

System leadership: mapping the landscape

David Hopkins* and Rob Higham

Institute of Education, University of London, England

System leaders are those headteachers who are willing to shoulder system-wide roles in order to support the improvement of other schools as well as their own. As such, system leadership is a new and emerging practice that embraces a variety of responsibilities that are developing either locally or within discrete national networks or programmes that, when taken together, have the potential to contribute to system transformation. Because this is an emerging practice, there has been no attempt to date to document how system leadership is being enacted and is evolving across the English education system. This article elaborates the concept of system leadership and illustrates its potential power as a catalyst for systemic reform in three ways. First, it not only provides an initial conceptualisation of system leadership based on the contemporary literature and recent policy announcements but also raises a series of concerns about the way the concept is being interpreted. Second, by drawing on responses provided by local authorities, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), a range of national agencies and professional associations as well local and national networks of headteachers and teachers, it maps the system leadership landscape in England current in 2006 by proposing a taxonomy of roles that system leaders are currently assuming. Third, and based on these analyses and research with leading headteachers, it locates system leadership within the literature on systems theory and leadership, proposes a potential model for system leadership and explores the tensions involved in developing the concept further.

Defining system leadership

The concept of ‘system leadership’ is one that has recently caught the educational imagination. Take for example these quotations from two significant opinion makers. The first is from the General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders in England and the other from a leading educational commentator whose work has a global reach.

John Dunford (2005), in a recent address to the National Conference of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), argued that:

The greatest challenge on our leadership journey is how we can bring about system improvement. How can we contribute to the raising of standards, not only in our own school, but in others and colleges too? What types of leaders are needed for this

*Corresponding author. Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL, UK.
Email: d.hopkins@ioe.ac.uk

task? What style of leadership is required if we are to achieve the sea-change in performance that is demanded of us? (p. 3)

In *Systems Thinkers in Action* Michael Fullan (2004) argued that:

... a new kind of leadership is necessary to break through the status quo. Systematic forces, sometimes called inertia, have the upper hand in preventing system shifts. Therefore, it will take powerful, proactive forces to change the existing system (to change context). This can be done directly and indirectly through systems thinking in action. These new theoreticians are leaders who work intensely in their own schools, or national agencies, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture. To change organizations and systems will require leaders to get experience in linking other parts of the system. These leaders in turn must help develop other leaders within similar characteristics. (p. 7)

These quotations share three implicit assumptions. The first is that if we are ever to achieve sustainable education change it must be led by those close to the school; the second is that this must have a systemic focus; and the third is that 'System Leadership' is an emerging practice.

These assumptions lead to three other observations that are discussed in detail in this article. The first is that there is a tension between system leadership being a national policy or a professional movement. This dichotomy, as is seen later, has profound implications for the prospect of sustainable educational reform. The second is that although system leadership is emerging as a professional practice, it is a concept that is located in a rich theoretical and research context. As we shall see, the conceptual concerns of system theory for relationships, structures and interdependencies (Katz & Kahn, 1976; Senge, 1990; Campbell *et al.*, 1994) underpin the contemporary work of system leaders in practice. The third observation is that whilst most school leaders in England are involved in some form of collaborative activity or networking (Hill, 2006), this is categorically not the same as system leadership. System leadership, in the sense in which it is used in this article, implies a significantly more substantive engagement with other schools in order to bring about system transformation. Specifically, we define it as a form of leadership where a headteacher or principal is willing and able to shoulder wider system roles and in so doing is almost as concerned with the success and attainment of students in other schools as he/she with his/her own.

The focus of this article is how such system leadership is emerging in practice, in particular amongst the headteacher profession. In *Every School a Great School* (Hopkins, 2007) it was suggested that the five striking characteristics of system leaders, those distinguishing them from broader collaborative activity, are that they deploy their experience, knowledge and skills to:

- actively lead improvements in other schools and measure their success in terms of student learning, achievement and welfare, both to raise the bar and narrow the gap(s);
- commit staff in their own and other schools to the improvement of teaching and learning, engaging them deeply in the organization of teaching, learning,

curriculum and assessment so as to ensure learning is increasingly personalized for students;

- lead the development of schools as personal and professional learning communities, building relationships across and beyond each school to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities;
- lead work for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture, not only in response to poverty but also to employ educational resources to help give communities a greater sense of aspiration and empowerment;
- manage strategically the impact of the classroom, school and system on one another, understanding that in order to change the larger system one has to both engage with it in a meaningful way and manage subsequent change at a school level.

It is a compelling proposition that such leadership holds significant potential to contribute to systemic educational improvement. It is an idea that has been positively advocated over the past four years by Government Ministers. David Miliband MP, for example, when Minister of State for School Standards, saw that the development and deployment of a cadre of system leaders could go a long way to responding to the key challenges he had identified for school leadership as part of a new relationship between schools and Government (Miliband, 2004). This included raising productivity in education, effecting greater social justice and ensuring sustainable improvement (Miliband, 2003).

