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Outstanding leadership in primary education: perceptions of school leaders in English primary schools

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Abstract

The nature of leadership and management in a school are key to achieving high quality education for all pupils. Leadership theories and empirical research have sought to identify characteristics of leaders, aspects of the context in which they work and their relationships with others to identify features of successful school leadership. This article reports on findings from a study into outstanding leadership in primary education using Q-methodology. The perceptions of head teachers, deputy head teachers, governors and academics with personal experience of leadership in English primary schools were gathered using Q-sort and analysed with PQ software. Overall, the analysis identified very strong agreement over six statements from a Q-set of 23 statements of outstanding leadership. There were subtle differences between urban and rural school settings.

Key words

Introduction

This article reports on empirical research into characteristics of outstanding leadership in primary education in England. The English education system has similarities with those of other countries but there are also differences and it is important to acknowledge context at macro, meso and micro level in interpreting and applying research findings. Researchers and school leaders from different countries (WELS, 2017; Hallinger, 2018) are increasingly recognising the critical role of context in leadership development and practice. Context can be seen in terms of two elements. Firstly, personal context which relates to an individual's life histories and experiences. Secondly, the broader contextual environment which includes school demographics and geographic location e.g. rural and urban. We strongly believe that context is important, particularly in research that aims to inform and improve educational practice.

For primary schools in England the term 'outstanding' carries highly emotive cultural and contextual meanings. We bring this to the attention of the international reader who may not be aware of the power and impact on schools, leaders, managers and governors of the

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Ofsted 'inspect and regulate services that care for children and young people of all ages' (Ofsted, 2018). In their inspection framework, Ofsted use the term 'outstanding' as the highest point in grading the quality of provision in educational settings so this term has high stakes meaning for schools, leaders and managers. In developing our research tool (Q-sort), we made use of Ofsted criteria to inform our work but do not advocate it as the means of labelling successful, effective leadership. Rather for us, it is a way of identifying characteristics of outstanding leadership along with other sources of evidence from theory and research on leadership and management, which we discuss in the following section.

Why is outstanding leadership important?

Theory and research has sought to identify characteristics which can lead to the development of outstanding leaders and school improvement in primary schools. This quest is underpinned by a political agenda to put excellence at the heart of primary education with school leaders at its centre in raising outcomes and standards for pupils (Matthews et al., 2014; DfE, 2015). The focus is on the needs and progress of all children and a commitment to the empowerment of both staff and pupils. Such a desire to establish high quality leadership is supported by programmes such as Teaching Leaders and Future Leaders (DfE, 2016) and the National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership (DfE, 2017).

Any examination of leadership is made more complex as Rutherford (2012) and Bottery (2016) suggest by the challenges facing current school leaders, including loss of morale, lack of trust, levels of appreciation, alongside demands to support the mental health and wellbeing of pupils (Howard et al., 2017). Such demands are linked to lack of funding, the pace of change in education and associated feelings of frustration. Furthermore, the search for a panacea to establish outstanding leadership in primary education is made even more complex by the range of contexts, setting and school type in which leaders operate and increased autonomy in the school policy landscape in England. This system change (Woods and Simkins, 2014) and the aspiration for a self-improving school system poses new challenges and perhaps opportunities for developing outstanding leadership that empowers staff and pupils to excel in every aspect of school life.

Changes to the education system in England driven by neo-liberal policies have led to the creation of new partnerships between schools. This has necessitated the development of softer inter-personal skills with an ability to communicate and network with others. An independent study into school leadership by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) found that the role of school leaders had become more challenging and the complexity and range of tasks they undertake increased significantly due to constant changes in educational policy. The demands that school leaders are now required to deal with include performance measures in attainment data sets across schools, demands for increased efficiency, staffing shortages and responsibility for the mental wellbeing of staff and pupils. Nevertheless, a search for the qualities and strategies that underpin outstanding leadership is vital given that Ofsted (2016) have indicated that the success of England's schools system is linked to the recruitment and retention of good and outstanding leaders. If we truly wish to secure the best outcomes for pupils in all schools then the role of

leadership is vital (Bush, 2008). Furthermore, Ofsted (2016) rightly claim that no school structure can be effective if the leadership is found to be poor.

What makes outstanding leadership?

