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Secondary school leadership preparation and development: Experiences and aspirations of members of senior leadership teams (SLTs)

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Abstract

In England, school leadership preparation has shifted from the National College and local authorities to teaching schools, their alliances and multi-academy trusts. Against this changing educational landscape we investigate opportunities presented to men and women in secondary school leadership teams (SLTs). Drawing on interview data from a BELMAS funded investigation, we report on leadership preparation and development opportunities, aspiration to headship, headteachers' support of 'in house', regional and national preparation programmes, coaching and mentoring involvement as well as access to formal and informal networks. Our analysis of SLTs as sites of potential for headship demonstrated some variability in women's and men's reported experiences. Accredited courses, higher degrees and workplace based preparation provided access to leadership preparation and development opportunities; access was not transferrable from school to school. We identified a fragmented system and suggest policy and cultural changes to allow SLTs to offer inclusive and sustainable opportunities for succession planning.

Key words leadership preparation, leadership development, secondary schools, educational leadership, headteacher, local authority, teaching schools, academy chains, succession planning

Introduction

Before taking on the role of headteacher, individuals prepare for headship and develop in their leadership journeys. It is usual for teachers in England to serve their time as educators in various learning spaces before taking on leadership roles. These roles tend to commence with middle leadership such as head of department or head of year and are associated with management responsibilities. This process of preparing for leadership has been a common pathway (all be it with some exceptions, although now closed, see 'Tomorrow's Heads' and 'Future Leaders Headteachers Leadership' programmes from the NCSL) for the majority of headteachers in England. Yet, with the changing educational landscape and the shift of leadership preparation from the National College and local authorities to teaching schools and

their alliances (DfE 2014), we investigate the opportunities presented to teachers in secondary school leadership as a result of changes in policy including the NPQH no longer being mandatory in England (from 2012).

Leadership preparation and development

The terms preparation and development are often referred to in simultaneous fashion yet we are aware of distinctions in their meaning and conceptualise these as pre-service for preparation and in-service for development (Moorosi and Bush, 2011). For pre-service leadership preparation, there is deliberate action taken by the individual and for the individual, which requires a willingness to proceed to learn the skills associated with the leadership role. In-service leadership development is nuanced; there are intended activities as part of the process to equip individuals and build their capacity as they learn and adapt to shouldering responsibility and accountability (Grogan and Andrews, 2002; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003; Tucker and Coddling, 2003; Harris, 2013). Whilst some development is instructed, developmental learning occurs both consciously and subconsciously through life and professional opportunities and experiences (Cliffe, 2016).

Experiences occur whilst teachers are in post where learning about leading and acting out leadership transpires through educational duties (Brundrett, 2001). As a teacher advances on leadership trajectories, teaching commitments tend to be reduced (Harris, 2013), although these may remain connected to leadership activities for example, members of SLTs may have specific responsibilities for pupil achievement (Schleicher, 2012).

The research

Our data for this paper was drawn from interviews as part of a BELMAS funded Small-Scale Research Project (see Fuller, Cliffe and Moorosi, 2014, 2015) where we investigated SLTs as sites for leadership preparation in English secondary schools in six local authorities (74 schools). Data collection occurred over three phases; a telephone survey to establish the SLTs composition regarding biological sex; a postal and online questionnaire to all SLT members; and follow up telephone interviews. It is from the final investigative phase entailing 16 telephone interviews with self-selected respondents where the focus for our paper lies. Interviews comprised questions which materialised after the analysis of the preceding two phases of data collection. These were in relation to leadership preparation and development and sought to establish how the local authority and school/academy (along with their

associated network/partnership/academy chain/federation/teaching school alliance) supported leadership development.

Findings

Various approaches to leadership preparation and development taken by schools emerged and the opportunities as revealed by the respondents covered several categories. For the purposes of this paper, we describe these through the respondents' shared experiences and models of leadership preparation and development as they existed at the time of writing. We are not claiming generalisability given the relatively small sample coupled with the rapid pace of educational change.