The guiding principle of system leadership – that Heads should work for the success and welfare of students in other schools, as well as their own – was further endorsed in the recent White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES, 2005b). Specifically, the White Paper set out the Government's intention to:

- (a) Develop better career paths for: school leaders who have the talent and experience to be considered as national leaders of education; those with the ability to run our most challenging schools; and those with the talent to be school leaders of the future.
- (b) Ask the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), working in partnership with the National Strategies, to develop the leaders of our most complex schools, those facing multiple disadvantage, and federations.
- (c) Encourage the growth of federations and other partnership arrangements which ensure our most successful school leaders are used to best effect and are able to support our less successful schools. (p. 100)

In response, the NCSL (2005b) stated that:

... this means the best leadership will get to the schools that need it most, more quickly. ... Complex schools include academies, federations of schools, schools with serious weaknesses and schools facing challenging circumstances. ... Pupils and staff in these schools will benefit from the influence of national leaders of education. ... NCSL will be disseminating good practice and guidance on the skills required for these complex roles, and will be commissioning development and support activities for existing, newly appointed and aspirant executive head teachers. (p. 1)

Taken together this combination of informed comment and government policy suggests that the concept of system leadership is an idea whose time has come. One can summarize these views by saying that system leadership is increasingly being seen as:

- a wider resource for school improvement, making more of our most successful leaders by encouraging and enabling them to identify and transfer best practice, reduce the risk of innovation in other schools and lead partnerships that improve and diversify educational pathways for students within and across localities;
- a more authentic response to low-attaining schools. Currently schools in special measures or serious weaknesses are responsible for approximately 300,000 pupils. Strong leadership is vital to turn these schools round. However, a central challenge is that these schools are often the least able to attract suitable leaders. Our most successful heads hold the potential to have an impact on these schools, which need their expertise, by working to develop and mobilize leadership capacity in the pursuit of whole-school improvement;
- a potential means to resolve, in the longer term, the emerging and related challenges of a declining demographic supply of well-qualified school leaders,¹ falling student rolls and hence increasingly non-viable schools, and yet ongoing pressures to sustain educational provision in all localities. The NCSL (2006) suggests system leadership solutions may include fewer headteachers across some groups of schools, new challenges and incentives for the retention of the most experienced headteachers, as well as new development opportunities for deputies and middle leaders to experience aspects of headship at first hand before taking on full headteacher responsibilities.

Before we get too carried away with such enthusiasm for the concept of system leadership, however, we need to admit that much of the well-intentioned advocacy is based on aspiration and a few early individual cases rather than systemic evidence. Despite its attractiveness as a new catalyst for system change there are a range of challenges to be faced up to if we are to avoid a simplified and uncritical approach to system leadership. We have several concerns. First, there is currently no clear or systematic knowledge of how leaders undertake system leadership roles. Second, there is insufficient evidence of effectiveness, including on the proportion of system leaders who are successful, their impact in different contexts and what might constitute best practice. Third, there is no certainty that sufficient leadership quality and crucially whole-school capacity already exists to provide a platform on which to develop a wide range of effective and sustainable system leadership roles. Fourth, it is not always clear how capacity is renewed within the schools from which system leaders work, especially those in challenging circumstances. Fifth, there is no consensus about how best (or who is best placed) to deploy and develop a range of existing and aspirant system leaders to ensure that they gain the skills, experience and support needed to be effective. And sixth, there is a wider debate within the headteacher profession about how to reconcile on the one hand an impetus for

collaboration between schools with on the other hand an accountability system focused on individual schools (which has the potential to act as an impetus for competition). This perceived tension certainly does not curtail nascent system leadership but it is considered an important contextual dimension in which wider systemic roles are being developed.

Above all, and perhaps most significantly, it is not actually clear what or how many system leadership roles are currently being undertaken. Possibly as a result of being a relatively new professional practice, there appears to have been no attempt to date to document how system leadership is being enacted and is evolving across the English education system. In an attempt to correct this situation, we report in this article on research that provides an initial perspective on the nature and extent of system leadership. To do so we first provide a snapshot of identified activity in June 2006; second, we set out a taxonomy of system leadership roles; third, we propose an outline conceptualization and model of what effective system leaders do; and finally, we explore the key emerging challenges for the future development of this practice.

Methodology

The research on which this article draws comes from four main sources conducted during the academic year 2005–2006.

