

# **Assessing the Validity of the NCSL Evidence Base: A Critical Review of the Research Published by the College.**

by

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### *Introduction*

When details of the proposed internal organisation of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) were first published in 1999 the intention was for there to be three divisions: Programmes, E-learning and Research. The inclusion of a research division was a welcome signal, carrying with it the implicit expectation that there was to be, for the first time in this country, a serious attempt to build an evidence base for leadership development and training in education that was empirically informed – a development that would also have implications for policy making on school leadership issues on general. Prior to this the basis for policy determination and decision making based on research had been judged to be limited at best (Glatter, 1999: 254). By the time the NCSL began its work in September 2001 ‘school improvement’ had been added to the description of the division, thus widening its brief and signalling its intention to focus on those activities which led to changes at the school level. Subsequently the college reorganised its senior executive roles and, by September 2002, had changed the title for the division to Research and Development. The intention of this article is to explore some of the emergent and outstanding issues that are evident after the first two years of the division’s operation. Although it is recognised that there may be work in progress this review will only focus on the research findings published by the division.

### *The NCSL Evidence base*

The Research and School Improvement Group (RSIG) within the college initially published a series of invited essays from noted national and international practitioners, academics and theorists to form a Knowledge Pool. A total of 31 such contributions have remained posted on the college web-site (accessed in early June, 2003) since that time. In the main these contributions are commentaries on aspects of leadership and management, informed by relevant literature and theory bases, with few examples of essays that are the direct result of empirical research.

The college has also added a further 49 contributions through the Research Publications section of their web-site. The largest body of contributors to this field are practitioners, particularly from NCSL Research Associates who tend to be serving headteachers seconded from their substantial post (usually for 20 days, although some early recipients of the associate status were given longer periods up to a total of 100 days). There are 19 practitioner reports, mainly single authored, although one report is co-authored and one was a joint effort by four contributors. The focus of the reports tend to be school based activities that have been empirical investigations with the largest 'n' of data subjects being 25 and the largest number of schools investigated in any one report being 15. One report, by co-authors, was the further analysis of data accumulated through a survey conducted in 1999 that involved a large number of respondent headteachers (1405).

Of the remaining 30 reports available through Research Publications on the NCSL web-site, eight report on the series of Leading Edge Seminars run by the college since its inception, seven are think pieces (presumably commissioned), eight are literature reviews (again, commissioned), one is an evaluation of a NCSL programme and one is a report on a practitioner seminar (involving representatives from LEAs, HEIs and industry as well as school based personnel). There are a further five reports that could be described as using traditional research methods of which three used multiple respondents (50, 20 and 19), one used secondary data sources and one was a single school case study investigating Leadership and Inclusion.

### *Research challenges*

Building an evidence base in this way is highly reliant on conventional wisdom and small-scale interpretive research. Whilst informative this approach cannot be considered as exhaustive and also runs the risk of being circular. Circularity in research is similar to the self-fulfilling prophecy in that you end up looking for what you expected to be there, rather than looking to see what might be there. That is an accusation that could be levelled at some of the evaluations of NCSL programmes, for example, in that they appear both to

measure their effectiveness against the components of the programme and to ask the participants the value they have placed on the process. The content of the New Visions programme for beginning headteachers, for example, has not been derived from empirical research and yet appears to be evaluated against the experiences of the participants rather than any externally derived criteria.

Such an accusation calls into question the applicability of conventional wisdom in establishing responses to the challenge of developing school leaders. In order to illustrate this conclusion I will review the issues faced in undertaking research into headship, particularly in my area of special interest - the beginning headteacher.

To date there is no commonly accepted knowledge base for headship in England. Nevertheless we do have a set of national standards for headteachers (Teacher Training Agency, 1998) and a sanctioned, soon to be mandatory, preparation programme (NPQH) that apparently emanates from those standards. The provenance of those standards is not clear, however, even if they do have currency with the NCSL and those who make use of NPQH in determining the quality of those applying for their first headship. The published description of the standards does not seem to draw on an evidence base from either literature or from the limited range of empirical findings that existed at that time. We might conclude that the standards have emerged following a series of investigations into the nature of the job of headteacher through the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Hall, Mackay and Morgan, 1986; School Management Task Force, 1990; Jirasinghe and Lyons, 1996), but there is no reference to these earlier studies in either TTA or NCSL publications.

Crow (2003), in his short review of preparation programmes, attempts to explain some of the issues relating to the establishment of a knowledge base for school leadership but, like most reports on the topic, his work draws on theory bases drawn from other occupations or school systems. His conclusions are not based on empirical research in England, although he does implicitly claim an applicability of his evidence base to the nature of headship. His report is

indicative of the way in which headship is understood either through extrapolations of associated theories (such as those drawn from leadership studies), through conclusions based on limited data sources or through assumptions.

