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Paper 1: Overview of the Review Design

Christopher Day[1], Pam Sammons[2], David Hopkins[3], Alma Harris[3], Ken Leithwood[4]

[1]*University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom,* [2]*University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom,* [3]*University of London, London, United Kingdom,* [4]*University of Toronto, Toronto, United Kingdom*

Background

The aims of the study were to i) establish how much variation in pupil outcomes (as measured by, for example, achievement, engagement, involvement, motivation) is accounted for by variation in the types qualities, strategies, skills and contexts of school leadership, in particular those of heads as 'leaders of leaders'; and ii) to determine the relative strengths of the direct and indirect influences of school leadership, especially that of the head, upon teachers and upon pupils' outcomes.

Research Questions

The research was designed to test and refine existing models of school leadership as far as they can demonstrate an impact on pupil outcomes. It was hypothesised that whilst such models are common across contexts in their general form they would likely to be highly adaptable and contingent in their specific enactment. The research thus sought to:

i) Collect and analyse attainment, attendance and behavioural data at a national level in order to explore the relationship between leadership and pupil outcomes;

ii) Collect evidence to identify and describe variations in effective leadership practice (types, qualities, strategies and skills) with a view to relating these changes to variations in conditions for pupil, teacher and organisational learning and outcomes;

iii) Explore to what extent variations in pupil outcomes are accounted for by variations in types, qualities, strategies, skills and contexts of leadership;

iv) Identify which influences significantly moderate the effects of leadership practice on a range of both short and long term pupil outcomes;

v) Identify which influences significantly mediate the effects of leadership practice on a range of both short and long term pupil outcomes; and

vi) Provide robust, reliable data on i) to ii) which would inform the work of the Department for Education and Skills (DCSF), the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), local authorities (LAs), and schools.

Methods

The first phase of the research involved a detailed review of the international literature on leadership and its influence on pupil outcomes by the team (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). This review was used also to inform the development of questionnaire surveys of heads and key staff and initial interview schedules in twenty case studies.

The quantitative strand of the project involved four components:

- An analysis of national data sets on primary and secondary school performance conducted to identify schools that were effective and improving over a three year period. The analyses were based on relevant published data and key indicators.
- An initial Wave 1 questionnaire survey of heads and key staff in a sample of such effective and improving schools to explore features of school organisation and processes including leadership. The survey asked heads and key staff to report on the extent of change in different features of school activity and practice over the last three years. This period was chosen to coincide with the years for which the analysis of improvement in pupil attainment had taken place (2003-2005).
- A second follow up Wave 2 survey of heads and key staff one year later to explore in more detail particular strategies and actions that were perceived to relate to improvement (informed by the interim results of the first survey and case study findings).

Qualitative data were collected over six rounds of interviews, spanning two academic years. Along with results from the Wave 1 of questionnaire data from the quantitative analysis, these informed the design of the research instruments for the subsequent three rounds. The first three rounds used semi-structured interview schedules with the head, other key staff and another colleague; a teacher, teaching assistant, secretary or bursar. Rounds 4, 5 and 6 took different forms. Round 4 included a semi-structured interview with the head and an observation of a meeting or school practice, selected by the head, which he or she felt demonstrated the leadership practices in the school. Round 5 used an innovative instrument designed in order to produce a graphical representation of the heads' perceptions of the strategies undertaken throughout the different phases of their leadership of the school and factors which had influenced their success. Following the interviews a detailed analysis of each case study school was conducted and Analytical Case Study (ACS) were constructed.

Frame

The project used an innovative mixed methods research design influenced by the review of the literature conducted at the beginning of the study. It sought to identify features linked to this initial framework using both quantitative and qualitative components. The use of mixed methods was seen to increase the possibilities of identifying various patterns of association and possible causal connections between variation in different outcomes indicators of school performance (as measured by data on student attainment and other outcomes) and measures of school and departmental processes. By incorporating both extensive quantitative and rich qualitative evidence from participants about their perceptions, experiences and interpretations of leadership practices and of school organisation and processes with that on student outcomes, it was possible to conduct analyses in parallel and to allow evidence from one source to extend or to challenge evidence from another source.

At certain points in the research process we analysed the quantitative evidence (attainment data and questionnaire surveys) separately and independently from the in-depth analyses of case study data collected for a smaller sample of schools. At other stages we deliberately chose to allow one source to inform the other. The sequencing of the study was an important feature that facilitated the integration of evidence, while attempts at a synthesis are presented in the concluding sections and are based on analysis of these data and reflection on their meaning.

Research findings

There are statistically significant empirical and qualitatively robust associations between heads' educational values, qualities and their strategic actions and improvement in school conditions leading to improvements in pupil outcomes. The results confirm and go beyond the model of successful leadership practices identified in the project literature review (Leithwood et al., 2006) that involve Creating Vision and Setting Directions, Restructuring the Organisation and Redesigning Roles and Responsibilities, Developing People and Managing Teaching and Learning. These affect and are affected by school internal conditions, culture and trust.

There are similarities between the effects of leadership practices on improvements in school conditions in Primary and Secondary schools in the study. However, the leadership of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) has a more direct influence upon learning and teaching standards in Primary schools than Secondary schools.

There is no single model of the practice of effective leadership. However, it is possible to identify a common repertoire of broad educational values, personal and interpersonal qualities, dispositions, competencies, decision making processes and a range of internal and external strategic actions which all effective heads in the study possess and use.

Such a common repertoire is necessary but insufficient in itself to secure effectiveness. It is the particular combinations of strategies based upon the heads' diagnoses of individuals, the needs of schools at different phases of performance development and national policy imperatives which are influential in promoting improved - student outcomes. The study shows how school improvement trajectories evolve over time in several phases.These strategies are underpinned by clearly articulated sets of values which focus upon promoting individual and social well-being and raising standards of achievement for all pupils.

Taken together these effect cultural change as well as changes in school classroom practices. The research indicates that there are significant differences in the intensity of actions and the use of certain strategies between schools in the Low start and High start groups especially in the secondary sector. A greater emphasis was given to the use of data for the improvement of teaching and learning conditions and classroom observation by schools in the Low start group.