First, we investigated the strategies and practices employed by Executive Heads of two or more schools. Fourteen Executive Heads were purposively sampled on the basis of having undertaken at least one full academic year in an executive post. An e-questionnaire was sent to each Head and they were asked to select a second respondent from the leadership team in one of their schools. The questionnaire was designed to elicit detailed answers to open questions and was structured around four themes. These were: how had the Executive Headship been initiated, brokered and organized; what strategies had been deployed to improve the partner school; what resources and support had been available and most useful; what had been the key challenges and outcomes? Eighteen responses were gained and analysed thematically.

Second, to explore the development of system leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances, we conducted one-week whole-school research visits in four schools that have achieved significant and sustained improvements in student achievement and well-being. The schools were sampled purposively from GSCE data, Fischer Family Trust contextual value-added data, Ofsted reports, data on free school meals and local intelligence. The visits focused on semi-structured interviews with the headteacher, members of the Senior Management Team, teaching staff and groups of students with the aim of documenting the processes and strategies underpinning the school's improvement. In three of the four schools, the headteacher had already moved to undertake wider system roles (for example, as a School Improvement Partner). This was all the more striking given that no criterion on 'undertaking a wider system role' was included in the sampling criteria.

Third, to map the current landscape, a database of existing system leaders was developed. An e-questionnaire was sent to every Local Authority in England, the DfES, a range² of national agencies and associations and a number networks of headteachers. Respondents were asked to identify headteachers taking on wider systemic roles beyond their own school. The following were given as examples: Executive Heads; leaders of soft federations; leaders brokering partnerships across local communities; leaders transferring best practice to support improvement elsewhere; and leaders sustaining school improvement in challenging circumstances. A response was gained from 76 local authorities (50%) as well as from all the national agencies and networks contacted. These responses were coded and inputted into a database that summarized for each leader his/her own school, local authority and system leadership role(s) being undertaken. A small random sample of these data entries was validated directly with each leader's school.

Fourth, to explore qualitatively both the range of emerging roles and the leadership strategies and challenges involved, two whole-day research seminars were held with a total of 50 existing and aspirant system leaders. The seminars were advertised nationally through the SSAT to which attendees applied for a place. The seminars focused on facilitated discussion structured around the four emerging themes of roles and strategies, agency and brokerage, professional capacity and development, and accountability, funding and systemic reform. The seminars were noted and analysed thematically. Four follow-up interviews were subsequently undertaken to investigate specific individual experiences. This phase of the research also drew on five other seminars organized around the theme of 'building capacity to sustain improvement' that were held with a total of approximately 200 school leaders.

Mapping the landscape

A first glance at a map of the landscape shows a significant amount of activity taking place. The total number of system leaders identified by respondents across all phases was 3078. About 30% were in the Secondary sector, 60% in Primary and 10% in Junior, Infant and Nursery. This points to a range of 9% to 13% of school leaders already engaged in some form of system leadership activity. Whilst this is an initial snapshot, what does seem certain is that system leadership may be thought of as an emerging professional 'movement', rather than an elite practice of a few 'super-heads'.

System leaders were also found to be widely distributed across the country. Every authority had at least a few system leaders, most contained between 10 and 30 and several, including Leeds, Norfolk, Cornwall, Birmingham and Kent, held more than 70.

Exploring this distribution further, an important distinction emerges in terms of the nature and geographic scale at which different roles are being organized and undertaken. Simply put, a division exists between headteachers undertaking roles created on a *national* scale, predominantly within the ambit of Government-led

Table 1. Extent of system leadership activity in England in 2006

System leadership roles	Origin	No.	%
Executive Headship of a Federation	Local	101	3.3
Less formalized support for a school facing difficulties	Local	81	2.6
Brokering & shaping partnerships across communities to support the ECM agenda	Local	78	2.5
Sustain improvement in a previously low-achieving school in challenging circumstances	Local	83	2.6
Consultant Leaders	National	2292	74.5
Mentor Heads	National	139	4.5
School Improvement Partners	National	255	8.3
Other ¹	–	49	1.7
Total	–	3078	100%

Note: ¹The small ‘other’ category included shared or joint headship and cross-phase school amalgamations.

programmes, and those taking on roles developed at a *local* level as a result of their personal commitment to system-level change.

As is evident in Table 1, the vast majority of identified system leader roles fall into the ‘nationally developed’ grouping. These include Consultant Leaders, School Improvement Partners and Mentor Heads.³ This group shares several key characteristics. First, the impetus and agency behind the roles are located at a national level, often within the DfES, NCSL or National Strategies. Second, the focus is on deploying the knowledge and skills of experienced heads (and other leaders) as part of a broader school improvement programme. Third, a funding schedule is provided for continuing professional development (CPD), salary payment, supply cover and/or travel expenses. And fourth, the roles themselves are relatively standardized through entry requirements and selection procedures, clear protocols for action set out in guidance and an evaluative system to monitor progress.

