

THE QUALITIES AND PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE SYSTEM LEADERS: PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, Sally Wilkinson confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sally Wilkinson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S' and a long, sweeping underline.

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ABSTRACT

The role of the primary school headteacher has evolved and current changes to the leadership landscape are influential in shaping this further, altering expectations of what it means to be an effective headteacher. This now includes being an effective system leader. This thesis explores the leadership qualities and practices needed by a primary headteacher to be an effective system leader.

The study is carried out in seven large rural local authorities in England. It is a qualitative research study based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 headteachers who are system leaders in the primary phase. Their specific roles are either as a national leader of education (NLE) and director of a teaching school alliance (TSA) or an executive headteacher.

Effective school leadership is defined with reference to research related to the concept of learning-centred leadership. The leadership qualities and practices identified here are considered alongside emerging research into system leadership and form the background to this research.

The responses from the telephone semi-structured interviews with the headteachers are submitted to thematic analysis which leads to the development of two models. One represents the connections between five leadership qualities following theme mapping and the other provides a framework for 12 leadership practices derived from network analysis. Although these are considered separately, the analysis of the findings draws links between the two models when appropriate.

The findings reveal leadership practices that the primary headteachers employ specifically as part of their role as a system leader such as building 'home' school

capacity, coaching and mentoring staff into leadership roles and establishing systems and structures in other schools.

Recommendations relate to government policy on aspects of system leadership and the professional development of headteachers as system leaders in the primary phase that will support their development practically, intellectually and personally.

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Lastly, thank you to my husband Clive and son Bryn for their essential support, encouragement and love.

The views in this thesis are mine and do not necessarily represent those of the local authority for whom I work.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the research

1.1 Background

The reason for embarking on this research was to enhance knowledge and understanding relating to the leadership qualities and practices needed by a headteacher in the primary phase to be an effective system leader. It is hoped that this will help inform the development of policy and practice in a large rural local authority (LA). At a national level, it is hoped that it will add to the knowledge of leadership practices employed by system leaders in the primary phase. This LA will be referred to throughout the thesis as LA J. What is meant by system leadership will be explored in detail through a review of the literature; however in general terms it is defined as taking on a leadership role to ensure the success of pupils in more than one school (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009). This is an essential component of the government's vision for the further development of a self-improving school system outlined in the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). At the time this paper was published, the school improvement service in LA J, in which I work as an officer, identified a lack of capacity within school leadership, particularly in the primary phase in the LA, to take this agenda forward. The following figures were not formally collected at the time, but from my personal analysis I have established that in 2010 out of 38 headteachers in the secondary phase there were three National Leaders of Education (NLE), two of whom were directors of TSAs, and six Local Leaders of Education (LLE). Whereas, out of 241 primary headteachers, there were no NLEs and five LLEs. Within the primary phase there were also 11 executive headteachers, that is a headteacher who leads and manages more than one school (Chapman, Muijs and MacAllister, 2011).

The figures for LA J from 2010 show a greater engagement by headteachers in the secondary phase with specific system leader roles. This influenced the decision to focus the research in the primary phase, particularly as , in August 2013, across the 254

schools in the primary phase in LA J there was still only one NLE, 24 LLEs (DfE, 2013c) and 24 executive headteachers (LA J, 2012). This small increase in system leaders was of concern to LA J as was the fact that several headteachers had encountered difficulties in sustaining their role as an LLE or executive headteacher. Therefore the school improvement service identified the need to provide both information and support to headteachers and governing bodies in the primary phase to encourage the development of system leadership within LA J. This was based on learning from the systems and structures in place in the primary phase in other large rural authorities considered by the Department for Education (DfE), through the Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT) (DfE, 2013b) to be statistical neighbours of LA J. This tool benchmarks all LAs nationally against a range of performance measures.

The Department has developed the Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT) to provide easy access to a wide range of data related to children and young people sourced from various departments across government. It acts as a single central evidence base that helps support the Accountability Framework and Transparency Agenda.

The Tool provides the functionality to 'benchmark' an authority nationally and against either its Region or Statistical Neighbours.

DfE, 2013b, p5

Each group of Statistical Neighbours consists of 11 LAs so each LA in England is compared against ten other LAs. The tool enables benchmarking of their progress against national performance measures relating to pupils' attainment and progress from Early Years to Key Stage 4. It will be referred to in this chapter when discussing the rationale, aims and context for the research and in Chapter 3 when setting out the criteria for the selection of research participants. However, it is acknowledged that although the DfE considers these LAs to be similar enough for benchmarking purposes, taking into account funding, social and economic factors, there are also differences between them. Whilst all are large in area and have a high proportion of their schools in rural settings, as Table 1.1 shows there is a quite a range in the number of primary phase schools. Although most of the LAs have 200 to 360 primary schools, there are two LAs with considerably less than this. From personal analysis, there are also differences in how the schools work together in partnerships in each LA. Some have

partnership arrangements in place to which all their schools subscribe and others are more fragmented. Equally, the extent of LA support and the capacity of the school improvement service are different in each LA.

Having acknowledged that differences exist, it is still seen as useful to use the LAs defined by the DfE as Statistical Neighbours to LA J as the source of the primary headteachers acting as research participants as they have a shared context at a general level.

1.2 Rationale

As stated above, the small number of headteachers in the primary phase in LA J in national system leader roles was a concern to the LA. As can be seen in Table 1.1, in comparison to its Statistical Neighbours (DfE, 2013b), having only one NLE in post placed it at the bottom of the group. LA J was also concerned about low pupil achievement as the county achieved below the national average of 75% Level 4+ in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2013 (DfE, 2013a). This placed it in eleventh position, and therefore lowest, in relation to its Statistical Neighbour LAs. To address this low pupil performance, LA J developed a revised School Improvement Strategy (LA J, 2013) which identified system leadership as a key driver to improving leadership capacity and therefore raising pupil achievement in the county. Previously, LA J had not seen facilitating the development of system leaders as part of its role as at the time this was led by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Following its closure, from January 2014 the National College for Teaching and Leadership¹ (NCTL, 2015c) has been given the responsibility for the promotion of system leadership with school leaders in England. It is therefore questionable whether LAs have a role to play (Chapman, 2015). This will be returned to in Chapter 2.

¹ Created from the merger of NCSL with the Teacher Training Agency when it was brought directly under the DfE.

| LA | Number of schools in primary phase | Director of Teaching School Alliance | NLE | LLE |
|----|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| A | 236 | 0 | 4 | 16 |
| B | 309 | 3 | 8 | 23 |
| C | 130 | 0 | 2 | 8 |
| D | 245 | 0 | 4 | 33 |
| E | 80 | 0 | 2 | 20 |
| F | 275 | 2 | 6 | 16 |
| G | 361 | 2 | 2 | 30 |
| H | 129 | 1 | 1 | 13 |
| I | 212 | 1 | 3 | 16 |
| J | 254 | 1 | 1 | 24 |
| K | 199 | 1 | 4 | 11 |

Table 1.1 Comparison of numbers of headteachers in the primary phase acting as directors of teaching school alliances, NLEs, and LLEs in LA J and its Statistical Neighbour LAs in August 2013. Source: DfE (2013c).

LA J's School Improvement Strategy (LA J, 2013) focused on learning from the systems and structures put in place by Statistical Neighbour LAs where system leadership was further developed, that is those with a greater number of NLEs and directors of teaching schools. These were visited by LA officers. I see the focus solely on systems and structures by LA J as one of the reasons why more headteachers were not moving into system leadership roles as the development of their leadership practices was not being supported by the LA. Alongside this, since July 2011, the LA had ceased to operate the School Improvement Partner (SIP) programme (DfE, 2011). From 2009 to 2011 this national programme had involved either accredited headteachers or LA officers making a termly visit to a school to challenge and support school leaders over school improvement. Its demise meant that there was no longer a school improvement professional allocated to each school in LA J. Instead, the focus of the

work of LA officers shifted in the main to schools causing concern to LA J. This meant primary phase headteachers in schools with good or better judgements in their most recent Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection and where standards were in-line or above the national average for the end of Key Stage 2 had little or no contact with the LA on a one-to-one basis.

From my personal analysis, I believe many of these headteachers felt isolated and unsure of the next steps to take to embrace the development of the self-improving school system. My hypothesis is that the problem being faced by headteachers in LA J on taking on a system leader role was therefore one of adaptive challenge.

An adaptive challenge is a problem for which solutions lie outside the current way of operating. We can distinguish technical problems, which are amenable to current expertise, from adaptive problems, which are not.

(Heifetz, 2003, p. 70)

The focus in LA J was on learning from the systems and structures in comparable LAs rather than considering the individual headteachers who were carrying out the system leader roles. Therefore I saw it as pertinent to focus my research on a specific aspect of system leadership in detail, the leadership qualities and practices needed by a headteacher in the primary phase to be an effective system leader, to complement the policy review and discussions that were already taking place within LA J.

1.3 Aims

The aim of this research is to develop further insight and understanding into the leadership qualities and practices that are essential to be an effective system leader in primary phase education in England. Whilst research has previously been carried out into the role of system leaders in this country, this has either been with a general focus across a wide range of primary and secondary contexts (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009; NCSL, 2011) or focused solely on one system leader role, again across primary and secondary contexts, such as that of the NLE (Hill and Matthews, 2010) or executive headteacher (Blackburn, 2012). Robinson (2012) considered the role of

system leader within the primary phase as it initially developed in the first decade of the twenty first century. This research acknowledges the very interesting insight Robinson (2012) provided into the views of headteachers as their role began to change. It also draws on 'The Review of the School Leadership Landscape' (Earley *et al*, 2012) commissioned by NCSL to summarise the views of headteachers, middle leaders and governors at a time of major change.

Through focusing on system leaders in the primary phase, this research seeks to enhance knowledge and understanding of their leadership qualities and practices that will add to the understanding developed in research in England in the last 15 years and significant international studies. The models derived from the research findings seek to inform understanding of the similarities and differences between the qualities and practices of a headteacher of one school and those of a system leader who is concerned with the outcomes for pupils in more than one school.

The selection criteria for the primary headteachers participating in the research, who all carried out this role in an LA considered by the DfE to be a Statistical Neighbour of LA J, are fully explained in Chapter 3. At the time of being interviewed, all the headteachers were involved in at least one system leadership role as either an NLE who was also the director of a teaching school alliance (TSA) or an executive headteacher, and in some cases they were undertaking both roles.

1.4 Research questions

This research explores the leadership qualities and practices needed by a headteacher in the primary phase to be an effective system leader. More specifically it asks two research questions:-

- What are the leadership qualities and practices needed by an executive headteacher to lead successfully a group of small primary schools?

- What are the leadership qualities and practices needed by a NLE and director of a teaching school alliance (TSA) to support successfully other schools?

1.5 Context

In considering the context in relation to the research questions, I will firstly provide an overview of influences on primary headship in England and then move on to the context of system leadership in England. I will conclude the chapter by summarising the specific situation in LA J in relation to system leadership. At both a national and LA level I will seek to show how the current situation relates to and has informed the focus of this research.

Successive studies focused on school leadership in the first 12 years of the twenty-first century (Earley *et al*, 2012; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007) have articulated the extent of change in England over this time and that this is still continuing.

In the evolving educational policy landscape, the challenges and complexity of school leadership, and headship in particular, continue to increase with a consequent intensification of work. The need to develop internal school capacity and effective partnerships with appropriate external support, appear essential for schools...

(Earley, 2013, p153)

One change for senior leaders in schools as they consider applying for headships is the requirement to have completed the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). This professional development opportunity was first offered to prospective headteachers in England in 1997. It became mandatory to have passed it in 2004 and then in April 2012 the government decided it was no longer a requirement in order to become a headteacher. Although many senior leaders have still undertaken this qualification since 2012, the removal of its mandatory status has meant that there is currently no certification required in England to become a headteacher at a time when the role is seen as challenging (Earley, 2013).

Another element of school leadership is the development of partnerships beyond the school. This is being promoted by the government, particularly through the formation of academy chains and multi-academy trusts (MATs) (Earley, 2013; Hill, 2010). A report from a seminar set up by NCSL in November 2012 to explore the views of a range of stakeholders on the progress towards a self-improving system in England highlights the potential challenges that are being faced.

The danger is that, as the system (that is, schools and leaders) itself replaces government and local authorities as the chief source of support, those who are not actively collaborating with others will be deprived of access to peer evaluation, challenge, CPD and other potential school improvement benefits. At the moment, on leadership development, for example, research by the College indicates that two-thirds of schools are leading their own, rather than collaborating with others, suggesting a lack of curiosity about what is happening in the rest of the system.

(NCSL, 2013, p. 5)

At the same time an accountability culture is in place that holds an individual school responsible for the achievement of its pupils. Discussion of the co-existence of collaboration alongside competition between schools will be returned to when considering the issues surrounding system leadership in Chapter 2.

System leadership is seen by some writers as a 'potentially ambiguous term as it has very different connotations according to context' (Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008, p. 13). This lack of an authoritative definition could be seen as linked to its origins emerging from a range of policies and initiatives many of which originated following the founding of NCSL in November 2000. As well as programmes which focused on developing the professional skills of school leaders, NCSL introduced initiatives that began to use the skills of headteachers beyond their own school. Alongside this informal roles operating at a local level such as leading networks and curriculum partnerships with nearby schools also evolved over this time. A list of consultant leadership roles compiled by Fidler and Atton (2004) includes various roles as external assessors, tutors, trainers and advisers. An attempt to summarise the

range of roles that has evolved from 2000 to 2015 is presented in Figure 1.1 organised under four headings which indicate in general terms the focus of the role.

| | |
|---|---|
| Training, assessment or guidance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessors for specific roles (E.g. advanced skills teachers, NPQH, initial teacher training.) • External advisers to governing bodies on headteacher's performance management • Tutors and trainers on national programmes (E.g. Leading from the Middle, NPQH) |
| Support and challenge for leadership across a range of schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCSL Consultant Leader (E.g. Primary Strategy, London Challenge) • Seconded LA associate adviser/consultant • School Improvement Partner • Local Leader in Education |
| Support and challenge for leadership and improving teaching and learning particularly in schools in challenging circumstances | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Leader in Education |
| Leadership of more than one school | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive Headteacher • Principal of a multi academy trust • Chief Executive of an academy chain |
| Strategic leadership of a partnership that includes other schools, universities and LAs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of a Teaching School Alliance |
| Inspection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ofsted inspector • Secondment to HMI |

Figure 1.1 Summary of the range of system leader roles from 2000 to 2015

The first formal system leader role involving primary headteachers was the Primary Leadership Programme which was launched through the National Strategies in 2003. This engaged serving headteachers in the role of Primary Strategy Consultant Leaders (PSQL) who would support another school that was considered vulnerable and facing difficulties. Previously, this consultant leader role may have been undertaken by a head on retirement, but as Earley and Weindling (2006) identify, increasingly a range of consultancy roles were being undertaken by serving heads. Another example is the consultant leaders that were a key element of the London Challenge when it was introduced in 2003 (Earley and Weindling, 2006). An important development in this

work was that the headteachers also involved excellent staff from their own schools in working with the schools identified as being in need of improvement. This could be seen as the forerunner to NLEs and National Support Schools (NSS).

Alongside the development of these system leadership roles, formal collaboration between schools was made possible through the 2002 Education Act. This introduced legislation that allowed the federation of schools under a single governing body. This was reinforced in the 2005 White Paper, 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All' which advocated the growth of federations and other partnerships so that 'our most successful leaders are used to best effect and are able to support our less successful schools' (DfES, 2005, p. 100) and introduced the role of NLEs. These were to be drawn from headteachers currently successfully leading schools in challenging situations. As well as supporting other schools, their role was seen as advising government on the direction of future education policy. I will consider the role of the NLE in detail later in this review of the national context for system leadership. This policy of the most successful school leaders working beyond their own school was reiterated in The Children's Plan (2007) and the National Challenge (2008) which followed the London Challenge (DfES, 2003). In the White Paper, The Importance of Teaching (DfE, 2010), this vision was extended to include the formation of teaching schools and TSAs. Led by an NLE, teaching schools would support vulnerable schools either from their own expertise or through brokering the support from other schools within their alliance.

I began this thesis with the broad definition offered by Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009) which is that a system leader is someone who takes on a leadership role to ensure the success of pupils in more than one school. I see the definition of the role of system leaders set out by NCSL as supporting and developing this as it refers specifically to the improvements that system leadership brings to all schools involved. These leaders,

...work within and beyond their individual organisations; sharing and harnessing the best resources that the system can offer to bring about

improvement in their own and other organisations; and influencing thinking, policy and practice so as to have a positive impact on the lives and life chances of all children and young people.

(Hill, 2011, p. 3)

This definition can be applied to a range of educational settings, so I would like to personalise it for the scope of this research which is focused on the primary phase of schooling. In this context, it clearly places system leadership as being led by practicing headteachers who work with the excellent staff in their own school, which continues to improve whilst at the same time they share their knowledge, skills and understanding with staff in other schools so that these schools also develop. This definition also shows leaders as drawing on the knowledge and understanding available in the wider system so that the best educational ideas support their schools. Lastly, it shows these leaders as feeding back their thinking into the wider system so that the whole system can learn from what they, in partnership with others, have put in place which is having a positive impact on the education and future life chances of pupils. This suggests an inclusive approach to system leadership (Earley *et al*, 2012) based on collaboration and mutual trust. They articulate how they are working across schools as leaders of teams, not as 'hero' heads, to enhance learning and achievement for all children and have the vision of this being part of a whole system transformation as envisaged by Fullan (2005).

Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009) identify five key system leadership roles which I see as a helpful beginning context in which to consider the leadership qualities and practices of the system leaders that took part in this research. These are:

- *Leadership that sustains improvements in very challenging contexts and then shares its experience, knowledge and practice with other schools;*
- *Leadership of collaborative innovations in curriculum and pedagogy;*
- *Leadership that brokers and shapes radically new networks of extended services and student welfare across local communities;*
- *Leadership of improvement across a formal partnership of schools;*

- *Leadership that acts as an external agent of change in other schools that face significant difficulties.*

(Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009, pp. 2-3)

In their roles as executive headteachers, NLEs and directors of TSAs, the participants in this research have carried out most of the above roles. A further one which would not have been in evidence when Higham and his colleagues carried out their research is that of director of a TSA. I will outline this role and how it differs from that of an NLE later in this section as part of considering the system leadership roles undertaken by the headteachers in this research.

