Headship or System Leadership – Which Way to the Future?

by

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Abstract

Headship in English maintained schools is an occupation that is proving less than attractive for the vast majority of potential applicants, leading to the probability of a recruitment crisis in the near future. Furthermore the school system suffers from over provision of school places and pockets of endemic under achievement, particularly in areas where there are challenging circumstances. High amongst the range of government led responses to these circumstances is the call for system leadership, a process whereby the experience and expertise of successful schools can be utilised more widely across the school system. This article evaluates the concept of system leadership and compares it with the emergent models of headship that have become apparent in effective schools. It is argued that the model of headship described in this article could enhance the attractiveness of the occupation whilst being more effective than system leadership in providing an effective learning environment for all students. The article concludes that whilst system leadership can be demonstrated as having clear advantages in some contexts it should not be considered to be a universal panacea and efforts to sustain and develop models of headship that focus on the unique needs of each should be sustained.

Headship or System Leadership - Which Way to the Future?

Introduction

Headship in England, as we understood it at the beginning of the current century, was an occupation that had evolved since the inception of a compulsory education system for the nation's children in the latter stages of the nineteenth century, but one for which the levels of accountability had been radically changed by the Education Reform Act of 1988 and legislation enacted subsequently through the next decade. The common view of headship emerging from this evolutionary process was that not only should there be a formal head of the school but also that person should be both responsible for and directly involved in the teaching and student learning taking place within. A major consequence was that headship came to be considered as an individual activity and the actions of the job holder usually described as 'pivotal' by various observers and researchers when assessing the effectiveness of the school (Baron, 1968; Department of Education and Science, 1977; House of Commons, 1998; Southworth, 2000), views that are perhaps summed up in the following statement:

> … [there is an] extraordinary centrality of the Headteacher in British schools. There is an almost universal focus of this job as being the pivot of all management and organization within schools. [….] We cannot think of any other established organization where this is the case, except perhaps the position of a British Prime Minister in relation to the Cabinet […] the nearest more ordinary comparison is with the founder-owner of a small business. (Torrington and Weightman, 1989: 135-36)

Headship in the early part of the new century continued without major adjustment of this perception, despite the fundamental changes to governance and management of schools caused by the new legislation. The job passed through a number of phases as new demands became apparent, but remained relatively unchanged with headteachers typically being perceived as the symbolic leader of the school and the personification of the school in action (Male, 2006). Recruitment to headships during this period remained buoyant and there seemed to be an adequate number of willing applicants to fill the calculated 10 per cent of vacant jobs that were advertised each year (Howson, 2005). We now appear to have arrived at a critical point, however, where several factors have combined to lead many to the conclusion that the job is no longer a desired career move, may be untenable and consequently needs to be redefined (Munby, 2006; Smithers and Robinson, 2007)

Firstly there is a growing shortage of willing and capable candidates for headship and, secondly, there is a growing desire to revise school systems and structures to match new policy objectives. Furthermore, there is the prospect of a future recruitment crisis as large numbers of headteachers currently in service are actively seeking to leave the teaching profession within the next few years (Smithers and Robinson, 2007). These factors coincide with a declining school population which, in many areas of the country, requires the local authority to review its provision in the search for efficient use of resources. The ongoing desire for increased school effectiveness, a concern shared by all stakeholders in the education service, adds impetus for change. These are challenging times, therefore, which demand a review of the conventional view of headship if schools are to continue to be led well in the future.

Alternatives to Headship?

A fundamental question that has arisen is whether all schools need a headteacher? In turn this has led government departments and agencies to investigate alternative models of school organisation, leadership and deployment of the workforce. A shortage of suitably qualified and experienced applicants for headship, when coupled with the current surplus of school places, certainly provides a sense of urgency to examine different organisational structures. When the issue of endemic under-performance of students is also added to this equation the opportunity to create new models of school organisation offer themselves as alternatives to resolving the recruitment crisis. There is much interest in this potential route to salvation from the principal actors on the national stage, the Secretary of State for Education and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), who are championing the idea of 'system leadership'. In its simplest form system leadership is the spreading of talented individual school leaders more widely than their own school, typically to act as a consultant or peripatetic support service to less successful schools. Following their inception in 2001 we have seen the NCSL at this level create a pool of such capable headteachers who are licensed to act as Consultant Headteachers and, in 2006, the Secretary of State developed the new category of expert headteachers known as National Leaders of Education (NLEs).