The second grouping of roles consists of those developed predominantly at a local level. These include Executive Heads, less formalized support partnerships, the leadership of local networks and sustained improvement in challenging circumstances. As demonstrated in Table 1, this group comprised only 11% of identified activity. But while less numerous, these roles appear to be as significant. For, whilst centrally driven roles establish a wide coverage in a relatively short time span, locally developed roles often emerge less quickly due to the necessity for working more directly through the complexities of agency, mission and what works in particular contexts. Indeed, the shared characteristics of these roles are that they are flexible, organic and often ad hoc. While aligned to national priorities of school improvement and student welfare, local responsiveness is a critical element in how these roles come about and how such leaders work to reform (local) systems.

With such flexibility and local variation, there are often complex and contextually specific answers to questions of who takes the initiative for a headteacher to become a

system leader and who makes ongoing key decisions at a local level. But such complexity is not seen to undermine the potential effectiveness of such roles. For example, as argued by the NCSL (2005a), in its advice on complex schools to the Secretary of State of Education:

... there is a growing body of evidence from around the country that, where a school is in serious trouble, the use of an executive head teacher/partner head teacher and a paired arrangement with that head's successful school, can be a particularly effective solution, and is being increasingly widely applied. (NCSL 2005, p. 3)

Taxonomy of roles

Having established a map of the existing landscape and an understanding of the scales at which such activity is being undertaken, it is important at this stage to reflect on how best we might describe and theorize this emerging range of roles. For, whilst diverse, they all share the guiding principle of system leadership – that of working for the success and welfare of students in other schools, as well as their own. Our research points to five distinct yet overlapping categories of system leadership and leads us to propose the following taxonomy.

First are those headteachers who develop and *lead a successful educational improvement partnership* between several schools. These are most usually focused on a set of specific themes that have clear outcomes and reach beyond the capacity of any one single institution. Examples include partnerships on curriculum design and specialisms, including sharing curricular innovation, 14–19 consortia, and behaviour and hard-to-place students. Whilst such partnerships often currently remain in what is commonly referred to as ‘soft’ organizational collaboratives, some have moved to ‘harder’ more formalized arrangements in the form of (co)federations (to develop stronger mechanisms for joint governance and accountability) or Education Improvement Partnerships (to formalize the devolution of defined delivery responsibilities and resources from their local authority [DfES, 2005a]). As a result of recent legislation such groupings now have the possibility of forming independent School Trusts. It is important to note here that this category was not well represented in the mapping of the landscape since it emerged during later phases of the research. It does, however, seem to hold potential to become a wider element of system leadership. Not only given the supporting impetus of current government policy but also because, rather than necessitating one school to have developed the skill and capacity to (help) lead the improvement of another, it is more clearly focused on two or more schools working jointly on issues of mutual interest and challenge.

Second are headteachers who choose to *lead and improve a school in extremely challenging circumstances*. A dual objective of system leadership is to both raise the bar and close the gap(s) in systemic student achievement. As such a key task is to ‘change contexts’ in our most challenging circumstances by choosing to lead and improve low-achieving schools and then sustain them as high value-added institutions over a

significant period of time. As Higham (2006) demonstrates, these leaders will be well placed to take on wider system roles in other categories by putting their knowledge, skills and experience to the task of improving other schools (in similar circumstances). Crucially, this will provide a professionally led route to achieve what Elmore (2004) defines as ‘the means to make sure that help gets to the right schools at the right time with the right technical expertise’ (p.253). Indeed, it is from such experiences that the NCSL’s new National Leaders of Education might most usefully emerge.

Third are those headteachers who *partner another school facing difficulties and improve it*. This includes both Executive Heads and leaders of more informal improvement arrangements who are differentiated from the first category on the basis that these leaders work from a lead school into a low-achieving or under-performing school (or schools) that require intervention. Executive Heads provide an example. They are responsible for two or more schools that have either entered into a Federation or a local (often time bound) agreement focused on a lead school working to improve a partner. There is central government involvement. The potential for these roles is provided for in legislation (Education Act 2002) and there are 37 DfES Pilot Federations, a few of which are run by Executive Heads. But the driving force behind these roles is predominantly located locally and as such can vary. For instance, where one partnership may be developed closely with a local authority, another may result from its perceived inertia. This flexibility also extends to how Executive Heads operate. There is no guidance, standardized accountability, professional development programme or centrally located funding stream. The 14 respondents to this research had negotiated and developed their own approaches. These coalesced around three key domains:

- building the foundations, including preparing their own ‘lead’ school as a prerequisite for partnership success, and setting up a partnership mandate to detail both freedoms to manage change and clear processes of accountability (most usually to the governing bodies)
- improving the partner school, including diagnosing strengths and weaknesses, communicating a vision of improvement, translating this into whole-school action to enhance teaching and learning, and transferring best practice appropriately to support progress;
- implementing an exit strategy, where appropriate, including building capacity for sustainable improvement as a final element of the partnership agreement.