The table in Appendix 1 summarises the numbers of system leaders involved in a range of roles in relation to a timeline. What cannot be deduced from the figures is the overlap that occurs through a headteacher taking on more than one role. A guide to the overall involvement of headteachers in system leader roles and how this has developed in recent times can be inferred from significant pieces of research in this area. Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009) reported from their attempt to map the extent of system leader activity in 2008 that between 5-6% of school leaders were involved in some form of system leadership. This was followed by research by Illuminas on behalf of NCSL during 2009-10 (Hill, 2011) which carried out phone interviews with 1092 headteachers. This found that 73% of heads had or were currently carrying out a system leader role, 40% had two or more roles and 25% were or had been an NLE, LLE, SIP or executive headteacher. The comparison between primary and secondary phases showed 56% of primary heads were engaged in at least one system leadership role, compared to 77% of secondary heads. The roles that were included in this definition were 'headteacher mentor, LLE, NLE, SIP (School Improvement Partner), executive head, consultant head, federation head or chair of a formal development group, professional partner' (NCSL, 2011, p. 4). Looking at the most recent data from 2014, there were still more system leaders from the secondary phase with the proportion of NLEs and directors of teaching schools in the secondary phase being almost double that in the primary phase. This disparity between the number of primary and secondary headteachers gaining positions of influence has

been echoed by Coldron *et al* (2014) in their research into ‘well-positioned’ headteachers in three LAs. More recently, in focusing directly on the positions of primary and secondary schools, they have concluded that,

The greater size and extra funding means that secondary teachers and head teachers have more opportunity than their primary colleagues to accrue social and cultural capital outside the school. The presence of a relatively large senior management team means that a secondary head teacher can delegate responsibility more easily.

(Coldron *et al*, 2015, p. 676)

As Hill (2010) highlights, whilst the creation of NLEs has been a positive development, ‘the scale of what has been supported and funded is small in relation to the total number of primary schools.’ (Hill, 2010, p. 35). There is a much higher proportion of LLEs in the primary phase which could be seen as a lesser role requiring less commitment and time away from their own school by headteachers. Focusing in this research on the qualities and practices of primary headteachers who are undertaking the higher profile role of NLEs, directors of TSAs and executive headteachers hopefully will support further our understanding of these attributes.

The number of headteachers undertaking the role of executive headteacher has expanded since it was made possible through the establishment of federations in the 2002 Education Act. The title executive headteacher is described by NCSL (2010, p. 3) as ‘any headteacher role that has some kind of lead managerial responsibility for more than one school.’ A survey by NCSL (2010) showed that almost all headteachers were the substantive head of at least one of the schools they were leading and in almost two-thirds of cases they moved from a temporary position of leadership in the second school to being the substantive head of this school as well. It is interesting to note that the steep increase in the number of headteachers undertaking the latter role between 2004 and 2010 and how in 2011 this then declined (see Appendix 1). One possible explanation is that this reflects the potential temporary nature of the role whereby an

executive headteacher could support a school through a leadership crisis and the school would then go on to appoint their own headteacher.

Unsurprisingly, given one of the reasons for executive headteachers coming into existence is the inability of some small schools to recruit a headteacher (Hartle and Thomas, 2003), there are often higher numbers in shire authorities which have large rural areas (Howson, 2012).

The characteristics of system leaders as an overall group will be considered later, in Chapter 2, however it is interesting to note here the findings of two studies that focused specifically on executive headteachers. Firstly, NCSL (2010) reported:

Executive headteachers identify eight skills that are needed to undertake their role:

- 1. Operating at a more strategic level*
- 2. Getting the balance between standardisation and respecting difference*
- 3. Being even-handed between schools*
- 4. Staying focused on performance*
- 5. Developing and practising interpersonal skills*
- 6. Working closely with governors*
- 7. Communicating effectively*
- 8. Developing personal resilience*

(NCSL, 2010, p. 4)

In a smaller study conducted across six federations in different LAs, Blackburn (2012) built on previous research by Barnes (2006). He echoed the need for executive headteachers to have effective communication and strong interpersonal skills, and he also highlighted the importance of developing others, a high level of organisational skills, vision, belief and enthusiasm. The leadership qualities and practices cited in

both studies have strong links to the findings of larger scale research that will be discussed in Chapter 2.

The other system leader roles undertaken by the primary headteachers in this research are that of NLE and director of a TSA. The role of NLE is seen by many as growing out of the role of Consultant Leader which was set up as part of the London Challenge (Earley and Weindling, 2006). Following the White Paper (2005) Higher Standards: Better Schools for All, it was set in motion through a letter to all heads in England inviting those who met the criteria to apply. The letter specifically mentioned needing leaders of schools judged by Ofsted as outstanding for leadership and management and whose school had the capacity and skills to lead another school out of the Ofsted category of special measures. The focus from the outset was therefore on the skills and knowledge within the school across staff rather than solely on the headteacher as they 'moored their outstanding school alongside one that was marooned or sinking, and imported their systems, skills and expert practitioners to get it moving in the right direction' (Hill and Matthews, 2010, p. 15).

As referred to earlier, it is clear that a high number of headteachers involved in system leadership carry out more than one role. Many NLEs also carry out the role of executive headteacher as can be seen from Hill and Matthews (2008) reporting that over a third of 200 NLEs in 2008 were also in this role. The position of executive headteacher may have begun on a temporary basis where it originated from supporting a school in difficulty, although this often then became permanent as the NLE and their National Support School (NSS) developed a close relationship with the supported school. However, NLEs were also appointed who were already executive headteachers of two or more schools.

In the second of two reports into the development of NLEs across primary and secondary sectors (Hill and Matthews, 2010), the conditions of the success of NLEs are

summarised in terms of four Cs: commissioning, capacity, capability and commitment. Under the last heading the authors outline what they see as an NLE's essential attributes and qualities: courage and commitment...tenacity...resilience...vision...self-belief and confidence, emotional intelligence...a sense of urgency... and humility (Hill and Matthews, 2010, pp. 69-70). These findings have been complemented by those of the Ofsted (2010) survey into NSSs which visited 24 primary and secondary NSSs and 20 schools that were working in partnership with them. They are also echoed in two research reports by Rea *et al* (2011) and Rea *et al* (2013) into the role of school to school support and system leadership in closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged groups of pupils. Although this research focused on an aspect of the headteacher's role which hadn't been part of their recruitment as a NLE, it found that a similar range of behaviours and skills were utilised as they led on this area successfully in their own schools.

In all four studies, a key feature of the success of NLEs was seen as their strong leadership of teaching and learning alongside the development of leadership across all staff. As with the NCSL (2010) report on executive headteachers, they found the focus on the professional development of teaching and support staff to undertake leadership roles was instrumental in their success. This has since been echoed in research into teaching schools, which cites pedagogy, professional development and leadership as the essentials for a self-improving school system (Stoll, 2015).

Although many NLEs are also directors of TSAs, the latter role is different in quite a few respects. The criteria for a school to lead a TSA begins in the same way as for a NLE in that it has a designation by Ofsted of 'outstanding' for overall effectiveness, leadership and management and teaching and learning. Following this there is then an extensive list of requirements such as the school having been part of long term partnerships with a group of other schools, made a significant contribution to initial teaching training (ITT) and provided professional development for teaching staff beyond their own school (NCTL, 2015a). This reflects the vision for the establishment of a network of

teaching schools which was set out in the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). Their role, along with their strategic partners who are part of the alliance is to ‘...demonstrate and disseminate best practice through their role in initial teacher training, the professional development of teachers, leadership development, succession planning, school-to-school support, and research and development...’ (Matthews and Berwick, 2013). Whereas NLEs will often work with one or two schools in challenging circumstances and draw on the expertise of their staff in the NSS as part of this, leading the TSA requires the director to be the strategic lead of a partnership between the teaching school and partners that will include other schools and often universities and LAs. They ‘...are expected to take increasing responsibility for managing the school system’ (Matthews and Berwick, 2013) using the resources from within the TSA to meet local needs across all the aspects of the teaching school’s role outlined above. From their two year study into teaching schools, Gu *et al* (2015) conclude in their final report that;

The skills needed to be an effective leader of a teaching school alliance are perceived as being different to those required by other system leadership roles. In working as an executive headteacher for example, it was felt that there were clear management and executive levers that can be used with tight accountability. However, in contrast, leading a TSA requires more capacity for influencing, engaging, building relationships, working in partnership, and potentially facilitating people to take more risks.

(Gu *et al*, 2015, p178)

Moving to the local context, LA J’s School Improvement Strategy for 2013-15 (LA J, 2013) highlights partnership between schools when it outlines the role of schools that are ‘great and unstoppable’ in supporting the improvement of teaching in other schools. However, personal analysis suggests that there are still insufficient numbers of headteachers in LA J willing to embrace this publicly through taking on a system leadership role. In August 2013, 19% of primary headteachers in LA J were engaged in one or more system leadership roles. Given the statistics from national research referred to earlier in this chapter, this would suggest that the involvement in system leadership by primary headteachers in LA J in 2013 was significantly below that found

nationally three years previously. This has implications for school improvement capacity in LA J, which still relies on LA officers to act in the guise of system leaders. This can be seen in the fact that in 2013-14, 15 LA officers acted as Challenge Partners (a role similar to that previously undertaken by School Improvement Partners) alongside 22 primary headteachers recruited to the role. This information was influential in informing my thinking as I read widely about the development of system leaders and led to the decision to focus on the leadership qualities and practices needed by primary headteachers to be effective system leaders.

Early in the research process, as is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 when focusing on the identification of participants, it was evident that there were very few system leaders in the primary phase in LA J who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. As referred to earlier in this chapter and explained in more detail in Chapter 3, the participants were therefore identified from LAs seen as Statistical Neighbours to LA J (DfE 2013b). However, two of the three primary headteachers acting as system leaders in LA J who did meet the criteria (as described on page 58) were contacted as part of the research process. Both were executive headteachers of two schools and also registered as LLEs. At this point, I would like to draw on their contributions as part of the context for the research. In Chapter 3 the telephone interviews that were carried out with them will be placed within the wider methodology of the study. The first executive headteacher, prior to taking on the leadership of the second school, had been teaching three days a week. She identified in that position, 'You are a manager. You don't have time to lead.' In taking on the second school she moved away from having a regular teaching commitment and recognised how her role changed significantly.

Once in a leadership role it was trusting staff to do things I'd done. Like when taking on a new initiative; it needed deeper conversations about teaching and learning with staff. I know them better now as teachers. We discuss pedagogy – what do we believe in? How will this look in the classroom? So I am leading teaching and learning from a more strategic perspective. That's a big difference.

Headteacher, LA J (2013)

In the interview carried out with the second executive headteacher, he talked about his view that the LLE role required him to support leaders in other schools develop their own successful strategies through coaching.

It'd be very tempting to just say how you do it, because you know it has worked, but that doesn't mean it will work somewhere else. Everyone's situation is different and it is really important to understand that and work with where the head is coming from.

Headteacher, LA J (2013)

This demonstrates how both these executive headteachers had recognised the adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 2003) and had made the changes that were needed to the way they worked to ensure the schools they worked with as system leaders (whether as an executive head or LLE) continued to improve. However, my professional view, from working with other primary headteachers in LA J who undertook these system leader roles, was that this clear understanding was not replicated by all colleagues.

As part of the initial preparation for the research, as explained in more detail in Chapter 3, I invited a group of eight executive headteachers working in the primary phase in LA J to be part of a focus group discussion. I had asked these system leaders if they would come together to talk with me and each other about their role as executive headteachers. Many of their contributions reinforced my personal view that a number of executive headteachers in LA J were using leadership practices tacitly and were not able to articulate them explicitly. This view of school leaders not necessarily being able to respond to the developments in school leadership has been highlighted in research commissioned by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) (Cooke, Bush and Malek, 2015). Some school leaders were seen as lacking confidence and concerned that they didn't possess the skills that were now required. However, this was balanced by others seeing opportunities and exciting challenges in the new leadership landscape.

The interviews with the two executive headteachers and the focus group discussion indicated the timing of this research as opportune. In engaging in an in-depth study of system leadership in the primary phase, I have already been able to have an input into strategic discussions with colleagues and the research focus was incorporated into the leadership professional development (PD) planned in LA J for the academic year 2013 – 14. The conclusions and recommendations from this research will continue to inform and support LA J's School Improvement Strategy (LA J, 2013). This will include informing policy and practice on headteacher development locally to ensure effective system leadership develops and thrives in LA J. It also aims to contribute to thinking at a national level into the qualities and practices of system leaders which appears to be an area on which few studies have focused (Greany, 2015).

1.6 Overview of the thesis

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature both into system leadership and into the theoretical framework for considering leadership qualities and practices in a primary school setting. In Chapter 3 the research design and methodology of the research is examined followed by a presentation and analysis of the findings in Chapter 4. Finally, in Chapters 5 and 6, the findings from the research are discussed along with the conclusions and recommendations for the future development and support of system leaders within LA J and implications that pertain at a national level.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The literature review begins by considering what constitutes effective leadership in relation to headteachers and within an educational context. It draws on views from significant research, carried out mainly in England over the last 15 years, and places this within the accountability framework currently operated through the DfE in England. Whilst it is recognised that the leadership role of the headteacher can be different in other education systems, significant international research is also drawn on, for instance when considering conceptual models of school leadership.

Having analysed research and the influence of government policy on what is considered as effective school leadership, the specific focus from the research questions of the leadership qualities and practices of headteachers is explored. This brings together ideas from research on how these characteristics may be defined and discussed.

The review then goes on to consider the complex policy context in England in which primary headteachers acting as system leaders enact their roles. It synthesises views from researchers to draw out both the positive aspects and the tensions that exist in the development of system leadership in general in England and specifically in the primary phase.

The literature review concludes by summarising the issues, dilemmas and questions yet to be resolved and leads into the methodology for this research in Chapter 3.

2.2 Overview of effective school leadership in the primary phase within the policy context in England

Research focused on leadership in an educational context has been a growth area for the last three decades, however many agree that there is no general theory (Lingard *et al*, 2003) and also that competing and contradictory models exist which can complicate discussions (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Harris, 2003). So many perspectives have been offered that the notion of 'adjectival' leadership (Leithwood *et al*, 2006) has been coined, highlighting the range of models that are available when discussing this area.

Some researchers see leadership as being separate from management in the context of education (Fidler and Atton, 2004). This reflects the view that whilst there are important links between the two, management is seen by some as reflecting the duties and responsibilities involved in a role, whilst leadership is based on influencing the thoughts and deeds of others.

Thus, leaders may be managers and managers may be leaders, but whereas management has a legal contractual basis, the basis of leadership is cognitive and grounded in the mental attributions of workplace peers...

(Gronn, 2003, p. 6)

This view sees management as centred on the implementation of policy whereas leadership involves influence, setting direction, policy formation, and leading change (Bush, 2011; Leithwood *et al*, 2006).

More recently, an integrated model of leadership (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009) has been proposed which reunites management and leadership. This has been echoed in the stance taken by (Leithwood, 2012) in the 'Ontario Leadership Framework'; one of the significant international studies that will be drawn on within this review.

A recent review of school leadership (Earley *et al*, 2012) commissioned by the NCSL set out the situation in England just over a decade into the twenty-first century. The report begins with the sentence:

The English education system is experiencing an era of unprecedented change, at least as significant as the move to Local Management of Schools after 1988.
(Earley *et al* 2012, p5)

The prevailing way of working since 1988 in England can be characterised by schools mainly working in isolation from each other. The introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) in the 1988 Education Reform Act, the inspection process, the establishment of Ofsted in 1993 and the publication of performance tables based on end of Key Stage 2 results in 1999 all contributed to a culture of competition between schools (Whitty, 2008).

Although these all remain in place, in this century greater collaboration between schools has also been promoted by government. This can be seen in initiatives such as the Primary Learning Networks and Excellence in Cities, as well as others led by NCSL such as Networked Learning Communities along with those promoted by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) (Allen, 2007). This led Hopkins *et al* (2009), in an abbreviated version of the review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of schools leadership in England, to state that ‘nearly all schools in England are involved in some form of collaborative activity or networking’ (Hopkins, Higham and Ahtaridou, 2009, p. 3).

These two drivers of school improvement, competition and collaboration, have therefore co-existed in recent years in England as national policy has sought to strike a balance between the two that it is perceived will bring the greatest benefits to system reform (Pont and Hopkins, 2008). It has resulted in schools becoming more connected as ‘competition remains, but now co-exists with collaboration and the creation of formal alliances through federations and chains’ (Matthews *et al*, 2011). The term ‘co-competition’ (Earley, 2013, p158) has also been coined to describe this co-existence.

However, some writers disagree that a balance has been found and rather see government policies in the twenty-first century as creating a 'volatile cocktail of competition and collaboration within the system.' (Chapman, 2013, p. 347). This view is linked to the external accountability measures regarding pupil outcomes that are in place in England. In the primary phase of schooling these relate to pupils' attainment and progress in English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. Chapman (2013) argues that publicly measuring the success of schools and school leaders in this way pushes the system towards competition. Similarly, Greany (2014) argues that the inherent policy incoherence through the promotion of both competition and collaboration within government policy is hindering improvements to the education system in England.

If the overall effectiveness of schools is increasingly being seen by researchers as dependent on effective school leadership (Earley, 2013; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008) and the current view in England on whether a headteacher is an effective leader is based to a large extent on the influence (direct or indirect) they have on improving outcomes for pupils (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008; Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009) then it could be argued that the development of system leaders who are concerned with improving pupil outcomes beyond one school is purely extending the definition of an effective headteacher. However, research into specific system leadership roles, such as executive headship (Hill, 2010), have identified differences as well as similarities in the skills required to lead more than one school. These will be returned to later in this chapter when considering system leadership roles in the policy context in England in more detail.

