

# Leading from the classroom: The role of assistant headteachers in primary schools

National Teacher Research Panel  
engaging teacher expertise



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## Aims of the project

The research aimed to explore the extent to which assistant headteachers were contributing to the leadership of primary schools. Nationally, leadership groups were introduced in September 2000 and a new post of assistant headteacher was created.

The research identified the rationale for the appointment, examined the variety of leadership activity that assistant headteachers were involved in and sought to determine the impact that this had in their schools. The enquiry focused on actions that were agreed by the participants to be leadership in nature, as opposed to managerial activity.

## Dimensions of the study

The research was conducted as part of the NCSL Research Associate Programme over a period of four months from October 2001 to March 2002, following a series of initial meetings with the headteachers of fifteen primary schools drawn from a variety of local authorities across the midlands.

## Summary of main findings

- Assistant headteachers were seen to be playing a significant role in school leadership
- The predominant leadership activities recorded were professional development and support
- Assistant headteachers have been appointed to all sizes of school
- Assistant headteachers were often seen as effective leaders because they were exemplary practitioners with credibility and can empathise with colleagues
- Schools have adopted creative and flexible leadership groups suited to their own circumstances but able to respond to new challenges
- The appointment of assistant headteachers enhanced the capacity for leadership in the school. Their skills, knowledge and expertise were making a significant contribution
- Not all assistant headteachers were aspiring to headship
- Many assistant headteachers did not have an adequate amount of non-contact time

## Background and context

The research base on deputy and assistant headteachers is far from extensive despite the

clear implication that leadership at this level can have a positive impact upon school development and student learning outcomes. Most recently, the idea of distributed leadership has received renewed interest and enthusiasm within the leadership field (Gronn, 2000; Harris 2002; and Spillane et al, 2001).

Earlier studies showed that often, in secondary schools, the deputy head role focused upon either pastoral or academic responsibilities, whereas in primary schools the role often covered both areas. However, the degree to which some of these responsibilities clashed and overlapped with those of the headteacher remained an important tension for deputy and assistant headteachers. In some cases deputies and assistant heads were expected to fulfil all the responsibilities of the headteacher and to deputise fully when the headteacher was away from the school. In other cases, their role was clearly a subservient one to the headteacher and tasks were delegated to them without negotiation.

Fifteen headteachers were invited to take part in the research. They represented six different LEAs across the Midlands. Some headteachers were very experienced and reaching retirement and some were newly appointed. They all had four things in common:

- they were headteachers of primary schools (or junior or infant);
- they had appointed an assistant headteacher (and in some cases more than one);
- they were committed to school improvement; and
- they were keen to be involved in the research.

## Findings

The assistant headteachers were contributing to the overall leadership of their schools in a variety of ways. The logbooks revealed a range of activity external to their classroom:

### professional development

- encouraging the professional development of staff
- giving professional support
- coaching
- enabling others
- building relationships

**curriculum development**

- promoting curriculum development
- extra curricula activities

**monitoring and evaluation**

- quality assurance activity
- observing teaching
- analysing school data

**planning**

- strategic and operational planning
- target setting
- dealing with staffing issues
- involvement in pastoral issues
- improving the learning environment
- dealing with health and safety matters

The list is an aggregation of the activity reported. The collection of leadership activity covers eleven weeks, or approximately one quarter of the academic year. Some activity is seasonal, i.e. it only happens at a particular time of year.

The assistant headteachers exercised their leadership skills continuously in the many contacts and interactions they had during the school day. The predominant leadership activities recorded were professional development and support. It was clear that their effectiveness as leaders was based upon the esteem in which their colleagues held them. It was not possible in such a short time span to measure the impact that the assistant headteachers had in their schools. However, it seemed clear to the researchers that they were making a significant contribution. The range of leadership activity displayed in this relatively small sample of primary schools was impressive.

**Leadership group structures**

Some of the schools in the study were adapting their staffing structures to respond to the changes they were encountering and the challenges they were facing. There was some staffing turbulence even within the short period of the research. There were a variety of responses to staffing options. It seems that some heads and governors have a strong preference for flatter, less hierarchical structures. In these schools, leadership groups are established with a head and one or two assistant headteachers but without a deputy at all.

**Roles and responsibilities**

The assistant headteachers in the sample had a variety of strengths, interests and prior experience. Their role within the school was customised to meet both the needs of the school but also the capabilities of the individuals. All of the assistant headteachers had been appointed internally.

**Influence and impact**

This evidence suggests that assistant headteachers are especially effective because they were exemplary practitioners. They had credibility with colleagues and exercise empathy and understanding. They were well placed to drive forward initiatives and influence changes. This process was two-way. In their role as intermediary they represented the views of colleagues in discussions with the headteacher.

**Professional development**

This action research created opportunities for professional development. In discussing the role of the assistant headteacher, the headteachers engaged in lively debate about school leadership and school improvement. Frank and honest disclosures about their leadership teams, job descriptions, rates of pay and strategy led to shared understandings. Meetings between headteachers and assistant headteachers to reflect on the entries in the logbooks provided both with valuable feedback that became a useful form of appraisal.

**Non-contact time**

The knowledge, skills and values of the assistant headteachers have increased the leadership capacity of their schools. However, it is astonishing how the assistant headteachers are able to do as much as they do with such little non-contact time.

**Research methods**

The headteachers met in small groups initially to exchange information about their schools, consider the national context for leadership groups and discuss some of the current thinking about school leadership. The action research, in which they would engage, was planned in detail at this meeting.

The groups met again towards the end of the spring term to report back, clarify some issues that had arisen and form some judgements about the leadership of their schools. In the interim period I maintained contact by

visiting the schools to meet with the assistant headteachers. I also received the logbooks filled out by headteachers and assistant headteachers and analysed the data.

At the outset the groups were encouraged to come to an agreement about what was understood to be leadership.

A logbook was kept for the period November 2001 to March 2002. AHTs simply recorded any instances where they felt they had contributed to the leadership of the school. In some cases the headteachers filled in the logbook. Where both headteachers and AHTs kept a logbook the process became not only a useful way of cross-referencing and verification, but also a spur for professional development. They created time to meet together for reflection and discussion on the role of the AHT.

Copies of the logbooks were sent at the end of each period of time. This helped in the monitoring of how the research was progressing. The data was analysed and the leadership activity recorded. Since every incident was unique it was necessary to characterise or cluster the activity.

## Conclusion

There is a wide variety in the structure of leadership groups and differences in the roles of the assistant headteacher. Schools have created a structure that meets their own unique circumstances.

There is confusion in the system concerning the act of deputising for the headteacher. The distinction between deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher is that assistant headteacher cannot be required to deputise. Yet some schools are appointing assistant headteachers in preference to deputies. It would be useful for schools to receive guidance on expectations, weight of responsibility and decision making for those deputising for the headteacher.

I recommended that:

- the act of deputising should be clarified;

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- there should be appropriate training for deputies and assistant headteachers who are not aspiring to headship;
- training for assistant headteachers should address interpersonal skills, values and attitudes and emotional intelligence;
- a minimum of 10 per cent non-contact time should be made available for assistant headteachers to enable them to offer professional support to colleagues, for instance through observation of classroom practice and coaching activity; and
- ways to establish a database of school leadership groups should be explored.

## Suggestions for further reading

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