



Learning-centred Leadership: Towards personalised learning- centred leadership

In this report we will not only provide an overview of learning-centred leadership, but also say how it is moving towards becoming *personalised learning-centred leadership*.

2 Introduction

Learning-centred leadership is a set of strategies which influence the quality of learning and teaching in classrooms. Leading learning, raising standards and focusing on pupils' achievements are the most important things leaders in schools do. Therefore, research at the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has concentrated on studying how leaders make a difference. The best evidence we have in this country and elsewhere suggests that a learning-centred approach to leadership makes a difference.

We also know many leaders are already doing this. We have worked closely with several hundred school leaders to test out with them the ideas set out in this overview, the pack itself and in the first *Learning-centred Leadership* pack (NCSL, 2004). The leaders' comments and advice have been absorbed into this report, and we are confident that what we describe here plays a major part in making school leadership successful.

Since the first pack of materials about learning-centred leadership was produced, we have continued to explore how leaders influence the quality of learning and teaching in schools. We have also investigated how improving pupils' learning is becoming increasingly more personalised. Therefore, in this report we will not only provide an overview of learning-centred leadership, but also say how it is moving towards becoming *personalised learning-centred leadership*.

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What We Know About School Leadership

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Inside every successful school you will find successful leaders. School effectiveness and school improvement researchers have consistently emphasised the importance of leadership. For example, a summary of findings from school effectiveness research concluded that: “Almost every single study of school effectiveness has shown both primary and secondary leadership to be a key factor,” (Sammons et al, 1995, p.8). Ofsted has also stated that the importance of good leadership pervades virtually every report it has prepared (Ofsted, 2003, para 10).

These findings reinforce teachers’ experience. Where leadership and management are weak or ineffective in a school, it is so much harder to do a good job as a teacher. Where it is effective, then not only can teachers teach, but staff and pupils are better motivated, student behaviour and attendance is good, people know what is going on because communications are clear and everyone feels they are pulling together and working towards shared goals.

At NCSL we have been building up the knowledge base on successful leadership. While for some, leadership is a contested concept, we have emphasised where there is clear agreement on how successful leaders act. We have drawn on work in the UK and internationally and developed good links with leading scholars and researchers around the world. One example of this is the work Ken Leithwood and Carolyn Riehl have conducted in North America. They have summarised what is known about successful school leadership in North America and the English speaking world. They identify five sets of practices which make leaders successful [see box 1].

What We Know About Successful School Leadership

Ken Leithwood and Carolyn Riehl have recently produced for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) a short summary entitled *What We Know about Successful School Leadership* (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). In this summary Leithwood and Riehl state that there are five major claims which research points to:

1. Leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction.
2. Currently, headteachers and teacher leaders provide most of the leadership in schools, but other potential sources of leadership exist.
3. A core set of leadership practices forms the basics of successful leadership and is valuable in almost all educational contexts. (These basics are: setting directions, developing people, developing the organisation.)
4. Successful school leaders respond productively to challenges and opportunities created by the accountability-oriented policy context in which they work.
5. Successful school leaders respond productively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students.

(Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, 2-7)

Box 1: What we know about successful school leadership

Summary of Research Findings, Leithwood & Riehl, 2003

In addition to these five sets of ideas, there are four other claims we can confidently make about school leadership:

1. There is no one way to succeed as a leader: “Successful leaders use a variety of strategies and styles depending on what it takes to create an environment for learning, and they actively search out the many good practices that are out there, but also adapt them to their particular contexts.” (Ofsted, 2003, para. 11, p.7)
2. Leadership is differentiated by school type, size, levels of performance, circumstance and individual leaders’ skills, experience and phase of leadership or headship. Context matters.
3. Successful leaders are optimistic, can-do individuals who are committed to making a difference for their pupils and passionate about learning and teaching. Expressed another way: no one wants to follow a pessimist.
4. They are also strongly person-centred, putting a premium on professional relationships, and build trust and collaborative ways of working throughout the school.

