

Leadership for transforming learning: NCSL's ten propositions and emergent leaders

Anne Gold, Peter Earley and Jennifer Evans – Management Development Centre, Institute of Education, University of London

Introduction

The term 'emergent leaders' embraces a wide variety and range of leadership and management roles, responsibilities and phases. Heather Du Quesnay (2002), NCSL's director and chief executive calls them "middle level leaders" in whom to foster "an optimistic, proactive outlook". NCSL (2001b) defines them as:

those teachers who are beginning to take on formal leadership roles or would like to do so... Many of these people have significant leadership responsibilities but they are working within a thematic or departmental context and not yet dealing with the full range of issues faced by headteachers and members of the leadership group.

Gold (1998) describes such leaders as "at the forefront of knowledge about a specific subject, and... a member of the largest team in the school". In other words, emergent leaders are not usually part of a school's leadership or senior management team and mostly they do not have whole-school responsibility. However, they hold significant management and leadership roles in schools where they are often the key influence of the quality of learning and teaching.

In November 2001, NCSL published its 'Think Tank' report (NCSL 2001a) which attempted to elicit what is known about learning and leadership from both the private and public sectors in a way that could be expressed as a set of propositions. Drawing on a wide range of evidence and discussion, the Think Tank framed a set of strategic statements or propositions that it saw as serving "to inform the College's thinking on a new framework for leadership development" (NCSL 2001a).

The purpose of this paper is to consider the extent to which the NCSL's ten propositions for leadership for transforming learning and leadership development are appropriate for the work of emergent leaders. Do they fit or make sense? And how might they be related to what is known about the good practice of pastoral and curriculum leaders in primary and secondary schools?

We would like to suggest that for the training and development of emergent leaders these ten propositions are organised into first and second tiers. We see first tier propositions as central to the work of emerging leaders and which need to be addressed clearly and thoroughly in any leadership development programme or plan. Second tier propositions are important too, but in our view, not central to the development of emerging leaders. Second tier propositions contain important notions which explain the background and the premises upon which emergent leadership is based. In a leadership development programme, they should be alluded to as explanations, but not necessarily explored in as much depth as first tier propositions.

What then are the ten propositions? How appropriate are they for this large group of 'emergent leaders'? And which in our view are first or second tier?

NCSL's ten propositions

1. School leadership must be purposeful, inclusive and values driven (first tier)

Without question, this is a key and central proposition. All teachers should be offered the opportunity to articulate their values of education, and with educative leaders, those values should inform all leadership activities. In other words, there will be a clear linkage between the principles underpinning transformational leadership, those which make for educative leadership, and those which guide each individual school. A leadership development programme for emergent leaders should offer them the opportunity to make these links individually and together

in groups. It is development work, in the shape of being led through a series of connected questions, which would be an ideal teambuilding exercise for 'family teams' (NCSL 2002).

2. School leadership must embrace the distinctive and inclusive context of the school (first tier)

It is often the culture and values of the group of emergent leaders in a school, as much as the variation in context, that give the learning and teaching in different schools their distinctiveness. Emergent leaders from different schools could meet together most effectively in subject or responsibility specific groups. In this way similarities and differences could be worked at, celebrated and learnt from. There exist generic subject ground rules, guidelines and assessment procedures which form the basis of any professional discussion, but these are mediated by the cultural, values, and context differences of schools. Subject leaders may learn best, in this case, from working with subject specialists from different schools, and thus exploring differences and similarities. Effective learning and teaching is not completely context bound and there is much to gain from sharing good practice both within and between schools.

3. School leadership must promote an active view of learning (first tier)

This proposition is firmly placed at the centre of the work of emergent leaders. They are the experts in student learning within their area of responsibility, and they must be encouraged to maintain and constantly update this expertise. However, they must ensure that other specialists in the same subject or curriculum area are also updated and should support other emergent leaders in other subjects and areas to do the same. Thus, part of any leadership programme for emergent leaders must help them to develop strategies for negotiating with their colleagues. Negotiating strategies will need to be developed for use both within the teams they lead and others to which they belong, and with the school's leadership team, for resources and structures which make for learning and teaching excellence within their own area.