System leadership can have a wider impact, however, including the migration of successful schools into other schools through branding, federation or collaboration. Branding is where one school takes over operations at other schools and imports its ethos,

practices and staff in order to change performance levels. Federation is where two or more schools are joined together in the search for improvement. Where there is either a joint governing body or a joint working group of governors from the schools involved this is known as a 'hard' federation; where such arrangements are informal or temporary these are known as 'soft' federations. Collaborating schools are those which have no formal relationship but are interdependent, either by choice or by force of circumstance.

During a period when some schools either fail to improve or continue to struggle against challenging circumstances notions of branding and federations become desirable for both central and local governments who are anxious for all schools to improve. Importing tried and trusted methods of success into other schools, either horizontally or vertically in the case of all age groupings such as can be seen in educational villages, has intrinsic appeal at a simplistic level. Such arrangements can also answer the other pressing systemic issue of numbers, in this case too few headteachers and too many school places. In other words branding and federations can provide opportunity for the rationalisation of resources though reducing the number of headships and the numbers of schools. Collaboration, on the other hand, does neither although it does provide greater chances of ensuring adequate curricular provision across the school system. An example of collaboration of this nature can be seen with school systems which pool post-16 provision across a local authority or region.

System leadership has its attractions, therefore, mostly on the grounds of improving schools, but also on the basis that is provides a possible answer to the growing problem of headteacher shortage. There is another question to ask before we follow the path to such an idealistic solution, however, and that is whether the school system would be better if there was not a headteacher for every school, as has been suggested by the new chief executive of the NCSL (Munby, 2006). The prospect of executive headteachers with responsibility for multiple sites or working as a peripatetic supporter is a radical and, as yet, unproven phenomenon. Easy acceptance of this type of formal leadership denies a more fundamental review of alternative models of headship which are tenable, and thus more attractive to prospective applicants, whilst also matching the needs of the system.

Alternative Views of Headship

The emerging view is that schools that are focused on effective student learning need to have that aim championed at all levels of the organisation, but especially at the apex.

Studies into distributed leadership (see Bennett *et al*, 2003) and into learner-centred leadership (Hallinger and Heck, 1997; Blase and Blase, 1998; Southworth, 2002) support this contention, with the NCSL consequently developing a range of development materials to support such school-based initiatives. Such studies lead me to conclude that learner-centred schools need executive leadership to be present at the point of service and not at a distance or translated through policy initiatives set by a parent organisation. This is because the essence of the state education system is that schools serve the needs of the local community. That is why they have individual governing bodies and a headteacher in order that those needs can be identified and met. Aggregation of schools, even at a low level, de-personalises education for students - a strange objective at a time when one other aspect of central government mantra is for 'personalised education'. System leadership may not be the panacea its chief proponents claim, therefore, and it may be more appropriate to consider how to continue the evolution of headship as we proceed further into the twenty-first century, and identify a model of headship which reflects the reality of schools in action.

A key feature of successful schools is their ability to adapt and transform before circumstances require them to change. In an era, such as now, when in the words of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus "the only constant is change" perhaps we should be looking at how headship can be reconfigured, rather than look for other types of school organisation and governance. The most successful schools already have such models of headship in place which, if understood and adopted, could make the job more attractive, tenable and effective than is currently the case.

Headship and Change

Schools are faced with multiple choices in regard to leadership activity and a study undertaken on behalf of the National Union of Teachers concluded that a huge number of responsibilities had been added to headteachers' role by recent government initiatives (Smithers and Robinson, 2007). The central feature of the maintained school system in England since 1988 has been the need to adapt to and accommodate such change, particularly in relation to new policy objectives from central government. From the multitude of changes that have emanated from central government I have identified 18 that I consider to be the key issues that have presented themselves as critical challenges to English schools since 1988 and to date (see Table 1), whilst recognising that the list may be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Table 1: Externally derived changes faced by state-maintained schools since 1988.