Fourth are headteachers who act as a *community leader* to broker and shape partnerships or networks of wider relationships across local communities to support children’s welfare and potential. Such leadership is firmly rooted within the context of both the national Every Child Matters and Extended School agendas. Matthews (2006) conceives of four key dimensions to this work as organizing resources for learning from the community, widening learning experiences beyond the school, drawing support for child and family welfare into the school or network and providing for the lifelong learning needs of the community. As such, this will often

include the leadership of multi-agency work given, as Osbourne (2000, p. 1) puts it, that some 'issues are so complex and interconnected that they require the energy of a number of organizations to resolve and hence can only be tackled through organizations working together'.

And fifth are those headteachers who work as a *change agent* or expert leader. The focus is on providing practical knowledge and guidance as well as the transfer of best practice within a formalized school improvement programme. This is currently the most numerous category given that it includes the roles identified above as existing with centrally organized programmes. There are in England at least three emerging change agent roles within the system whose remit is specifically school improvement: Consultant Leader, School Improvement Partner (SIP) and National Leader of Education (NLE). The latter two roles, particularly the NLE, are more recent innovations where experience is still relatively limited.

Consultant leaders, as the largest role comprising 74.5% of all activity, provide an important example. Since 2003 the leadership strand of the Primary National Strategy has employed consultant leaders as part of its improvement programme covering schools in all local authorities. The consultant leaders advise leadership teams, target external support, share best practice and help sustain action to advance teaching quality and higher standards, especially in English and mathematics (DfES, 2003). Building on these practices, the London Challenge is piloting 20 new consultant leader posts as a means to develop the leadership capacity of London's most challenged primary schools. The consultant leaders will share responsibility with each leadership team for a school's performance. Following this pilot, London Challenge will seek to offer a permanent London-wide brokerage service of consultant leaders for all London boroughs (DfES, 2006).

Underpinning these national/government-developed roles is the NCSL's Development Programme for Consultant Leadership. This is:

... aimed at experienced head teachers with [at least five years' headship experience and] a proven track record of success ... to encourage school leaders to take a prominent role in facilitating the learning of others in school leadership positions and senior management teams, by responding to their professional needs. The programme is focused around client-centred consultancy and is based around a framework of competencies which form the cornerstone of NCSL's quality assurance strategy. (NCSL website, November 2006)

In evaluating the Consultant Leader Programme, Earley and Weindling (2006) found that it was effective in creating roles that 'provide the support ... for what is generally recognized as a demanding and lonely [head teacher] job ... together with the challenge needed to encourage [its] development' (p. 46).

What effective system leaders do

We have now explored a range of system leadership roles and established taxonomy of the five key areas of identified activity. We have also seen some emerging evidence

of the effectiveness of system leadership, with regard to specific roles and objectives. What seems increasingly important is how system leaders actually work to achieve these objectives – for, as we are keenly aware, their work often enters new territories that have novel challenges and no well-rehearsed solutions.

The literature on systems theory at least provides a direction of travel. The key insight here has been well summarized by Kofman and Senge (1995, p. 27) when they state that the:

... defining characteristic of a system is that it cannot be understood as a function of its isolated components. ... the system doesn't depend on what each part is doing but on how each part is interacting with the rest. ...

This leads to the realization, intimated earlier, that in order to maximize the value of systems theory one not only needs to utilize a systems-thinking perspective, but also to view it within the context of a learning organization.

This is the point that has been best illuminated by Peter Senge (1990), who argues that for organizations to excel they have to become 'learning organizations', which he defines as:

... organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (1990, p. 3)

To Senge, the key to becoming a 'learning organization' is for leaders to tap into people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels, so that broader systemic interdependencies and how to change them effectively can be made clearer (1990, p. 4). This in turn requires the assiduous development of the range of skills associated with system leadership to transform not only the organization but also the system as a whole.

An important perspective on this skill set is offered by Heifetz (1994) through the concept of 'adaptive leadership'. His argument is that leaders increasingly require skills that move beyond traditional management solutions for technical problems to provide adaptive responses to challenges 'without easy answers'. Technical problems, such as how to teach numeracy, and their solutions will of course remain vital. But system leaders will also need to work adaptively to lead people and organizations beyond restrictive boundaries, perceived wisdoms and entrenched cultures where they exist as obstacles to improvement.

