

## Taking a lead: how to access the leadership premium

### Executive summary

- As plans for whole system structural reform have developed, much of the government's education reform strategy has come to turn on its being able to capitalise a leadership premium.
- Yet despite a massive literature that has built up around the subject, the convictions of politicians, regulators, and professional development bodies, about what leadership looks like, how it contributes to school improvement, and what really counts (personalities, traits, or practices?), on how to develop leadership, and how it is related to context, are not well-grounded.
- Those engaged in school effectiveness research (SER) share with them a common set of assumptions, to mutually reinforcing effect.

### *Is it really all about the leader?*

- The most obvious of these assumptions, bizarrely, relates to the tendency to over-state the importance of leadership as a standalone factor in improving attainment, to the neglect of understanding of how it interacts with other key school factors.
- This tendency to over-statement of leadership's direct importance to academic outcomes is largely the result of adopting theories and research strategies incapable of questioning it.
- In relation to the literature as a whole, few studies have attempted to quantify the contribution of leadership. Those that do find leadership variables only modestly to weakly related to pupil outcomes. Yet this has not checked enthusiasm for theories of leadership assuming direct effects.

### *Are we asking the right question?*

- The realisation is slowly dawning on leadership effectiveness researchers that they may not be asking the right question in respect of the influence of leaders on outcomes, with an increasing and substantial minority of studies positing a number of school-related factors as mediators.

### *Mediators: how leaders influence outcomes*

- Though not without design and methodological limitations of their own, estimations of mediate, indirect effects of leadership work with the theory that leaders help create the conditions under which teachers may be optimally effective. Mission and goal setting, variables related to the setting of the curriculum, and the provision of instructional guidance for teachers, are identified as important means by which they exercise their influence. Leadership matters for determining both the motivation of teachers and the quality of teaching in the classroom.
- The importance of these mediators is corroborated in the economic literature by a number of studies of 'school autonomy' – the result of reforms to governance often

alternatively referred to as ‘decentralised decision-making’ or ‘school-based management’.

- In addition to changes to leadership and management structure, this research also indicates that the scope to shape curriculum and instructional method, and the motivation of staff (specifically through the use of appropriate pay and conditions incentives), are important for raising academic achievement. In more autonomous school contexts the importance of these mediating factors is accentuated.
- Yet problems with the underlying effects model persist. This research suggests leadership decisions as the sole cause of change in organisational performance – a conception which clearly does not do justice to the complexity of heads’ relationships and interactions with staff, pupils, parents, and others, in context.

#### *Contextual factors and reciprocal effects: how leaders are enabled*

- Considering these issues, some have begun to posit that educational outcomes and school environment are equally strong determinants of principal leadership behaviours as principal leadership behaviours themselves are of educational outcomes.
- This ‘recursive’ or ‘reciprocal effects’ model has clear resonance with earlier ‘contingency’ theories of how leadership works, stressing that organisational performance depends as much on the favourability of the situation for the leader as it does on the effective exercise of his/her influence over followers. Substantiating this theory becomes more viable with the development of this effects model, with the availability of statistical tools for testing the notion of leader ‘fit’, and in what should be a more receptive policy environment.
- The greater part of the leadership research community however, still seems reticent to move forward with this agenda. In that the leading question for social scientists is not ‘what works?’ but rather ‘what works for whom and under what conditions?’ this is surprising.

#### *The theory-laden nature of leadership studies and its consequences*

- Among more prosaic reasons relating to resources and capacity, it is undoubtedly the case that, wittingly or otherwise, underlying commitments to different effects models supporting various research theories, and reluctance to work together to develop a fuller understanding of the nature of leaders’ influence in context, have often not helped move things forward.
- ‘Great man’ or heroic theories of leadership, and the ‘trait’ and ‘behaviour’-based permutations of these that followed – all bolstered by the assumption of direct effects – have persisted in various forms long after they should have done – most recently in the form of transformational leadership theory.
- Here organisational success (and failure) is attributed to individual competence on the basis of virtually no evidence at all. With the vigorous support of their advocates, they have, in turn, exercised with their popularity, an unhelpfully normative influence on practice.