The vision set out in the government's White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching' (DfE, 2010) could be seen as setting out the agenda for schools to be in charge of their own improvement, rather than it being led by central government or local authorities. A similar perspective was previously suggested by Hopkins (2007) in his capacity as an adviser to the previous Blair government. He argued that a move was needed from a centrally prescribed improvement agenda to schools leading reform (Figure 2.1) if the

education system in England was to continue its upward trajectory in improving pupil outcomes. Despite this emphasis on autonomy, Glatter (2012) reports that schools in England feel increasingly constrained by government requirements. This could be seen as implying that the high level of

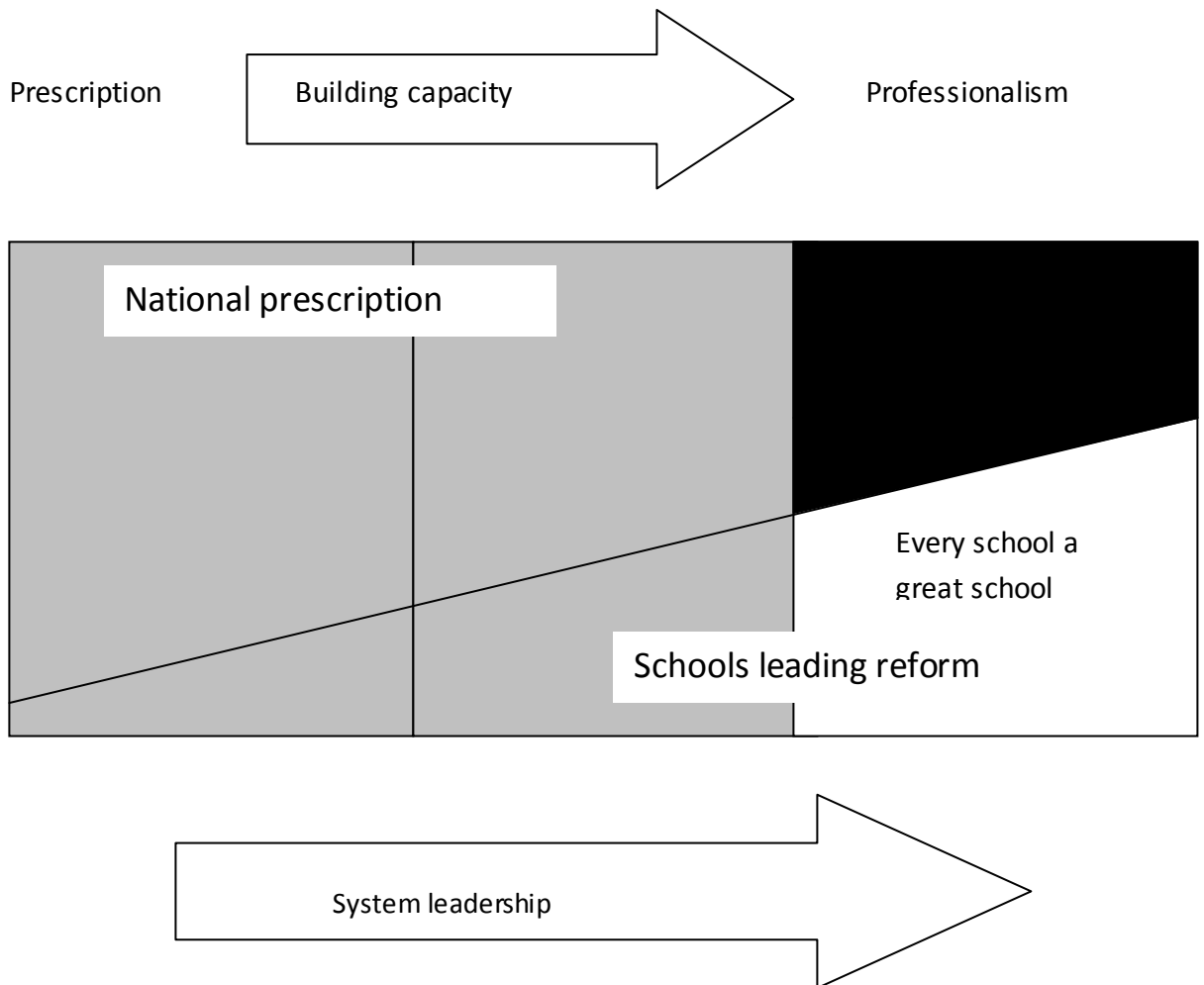


Figure 2.1: Towards sustainable system-wide reform (Hopkins, 2007, p169)

accountability put in place by government, which is focused on pupil outcomes, is potentially limiting schools in taking the initiative to lead reform in education as the risks involved are too high.

In contrast, the impact of the Ontario Education Strategy (which was originally influenced by the education reforms introduced by the Labour government in England in 1997) has been an increase in attainment by pupils alongside school leaders being

part of a 'highly sophisticated, forward-thinking leadership development programme informed by the latest academic research' (Edge *et al*, 2013, p. 5). The latter is embodied in the 'Ontario Leadership Framework' (Leithwood, 2012). This is seen as a practical tool that supports the recruitment of aspiring leaders, enables existing leaders to reflect on their strengths and areas that could potentially be improved. It is also a basis from which external sources can assess the quality of leadership in schools and provide feedback to senior leaders. This will be returned to as a resource to support the exploration of what is meant by the leadership qualities and practices of effective system leaders.

I will now consider specific theoretical models of school leadership through drawing on significant research from the last 15 years into highly effective leadership in primary and secondary schools carried out in England alongside reference to significant international research.

Over the last 35 years, two dominant conceptual models of educational leadership that have been used to describe how school leaders influence the quality of teaching are those of transformational (Leithwood *et al*, 2006) and instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2003). Transformational leadership is seen as being manifested through such practices as having a vision, setting goals and direction, demonstrating high expectations and developing a school's culture (Leithwood, 1994). Instructional leadership is seen as more concerned with 'coordinating, controlling, supervising, and developing curriculum and instruction in the school' (Hallinger, 2003, p. 331).

More recently, the models of transformational and instructional leadership have been combined in the concept of learning-centred leadership (Southworth, 2004). Although Leithwood (2006) initially argued that learning-centred and instructional leadership were not specific theories of leadership as they did not have conceptual coherence and were not backed by empirical evidence, in later research he amended this view (Day *et al*, 2010).

Learning-centred leadership is regarded by many researchers as summarising the key purpose of school leadership (Day, 2007; Pont, Nusche and Hopkins, 2008). Within this concept, although the headteacher is seen as central to the success of a school, this view of leadership reaches beyond an individual leader:

It is about learning – pupil, adult (teachers, staff and governors), organisational learning and leadership networks – and teaching. The notion of learning-centred leadership has developed from both transformational and instructional leadership.

(Earley and Weindling, 2004, p. 14)

However, not all research into learning and leadership is aligned. In comparing research into school leadership by OECD (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008) with that of the Carpe Vitam Leadership for Learning Project (LfL) (Frost and Swaffield, 2008), Gronn (2009) highlights what he sees as ‘two quite dramatically different sets of international perspectives on school leadership’ (Gronn, 2009, p.311). The OECD he summarises as focused on uniting policy agendas around school autonomy, distributed leadership and system leadership, whilst Carpe Vitam is seen as ‘an on the ground attempt to construct an international practitioner based project’ (Gronn, 2009, p311). Researchers in the international Carpe Vitam LfL project that involved seven countries (Australia, Austria, Denmark, Greece, Norway, United Kingdom and USA) set out a key purpose of their research as being to ‘meet the challenge of a performativity culture by examining school leadership and its relationship to learning across different cultures and national systems’ (Frost and Swaffield, 2008, p. 101). They were seeking not only to debate the link between leadership and learning, but challenging the school effectiveness tradition through the outcome of their research project being seen in the set of principles, strategies and practical tools that evolved rather than equated to measures of pupil attainment (MacBeath and Dempster, 2008).

In seeking to develop further understanding of the relationship between leadership and learning the Carpe Vitam LfL Project was also hoping to develop more effective strategies for schools to promote learning-centred leadership.

Although some researchers see learning-centred leadership as being synonymous with instructional leadership alone (Bush, 2011), the view of it containing both conceptual

models has been reinforced by researchers carrying out a large scale empirical study on successful school leadership (Day *et al*, 2010). Originally in their ‘seven strong claims’ developed from their literature review carried out prior to the research they saw transformational leadership as the key (Leithwood *et al*, 2006), but the study showed:

That successful heads draw equally on elements of both instructional and transformational leadership. They work intuitively and from experience, tailoring their leadership strategies to their particular school context. Their ability to respond to their context and to recognise, acknowledge, understand and attend to the needs and motivations of others defines their level of success.

(Day *et al*, 2010, p. 8)

This view was confirmed in a recent review of international literature on successful school leadership which ‘concluded that the two forms of leadership are not mutually exclusive’ (Day and Sammons, 2013, p. 2). However, where researchers in the Carpe Vitam LfL project differ is in their view of ‘leadership as an activity rather than the functions of particular leadership roles or positions of status’ (Frost and Swaffield, 2008, p 113). Whilst I see this view of leadership being distributed across a school through how people act as helpful, nevertheless in England there are particular responsibilities which reside with the headteacher and therefore make consideration of this particular leadership role of interest. This is extended in this research to focus on the qualities and practices of primary headteachers when undertaking particular system leadership roles as this is an emerging area which is yet to be fully explored.

The methodology adopted in the Carpe Vitam research, which included the deployment of critical friends to work alongside schools (Swaffield, 2008), supports their view that LfL is developed through participation. However this approach, as the research team acknowledge (Holden, 2008), is resource intensive. Also, the schools participating in the research are seen as coming from a particular demographic group that had a readiness for international exchange and entering into a dialogue about the way leadership and learning are viewed in their schools (Holden, 2008).

I would like to conclude this section of the review by considering two research studies by Southworth (2004) and Day *et al* (2010). These can be seen as falling within the school improvement tradition in England (Gronn, 2009). They both focused on developing greater understanding of effective school leadership through researching the leadership of headteachers. As such they are removed from the approach taken by the Carpe Vitam project, but they do represent an approach to which this research is more closely aligned.

These two studies are seen as significant examples of research focused on school leadership by headteachers in England. Southworth's (2004) study is significant as it was the first to introduce the notion of learning-centred leadership. It was also the first to focus explicitly on the specific context in which headteachers enact their leadership role by considering the size of their school. As a seminal work, his study is often referred to in the field of research into school leadership in England (Earley, 2013).

Likewise, the '10 Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership' by Day *et al* (2010), is seen as significant. These have evolved from a group of studies including one carried out on behalf of the DfE (Day *et al*, 2009) into 'The Impact of School Leadership on Pupil Outcomes'; the 'International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP) (Leithwood and Day, 2007) which was conducted in 63 schools across eight countries and Day's (2007) study into ten successful, experienced headteachers from the primary and secondary phases in England. The latter were all in urban schools in challenging circumstances and in this study he found that 'the headteachers sustained their success by the application of a combination of essential leadership values, qualities and skills...' (Day, 2007, p. 59). This was broadened in the '10 Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership' (Day *et al*, 2010) to take in the learning-centred leadership stance that:

...successful heads improve pupil outcomes through who they are – their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences – as well as what they do in

terms of the strategies they select and the ways in which they adapt their leadership practices to their unique context.

(Day *et al*, 2010, p. 2)

The references in these two studies to leadership qualities and practices will be set alongside the findings from the Mckinsey and Co international review of school leadership (Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010) and the integrated model of the 'Ontario Leadership Framework' (Leithwood, 2012). They will then be used as a point of reference when considering the leadership qualities and practices of system leaders in the primary phase interviewed for this research.

2.3 Exploring the leadership qualities and practices of headteachers

From my reading of key research into school leadership from the twenty-first century, I have found the ways of describing leadership qualities and practices are many and varied so prior to focusing on these I will place them within the wider context of other terms that are commonly used. Although I recognise that the way I am suggesting organising the terms is not in any way definitive, I hope it will support understanding of how I am interpreting these aspects in the context of this research.

The term characteristics is the word often used as an overarching description of this area (Hay Management Consultants, 2000);PWC, 2007) under which further terms are used to discuss it more specifically. Based on my reading, I have identified leadership qualities and practices as two of these more specific words and aligned them to other similar terms.

- Characteristics
 - Practices, behaviours and actions
 - Qualities, dispositions, attributes and values
 - Competencies, skills, knowledge and understanding

The separation of 'practices' from 'competencies' reflects Leithwood's (2012) view that the latter links to the quality with which a person does a job. He explains that in the original 'Ontario Leadership Framework' (OLF) the concept of competencies was

identified by skills, knowledge and attitudes. On the other hand he sees a 'practice' as 'a bundle of activities exercised by a person or group of persons which reflect the particular circumstances in which they find themselves and with some shared outcome(s) in mind' (Leithwood, 2012, p 5). This definition is helpful in separating 'practice' from the approaches, strategies, processes and perspectives which may support the activities.

'Qualities' are seen as linked to a term commonly used in early leadership research, that of personal 'traits'. In this context, the focus on these was part of the view that schools needed charismatic leaders who displayed certain attributes and dispositions (Bush, 2011). This view of focusing on leaders rather than leadership was questioned by Hallinger and Heck (1996) in their review of leadership research from 1980 to 1995. However, the qualities demonstrated by effective school leaders as part of their role have remained part of leadership theory and are part of models such as the OLF within the 'personal leadership resources' identified as critical for leaders to draw on (Leithwood, 2012, p 44).

Whilst this linkage of terms is helpful in coming to definitions of practices and qualities, to ensure clarity within this research, the following from the 'The Concise Oxford Dictionary' (ninth edition, 1996) will be used:

Quality...3 a distinctive attribute or faculty; a characteristic trait.

(1996, p. 1119)

Practice...1 habitual action or performance.

(1996, p. 1072)

The qualities and practices of school leaders are often referred to together in research as being key to effective leadership. However, when considering the two aspects, there has been an emphasis in some research studies on leadership practices. These have been highlighted as being more influential and having 'a greater impact on pupil performance than school structures or leadership models' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007, p. 1). They are also seen as being a visible outcome of a leader's internal state as 'what leaders do depends on what they think and feel' (Leithwood *et al*, 2006) and

therefore there is a 'personal component that is shaped by the leadership narrative and is part of one's individual identity' (Crawford, 2009, p. 101).

The emphasis on leadership practices can be seen in the summary in Table 2.1. This has been constructed by beginning with the conceptual leadership model of learning-centred leadership and, as discussed previously, splitting this to show transformational and instructional leadership as its major constituent parts. The leadership qualities and practices of effective headteachers as described by Southworth (2004), and Day *et al* (2010) are then summarised in the appropriate boxes. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, these are seen as significant studies. These are followed by a summary of the practices and personal leadership resources identified in the OLF (Leithwood, 2012) which has been instrumental in the success of the 'Ontario Leadership Strategy' (OES) (Edge *et al*, 2013). Lastly, the right-hand column summarises the practices and beliefs, attitudes and personal attributes listed in the international review of leadership carried out by McKinsey and Co and funded by the NCSL (Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010) As can be seen, their review (which drew on studies from strongly performing education systems worldwide, including England) confirmed many of the leadership qualities and practices identified as important in the two research studies and the OLF. The practices centred on the key areas of setting vision and direction, developing staff and putting effective management systems in place. These draw on Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) four core leadership practices and are generally seen as being significant in whatever school context the leadership is taking place as confirmed in research by Matthews *et al* (2014) into outstanding primary leadership in England. It is the way that the leadership practices are applied that is seen as being adapted to the context rather than the practices themselves (Day and Sammons, 2013). It is not surprising therefore to find they are also present in models relating to the leadership of system leaders including forming the basis for the first evaluation of teaching schools commissioned by the DfE (Gu *et al*, 2014).

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Learning-centred Leadership | Transformational Leadership | | | | |
| | | Southworth (2004) | Day <i>et al</i> (2010) | Leithwood (2012) | Barber <i>et al</i> (2010) |
| | Qualities | Approachable Reflective Determined Committed | Build trust | Perceiving and managing emotions Acting emotionally appropriately Optimism Self-efficacy Resilience | Self aware Resilient Persistent Optimistic Enthusiastic Understand context and people |
| | Practices | Continuing Professional learner Modelling Team building Develop others | Define values and vision to raise expectations Reshape conditions for teaching and learning Restructure the organisation Redesign leadership roles and responsibilities Set directions Build internal collaboration Build relationships outside school | Building a shared vision Identifying shared short-term goals Creating high performance expectations Communicating the vision and goals Providing support for staff Stimulating the professional capacities of staff Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents Build collaborative cultures and distribute leadership Structure the organisation to facilitate collaboration Connect the school to its wider environment Buffer staff from distractions to their work | Build a shared vision and purpose Role modelling Set high expectations for performance Develop people Establish effective teams and distribute leadership Protect teachers from issues that distract them from their work Connect to parents and community Recognise and reward achievement |
| | Instructional Leadership | | | | |
| | Qualities | | | Problem-solving | Willing to take risks and challenge accepted beliefs and behaviours |
| | Practices | Monitoring Ongoing professional dialogue linked to pedagogy and curriculum | Enhance teacher quality Enhance the quality of teaching and learning Enrich the curriculum | Staff the instructional programme Provide instructional support Monitor student learning and school improvement progress Build staff's internal accountability Meet the demands for external accountability | Monitor performance Design and manage teaching and learning programme Establish school routines and norms for behaviour |

Table 2.1: Summary of leadership qualities and practices of effective headteachers

One of the first representations of what the authors term the 'key capabilities' of system leaders by Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009) (Appendix 3) draws on these four core leadership practices. It enables the reader to visualise at a strategic level how a system leader begins from core practices in place in their own school which then extends to further schools and influencing the wider education system. It is interesting that this model is based solely on capabilities. Matthews *et al* (2014) research into outstanding primary school leadership in England reinforces the view that system leaders have the specific skills set out in Appendix 3, however it also stresses the qualities they possess:

All are driven by wanting to make a difference to the lives of as many children as possible. The bedrock is moral purpose. ... They are driven by values and a clear and simple vision; they are courageous, tenacious and pre-disposed to action in the context of measured growth.

(Matthews *et al*, 2014, p60)

Hopkins has stated elsewhere that he is 'not a great believer in attributional or heroic theories of leadership' (Hopkins, 2007, p. 165) and this may have influenced the focus on behaviours and skills. I view the arguments put forward, in research mentioned earlier in this chapter, for the importance of leadership qualities alongside that of practices as convincing and would therefore see the exclusion of them from this research as an omission.

Another model, seeking to develop into a national standard for system leaders in terms of knowledge, professional qualities and actions was devised from contributions by system leaders at a session funded by NCSL and the Innovations Unit of the DfES in 2005 (Appendix 2). Although the list of 32 statements that was produced seek to outline what system leaders should know about and how they should behave and act, I see many of them as very broad. I would argue that a framework containing more specific statements linked to actual practices of system leaders is needed.

More recently, Hill's survey (2011), on behalf of NCSL, found a commonality between the views of professional partners, LLEs, NLEs and executive headteachers on the most

important skills for system leaders. They all saw interpersonal skills in conjunction with communication and presentation as highly important and put them alongside the experience of being a headteacher, and strategic thinking ability as the highest ranked skills. However, there are several interpretations of what is meant by interpersonal skills. In the context of a discussion of the qualities needed by system leaders, Collarbone and West-Burnham (2008) suggest the need for:

...leaders who are more than effective communicators but are rather able to communicate a compelling sense of the future, secure engagement and commitment to that vision and create shared understanding that informs practice. This requires much more than a set of technical skills – rather a set of personal qualities. In this context, qualities are defined as authentic and deeply ingrained approaches to human engagement.

(Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008, p.87)

This view is reiterated in research into the skills and qualities needed by one of the first system leader roles, that of consultant leader (Earley and Weindling, 2006), which places it in the context of the importance of developing trusting relationships. To turn this around, relational trust is considered to be founded on beliefs and behaviours, being made up of respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

Taking into account the aforementioned research into the qualities of headteachers from studies of effective school leadership (Table 2.1) and that into consultant leaders (Earley and Weindling, 2006) along with those by NCSL (2010) into executive headship and by Hill and Matthews (2010) into NLEs, the following essential leadership qualities reoccur. As the terms used in these studies do vary slightly, a definition has been created for each one that reflects views from across the studies.