This theme, as we saw earlier, underpins Fullan's (2005) exposition of the role he believes school leaders will need to play as 'system thinkers in action' if sustainable large-scale reform is to be achieved. This, Fullan argues, will necessarily involve adaptive challenges that 'require the deep participation of the people with the problem; [and] that is why it is more complex and why it requires more sophisticated leadership' (p. 53). For Fullan, examples of this new work include: leading and facilitating a revolution in pedagogy (p. 57); understanding and changing the culture of a school for the better (p. 57); relating to the broader community, in particular

parents, and integrating and coordinating the work of social service agencies into the school as a hub (p. 61). This will demand:

... above all ... powerful strategies that enable people to question and alter certain values and beliefs as they create new forms of learning within and between schools, and across levels of the system. (2005, p. 60)

There is a loud and clear read-across here from system theory to the key areas of system leadership activity we have already identified. There is also a sense of a shared, central skill set that system leaders need to be effective that reflects the established literature on educational leadership (for a comprehensive review see Leithwood *et al.*, 1999). There is, however, a real concern about the increasing tendency in the literature to distort the generic competencies of leaders through celebrating singular aspects of the role. Leithwood and his colleagues (2004, p. 4) express this worry succinctly:

... we need to be skeptical about the 'leadership by adjective' literature. Sometimes these adjectives have real meaning, but sometimes they mask the more important themes common to successful leadership, regardless of the style being advocated.

These are wise and cautionary words and of course it has not escaped our notice that we ourselves are in danger here of being hoisted by our own petard. In defence we would claim that the concept of 'system leadership' is embracing rather than esoteric. This claim is made on three grounds. First the concept of system leadership locates itself within the general literature on systems theory and thinking and as such is inclusive rather than exclusive. Second, as we see shortly, 'system leadership' as a 'theory of action' embraces a catholic range of disciplines in order to exert its power (see for example Elmore, 2004; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). And third as it is hoped is becoming clear, 'system leadership' will only exert any influence to the extent that it focuses on teaching and learning (i.e. is instructional), shares its authority with others (i.e. is distributed) and so on. To reiterate, system leadership as a concept is integrative not singular.

This discussion emphasizes the focus on the key capabilities required by system leaders. Inevitably this demands the development of hypotheses as we move inductively from our data. Here we have found it helpful to draw on Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) core leadership practices in proposing an initial outline of the capabilities system leaders bring to their role. This is set out in Table 2.

Building on these key capabilities, and combining them with the range of identified roles, it is possible to offer a model of system leadership practice that emerges inductively from the actions of our sample leaders. This is set out in Figure 1.

The model exhibits a logic that flows from the 'inside out'. At the centre, leaders driven by a moral purpose related to the enhancement of student learning seek to empower teachers and others to make schools a critical force for improving communities. This is premised on the argument already made, that sustainable educational development requires educational leaders who are willing to shoulder

Table 2. A conceptualization of the key capabilities for system leaders

Core practices	Key system leadership components
Setting direction	Total commitment to enable every learner to reach his/her potential with a strategic vision that extends into the future and brings immediacy to the delivery of improvements for students Ability to translate vision into whole-school programmes that extending the impact of pedagogic and curricular developments into other classrooms, departments and schools
Managing teaching and learning	Ensure every child is inspired and challenged through appropriate curriculum and a repertoire of teaching styles and skills that underpin personalized learning Develop a high degree of clarity about and consistency of teaching quality to both create the regularities of practice that sustain improvement and to enable sharing of best practice and innovation
Developing people	Enable students to become more active learners, develop thinking and learning skills and take greater responsibility for their own learning Involve parents and the communities to minimize the impact of challenging circumstances on expectations and achievement Develop schools as professional learning communities, with relationships built and fostered across and beyond schools to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities for staff
Developing the organization	Create an evidence-based school, with decisions effectively informed by student data, with self-evaluation and external support used to seek out approaches to school improvement that are most appropriate to specific contextual needs Extend an organization's vision of learning to involve networks of schools collaborating to build, for instance, curriculum diversity, professional support, extended and welfare services and high expectations In so doing, build a school's capacity to support wider system leadership roles

broader leadership roles, and who care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own.

It is also clear from our research that system leaders share a characteristic set of behaviours and skills. As illustrated in the second inner ring of the diagram in Figure 1 these are of two types. First, system leaders engage in 'personal development' usually informally through benchmarking themselves against their peers and developing their skill base in response to the context they find themselves working in. Second, all the system leaders we have studied have a strategic capability; they are able to translate their vision or moral purpose into operational principles that have tangible outcomes.

Taken together these two central circles of the diagram reflect the core practice of 'setting directions' as noted in Table 2.

As is denoted in the third ring of the model, the moral purpose, personal qualities and strategic capacity of the system leader find focus in three domains of the school



Figure 1. A model of system leadership practice

detailed earlier: managing the teaching and learning process, developing people and developing the organization.