National Initiative	Local Implication
Local Management of Schools	Part of 1988 Education Reform Act - Devolution of almost entire school budget to schools. Some schools applied for Grant Maintained Status (GMS) and became accountable at a national, rather than local, level. All schools became accountable for budgetary maintenance.
National Curriculum	Part of 1988 Education Reform Act - Standard curriculum and assessment processes introduced for all state maintained schools. Early difficulties with implementation resulted in several revisions and a major review in 1995.
Open Enrolment and Marketing	Part of 1988 Education Reform Act – Schools allowed to recruit to capacity, rather than share out pupils equally. Policy led to competition between schools and employment of marketing philosophy.
Ofsted Inspections	1992 Education Act created Office for Standards in Education. All schools to be subject to regular inspection on Ofsted criteria. Schools judged to be weak to be given special attention.
Target-Setting	1998 = statutory requirement for all schools to set challenging targets. National targets set for literacy and numeracy in primary schools and for aggregate scores on national tests for secondary schools.
Remodelling the Workforce	Attempts to reduce teacher workload and bureaucracy in 2005 led to large number of tasks being delegated to support staff. Growth in numbers of employees within school.
PPA Time and Resources	All teachers given guaranteed non-contact time for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) in 2005. Accommodation and equipment issues for large numbers of primary schools.
TLR Allocations	Fundamental change to the nature of posts of responsibilities in 2005. All promoted positions for teachers to be on the basis of teaching and learning responsibilities (TLR) rather than for management.
Revised Curricula	Major planned revisions to National Curriculum, including for Early Years (0-5), Key Stage 3 (11-14) and for 14-19 age range (2000 onwards).
Building Schools for the Future	Major investment in building fabric. Process closely linked to curricular provision, but focused in initial stage on areas of endemic low performance on national tests. First phase in 2006.
School Self-Evaluation	Ofsted inspections to be based on School Self-Evaluation (SEF) document. Focus shifts to schools after an era of external inspection from 2005.
Extended Schools	All schools (by 2010) to ensure pupils have access to supervised care beyond traditional school day. Many schools provide basic meals as well as a range of activities.
Every Child Matters	Focus on whole child development, including basic social welfare guarantee. Local government reorganises around principle of Children's Services rather than separate educational and social services. Implemented 2006.
Personalised Learning	Policy declaration that includes the expectation that individual learning needs will be identified and met appropriately. Students encouraged will be encouraged to manage their own learning and there will be an emphasis on student voice.
Collaboration and Federation	Emphasis on system enhancement rather than on individual schools. Encouragement for collaboration, federations and amalgamations. National Leaders of Education (NLEs) appointed to enhance system leadership from September, 2006.
Training and Development Agency	TDA established in 2006 to extend previous work of Teacher Training Agency and to include all members of school workforce. Will probably lead to fundamental changes in provision for continuing professional development.
Specialist Schools Trust	Most secondary schools given specialist status, commonly in line with a curriculum area. Trust established in 2004 to provide support and coordinate development, including in-service education of teachers.
Learning with New Technologies	Sustained investment in computer technology and digital media since 1997 introduced and sustains new challenges in establishing effective learning environments.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 created, by itself, three fundamental changes to schooling with an equivalent effect on the nature of headship. The *devolution of funding* to schools, including the creation of Grant Maintained Schools, constituted a determination to make state-maintained schools increasingly independent of their Local Education Authority. With the majority of schools subsequently becoming responsible and accountable for budgetary decisions, which included staffing costs for the first time, the job of headteacher quickly became more oriented to school management rather than curriculum leadership. This was especially true with the imposition of the *National Curriculum* in the same act which caused endless problems to schools as they attempted to enact, rather than amend, the regulations. Finally, in this landmark legislation, schools had to adapt themselves from planned provision to a market place environment as the impact of *open enrolment* began to be experienced in the years that followed.

The effect on headship was for a radical reappraisal of the knowledge, skills and expertise needed for the job and much time and effort was spent in adjusting to the new environment. A reforming government was in no mood for stability, however, and pressed on with more reform, particularly in regard to school inspection where the dipstick approach of school evaluation employed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) for most of the twentieth century was replaced by a universal model in the 1992 Education Act, which created the *Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)*. All schools were subsequently required to be inspected on a regular basis by a team led by a Registered Inspector, using a framework devised by Ofsted under the direction of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI). In basing their reports on outcomes and contributory factors Ofsted established a model of operation and management to which all schools were expected to subscribe and effectively became the principal architect of a preferred model of school organisation and leadership (Bolam, 1997).

The general election of 1997 brought in a Labour government after 18 years of Conservative educational policies based on the principle of a free market and parental power. This was a New Labour government, however, seemingly more concerned with the retention of power than a reform agenda based on socialist principles. They set the tone quickly when the new Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, threatened

within days of taking office to 'name and shame' schools he considered to be underperforming, with a view to closure if they did not improve rapidly. This introduction heralded a new era of accountability, this time based on the premise of *target-setting*, whereby schools were required by edict and policy to conform to models of student performance on standard tests that were administered nationally. The principal task of headteachers changed once more, therefore, as the external demands for enhanced student attainment tended to dominate their agenda. The requirements of compulsory target-setting based on aggregate student scores in standard tests, introduced by statute in 1998, became increasingly sophisticated as the crude measure of raw scores initially employed by central agencies and the media was replaced by more accurate and fair means of judging school performance, such as contextual value-added scores which attempted to rank school performance in relation to the potential of its population. The effect on headship was once more to require them to develop new knowledge, skills and expertise in a fast changing policy culture.

