, increased number of students and in two cases expansion of the school to include a sixth form. In other words the schools had continued to thrive in the heads’ absence. Many of those interviewed put this down to an even more motivated senior and middle leadership and the benefit of new ideas brought in as a result of the work done beyond the school.

This report has looked at schools already successfully embarked on outreach work and system leadership. Those schools considering such a route might like to consider the elements that need to be in place.

Not surprisingly, the first element required is that of [a successful, and flexible, headteacher](#) (see Matthews & Hill 2010). It would be difficult, but not impossible, for a senior team to ‘work around’ a traditional and entrenched headteacher. Second, there needs to be in place the makings (at the very least) of [a strong leadership team empowered by distributed leadership](#). Effective ‘acting up’ in practice requires deputies who can confidently take over the day-to-day running of the school and in turn have their responsibilities supported by others, through the application of [a ‘grow your own’ philosophy](#). This is supported by a culture of staff learning through an already existing commitment to CPD for all staff. Finally, there needs to be understanding, and [support from the governing body](#) and a recognition by them and the wider school community, that models of 21st-century headship with engagement in system leadership cannot simply be judged within traditional criteria and mindsets.

Recommendations

It is clear from this research that the use of headteachers (in particular, NLEs) to support school improvement has been important and effective, being seen as beneficial both to the headteachers themselves and to the staff in their schools, which has helped to contribute to the continued success of those schools.

Further research is also needed, however, to explore the views of students and parents as to this new approach to school leadership, especially the notion of headteachers not always being available in school. Another area that could profitably be explored is why this new role of headship takes off in some schools and not in others. Those in the sample studied were schools deliberately chosen as they had made a success of this outreach work. It is suggested that the skills, vision and confidence of the heads themselves were key factors in this success, although all the heads also talked about the 'serendipity' of 'being in the right place at the right time'.

There is also evidence from this study that 'tasting headship-type roles' is encouraging a significant number of senior and middle leaders to consider more positively the role of headship for themselves. Equally, by their own admission and on the evidence of their colleagues, headteachers themselves can be clearly refreshed and re-motivated by taking on outreach roles.

Ingate (2010) suggests system leadership is important for three reasons: 'it provides practitioners with fresh challenges and a capacity to influence the educational agenda... it has the potential to support much needed bottom-up reform... [and] through extending professional lifespan, it can stave off the looming leadership vacuum'.

If it proved to be the case, even for some heads, that involvement in outreach work would serve to keep some of our most experienced and effective heads in post until and beyond the retirement age by providing that fresh challenge and opportunity for wider influence, then this must be a strategy worth pursuing. It would ensure the continued success of their schools as well as of the wider system, it would support 'bottom-up' reform and development and it would also allow more time for succession planning strategies to take effect by 'staving off the looming leadership vacuum'.

This small-scale research study explored the benefits of outreach work through system leadership as an effective recruitment and retention strategy for headteachers. If explored on a wider scale and over a longer time span, those benefits could be promoted across the profession and provide, inter alia, an antidote to the anticipated crisis of headship set to take place as the 'baby boomers' begin to retire within the next few years.

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