- Moral purpose To carry out actions that have the goal of improving the situation for others rather than yourself
- Integrity To follow through from what you say into action or ‘walking the

talk'; work honestly with others, trustworthy

- Humility To recognise and utilise the skills of everyone; that it is about the team
- Resilience To maintain a committed focus despite setbacks or difficulties
- Reflective To consider past events and people's views to inform future actions

I realise that these definitions are presented quite simply and that recognising each quality from the participants responses in this research will involve interpretation on my part. West-Burnham (2013) has expressed reservations about defining leadership in simplistic terminology, however as I see leadership qualities as being as important as the practices that leaders employ I would argue that it is important to strive for a clear framework within which they can be discussed.

This view has been reflected in research by Coldron *et al* (2014) involving 15 headteachers from the primary and secondary phases in three LAs. This focused on understanding the headteachers' response to the current changes in government policy. In order to describe the complex situation in which the headteachers found themselves, the researchers distinguished 'between person-as-headteacher and headteacher-as-person' (Coldron *et al*, 2014, p. 397). Their findings show that this was an important distinction as:

...the disposition of an individual to act in particular ways is not only influenced by institutional habitus or the need for the institution to which they belong to accrue capital in given circumstances. It is also influenced by dispositions and criteria of action associated with many other identities of each individual.

(Coldron *et al*, 2014, p400)

This reflects the view of 'leadership as an organisational quality' alongside which 'personal leadership qualities' (Crawford, 2014, p. 6) are essential.

The possible qualities identified above will be explored as part of the analysis of the interview data. They are seen as those needed for authentic human engagement which is seen as important to the success of a system leader whatever their specific role (Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008).

2.4 The development of system leadership within the policy context in England.

In education, the notion of system leadership is a relatively recent one, having been in existence for approximately ten years and it is still an emerging and developing area. Early thinking in England was stimulated through the publication by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) of a pamphlet by Fullan (2004) that was intended to encourage debate on how, at a time when standards in English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 had reached a plateau, introducing systems thinking could improve pupil outcomes. He advocated an approach that would, 'unleash, develop and cultivate the intellectual and moral resources and commitment of those at local and community levels across the system' (Fullan, 2004, p. 6).

Systems thinking is espoused by Senge (2006) as the pivotal discipline of the five he identifies as ensuring a learning organisation realises its aspirations. It involves seeing interrelationships and structures that underlie complex situations. Fullan (2004) offered a vision of school leaders able to see the complexity of the education system from school level, to local authority and national policy.

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 with similar characteristics.

(Fullan, 2004, p. 9)

This signalled a major change from headteachers' success being thought of solely in terms of the impact they have on the outcomes of pupils in their own school to the

impact they have on developing more leaders who can successfully lead other schools and ultimately becoming 'almost as concerned about the success of other schools as they are about their own school' (Fullan, 2004, p. 9).

Writing at a time when the education agenda in England was being set and driven largely from the centre through the Primary National Strategies, Fullan proposed that more interaction was needed between 'local and central levels' to ensure standards continued to rise:

...we need to be able to mobilize, draw on, and reconcile the power, resources and action of the centre on the one side, with the ideas, wisdom, and engagement of the field on the other side. We need a system that mitigates the weaknesses of both central authority and local autonomy as it builds on their combined strengths.

Fullan (2004, p.7)

Although the logic behind Fullan's (2004) thinking seems clear, the prevailing educational policy context of the time could be seen as a significant barrier to the changes that systems thinking and its application within system leadership required. As noted earlier, the public accountability of individual schools and therefore school leaders, for the performance of their pupils had created a competitive situation between schools. This could have exerted an influence on headteachers and their decision on whether to engage with this new agenda.

Fullan (2004) was also writing at a time when it was known that many heads were reaching retirement age and there was concern about whether there were sufficient numbers of leaders coming forward to replace them (Hartle and Thomas, 2003). This concern was the reason behind Glatter and Harvey's (2006) preliminary exploration into shared headship. One of the findings from their evaluation was that 'job redesign should be part of a longer educational vision, not simply an expedient to deal with a current problem' (Glatter and Harvey, 2006, p. 3).

Further research studies (NCSL, 2010; Robinson, 2012) have shown that the main motivation headteachers stated for taking on an executive headship was based on a moral purpose to improve the education of pupils across the schools they led and also to ensure the viability of small schools in their locality. However, most headteachers also reported that they were recruited into the role through a direct request from the LA or another governing body, rather than through applying for the job or being part of a local planned solution. This could be seen to indicate that the way many executive headships have been established is reactive to the situation of not being able to recruit an individual headteacher or because the school is in difficulties rather than a planned approach from a local group of schools that seeks to have a positive impact on the education of all children in a locality. It is therefore questionable whether the 'job redesign' and 'longer educational vision' that Glatter and Harvey (2006, p 3) urged for have taken place.

Writing more recently, Chapman (2015) seems to be calling for a similar re-evaluation of not just the role, but the development of school leadership. He calls for a focus on 'building collective capacity and deep understanding of managing change in complex arenas. This will require a fundamental rethinking of how we develop our leaders' (Chapman, 2015 p 349).

With the withdrawal of NPQH as a mandatory qualification for headship and no nationally organised professional development for roles undertaken by system leaders², I would argue that Greany's (2014) view of policy incoherence, cited earlier, is justified. I would also suggest that the current situation does not yet embody the vision of combining the strengths of 'central authority' and 'local autonomy' which Fullan (2004, p 7) offered in his original publication.

² Since this research was undertaken, a programme for 'Executive Educators' is now available from (The Future Leaders Trust, 2016)

Greany's (2014) and Chapman's (2015) views are in contrast with those expressed in a series of think pieces written for the NCSL a few years previously by Hargreaves (2010; Hargreaves, 2011; Hargreaves, 2012). He identified system leaders as one of the four building blocks essential to his concept of a 'self-improving system of schools'. Headteachers moving into the various system leader roles identified by Hargreaves (2010) are seen as highly effective leaders within their own schools. He argues eloquently for these headteachers to move into roles where they are concerned for the outcomes of pupils in more than one school. As an adviser in a large rural LA where recruiting to headship, particularly of small schools, can be problematic, I would acknowledge that I have been keen to see this take place.

In arguing against the achievement of this vision, Chapman (2013) sees writers in the field of system leadership as making 'generous claims' about the importance and impact of school leaders as, 'England appears to have developed an overreliance on charismatic system leaders and it is becoming evident it just does not have enough of them' (Chapman, 2013, p347). His view would seem to be echoed in the unequal picture in the geographical distribution of system leaders noted by the Chief Inspector of Schools in his 2012-13 annual report (Ofsted, 2013b). Here he highlights that although there are 870 NLEs across England, some large shire counties, particularly along the east coast and in the south west, have very few. This was also reflected in eastern England in the low number of teaching schools. He concludes that, 'A lack of coherent distribution across the country means that weaker schools cannot always access the local expertise and support they need.' (Ofsted, 2013b, p. 31). His annual report for 2013-14 (Ofsted, 2014b) shows that this position has not changed significantly as 'the geographical gap' is again referred to as certain areas do not have sufficient good school leaders who can take on a leadership role beyond their own school.

Although I see the arguments for system leadership as persuasive, there is no doubt that the reality, as researchers such as Chapman (2013) and Glatter (2012) and Ofsted (2013b, 2014b) have drawn attention to, is far from perfect. Even when schools have

decided to collaborate in federations or chains, usually under the leadership of one headteacher enacting at least one of the system leadership roles set out in Chapter One, the evidence on the performance of these is seen by some as mixed and also too early to have conclusive evidence of their success (Simkins *et al*, 2015). I will return to the shortage of system leaders at the end of this chapter as one of the issues requiring further consideration.

The summary of the origins of system leadership above and in Chapter 1 show that a range of national policy initiatives in the first decade of the century sought to develop new strategies to extend the influence of effective school leaders as part of system reform. Whilst not changing the essence of what is known about effective school leadership, this has signalled a major change to the role of successful headteachers and staff in their schools, and relationships between schools. Depending on the perspective adopted, it could either be seen as placing system leaders at the forefront of leading renewal in the education system or that they are acting as ‘functionaries of the state’ (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009). I would argue that both are accurate. To return to Hopkins (2007) diagram (Figure 2.1), the current education system in England is at a point where the influence of national prescription in terms of educational innovation is diminishing and schools leading reform is gaining ascendancy. However, as Hargreaves (2014) asserts, central government is still instrumental in extending the strategies through which system leadership can spread and develop and is in the position of being able to either blame schools if this does not work or take the plaudits if it does. That means there will sometimes be tensions, particularly where headteachers differ in their views on aspects of national policy. This was evident in this research where some headteachers acting as NLEs and directors of TSAs approved of the current government policy on academisation whilst others did not.

The question is does this variation in agreement with aspects of government policy mean some headteachers would be less likely to undertake these types of roles? In her research, Robinson (2012) asked the following question:

...to what extent is undertaking system leadership a conscious attempt by headteachers to facilitate reforms on behalf of the government because they believe in them for their intrinsic worth, or are there other more extrinsic forms of motivation?

(Robinson, 2012, p. 42)

She carried out semi-structured interviews with 27 headteachers deemed effective through Ofsted inspection outcomes in 14 local authorities from 2005-2011. They were carrying out a range of system leadership roles over this time including executive headship and acting as SIPs. In 2006 four were NLEs and by 2011 this had risen to 14. She concluded that there were three main reasons why headteachers undertook new roles: through a sense of moral purpose; to provide professional challenge and development for themselves; and because it could bring financial benefits for their school. The first reason clearly demonstrates the commitment to the learning of children in schools beyond their own school which is seen as key to the success of system leadership. Her findings are reflected in that of Hill (2011). In his research, almost all headteachers acting in a system leadership role said they found the role personally rewarding with over three-quarters agreeing that it had enabled them and their staff to improve the outcomes of pupils in other schools. These two pieces of research highlight the professional response of these headteachers to playing a significant part in improving the education system through nationally organised roles which they believe are worthy of their support. They see the benefits these bring for their own school staff and ultimately therefore for their pupils which transcends reservations they may hold on specific aspects of government policy. However, it is also important to remember the viewpoint of 'well positioned headteachers' in research by Coldron *et al* (2014), mentioned in Chapter 1, which revealed that headteachers saw taking on a system leadership role as providing more ready access to national and local policy information and supporting them in ensuring their school was best placed to benefit from the changes that were taking place through the introduction of government policy. They were also acutely aware of the potential

transience of their situation (Coldron *et al*, 2014), particularly in undertaking the national role of NLE which is dependent on their school continuing to have an outstanding grade for leadership and management.

The individual external conditions system leaders are required to meet are only a small part of what is needed for system leadership to succeed in its aims. There are further elements that need to be in place.

...before such system leaders fully engage externally, they appear to first develop a deep and rigorous understanding of improvement in their own school. Without the core currencies of pedagogy, curriculum, and student well-being, many would question whether they could lead improvements across the wider system.

(Higham and Hopkins, 2010, p. 133)

Having an established credibility as a leader of teaching and learning is an essential prerequisite for success as a system leader which has been identified both by NLEs and staff in the schools they support (Ofsted, 2010). Alongside this the NLE, once they had ensured that their school had the capacity to carry out support, needed to ensure that the expectations of joint working were clear, 'creating a climate of professional generosity and exchange' (West-Burnham, 2013, p. 21). This created an atmosphere where both schools recognised that they could learn together even though one had originally been identified as having weaknesses. This links to the concept of segmentation which Hopkins (2007) says is the added element which is needed, along with personalized learning, professional teaching, networks and collaboration and intelligent accountability for system leadership to be successful.

By segmentation Hopkins (2007) means that any support or intervention should relate directly to the context in which the school finds itself. Effective system leaders recognise that they need to understand fully the needs, challenges and strengths of a school they are working with in order to bring the appropriate drivers from Hopkins' elements listed above to bear on improving pupils' learning and progress. Without this, a formulaic approach could be put into operation which would be likely to be based on what the system leader perceived were the strengths of their own school or

the 'right' things to put in place and may in fact be a complete mismatch to the actual needs of the supported school. This links to Matthews *et al* (2014) study of outstanding primary school leadership in England which found that the emphasis of leadership differed according to the context in which the school found itself.

...the task of the school leader may be to rescue an inadequate school, reinforce one that requires improvement, refine one that is moving from good to outstanding, review one that aims to remain outstanding or improve still further and replicate best practice in other schools in the system leader sphere of influence.

(Matthews *et al*, 2014, p. 36)

Considering the capacity of the system leader's school in more detail, it is acknowledged in several pieces of research (Robinson, 2012; NCSL, 2011) that taking on the role of system leader heralded a change for headteachers in how they managed their own roles. Simply put, this involved their leadership becoming more strategic and less operational. A recent large scale survey found this has been commonly brought about in two ways:

...a large proportion of all headteachers (89 per cent) said they had encouraged and enabled other teachers to contribute to school leadership and just over three-quarters of headteachers (78 per cent) had delegated or further embedded more strategic responsibilities across the senior team.

(Earley *et al*, 2012, p. 11)

This encapsulates both the use of distributed leadership, seen as the extension of leadership roles beyond those staff in identified leadership positions (Harris, 2010), and a greater distributing of leadership responsibilities by the headteacher to their existing or newly created senior leaders. The latter is discussed more often in the research literature with the detailed knowledge of senior staff and their strengths being seen as key to the headteacher's strategic decisions on the development of their roles (Pont and Hopkins, 2008; NCSL, 2010; Robinson, 2012). This would also seem to suggest that previously some headteachers had delegated management roles to their senior leaders, but had not extended this to leadership of specific areas which was

then necessary when the headteacher became a system leader with responsibilities across more than one school.

One area of system leadership in which research is relatively new is that assessing the influence and impact of the leadership of learning in school-to-school networks. Research projects focused on TSAs have taken as one of their themes 'how can leaders lead successful TSAs which enable the development of consistently great pedagogy?' (Stoll, 2015, p. 6). The key messages on leadership drawn from their findings provide clear strategic actions for system leaders of a TSA and compliment the focus taken in this research.

The immediate practical pressures on system leaders continuing in their role would seem to be ensuring that senior leaders in their substantive or original school (this will be termed their 'home' school when discussing the findings from this research) carry out their roles effectively so that it remains successful, alongside balancing the time spent away from this school to work with others (Earley, 2013). The latter was also found by Hill (2011) to be a negative factor for headteachers when they considered taking on a role beyond their own school. In the same piece of research, two-thirds of existing system leaders also reported that the time commitment had 'put pressure on their capacity to do other things' (Hill, 2011, p.11). This view is reinforced by Chapman (2015) when he acknowledges the amount of time and energy needed to build a federation.

The energy and time needed by system leaders to devote to working across schools is important when considering their continuation in a system leadership role over time. At a more theoretical level, Fullan (2006) suggests that sustainability has a cyclical nature as it is linked to the energy levels of those involved and the plateaus that occur when new strategies are required to be devised and implemented as part of adaptive change (Heifetz, 2003). In the last of his think-pieces on the self-improving school

system, Hargreaves (2012) puts forward what these strategies might be within the context of his criteria for successful deep partnership working between schools. He sees them as 'joint practice development, high social capital, collective moral purpose and evaluation and challenge' (Hargreaves, 2012, p20). Putting all these in place requires time. To be really effective, joint practice development requires the trust that enables the sharing of knowledge and expertise between teachers seen when high social capital exists. This is enacted in the context of the collective moral purpose that exists between the schools. Finally, headteachers lead the process of evaluation and challenge across the schools. This, Hargreaves (2012) argues, is the hardest aspect for headteachers to establish but essential as 'they will all need to become analytic investigators if the school system is to be truly self-improving' (Hargreaves, 2012, p.22). I will return to these criteria for deep partnerships between schools in the analysis of the findings from this research.

As well as the pressures on system leaders at an individual level, it could be argued that additional factors crucial to the sustainability of system leadership in England are its geographical positioning across the country (Ofsted 2013c) and the extent of their availability to support within the primary phase of education (NCSL, 2011) as a driving force in system reform.

A question I see as arising from this is where are LAs positioned in supporting the growth and sustainability of system leadership? Barber, Whelan and Clarke (2010), in their report summarising findings from an international review of school leadership, see a 'middle tier' as 'essential if all schools (not just some schools) are to be great schools.' (Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010, p28). They acknowledge that internationally the structure of this middle tier varies greatly, however they identify five practices which they see as explaining the contribution that it makes. These can be summarised as:

1. *Supporting weaker school leaders*

2. *Delivering effective professional development*
3. *Managing clusters and lateral learning*
4. *Strengthening succession planning*
5. *Strengthening moderation and accountability*

(Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010, p. 16)

In considering case studies of the middle tier in England Aston *et al* (2013) define it as a 'diverse range of bodies that operate between schools and central government to support school-led improvement' (Aston *et al*, 2013, p. 1). At present in England this includes LAs, TSAs and academy chains. Their findings are similar to those of Barber *et al* (2010) and include highlighting the role of the middle tier in 'nurturing a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility for the system as a whole through effective system leadership.' (Aston *et al*, 2013, p3). Similarly, Hill (2012) at first suggested an adapted role for LAs that reflected the new context of diversity in school organisation. His vision of LAs reporting to a regional commissioner who has oversight of the whole system has come a step closer with the appointment of a national Schools Commissioner in 2014 followed by eight Regional Schools Commissioners. However, at present their remit is closely linked to academisation (Green, 2014) with maintained schools remaining the responsibility of LAs.

More recently, Hill's vision has excluded LAs from the middle tier as he sees all schools working as part of some form of partnership (Hill, 2015) in which school improvement support and intervention is the responsibility of TSAs, academy chains and other groupings of schools. This is echoed in the White Paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere (DfE, 2016) which sees all school improvement support as being provided by the above and any intervention needed coming from the Regional School Commissioners. In contrast to this view, one LA's response to the challenge from the DfE to raise achievement in their schools (Abbott, Middlewood and Robinson, 2014) was to introduce a more formal way of working with the NLEs and LLEs locally on

brokering their support for school improvement. This development of LAs working in partnership with system leaders aligns with the conclusion from a report jointly commissioned by the DfE and Local Government Association (LGA) (Parish, Baxter and Sandals, 2012) into the evolving role of LAs. It addresses a key message to ‘local partners in education’ which includes LAs:

Focus on co-creating, with schools, a local education culture based on a clear moral purpose and identify the headteacher advocates who can lead that process. Work with schools to support the conditions in which headteachers are prepared to challenge each other to take decisions which are in the collective interest of pupils in the wider community as well as the interests of pupils and parents at their school.

(Parish *et al*, 2012, p12)

However, more recently, Hatcher (2014) has questioned whether the new partnerships led by headteachers being created in LAs are allowing all stakeholders to be part of local decision making.