There is widespread agreement that school leadership is about improving the quality of learning and teaching. All leaders in a school, but especially the senior ones, have a sense of direction and purpose, high aspirations for the school and relentlessly focus on pupils’ achievements and progress. Therefore, it is important to investigate and develop clarity about how leaders influence what happens in classrooms. All leaders, be they heads, deputies, members of the senior leadership team, or heads of departments, key stages or subjects need to be able to answer one key question:

How do you make a difference to learning and teaching?

NCSL has been exploring how leaders make a difference and what we have found we have called learning-centred leadership. We have adopted this title because such leaders focus on pupils' learning, progress and achievements, and use this knowledge to support teachers and their development.

We know that learning-centred leadership is complex. There are many factors at work, and they impact on one another in dynamic and subtle ways. Yet there are some common pathways by which leaders do make a difference to what happens in classrooms.

How Leaders Influence What Happens in Classrooms

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Learning-centred leaders influence in three ways:

- **directly**: where leaders' actions directly influence school outcomes
- **indirectly**: where leaders affect outcomes indirectly through other variables
- **reciprocally**: when the leader or leaders affect teachers and teachers affect the leaders and through these processes outcomes are affected

(Hallinger & Heck, 1999, pp.4 – 5)

Although all three forms of influence can be seen in the work of headteachers and other leaders, it is the indirect effects which are the largest and most common.

The reason why indirect effects are the largest is because leaders work with and through others. Headteachers, deputies and heads of departments and key stages all rely on colleagues to put into practice agreed ways of working. As such, whatever leaders wish to see happening is contingent on others actually putting it into practice. Leaders work with and through others. Leaders are reliant on others because their ideas are mediated by teachers and other members of staff.

So saying, what emerges from recent research (Southworth, 2004), and from leaders with whom we have worked, is the fact that really effective leaders know this and work very carefully on their indirect effects. In other words:

Effective school leaders work directly on their indirect influence.

They do this through various processes which can be summarised as three interrelated strategies:

- modelling
- monitoring
- dialogue

Modelling

Modelling is all about the power of example. Teachers and headteachers are strong believers in setting an example, because they know this influences pupils and colleagues alike. Research shows that teachers watch their leaders closely. Teachers watch what leaders do in order to check whether their actions are consistent over time and to test whether they do as they say, because teachers do not follow leaders who cannot walk the talk.

Successful leaders are aware that they must set an example and use their actions to show how colleagues should behave.

Effective leaders know they are on show. They understand that they are being watched and use their visibility to their advantage by playing to their audiences. It is not so much a matter of putting on a show as being aware that they are observed and listened to, and they, therefore, choose their words with forethought and care and ensure, as far as they can, that their words and deeds are in harmony.

Not only are leaders closely observed, but what they pay attention to gets noticed. Leaders who visit classrooms, encourage colleagues to talk about their teaching successes and concerns, know how individual children are progressing, ensure that meetings of teachers focus on learning, use pupil progress and outcome data to analyse the school's performance levels are demonstrating that they remain strongly connected to classrooms.

Monitoring

Monitoring includes analysing and acting on pupil progress and outcome data (eg assessment and test scores, school performance trends, parental opinion surveys, pupil attendance data, pupil interview information). Using data is today widely recognised as playing a vital role in understanding and diagnosing what needs to be done. Data also plays a part in making learning more personalised for students.

Leaders also need to visit classrooms, observing teachers at work and providing them with constructive feedback. Although some of this will be judgemental, the intention is to make this process educative and developmental for both parties. In the great majority of cases, classroom observation needs to be understood as a learning experience for both the observer and the teacher.

Monitoring classrooms is now an accepted part of leadership. Moreover, Ofsted has found that there is a strong link between very good monitoring and good or better teaching (Ofsted, 2003, p.20). Where monitoring is effective, the quality of teaching is noticeably higher than in schools where monitoring is poor and infrequent.

