



Leading the Way: a Review of the Changing Nature of School Leadership

A report prepared for ASCL by BritainThinks

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February 2015

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Foreword

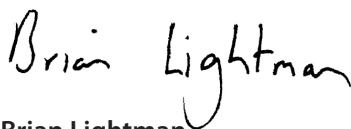
ASCL's Blueprint for a Self-Improving System offers a vision for the future of education in England. We want a system in which all children and young people achieve. The blueprint is a re-imagining of education in England – a move away from prescription to a profession-led system that is evidence-informed, innovative and ethical. It starts from the premise that profound and sustained reform of the education system will not come from outside the profession: it depends on those of us within the education profession taking the lead.

In order to do so, we need leadership that embraces uncertainty, adopts an open, enquiring mindset and refuses to be constrained by current horizons. Right now, there is a window of opportunity – an opportunity for the profession to step forward. Leading the change will involve a mindset – our education system is not composed of a series of givens by those outside the profession, to which we are required to respond and by which we are constrained. Rather our leadership must be active, passionate, ethical and driven by our collective dedication and effort. We need to break the chains that lead us to accept certain beliefs or ways of doing things.

ASCL decided to undertake qualitative research with a range of actors in the system, including school leaders, policy-makers, opinion-formers and influencers, political advisers, regulators, and civil servants. Our intention was to get a better understanding of how the profession is moving towards this vision and stakeholders' perceptions of the changes.

We commissioned BritainThinks, an independent organisation, to undertake the research. The findings are so valuable that we decided to ask BritainThinks to develop this think piece, which provides an outline of these actors' perceptions of the changes.

We are very grateful to the people who gave so generously of their time to help us build a rich picture of the changes and to reflect on what they may mean for education leadership in England. We know that taking 40 minutes out of a busy day to be interviewed can be very difficult to accommodate. We were truly delighted with how quickly people put themselves forward to participate in the research. This demonstrates a real appetite to understand and begin to articulate the changes – to find the meaning therein and to work towards a common good.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian Lightman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Brian" and "Lightman" being capitalized and prominent.

Brian Lightman
ASCL General Secretary

Approach

BritainThinks, a strategic research consultancy, was commissioned in late 2014 by ASCL to conduct interviews with a number of opinion leaders and school leaders across the education sector as part of a wider review of the changing nature of school leadership.

In total, 45 telephone interviews were conducted between 3 November 2014 and 9 January 2015.

Twenty interviews were conducted with opinion leaders from a number of categories:

- 'Political and wider political' (eg parliamentarians, special advisers and other policy makers).
- 'Non-political' (eg senior civil servants working for regulators, government departments or other agencies).
- 'Influencers' (eg representatives of think-tanks, education research organisations, journalists).

Twenty-five interviews were conducted with school leaders from a number of categories:

- 'Emerging Leaders' (eg teachers on Teach First, Teaching Leaders or Future Leaders programmes).
- 'Emerging senior teams in multi-academy trusts (MATs) (eg members of the MAT leadership team but not CEO/executive headteacher).
- 'System leaders' (eg leaders of a partnership of two or more academies in a local area, including CEOs and Executive headteachers).
- 'Primary school system leaders' (eg leaders of a partnership of two or more primary schools in a local area).

Interviews lasted between 30-40 minutes and were conducted by telephone by BritainThinks researchers.

The following sections, developed by BritainThinks, represent an overview of the main findings from the research, with verbatim quotes from across the stakeholder interviews used for illustration and elaboration.

How is school and college leadership changing? The stakeholder perspective

Introduction

There was widespread agreement among interviewees that the pace and scale of change in the education sector in recent years has been significant. The key changes pertaining to the nature of school and college leadership were identified as:

- more autonomy for school leadership in terms of making key decisions about the structure and direction of their school/s
- greater accountability
- a wider range of leadership roles
- an evolving relationship between primary and secondary leadership
- a support infrastructure that is more variable between different types of school
- leaders increasingly coming from different backgrounds

This overview of stakeholder perceptions will examine these changes in turn, grouping them according to the broader structural trend underpinning each: the move towards a 'self-improving, school-led' system; the diversification of school structure; and new pathways into school leadership.

"It's been radical in the last four and a half years under Gove. It's been significant partly for its pace and because of its impact"

[Opinion Leader]

"You have more choice in terms of how you're organised - you can go it alone or work together. . . there are a lot of demands and you work long hours but there are a lot of opportunities - you can do what you want to do!"