Alongside this Charlie Taylor, Chief Executive of NCTL, indicated that his ‘expectation is that by 2016 teaching schools and the best schools and academy chains will be leading teacher training, school improvement, the training and selection of new leaders, continuous professional development’ (Taylor, 2014) without a place for LAs. Given the lack of system leadership capacity identified previously, it could be questioned whether Taylor’s vision is achievable in this time span. In contrast, Simkins *et al* (2015) present the case for ‘the potential role of the LA as a ‘broker’ for new patterns of school organisation’ (*op cit*, 2015, p.1) although they acknowledge that this would be difficult for LAs to navigate given the fragmentation of the school system as academy chains and multi-academy trusts continue to gain power and influence.

Another factor preventing headteachers from putting themselves forward for system leadership roles has been found to be their view that they lack the necessary experience (Hill, 2011). This brings the importance of PD to the fore, both for

headteachers interested in becoming a system leader and for those already undertaking the role.

It is sometimes argued that the move from deputy headteacher is one of the most significant changes in role – the move from headteacher to system leader may be of a greater order of magnitude given the changing scope of the work involved.

(Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008, p. 25)

PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) describe three areas in which they see some headteachers as potentially struggling to make the transition, by remaining operational; not prioritising staff recruitment, management and retention; and not having sufficient skills in networking and communication.

The need for specific PD for system leaders has been raised from early on in their existence (Fullan, 2006; Pont and Hopkins, 2008). Whilst Hill (2011) found that existing system leaders scored themselves with a higher confidence level across a range of skills and attributes than colleagues who did not have this role, they still highlighted the wish for further PD.

The forms of development support that existing system leaders most value are an experienced coach/mentor, access to support networks of others undertaking similar roles, a formal induction process, and periodic conferences to share trends and best practice. There is also some demand to tailor training to schools being supported by system leaders.

(Hill, 2011, p. 18)

These findings from the survey were seen as offering NCSL a way forward as more NLEs and LLEs were being recruited. However, the move to providing a systematic approach to PD for system leaders has not yet materialised as NCSL has been reformed as NCTL. Similarly, the call to bring together nationally recognised system leaders such as NLEs under a specific association ‘to act as a powerhouse of cultural change’ (Hargreaves, 2014) is also not currently forthcoming.

Sandals and Bryant (2014), in their report commissioned by the DfE to take a 'temperature check' of how the education system is evolving in England, highlight seven lessons for leading change effectively in a local education system. They see this as applying from a single school up to a whole LA. The seventh lesson is to:

Empower others – judge the right time to let others take the lead. Timely adapters do this by building capacity, responsibility and associated accountability among their partners.

(Sandals and Bryant, 2014, p10)

Greany suggests that what is needed is to support the sustainability of system leadership is for government to, 'Identify funding that can be used to build capacity, in particular in primaries and geographical areas where standards are low and there are too few outstanding schools' (Greany, 2014, p. 34). He puts forward the idea of separating 0.5 per cent of the schools budget which would make £150 million available to schools to build capacity in these areas. This would fund local area challenges, incentivise local self-improving systems and invest in making TSAs more sustainable and focused on impact.

2.5 Conclusion

A review of the literature relating firstly to effective school leadership and its links to system leadership has revealed potential leadership qualities and practices of system leaders. This will inform my analysis of interviews with 12 headteachers who undertake the roles of executive headteachers and NLEs (most of whom are also directors of TSAs) in the primary phase. As yet the leadership qualities and practices that enable them to move from leading one school successfully to be systems leaders in the primary phase have not been fully researched. It is hoped this research will contribute to this area.

The leadership qualities and practices which have emerged in significant research in England and internationally have been considered through the concept of learning-centred leadership (Southworth, 2004) which includes both transformational and instructional leadership (Day *et al*, 2010). The review has shown that there is a strong link between the leadership of effective headteachers in one school and when they move beyond this to work in a system leader role where they are focused on improving pupils' outcomes in further schools. However, it has also demonstrated that there is a difference between the two roles with system leadership being an example of an adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 2003) as it requires headteachers to develop new ways of working. This is reinforced by thinking from Senge (2006) and Fullan (2004) that headteachers working as system leaders need also to be systems thinkers who act with an awareness of the complex situations operating at school, local and national levels.

At a national level, this includes working in the context of government policy that emphasises both competition and collaboration between schools which some writers see as needing to be addressed to achieve a balance that will support the development of local coordinated approaches to school-led reform (Chapman, 2013). A question I see as remaining unanswered is how much the complex situations nationally are also a product of how system leadership came into being in England. It is possible to see it as 'not an academic or theoretical idea' (Hopkins, 2007, p. 16), but rather as one that has grown out of the challenges presented in system reform. Viewing it from this perspective perhaps goes some way to explaining the incoherent policy context (Greany, 2014), as it could be seen as being introduced alongside an existing accountability framework without sufficient consideration being given to whether it was possible for it to thrive in this context.

Another aspect of introducing system leadership as a driver for school improvement that does not seem to have been clearly articulated is the critical mass of good leaders needed to ensure, 'that system leadership becomes a movement rather than the

practice of a small number of elite leaders' (Pont and Hopkins, 2008, p. 10). This is evident in some large shire counties and particularly those in eastern England where there are a high number of primary schools for each NLE or LLE (Ofsted, 2014a). However, I would argue that Ofsted offer no solution to this issue. The introduction of the Future Leaders programme (Ofsted, 2013c) is promoted as ensuring more good leaders are developed and become headteachers, particularly in areas where there are more disadvantaged pupils and schools in challenging circumstances, but the view on the development of more system leaders is that 'More of these excellent leaders need to emerge if England's schools are to become world class.' (Ofsted, 2014b, p28)

In the conclusion to their research into effective school leadership, Day *et al* (2010) state that,

Improving the cognitive, emotional and practical capacities of heads to achieve effectiveness and broader success requires training and development programmes that pay attention to:

-the challenges of the particular personal, organisation and policy contexts in which heads work or are likely to work

-the development of clear sets of values, interpersonal qualities, diagnostic skills and judgemental capacities.

(Day *et al*, 2010, p. 19)

I would argue that the same tailored PD is required by headteachers considering undertaking a system leadership role or roles. I see the building of capacity through PD for existing and potential system leaders as an important missing element in ensuring the continued emergence and therefore sustainability of system leadership. Although writing about NCSL's Succession Planning Programme for Headteachers from 2007-2009 rather than system leaders specifically, Bush (2011) acknowledges that succession planning in a distributed system is a major challenge (Bush, 2011, p.197). I would argue that the same issue applies for system leaders and therefore in the conclusion to my thesis I will consider PD that could be supportive for the development of future system leaders and the possible role of the LA, as part of the middle tier, in this. I acknowledge that this aligns to one of the 'competing visions'

(Simkins *et al*, 2015 p. 1) currently being debated in relation to the middle tier. In one of these two visions no formal middle tier exists and in the other a middle tier exists that includes a role for LAs in supporting the development of collaboration between schools. I will return to the potential role of the LA as part of the middle tier within the recommendations in Chapter 6.

I will now present the methodology and research design that underpins this research before moving on to present and analyse the findings.

Chapter 3: Methodology and research design

3.1 Introduction

This research aims to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the leadership qualities and practices of effective system leaders in the primary phase. System leadership was discussed in detail in Chapter 2 and in summary is defined as assuming a leadership role to ensure the success of pupils in more than one school (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009). The system leaders who are participants in this research are primary headteachers who are both NLEs and directors of TSAs or executive headteachers.

This chapter will provide an overview of the theoretical stance from which the research was approached and how this influenced the research design. The selection of the research method, research participants, my positionality and ethical considerations involved in the research process will then be discussed. The chapter concludes by setting out how the data collected through the research method of telephone interviews was analysed.

3.2 Theoretical framework

This research was approached from the perspective of social constructionism as I wanted to develop my knowledge and understanding of a real leadership situation and provide 'interpretations of human actions and social practices within the context of meaningful, culturally specific arrangements' (Scott and Usher, 1999, p. 26) from which I could generate a conceptual and practical model. From the outset it has been important for me to be reflexive (Robson, 2002) and recognise the potential influence that my occupation as an LA school improvement professional could have on the research process. Through this role I am immersed in the world of school leadership on a day to day basis. In the recent past I have also been a headteacher and this

background also adds to my pre-understandings which mean I cannot stand outside the research (Scott and Usher, 1999). However, I see this as helpful as these pre-understandings have been tested and modified through the process of interpretation and developing understanding as the research has progressed. I will return to the importance of reflexivity when considering the research method of interviewing and at other appropriate points throughout the chapter.

At the heart of my ontology is the view that:

... all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.

(Crotty, 1998, p. 42)

This has underpinned the development of the research process and forms a link between the reasons for undertaking the research as outlined in Chapter 1, the approach and method chosen for data collection and the analysis of the findings in Chapter 4. I have chosen not to discuss this theoretical basis of constructionism in detail as I intend to concentrate on the methodological aspects of the research. Whilst I acknowledge that there will not be an absolute truth appearing from the research through the socially constructed meanings, my aim is for the analytical generalisation (Robson, 2002) to produce interpretations that contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the leadership qualities and practices of primary headteachers as they act as system leaders in the primary phase.

3.3 Research design

In seeking the most appropriate method with which to explore the research questions, the choice of interviews could be seen as selecting the obvious route as it is a very commonly used method both in educational research and more widely in a variety of forms in society at large (Burgess, 1984). However, following careful consideration of the alternative of a questionnaire, which is considered part of survey research

methodology, I concluded that the exploratory nature of this research required a more flexible design. Developing understanding of the leadership qualities and practices of effective system leaders required the use of open ended questions and these are not seen as generating high quality data in questionnaires as participants will often provide short answers and there is no opportunity for the researcher to probe for further information or clarification (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

It can be seen as a mistake to call interviewing a research method as some see it as ‘a family of research approaches that have only one thing in common – conversation between people in which one person has the role of researcher’ (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 2). This expresses the difference that exists between the two extremes in terms of interview types, the structured and unstructured interview. Although it is generally held that interviews do not link to a particular epistemological stance (Crotty, 1998), semi-structured interviews, can be seen as resembling conversations. It can therefore be argued that they support a constructionist research stance of developing further understanding through a process of knowledge construction (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) where the research interviewer is engaged in interpreting meaning. Some researchers see this as linking to a phenomenological perspective (Foddy, 1993; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) however, within traditions of flexible research design, the principles of symbolic interactionism have also been influential (Robson, 2002) as can be seen reflected in one of its principles:

Social life is formed, maintained and changed by the basic meanings attached to it by interacting people, who interact on the basis of meanings they assign to their world; social life and objects become significant when they are assigned meanings.

(Robson, 2002, p197)

This provides links at a general level to the interview conversation as it is also acknowledged that as well as enabling the interviewer to gain greater understanding, the process of being interviewed may produce new insights and awareness for the participants and even change their ideas and views during the course of the interview

(Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). There are further links through the symbolic interactionist view that:

...social actors in any social situation are constantly negotiating a shared definition of the situation; taking one another's viewpoints into account; and interpreting one another's behaviour...

(Foddy, 1993, p20)

This is partly why critics of what are often termed 'qualitative interviews' (Potter and Hepburn, 2005) doubt that information gained through interviews can provide any view on what actually happens beyond the interview situation. Further understanding would therefore require data collection through other methods, such as observation and require a more ethnographic or participant observation design. However, viewed from a constructionist perspective, it is through the process of interaction between interviewer and participant that knowledge is constructed.

3.4 Identification of participants

The formulation of the research questions and research design influenced the identification of participants. Also, it was informed by a review of the literature. As presented in Chapters 1 and 2, NLEs, directors of TSAs and executive headteachers are distinctive system leadership roles and as such have been the subject of previous research (Hill and Matthews, 2008, 2010; NCSL, 2010; Gu *et al*, 2015).

The interaction between the researcher, as the interviewer, and the participant was seen as the process through which to develop knowledge and understanding of the leadership qualities and practices needed by system leaders in these roles as they either led or supported other schools. Therefore, primary headteachers undertaking these roles as system leaders were viewed as the population from which participants would be selected.

As is shown in the table setting out the numbers of headteachers engaged in system leadership roles (Appendix 1), the whole population did not constitute a manageable sized sample for undertaking interviews as it would have consisted of several hundred primary headteachers. Therefore an approach to selecting a group or sample from this population was needed.

Firstly, a common selection criterion was identified. To become a NLE, as mentioned in Chapter 1, requires the leadership and management of the headteacher's school to be judged as outstanding by Ofsted. Therefore it was seen as appropriate to also apply this criterion to the selection of the executive headteachers as participants. Only headteachers of schools inspected under the Ofsted framework which came into effect on 1st September 2012 were considered (Ofsted, 2012). This ensured that this was a recent judgement which had been made when the existing headteacher was in post.

Initially, identification was carried out within LA J, the LA in which I work, but as there was only one primary NLE and director of a TSA in post and two executive headteachers who had a judgement of outstanding leadership under the September 2012 Ofsted framework (Ofsted, 2012) this was not seen as a sufficiently large group with which to carry out the research. Instead the two executive headteachers from this group were interviewed as a pilot prior to the research. I will outline the benefits gained from doing this when discussing the research methods later in the chapter.

As there were insufficient system leaders that met the criteria to be participants in the research within LA J, another approach was needed to create a manageable group from the large number of NLEs and directors of TSAs and executive headteachers that met the criteria nationally. The Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT) (DfE, (2013b) provided an objective basis for the sample selection. As explained in Chapter 1, through this each LA in England is compared by the DfE across a range of performance measures. The selection criteria outlined above were then applied to system leaders

from the ten Statistical Neighbour LAs. The research participants identified in these ten LAs represented the whole population of primary headteachers acting as either NLEs and directors of TSAs or executive headteachers of schools judged outstanding by Ofsted (including for leadership and management) since the introduction of the framework in September 2012.

Creating this purposive sample from system leaders in LAs considered by the DfE to be Statistical Neighbours to LA J (DfE, 2013b) was seen as providing a background in which there was a degree of commonality of circumstances, for instance in terms of funding per pupil and demographics. The group also have the potential to be typical of system leaders in the primary phase nationally as their knowledge and experience could be representative of the larger population across all LAs (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014). However, it is recognised that this cannot be assured.

In August 2013, when the research participants were selected, there were 37 NLEs in the primary phase within the ten Statistical Neighbour LAs, seven of whom were also directors of TSAs. The combination of these two roles set these headteachers apart. As stated previously, the criterion for selection of the executive headteachers was that their school had been inspected under the Ofsted framework (Ofsted, 2012) in place in August 2013. At that time, the official statistics of inspection results published by Ofsted (2013a) were released in stages every four months, therefore the full picture of inspections for the academic year 2012-13 was only completed in December 2013. This meant that the number of executive headteachers meeting the participant criteria evolved from August to December 2013. The seven executive headteachers of primary school federations, trusts or academy chains that were identified represented the complete population of those in which the current leadership had been recognised as outstanding by Ofsted in the academic year 2012-13 through the inspection of at least one school in the group. When one of these executive headteachers was contacted it transpired that one of her schools had recently succeeded in being designated as a teaching school and that she had also been accredited with the status of NLE. Another

executive headteacher had also been accredited as an NLE. Both of these had not yet been added to the list published by the DfE.

The final whole population of 14 system leaders in the role of NLE and director of TSA or executive headteacher of primary schools in the ten LAs that were Statistical Neighbours of LA J meeting the aforementioned criteria were contacted initially by phone during the autumn term 2013 and spring term 2014 to ask if they would agree to take part in the research. All were very positive about assisting with the research except for one NLE and one executive headteacher, both in LA K, who said that they could not spare the time to participate in an interview. Key information about the 12 primary headteachers who agreed to be interviewed is summarised in Table 3.1. It can be seen that four of the six headteachers contacted because they were NLEs and directors of TSAs were also executive headteachers. A further two, contacted because they were executive headteachers of a group of schools where one school had recently been judged by Ofsted as having outstanding leadership and management, were also NLEs but not directors of TSAs. This resonates with the findings from Hill (2011) where 40 per cent of headteachers had two or more roles as a system leader.

3.5 Research method

There is a plethora of ways to name and describe 'qualitative interviews' which is why Rapley (2007) decided on this term to encompass ones such as conversational, life-history, informal and semi-structured 'where interviewees are specifically encouraged, by questions and other verbal and non-verbal methods, to produce elaborated and detailed answers' (Rapley, 2007, p15). Other researchers have concentrated on the extremes of structured and unstructured interviews (Fontana and Frey, 1994) and a third group have written whole books solely on the subject of semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007; Wengraf, 2001).

| Headteacher (Gender – M = male, F = female) | System Leader role(s) | No. of schools leading at March 2014 | Designation of school(s) | Ofsted overall effectiveness judgement for each school at March 2014 |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| 1 (M) | NLE, director TSA and executive headteacher | 7 | Multi-academy trust (MAT) | 2 outstanding 4 good 1 requires improvement |
| 2 (F) | NLE, director TSA and executive headteacher | 3 | LA | 1 outstanding 1 good 1 requires improvement |
| 3 (M) | NLE, director TSA and executive headteacher | 2 | MAT | 1 outstanding 1 not yet inspected |
| 4 (M) | NLE and director TSA | 1 | LA | Outstanding |
| 5 (M) | NLE, director TSA and executive headteacher | 1 | LA | Outstanding |
| 6 (F) | NLE and director TSA | 1 | LA | Outstanding |
| 7 (F) | NLE and executive headteacher | 2 | LA | Both outstanding |
| 8 (F) | NLE and executive headteacher | 2 | LA | 1 outstanding 1 good |
| 9 (M) | Executive headteacher | 2 | LA | Both outstanding |
| 10 (F) | Executive headteacher | 3 | LA | 2 outstanding 1 requires improvement |
| 11 (F) | Executive headteacher | 3 | LA | Two outstanding and one RI |
| 12 (F) | Executive headteacher | 2 | Part of academy chain | Both outstanding |

Table 3.1: Information on participants

My approach to interviewing in this research has definitely sought to achieve what Rapley outlines as the purpose of the qualitative interview, and I can also see that my constructionist stance could also lead to the interviews being perceived as ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1984, p. 102). However, I find the distinctions

linked to the term semi-structured interview to be the most aligned to the actual approach that evolved during the research process.

Wengraf (2001) sees the semi-structured interview as being characterised by the fact that there are a few prepared questions which relate to the overall theme or topic of the interview with others being created based on the responses of the participants. This places the interviewer in charge of the interaction as the questions give it a focus, keep it on track and act as a reminder to the interviewer (Rapley, 2007). Although there is flexibility in how the interviewer reacts to the participants' responses through improvised questions that either probe for further information or seek to clarify understanding, which does lend a conversational feel to the situation, there still remains a clear predetermined focus which I believe sets it apart from more informal and unstructured interview formats. The disadvantage can be a lack of spontaneity if the initial questions are relied on too heavily and this may then result in areas not identified at the outset being missed out as the researcher stays too firmly focused on what they planned to ask (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014).