Finally, although there are a growing number of outstanding leaders that exemplify these qualities and determinations, they are not necessarily ‘system leaders’. A system leader not only needs these aspirations and capabilities but in addition, as seen in the outer ring of the model, works to change other contexts by engaging with the wider system in a meaningful way. We have included in the outer ring the range of roles identified from the research that focuses on improving other schools, sharing curriculum innovations, empowering communities, and/or leading partnerships committed to enabling all schools to move forward.

The model represents a powerful combination of practices that give us a glimpse of leadership in a new educational landscape. Realizing that landscape, however, may also require a bigger shift within the broader education system.

Developing system leadership

It is clear that the practice of system leadership will bring new challenges and roles for school leaders and their schools. What is less clear is what this might mean for other system actors, most notably government. If school leaders are to take on wider responsibilities for system reform, how should a government work to develop such activity? And would a real and authentic commitment by government to do so inevitably mean a rebalancing of roles, agency and control between schools and the

government? In considering these issues, we now turn finally to explore some of the key systemic challenges for government.

There is of course evolution already in train. In England for example, the 'New Relationship with Schools' policy is paving the way for, on the one hand, new flexibilities and inspections holidays for schools deemed to be very good or outstanding whilst, on the other hand, sharper intervention in schools judged to be unsatisfactory. This brings an important and necessarily differentiated approach to the more traditional dialectic of prescription versus professionalism, centralism versus devolution, etc. It is also all the more poignant following Ofsted's (2006) most recent annual review in which 13% of secondary and 7% of primary schools were found to be 'inadequate', and 38% and 32% respectively were judged to be 'satisfactory'. This represented a doubling of schools in both phases judged to be inadequate since the previous year, with the vital caveat that the judgement framework has been toughened to 'raise the bar'. Nevertheless, these are now schools under the microscope, with a lack of leadership and poor teaching identified as the two main reasons behind their inadequacy.

The case made by these data for system leaders, particular those working directly for wider school improvement, is unmistakable. Yet it brings with it new challenges and complexities for policies such as the 'New Relationship'. As we have seen, fundamental elements of system leadership are the more authentic collaboration on and transfer of school improvement intelligence and leadership best practice by experienced leaders. These are inherently professionally led, bottom-up solutions. But they are solutions to problems that have traditionally been the responsibility and preserve of the central apparatus of the state. This includes the deeply ingrained workings of the accountability, funding and governance systems that place the unit of an individual school at their centre. It also includes the location of agency and incentives, and the focus of support and professional development. Ofsted's report reminds us that there are strong and enduring reasons for these designs. But will the New Relationship do enough to create the space within them for system leaders to achieve deep, meaningful and sustainable reform (Fullan, 2005; Hopkins, 2007) in the face of challenges 'without easy answers'?

In considering these tensions, it is worth briefly returning to the distinction made earlier in our mapping of the system leadership landscape. This was between system leaders working in national programmes and those working in locally organized often ad hoc roles. As demonstrated, the majority of system leaders operate in national programmes that have incentivized activity through organization, funding and professional development, which have in turn created new opportunities for headteachers. This is the 'enabling state' at work. It is an important step towards rebalancing agency by making it more possible for headteachers to lead technical and adaptive solutions in a widening professional domain of cross-school and system improvement.

Yet, within these opportunities, we may already be witnessing limitations of government-led activity. For, whilst new leadership roles emerge, the Government's tendency to check and control does not seem to significantly diminish. This tendency

is related to a focus on effectiveness and value for money, but it also seems to betray a government that has yet to develop sufficient trust in the profession. The result is less than 'intelligent' accountability and at the extreme a tick-box bureaucracy, rather than dynamic system reform. The evidence is by word of mouth but mounting. We already hear concerns about the accountability functions headteacher SIPs are being asked to perform and how this restricts the finite time they have available to engage in the conversations that provide professional support and challenge. We also hear mutterings about schools joining consortia or loose co-federations primarily because this is where they feel the Government will place access to future initiative and/or programme funding.

A greater degree of freedom exists on the other side of the divide, in the roles we identified as being locally developed, often ad hoc and contextually responsive. In such activity, professionals not only deploy their experience and skill to lead improvements, they also define the terms on which such activity is undertaken and sustained. In this way, it is understandable why a number of our respondents conceived of these roles to be a more authentic form of system leadership. With no single framework or protocol, a range of models is developed in relation to specific needs (and times). Some centrally driven momentum is sacrificed, but on the principle that system leadership must inherently be a professionally led agenda. Furthermore, from this perspective, the role of an 'enabling state' becomes focused on reducing barriers to collaboration and wider policy disincentives, with national agencies providing bespoke professional development to individual system leaders.

But there are limitations here too. Momentum seems to be significantly sapped by the time taken and energy used to develop and agree the relatively procedural project and governance structures that underpin these roles. There will be concerns for rigour if effectiveness is not clearly defined or where an individual system leader does not have a wider perspective on emerging best practice.