Local authorities

What became clear through the interviews was the respondents' lack of engagement with the local authorities. With many schools operating as academies and teaching schools it was clear the academy chains were increasing their support for leadership development at the expense of the local authority, thus putting 'schools at the centre' (Simkins, 2012, p.635). Overall, were low opinions as to the value of local authority support, 'I think in the current state in terms of what is the local authority role, I think it's diminished ... greatly' (Becky - assistant headteacher); a comment aligned to Chapman's (2013, p.348) 'erosion of the local authority (school district) power'.

As a headteacher, Sam's views of local authority support were negative:

I don't think [the local authority] support leadership development. I don't think they even know who the good leaders are in their schools ... one of their problems is that they think that everybody is equal and everybody has the same voice. They don't like ... to differentiate or they haven't in the past. They are being forced to now by using SLEs [Specialist Leader of Education] and heads of good and better schools to support other schools' (Sam - headteacher).

Sam thought the NCSL along with teaching schools did more than local authorities to develop leadership claiming the lack of support had frustrated her 'it's actually done my head in' citing meetings without quality where all voices were regarded as equal even if (in her opinion) leadership strategy decisions were taken which brought 'everything down'. Sam's reasoning was based on what she considered was a lack of knowledge stemming from local authority advisers having no more than middle management experience in schools, 'very few

heads go into local authorities, so they don't have people who have themselves been senior leaders in schools' (Sam).

Craig held similar views, he recognised adherence to local authority guidance for some school activities such as educational visits and NQT provision was useful but leadership development was not. He acknowledged the profession was in a period of change

I think it's a really interesting time with ... local authorities ... going ... in the time ... of austerity ... we're in a different age ... I speak as seeing a lot of ... advisors who are paid very good salaries, who I really would question their impact ... they gave local authorities a bad name' (Craig - assistant vice principal).

The move away from local authority support for leadership preparation and development follows the decline of localised subject advisors as noted by Jillian (assistant headteacher), who spoke of once close relationships dwindling to nothing. Ian (director of finance) described his academy as being at 'arm's length to the local authority'. Whilst not using the authority's services for professional development, they did buy into and utilise services such as governor support.

Teresa had experience of working in a previous authority where there was considerably more support but she noted 'I can't think, whether or not it's linked to different authority practice or whether it's linked to recent cuts to local authority funding'. She explained support for her role as an assistant headteacher was not as imperative as it should be for a headteacher or a deputy. Requirement for such support was outlined by Gavin who referred to provision being available in the past but withdrawn for the academy. He referred to Government cuts by the then Coalition Government (2010-15) (in Government at the time of the interviews) he exemplified

I don't know what they, our current Coalition Government's vision for local authorities is, the way that they seem to be cutting services ... I don't know where ... this leadership development will come from ... I think maybe the Coalition Government is thinking it comes from the National College and also from teaching schools (Gavin - deputy headteacher).

Two of our respondents worked in Catholic faith schools where were outside the local authority structure. Catholic schools generally look for practising Catholics to assume headteacher and deputy roles (Richardson, 2014). Lesley (deputy headteacher) recognised support might be available from the authority if requested but she acknowledged it was the

‘luck of the draw as to where you are and whether you get suggested for [leadership preparation]’.

As a result of her local authority having lost its capacity to offer leadership preparation and development, Emma (headteacher) spoke of an emerging voluntary federation; an alliance of schools which provided training for teachers. Even when local authorities offered support, the preference was to opt out in favour of academy chains or federations.

Academy chains

Emma explained how the federation provided leadership preparation particularly for middle leaders and aspiring senior leaders. Jane (deputy headteacher) preferred a federation approach to leadership preparation and development, an approach summarised by Sam who stated ‘I certainly think that groups of schools, federations, partnerships, chains are the future of leadership development’.

Partnering schools appeared to be common practice with two or more schools sharing middle leadership training with the aim of school improvement (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009). Members of SLTs spoke of their schools’ specialisms and the benefits these provided from teaching schools to National Challenge initiatives. However, some of the schools in partnership were in very different geographical areas, had very different school populations and cultures. Such practice was shared by Jillian who explained the different school contexts brought challenges.

