

School Leadership and Management in England: The Paradox of Simultaneous Centralisation and Decentralisation

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Abstract

Effective leadership and management are increasingly recognised as vital components of successful schooling. This paper examines how they are practiced in England, where there is a high degree of centralization, notably in respect of finance and staffing, but within a tightly constrained curriculum and inspection framework. The paper discusses leadership structures and processes in English schools, explains how principals are prepared for their leadership roles, and examines the evidence on the impact of leadership on school and student outcomes. It concludes that leadership will continue to play a significant part in school improvement.

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Introduction

Schools operate within a legislative framework set down by national, provincial or state parliaments. One of the key aspects of such a framework is the degree of decentralization in the educational system. Highly centralized systems tend to be bureaucratic and to allow little discretion to schools and local communities. Decentralized systems devolve significant powers to subordinate levels. Where such powers are devolved to the institutional level, we may speak of 'self-management'.

Decentralization involves a process of reducing the role of central government in planning and providing education. It can take many different forms. In the United Kingdom (UK), decentralization began with the 1988 Education Reform Act and has been further developed in subsequent legislation. It is evident in three main ways:

- Devolution
- Participative democracy, involving participation by school stakeholders
- Market mechanism, involving a significant measure of consumer choice.

Devolution

Devolution involves the granting of powers by national governments to subordinate bodies. The UK government devolved significant powers to a Scottish parliament, and reduced powers to Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies, in 1999. Education is one of the main powers devolved to these bodies, with school policies being determined within the Scottish parliament and the two assemblies. The government is now responsible for education in England but not in the rest of the UK. This paper will focus mainly on England, the most populous of the four countries.



Participative Democracy

This aspect of decentralization involves stakeholders becoming directly involved in school governance. It extends the concept of democracy beyond national and devolved bodies to the institutional level. It can be a significant feature of nation-building, as in post-Apartheid South Africa, or a recognition of the need for lay involvement in schooling. In England, each school has a governing body, with representatives of parents, the local community, teachers and other staff, with the headteacher as an *ex officio* member. The SGB chair must be a lay member (parent or community member). Caldwell and Spinks's (1992: 4) definition provides a clear link between self governance and decentralization: 'A self-managing school is a school in a system of education where there has been significant and consistent decentralization to the school level of authority to make decisions related to the allocation of resources.'

Market Mechanism

The application of market principles to education means that consumers may exercise choice, notably in deciding which school their children will attend. However, the choice is constrained by the capacity of the school, meaning that popular schools are often over-subscribed. This has led some commentators to describe school choice as a manifestation of a 'quasi-market', meaning that it has some, but not all, features of the market place. Parents can exercise choice but cannot be certain that their preferred school will be able to accommodate their children.

Research Findings

The research on self-management in England (Bush, Coleman and Glover, 1993; Levacic, 1995; Thomas and Martin, 1996) largely suggests that the shift towards school autonomy has been beneficial. These perspectives are consistent with much of the international

evidence on self-management (OECD 1994). Caldwell (2008: 249), one of the founders of the 'self-managing schools' movement, argues that the benefits of self-management are 'relatively straightforward':

'Each school contains a unique mix of students' needs, interests, aptitudes and aspirations, and those at the school level are best placed to determine the particular mix of all the resources available to achieve optimal outcomes'.

Autonomous schools and colleges may be regarded as potentially more efficient and effective but much depends on the nature and quality of internal leadership and management if these potential benefits are to be realized. Self-management also serves to expand the scope of leadership and management, providing the potential for principals and senior staff to have a greater impact on school outcomes than was possible in the era of state control (Bush 2011).

Simultaneous Centralisation and Decentralisation: A Paradox

In England, there has been significant decentralisation to school level in respect of budgets, school choice and governance, but the curriculum remains centralised. A highly prescriptive national curriculum is in place for primary and secondary schools, with some exceptions (see below). The national curriculum covers what subjects are taught and the standards children should reach in each subject. Each subject has a 'programme of study', setting out what children should learn. Compulsory schooling is divided into four 'key phases', as shown in table 1.