[School Leader]

While some stakeholders were supportive of the changes and others opposed, there is a widespread acceptance of the changed landscape as the new reality and an inclination to engage constructively. Participants in this research felt that lots of opportunities had opened up for ambitious and driven leaders in the education sector to be able to really shape their schools and, as such, the education system more broadly.

The implication is that [school leaders] should be more opportunistic and forward-looking. They should think about those kinds of opportunities and celebrate them...and share them. Everyone knows about the pressures... but...thinking about the opportunities for how the profession can develop is really important"

[School Leader]

"School leaders will be expected to take control and responsibility for much of the system: initial teacher training, continual professional development, leadership development, and school-to-school thought. So much more is being asked of school leaders, in terms of not just looking after their schools, but also working in partnership with others to look after the region [and] in a sense to fill the space left by local authorities... it's for schools themselves to sort out, what is it that schools need, and how can they provide it for each other"

[School Leader]

It was thought that some of the emerging and growing challenges faced by the profession had not yet been addressed and that there is now a need for school leaders to establish what has been learned and achieved over recent years in order to make the most of opportunities moving forwards.

"I think it's changed dramatically and rapidly - on the one hand there are lots of opportunities for system leaders to influence the system... there are lots of challenges too. I think a lot of system leaders lack confidence in stepping up to that level"

[School Leader]

Moving towards a 'self-improving, school-led' system

Stakeholders observed a shift towards a 'self-improving, school-led' system, away from the traditional, top-down system where local authorities had primary responsibility for raising educational standards. While a minority of stakeholders expressed some reservations about this shift, the majority were enthusiastic. Irrespective of their views on the change, all stakeholders accepted this shift as 'the new normal' and were inclined to engage with the implications constructively.

"We are in a different world now; a world where we have to embrace the responsibility that has been given to the profession and move on with that."

[Opinion Leader]

The most obvious implication of this underlying trend for school and college leadership, according to stakeholders, is greater autonomy for leaders themselves.

School and college leaders are deemed to have greater freedom and flexibility to innovate and drive change in their schools (and more widely). Stakeholders spoke of the role of leaders being "bigger" and "more important" under the self-improving, school-led system. For enterprising headteachers, this provides a real opportunity to influence the system and raise education standards. Stakeholders also noted that the onus was on leaders to realise and confidently take advantage of this opportunity.

Other organisations in the sector, including professional associations, were deemed to have a role in building leaders' confidence and capacity to exploit new opportunities, for example by sharing best practice and developing professional networks.

"Because of more autonomy for schools and more schools in chains, you have a need for entrepreneurs and people that take risks. It's a big opportunity for school leaders."

[Opinion Leader]

"There are new opportunities for school leaders to exercise professional creativity in the interests of children, which is fantastic - but we've had a generation of teachers who have not necessarily been prepared for it... The government has not done a lot to prepare workforce for this, so there is an opportunity for professional associations to help their members to embrace independence and equip them with skills to manage it."

[School Leader]

"I think it's changed dramatically and rapidly - on the one hand there are lots of opportunities for system leaders to influence the system... there are lots of challenges too. I think a lot of system leaders lack confidence in stepping up to that level."

[School Leader]

Alongside greater autonomy, a second, related implication of the shift towards a school-led system is greater accountability for school leaders.

According to stakeholders, leaders now have greater responsibility to demonstrate their school's progress and improvement, particularly to Ofsted, while the personal consequences of failing to improve are felt to be more severe. This means that school leaders are operating in an increasingly rigorous, demanding and competitive environment. While there are risks, stakeholders have noticed many school leaders meeting these challenges and thriving.

Some stakeholders noted the recruitment of high-quality school leaders, already seen as challenging, might become even more so as a result of increased accountability. Communicating the novel opportunities of both professional development and raising education standards, as well as the stimulating challenge of leadership in the new system, was seen as key to attracting the most ambitious and talented future leaders.

Stakeholders felt that there was a need for professional associations to provide joined-up thinking around these challenges and, again, to build up confidence in the profession to allow it to meet them.

"It's probably more stressful than it's ever been for school and college leaders, and I think that's partly due to Ofsted, so you've got less time to improve your school before you get given a judgement... So I think that means that people are more reluctant to take on deputy head, head roles... and risk getting sacked. On the other hand, you do see a lot of people thriving and really seizing the mantle. So I think there are more opportunities for heads to make a name for themselves... if things are going well there are more opportunities than ever before to stay in school leadership for a longer period of time."