In summarising the process of using semi-structured interviews as 'high-preparation, high-risk, high-gain and high-analysis' Wengraf (2001, p5) highlights some key aspects that I see as worthy of attention. The preparation of the small group of interview questions used in this research took a disproportionate amount of time in relation to the amount of text they contained. However, I realise that this was a very important process which was fundamentally linked to my reading of the literature on research methodology and also on school and system leadership.

The focus group discussion with the eight executive headteachers from LA J was also part of this preparation process. As described in Chapter 1, in talking to these headteachers about their role I realised that they were enacting practices tacitly and were not able to explain them clearly. In asking them questions and listening to their

responses I noted that those questions with the request to ‘tell me about...’ or explain ‘how’ were the ones which resulted in the most developed answers. This supported me in developing draft questions which I piloted with the two executive headteachers in the primary phase from LA J who, as outlined earlier, were system leaders within LA J who met the criteria applied to the selection of the research group. I therefore saw them as an appropriate group with which to trial the main aspects of the research process, including the draft questions. The questions, along with the ethical considerations that were applied, will be referred to later in the chapter when discussing the research group.

The executive headteachers were first asked to respond directly to the draft questions in a telephone interview to mirror the approach planned for the research group. Following this they were asked to give their views on the questions themselves, particularly whether their meaning had been clear and if they had felt there was any expectation created by the questions to answer in a certain way.

The reactions of the pilot group of two executive headteachers to the questions were helpful to the overall research in three ways. Firstly, they were positive about the structure of the questions and reported that they felt encouraged to tell their story. Secondly, as shown in the quotations from their interviews in Chapter 1, their responses also provided contextual information regarding their system leader role within LA J. Lastly, as I will return to shortly when considering the research method, it provided an opportunity for me to practice telephone interviews, including asking spontaneous follow-up questions that sought to develop the headteachers’ responses further.

3.6 Interview models

Following the decision to conduct this research solely within those LAs that are statistical neighbours to LA J, and to carry out semi-structured interviews with the identified headteachers, I considered how this would take place. I calculated that the distances and time involved if I were to travel to meet with each headteacher in person would take approximately ten days and incur considerable travel costs. On the other hand I realised that the most common model for qualitative research interviews remains face-to-face interviewing (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). However, other forms of synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (independent from time and place) interview models are becoming more prevalent (Opdenakker, 2006).

The decision to carry out long-distance interviews was a compromise 'between ideals and practicalities' (Brown and Dowling, 2010, p. 31). Having identified a geographically dispersed group of research participants I needed to ensure that the amount of time needed and the expense of travel did not prevent me from completing the interviews. I identified three possible models of interviewing which would be inexpensive and potentially less time consuming. These were email, Skype and the telephone. In deciding which of these would be most appropriate, I was keen not to just consider the benefits of remote interviewing for myself, but to also take into account the working lives of the headteachers I hoped to interview.

James and Busher's (2006) studies demonstrate how they used email interviewing to 'capture and reflect narrative accounts of participants' experiences and provoke their in-depth reflection of their understandings of their professional experiences and identities.' (2006, p. 405). They see this model as enabling their participants to reply at a time that suited them and to have the power not to reply at all. They also hoped that it would encourage participants to revisit their narratives including redrafting their views. One factor I see as significant to the success of email interviewing in their studies is that the participants were already known to them. This means that there

was already a rapport and trust established between them which is seen by many writers in the field as important to producing quality interview data (Kvale, 2007; Wengraf, 2001). I would be contacting headteachers who did not know me and so would need to develop this trust. Kivits (2005) found that this took time and that there was also a risk of participants losing interest in the research and forgetting to reply to emails. I was particularly aware that the headteachers I would be contacting would already be receiving many emails a day; therefore they may be less inclined to take part in research which they may view as adding to this load.

The second alternative considered was Skype. This interview model would create a visual link thus assisting in developing the rapport between myself and the participant. However, the reliability and quality of this medium can vary through the loss of sound or visual connection due to the speed of broadband available (King and Horrocks, 2010). As I experience this variability regularly in my personal use of Skype I was concerned that this could work against my aim of ensuring that taking part in the research was as straight forward as possible. From the point of view of the participants, I was also aware that introducing technology with which they might not be familiar may have put them off engaging with the research or become a distraction during the interview as they would not be used to being visible on screen.

Following the above considerations, I decided to carry out the semi-structured interviews by telephone. Although telephone interviewing has been used in social science research for many years (King and Horrocks, 2010), the literature has tended to focus on structured interviews requiring perhaps short answers to closed questions (Morton-Williams, 1993). In deciding on this model for conducting interviews requiring longer, detailed responses, I was aware that it was important to carefully assess the disadvantages and seek to mitigate them as much as possible. As the approach was new to me, I used the pilot as an opportunity for me to trial telephone interviews.

In a review of telephone interviewing, Shuy (2002) suggests that this model can result in less thoughtful responses from participants due to the lack of visual cues and the faster pace in which interactions take place. The latter could be enhanced by a lack of engagement on behalf of the participant if they feel that the researcher, by telephoning rather than taking the time to speak to them face-to-face, is conducting an unequal relationship (Seidman, 2013). Conversely, the fact that the telephone interviews would not take so much time as meeting in person could be appealing to a busy headteacher. They would potentially find it easier to set aside time to receive a telephone call whereas having a stranger come to their school could be seen to require the social niceties of giving a tour of the site and introductions to staff before the interview took place. This could have been why there was a high level of positive response to being interviewed by phone, although two headteachers who declined to take part still cited lack of time as their reason.

I was aware that the lack of opportunity for non-verbal communication could make it harder to establish a relationship as myself and the participants were complete strangers and body language and facial expressions are very helpful in helping newly acquainted people feel at ease with each other (Arksey and Knight, 1999). This could also lead participants to shorten their answers as there would be no non-verbal encouragement that shows the active engagement of the interviewer when they are there in person (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). This however presumes that the interviewer's presence always has a positive effect on the participant, when in fact the opposite may be true, particularly if there is something of a sensitive nature that is part of the conversation. In this scenario the physical and emotional distance between interviewer and participant could make it easier for the participant to talk about the subject (Opdenakker, 2006).

From the literature it was clear that being a thoughtful interviewer and establishing a relationship with each of the participants was essential (Kazmer and Xie, 2008; Seidman, 2013) to mitigate the potential disadvantages to telephone interviewing

outlined above. In the initial phone call to the headteachers I was conscious of needing to portray taking part in the research as a positive experience as I felt this would influence their decision about whether to proceed. I feel that the focus of the research being to study effective practice was one of the reasons that the headteachers responded favourably to it. They also seemed pleased that someone was looking at their group of system leaders in order to share best practice more widely.

Having provided them with a verbal outline of the research, and agreed a convenient date, time and approximate duration for the interview, I secured an appropriate email address to send the written outline and the five main questions in advance of the telephone interview. I did this to give the participants the time to reflect on the questions and consider their responses as well as to help put them at ease and have confidence in me as a researcher (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). At the start of the telephone interview I also sought to put the headteachers at ease through an introduction that again acknowledged the fact that I realised they were busy people, thanked them for giving up their time and confirmed the maximum length or finishing time for the interview. In one case I was given an inaccurate email address and so Headteacher 6 had not received the email. As can be seen in Appendix 6, this interview began with the participant initially feeling hesitant potentially because of being unsure about what was to follow which reinforces the importance of this part of the pre-interview preparation (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Before beginning each interview I also confirmed with the participant that they gave permission for the interview to be recorded (which had been mentioned in the information sheet sent via email) and reassured them that this would be stored securely.

During the interview I was conscious of the need to verbally demonstrate that I was actively interested in what they were saying whilst also remaining aware of how time was passing and considering how the participant was feeling (Seidman, 2006). I realised that my verbal comments were replacing the signals that, had we been meeting in person, would have largely been given through my body language and were

designed to reassure and reward the participant without evaluating their response (Fontana and Frey, 2008). My short comments were also an attempt to reassure the headteachers that I understood what they were saying and therefore help the interview feel as natural as possible. I saw this as part of making the interview:

...more honest, morally sound, and reliable, because it treats the respondent as an equal, allows him or her to express personal feelings, and therefore presents a more 'realistic' picture...

(Fontana and Frey, 1994, p. 371)

At the end of the first interview the headteacher asked if he would be able to have a copy of the findings from the research. To meet this request I offered to create an executive summary which I would email them on completion of my thesis. I subsequently made this offer to each of the participants and it was very warmly received. I see this as giving something back to the headteachers in recognition for sharing their expertise. On reflection, I realised that this should have been offered at the outset and included in the information sheet.

I mentioned previously that an advantage of telephone interviewing could be seen to be that they did not take as much time to conduct as face to face interviews. In reflecting on my experience as an interviewer, this was not actually the case. This was due to several factors. Firstly, I was contacting headteachers who were complete strangers. Often the initial direct access to them on the telephone to ask if they would be part of the research had to be negotiated with a member of the school office staff. Although always helpful, these staff were obviously aware of the many calls on the headteachers' time and sometimes required a lengthy conversation or asked for me to call at another time in order to make the initial request of the headteacher. In a few instances I was asked to send the email containing information about this research prior to being given permission to speak to the headteacher.

Secondly, finding times in the diaries of two busy professionals; the interviewer and the participant; both of whom worked full time, for when the interviews could take

place meant that sometimes two or three weeks would lapse between the initial contact and the actual interview. A positive aside to this was that only one of the interviews had to be rescheduled once a date had been made which was due to the headteacher needing to prioritise a meeting involving safeguarding. I think this demonstrates a high level of commitment on the part of the headteachers to taking part in the research.

3.7 Development of the interview themes

As I began to read more deeply in the area of system leadership my overall research question became clear. However, even with my previous experience and wide reading on the subject of interviewing, I found it initially difficult to frame questions that would 'open up' headteachers to exemplify the leadership qualities and practices that were part of their success as system leaders. My constructionist stance meant that I saw the interviews as an opportunity for the co-construction of knowledge (Crotty, 1998) during the interview so I was seeking to construct open ended questions that would allow participants to talk at length and in detail, but at the same time remain within specific areas so that analysis of the interaction would elicit useful data. I was conscious of the importance of 'brevity, grammatical simplicity, specificity and concreteness' (Foddy, 1993, p. 51) which are essential principles on which good interview questions are based. I was also aware of how poor questioning could lead to the data collected being contaminated through instances such as participants not understanding the meaning of questions or because the order in which questions had been placed caused them to be confused (Kvale, 2007). One aspect that also particularly concerned me was leading the headteachers to talk about certain leadership qualities or practices because of the content or phrasing of my questions. An early question I created that could have influenced participants in this way was 'How do you ensure good or better teaching in all classes?' Other questions I initially created were too specific, such as 'Can you tell me about the three most important things you do to move a school on?' as by limiting the participants to a certain number I would have risked missing data and the phrase 'moving a school on' may have had

connotations for the headteacher that meant they only referred to certain practices they had employed. The final questions listed in Appendix 5 highlight the slight differences between those asked of an executive headteacher and the ones for an NLE and director of a TSA.

In devising specific open ended questions I sought to provide opportunities for the participants to talk about aspects of their working lives that would illuminate key practices and qualities essential to their system leadership role or roles. I was very careful not to ask about these directly as I realised that this would potentially influence their responses if they felt there were some practices or ways of behaving of which I might approve or disapprove (Hammersley, 2008).

I also realised that making the questions open ended did not guarantee the validity of responses as it is whether the participant understands the meaning of the question that is more important than its format (Foddy, 1993). Therefore, as mentioned earlier, once I had devised a draft set of questions I piloted them with two executive headteachers from LA J. Their responses demonstrated that the meaning of the questions was clear and that they did support them in talking about their leadership qualities and practices as a system leader. They provided some useful feedback that the questions did not direct them too closely to thinking about specific situations so they could consider select examples that helped them to illustrate their views. I also used these pilot interviews to decide if I would create any specific probing questions with which to follow up the main questions should I feel there was information missing in the initial reply (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014). My conclusion was that I was unlikely to be able to craft suitable focused probes from such open-ended main questions and that I could also be distracted from listening attentively by thinking about which of these I needed to ask. Therefore I decided to email the initial five questions prior to the interview and then ensure participants were aware at the start of the interview that I might ask some follow up questions, so as not to surprise them, and to improvise these depending on the information provided. My confidence in doing the latter came

as a direct result of having a high level of understanding about the areas that the headteachers were talking about which I see as a really positive aspect of being an 'insider' as it allows the interviewer to interpret, understand and respond to comments and queries from the participants (Arksey and Knight, 1999). I will consider other potential influences and disadvantages to being a school improvement professional when looking at interviewer positionality.

As I carried out my first interview, I continued to reflect on whether the questions were supporting the participants in talking about their qualities and practices. The responses to all but the first question were very productive. My original first question was simply 'Why did you become an NLE/executive headteacher?'. The answer given by the participant emphasised the organisational way that they had become an NLE rather than what motivated them to do it. By changing it to 'What was the appeal of becoming an NLE/executive headteacher?' the responses of later participants began immediately to talk more about the motivations for why they undertook the role and therefore provided information on their leadership qualities and practices. Following this change I was pleased in the other 11 interviews with how the five questions fulfilled my aim for them to give a general theme to the interaction, whilst allowing the headteachers to determine much of the direction of their responses.

Of all the questions, the last one which referred to the sustainability of their role provoked the most direct comments about the actual question from the headteachers. The initial response of Headteacher 5 was typical 'That's a really good question.' This was said with an intonation that signalled that the comment was a compliment because it was the right question to ask.

3.9 Interviewer positionality

Previously, I have highlighted the positive influence on this research of my role as a school improvement professional, but obviously this could also have had a negative impact on the interviews if I had allowed my views to interfere in the research

situation. Any data collection can be seen as, 'an intrusive act by the researcher; even in the course of an interview, the researcher's biography imposes an order on how the social actor understands their life' (Scott and Usher, 1996). I was therefore extremely careful that the dialogue I engaged in with the participants during the interview was from a stance of 'qualified naïveté' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). I ensured that I conveyed my understanding of the situations the participants were narrating through making regular affirmative noises and asking pertinent follow up questions. Through this I sought to support the co-construction of knowledge without influencing the participants' responses. Miller and Glassner (2011) highlight the view that it is important that researchers are members of the groups they research so that they have the knowledge necessary to understand the life experiences recounted during the interview. There were several occasions when I was able to support the participants by indicating that I understood what they were talking about, for instance what an acronym meant or through knowing about a government initiative so that they did not need to interrupt their narrative to explain.

I also saw it as important that the headteachers could sense my interest in the topic as this would encourage them to talk further and provide greater details, reflecting the collaborative nature of the interview process (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011). An indication that my approach of active listening that pointed to a shared understanding worked well can be seen from the vast majority of interview transcriptions showing participants speaking freely without pauses. I take this to show that they were not rehearsing internally or checking what they were saying before answering the questions. At some points they appeared to be thinking aloud as they would realise that they had just said something slightly incoherently and amend it or add further explanation. In this way the interviews did come close to becoming a conversation, but it was still a situation in which I remained in control and where I realised that my own views on school to school support should not be conveyed. I saw maintaining this neutrality as important:

Ideally, the interviewer uses his or her interpersonal skills merely to encourage the experiences of, but not to help construct, the attitudes, sentiments and information in question.

(Gubrium and Holstein, 2002, p. 14)

I feel I have developed these interpersonal skills over the last few years as I have carried out face to face interviews as part of the doctorate (Wilkinson, 2013). Transferring this to telephone interviews meant that I needed to think of using verbal cues in place of body position, eye contact and head nodding to support participants in feeling they could share their ideas and views without being judged.

The last consideration in my interviewer positionality is my employment. Had I introduced myself to the headteachers in my role as an LA school improvement officer as opposed to a doctoral student I may have automatically influenced the views they were prepared to share with me due to a perceived power imbalance between us. Although I do not see myself as being of a higher rank than headteachers, as I have always sought to work in partnership with those in LA J, I am aware that being a local government officer carries with it possible perceptions of hierarchy. Had I included my job role in the introduction it could have meant that headteachers would have felt that as they were speaking to a government employee they should mediate the sentiments and information they shared. As I have already mentioned, only three headteachers asked about my background towards the end of the interview. When I shared it they both remained positive and asked about how the role of system leader was developing in LA J. I think because the interview had been an interesting experience for them and we had established a rapport they were not concerned at that point about my role as a school improvement officer, rather it helped them to understand how I came to have knowledge and understanding about their world.

3.10 Ethical considerations

This research was carried out in accordance with the guidance issued by the British Educational Research Association (2011). This was applied to the research preparation

phase, comprising the focus group discussion and pilot interviews, as well as the main research itself.

In order to ensure the voluntary, informed consent of all headteachers involved in the research process, they were provided with information about its purpose, how the findings will be used and who would have access to the final report. This information was firstly shared verbally during the initial telephone call made to enquire whether they would consider taking part in the focus group discussion, the pilot interviews or in the research itself. Subsequently it was shared in a written form included as an attachment to an email sent to each person individually. An example of this information is included as Appendix 4. In addition, in both the initial telephone call, at the start of the focus group discussion, the pilot interviews and the research interviews themselves, participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point in the research process.

The headteachers who agreed to take part in the focus group discussion and pilot interviews were all known to me. I made sure that they were aware that although LA J was supportive of the research I was planning to undertake, in carrying it out I was acting as a doctoral student not an LA employee.

None of the headteachers taking part in the research itself were known to me prior to this research. When I introduced myself to each participant it was as a doctoral student from the Institute of Education. I purposely did not offer information on my job as a school improvement professional as I perceived that this could impinge on the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). I will discuss my positionality in more detail later in this chapter. There were three headteachers who asked for information about my education background towards the end of their interviews. I answered their requests honestly and as this came very near the end of each interview I do not feel that it influenced their responses.

At the start of the focus discussion group I confirmed with all the headteachers that they agreed to me taking written notes of our discussion and that any comments made by individuals would be anonymous. They were also made aware that the notes would then be retained as part of the background information and potentially used in the final thesis as part of the context to the research.

At the start of each telephone interview (including the two pilot interviews) I confirmed with participants that they agreed with the interview being recorded. In transcribing the audio recordings I respected interviewees' requests for specific information shared during the research to be treated confidentially and therefore have not included this in any quotations. Following the consent of the participants for audio recordings to be made of the interviews, these were stored, along with transcriptions of the whole interviews, on the researcher's computer which is password protected.