School Leadership in the Twenty-First Century

By the end of the twentieth century there were clear indications of improvement in the maintained school system as a result of the legislative interventions by successive governments. Student attainment levels were much higher, schools were better managed (according to Ofsted) and headteachers better prepared and more capable than at any time in history. There was recognition at all levels of the school system, however, that further improvement would not be achieved through greater application of the same techniques that had brought success to date. The next stage of improvement would require a different approach and would be one based on the principle of leadership at the school level. This new era was intended to be one of "informed professional judgement" as described by the principal government adviser, the Head of Standards within the Department for Education and Skills (Barber, 2001). Now the emphasis was to be on local decision-making in relation to identified need, with differences in provision not only to be tolerated but encouraged so long as there was evidence of continued improvement. The school system, argued Barber, was sufficiently rich in knowledge to allow for trust in local decision-making, rather than dependence on national prescription (see Figure 1). Ofsted, he suggested, had not only provided the necessary knowledge base, but also the safety net of continued inspection.

Figure 1: The changing knowledge base of school performance
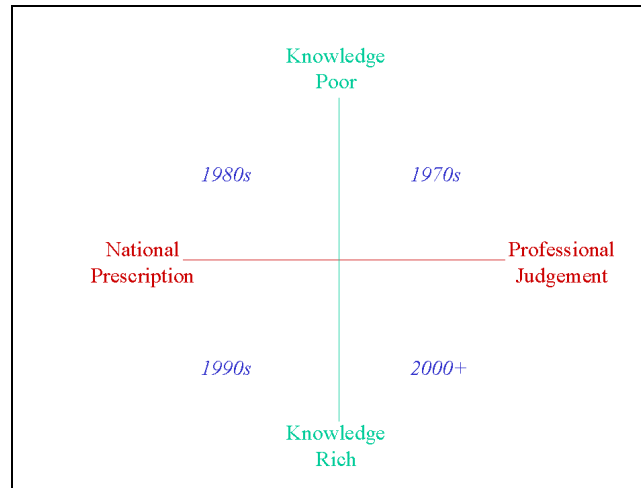
Source: Barber (2001)

By this time the typical headteacher was highly skilled in school organisation and management, but headship was still an occupation that was responsive rather than proactive. In order to match the desired state signalled by Barber (2001) school leadership would have to be developed, a projection viewed too often until this time as being the sole preserve of headteachers. Although the job of headteacher had been codified through the development and introduction of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) by the Teacher Training Agency in 1997, critics had highlighted the way in which the new qualification had marginalised other key participants in local decision-making, notably governors and other senior staff in schools, and placed too much emphasis on the headteacher as hero-innovator (e.g. Male, 1997). The introduction of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) moved leadership to the top of the agenda, however, and began the process of creating the means by which schools could address their own needs by developing leadership capacity.

The NCSL was charged with the task of taking over existing provision for headteachers, including the NPQH, the Headteacher Leadership and Management Programme (Headlamp) and the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH), which had been developed and administered by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in its term of office between 1994 and 1999. By the time the NCSL became operational in September, 2000 the NPQH had been reviewed and amended, with LPSH being deemed to be more than adequate in a separate review (Collarbone, 2001). An internal review of Headlamp followed, led by the Head of Programmes within the new college (Newton, 2001). More important, however, was the establishment of a Think Tank by NCSL and the subsequent

publication of a Leadership Development Framework (LDF) which outlined the vision they believed should underwrite future policies in relation to school leadership and management (National College for School Leadership, 2001a). The LDF examined the nature of school leadership and produced a set of ten propositions that collectively subscribed to the notion of leadership for transforming learning:

> The emphasis on transformation is both deliberate and necessary. Reform strategies and leadership programmes can no longer take only an incremental approach to change to student learning and attainment. This is particularly the case given the ambitious national agenda for sustainable improvement for all students in all settings. Leadership now needs to be seen within a whole school or systems context and to impact both on classroom and the work culture of the school. Hence the emphasis on transformation. This implies an expansion in the capacity of the school to manage change in the pursuit of student learning and achievement, and the creation of professional learning communities within the school to support the work of teachers. (National College for School Leadership, 2001a: 8)

The framework thus reflected the spirit of the times when it was perceived that the next level of school performance would not be achieved by greater application of the same strategies for improvement that have proved successful in the past and that the answer to continued improvement laid beyond a nationally prescribed model of school organisation and operation. "The challenge for educational leaders", said the Think Tank Report "is to adopt and adapt well proven practices from elsewhere within the context specificity of their own school" (National College for School Leadership, 2001b: 9). Furthermore the LDF concluded that school leadership should be a collective term in recognising that schools are complex entities whose successful maintenance and leadership is established through the coalescence of the skills, knowledge and capability of senior staff, working in conjunction with members of the public serving on governing bodies.