Theories of leadership and empirical research have sought to identify characteristics of effective and successful leadership practice in different contexts, including outstanding primary schools in England. Matthews et al.'s (2014) study commissioned by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL)[1] suggests that outstanding leadership may be organised under three overlapping categories: i) what leaders are like as people, ii) what leaders do, and iii) how leaders do it. Other models developed by Leithwood et al., (2006) and Day et al., (2010) also reflect these three broad themes and indicate qualities, practices and behaviours that characterise successful school leadership. The first broad theme, focusing on the personal qualities of an individual seems important as Leithwood et al. (2006: 14) note leaders' personal traits, dispositions and personality characteristics may explain why some individuals have the capacity to develop more quickly than others do. Leithwood et al. (2006) suggest that successful leaders are open minded, flexible thinkers, persistent, resilient and optimistic in forming their core values. Such personal values may be driven by a moral purpose that centres on a commitment to social justice and a determination to remove barriers to children's success. They are thus driven by their core educational values and beliefs rather than external ideologies. Other individual qualities include their:

> vision, determination, resilience, tenacity and drive, laced with the courage of their convictions and carried forward with an irresistible momentum (Matthews et al., 2014:19).

This suggests that outstanding primary school leaders have exceptional character, determination and courage, set values, are very clear about their priorities, and possess the interpersonal skills to be able to take people with them (Matthews et al., 2014). Other educationists, such as Brighouse (2007) maintain that a consideration of the context for leadership is important when questioning what makes for successful leadership. Leithwood et al. (2006) suggest that rather than context alone being a marker of success it is sensitivity to context by leaders rather than individuals using different practices in different situations, which link to Matthews et al.'s (2014) second and third overlapping categories of outstanding leadership. In our research, we were interested in exploring the role of context, in what leaders do and how they do it, and consulted literature beyond the field of school leadership in the UK to identify characteristics of outstanding leadership in other contexts. Tamkin et al.'s research with high performing business and commercial organisations identified three principles of outstanding leadership:

> they think and act systematically, they see people as the route to performance and they are self-confident without being arrogant (Tamkin et al., 2010:5-6).

Barber et al., (2010) provide a list of practices derived from a review of education systems across eight countries. The common features identified by this and other research (Bush, 2008; NCSL, 2007; Dhillon, 2013) are building a shared vision, establishing

effective teams, enriching the curriculum, building trust and collaboration both within the school and with parents and the wider community. These characteristics of outstanding leadership reflected our own observations from professional practice in the organisations in which we work and in our partnerships with schools, colleges and commercial organisations.

Research methodology

Our study focuses on characteristics of outstanding leadership and used Q-methodology to research stakeholders' perceptions of outstanding leadership in different educational contexts. The methodology originates from psychology and is used to study people's subjective viewpoints. In Q-methodology, subjectivity refers to an individual's personal point of view on any matter of personal or social importance (Brown, 1980; McKeown and Thomas, 1988). The stakeholders who contributed to the analysis presented in this paper are primary school headteachers, deputy head teachers, school governors and academics with practical and personal experience of leadership in primary schools. We used freely available software (PQMethod) to analyse their perceptions of outstanding leadership in primary education and followed ethical procedures in line with BERA guidelines (BERA, 2018) during all stages of the research process.

Research process

Q-methodology is a structured process with an order of stages as shown in figure 1. Figure 1 is a simplified illustration of the approach as influenced by (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2013). These stages are interdependent since a Q-sort cannot take place without first generating a set of statements called a Q-set and selecting suitable participants referred to, in Q, as the P-set. The Q-set statements are used as stimuli to elicit participants' viewpoints. A distribution grid is the apparatus by which the statements are placed and recorded.

Figure 1: Q Methodology Step-by-Step management and process.

The research questions were formulated through observations of leadership in different educational settings and a literature review of successful and outstanding leadership. The study built on research undertaken by Dhillon (2016) and feedback from practitioners and academics at international conferences on leadership and management ((Dhillon, 2015; 2016). This iterative process generated 23 statements (the Q-set). The participants (the P-

set) for the findings reported in this paper are fourteen leaders, governors and academics with personal experience of headship or deputy headship in English primary schools. Participants placed the set of 23 text statements, on a prearranged distribution grid, placing items that they most agreed with to the right and the ones they most disagreed with to the left. All items were placed and therefore the participants were forced to decide the psychological significance of each item placed (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Statements of high psychological significance, to the participant, receive a higher ranking on the grid compared to statements of low psychological significance. There are 23 statements and a distribution grid with a seven point range from -3 to 3 including 0. An even distribution grid was used, as shown in Figure 2, with 18 places (78%) forced agree or disagree, and 5 places (22%) neutral.