There are of course variations to this bottom-up/top-down dialectic. For instance, strategic local leadership partnerships already exist between headteachers and local authorities. In one such model the authority retains legal responsibility for value for money whilst delegating decision-making to a partnership of headteachers who bring coherence and accountability to local collaboration. A perspective on how these (and other) possibilities may inform current professional action and government influence will be dependent on a range of criteria. If, however, a shared criterion is to develop effective system leadership in a growing number of schools, then the following suggestions for more short-term action may prove instructive.

Suggestion 1: Incentivize rather than legislate. The traditional response has been intervention and management from government, national agencies or local authorities. The argument here is that this leadership now needs to come more from headteachers themselves or from agencies committed to working with them in authentic ways. It is clear that the more bureaucratic the response the less likely it will be to work. A more lateral approach may be to create the conditions within the system to promote system leadership and collaborative activity through, for example,

adjusting accountability requirements, and funding for capacity building. With the right incentives in place schools will naturally move towards these new ways of working and mould them to the context in which they operate and to the challenges they face.

Suggestion 2: Place the agency close to the school. There are now in England, as noted earlier, at least three emerging change agent roles within the system whose remit is specifically school improvement: Consultant Leader, National Leader of Education and School Improvement Partner. The intention that must be maintained is that instead of creating a new bureaucracy their brief is increasingly focused on facilitating relationships between schools to maximize the potential of purposive collaboration. This approach to school transformation is made increasingly possible by the highly sophisticated data now available on school and student performance. It enables groups of schools to identify (a) issues where they shared both strengths and weaknesses, i.e. their capacity for sharing, and (b) common issues where they are likely to need some external input.

Suggestion 3: Use school 'independence' collaboratively to tackle underperformance. The underlying assumption here is that independent state schools freed of local control but working collaboratively offer a particularly appropriate organizational format for schools, usually those in the inner cities, where rapid transformation of standards and support for students is most needed. The key point is that the freedoms associated with Trust status, for example, can be used to promote collaboration and inclusion to directly address the needs of inner-city students. The crucial condition is that the schools in the Trust accept responsibility for the education of all the students within their geographic area. This arrangement will enable the now well-proven school improvement strategy based on the best of practice in our most successful Federations to apply across a range of schools and to bring together a range of policy initiatives among them – Extended Schooling, Personalized Learning, 14–19 vocational reforms, High Performing Schools – to give a real bite to the transformation of inner-city schooling.

A final word

This article has provided a conceptualization of system leadership and mapped the current system leadership landscape for the first time in England using 2006 as a baseline. It has illustrated that there is already significant system leadership activity, far more than previously expected. It has also demonstrated that system leadership can contribute decisively to a full range of government and local agendas by sharing of expertise, facilities and resources in educational specialisms, innovation and creativity, leadership and management, vocational education and skills support. In addition, a full range of children's services agendas and constructive links between parents and schools, businesses and further higher education providers and schools

are best served by such arrangements. The collective sharing of skills, expertise and experience creates much richer and more sustainable opportunities for rigorous transformation than can ever be provided by isolated institutions.

But we have also seen that the notion of system leadership itself is not unproblematic. There is evidence to show that replicating best practice from one school to other is not easily achieved. It is clear that there are limits to headteachers working across the system without becoming distracted from sustaining improvement in their own schools. There are also significant contradictions within, and tensions between, government-led system leadership and those increasing demands for giving school leaders more agency to take the lead. Above all, there is a lack of evidence to demonstrate that school leaders engaged in system thinking and action can consistently provide solutions to complex systemic problems. And yet, whilst the whole idea of system-level reform is territory that is neither clearly charted nor uncontested, it is, as we have seen, terrain that is beginning to be productively explored both in practice and theory by the new breed of educational change adventurers.

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Notes on contributors

Professor David Hopkins holds the inaugural HSBC iNet Chair in International Leadership at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning (LCLL), Institute of Education, University of London. Between 2002 and 2005 he served three Secretaries of State as the Chief Advisor on School Standards at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Dr Rob Higham is a RCUK Academic Fellow in Educational Leadership at the LCLL, Institute of Education, University of London. He previously worked as a Civil Servant at the DfES.

Notes

1. The current declining supply of school leaders relates to a high proportion of headteachers nearing retirement age coupled with a lack of deputies coming through. Gronn (2003) argues that this trend is underpinned by a broader 'disengagement from leadership' as teachers abstain from taking on leadership posts, leading to projected shortages and recurring recruitment difficulties.
2. These included the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), Association for School and College Leaders (ASCL) and National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT).

3. National Leaders of Education would also be included in this group but the role was only formally identified after the research had been completed.
4. The small 'other' category included shared or joint headship and cross-phase school amalgamations.

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