

Deputy and Assistant Heads: Building leadership potential

Summary Report | Summer 2003



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1. Introduction

“Remarkably little is known or published about deputy heads”.

Southworth, (1998:89)

This summary is an abbreviated version of the full review of literature on deputy and assistant headteachers commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). This summary report aims to provide a synthesis of the main findings in a form that is accessible and informative. The report focuses particularly on the key findings from the review of the literature and makes some recommendations concerning future professional development and research for this important group of school leaders. It is acknowledged at the outset that the international literature pertaining to assistant and deputy headteachers is substantially smaller than that relating to headteachers or principals. However, this review maps the existing evidence to highlight what is currently known about assistant and deputy headteachers in primary, secondary and special schools.

2. The Role

2.1 Role and responsibilities

A disproportionate amount of the literature in the review focused upon elements of the role and, in particular, the responsibilities associated with deputy or assistant headship. This concentration upon the duties and responsibilities of assistant and deputy headteachers frequently raised issues of role demarcation and by association the relationship with the headteacher. The literature pointed unequivocally towards tensions concerning the exact role of the assistant or deputy headteacher in relation to the headteacher. It showed that:

- Role tensions exist for deputy or assistant heads as the responsibilities often overlap with those of the headteacher. In some cases deputies are expected to fulfil all the responsibilities of the headteacher and to deputise fully when the headteacher is away from the school (Harvey, 1994; Ribbins, 1997).
- Within most schools, assistant and deputy heads are given particular areas of responsibility such as discipline, staff-development, data-management or attendance. The degree to which they are given leadership responsibility is highly dependent on the headteacher (Rutherford, 2002; Southworth, 1995).
- The main role of the assistant or deputy head is considered to be one of ensuring stability and order in the school, a maintenance rather than a developmental or leadership function (Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; Weller & Weller, 2002).
- The leadership potential of assistant and deputy heads in many schools is not being fully released or exploited and their leadership capabilities are not being developed in the role (Rutherford, 2002).
- Further study is required into the nature of the relationship between assistant and deputy heads and other senior leaders, and the influence these relationships have upon the work of the leadership team.

2.2 Preparation for headship

One key assumption about deputy or assistant headteachers is that they aspire to headship and that their current role is an important stage in their development as a potential headteacher. While headship is certainly not an aspiration for all deputy or assistant heads, many deputy and assistant heads do seek promotion to headship. However, a number of studies demonstrated that many headteachers found their experience as a deputy particularly frustrating or disappointing because of the lack of leadership influence they felt they had within the school. In addition, there are currently limited opportunities for formal leadership training for assistant and deputy heads. This is potentially a major drawback in preparing for headship and becoming more effective in the role. The literature highlighted that:

- The experience of being a deputy or assistant head is not always helpful preparation for headship because of the lack of direct leadership experience some deputy or assistant heads encounter in this role (Ribbins, 1997).
- The absence of targeted professional training and leadership development for assistant or deputy heads is considered to be a major drawback in preparing for headship (Ribbins, 1997).
- Assistant and deputy heads often experience a lack of professional support in their role. The support of the headteacher and other members of the leadership team is a key contributor to feeling valued and motivated in the role (Glanz, 1994).
- Where deputy and assistant heads are given leadership responsibilities within the school, higher levels of job satisfaction follow (Chen, Blendinger & McGrath, 2000; Pellicer, Anderson, Keefe, Kelley & McCleary, 1990).

2.3 Contemporary changes in role

The growing workload of headteachers in the last decade, particularly resulting from the local management of schools, has contributed to an increase in the delegation of responsibilities to assistant and deputy headteachers. The main consequences of this increase in responsibilities were found to be reduced attention to the quality of their own teaching, difficulty keeping up with new developments and the feeling that if the headteacher were away for a longer period (more than one week), they would find it very hard to take over the headship role. The literature highlighted that:

- There is increased pressure on assistant and deputy heads within schools to meet the many demands and requirements imposed externally upon schools and generated internally within schools (Campbell & Neill, 1994).
- This expanded set of responsibilities inevitably places an additional demand on the time of deputy and assistant heads. In most cases, extra time has not been allocated and more 'personal' time is being taken to complete the tasks required (Southworth, 1998; Webb & Vulliamy, 1996).
- In primary schools, there is a particular tension between the teaching and management roles of the deputy and a great pressure upon the time available to fulfil both roles (Campbell & Neil, 1994; Southworth, 1998).
- The influence and involvement of the assistant or deputy head in leadership and development activities varies considerably across schools (Rutherford, 2002).
- In some schools assistant and deputy heads remain a central part of the discussion and decision-making process, whilst in other schools the decisions are still made by the headteacher with little real consultation (Rutherford, 2002).
- Where assistant and deputy heads build up strong relationships with headteachers the possibility for broadening leadership responsibilities and extending responsibility for developing the school is increased (Hartzell, Williams & Nelson, 1995).

Despite a general shift towards increased responsibilities for deputy and assistant headteachers, in most cases the role is still mainly concerned with maintenance rather than developmental functions. The deputy or assistant head is still seen as someone who ensures the school operates properly and generally keeps things running on a day-to-day basis despite a willingness to engage in leadership activities (Smith, 2002). In only a small number of cases was the deputy or assistant head seen as being close to being a second headteacher or as someone with real leadership responsibilities. Evidence would suggest that where assistant and deputy headteachers build up strong relationships with headteachers the possibility for broadening leadership responsibilities and extending responsibility for developing the school is increased (Marcoulides & Heck, 1993).

3. Access and Career Progression

3.1 Barriers to access and promotion

It is generally accepted that gender and ethnicity can prove to be covert barriers to promotion within a wide range of professional fields. Within the school leadership literature, issues of gender and ethnicity feature, but there are relatively few studies that focus specifically upon these issues. The literature pertaining to deputy and assistant heads contains little serious consideration of gender and ethnicity issues. Consequently, the review focused upon those studies of gender and ethnicity within the broader context of school leadership that have implications for access and promotion for assistant or deputy headship.

3.2 Gender

The limited literature that focuses on the relationship between gender and leadership indicated that gender as a barrier to promotion continues to exist and that women are less likely than men to aspire to leadership positions. The literature suggests that women are more likely to secure a deputy post than to be offered headship (Huang, 2003). It also showed that women were under more pressure to prove themselves than men in their leadership role (Coleman, 2002). This was even more strongly the case for women from ethnic minority backgrounds who felt a need to continually prove that they were as good as their male and female counterparts (Shakeshaft, 1989; Coleman, 2001). Interestingly, there is no evidence to suggest a gender divide in approaches to leadership. The research evidence dismisses the idea that there are 'male' and 'female' ways of leading (Evetts, 1994; Coleman, 2002). Instead, the evidence suggests that there is good or effective leadership practice and this is not gender specific (Vinkenburg, 2000). In summary the literature revealed that:

- There are more male than female deputy heads, assistant heads and headteachers in the UK. It has been argued that this sends out a negative message to women who aspire to such roles (James & Whiting, 1998).
- There is evidence to suggest that women are less likely than men to seek promotion to headship, irrespective of experience or capability (Hall, 1996).
- The responsibilities allocated to men and women in deputy or assistant headship positions differ considerably. Women are more likely to deal with pastoral matters and men with discipline and curriculum matters (Coleman, 2002).
- Women feel under more pressure to prove themselves than men as assistant and deputy heads. This is even more strongly the case for women from ethnic minority backgrounds (Coleman, 2002).

3.3 Ethnicity

The research evidence also suggests that ethnicity presents significant barriers to promotion and a high degree of professional challenge (McKenley & Gordon, 2002). One barrier to promotion was found to be the reliance of many teachers on informal networks, of which ethnic minority teachers were not part (Quicho & Rios, 2000). Research on effective schools with high levels of pupils from ethnic minority groups shows that the presence of teachers from the same ethnic group can provide pupils with role models and lead to higher achievement within these groups (Lindsay & Muijs, forthcoming). The representation of teachers from ethnic minority groupings has been shown to be an important factor in improving pupil achievement (Singer, Murphy & Singer, 1998). These findings highlight the need for increased representation of ethnic minority teachers within schools, particularly at senior leadership levels. In summary, the literature revealed that:

- Being a school leader from an ethnic minority group presents significant personal and professional challenges (McKenley & Gordon, 2002).
- Assistant and deputy heads from ethnic minority groups have reported feeling that they have to work harder and are allowed to fail less than their white peers (McKenley & Gordon, 2002).
- Black teachers are less likely to be encouraged to apply for promotion to senior roles than their white counterparts and are more likely to be made to teach subjects for which they are not qualified (General Teaching Council, 2003).

4. Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is a form of collective agency incorporating the activities of many individuals in a school who work at mobilising and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change (Spillane et al, 2000). Engaging many people in leadership activity is at the core of distributed leadership in action. This would imply a much stronger leadership role for the deputy or assistant headteacher and some re-definition of core responsibilities.

This literature review suggests that the traditional role of the deputy or assistant headteacher is still prevalent in schools despite major changes in the last decade. This traditional role consists largely of administrative and routine maintenance functions. In contrast, a distributed form of leadership suggests an emergent leadership role for deputy and assistant heads where they are centrally involved in building culture and managing change. In this emergent role, assistant/deputy heads clearly share responsibility for leadership with the headteacher and other teachers (Muijs and Harris, 2003). The literature suggests that:

- An emergent leadership role for an assistant or deputy head would necessitate communicating and developing vision, promoting shared understanding amongst staff, working as a change agent (understanding change processes, initiating programmes and encouraging participation) (Calabrese, 1991; Williams, 1995; Kaplan and Owings, 1999).
- An emergent leadership role will entail more responsibility for planning and co-ordinating change within the school and it is important that assistant and deputy heads are fully prepared for the demands of this leadership role (Weller & Weller, 2002).

5. Implications for Future Professional Development and Training

It is clear from the review of the literature that assistant and deputy headteachers have an enormous amount to contribute to school improvement yet within many schools they are currently under-utilised as leaders. It is also clear that without proper investment in the training and development of these key leaders, motivation levels will continue to be variable as assistant heads and deputies continue to see themselves as only being concerned with low level maintenance activities.

The evidence points towards a need for specialist training for those who see assistant and deputy headship as a career choice rather than a step towards headship. To achieve this will require action and support from the headteacher as well as training programmes that skill deputy and assistant headteachers to undertake a more substantial leadership role in schools (Mertz 2000). Training and recognition for established leaders is therefore both necessary and desirable to ensure that leadership at this level is both enhanced and that the potential for school improvement is maximised. The research evidence suggests that:

- There is a need for specialist training for those who see assistant and deputy headship as a career choice rather than a step towards headship.
- People skills, communication skills, knowledge of leadership theory, techniques for improving curriculum and instruction and working with teams are considered by deputy and assistant heads to be important elements in any future professional development programmes.
- There is a need for professional development programmes that focus specifically on leadership skills, knowledge and understanding for assistant and deputy heads.
- To attract deputies and assistant heads of ethnic minority backgrounds, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the difficulties that they face and specific introductory and support programmes for those who are considering such a career move.
- More research into the particular development needs of these groups is required to ensure that future provision is relevant, appropriate and ultimately effective.

6. Conclusion

This review of the existing research would suggest an urgent need for professional development programmes that focus specifically on leadership skills, knowledge and understanding for deputy and assistant headteachers. The implications for those concerned with professional development are quite clear. Firstly, the career aims of many deputies are met in this role. They do, however, require ongoing professional development and support as part of this long-term and developing role. Secondly, on appointment to deputy or assistant headship there should be opportunities for the deputy or assistant head to link with a programme focused on the specifics of this role. There may even be a need for more clearly defined professional development steps towards the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Thirdly, to attract deputies and assistant heads of ethnic minority backgrounds, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the difficulties that they face, and specific support programmes for those who are considering such a career move.

In terms of gender and ethnicity, there are still stereotypes that prevail and future professional development provision has to address these issues carefully and sensitively. Any professional development programme for assistant or deputy headteachers will also need to have a keen awareness of the challenges that new appointees face and the particular barriers to promotion to headship that currently operate.

Finally, further investigation is needed into the particular development needs of assistant and deputy headteachers to ensure that future provision is relevant, appropriate and ultimately useful.

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