At the end of each key stage, there are national, or teacher, assessments, to establish if children have reached the level of attainment expected at that stage (ibid).



Table 1

National curriculum key stages (www.gov.uk/nationalcurriculum)

Phase	Key stage	Year	Age-group
Primary	KS1	Years 1-2	5-7
Primary	KS2	Years 3-6	7-11
Secondary	KS3	Years 7-9	11-14
Secondary	KS4	Years 9-11	14-16

The implementation of the national curriculum is monitored through an inspection process overseen by the statutory Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Ofsted (2012:4) explains the purpose of inspections:

‘The inspection of a school provides an independent evaluation of its effectiveness and a diagnosis of what it should do to improve. It is based on a range of evidence available to inspectors that is evaluated against a national framework’.

Inspectors are required to report on the quality of education, notably:

- Pupil achievement
- Quality of teaching
- Behaviour and safety of pupils
- Quality of leadership and management

(Ofsted 2012: 5).

Judgments on these four criteria, and on the overall effectiveness of the school, are in four categories:

1. Outstanding
2. Good
3. Requires improvement
4. Inadequate

(Ibid)

Many schools follow Ofsted expectations closely to avoid a negative report. Most teachers are like Bottery's (1998: 24) 'Alison', who examines every issue in relation to their school's Ofsted report. Hoyle and Wallace criticise the 'visionary rhetoric' of many schools and claim that the reality is that visions have to confirm to centralised expectations and to satisfy Ofsted inspectors; 'any vision you like as long as it's central governments'

The prescriptive national curriculum, policed by a national inspection body, provides a sharp contrast to the decentralised aspects of schools; governance, school choice and budgets. A distinction can be made between what schools should do, which is prescribed, and how they choose to do it, which is discretionary. While the English system has several self-managing features, the core activities are centrally prescribed.

New Forms of Autonomous Schooling

The advent of new forms of schooling in the 21st century has extended the trend towards 'constrained autonomy'. In 2000, the previous Labour government introduced academies. These were sponsored schools operating as charities on the basis of a 'funding agreement' with central government and having no formal connection with the local authority. There were 203 such academies, mostly established in deprived areas, described by government ministers as 'independent state schools' (Glatter 2012: 564).

The new Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government expanded this concept, with more than 2300 academies in place by September 2012 (Higham and Earley 2013). There was a powerful incentive for schools to convert to academy status as they received additional income, taken from local authority budgets. The post-2015 Conservative government announced plans for all schools to become academies by 2020 but this was strongly opposed by teachers and politicians and has now been modified. The coalition government also introduced a new category, called 'free schools', established by



parents, teachers, or other groups, but funded by government (Glatter 2012: 564).

Academies and free schools are not required to follow the national curriculum but they are still subject to the Ofsted inspection process. They must teach a broad and balanced curriculum, including English, maths, science and religious education (www.gov.uk/nationalcurriculum).

The introduction of these new forms of government was accompanied by political rhetoric about their popularity and value. Michael Gove (2012: 3), former Secretary of State for Education, claimed that 'greater freedom and autonomy for school leaders is the route to genuine and lasting school reform'. However, this claim is challenged by academics. Glatter (2012: 564) states that, 'despite the persistent and growing emphasis on autonomy, most school practitioners consider themselves significantly constrained by government requirements'. Higham and Earley (2013) explain this paradox in terms similar to the 'what' and 'how' distinction made earlier in this paper. They argue that this is partly due to the nature of school autonomy, which from 1988 focused on the delegation of financial and site management, and aspects of deregulation, while the traditional fields of professional autonomy, including curriculum and assessment, were prescribed through the National Curriculum and tests.

School Leadership and Management Structures

School governing bodies have discretion to determine their leadership and management structures; they are not prescribed by national or local government. The only legal requirement is to appoint a headteacher. Other senior positions, such as deputy or assistant heads, and middle manager posts, such as heads of department or pastoral leaders, are usually appointed. School structures vary, with different titles being used, but larger schools usually have one or more deputy heads, a few assistant heads, and several academic and pastoral middle managers. Research on high

performing schools (Bush and Glover 2012) found that all schools had large senior leadership teams (SLTs). Two of the four secondary schools in their study had nine people in their leadership teams, while another had seven and the smallest school had six members.