I have also sought to preserve participants' anonymity by referring to each one as a number rather than using names and not linking them to any particular LA. I am however aware that due to description of the sample as being located in specific large rural LAs, the small numbers involved and the fact that almost everyone who met the criteria was interviewed that it may be possible to identify individuals. The possible loss of anonymity I see as being mitigated by the fact that participants were overwhelmingly positive in what they said as they were talking about how they carried out their roles. This means even if they were identified, there would be little or no chance of it causing them embarrassment or being detrimental to their job. However, during the interviews there were a few occasions where the headteachers mentioned individual members of staff in their schools as an example to illustrate a point. Therefore, care has been taken not to refer explicitly to these instances. They have not been used as quotations within the thesis as I realise that these individuals have not had any freedom to choose whether they are part of the research and it is therefore my responsibility to protect them (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

The interviews were conducted on a date and at a time of day negotiated with the headteacher as convenient for them. I recognised that I was taking precious time from these headteachers' busy schedules and so in the initial telephone conversation I reassured participants that the interview would be kept to a reasonable length of no longer than 45 minutes. Also, at the beginning of each interview I checked the amount of time that the headteacher actually had available at that time and on two occasions where they needed to finish the interview by a specific time ensured I kept within those parameters.

3.11 Process of data analysis

3.11.1 *Recording and transcribing the interviews*

I had decided to make audio recordings of the 12 telephone interviews in order to capture the exact language used by each participant and to provide an objective record of the information they had given (Opie, 2008). After the first interview I listened to the recording and found it a very helpful part of what I realised was an iterative process. As I moved between data collection and my reading of the literature and back to the data I could see that this process was supporting the development of my thinking.

As I stated above, the participant's responses in this initial interview caused me to rephrase the first question. It also brought about the decision to transcribe the whole of each interview. When planning this research I had decided that in order to obtain meaning from the interviews about the leadership qualities and practices of the system leaders, the focus would need to be on larger pieces of interview text to ensure the context was retained. In previous research (Wilkinson, 2012) I had listened to audio recordings from face to face interviews and followed a common process (Robson, 2002) of being selective about which sections to transcribe in full (noting the timings of these) whilst leaving other parts as a brief summary of the content. Following the first interview, I decided that everything the participant had said could

contribute to developing further understanding of his personal leadership qualities and the practices he employed and so the whole interview recording should be transcribed.

This was a major decision to make due to the time involved in transcribing each interview. It took me five hours to type the first one which was just over half an hour long. In doing this I was agreeing with Kvale (2007) that creating a transcription is not a clerical task, but an interpretative process in which a text is translated from oral to written mode. Following the second interview I again transcribed this in full. This time however I began to question whether, due to the nature of the information I was interested in obtaining from the interviews, I actually needed to carry out the transcription myself. I was interested in the headteachers' thoughts and views and I felt that I didn't gain any more from transcribing than I had from listening to the recordings of the participants' responses. I therefore decided to employ someone to carry out the transcription of the remaining ten interviews. This person was someone who was used to transcribing legal documents so she completely understood the confidential nature of the transcriptions and agreed not to discuss them with anyone.

Once the transcriptions were complete, I listened to each interview twice with the transcription in front of me, making any slight adjustments that were needed to ensure it was a faithful representation of what the headteachers had said. I feel this process also enabled me to focus and reflect more on the meaning of what the headteachers were saying than if I had been engaged in typing, thus having a greater impact on the development of my thinking linked to my reading.

3.11.2 Analysis focused on meaning

In carrying out an analysis of the 12 interview transcripts I sought to 'bring the subjects' own understanding into the light' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p196) as well

as provide my own perspectives on the underlying leadership qualities and practices that their narratives held and in this way bring their story together. I was therefore interested in analysing the interviews to interpret the meaning of what was being said rather than the participants' use of language.

I saw engaging in analysis of the interviews as a continuous dialogue between the data, knowledge and understanding gained from the literature and my own professional experience (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014). These interacted as I submitted the data to coding using the constant comparative method of thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Once all the interviews were complete, the typed interview texts were placed in NVivo 10. I had already listened to the recordings of each of the interviews twice when checking the accuracy of the transcriptions and so temporary constructs (Thomas, 2013) emerging from the data were already beginning to appear.

The analysis of the leadership qualities and practices of the headteachers as system leaders were considered separately during coding due to the differences identified in the conceptual framework emerging from the review of the literature. This was also reinforced by the way the data responded to coding. The latter was therefore both concept and data driven (Gibbs, 2007) as I will demonstrate when discussing the coding of qualities and practices in turn and return to when presenting and discussing my findings in Chapter 4.

Each section of an interview that reflected a leadership quality was highlighted with reference to the five leadership qualities emerging from the literature as set out in Chapter 2. These were moral purpose, integrity, humility, resilience and being reflective. This drew out the connections between the sections referring to each

quality whilst maintaining the chronological order in which they appeared in each interview as shown in the example in Appendix 7. During the coding of the interviews I realised that I needed to challenge myself as I attributed a section of an interview to being evidence of a particular quality to ensure that I was consistent in my interpretation. Using the constant comparative method (Miles and Huberman, 1984), one word that kept coming into my mind in response to what the participants had said was 'commitment'. However, although I do see this as an important aspect to the leadership provided by the headteachers, it is defined as:

Commitment...2.the process or an instance of committing oneself...

(1996, p286)

Therefore, on reflection I realised that as a process it does not come under the heading of leadership qualities as applied in my organisation of terms in Chapter 2. There were no further qualities that appeared during coding so the original five identified from the literature will form the basis of my analysis.

Each interview was then submitted to the process of theme mapping through which connections between qualities were established (Thomas, 2013). This process is described in more detail in Chapter 4 in relation to the overall theme map (Figure 4.1) that emerged from the commonality found in the relationships across all the interviews.

The constant comparison method was also applied when analysing the interviews for evidence of leadership practices. However, because the conceptual framework emerging from the review of previous research into this area showed that some practices were very often aligned to particular aspects of school and system leadership, the method of network analysis (Bliss, Monk and Ogborn, 1983) was used. This enabled sub-themes appearing in the data to be linked to the core themes

identified through the literature. An example of the coding of leadership practices from a section of one interview is included in Appendix 8.

The initial coding of leadership practices was based on the four main headings used by Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009) in their 'conceptualization of the key capabilities for system leaders' (Appendix 3) which in turn, as mentioned in Chapter 2, had previously been identified by Leithwood and Riehl (2003). As I noted where the participants' responses linked to setting direction, managing teaching and learning, developing people or developing the organisation, I began to attempt to isolate the actual practices they were talking about and generate codes to name these. It was very easy to use generic language based on my reading such as 'distribute leadership', 'manage change' or 'build social capital' which did not articulate accurately or clearly enough the actual practice that the participant was referring to. As I coded the first three interviews I continued to challenge myself over the language I was using and also the organisation of these under the four main headings.

The use of NVivo 10 enabled efficient sorting and categorisation of the data during coding. The latter was always carried out at a paragraph level to ensure that the meaning was retained through the context. Having created the initial coding from the first three interviews, I read and re-read the paragraphs under each code in conjunction with returning to the literature on effective school leadership and the development of system leadership. At this point, I realised that I had sometimes been coding the same heading in two ways and also that some headings were duplicates of each other and therefore needed amending. An example of the former was using the code 'build school capacity' whether it was in the headteacher's original school or another and therefore it duplicated with 'build systems and structures'. I therefore amended both codes to differentiate between these into 'build 'home' school capacity' and 'establish systems and structures in other schools'. I also merged headings that duplicated one another. For example, I had initially created separate codes 'engage in professional dialogue' and 'create shared understanding', but on re-reading the

paragraphs I decided that the data were actually about both of these and so created the code 'engage in professional dialogue to create shared understanding'.

3.12 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the design of the research and its methods. The theoretical stance of social constructionism that underpins this research and how this informed the methodology; the selection of semi-structured telephone interviews as the research method and constant comparative thematic analysis of the data have all been discussed.

Having also demonstrated how the models representing the leadership qualities and practices of system leaders evolved through the process of data analysis these will now be used as a central part of the presentation and analysis of the findings from the research in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Presentation and **analysis of research findings**

4.1 Introduction

This research is focused on developing further understanding of the leadership qualities and practices needed by headteachers to be effective system leaders in the primary phase of education in England. Through reading of the literature, I realised that whilst significant research had been carried out into successful school leadership, research focused on system leaders working beyond more than one school tended to generalise across the primary and secondary phases. This research focuses solely on those undertaking specific system leader roles within the primary phase. To explore this area, I carried out telephone interviews with 12 headteachers from seven large rural LAs who were working to ensure the improvement of the outcomes of pupils in more than one school either through being an NLE and director of a TSA or an executive headteacher.

I intend to present the findings alongside the analysis. I see their joint consideration as reflecting the interpretivist stance taken in this research. This has implications for how the findings are viewed as I recognise that my detailed analysis is based on an interpretation of the interview evidence based on my thoughts from the reading of the research literature and understanding of the research participants' situation in working beyond one school. The purpose of the presentation and analysis of the findings is to identify the presence of specific leadership qualities and practices within the interview evidence. It is hoped this will illuminate those that emerge strongly from the interviews and therefore extend understanding of ones that may be important to carrying out the system leadership roles which the primary headteachers participating in this research fulfil. In Chapter 5 a summary of the findings will be discussed and interpreted further.

In brief, my reading of the literature on effective school leadership drew me to focus on the conceptual leadership model of learning-centred leadership. Summarising the leadership qualities and practices from two important studies in England (Day *et al*, 2010; Southworth, 2004) and comparing these to international research into leadership development (Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010, Leithwood, 2012) provided an initial theoretical framework and this was developed further through considering research on system leadership. The latter is still an emerging area, where Fullan's (2004) initial ideas; which include Heifetz's (2003) properties of adaptive challenge; linked to systems theory (Senge, 2006) are being considered in relation to the changing landscape of school leadership (Earley *et al*, 2012). However, research into this area has also drawn on the leadership qualities and practices identified within learning-centred leadership as can be seen in the extract from Higham, et al (2009) model of the key capabilities of system leader in Appendix 3.

In the conceptual model of learning-centred leadership the two major constituent parts are seen as transformational and instructional leadership. As set out in Chapter 2, the former contains the key areas of setting vision and direction and developing staff, whilst the latter is more focused on ensuring effective systems for teaching and learning are in place. Within the studies referred to above into effective school leadership and also those carried out into system leadership (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009; NCSL, 2010, Gu *et al*, 2014) these key areas are explained in a range of different terms. This research explores how leadership practices that are present within these four areas are enacted by primary headteachers undertaking system specific system leadership roles. Alongside this, their leadership qualities, as defined in Chapter 2, are also considered.

Studies have demonstrated how, as well as leading within their own school, system leaders focus on developing the leadership of others as an important part of improving the schools with which they work either temporarily or permanently (NCSL, 2010; Hill, 2011). Alongside this they lead the process of evaluation and challenge which

Hargreaves (2012) sees as essential to the success of a self-improving school system. In this chapter, through the presentation and analysis of the findings from the interviews with system leaders in the primary phase, I intend to reveal their key leadership practices and qualities, emerging from this research. As part of this I will seek to also inform understanding of the similarities and differences between headteachers working in the role of NLE and director of a TSA or as an executive headteacher and those working solely within one school. It is hoped that this will support and extend the understanding gained from the research considered within the literature review.

As stated in Chapter 3, I developed separate conceptual models of the leadership qualities and practices of system leaders derived from my reading of significant literature and the analysis of the 12 interviews. In each section I will firstly briefly reiterate the basis of the model developed from my reading of the literature prior to looking in depth at the findings from this research. The findings will be presented alongside the analysis with each quality and practice identified from my interpretation of the interview transcriptions being addressed separately. Selected quotations from the interviews are used to illuminate and exemplify the analysis.

4.2: Leadership qualities of system leaders in the primary phase

My reading of the literature places the consideration of leadership qualities firmly within the aspect of the conceptual model of learning-centred leadership that is often referred to as transformational leadership (Leithwood *et al*, 2006). Having drawn out the qualities mentioned by significant research (Southworth, 2004; Day *et al*, 2010; Barber *et al*, 2010; Leithwood, 2012) into effective school leadership (Table 2.1) I combined this with a synthesis from research into the qualities needed by system leaders (Hill and Matthews, 2010; NCSL, 2010). This identified five possible qualities that could be seen as important to the effectiveness of system leaders. These are moral purpose, integrity, humility, resilience, and to be reflective. A definition of what

is meant by each of these qualities is provided in Chapter 2. As explained in Chapter 3, I then challenged myself when submitting the interview transcriptions to coding to ensure I was consistent in my interpretation across all the interviews.

I decided to create a visual representation of the qualities as I noticed during coding of the interviews that there could be a significant overlap in the data for each quality with the same part of the interview quite often providing an example of more than one. This can be seen in the following interview extract from Headteacher 6 which is part of her response to my question about the appeal of the NLE role.

...erm... the National Support School which is attached to the NLE badge if you like. Erm I think that came about really because staff here have really taken on the idea that all children in (name of LA), if you like, deserve a good education not just the ones that come here. Erm and that if we needed it we would want somebody that was a practitioner who could come in and help us with that not somebody who was in an office in county hall somewhere. So there was a big buy in from staff with that. And so my role as an NLE is just the top of the duck really.

Headteacher 6

I coded this as demonstrating the three qualities of moral purpose, humility and being reflective. She is clear that the reason behind taking on the role of NLE is to make a contribution towards ensuring all children in the County have 'a good education', not just those that attend the school of which she is the headteacher. This is combined with humility as she recognises that it is the effectiveness of all the staff in the school which is enabling the school to be judged outstanding by Ofsted and hence why she is able to act as an NLE. Lastly, she and the staff have reflected that if they required support they would rather it was a fellow practitioner who provided it and this has influenced their decision to act as a National Support School.

I believed that developing a model showing the relational mapping of the qualities could support understanding of how these may be linked at a practical level. This

could potentially support discussion of their development and occurrence with headteachers aspiring to system leadership roles. This will be returned to when considering the recommendations and conclusions to this research. Therefore, the process of theme mapping, described in the previous chapter, was used to identify the connections between each quality and resulted in the model illustrated in Figure 4.1. The broken lines indicate that there is a connection between the two qualities.

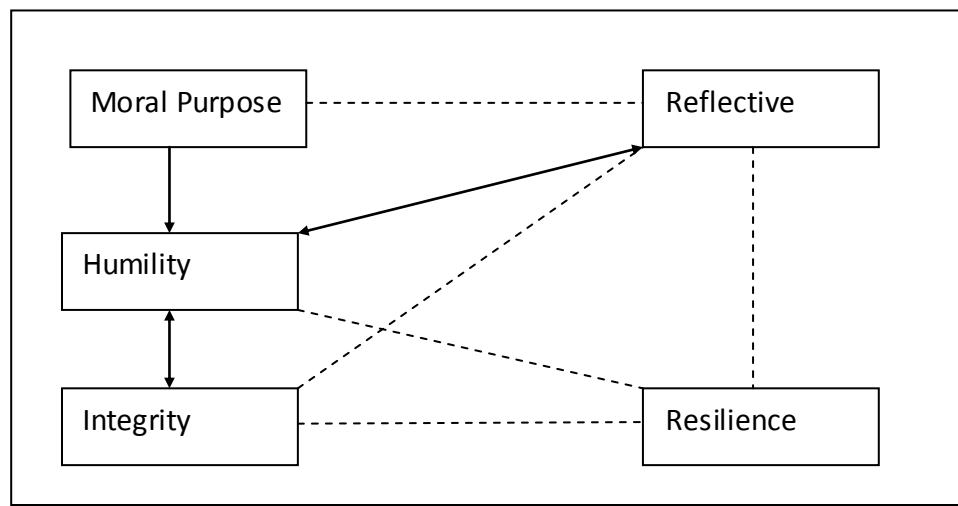


Figure 4.1: Key leadership qualities of system leaders

A solid line with an arrow indicates that the quality in some way explains the other quality to which the arrow points. I will now explore each of the qualities and their relationship as depicted in the model.

Moral purpose

The theme mapping analysis indicated that the strong moral purpose that motivated 11 of the 12 headteachers partly explained their humility. Although they sometimes gave the impression that they thought their reason for taking on a system leadership role could sound trite, it was nevertheless based on a genuine wish to improve pupils' education.

The only thing that matters is what the children do. Our core business is learning, not teaching, and what the children do. Everything we do we ask

ourselves a couple of key questions. Number one, what will it look like in the classroom? Number two, will it improve children's learning?

Headteacher 5

This resonates with Robinson's (2012) research where moral purpose was one of the three main reasons given by headteachers undertaking system leadership roles. It is also one of the four strategies that Hargreaves (2012) puts forward as denoting successful deep partnership working between schools and is highlighted by Gu *et al* (2015) as a driver for headteachers to move into the leadership of teaching schools. The participant who did not refer to this quality was relatively new to executive headship. As the headteacher of a small school, she had been approached by the governing body of another small school as their headteacher was retiring. She talked about the motivation for taking on the role of executive headteacher as being because it offered a challenge. This is another of the motivating factors mentioned in Robinson's (2012) research along with bringing financial benefits to the school.

The headteachers recognised that undertaking such a big responsibility was not something they could achieve on their own. Headteacher 5 uses 'our' and 'we' in the above quotation. This was echoed in all the interviews as the headteachers acknowledged that fulfilling this moral purpose would take everyone working as a team to achieve the goal.

Humility

This was the leadership quality that was coded the most times, appearing in 40 sections across all 12 interviews. The headteachers talked about the strengths of their staff as being the main reason they could go out and undertake the system leadership role. They were most effusive about staff in their 'home' school, however where a federation had been in place for some time they would praise the ability of the staff in all the schools equally. Even in cases where they were working with a school in challenging circumstances, they would talk about the relative strengths, showing they recognised that building on these was the way forward for working with that school.

So where I focus is on the actual belief systems of that team and actually coaching, working with them to see what the bigger picture is rather than the minutiae of their day to day monitoring systems. Actually what do we look at as a culture and how do we change the culture and turn that culture around? And then keep embedding that across the whole school system with changes is even more tricky because you will always have those blockers, those ones ...erm..., who will not move. So then I work with the leadership teams to establish... erm... empathetic ways of looking at personality, looking at how you work with individuals and looking at how we empower people.

Headteacher 3

The emphasis for all the headteachers was on empowering others. As will be seen with the analysis of their leadership practices, they often gave examples of how it was important in their work with other schools that they had not imposed their thinking on the supported school. Their humility enabled them to listen to others, recognise their skills and build on these. This in turn was supported by their integrity.

Integrity

The headteachers recognised the importance of the credibility they brought to their role of system leader. As is evident in the previous quotation from Headteacher 6, many of the headteachers mentioned that if they were leading a school in difficulty they would prefer to be supported by a fellow practitioner rather than an adviser. This was because such a person would understand how the issues felt 'on the ground' in a school from their own recent experience.