They were very affluent, all white. Miles away to go for anything, their learners were very passive, it was so different and you know, because we work really hard on teaching and learning and our teachers would go there and there was nothing for them to learn to be honest ... it was really difficult, yeah after school [for] some of our staff to get to, it was like an hour and half’s journey (Jillian).

Craig spoke of ‘grand visions’ to bring schools together in chains. Whereas Gavin explained his school was a converter academy which could offer services to other schools. Teaching schools need to establish links with other schools and whilst Neil (assistant headteacher) worked in a school without such status he saw opportunities in seeking partnership with a school which did.

Lesley shared concerns which new partnerships brought at the expense of existing arrangements. For example, a partnership with schools sharing mutual vision and values ended after 25 years to 'become involved in more localised collegiate school partnerships ... Catholic schools are not allowed to become academies as single schools, they can only become academies by joining together with other schools'.

The majority of the respondents made reference to changed working structures. Prospects through academy chains were cited as the most likely way a teacher could access pre-service leadership preparation and in-service development programmes, whilst limited opportunities were still available through the local authorities, not all respondents aspired to headship.

Aspiration to headship

Sue (assistant headteacher) was positive about her local authority giving details of an aspiring assistant heads' network and an aspiring deputy heads' programme. Sue worked with her local authority and local university to contribute to an aspiring middle leaders' programme. In comparison, Elizabeth claimed she had no aspirations to move beyond her role as an assistant headteacher and even that was an unplanned position.

As headteacher, Emma saw her role as encouraging others from the SLT as well as teachers across her school to aspire to leadership positions. She talked of some of her SLT successes stating there was only one member without the NPQH qualification (although he was due to enrol) and her school business manager who had achieved business management certificates from the National College. Emma thought 'it is really important that people [are] engaged in serious professional development to prepare them for the role that they're doing or they aspire to do'. However, she explained the reality of applying for headship was tough and shared the experience her deputy had at her headship interview and another SLT member's lack of aspiration.

She actually hated the whole process ... She has been put off it for life and said "I am not meant to be head" ... You know what? I think she is an excellent deputy head, but her experience of going for a headship interview terrified her. Now, I think that is just what happened there and I think maybe it would change if she would do it again but for the moment she is saying "I do not want to do it" ... the other member [of] staff who could potentially apply for headship said she will not apply for headships until her children who are very young are a bit older because she actually doesn't want that level of responsibility while her children are young, now that's not me saying ... she shouldn't do it because I think she would be an excellent head. That's her saying I

don't want to do it until I am at this stage with my children ... Whether that's right or wrong ... that's for her to decide (Emma).

Jane reflected on headship applications noting the current climate made it difficult due to the fear and pressures the position could bring, depending on an applicant's school choice. For example, she said if

you go for this outstanding school ... you're almost destined to fail because the *outstanding* probably will be taken away from you and if it's done on your watch you might get fired. If you go for a grade three school and you can't turn it around quickly ... very, very quickly, sometimes in unreasonable amount of time ... you may get fired (Jane).

Confidence or a lack of it plays a part in leadership aspiration. Jane's point of view appeared to centre on her lack of experience and commented that outstanding schools wanted to appoint existing headteachers rather than deputy heads.

Every time I go to a good school, I'm clobbered by someone who's an existing head. So, it's tricky and then of course, if the deputies don't move on there's nowhere for the assistant head to go ... So, there's a bit of a block there ... I mean, I know that ... colleagues of mine want to move ... up to headteachers ... They've gone for an interview where there were 12, 13, 14, 15 [candidates] (Jane).

Jane mentioned if she were to achieve the position of headteacher in a federation, there would be a 'super head' above her, an executive headteacher as an additional layer in the leadership hierarchy perceived to limit a headteacher's autonomy (Courtney, 2017). Jane did not consider this to be an attractive proposal

so, I've got all of the accountability and all of the risk of a headteacher but none of the freedom to make the school what I would want it to be because I still have ... the person above me ... So, why would I do that? I might stay where I am ... Where I've less risk ... still got a decent salary ... You know ... it doesn't make sense really ... the structures at the moment.