The trend towards larger SLTs is influenced by two main factors. First, the devolution of many additional responsibilities to school level has expanded leadership and management activities beyond the point where they can be handled by the headteacher alone, or by a small number of senior staff (Bush 2011). School leaders are now responsible for managing the school site, all aspects of school budgets, including staff and equipment, and marketing the school to secure sufficient enrolments in a competitive quasi-market, as well as traditional professional responsibilities for managing the curriculum and learner welfare. A second, and linked, factor is a move away from the previous belief in the value of singular leadership. Heroic models of leadership, where strong heads are the main decision-makers, have been supplanted, or supplemented, by shared approaches, epitomised most strongly by notions of distributed leadership (Harris 2013). Critics of this relatively new leadership concept (Fitzgerald and Gunter 2006, Hartley 2010) argue that distributed leadership is at best a device to share leadership and management activities and, at worst, a form of 'managerialism', with teachers being required to take on additional tasks. The extra responsibilities imposed on schools have clear implications for leadership preparation and development.

Preparing and Developing School Leaders

There is considerable diversity in the scale, nature and impact of the leadership preparation and development models in use in different countries. The pattern adopted in each nation reflects its collective sense of what is appropriate to underpin the quality of education in the 21st century. In evaluating these diverse approaches, we should acknowledge the vital importance of culture and context



in shaping education, leadership and leadership development in each country:

‘Models of preparatory training, certification, selection, assessment, induction and ongoing development for school leaders are necessarily rooted in specific national conditions and contexts. They are the product of unique, and dynamically changing, sets of circumstances – political, economic, social, cultural, historical, professional and technical – in that country’ (Bolam 2004: 251).

The establishment of the English National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in November 2000 is probably the most significant global initiative for leadership development. Referring to the OECD study of nine countries (CERI 2001), Bolam (2004: 260) says that ‘none of them match up to the college’s unique combination of features’. Crow (2004: 296) adds that the NCSL has the opportunity ‘to be a driving force for world-class leadership in our schools and the wider community’.

Simkins (2012) notes that patterns of leadership development provision in England have evolved in response to changing conceptions of how the school system should be organised. Bolam (2004: 251) says that the NCSL should be treated as the ‘the latest stage of an evolving policy innovation’. As noted above, the 1988 Education Reform Act, described as ‘the defining legislative moment’ by Simkins (2012), located many more responsibilities at school level and greatly expanded the management role of headteachers and their senior colleagues. The government appointed a School Management Task Force (SMTF) in 1989 and its influential report (SMTF 1990) set the agenda for school management development for the next few years (Bush 2004). Probably its most important legacy was the establishment of mentoring schemes for new headteachers (Bush and Coleman 1995).

The next major development was the establishment of the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), which took an interest in leadership development as well as the pre-service education of teachers. Bush (2008) debates whether this change in the discourse of the field, from management to leadership, was substantive or semantic. The TTA set

up the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), the first national qualification for aspiring heads, in 1997.

Bolam (2004) notes that the idea of national college was discussed as early as the mid 1980s, but was rejected because it was felt that a residential college could not cope with the scale of need, with some 25,000 heads and up to 70,000 senior and middle managers. He argues that it returned to political prominence in the late 1990s, for three main reasons:

- It fitted the new Labour government's plans to raise standards in education.
- Developments in ICT meant that the residential dimension became less significant.
- The government was prepared to invest significantly in a national college and its ICT infrastructure.

Following a period of consultation, the NCSL opened in temporary accommodation in November 2000. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair opened its state-of-the-art learning and conference centre in Nottingham in 2002. The NCSL took over responsibility for the NPQH, as well as acquiring, and greatly expanding, TTA's suite of leadership development programmes.

Why is leadership preparation important?

There is great interest in educational leadership in the early part of the 21st century. This is because of the widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes. In many parts of the World, including England, there is increasing recognition that schools require effective leaders and managers if they are to provide the best possible education for their students and learners (Bush 2008).