4. School leadership must be instructionally focussed (first tier)

It is clear that within any leadership development programme emergent leaders must address organisational and instructional leadership skills. Some of these skills, particularly those needed for developing strategies to put into place and maintain the instructional process, need not be addressed in a face-to-face setting (for example, designing, managing and monitoring the instructional process). Those skills which are interpersonal, however, and which depend on relating effectively to other teachers are easier to develop through well-facilitated group work. Personal and interpersonal skills or domains include developing trust, sensitivity and openness, all of which are crucially important for transforming learning but difficult to develop.

5. School leadership is a function that needs to be distributed throughout the school community (first tier)

Although we see this proposition as first tier, in some ways it may be more tangential to the emergent leader's role than the propositions already discussed. The development of leadership and interpersonal skills in the programme must address issues such as leading and building a team, leadership styles, and motivating staff (as in proposition four). However, the emergent leader may have limited scope for distributing leadership to those whom they lead, particularly in a school in which the culture and structure is hierarchical. To some extent this proposition will be directed by the school's leadership team and by other senior managers. Operating in a school culture or structure in which notions of leadership are firmly located at the top will make the emergent leader's attempts to distribute leadership more difficult. Working collegially and promoting a culture of collaboration in which tasks and responsibilities are shared and leadership distributed is likely to be easier to operate if it is normal practice at all levels within the school community.

6. School leadership must build capacity by developing the school as a learning community (first tier)

This proposition is central to the work of emergent leaders, and is closely connected with propositions 1–5. As the person with responsibilities for a subject or area, the emergent leader can support and help develop further a school culture where staff work collaboratively to address both student achievement and their own professional development. They will do this with their subject knowledge and with the understanding about adult learning that they develop as part of their leadership and management programme. It is not possible to change a school culture completely from the emergent role, but several emergent leaders can work together. It is important that questions about culture transformation are raised in any courses or programmes aimed at emergent leaders. Developing the whole school as a learning community is clearly a major responsibility of senior staff, yet as with dispersed and distributed leadership, emergent leaders can do much to promote a culture of learning. Traditionally middle managers have been less comfortable with their responsibility for staff development than they have with other parts of their role (Earley and Fletcher Campbell 1992), although this is changing in the light of such initiatives as *Investors in People* which highlights the responsibility that all leaders and managers have for the development of their teams (Earley 1996). Emergent leaders' training and development will need to ensure this responsibility is given prominence and that they are well versed in models of adult learning and understand the full range of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and strategies available to them.

7. School leadership must be futures oriented and strategically driven (second tier)

There is a need for emergent leaders to understand and respond to strategically-driven management. However, they will not usually be able to take whole school responsibility for it. They may lead by example within the area for which they have responsibility, but it would not be possible to take whole-school leadership in this area from a middle position. They can however play a significant role and contribute to strategic thinking and planning (Earley 1998). The leadership and management development programme for emergent leaders should therefore contain information about operating strategically and provide opportunities for skill development, especially in the areas of effective strategies for managing change. In this way, they will better understand and support the work of the school's leadership team. They may also be equipped with the knowledge and skills to become action researchers in order make sense of complex transformation as well as developing a community of learners.

8. School leadership must be developed through experiential and innovative methodologies (first tier)

Emergent leaders need to develop and then be able to choose appropriately from a wide range of leadership styles and skills. They also need to find ways of making those styles and skills fit the school in which they work. In other words, the leadership programme must offer them:

- the knowledge and the space to develop the appropriate skills in order to lead and manage the area for which they are responsible
- an understanding of how those skills and knowledge might fit with the school culture
- the skills to keep the school at the forefront of the technology of management

A commitment to lifelong learning is likely to be enhanced if appropriate methodologies are deployed. For managers and leaders these are likely to be predominantly experiential, building on what we know about adult learning, learning styles and the importance of structured reflection. Information and communications technology (ICT) applications will have an important role to play. However, their limitations, particularly in developing certain skill areas, need to be recognised, as do the desires of those in receipt of training (see Earley et al 2002).