Generally there has been a paucity of research findings into the headship role, particularly since the introduction of site based management, through the Local Management of Schools contained within the 1988 Act. This is surprising, given that most researchers and observers consistently have deemed the role to be 'pivotal' in the establishment and maintenance of effective schools (e.g. Baron, 1968: 2; Department of Education and Science, 1977: 36; House of Commons, 1998; Southworth, 2000: 16). The principal study conducted on headship prior to the Education Reform Act was extensive both in the number of respondents and in the range of investigative techniques employed, even if it only focused on those from the secondary phase (Weindling and Earley, 1987). Subsequently there were a range of small-scale studies that focused on aspects of the work environment for headteachers (e.g. Clerkin, 1985 and Harvey, 1986), on training programmes (e.g. Gunraj and Rutherford, 1999; Blandford and Squire, 2000) or on the nature of headship (e.g. Southworth, 1995; Male, 1996; Male and Merchant, 2000). Few have focused exclusively on primary headteachers, despite there being nearly 20,000 of them, and there have been very few investigations into the nature of headship in special schools (Rayner and Ribbins, 1999; Male and Male, 2001).

Meanwhile government sponsored investigations into the headship either have been a by-product of other services or remain unpublished. Potentially rich sources of government data have not reported on the nature of headship itself, although many interesting statistics have emerged from the work of departmental and non-departmental government bodies. Statistics on education are published annually by the DfES, for example, as is the report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI). Both reports need separate analysis and interpretation, however, for those seeking to inform themselves on developments in headship. Where empirical research was commissioned by

government agencies the data or findings have generally not been made available for public scrutiny. The formal evaluation of the NPQH scheme, for example, undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) during 1998, has never been published, nor have Ofsted investigations into the scheme been made public, although a resumé of the Ofsted findings from the inspection into the first seven cohorts of NPQH and the induction of new headteachers was contained in the HMI report on leadership and management training for headteachers (Ofsted, 2002). Similarly the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), responsible for headship training and development from 1994-99, did not publish any of its findings from a wealth of data that has been collected as a by product of its activities in the field during this time. Despite the fact that all Headlamp funded activities have to be evaluated by the participant, for example, none of this data has ever been made available and we have no feedback on the reviews of the training provision and assessment processes which were systematically conducted by the TTA as a part of its quality control procedures, although a brief selected summary of findings was included in the NCSL review of Headlamp (Newton, 2001). The total of evaluation of the Headlamp scheme available for public inspection, meanwhile, has been just three paragraphs in the annual report of HMCI in 1996-7 (Ofsted, 1998: paras 292-294). In 1998, the TTA commissioned an independent evaluation of Headlamp which was completed and submitted to the TTA in September of that year and was due for consideration at the November meeting of the Board. The publication of the Green Paper (*Teachers: Facing the Challenge of Change*) intervened, however, and the report was shelved and remains unavailable to the public.

Exceptions to this pattern have been the investigation into the role of headteachers conducted by the Parliamentary Select Committee (House of Commons, 1998), an independent research survey conducted in 1999 and reported subsequently (Male, 2000; Male and Hvizdak, 2000; Male, 2001a; Male and Male, 2001; Male, Bright & Ware, 2002) and a report commissioned by the DfES into the state of school leadership in England and conducted in 2001 (Earley, Evans, Collarbone, Gold and Halpin, 2002). The Select Committee proceedings resulted in responses from all interested parties,

including government agencies, resulting in the publication of a report that provided the clearest picture of the nature of the role, and the associated training, development and educational needs of the nation's headteacher workforce that has been available to date. The independent survey conducted by Male and Hvizdak, with over 1400 respondents, provided the biggest data set ever accumulated nationally on the perceptions of the nation's headteachers (Mansell, 2002). The DfES study employed an extensive range of data gathering techniques with serving and aspiring headteachers, deputy and assistant heads, middle-managers, training providers, school governors and LEA senior officers to provide insights into key aspects of current school leadership practice and development. The data were gathered using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research techniques: specifically postal questionnaire surveys of school leaders, governors and LEAs, a series of focus group and associated on-line 'hot seat' discussions, case studies and telephone interviews. The role of headteachers formed a significant part of the research. Limitations have to be placed on both the Male and Hvizdak study, which reported only on the perceptions of serving headteachers, and on the Earley *et al* study for which the data collection, after initial sampling errors, was spread over a significant period of time. Whilst undoubtedly valuable, both studies have methodological weaknesses that place doubt over the generalisability of the findings.