Monitoring also enables leaders not only to keep in touch with colleagues' classrooms, but also to develop, over time, knowledge of teachers' strengths and development needs. It is a diagnostic audit of colleagues' skills and the strengths they should share with colleagues and learning needs.

As such, it informs judgements about who could play a part in supporting colleagues. If one teacher needs support in an aspect of their teaching which another colleague is experienced and skilled in, then it makes sense for them to work together and for one to coach the other. However, such an arrangement cannot be brokered unless and until diagnosis has taken place and there is an audit of pedagogic strengths. In other words, monitoring plays a crucial role in peer coaching and professional support.

Dialogue

Dialogue is all about creating opportunities for teachers to talk with their colleagues about learning and teaching. The kinds of dialogues which influence what happens in classrooms are focused on learning and teaching. Leaders create the circumstances to meet with colleagues and discuss pedagogy and pupil learning.

Often these dialogues appear to be informal. They can occur in corridors, offices, at the foot of the stairs or by the photocopier. Typically, though, they take place in classrooms and they often follow a particular pattern.

When leaders visit classrooms, say at the end of the school day, they encourage teachers to describe and analyse what they have done that day. They might ask about a specific pupil or group, or follow up an aspect of teaching which the staff have agreed to take as an area for development, such as questioning, marking or children with special learning needs.

Describing to a colleague what you did and analysing what happened often requires us to state what we think. This process is insightful both to the listener and the speaker, because we can learn from our retelling things we had not previously been aware of. Recounting such stories is revealing to the storyteller. Frequently, we are only aware of something we thought when we hear ourselves say it out loud to someone else. That is when we realise: “I didn’t know I knew that.” That is when we learn. Dialogue, then, is not simply two colleagues talking – it is professional learning and it is sometimes profound professional learning.

This discovering of self-knowledge is called articulation. When we explain classroom incidents and events to an interested colleague, we articulate for them and to ourselves our thinking, understanding and assumptions. We make our tacit knowledge explicit. Once we have made our knowledge explicit we can work on it. While it remains implicit, we can neither share it nor use it as a resource for ourselves and others.

We all learn from experience, but not all of us learn as much as we might. Furthermore, research in the USA (Blase & Blase, 1998) shows that leaders often overestimate what teachers learn from their classroom experiences and, therefore, do not provide the support they need to increase their learning about their teaching. Without others – in this case, leaders – to facilitate our learning, we sometimes learn very little from our work.

Teacher and leader dialogues enhance teachers' reflections about teaching methods and expectations of pupils, and inform teachers' classroom behaviours (Blase & Blase, 1998, p.93). Talk enables teachers to expand their teaching repertoires and improve their understanding of their practices. More than that, talk which involves enquiry, challenge and insight transforms practice. It enables us to understand more and to improve. It helps us to see anew and to change what we and pupils do.

Three strategies: one powerful effect

The three strategies of modelling, monitoring and dialogue interrelate and overlap. Each makes a difference, but it is their combined effect which really matters.

Modelling curiosity about teaching methods and classroom processes conveys to everyone that the core business of the school is uppermost in the minds of the leaders. Monitoring what happens in classrooms, looking at pupil outcome data and observing teaching demonstrate what leaders are paying attention to. Talking about learning and teaching, challenging conventional practices, and identifying and valuing good teaching similarly reinforce these messages.

Dialogues demonstrate that teachers' knowledge and skills are valued and seen as part and parcel of improving teaching, learning and the school. Increasing teachers' reflective powers and expanding their teaching repertoires are treated as professional learning opportunities and processes. And this is bolstered even more by the fact that it is done in ways which enable individuals to construct new meanings and, with their leaders, to co-construct shared insights and solutions.

For this reason, learning-centred leadership is an apt title, because it captures the fact that it is centred on the learning of pupils, teachers, staff and leaders.