9. School leadership must be served by a support and policy context that is coherent, systemic and implementation driven (second tier)

It may be that this proposition is more tangential to the task of emergent leaders than some of the other propositions. Although it is important for emergent leaders to understand why they are being asked to complete certain professional activities, and why requests are made for specific information, they are unlikely to be able to influence policy in any significant way from the middle. This proposition may not need as much emphasis as some of the other propositions. Emergent leaders rarely have the opportunity to make links outside the school except within their subject or area of responsibility. Although it is important for them to understand the wider policy context of the school and education more broadly, this is usually part of a wider professionalism or a more general education and knowledge: a school in which staff talk about broad issues, education included, is a school with a more vibrant culture.

10. School leadership must be supported by a National College that leads the discourse around leadership for learning (second tier)

It is clear that emergent leaders need a national champion to speak for them, to offer them easy access to quality leadership and management development, and make sure that they have the opportunity to adapt newly acquired leadership skills and knowledge to their own professional values and context. They also need a 'centre' to take responsibility for helping them keep up to date on developing leadership issues. Subject associations and locally convened subject groups may offer opportunities to update subject knowledge. It seems that emergent leaders are usually confident about their subject knowledge, but feel less comfortable about taking on significant management and leadership responsibilities. In some cases, emergent leaders seemed to need 'permission' and encouragement from colleagues, but particularly from the senior leadership team, in order to act as leaders (Earley et al 2002). However, it may not necessarily be NCSL alone that supports emergent leaders in their development as transformational leaders.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above that some of the College's propositions fit more comfortably and centrally than others, in that they are more easily related to appropriate practice for emergent leaders. In this paper, we have organised them into first and second tier propositions, thus acknowledging that some of them are central to the work of emergent leaders, while agreeing that the others are important, but not so centrally critical to their work.

Thus, tier one propositions include:

- school leadership must be purposeful, inclusive and values driven
- school leadership must embrace the distinctive and inclusive context of the school
- school leadership must promote an active view of learning
- school leadership must be instructionally focussed
- school leadership is a function that needs to be distributed throughout the school community
- school leadership must build capacity by developing the school as a learning community
- school leadership must be developed through experiential and innovative methodologies

While tier two propositions are:

- school leadership must be futures oriented and strategically driven
- school leadership must be served by a support and policy context that is coherent, systemic and implementation driven
- school leadership must be supported by a National College that leads the discourse around leadership for learning

References

- Du Quesnay, H, 2002. 'A leading Question', *Guardian Education*, March 5, 2002.
- Earley, P. and Fletcher-Campbell, F., 1992. *The Time to Manage? Department and Faculty Heads at Work*. London: Routledge.
- Earley, P., 1996. Introduction. In: Earley, P et al, eds. *Improvement through Inspection? Complementary Approaches to School Development*. London: David Fulton.
- Earley, P., 1998. Middle Management: The Key to Organisational Success? In: Middlewood, D. and Lumby, J., eds. *Strategic Management in Schools and Colleges*. London: PCP/Sage.
- Earley, P., Evans, J., Gold, A., Collarbone, P. and Halpin, D, 2002. *Establishing the Current State of School Leadership in England*. London: DfES.
- Gold, A., 1998. *Head of Department: Principles in Practice*. London: Cassell.
- NCSL, 2001a. *'Think Tank' Report to Governing Council*. Nottingham: NCSL.
- NCSL, 2001b. *Leadership Development Framework*. Nottingham: NCSL.
- NCSL, 2002. *Leading from the Middle programme proposals*. Nottingham: NCSL.