Work on beginning headship has been even more limited than the small collection of studies that have attempted to illuminate the nature of headship since 1988. The research undertaken by Weindling and Earley (1987) has remained the most comprehensive study, although its relevance is reducing as the data were gathered in the early 1980s and the data subjects were all from secondary schools. Small scale studies undertaken post-1988, however, have indicated real issues with regard to the adaptation needed by successful headteacher applicants to their new occupational identity. Dunning (1996: 111), for example, reported on the management problems faced by newly appointed headteachers in Wales, while Draper and McMichael (1998: 207-8) reported on the 'surprise' newly appointed headteachers in Scotland experienced and Daresh and Male

(2000: 95) reported on the 'culture shock' associated by English headteachers and US principals with the transition to the new role. On a wider stage the International Beginning Principals Study (IBPS) sought to investigate and report on the experiences of beginning headteachers and principals during their first two years in post, gathering data through a self-completion questionnaire administered to a sample of headteachers in England and principals in Belgium, Canada, Netherlands and USA who took up post in September, 2000. Similar research questions underpinned the design of questionnaires used in all countries, thus allowing for data to be compared across the countries whilst each questionnaire reflected the linguistic, cultural and structural differences between school systems. Initial findings from the IBPS were reported to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (e.g. Barnett, 2001; Berg, 2001; Male, 2001b; Male, 2001c).

Only one element of the investigations into beginning headship/principalship could be deemed to be representative, however, with the Belgian aspect of the IBPS reporting on some 300 plus respondents (Vandenberghe, 2003). Meanwhile the investigations conducted in the USA by Barnett were confined to just 10 respondents in Colorado, whilst Berg's work was even more limited with only one respondent to her survey in Rhode Island. Responses were received from 35 headteachers in England who had taken up post in September, 2000 which, whilst a small number, was still a 70 per cent response rate. This small number was entirely due to the difficulties encountered in identifying beginning headteachers, an almost impossible task without support from central or local government agencies. Serving headteachers in this country are considered to be one of the most elusive of subjects (Cohen and Mannion, 1994: 86), an assessment borne out by attempts to locate qualified data subjects for the study of beginning headteachers.

This story reaches a sorry conclusion in that we have still to enact an investigation into the challenges and issues facing beginning headteachers that can be deemed to be representative. Interested in the findings from prior research, the NCSL commissioned work to begin work in 2001 on devising a



questionnaire that would investigate the challenges facing newly appointed headteachers in England following appointment and reveal their personal training, development and educational needs. Work on the content and design of the questionnaire continued throughout the latter months of 2001 with a view to administering the questionnaire in February, 2002. The project fell foul of the government agencies' system of managing the volume of documentation into schools, however, and was shelved until the current academic year when work was scheduled to resume on the project with a view to administering the questionnaire in February, 2003 to those who had taken up post since September, 2002. Sadly, however, the project was once again shelved by NCSL in deference to the principle of not over burdening headteachers with administration. The possibility of sustaining the investigation independently was compromised by not being able to find beginning headteachers, with access denied to the only coherent list (compiled by the DfES) on the grounds that the release of the list to a third party would contravene the Data Protection Act.

### *Discussion*

The major question that arises from this review of NCSL research activity is whether the published outcomes represents a secure evidence base on which the college can inform policy making at the national level or training and development opportunities for school leaders within their own remit. The empirical evidence that has been published cannot be considered generalisable given the low numbers involved in practitioner reports and the samples used in the five studies that are empirically informed. The report on Black and Ethnic Leaders, for example, employed a convenience sample of 20 respondents, with the report on Leading Provision using 14 telephone interviews followed by five LEA visits. The largest 'n' was achieved through an investigation into Building Capacity involving 50 headteachers.

The lack of generalisable data, however, does not necessarily mean that the range of research activity is less than informative. Greenfield (1975), in a significant contribution to the quest for a knowledge base for educational administrators in the USA, concluded that students of organisations should

turn their backs on logical positivistic science and adopt interpretive modes of enquiry. His conclusion is matched by the desire of researchers in a post-positivist paradigm to understand the lived experiences of others and to derive theory from the subsequent interpretations. In this way grounded theory emerges that informs future practice. Certainly many of the small-scale investigations reported above, including the majority of the practitioner reports sponsored by the NCSL, could be deemed to be interpretive in nature. Additionally, some of the reports and some of the evaluations of NCSL programmes could be deemed to be investigative in nature and labelled Action Research, again an entirely valid means of investigating and improving practice.