Outstanding Leadership

-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3

(2)   (2)

   (3)   (3)

        (4)   (4)

              (5)

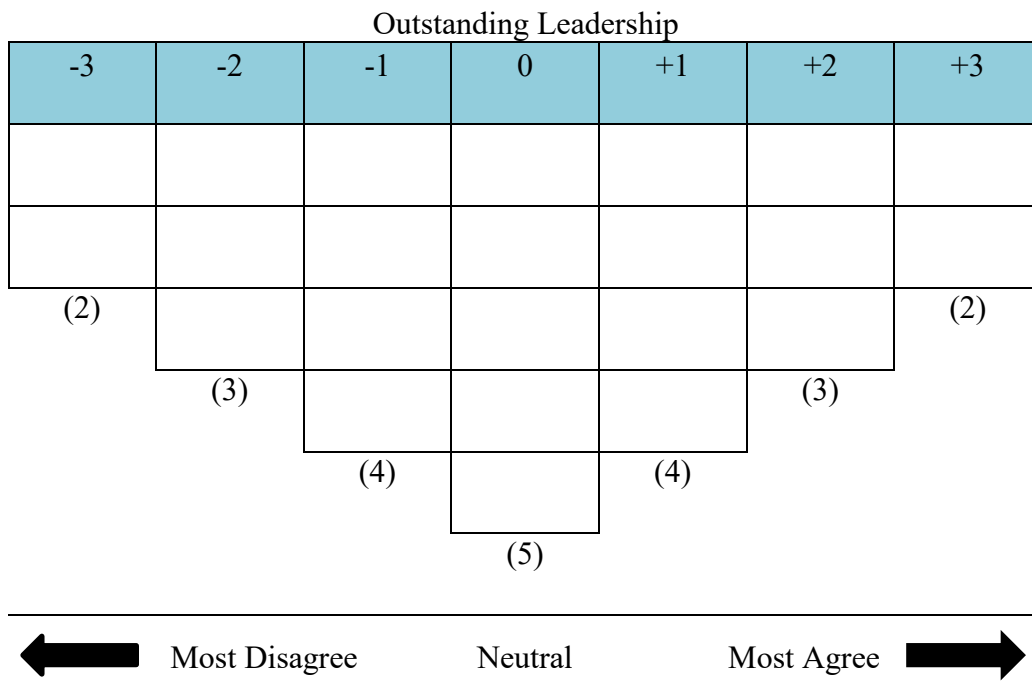⬅ Most Disagree   Neutral   Most Agree ➡

Figure 2: 23 item frequency distribution grid with 23 ranking positions, 18 forced agree or disagree and 5 neutral places.

Each Q-sort was coded for anonymity and confidentiality as advocated by BERA, (2018) and factor analysis using the Brown centroid (Brown, 1980) selected within the software, with 6 extracted factors (centroids). A principal component factor analysis followed this, whereby the results identified four factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1. Factor one being 4.6930, four times the value needed to be a significant factor. An eigenvalue of 1 is conventionally used as a measure of significance of a factor however, Brown (1980:40) urges caution when using such measures only, and gives an example of a case when the eigenvalue and variance measure, in a Q-study was meaningless because of the significance of the different participants. This was a consideration during the analysis and interpretation stages as we cross-checked the generated analysis with hard copies of Q-sorts and demographic information sheets completed by participants to tease out nuances in viewpoints. The demographic information related to the school (number of pupils;

urban/rural location) and the individual participant (gender; number of years in leadership role; qualifications in leadership).

Findings and discussion

The findings show both strong agreement overall and subtle differences in perspectives amongst the fourteen participants (the P-set) over characteristics of outstanding leadership in primary education. This is based on their ranking of the Q-set of 23 statements on the distribution grid and the statistical analysis generated by PQMethod software. The 23 statements had been numbered (1-23) at random for ease of data processing and participants were informed of this before they completed the Q-sort. In this article, we report the results for Factor one, (eigenvalue 4.6930). The eigenvalues for the other three factors were 2.2636, 1.6064 and 1.4091 respectively. The eigenvalue measure of significance for Factor one identified six statements that participants most agree and six that they most disagree. These twelve statements presented in Table 1, show the number and wording of the statements and the associated Z scores that express the strength of overall agreement and disagreement about characteristics of outstanding leadership in primary schools.