The Changing Nature of Headship

The emphasis on self-determination and collaboration within and between schools became the new hegemony of school leadership and the traditional concept of headship was no longer deemed to be adequate to meet the demands. Geoff Southworth, a key figure in the hierarchy of the NCSL and a recognised expert in the nature of headship, sums up the belief that school leadership (as opposed to headship) is, "distributed, differentiated and diverse" in the new century (Southworth, 2006). This is because there are many more school leaders playing a part (deputies, middle leaders, business managers) and

leadership is differentiated because contextual awareness is a key feature of success. New forms of leadership are developing because schools as organisations are changing,

> The past is now another country where leaders did things differently. I think the future looks bright and different and [school leadership] is no longer one model enacted individually, but many models. (Southworth, 2006)

Typically we now find school leadership to be shared, with the personal accountability of the headteacher being the only feature that distinguishes them from other senior members of the organisation. That part of the job has not gone away and is unlikely to do so as headteachers have specific responsibilities in law and within their terms and conditions of service. Operationally, however, the most effective schools are those where strategic decisions are investigated and determined collectively. When reviewing more recent major initiatives, for example, it would be unusual to find a school where *re-modelling of the workforce*, the revision of teaching timetables to allow for the requisite *planning, preparation and assessment* (PPA) time and the allocation of *teaching and learning responsibilities* (TLR) had not been handled as a joint effort of the senior leadership group in conjunction with the governing body. Headship has become a different occupation, therefore, and one that needs a new and more adequate model to describe effective headship in action.

Towards a new model of headship

The principal component of the LDF was the expectation that school leadership should have student learning at the heart of its behaviour. Although it may seem perverse after more than a century of state maintained schools to be only now talking about the job of head*teacher* in relation to student learning, the reality of change during the latter stages of the twentieth century did seem to move their role toward operational management. The most effective schools, however, are those who have moved beyond this mode and have successfully amended the internal structures and processes so they can not only successfully manage student learning that is related to need, but can also deal more effectively with external initiatives that could affect their day to day stability. Internally there are generally some key elements of the organisation that need to be harmonised in order to provide the most effective learning environment for the student body they serve. First, they must have a clearly defined culture through which provides a frame through which possible decisions are explored. In Figure 2 this is presented as *Ethos* which, in summary, is 'the way in which we do things round here' and is a culture which has its roots in an explicit values base. They must then have a clear grasp of the difference between

school leadership and *school management*. Once that understanding is in place then the school's working practices can be structured so that they have an effective *senior leadership team* and evidence of effective *teacher leadership* in action.

Figure 2: The internal demands of headship in the 21st Century
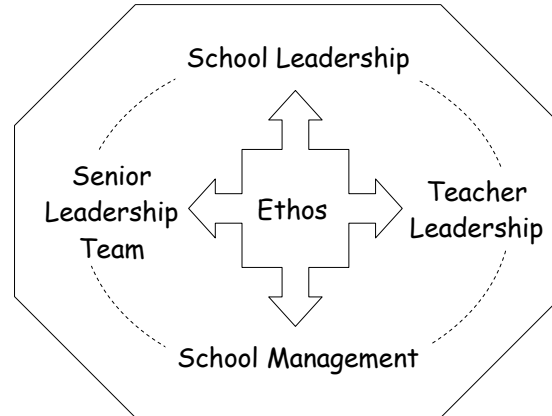
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Leadership is commonly distinguished from management by means of determination. In other words, leaders make decisions and managers operationalise those decisions. Both terms are verbs, rather than nouns, however, so leadership and management are both legitimate activities for all members of an organisation. In the most effective schools senior members of staff, particularly headteachers, spend more of their time in leadership mode. Conversely in struggling or under-performing schools more senior staff time is spent managing than leading. Where the school is continuing to struggle, the type of management being employed is almost certainly ineffective, whilst schools in the early stages of improvement can rely on proven methods of response rather than have to re-invent the wheel. All schools need effective management systems, therefore, and must have the means by which they can effectively deliver policies and maintain good practice. In terms of achieving an appropriate focus it is helpful to make the distinction between maintenance, development and innovation. A balance needs to be maintained between the three, either through structure or practice. Some schools, for example, have appointed staff with specific management responsibilities in order to make sure existing systems and processes are running smoothly: School Business Managers and career Deputy Headteachers spring to mind at this point. Other schools have ordered their meetings of senior staff accordingly so that in addition to regular meetings to discuss the here and now (maintenance) there are also meetings that focus on improving such processes (development) or dealing with new issues (innovation). The key concern is for balance.