The pertinent questions that remain over the validity of the NCSL evidence base following this discussion are whether:

1. the syntheses of conventional wisdom and secondary evidence are valid means of establishing a knowledge base;
2. the methodologies employed in practitioner enquiries are robust and rigorous;
3. the evaluation of NCSL activities and extrapolation to theory are circular;
4. the lack of representative data is problematic;

In applying these questions to the evidence base that informs beginning headteachers the criticism relating to the appropriation of existent theory drawn from other occupations remains. Crow (2003) points to the way in which socialisation theory has been used to illustrate the development of occupational identities and suggests that headteachers have a number of attributes to develop that are generic to all headships, a process he labels 'professional socialisation'. The development of the headteacher identity is then shaped to the specific demands of the school through a reciprocal process of organisational socialisation where the culture of the school both shapes and is shaped by the newly appointed headteacher. The factors that shape headteacher identity, however, extend beyond any formal preparation

programme and induction procedures with current headteachers, LEA administrators, teachers, students, parents, family members and friends all contributing to the socialisation of aspiring heads (Crow, 2003: 3). This is an important addition to the debate, for the use of socialisation theory to role adoption often overlooks these influences that are external to the occupational issues, yet are central to the development of situational self. Indeed, 'socialisation' has been described as one of the vaguest terms employed in the vocabulary of the social sciences and has included descriptors drawn from psychology, sociology, anthropology, ethology, pedagogy, social work and political science (Brezinha, 1994: 2). Similarly concepts of professionalism are problematic and contended. The combination of the two words to provide a descriptor of the induction process for headship can thus be judged to be more a theory of convenience than an accepted or proven concept. The conclusion to be drawn from this debate is that in order to achieve understanding of the personal and occupational transitions to the new role of headship there will need to be a much wider investigation into the lived experiences and life histories of beginning headteachers than has been the case to date. As things stand we do not appear to have such investigations of lived experience, with only a limited number of attempts to investigate life histories of headship in general (Ribbins and Marland, 1994), of women in headship (Coleman, 1996; Hall, 1996) or those in special schools (Rayner and Ribbins, 1998). The essence of this short review of investigations into beginning headship is that there is evidence that conventional wisdom, frequently derived from other occupations, is untested and, therefore, unstable. The suggestion that the use of conventional wisdom and secondary evidence bases to inform practice may be problematic thus remains.

The second question, whether the methodologies employed in practitioner enquiries are robust and rigorous, will almost certainly have to remain unanswered by this article as no evidence exists to aid the resolution of this teasing question except that which could be assumed from reading the various reports. Even then it would need further qualification from the authors or from representative(s) of the Research and Development division of the NCSL as to the rigour of the work before a judgement could be made. All that

can be suggested at this time is that very few of the practitioner reports reveal the methodological discussion that has informed the data collection, nor do the reports seem to indicate the limitations of the findings. If we are to take the findings as informative (and developmental in terms of theory) I would have anticipated more in the way of research definition.

In many ways I have already addressed the third question relating to the validity of the NCSL evidence base in posing questions around the potential for circularity in systemic and commissioned evaluations. The establishment of objectivity, and/or a politically neutral stance, are central to the veridacity of research findings. By its very nature the NCSL is an organisation affected by politics before we even begin to address the potential for political activity within the college itself or in interactions with those with whom it works. As a central government agency, in a direct relationship with the DfES, the college is exposed to a number of macro-political issues and concerns and must be seen to be supportive of government intentions and, presumably, policies. There is no degree of independence contained or perceived in its charter of operation with the inevitable result that it must be subject to political will. Charged with the responsibility of enacting improvement in the nations' schools through the enhancing the capability of school leaders, it is unlikely to be disposed to the establishment or support of programmes of training and development that cannot be shown to be contributing to the expectations of the macro-political structure. So where are the rituals and rules that determine objectivity and neutrality in the evaluation and research activities that are associated with the college's actions? They are not apparent in the information available in the public domain.

Which brings me to the fourth question, the notion of representative data. The earlier discussion regarding the imperative for interpretive research in order to understand the nature of school leadership needs to be set against the requirement for the establishing a representative sample of the population. One of the stark statistics that emerges from previous programmes of professional development for school leaders is that after 10 years of heavy investment in formal training by central government only 11 per cent of the

target population had actually participated (School Management Task Force, 1990: 7). What is not evident from NCSL data sources is what the percentage of participants in current college programmes is in relation to the total population. We do know there to be some 25,000+ maintained schools in the country, each of which will almost certainly have a number of employees whose work potentially will be defined and supported by the NCSL. We also suspect, from previous discussion in this paper, that a good deal of the published research material is confined to a small number of contributors from the field and is informed by a limited range of respondents, with the majority of such respondents seeming to have a prior relationship with the college. So the potential for skewed data is enormous and it would appear that the establishment of a wider range of information, perceptions and opinion would be a pre-requisite to the research ethic of the college.