To encourage aspirant leaders such as Jane, there is a need for headteacher support for leadership preparation and development.

Headteacher support

Some headteachers offer and promote support through in house, regional and national preparation programmes as well as seeking out assistance for themselves in their roles. Sam was proud 'of growing our own'. Her approach resonates with an account of headteacher preparation in 'an expansive leadership learning environment' (Fuller, 2016, p.116) or SLT community of practice with a clear focus on leadership learning and multiple opportunities

for senior leaders to expand their leadership repertoires. Although Sam did make external appointments, these were from within the local authority. She acknowledged the movement of teachers between authorities was reduced because families preferred not to relocate and attitudes had changed. Previously the assumption being that to move authority indicated a better candidate 'I think there was [this attitude] 15, 20 years ago' (Sam).

Headteacher support was prevalent in Elizabeth's school, a programme of internship allowed staff from the teaching school alliance to gain experience at one of the outstanding schools in the partnership 'to learn how to make that leap from middle leader to senior leader' (Elizabeth). Opportunities for leadership development were described by Jack (assistant headteacher) of taking on whole school roles in order for colleagues to gain additional experience. However, Nat (assistant headteacher) noted whilst some provision for development might exist for the SLT, or roles which could give a teacher whole school responsibility, the school lacked a coordinated programme.

Financial and time constraints were raised by Lesley as being reasons for lack of headteacher support, although some did not seek leadership training, Emma as headteacher thought everyone should be entitled to training. She claimed her provision was strong balancing the needs of the school with those of the individual. A range of programmes were available to the teachers, particularly those who showed potential and sought responsibility.

A shared responsibility is how Jane viewed the headteacher's support for leadership development. Whilst some opportunities such as conferences and training were determined by job descriptions, Jane reasoned it was the individual's responsibility. 'You know ... you can't have all the staff sitting around waiting for someone to hand them a training course on a plate, you have to look for yourself as well' (Jane). Jane raised awareness of preconceived ideas people had of suitable characters for senior leadership 'the way they look, the way they talk, their age etc., ... whilst everybody knows it would be deeply wrong to overtly discriminate I'm not sure that sometimes your people's personal prejudices don't seep into decision making'. Jane relayed experience was essential to combat difficulties as a result of being promoted too early.

Coaching and mentoring

Coaching and mentoring procedures were available to most of the respondents and their SLTs, whilst practice was shared there was no evidence to quantify how they impacted on leadership preparation and development. Coaching processes aim to initiate ideas and improve personal performance (Sardar and Galdames, 2017). Jane's view indicated the processes better prepared individuals than 'a generic training course read by somebody that hasn't worked in school for ... five years ... that really ... doesn't sit well with people I think nowadays. That model of training is very old fashioned' (Jane).

SLT members reported how training others formed part of their duties.

I have been trained to ... deliver training for middle leaders ... I've been trained as a facilitator in that, but that's not directly related to my job ... that's sort of like an additionality. I'm also a specialist leader of education ... I have had one day's training on that (Becky).

Being engaged in long term projects as well as shadowing colleagues in leadership curriculum and pastoral positions were leadership preparation activities described by Gavin. Teresa mentioned mentoring as contributing to leadership preparation and development opportunities for teachers in Catholic schools, but experiences such as being seconded into deputy headship, tended to only be available to practising Catholics.

Emma spoke positively in relation to preparing her team, specifically with reference to coaching and role rotation (Fuller, 2016).

Changing their job descriptions and roles ... Not totally necessary but certainly helps them so they can ... experience everything ... it's actually adjusting their job descriptions so when they had experience and successful experience in one area they can then experience another area so that they can actually be as well versed as they can be ... and by attendance ... [to] various governing body meetings. So, we change who is on which committees so they can get an oversight of finances like, buildings and standards (Emma).