Assuming that an appropriate balance has been achieved the next stage is to build the capacity of the senior leadership group so that not only are leadership responsibilities and actions shared, but the members become a *team*. The difference between a group and a team is well documented elsewhere (e.g. Katzenbach and Smith, 1993), but is usually determined as the willingness of members to give up on self-interest in favour of the group. Members of a team tend, therefore, to be prepared to give with no guarantee of getting anything back in return. Conversely members of a working group can be identified as protecting their self-interest at a cost to overall ambition. Teams are generally considered as more desirable and are recognised as creating synergy, where the collective outcome exceeds the sum of individual inputs. A senior leadership team can only operate, however, where there are high levels of trust, in addition to mutual accountability. The challenge for headteachers here is to recognise that although they cannot escape their individual accountability as formal leader of the school neither can they complete all the leadership tasks that could accompany the job. Advice now offered to headteachers by the NCSL, as well as in a multitude of ways by most other researchers and commentators in the field, is that they need to build leadership capacity within their schools, commonly referred to as 'distributed leadership' (Bennett *et al*, 2003), if only to cope with the sheer volume of externally derived initiatives. Such a task is easier on paper than in reality, however, as has been demonstrated by a recent study which explored the difficulties of an experienced headteacher who found it extremely difficult to wean himself away from the constant information flow that he had enjoyed previously when allowing his deputy to take over for a month in an internship experiment. The sense of dislocation frightened him, but ultimately made him realise what an enormous leap of faith true distributed leadership required (Male and Wright, forthcoming). The challenge of letting go as an individual in order to become better as a team should not be underestimated, therefore, but should be recognised as an important element in creating effective schools.

The major internal challenge, however, is to develop teacher leadership. To understand this concept fully will take many more words than this article allows, but in essence it is a principle of action whereby teachers take immediate responsibility for leading learning at the ground level. In many ways this emergent model of leadership, deemed so central to effective schools, is built on the premise that the classroom environment has changed radically in recent years. In primary schools, for example, there has been a rapid growth in the number of employees within mainstream schooling as continued government investment has created large numbers of teaching assistants. One consequence has

been the need for teachers, traditionally in sole charge of classroom organisation and student learning, to now be responsible for organising and managing a team of people. Added to this phenomenon have been the government driven initiatives of workforce remodelling and PPA time which have further eroded the traditional model of classroom practitioner. Similar and related effects have been seen in secondary schools. The implication for teachers is that circumstances have been created whereby they are required to move from first-order practitioners (where they are the prime influence in student learning in the classroom environment) to second order practitioners whereby they effect change to student learning with and through others (Murray and Male, 2005). In practice this will lead to a much greater involvement of teachers in leading learning and will require them to have knowledge, skills and expertise in advance of that traditionally found with qualified teacher status. The full range of teacher leadership attributes and behaviours identified through research has been presented in a recently published meta-review of which all senior leaders in schools, including headteachers, should be aware (Harris and Muijs, 2007). For now, however, the key issue is to recognise the centrality of this element of the leadership equation to successful schools.

**So where does this leave headship?**

Analysis of the literature on highly effective schools suggests that the true art of institutional leadership has always been to manage the boundary between the school and the external environment. Selznick (1983), for example, distinguishes institutional leaders from everyday managers by stating that leaders act on the boundary tensions between the core activities of an organization and the wider demands, challenges and opportunities of its environment. This work of boundary spanning involves protecting and supporting critical organizational functions while simultaneously attempting to accommodate external demands. If there was any contention in the past that this was the way for headteachers to behave, there can be little dissension in the present as the pressure to manage the external environment continues to grow.

As can be seen from Table 1, the rate of externally driven potential changes seems to be increasing, rather than receding in intensity. Despite the apparent clarion calls for self-determination that appeared at the start of the new century, the demands for change continue to emerge in government policy. At the time of writing, for example, schools are wrestling with the agendas created by the governmental support for a range of social welfare measures to be delivered through schools, such as *Extended Schools* and the

Every Child Matters policy. When you add the impetus for changing the inspection model to one of *school self-evaluation* and for *revising the curriculum* (and attendant assessment processes), to say nothing of *Building Schools for the Future* (BSF), the pressure for change continues.

