

Assistant & Deputy Heads:

key leadership issues and challenges

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Introduction

Effective leadership has long been established as a key factor in securing school effectiveness and school improvement. However, in many research studies leadership is equated with the role of the headteacher and, consequently, evidence concerning school leadership largely emanates from this perspective. It has been suggested that too much of the school leadership literature has relied upon the accounts of headteachers to define effective leadership in action (Razik and Swanson, 2001; Owens, 2001; Morrison, 2002). By comparison, the research evidence concerning the leadership of other established school leaders, such as assistant or deputy heads, is relatively sparse. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the few literature reviews of assistant or deputy headship is the paucity of research studies on this important group of school leaders (Harvey and Sheridan 1995; Ribbins 1997).

In many respects, the role of the assistant head has evolved from the deputy head's role, gradually making way for a much stronger institutional presence in the late Nineties. The role has also evolved in response to the recognised need to distribute leadership more widely to secure long term improvement in times of change (Harris, 2002; Day et al, 1999). Consequently,

this article considers key leadership issues and challenges for deputy and assistant heads and explores the relationship between both roles.

1. Manager or Leader?

Traditionally, the deputy head has chiefly been concerned with administrative functions in the school, focusing either upon pastoral or academic duties in the case of a secondary school and covering both areas in the primary school. However, the exact nature of this role and the degree to which responsibilities blur with that of the headteacher have remained a largely unresolved issue. A survey of over 400 deputy principals in Australia found that many perceived a lack of clarity in their role which led to unrealised expectations of having a much stronger leadership role than they actually possessed. There was a view that the role was too reactive with little real scope for leading innovation and change. As a direct result, job dissatisfaction and low levels of motivation were prevalent in up to 20% of those surveyed (Harvey 1994).

As well as the head's unwanted administrative tasks, research studies found assistant heads to be mainly charged with supervisory tasks over staff and students, such as discipline and attendance. Indeed, these were found to be the two most common duties of assistant principals in America (Scoggins and Bishop 1993). In a more recent study, the main role of the assistant head was still considered to be one of ensuring stability and order in the school, a maintenance rather than a developmental function (Weller and Weller 2002). This

is a finding widely replicated across many studies and countries (Mertz 2000).

Various research studies indicate that assistant heads in general wish to increase their leadership capability through more involvement in planning, policy making, staff and curriculum development and external relationship roles. A survey in the US, which explored job satisfaction among assistant heads, found that those who believed they were undertaking leadership responsibilities felt their talents and skills were being well used and reported higher levels of job satisfaction (Sutter 1996). Another US study also reported that assistant heads wanted to take on a stronger instructional leadership role and that this contributed directly to higher levels of motivation and self-efficacy (Pellicer, Anderson et al. 1990).

In the UK, Ribbins (1997) found that some of the heads he interviewed complained that their time as a deputy had been frustrating or disappointing, often because of the lack of leadership influence they felt they had on the school. Some interviewees actually stated that they felt that they had had more influence as head of department than as deputy head. This negative view of their time as a deputy as revealed in the Ribbins (1997) study often contrasted starkly with their view of being a head, which was largely much more positive. The inherent role conflict as a deputy in being both a supervisor of teachers and a support for teachers is considered to be a main downside of the job (Glanz 1994).

2. Maintenance v Development?

The growing workload of headteachers under school-based management has significantly contributed to the increase in delegation of responsibilities and pressure on assistant and deputy heads. A study of primary school deputies (Jayne 1996) illustrated how the role had expanded to include curriculum leadership and external liaisons as well as more traditional administrative roles. This expanded set of responsibilities inevitably places an additional demand on time. However, many studies showed that extra time was not allocated for the additional tasks required (Campbell and Neill 1994; Helps 1994). In primary schools, in particular, there is a tension between the teaching and management roles of the deputy, yet evidence would suggest that this issue is not taken into account (Vuliamy and Webb, 1995).

More recently, the role of the assistant head is seen as one of partnership in management alongside the head, with staff development, communication between head and staff and resource management being cited as new responsibilities (West 1992; Southworth 1994; Hughes and James 1999). However, despite the general movement towards increased responsibilities for deputy and assistant heads, the traditional 'maintenance' view of the role persists. For example, Ribbins (1997) found that the view of the assistant

head as a stand-in for the head remained prevalent. Only in a small number of cases was the deputy or assistant head seen as being close to being a second head or someone with leadership responsibilities. Southworth (1995) points out that the crucial factor in deciding whether or not the assistant head will have an enhanced instructional leadership role is the attitude of the head. If the head does not support a strong role for the assistant head, it is unlikely that this will happen.

3. Delegating or Distributing?

Recently, the traditional view of school leadership, focusing on the head and more particularly the head as a strong individual leader, has come under increased criticism. It has emerged from research findings that effective leadership need not be located in the person of one leader but can be dispersed within the school (MacBeath 1998; Day, Harris et al. 2000; Harris 2002; Harris and Muijs 2002). These 'distributed' forms of leadership have been identified as crucial to improving schools and implies a redistribution of power and a realignment of authority within the organisation. It means creating the conditions in which people work together and learn together; where they construct and refine meaning leading to a shared purpose or set of goals. Evidence would suggest that where such conditions are in place, leadership is a much stronger internal driver for school improvement and change (Hopkins 2001). One of the key questions is how leadership is distributed to and through the deputy or assistant head and what this means for their role.

Harvey (1994) posits two distinct roles for the deputy/assistant head in this respect, the traditional and emergent role. The traditional role, as mentioned above, consists largely of administrative and routine maintenance functions. In contrast, the emergent role defines the deputy/assistant head as an educational leader, critically scrutinising educational policy and practice, building culture and managing change and articulating shared professional practice. In this emergent role, assistant/deputy heads clearly share responsibility for leadership.

The elements that would make up such an emergent role for an assistant or deputy have been articulated as follows:

- Curriculum development and innovation;
- Promoting the school goals;
- Communicating and developing vision and promoting shared understanding amongst staff, taking advantage of the assistant head's intermediate and visible presence between staff and head;
- Working as a change agent (understanding change processes, initiating programmes and encouraging participation);
- Being a leading professional with a specialised knowledge base (e.g. on discipline); ➤

- ■ Evaluating and coaching teaching staff;
- Being a community relations agent, developing community links;
- The traditional discipline role can also be retained in this model (Calabrese 1991; Williams 1995; Kaplan and Owings 1999)

Essentially this points towards assistant heads moving from a largely managerial to a leadership role, something it is argued that will require substantial support and training (Weller and Weller 2002). However, research has shown that these enhanced leadership responsibilities are linked directly to higher levels of job satisfaction, through the stronger control over their own work, more flexible roles, the possibility of taking initiative and the collegial support that comes from collaborative work. However, this wider role will also entail more responsibility for planning and coordinating and it is important that assistant/deputy heads are fully prepared for this leadership role (Kaplan and Owings 1999).

4. Commentary

It is clear that assistant and deputy heads 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. Long term sustained school improvement requires the leadership capabilities and capacities of the many rather than the few (Fullan 2002). Consequently, established leaders within schools offer a leadership force that up to now has not been fully exploited.

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

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