And while it influences practice in indirect ways, it also creates reciprocal effects too. The leader will learn about exciting and innovative teaching approaches from colleagues and the knowledge and insights which they discuss will enhance and thereby influence the leader's knowledge and understanding of learning and teaching.

Together, the three strategies create powerful learning for teachers and leaders which, in turn, develops stronger analyses and appreciation of teaching and learning.

School-wide Structures and Systems

Until relatively recently we have been fascinated with leaders rather than leadership. There has been a tendency to portray leaders either as charismatic, heroic figures or as individuals with a set of personal characteristics which few could emulate.

As a consequence of this fascination with the individual leader, two things have been underemphasised and underestimated:

- the importance not only of successful leadership, but of good management
- the contribution of organisational, curricular and staff development structures and systems

It is apparent from our knowledge of schools that successful headteachers use an array of organisational structures and systems. These are common to schools of all sizes; they are not the preserve of larger schools (Southworth, 2004).

We know that the following structures and systems are important to making a difference to the quality of learning and teaching in classrooms and those listed here stand out as common to most of the headteachers and leaders we have consulted or researched:

- planning processes: for lessons, units of work, periods of time, individuals and groups of pupils, classes and years
- target-setting for individuals, groups, classes, years, key stages and the whole school
- communication systems, especially meetings
- monitoring systems: analysing and using pupil learning data, observing classrooms and providing feedback
- roles and responsibilities of leaders (including mentoring and coaching)
- policies for learning, teaching and assessment and marking

Separately, but mostly together, these structures and systems ensure the school is an open organisation where everyone is familiar with one another's role, responsibilities and achievements. Classrooms will not be private places, but venues visited by colleagues looking to develop themselves and to play a part in developing others. Indeed, classrooms could be seen as learning centres for staff, because teachers are learners too. By visiting other rooms we can all learn more about our own approaches in the light of what others do.

When the structures and systems listed above become embedded and collaboration and peer learning begin to take off, then the culture of the organisation begins to alter and reform.

To create the conditions for schools to become learning communities where learning-centred leadership thrives, a rather specific organisational culture is needed. School-based research shows that there needs to be a climate of trust, openness and security.

Leaders who are learning-centred think about how their actions encourage these three characteristics. However, they do not wait until the culture is 'right' before exercising learning-centred leadership: they recognise that the way they do things creates and sustains such a culture.

Towards Personalised Learning-centred Leadership

Today there is growing recognition that learning needs to be more personalised than ever before. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that teachers know that pupils' learning styles and preferences differ and that teaching needs to take account of these differences. Another is that greater curricular choice is expected by pupils and parents alike. A third is the need to build schooling around the needs and aptitudes of individual pupils and to make sure that the talent of each pupil is supported and encouraged (Hopkins, 2004). This third point is about needing to make systems fit pupils, rather than fitting people to a system (Gibbons, 2004). Personalised learning is a powerful concept:

“It means engaging parents and pupils in partnership with teachers to deliver a tailor-made service for students, so that they can achieve the highest possible standards.”
Hopkins, 2004

According to the DfES, personalised learning has five components:

1. Assessment for learning and the use of evidence and dialogue to identify every pupil's learning needs
2. Teaching and learning strategies that develop the competence and confidence of every learner by actively engaging and stretching them
3. Curriculum entitlement and choice that deliver breadth of study, personal relevance and flexible learning pathways through the system
4. A student-centred approach to school organisation, with school leaders and teachers thinking creatively about how to support high-quality teaching and learning
5. Strong partnership beyond the school to drive forward progress in the classroom, to remove barriers to learning and to support pupil well-being

It is apparent from this list that learning-centred leadership is capable of being aligned to personalising learning. Indeed the two should simply be fused, as we are seeing in some of the work of primary and secondary headteachers who are members of NCSL's Leadership Network. Monitoring and dialogue have a central role to play in ensuring school and classroom systems are fitted to children's needs. Monitoring which includes pupils' perspectives will be richer, and leaders who ensure that pupils are consulted and their views acted upon by teaching and support staff alike will be using evidence from the learners to inform teaching practices. They will be developing teaching and learning through the lenses of the learners.