While the argument that leadership does make a difference is increasingly, if not universally, accepted, there is ongoing debate about what preparation is required to develop appropriate leadership behaviours. In England, as in many other countries, school leaders



begin their professional careers as teachers and progress to headship via a range of leadership tasks and roles, often described as 'middle leadership'. Principals may continue to teach following their appointment, particularly in small primary schools. This leads to a widespread view that teaching is their main activity (Bush 2010).

This focus on principals as head teachers underpins the view that a teaching qualification and teaching experience are the only necessary requirements for school leadership. However, from the late 20th century, there has been a growing realisation that headship is a specialist occupation which requires specific preparation. Bush (2008) identifies four factors underpinning this change of attitude:

- The expansion of the role of school principal, arising from enhanced accountability requirements and the devolution of additional powers to the school level following the 1988 Education Reform Act.
- The increasing complexity of school contexts, arising from globalisation, technological and demographic changes, and the demands of enhanced site-based responsibilities.
- Recognition that preparation is a moral obligation, because principals have onerous responsibilities that differ from those facing teachers, and leaders should have an 'entitlement' (Watson 2003) to specialised preparation.
- Recognition that effective preparation and development make a difference. Leadership is not 'fixed at birth' (Avolio 2005: 2), leading to a view that systematic preparation, rather than inadvertent experience, is more likely to produce effective leaders (Bush 2008).

Professional and Organisational Socialisation

Heck (2003) distinguishes between professional and organisational socialisation. The former includes formal preparation and the early phases of professional practice. Organisational socialisation involves the process of becoming familiar with the specific context where leadership is practiced. Where leaders are preparing to take a more senior position, such as principal, they are engaged in a process of

professional socialisation. Because future leaders rarely know where they will be appointed, context-specific preparation is not possible, although developing skills of situational analysis is both possible and desirable. In-service leadership development, however, needs to include a significant element of school-specific learning. Many leadership programmes, particularly those provided by universities, may be regarded as predominantly aiming at 'knowledge for understanding' (Bolam 1999). These courses focus mainly on the 'content' aspects of the leader's role, including leadership for learning, managing finance, and leading and managing people (Bush 2008).

Leadership Development Processes

An important consideration in designing leadership development programmes is to determine the balance between curriculum content and delivery processes. While there is some evidence of an international curriculum for leadership development (Bush and Jackson 2002), there is considerable variety in the modes of delivery. Several NCSL programmes focused on process rather than content. Instead of the adoption of a prescribed curriculum, leaders were developed through a range of action modes and support mechanisms, often customized to the specific needs of leaders through what is increasingly referred to as 'personalised learning'. Such individualization is justified because school leaders are adults, and senior professionals, who expect to be involved in determining their own leadership learning. Mentoring and coaching are two examples of personalized learning.

Mentoring

Barnett and O'Mahony (2008: 222) refer to 'the growing recognition [of the need] to provide support for aspiring and practicing leaders' and point to mentoring (and coaching) as key support processes. The mentor may be a more experienced leader or the process may be one of peer mentoring. They add that mentoring



is 'intended to encourage formal and informal career development [and] reciprocal learning between mentors and mentees' (ibid: 238). Pocklington and Weindling (1996: 189) argue that 'mentoring offers a way of speeding up the process of transition to headship'.

Hobson and Sharp's (2005) systematic review of the literature found that all major studies of formal mentoring programmes for new heads reported that such programmes have been effective, and that the mentoring of new heads can result in a range of perceived benefits for both mentees and mentors. However, mentoring is only likely to succeed if there is careful selection of mentors, specific training linked to the needs of the programme, and purposive matching of mentors and mentees.

Coaching

Coaching was often included in NCSL programmes (Bush, Glover and Harris 2007). It differs from mentoring in being short-term (Barnett and O'Mahony 2008), and being focused on developing specific skills (Bassett 2001), but such distinctions are not applied consistently, and coaching and mentoring practices often seem quite similar.

Simkins et al (2006), looking at NCSL approaches, conclude that three important issues affect the coaching experience: coach skills and commitment, the time devoted to the process, and the place of coaching within broader school leadership development strategies. The NPQH is one major programme to include coaching. Bush, Glover and Harris (2007) argue that coaching appears to work best when training is thorough and specific, when there is careful matching of coach and coachee, and when it is integral to the wider learning process.