Statement number	Overall most agree by rank order (Z scores 1.420 to 1.034)	Overall most disagree by rank order (Z scores -1.598 to -1.214)	Statement number
13	High expectations of all members of staff and pupils (Z score 1.420)	Passion for providing world class education (Z score -1.598)	2
9	Maximising talent and deploying it effectively in the organisation (Z score 1.392)	Ability to foster discussion and debate (Z score -1.353)	11
22	Taking decisive action to address poor performance of staff (Z score 1.237)	Develop entrepreneurial innovative approaches to improve education (Z score -1.336)	12
5	Inspirational leader who leads by example (Z score 1.224)	Engaging local community in a shared vision for education in the area (Z score -1.289)	6

8	Ability to bring out the best in people and inspire others (Z score 1.060)	Reconciling opposing points of view and summarising agreed points (Z score -1.276)	21
15	Developing an aspirational culture in the school/college and local community (Z score 1.034)	Balancing financial constraints with aspirational educational ambitions (Z score -1.214)	3

Table 1: Statements most strongly agreed and most strongly disagreed by the P-set from the Q-set of 23 statements of outstanding leadership and 23 ranking positions

As Table 1 shows the most strongly agreed characteristic of outstanding leadership in primary education is 'high expectations of all members of staff and pupils' (statement 13, Z score 1.420) and the most strongly disagreed is 'passion for providing world class education' (statement 2, Z score -1.598). In this section, we do not discuss each statement in detail but draw out common areas in the perceptions of the Q-sort participants.

In interpreting the six most strongly agreed statements, a focus on the people (staff and pupils) in the individual school is more highly associated with outstanding leadership than the wider aspects of leading an educational organisation and its community. The six most agreed statements largely reflect positive aspirational and inspirational characteristics of leadership, with aspirational characteristics rated higher than inspirational characteristics.

Aspirational leadership centres on characteristics such as high expectations of staff and pupils, maximizing talent and deploying it effectively in the organization and taking decisive action to address poor performance of staff (statements 13, 9, 22). Inspirational leadership is characterised by a leader who leads by example, has the ability to bring out the best in people, inspire others, and develop an aspirational culture (statements 5, 8, 15). Since these statements were ranked out of a possible ranking position of 23 the findings clearly reflect the more challenging aspects of outstanding leadership i.e. people management and securing high standards in the organization, something DfE (2015) might consider systems and processes elements of leadership. Such findings indicate the challenges and tensions regarding aspects of leadership in primary school settings as the need to inspire and motivate others (staff and pupils) has to take place in the context of the ambition to attain high standards of education for all and continually address levels of staff performance. Some of these pressures are policy driven (e.g. Ofsted inspection) whilst others relate to the personal and professional characteristics of successful and effective leaders found by earlier studies (Day et al., 2010; Matthews et al., 2014; Tamkin et al., 2010).

Our research reinforces the perceived role that personal and professional characteristics play in creating outstanding leadership. As Matthews et al. (2014) similarly indicate, one of the categories of outstanding primary school leadership is 'what are the leaders like as people' in terms of their professional, personal outlook and values. Our observations and professional experience as teachers, middle leaders, deputy headteachers and governors

affirms that outstanding leadership is driven by passion for high quality education for all children, both in terms of challenge and high expectations. We may surmise that such characteristics fall within a personal or professional desire to be an outstanding provider of primary education and a moral imperative (Leithwood et al., 2006; DfE 2015) to strive for excellence in education. However, in the policy context of the English education system such determination may arise from the pressures of an accountability agenda, as also identified by Day and Sammons (2014) and high stakes assessment of the quality of leadership and educational provision by Ofsted (Ofsted 2015; 2018). Outstanding leadership characteristics such as maximising talent and deploying it effectively in the organisation (statement 9, Z score 1.392) and taking decisive action to address poor performance of staff (statement 22, Z score 1.237) must surely be seen in terms of a single minded focus on performance and driving forward excellence in one's own school. Such a focus is in marked contrast to the softer inter-personal characteristics of outstanding leadership, which centre on an ability to foster discussion and debate (statement 11, Z score -1.35) and develop innovative entrepreneurial approaches to improve education (statement 12, Z score -1.336). Perhaps a desire to consult and take risks in developing innovative approaches to education is marginalised by the demands of the inspection regime and performance indicators.