[Opinion Leader]

"There is definitely more pressure on headteachers, there's more accountability but also more opportunity to take on bigger roles, there are more executive headteachers. It used to be you would become a headteacher, then a head of a bigger school, then maybe you might go and work in the local authority for a bit. Now, you become a headteacher, then you could be an executive headteacher of two or three schools, oversee an academy group, or you could be chief executive of an academy chain. There are more opportunities in leadership terms."

[Opinion Leader]

"It's the accountability. The stakes for school leadership are incredibly high; I don't know why anybody would want to give up a comfortable deputy headship to go into headship. Having said that, I think headship is the best job ever, it's a wonderful role because you can transform the lives of children, but we are constantly being scrutinised... There needs to be a degree to which leadership is given some joined-up thinking and that's where I think our professional associations need to be working."

[School Leader]

Diversification of school structure

Stakeholders pointed to the proliferation of MATs and other alliances of schools as a significant and ongoing change in the sector with strong implications for the nature of school leadership. The discretion afforded to senior leadership in determining the scope and structure of MATs and alliances was seen as a key cause of the diversification of schools.

"Over the last five years there have been significant changes and it's now a much more complex environment, now there are trusts and federations and we have executive headteachers."

[School Leader]

Most stakeholders perceived significant benefits accruing to schools as a result of collaborating in a MAT or other alliance. School leaders, for example, spoke of the increased efficiency of leadership teams where roles become increasingly specialised, allowing for an efficient allocation of responsibilities and providing individual schools with access to specialists not available to those outside such structures. These groupings were also felt to provide an important support structure for individual schools to compensate for the diminishing involvement of local authorities.

"These sorts of management structures work in other industries - my personal opinion is that there are huge benefits to schools working together, and these positions tend to work well."

[Opinion Leader]

"The stand alone schools are going to have to collaborate. They don't all need a school business manager, they don't all need a board of governors and they don't need headteachers either. They can collaborate."

[Opinion Leader]

There is now a much wider range of leadership roles as a result of the diversified school structures; stakeholders identified not only new job titles and specifications but also new relationships and models of working. Interviewees identified a move away from the model in which the headteacher operates as a 'lone ranger' towards a model of collective leadership (even if ultimate responsibility still rests with the senior leader). Stakeholders and school leaders also noted that middle leaders' role had changed, as they are increasingly responsible for the implementation of policy in schools.

"Leadership is much more distributed and diverse than it once was. Previously, a headteacher was a head-teacher. Now, all of the management and administration is part of the school's responsibility. Especially with MATs, you now have executive leadership, finance directors, etc as opposed to just bursars."

[Opinion Leader]

"The model of a long ranger hero head working by himself in a silo, keeping his secrets and successes to himself, is now outdated... in collaborative arrangements or formalised trusts, you have shared intelligence... and shared learning. It's compelling that we're better together than we are apart."

[School Leader]

"It is actually the middle leadership that drives the school; the leadership might have the vision, but it is the middle leaders who actually have to drive through the vision or the initiatives on behalf of the leadership team."

[School Leader]

School leaders spoke of new career opportunities having opened up in the new diversifying landscape of leadership. In particular, the ability now to move beyond headship of a single school into system leadership was perceived to be an exciting and challenging new opportunity for ambitious leaders. Further, the lack of any standardised structure into which new roles are required to fit was felt to have created a sector in which there is greater space to carve out one's own role and actively shape the system.

"It provides a sense that school leadership is not the end of the road - there are different things you can do. It makes it interesting in terms of career and in terms of challenge, as those are going to be very different skill that are needed."

[School Leader]

Leadership is more than just lead your own school, it's much broader than that now - that makes it very exciting, but also very challenging."

[School Leader]

Stakeholders talked about the different skillset now required of school leaders, and the growing demand for individuals with specialist expertise working together in leadership teams. Some also noted that a different mindset was required of the most successful leaders, including an entrepreneurial ambition and drive to succeed. For example, the establishment of MATs and federations was considered to have created a greater need for business-minded leaders with skills in financial management.

"Successful heads build great teams around them, they are open to challenge and willing to engage. They embrace the accountability if you like."

[Opinion Leader]

"The new roles are less focused on teaching and it requires new business skills in how to manage organisations. If you've come through a school, you wouldn't have been exposed to that and suddenly being exposed to that broader role, a lot wouldn't understand."

