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Title: New models of school leadership: rhetoric or reality?

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Background

This paper draws on the findings of a research evaluation project funded by a large local authority in the south of England in order to explore the development of alternative models of school leadership. Leithwood et al (2006) argue that school leadership is the most influential factor on pupil learning after classroom teaching. However, recent findings indicate that head teachers are over-stretched and often lose sight of strategic objectives in daily operational duties (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2007). Studies indicate that one solution is a more distributed network of leadership practice, with multiple levels of involvement in decision making, within which all individuals are committed to improving their own leadership capacity (Fullan, 2006; Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2008). The Education Act (Parliament of the UK, 2002) provides that two or more maintained schools may federate under a single governing body, and sets out different possible models. Prompted by this and their Local Authority initiative, the schools studied in this project have been in the process of establishing new structures and models of leadership broadly based upon the distributed model. Most of the schools have been developing 'hard' and 'soft' federations within and cross-phase, with a varied mix of schools working together, including selective, non-selective, private and special schools. New forms of headship include executive heads and co-headships, with joint or separate governing bodies.

Research Questions

The project set out to investigate the varied innovative models of leadership within the local authority, and to study the challenges and benefits of these new models, especially the extent to which they are tailored to local conditions and contexts. The research team set out to explore the benefits, barriers and challenges involved in the implementation of new organisational structures, and to discover the attitudes, responses and perceived rationales of those carrying out new roles. In doing so, the researchers examined the matrix of responsibilities and their coverage in practice. Developing understanding of these initiatives in leadership styles and structures in schools was situated within the wider context of the development of community and extended schools, links with other professional services and the operation of school partnerships and consortia.

The following research questions were used:

- What are the rationales for the change to new models of leadership as perceived by key leadership figures in the schools?
- How do leaders perceive the challenges and benefits of these new models?
- How is responsibility and power distributed between schools in leadership models involving more than one school?
- How is collaboration between the range of schools functioning from the perspectives of those who working in them?

Methods

The study has taken place over a four-month period and has so far involved questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with leaders within the school. Initial questionnaires were sent out to twenty-one head teachers in federations of various kinds and a selection of community schools. In addition to providing important background data, the questionnaires also informed the construction of a sample of head teachers and governors who were then interviewed. Fourteen semi-structured interviews took place and the data is being processed and analysed. Narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly 2000)

was used to examine the interviewees' own accounts of the processes involved in their change of leadership, including relationships and types of support, major problems and conflicts and longer term professional school development issues.

Frame

In analysing the data, we draw on scholars in the field of leadership studies and specifically distributed leadership, including Harris (2008) and Lambert (2003). The latter's 'Leadership Capacity Matrix' was seen as very useful as a means of establishing the capacity of the schools to accomplish the aims of the new models of leadership which are being developed. We also draw on other researchers in the field to establish a frame for analysis to explore the processes underway (Leithwood et al., 2006; Lewis & Murphy, 2008; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2007). More widely, a situated learning framework is used in order to identify contextual factors affecting the implementation of new models.

Research findings

The initial findings from this study have been rich in insights about the perceived successes and challenges of working with new leadership styles. The researchers have found tensions between the rhetoric and the reality of collaborating with other teachers and schools. Issues were raised about the changing location of power and control amongst the schools working within federations. This has been seen to be particularly prevalent when selective and non-selective schools attempt to collaborate. Fears about loss of an individual school's identity were raised as a challenge as schools work together, share resources and attempt to consolidate an ethos. Most strikingly, there seems to be an absence of a clear vision for the children in the school. Perceptions of the rationale for change in leadership structures often do not include clear reference to the children's learning or well-being.

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