Support internally was mainly sourced from SLT members.

External support by way of mentoring occurred at different levels. Jillian looked beyond her school to her contacts from business to mentor the new head of English. Teresa believed all headteachers should have a mentor but revealed her headteacher did not have such support. A view shared by Sam who took it upon herself to mentor new heads who she 'just happened to come across ... and [I] feel sorry for them. Oh my goodness! ... you offer telephone support, face-to-face meetings, or whatever'.

Networking

Formal and informal networks of senior leaders in and outside education were reported which provided opportunities to learn from one another (Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010). Sam referred to her teaching school alliance as a formal partnership, although voluntary, all members contributed to a budget to create an infrastructure sharing joint targets. The usefulness of the networks appeared to be mixed as Craig reported 'we're in a network, but there isn't really a lot going on in other than leadership meetings'. He recognised a need for collaborative partnerships and shared resources, his comments resonated with Jackson's (2002) networks as sites for specialist knowledge creation and transfer. Gavin talked about his SLT who delivered programmes to other schools located in different geographical areas, whilst Neil explained the formation of a new trust and its potential networks.

Whilst some networks were in initial stages others were well established. Emma's school was linked to a girls' schools network as well as a federation with staff completing formal paired exchanges as part of their leadership development and informal CPD. Jane discussed being a member of local networks recognising the role of her union as being key to networking opportunities.

Qualifications and training

Whilst value was placed on in-service experience, there were mixed responses to the necessity of formal qualifications. Emma had already made it known she supported all her SLT in gaining the NPQH, but Sam's view was more cynical 'you know, with NPQH, you just weighed the folder. If you put enough paper in, then you got a stamp. It wasn't good enough'. Craig's assessment was leadership preparation could be done through the NCSL but pointed out that strong schools should provide training.

Completing master's programmes and linking with their local university gave opportunities for Emma's staff. Jane said teachers who had headship aspirations were encouraged to embark on master's programmes although, she considered these less important than completing the NPQH for which support was offered. The responses towards practice based research and master's provision appeared to lack value and are at odds with the phenomena of a growing research culture in schools (Godfrey, 2016).

Jillian supported leadership training for her SLT, whilst Teresa experienced a course run by the authority. Gavin mentioned the importance of providing other professional qualification programmes for middle and senior leaders, whilst Steve talked about the courses they were operating via Chinese partners. These included an outstanding leadership course he was attending with one middle leader and two of his colleagues from the SLT. Whilst he thought the training was 'exceptionally good' he commented it was very expensive.

Concluding remarks

Models of leadership and development opportunities included accredited courses, higher degrees and workplace experiences. However, access to opportunities was not transferrable from school to school; not all mentioned the SLTs as being sites for development, therefore evidencing unequal opportunities as different principles are in play. Variance occurs both in SLTs and local authorities. This reflects the changes to the educational landscape resulting in a fragmented system.

The shift from the National College and the NPQH to the 'ad hocness' of the teaching school alliances brings inconsistencies to how SLTs approach and generate leadership preparation and development activities in these different partnership arrangements; this exacerbates opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers. The respondents' stories add to the literature in relation to the Equality Act (2010) where the consequences of discrimination and a lack of diversity result in imbalanced compositions of SLTs (Cliffe, Fuller and Moorosi, in press).

In selecting future leaders there is perhaps a need to challenge the emerging structures to ensure cohesive approaches to combat inequality. Arguments for communities of practice as 'expansive leadership learning environments' (Fuller, 2016, p.116) could be applied to SLTs in their designs of preparation and development opportunities and this warrants further investigation. Policy and cultural shifts to get to the core purpose of leadership preparation and progression of moving from aspirant to experienced leader through development are required for SLTs to offer inclusive and sustainable opportunities to ensure succession planning in schools. With the removal of the NPQH as a mandatory requirement in England for headteachers and the reform of NPQs, there needs to be an overview of pre-service leadership preparation and in-service development provision.