[Opinion Leader]

"It will change the people who want to go into headship...you used to never be a headteacher without having been a teacher first. Now you see people coming, to a greater extent, from other professions, having done five years, 20 years as a management consultant."

[Opinion Leader]

In the context of this increasing diversification of the schooling sector, numerous stakeholders also noted that many of these new roles were not yet recognised by professional associations and training providers.

Another change to the nature of leadership resulting from the diversification of school structure suggested by interviewees is the changing relationship between the leadership of primary and secondary schools. Whilst all-through schools and continuous schooling was considered to be relatively rare, alliances and trusts that join both primary/secondary schools together were felt to have more profoundly altered the landscape of leadership.

The need to facilitate dialogue and learning across the primary and secondary sectors was deemed to be of particular importance; indeed, leaders with a cross phase remit expressed an interest in entering leadership networks that would facilitate dialogue across primary and secondary and in pursuing opportunities to share best practice across the sector.

"It's a profession that is very divided in terms of primary and secondary and there's a lot of mistrust and suspicion...The idea of having much more porous boundaries is a really critical one."

[Opinion Leader]

"It takes quite a lot for people like me, who come from a secondary background, to get your head around how primary leadership works, what the differences are in the curriculum, teaching methods and so on."

[School Leader]

New pathways into school leadership

Generating new and creative ways to bring a diverse and talented group of people into leadership roles was considered to be a necessary requirement in the sector. Programmes such as Teach First, Teaching Leaders and Future Leaders were all thought to have an important role in doing this.

Stakeholders and school leaders also felt there was an interesting trend towards recruiting leaders from outside the profession. The need for a new set of business and management skills in leadership was felt, by some, to necessitate wider and more creative recruitment practices. This widening of the talent pool was also perceived to help in meeting the recruitment challenge faced by school and college leadership. Some stakeholders, however, expressed concern at the possibility of candidates with very little classroom teaching experience ascending rapidly to leadership positions.

Some stakeholders and school leaders felt that the current range of training programmes for leaders do not properly match current and emerging needs of leaders in education. Given the likely increase in the numbers of leaders recruited outside the sector, some interviewees called for training that takes into account a divergent set of experiences and backgrounds.

"I would welcome a diversification of routes into leadership - especially if it means that the talent pool increases."

[School Leader]

"My main difficulty is recruitment, so the more creative ways we have of bringing the best people into education, the better."

[School Leader]

Afterword

This research adds to the growing body of evidence that the nature of school leadership is changing. The roles performed by school leaders are becoming much more diverse. The research has shown that deeply held sectoral differences between primary and secondary education are disappearing.

The emerging system has strong school-led features. System leader roles are not just the reserve of formal groups of schools like MATs and federations. Increasingly, school leaders are leading the system through teaching school alliances, head-teacher boards, and think tanks or indeed through being elected to representative roles within their professional associations.

Formal partnerships of schools in the form of MATs and federations are proliferating very quickly. This is an explicit feature of the drive to subsidiarity and based on the evidence that formal partnerships make the most difference.

Formal partnerships also have the scale and capacity to take on system roles which individual schools cannot always do, like the capacity for initial teacher education, sustainable professional learning within and across schools, and research and development.

New pathways to school leadership – for example via Teaching Leaders and Future Leaders – are leading to new school leaders with different backgrounds, teaching experiences, attitudes and expectations coming through the system.

This research has profound implications for ASCL as a professional association. The think piece signals this new direction of travel for the association. We have set out our vision for the education system in the blueprint. It is now time to:

- be bold about the moral purpose informing the vision and execute that purpose with confidence
- speak authoritatively to the government on behalf of the profession
- provide thought leadership to the profession, opinion formers, policy makers and government

Our blueprint indicates the need for government to step back. This is necessary for our education system to move from 'good' to 'great'. We know that the 'good' to 'great' journey marks the point at which the school system comes to rely largely upon the values and behaviours of its educators to propel continuing improvement.¹ The focus shifts from central prescription towards ownership by the profession of outcomes and the quality of education.

Let us work together to seize the day.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Kent". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of both names being capitalized and prominent.

Dr Peter Kent
ASCL President

1 Barber, M. and Mourshed, M. and Chikioke, C. 2010, How the World's Most Improved Systems Keep Getting Better, London, McKinsey & Company

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February 2015