Group learning

Despite the tendency to emphasise individual leadership learning, group activities play a significant part in many development

programmes. While this may sometimes be an opportunity for an essentially didactic approach, delivering a 'body of knowledge', there are several other group learning strategies that may be employed to promote participants' learning. The main approach to group learning in NCSL programmes is networking. Bush, Glover and Harris's (2007) overview of NCSL evaluations shows that networking is the most favoured mode of leadership learning. It is likely to be more effective when it is structured and has a clear purpose. Its main advantage is that it is 'live learning' and provides strong potential for ideas transfer. Visits with a clear purpose may also lead to powerful leadership learning. Visiting similar contexts (e.g. other small primary schools) appears to be particularly valuable.

Mandatory or Discretionary Provision?

The NPQH was previously mandatory for new first time heads and available only via the College. This monopoly position imposed great pressure on the NCSL to make sure it was 'fit for purpose'. A lack of pluralism provides a good prospect of a genuinely standardised qualification, but runs the risk of damaging the whole schools' system if it is inadequate (Bush 2008). The government decided to end mandatory status in 2012, perhaps the first example globally of a retreat from requiring trained and qualified principals. This change was accompanied by a licensing system. The College ceased to be the NPQH provider and 28 licences were awarded, on a regional basis, to provide enhanced choice for schools and leaders. The licensees include 'outstanding' schools, as judged by Ofsted inspections, universities, local authorities and private sector bodies. This privatised model applies to NPQH and to two other qualifications (one for senior leaders and one for middle leaders).

The Impact of Leadership and Management

Leithwood and Levin (2004: 2) note that 'linking leadership to student outcomes in a direct way is very difficult to do'. They conclude that 'a study that seeks to assess the impact that school



leadership can have on school outcomes faces some formidable challenges' (ibid: 25). This is largely because leadership is a mediated variable, impacting on student outcomes through influencing teachers' classroom practice.

Research in England (e.g. Leithwood et al 2006) shows strong links between effective leadership and school improvement. Robinson's (2007) meta-analysis of international research indicates that direct leader involvement in curriculum planning and professional development is associated with moderate or large leadership effects. 'This suggests that the closer leaders are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to make a difference to students' (Robinson 2007: 21). Robinson et al (2008), and Robinson et al (2009), add that the average effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was almost four times greater than that of transformational leadership. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development had the greatest effect size of 0.84 but planning, co-ordinating and evaluating teaching and curriculum (0.42), and establishing goals and expectations (0.42) were also significant (Robinson et al 2009). Leithwood et al (2006) note that there are no recorded cases of enhanced school and learner outcomes, without talented leadership. It is now also widely established that good leaders are 'made', not 'born' (Bush 2008).

The impact of leaders on school and learner outcomes is indirect. The relationship between leadership and learning outcomes is fraught with conceptual and methodological challenges. Conceptually, the assumption is that principals and other leaders determine the climate for enhanced teaching and learning, and put in place processes and resources, especially teachers, designed to improve test results and other school outcomes, including attendance and learner behaviour. A normative model (figure 1) illustrates how leadership, and leadership development, impact on learner outcomes.

Figure 1:

Normative model showing links between leadership development and learner outcomes (adapted from Leithwood and Levin 2004, and Bush and Glover 2012a).