There is little likelihood that schools have sufficient capability to cope with such a multitude of choice and most will probably seek to deal with a small number of key issues at any one time, with their relative importance fluctuating according to the pressure accompanying each new opportunity. I suggest that at any one time there is probably capacity within the school for dealing with about eight key, pressing issues. Any more would preclude a focused approach to leadership and management activity whilst, conversely, fewer could lead to the atrophy of development. Furthermore I argue that in any school, by default, two of these issues are constants – local issues that directly impact on the school and the maintenance of successful relationships with parents and the local community. In struggling schools there is a strong likelihood of there being a greater number of in-school or local issues that need urgent attention whilst in schools operating satisfactorily the other six are almost certainly externally driven initiatives that have a high probability of requiring change to current practice.

Figure 3: Government policy initiatives since 1988
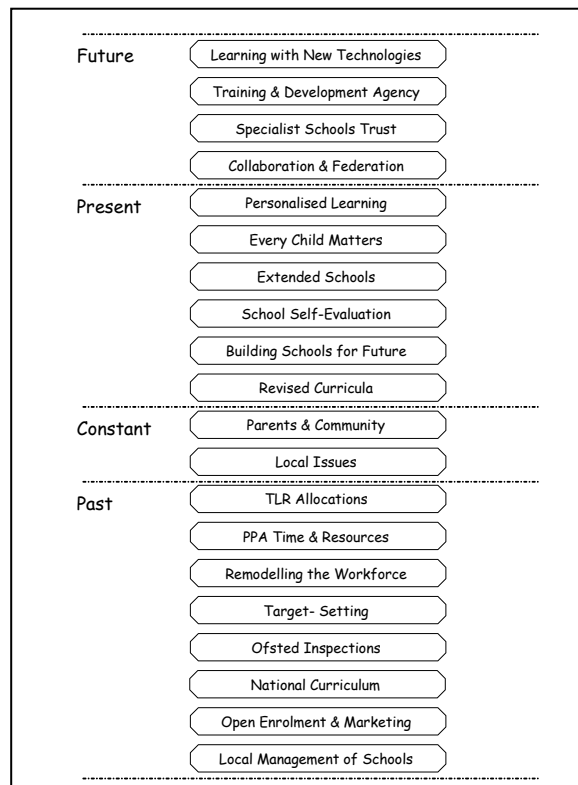
A review of the initiatives across the last twenty years will show, therefore, that many of the challenges have already been resolved. A change issue is normally considered to be complete when it has been incorporated into everyday life and new routines have become accepted, natural and comfortable (Adams *et al*, 1976). Typically eight of these key issues have now been addressed by most schools to become part of their management processes, rather than the focus of continued leadership activity, leaving six as current and unresolved and a further four as pending as depicted in Figure 3.

Effective schools will, therefore, be struggling with eight key external issues at the moment with another four already identified as requiring attention within the foreseeable future. Ineffective schools, however, will still be seeking to consolidate their internal organisation and procedures as depicted in Figure 2 and as explained above. According to the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspectors, however, the vast majority of maintained schools are now deemed to have satisfactory leadership and management systems and personnel (Office for Standards in Education, 2006) with the consequence that it is reasonable to conclude that most schools are mainly concerned with externally driven issues at the current time. That being the case their organisation and structure will resemble that shown in Figure 4 where it can be seen that the role of headteacher in the effective school has become more team focused with individual behaviour moving to the periphery. This model does not deny that headteachers still have a role to play in internal school leadership and many modes will have to adopted according to circumstance. Four such modes are illustrated in this model: command, facilitative, democratic and service, with each mode having an appropriate use in support of effective school operation. Highly effective formal leaders are characterised, however, by their ability to be invisible when things are working well and highly visible when things are not so good. The claim made in this article is that most serving headteachers can be invisible to internal processes at the moment, but need to be highly visible when considering how to deal with external derived issues.