The significance of the ranking of statement 22 (taking decisive action to address poor performance of staff) by our Q-sort participants surprised us and is a key finding of this study with clear implications for leadership and management practice, especially for primary settings aiming to achieve and sustain outstanding leadership. From the literature review and our professional experience as governors and leaders in schools, we have not found any reference to this characteristic of leadership. The statement is less highly ranked in other settings (secondary schools and colleges) that we have researched in our wider study (Dhillon et al., 2017). In interpreting its significance for primary education, we suggest that factors such as small size of school and few members of a leadership team mean that poor performance of staff cannot be left or 'swept under the carpet' because it is difficult to address. Inaction or indecisive action can quickly lead to poor morale, negatively affect the aspirational culture in a school, and make it even more difficult to develop outstanding leadership. This suggests that for outstanding leadership to thrive and survive inspirational and aspirational aspects of leadership need to be complemented by decisive action to address poor performance. In this respect, this study extends our knowledge of the process of developing outstanding leadership and of the relative importance of addressing poor performance of staff and taking decisive action to address poor performance. 'Taking difficult decisions and communicating them honestly to those affected' (statement 23, Z score 0.832) was also high on the relative significance of the full set of statements with the implication that trust and honesty is necessary to build and sustain outstanding educational leadership.

It is interesting to note, as shown in Table 1, the relative lower priority given by the Q-sort participants to the wider context of education, such as passion for providing world class education, developing entrepreneurial and innovative approaches and engaging the local community in a shared vison of education (statements 2, 12, 6). This emphasis may be due to the demographic composition of our P-set as well as the accountability driven policy environment.

To complement the overall analysis of participants' viewpoints (n=14) we completed an analysis of urban (n=9) and rural primary school settings (n=5) to explore another dimension of the influence of context on perceptions of outstanding leadership. Table 2 presents the results of the most strongly agree statements for urban and rural settings and shows slightly different rankings but interestingly the Z scores for the most agree statements are the same across both contexts (statements 1,5,15,13,8,9,2). In interpreting these differences, we can consider gender and other characteristics such as school size, length of experience in leadership and leadership qualifications to arrive at a more nuanced explanation. For example, the rural sample were all females whilst the urban consisted of five females and four males and two statements (8 and 13) are common to both settings though with slightly different Z scores. This example illustrates how statistical data from the software can help to tease out nuances between participants' viewpoints when interpreted within the context of the coding we used to enable us to compare across contexts.

Statement number	Urban most agree	Rural most agree	Statement number
1	Clear strategic vision and communicated effectively to others (Z score 1.706)	Inspirational leader who leads by example (Z score 1.706)	5
15	Developing an aspirational culture in the school/college and local community (Z score 1.706)	High expectations of all members of staff and pupils (Z score 1.706)	13
8	Ability to bring out the best in people and inspire others (Z score 1.138)	Ability to bring out the best in people and inspire others (Z score 1.138)	8
9	Maximising talent and deploying it effectively in the organisation (Z score 1.138)	Passion for providing world class education (Z score 1.138)	2
13	High expectations of all members of staff and pupils	Taking difficult decisions and communicating them honestly to those affected	23

	(Z score 1.138)	(Z score 1.138)	

Table 2: Statements most strongly agreed in urban and rural primary school contexts

Conclusion

In this article, we have considered characteristics of outstanding leadership in primary education from theoretical and empirical standpoints. Using theory and research from different leadership contexts and the professional experience of stakeholders in a range of educational settings in England, we developed a set of characteristics of outstanding leadership that we used for the empirical work reported in this paper. Our use of Q-methodology in the context of primary education identified six statements that strongly contribute to outstanding leadership in English primary schools, presented in Table 1. These six statements chosen from a Q-set of 23 statements of outstanding leadership focus on the individual school and the people (staff and pupils) in the school rather than the wider aspects of leading an educational organisation and its community. The most highly ranked characteristics largely reflect the positive aspirational and inspirational characteristics of outstanding leadership, with aspirational characteristics being rated higher than inspirational characteristics (statements 13, 9, 5, 8, 15). These include high expectations of staff and pupils, maximizing talent and deploying it effectively in the organization, leading by example, ability to inspire others and developing an aspirational culture, which resonate with findings of earlier studies on outstanding primary leadership. Where our findings further extend knowledge of the challenges and tensions in developing and sustaining outstanding leadership is in the importance of taking decisive action to address poor performance of staff (statement 22). We were surprised at the importance placed on this characteristic of outstanding leadership by our participants but it highlights the challenging aspects of leadership alongside the motivational, aspirational and inspirational ones.

In conclusion, we suggest that these characteristics of outstanding leadership have application in other contexts and countries. Furthermore, the Q-sort we have developed can be used as a reflective tool for leadership learning and development. Leadership teams can use the Q-sort to reflect on their own leadership context and identify strategies to improve leadership practice in their schools.

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[1] The NCTL no longer exists. It was an executive agency, sponsored by the Department for Education in England and existed from 29 March 2013 to 31 March 2018