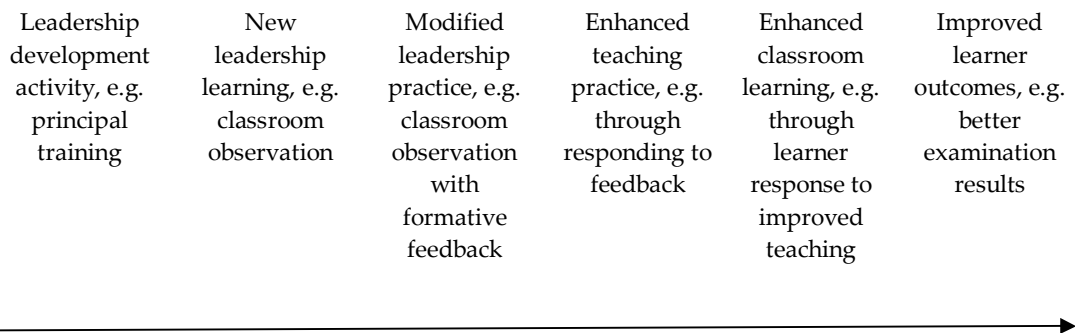


Figure 1 presents a plausible model to explain how leadership development activities can lead to enhanced learner outcomes. However, there is the potential for 'leaks' at every stage of the model.

- The leadership development activity may not lead to new leadership learning. A range of provider and participant variables may inhibit learning.
- New leadership learning may not lead to modified leadership practice. Participant and school context variables may prevent implementation of leadership learning.
- Modified leadership practice may not lead to enhanced teaching practice. Much depends on whether leaders are able to motivate, and monitor, teachers to improve their teaching practice.
- Enhanced teaching practice may not lead to enhanced classroom learning. A range of school and learner variables could inhibit learning including, for example, socio-economic



problems such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, lack of homework facilities, and poor learner and family attitudes to schooling.

- Enhanced classroom learning may not lead to improved learner outcomes. While learning might improve, this may not be sustained or might not be translated into successful examination results.

(Bush and Glover 2012a)

Leithwood et al (2006) conducted major research on the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes in England, funded by the government. Their findings are significant and show that:

- School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.
- School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.
- School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.
- School leaders are responsive to the contexts in which they work.

Perhaps the most important of these findings is the emphasis on distributed leadership and links to the common-sense assumption that several leaders can have more impact than the principal acting alone. Leithwood et al (2006: 12) claim that:

‘Total leadership accounted for a quite significant 27% of the variation in student achievement across schools. This is a much higher proportion of explained variation (two to three times higher) than is typically reported in studies of individual headteacher effects’.

The Leithwood et al (2006) research, and the Robinson (2007) meta-analysis, collectively show that leadership is very important for school improvement and learning outcomes. The growing interest in school leadership, in England and globally, is underpinned strongly by such powerful evidence.

Conclusion: The Future of School Leadership and Management in England

The 1988 Education Reform Act, and subsequent legislation, has greatly expanded the role of leadership within a decentralised schools' system. The responsibilities for finance, staffing, the school site, and marketing, added to the traditional role of curriculum management, have led to an increase in the number of senior and middle leaders in most English schools. This growth in leadership and management responsibilities has contributed to a shortage of headteachers, notably in primary schools (Bush 2011a). This also means that most successful schools rely on what are often quite large senior leadership teams, informed by notions of distributed leadership (Bush and Glover 2012a).

Given the importance of educational leadership, Bush (2008: 125) argues that the development of effective leaders should not be left to chance. It should be a deliberate process designed to produce the best possible leadership and management for schools and colleges. School leadership is a different role from teaching and requires separate and specialised preparation. Given this widely supported claim, the decision to withdraw mandatory status from NPQH is surprising as it is certain to lead to unqualified heads being appointed in some schools.

In the past decade, there has been a global trend towards more systematic provision of leadership and management development, particularly for school principals. Hallinger (2003: 3) notes that, in 1980, 'no nation in the world had in place a clear system of national requirements, agreed upon frameworks of knowledge, and standards of preparation for school leaders'. In the 21st century, many countries, including England, are giving this a high priority, recognising its potential for school improvement. Even following the end of the NPQH's mandatory status, many potential heads undertake leadership training, with a national curriculum, before becoming principals and receive national accreditation on successful completion of the activity.



The global interest in school leadership is predicated on the widespread assumption that it will lead to school improvement, and enhanced learning outcomes. The empirical evidence for this perspective is increasing despite the difficulties of assessing impact because of the conceptual and methodological problems, discussed earlier. The research in England (Leithwood et al 2006), and globally (Robinson 2007), shows that effective school leadership makes a significant difference to classroom learning and student outcomes. As a consequence, the contemporary interest in leadership in England seems likely to continue.

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