Figure 4: A new model of headship in the 21st Century
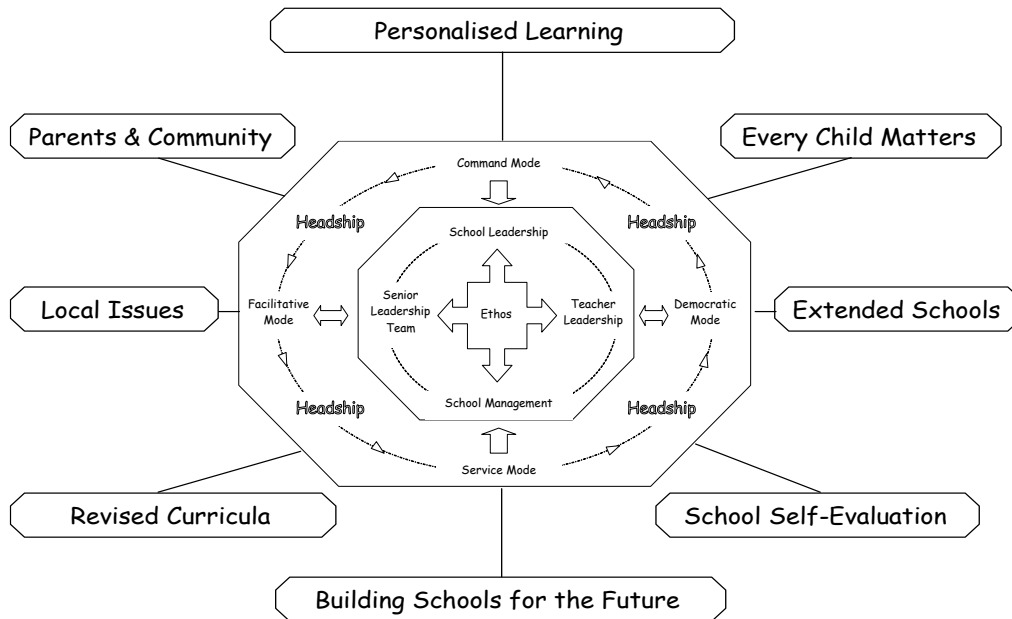
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The role of headteacher in the current era, therefore, is one of managing the boundary and ensuring the means by which their school can adapt successfully to the new environment. It is important this is recognised as not only has it become evident that headteacher recruitment has become difficult as the demands of the job have risen, with vacancies having to be advertised several times (Howson, 2005), but here has also been evidence of capable, prospective leaders not feeling motivated by the thought of becoming a headteacher, with recent figures suggest only 28 per cent of senior leaders in schools expressed an interest in becoming a headteacher citing, amongst other things, work-life balance, stress, inspection and personal commitments as the key factors for their decision (Munby, 2006). The model presented here suggests that true leadership and self-determination of schools are possible in the majority of schools in England today, thus giving a chance for headteachers to feel motivated once more and to be able to achieve an appropriate return for their emotional and physical commitment to the job.

Headship or System Leadership?

A preliminary investigation commissioned by the NCSL into emerging models of headship makes the salient recommendation that any job redesign should be part of a larger educational vision, not simply an expedient to deal with a current problem" (Glatter and

Harvey, 2006: 3). The report also highlighted the need to focus as much on governance as on school leaders, to look closely at the interaction between them and not to forget about local authorities. Although the study explored models of shared headship, the key messages can be considered equally relevant in the debate about system leadership. Responsibility for the provision of school places remains with the local authority, meaning that any movement toward system leadership that does not have their express permission will usurp that authority. Amalgamations and federations are contingent, therefore, on the approval of the local authority who are accountable to the electorate. Meanwhile each school has its own governing body with requisite articles and instruments of government that, under current legislation, makes it the legal decision-making agency for that school. System leadership can only become operable with the agreement of local authorities and governing bodies and this fact needs to be borne in mind when considering the nature of school leadership for the future.

The Education (Teachers) Regulations 1993 required that the staff of a maintained school "shall include a headteacher" with responsibility under the terms of the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act 2004 for the leadership, internal organisation, management and control of the school within a framework of current legislation and instruments of government. The nature of headship in England is based, therefore, on the contractual obligation to the school rather than the system and provides the headteacher with clear accountabilities to the school community. The suggestion that all schools do not necessarily need a headteacher has to be set in this context and the calls for system leadership recognised as an ambition, rather than an inevitable reality.

The judgement as to the relevance of headship or system leadership as being the answer to endemic and chronic problems is once again, therefore, set in a mode of circumstantial contingency (i.e. what is best for any given school at any one time). The core argument for system leadership is far from complete and requires a number of local political factors to be aligned if it is to hold good. It is almost inevitable that some schools will benefit from branding or federation, but it is by no means guaranteed that such an approach is a universal panacea. Schools with effective leadership and management processes, with headteachers able to concentrate their attention more on the outside world than on internal functions, stand at least as much chance of providing an efficient education as a system wide approach. Having weighed the evidence I would suggest headship to be a better bet for the future than system leadership, mainly because it allows for a focus on the needs of

the school community, with subsequent actions being specific to that context rather than generic. Only in that way can the pupils engage in a learning process relevant to their context and one that equips them for a productive future. Let's hope we can make the job of headteacher more attractive than the current circumstance by recognising and celebrating the centrality of headship, therefore, and encourage talented individuals to apply for what has always been one of the most rewarding posts in the school system!

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