In short, learning-centred leaders who strive to personalise learning through the five components will be personalised learning-centred leaders.

Implications for School Leadership

There are three implications for school leadership. We need to:

1. Increase the number of leaders in schools
2. Support and develop these individuals to be learning-centred leaders
3. Work towards developing personalised learning-centred leadership at all levels

1. Increase the number of leaders in schools.

We need lots of leaders in schools and we already have them. The problem is that too often leadership is seen as being only for those in particular positions in the school – the headteacher, deputy and subject leaders. Without doubt, these colleagues are and should be leaders, but this sometimes blinds us to the fact that other colleagues also perform leadership roles. The difference is they are informal leaders and they exercise their leadership from time to time.

We need lots of leaders in school, engaging in peer leadership amongst teachers, learning assistants and support staff. If lots of leaders are empowered, then we can make schools powerful learning organisations for all.

2. Support and develop these individuals to be learning-centred leaders.

If leadership is to be widely distributed, what is it that is to be distributed? The answer to this question is not simply 'leadership': rather it is that we should distribute a particular type of leadership. We do not just need lots of leaders: we need lots of learning-centred leaders. Schools may not need more strategic leadership, but they do need as many leaders as possible making a positive difference to what happens in classrooms.

Distributed leadership, as shared and widely spread leadership is called, is about developing lots of learning-centred leaders. It is about increasing the density of leadership so that everyone has access to facilitative leaders who can help them articulate and analyse their professional experience and act on it to improve the quality of teaching.

Therefore, we need to develop learning-centred leaders, and this is part of the new work of headteachers and deputies. They must mentor and coach colleagues who, from time to time, share their classroom expertise with colleagues. Expressed another way, there is a need to grow tomorrow's leaders today, which is why NCSL has also published guidance on developing leaders in their workplaces (NCSL, 2004a).

In other words, part of learning-centred leadership includes learning to lead and enabling others to take on such leadership across the school. We need senior leaders to ensure that those to whom leadership is distributed, those colleagues who in the light of dialogues and discussion are identified as having skills and experience to share with their colleagues, receive both the invitation to lead and practical advice and support, over time, to make sure that they can lead and learn from their experience of leading others.

3. Work towards developing personalised learning-centred leadership at all levels.

Developing personalised learning-centred leadership involves using the processes and ideas discussed throughout this paper, but also ensuring that across the whole school teachers use:

- assessment for learning
- teaching and learning strategies matched to learners' needs and progress
- pupil consultations and pupil perspectives to identify children's needs and students' curricular choices and to inform individual learning plans
- involvement of parents and other agencies beyond the school to support learning and to remove obstacles to individuals' progress

The more a school moves towards personalised learning, the more it needs learning-centred leaders. This is especially true in terms of middle levels: heads of department, subject leaders and key stage leaders must all contribute to changing the school, so that teachers make their classroom practices attuned to children's learning needs.

Developing teaching for learning means developing teachers and using teacher leadership to spread and strengthen personalised learning practices. Nor should it go unnoticed that learning-centred leadership of teachers and teaching is and should be a personalised process of teacher development. Working with teachers one-to-one and in small numbers, attending to their professional learning needs and providing coaching and peer support ensure that the processes of learning-centred leadership exemplify personalised learning: the medium is the message.

In conclusion

Learning-centred leadership is, thus, not one thing, but many. It is about making a difference to what happens in classrooms by spreading the skills and talents of teachers within individual classrooms across the whole school, to the benefit of all pupils. And it is about doing this by design, not by default. Much of what is described here already goes on in schools – but it is not always organised and planned as much as it now needs to be. Perhaps the challenge is to work towards making learning-centred leadership more personalised, more often and provided by many more leaders.

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