### *Oppositional research*

- This has been encouraged by a tendency within the field to pit different aspects of leadership – hierarchical / distributed, transactional /collaborative, for example – against one another, rather than seeing them as integral to what we mean by leadership.
- Thinking in terms of competing theories or paradigms is encouraged by the high stakes nature of the discourse around school effectiveness and accountability, and has led to widespread over-prescriptivity in relation to what is at best a limited research base.

### *The importance of theoretical integration and better research design/method*

- While there is some evidence of theory convergence around the ‘leadership for learning’ model, and increasing acknowledgement of the adaptive nature of leadership in relation to context, there is still too often a gratuitous preference for new theory among researchers.
- Meanwhile, best practice case study approaches, involving interviews and the collection of documentary evidence, and questionnaires – methods susceptible of a range of biases – continue to predominate.
- Researchers are slow to collaborate and rise to the challenge of the kind of longitudinal study that would be useful in assessing reciprocal effects, and appear to have no interest in undertaking studies of quasi-experimental design, let alone full experimental studies featuring randomised assignment to treatment and control groups.
- Such undertakings are crucial if leadership effectiveness research is to recover its credibility and move towards a useful understanding of the complexities of school leadership, and what makes for success.
- Because of the over-theorised nature of leadership studies, and the limitations of both research design and method that have characterised the field, atheoretical re-description of actual leadership decision-making and practice, in context, and over time, is a necessary first step. If it can be established, over time, how far particular patterns are influenced by context or are constant, then there is a route to assessing the impact of those practices, and thus to a more viable strategy for replicating good practice.
- There is, in short, a long way to go in leadership studies.

### *Policy implications*

- First, we simply do not know enough about what particular practices are impactful, learnable and transferrable, to require participation in leadership development programmes. There is no robust evidence to support claims that professional qualifications make a difference to the quality of headship.
- In that it seems likely that emerging leaders are as much shaped by the opportunities and challenges of the contexts in which they find themselves, it makes sense to shift the locus of leadership identification and development to the schools level, to be led by head-teachers, in situ. Happily, this is broadly in accord with the trajectory of recent

government policy. Moves towards the process of acquiring the necessary skills becoming more practical and work-based are also sensible.

- If school leaders themselves cannot identify potential leaders, and design and develop opportunities for leadership development in school, there is certainly no basis for believing this to be within the skill set of central government.
- Incentivising them to do so is therefore the right direction for policy. The best way of doing this is to work towards a model of headship training and continuing professional development that is leader- and demand-led.
- This should essentially consist of two elements: 1) a head-teacher shadowing scheme based on the observation of leaders in the school context, supported by 2) course content oriented to improving research literacy and building and refreshing knowledge of what works.
- Mentoring and peer-to-peer support would be provided by leaders of similar schools according to demand from those in need of advice, strategy, and support. This consultancy model would get around the misleading sense that an intervening 'hero head' is in some way taking responsibility for the outcomes of the advice he/she has given.
- The present government, however, seems at present to be set on re-investing in hero-heads and a suite of leadership development qualifications to be provided by the National College of Teaching and Leadership. This is in accord with the government's general counter-veiling tendency to override incentives-based strategy and take decision-making back to the centre – as witnessed by its ongoing control of the recruitment of academy sponsors, and increasing centralisation of decision-making in respect of national educational standards and assessments, regulation, and accountability.
- In that the research suggests it is leaders' discretion in the key areas of change to leadership and management structure, motivating staff through mission and goal-setting and appropriate incentives in pay and conditions, and curriculum and pedagogy – and consistent implementation of those decisions – that counts, centralisation policy geared to accessing a leadership premium is not well-advised.
- Such reforms threaten to stymie the potential of its school-based management reforms by taking over recruitment at the top tier and reducing leaders' scope to take decisions and effect strategies in the areas identified to have bearing on academic improvement.
- While the evidence base in this respect, as in others, is limited and far from robust with respect to causation, and researchers have a long way to go before they are capable of articulating in any detail the specific decisions and practices, in context, that shape the conditions for effective learning, it does at least give us a starting point.
- To progress from here, what we really need in our leaders is the ability attend to and to follow the evidence – for our leaders, in short, to become followers.