The college has been subject to pressure since its inception, however, not to increase the demands for responsiveness from practitioners through conducting wide scale surveys, having been included in government moves to reduce the administrative burden on schools. A review by central government agencies in 2001 recognised that schools had been inundated with documentation during the early stages of a Labour government anxious to improve the education service (3000 documents into schools during the first 1000 days of government following the 1997 General Election, many of them requiring a response). This led firstly to the establishment of collaborative discussions between government agencies to determine the volume of hard copy that can be permitted to go into schools. This response from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), as the principal agencies concerned, has been matched by a determination by the leading headteacher professional associations, the National Association for Headteachers (NAHT), Secondary Headteachers' Association (SHA) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT), to limit the demands.

A key purpose for researchers establishing a representative data base is that it allows for the extrapolation of findings to provide secure evidence on which substantive conclusions can be drawn. On its published track record NCSL is failing to provide its own secure evidence base for decision making on training and development activities or for informing policy decisions on the wider scale. Rather it appears to be reliant on another government agency, almost certainly Ofsted, without having established either an agreed definition of key criteria or providing a qualification of the subsequent findings. This assertion is given credence by the identification of the areas for core modules contained within contract the Headteacher Induction Programme being ascribed to the findings from Ofsted, as contained within the report of the Chief HMI in 2002. It is also an assertion acceded to by a senior NCSL official in a personal discussion conducted at the inaugural International Conference held at the college in October, 2002.

If the use of Ofsted findings by NCSL is the empirical base for decision-making on the training, development and support for school leaders then a review of the Ofsted Framework for Inspection raises the issue of appropriate data collection. The Ofsted Framework for Inspection (2000) lists six aspects of leadership and management that are to be reported in arriving at a judgement of how well the school is led and managed, focusing on the efficiency and effectiveness of the headteacher and key staff, the work of the governing body, the school's monitoring and evaluation processes, the strategic use of resources, best value and the adequacy of staffing, accommodation and learning resources. A brief review of 10 Ofsted reports chosen at random from that agency's web-site (accessed late May, 2003) demonstrates that inspectors follow this framework in shaping their report. No definition is provided in the Ofsted Framework of the key terms, however, and there is no distinctiveness drawn between leadership and management. It may be that such definitions are provided during training and updating of Ofsted inspectors, but this is not apparent from the information provided through this source. There is a possibility, therefore, of the definitions (and, therefore the conclusions) being open to interpretation by members of the Ofsted inspection process. Although the new Ofsted framework (due to be

operational in September, 2003) does draw the distinction between leadership and management, the same potential issues of interpretation continuing to exist.

The absence of representative, and thereby generalisable, studies means that programmes of training, development, education and support may be working on a limited view of participants' needs. The challenge to the NCSL is that it probably has a limited information base and appears to be making decisions and provision through supposition and externally derived data sources, some of which may be biased.

### *Conclusions*

The challenge is offered to the NCSL to address the issues highlighted in this paper in order to improve the veridicality of the data available to them to guide decision making and future provision. Without rigorous, representative and generalisable data the college is, at best, working on limited data and, at worst, failing to meet the needs of a proportion of the population they purport to be serving. More needs to be done to ensure objectivity and to reduce the potential for bias and circularity. A starting point for this process would be to ensure that all research reports published by the NCSL indicate the provenance of their conclusions and, where these are practitioner reports, there is requirement on the author to provide a clear statement of methodology and limitations for the findings.

The college also needs to address the reluctance to ask serving headteachers, other than those who are already in a relationship with the college, to engage in research activity concerning the nature of their role. The absence of any such initiative has added to the traditional difficulty of getting headteachers to respond to surveys, especially where participation is voluntary. None of the political difficulties encountered in this respect with fellow government agencies and professional associations is insurmountable. Firstly, research should not be viewed as administration – especially when it is voluntary. To locate a genuine attempt to gather data in the interests of a group of educationalists as administration is tantamount to the infantilisation

of those in role. All members of the teaching workforce have the capability to make their own decisions, none more so than headteachers. Further, it is contended, engagement in the process of research should be perceived as a professional responsibility by those who occupy such roles. The labelling of research as administration takes away that responsibility. Secondly, the process of data registration could be reviewed to allow for the release of names to other agents where applicable and appropriate. Many commercial organisations address this issue successfully through providing the option to opt out of receiving follow up material after an initial transaction. It should not be beyond the wit of government agencies, central and local, to legislate for such possible data transfer.

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