Although it was important that the headteachers were successful in leading their schools, it was also essential that this was not arrogantly portrayed as being because they had developed all the answers themselves.

All of our improvements have come about with us looking in other places, seeing what other people do well. Thinking about how it could fit with what we are doing erm and actually managing the changes that will have an effect on us. And when I say managing, I've got a very good team of people who spread the word very well and they do walk the talk.

Headteacher 6

This again demonstrates the strong link found when analysing the data between humility and integrity. The credibility of the headteachers as school leaders, as they are quick to stress, is also built on the fact that the team around them have the ability to follow through from what is said into action.

Wanting to empower others did not prevent the headteachers from following through in the improvements they saw as being necessary in first their 'home' schools and then in those they supported.

Being honest very straight forward, very straight, sometimes probably too straight sometimes erm always honest never holding anything back but also being very positive. Positive in the fact that you are in a situation that you might not want to be in erm some of them haven't even contributed to that situation. but generally everybody has to have an ownership of it and so with the leadership team it's always very quickly finding the skills, in fact diagnosing the problems within the leadership or working with those that have got the skills to do something about it.

Headteacher 2

This quotation shows this headteacher working with staff, and particularly the leadership team, in a school in challenging circumstances with an honest but positive approach to the situation they are in and what needs to be done to improve it. She recognises that she is straightforward in her approach and although she expresses some doubt that this may sometimes be too forthright she shows integrity in continuing to work in this way. It also shows how this headteacher's integrity was connected to her ability to reflect on the situation the school was in and recognise that although not all of the staff may have been responsible for its challenging situation they all needed to pull together to resolve it.

Reflective

This quality was derived from the data of all but one interview. The participant who did not refer to this quality was Headteacher 9. Her responses indicated that she could be likely to employ an autocratic leadership style. This may be the reason why she did

not give instances of being reflective as she was confident in her approach and did not feel the need to take into account other people's views or adapt future actions based on past events.

Often the headteachers demonstrated this quality through talking about the sustainability of their role or how they had responded to a particular staffing situation. In both cases they showed how these past events and staff views informed their future actions, making a clear connection to their humility and moral purpose:

If there's a misunderstanding, it is checking all the time that the message is consistent and we're doing it for the right reasons. Keep coming back to your core principles because when things get hard go back to that. Why are we doing this? View it from the child's point of view first, look at what it looks like for them. Does that help?

Headteacher 5

His approach was also to encourage and model the development of a reflective approach in his staff and those he works with in other schools. This can be seen as an example of emotional coherence (Crawford, 2009) as this headteacher recognises that when there are substantial changes that staff can become anxious and the reason for the changes can be forgotten or become hidden and so returning to why they are doing things is important. The connection to this headteacher's moral purpose is also clear as his reflections take him straight back to the reason for everything he does in his role as headteacher and system leader - improving education for the children.

Resilience

This quality was alluded to least by participants as it only appeared in eight of the 12 interviews. On all occasions that resilience was present, it was part of the participant's response to the question "Can you tell me about your approach to leading and managing change?" The headteachers talked about when they had experienced initial difficulties in implementing changes and how they had overcome these through in some cases having 'challenging conversations' where it was an individual member of

staff that was not responding positively or by gaining the support of a group of staff over time. In some cases both approaches were required:

And so it is contextualising it. It depends on where the senior leadership and governance of that school is in terms of wanting the NLE in. Because sometimes it is an imposition, they are not ready, they see it as something being done unto them rather than actually being a supportive network. So a lot of work has to be done in gaining that trust and developing a relationship where you can have those challenging conversations because usually there are some really challenging conversations.

Headteacher 1

This example also demonstrates the importance of the integrity of the system leader. It was not just about waiting for people to change their views. As this headteacher shows, his resilience is linked to working closely, openly and honestly with staff so that most are brought on board as quickly as possible and then the number of staff requiring 'challenging conversations' is reduced. Obviously each headteacher's experiences of system leadership is unique and it could be that some participants had not yet needed to be resilient. At the time of being interviewed, all the headteachers had been in a system leadership role for at least a year so it is more than likely that there would have been times when they were leading and managing change. The reason why this had not needed resilience could possibly be that for these four headteachers there had been no opposition to changes they had put in place. Alternatively, it could have been that if I asked more directly about their determination that these headteachers may have provided examples which demonstrated their resilience.

4.4 Leadership practices of system leaders in the primary phase

The basis of the model that sets out the leadership practices talked about by the participants in this research has its origins in Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) four core leadership practices that emerged from research into effective school leadership and were reflected in later studies (e.g. Day *et al* 2010, Leithwood, 2012). These four: set direction, manage teaching and learning, develop people and develop the organisation were also used by Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009) in their research into system

leadership to form the basis of their model for the key capabilities of system leaders (Appendix 3). This research seeks to provide further insight into the key leadership practices that system leaders in the primary phase employ under each of these four headings.

| Leadership practices | No. of participants mentioning | No. of times mentioned in total |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Set direction | | |
| Build and share a vision | 12 | 33 |
| Engage in professional dialogue to create shared understanding | 12 | 29 |
| Strengthen pedagogy and curriculum in other schools | 9 | 14 |
| Manage teaching and learning | | |
| Ensure high quality of teaching and learning | 11 | 16 |
| Share and extend best practice | 10 | 16 |
| Monitor and evaluate performance | 11 | 20 |
| Develop people | | |
| Set high expectations | 10 | 13 |
| Engage in succession planning | 10 | 20 |
| Coach and mentor staff into leadership roles | 10 | 23 |
| Develop the organisation | | |
| Build 'home' school capacity | 12 | 23 |
| Establish system and structures in other schools | 11 | 27 |
| Spread school to school support | 10 | 22 |

Table 4.1: Number of times and by how many participants each leadership practice was mentioned. (n=12)

A summary of the number of times each leadership practice was referred to and by how many participants (Table 4.1) shows that all of the key leadership practices were mentioned by three quarters or more of the participants and on average more than

once per participant. I believe that this supports my synthesis of the data into these key practices through the process described in detail in Chapter 3.

Four of the practices were mentioned less frequently by participants. These were setting high expectations, strengthening pedagogy and curriculum in other schools, ensuring high quality teaching and learning and sharing and extending best practice. They are practices recognised within research into school leadership in general as being important and could have been expected to be more prevalent. My reasoning as to why they were mentioned less frequently is two-fold.

Firstly, my initial questions created for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix 5) were intended to be open to interpretation by the participants so that they talked from their own views and experiences without me asking them directly about any of their leadership practices. Therefore I would expect there to be a difference in how often some key leadership practices were referred to as participants told their own story from their point of view.

Secondly, as will be seen in the detailed analysis that follows, these four practices were mostly referred to by participants as part of specific examples that related to other practices. Therefore, although they stand on their own as key leadership practices, they were mentioned as part of providing detail about another practice. Two examples that illustrate this are that 'setting high expectations' was often mentioned as part of 'building and sharing a vision' and 'ensuring high quality teaching and learning' was seen as key to the 'monitoring and evaluation of the performance of leaders'.

I intend to present and analyse each of the leadership practices referred to by participants in this research in turn following the presentation of the overall model

derived from the interview analysis. Although represented in two dimensions, I see the model revealed through the network analysis and drawn in Figure 4.2 as a square based pyramid. The four core practices are presented at the pinnacle of each face of

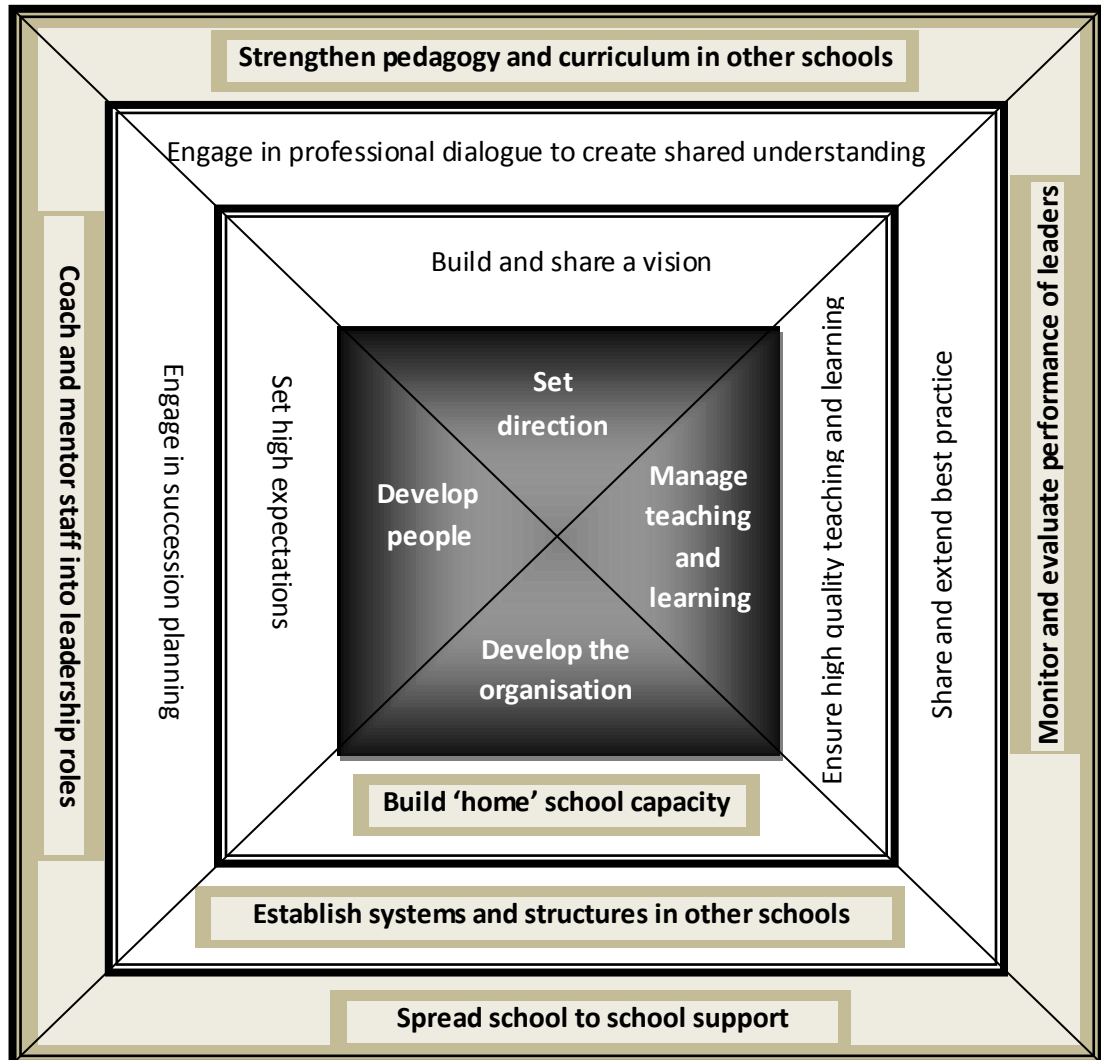


Figure 4.2: Key leadership practices of system leaders

the pyramid as headings under which the leadership practices revealed in this research are organised. This acknowledges their prominence in the model of learning centred leadership, established in the research cited above and in Chapter 2. As headings, they provide the framework for the model under which the key leadership practices are organised, but were not part of the interview analysis. The practices in each layer are linked both to the core practice that tops each triangular face and to the other

statements in the same layer on each of the faces. I will seek to draw out this two-way coherence as I discuss each of the practices through analysis of data from the interviews. To support this I will focus on the three key practices emerging from each core practice in turn. By considering the practices in this order I am simultaneously reflecting how these are part of the headteachers' leadership whatever the context, whilst focusing specifically on how they relate to their role as system leaders. This is because I acknowledge that effective system leadership has its origins in the key practices of successful leadership and I wish to draw attention to the detail of how these headteachers have extended these practices in the range of system leadership contexts in which they work. The practices in the model which seem particularly key to their roles as system leaders have been highlighted in bold text with a grey background. I will highlight the significance of these as part of considering each of these key leadership practices in turn and return to them in the conclusion to this chapter.

I will now analyse the key leadership practices under the headings provided by the four core practices in turn. As well as focusing on each one I will seek to draw out the coherence between those under the same heading and, where relevant, those in the same layer of the pyramid.

4.4.1 Set Direction

Build and share a vision

This is the first of three key leadership practices that headteachers saw as important to their work in whatever school they were working with: their 'home' school, one they were supporting or another of which they were the executive head. To recap, the importance of this practice, along with ensuring high quality teaching and learning and setting high expectations, echoes findings from research into successful leadership (Day *et al* 2010; Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010). It is notable that it was referred to

many more times than the latter two. My reasoning as to why this was the case is explained above.

The fact that all of the headteachers mentioned building and sharing a vision on multiple occasions during each interview suggests that they saw it as a high priority. They see it as an essential element of ensuring all staff and governors in a school hold the same long term view of where the school is heading and can thus work as a team to ensure it achieves its vision. The headteachers in this research also made a direct link between the longer term vision and what needs to happen in the shorter term in order for them to ensure its fulfilment.

So then I took staff through, OK so if this is saying what we want - we crystallised our vision. How are we going to get there? What do we need to be doing? And Sharon my Chair of Governors did the same with the governors so that we had a very clear picture so not just what is it going to look like next week. It can be very easy to become embroiled in the minutiae and miss the big picture stuff.

Headteacher 12

I see the awareness shown here of the danger of becoming caught up in small events or actions as being linked to strategic thinking. It is not that the detail was not important, but rather that the headteacher recognised the need to balance it with attending to the longer term or more holistic view.

Several headteachers mentioned the need to give careful consideration to the reasons behind the partnerships they were entering with other schools. They recognised that keeping a strong focus on the vision for partnership working was essential as they had witnessed other groups of schools that had not done this.

I think sometimes they have gone into it for the wrong reasons and I used to say, I think I've stopped saying but I will say it to you, they went into a huddle for the wrong huddle for the wrong reasons you know penguins do it to keep warm (laughs).

Headteacher 2

It is clear from the headteachers' responses that although building and sharing a vision is a key leadership practice of system leaders, there is no blueprint for how to do this. The approaches taken by the system leaders were directly linked to the context in which they found themselves and so therefore the needs of the school. Most talked about working very collaboratively, building the vision from the ground upwards and outlined a discussion process that was ongoing and organic. This was often true of headteachers that were very established in their school and where the pace of change was more measured. A minority still stressed the involvement of all staff and governors, but then saw the vision as set. This linked to the leadership styles employed by the headteachers, with the latter approach representing a more didactic view.

What we do is we share all the staff so the staff in all three schools that we run have a secondment policy so that what I tend to do is I place the senior assistant head in a school and it's one from here so they already have the established ethos that I want that we have here so therefore that is transferred to the new school and all staff have to operate within that and then we gradually embed that with the staff, the children and the families. We need to make sure that the families are on board in terms of the parents and meet with the parents but fundamentally it's because the staff utilise and all share the same values to start with.

Headteacher 11

This direct way of working was not common; however it does represent one end of the continuum in terms of the approach to building and sharing a vision expressed by the headteachers. It also encapsulates the views of everyone that it was essential that all the schools of which they were the substantive head should share and adhere to the same vision.

Engage in professional dialogue to create shared understanding

This is another key practice that was referred to by all the headteachers and was seen as the mechanism through which to both build and share the vision and sustain it. The emphasis they all placed on developing the shared understanding; whether with staff, governors or parents, could be seen as showing recognition that the success in

implementing the vision depended on everyone pulling in the same direction. This practice is also one which has been identified in research into effective leadership in primary schools Southworth (2004). Southworth's model of learning-centred leadership included professional dialogue and discussion as one of three ways in which headteachers' exercised influence in their school.

Headteacher 7 summarised her approach to professional dialogue as being through four 'conversations' that she continually had with all stakeholders. The first was to build relationships and trust, the second to identify possibilities for next steps and into the future, the third to agree actions. She continued:

And that last one which actually for me is critical is a conversation for feedback, so if you go through any process or any way of bringing in change or doing new things or developing things is giving people the permission and a way to give some feedback on how it's going. Does this still feel that it matches our core values and visions, has it had the impact we thought it was going to have, can we really say we've got the evidence to show that it works for us, that it is working and how do you feel? Are you a better professional as a result? Are children's lives being improved? Are standards improving as a result of what we've done and that feedback and governors are involved with that as well in terms of them being empowered to really know what difference we are making and to hear it coming from the horse's mouth if you like, engaging with staff and the parents of the children as well as me.

Headteacher 7

This explanation can be seen as encapsulating a cohesive approach through which everyone in the school is involved in how it moves forward. The focus is clearly on making improvements that have a positive impact on the children's education and recognition that this requires everyone to engage in the process, understand why changes are being made and reflect on their success.

This explanation by Headteacher 7 also demonstrates an important link between this key practice and others on the same layer of the pyramid (Figure 4.2). She refers to asking colleagues to reflect, 'Are you a better professional as a result?'. This connects to succession planning as she sees one of the outcomes from the improvements being implemented in school which are for the benefit of the children as also developing the

staff. Her references to providing evidence on how an initiative is working also allude to the importance of sharing practice.

Strengthen pedagogy and curriculum in other schools

This key practice was mentioned by the least participants being referred to by only nine of the 12 headteachers. It also had one of the least number of references, being coded on 14 occasions. As mentioned previously, the nature of the initial questions posed in the semi-structured interviews may have contributed to the lower numbers as they probably encouraged headteachers to talk about their leadership practices in a more generic way. The analysis of the 14 references to this practice revealed that all of them occurred in one of two ways. One was when the headteacher gave an example or anecdote to illustrate a point they wanted to make. This is evident in the following response from Headteacher 12. She was talking about how her role as an executive headteacher of two schools was sustainable through how she had developed the organisation. Her response reflected all three layers of this face of the pyramid as she talked about how she built the capacity in her 'home' school and then established systems and structures across the two schools. Her narration of how school to school support is organised provides the link around that layer of the pyramid to strengthening pedagogy and curriculum in other schools as she talks about the teachers she has in place to carry out that work. She remarked:

I've got three Specialist Leaders of Education across the federation including my school business manager and two other teachers. I've got other teachers here who can offer support, we are a SCITT school, we are involved in teacher training...

Headteacher 12

This practice was also referred when a follow up question elicited detail on a specific point. This was the case when talking with Headteacher 6 who is an NLE and whose school at the time was also a Leadership Development School used by NCSL to undertake training of headteachers and other senior leaders. As a NSS her senior

teachers were involved in supporting schools in challenging circumstances and she has taken this into account when making strategic decisions about their teaching commitment. When asked how she worked with leaders to ensure they 'walked the talk' she said:

I've taken them along with me in the sense that they are not classroom bound. That the three key drivers in the primary school are not classroom teachers for the most part. But what they do have; they have the most difficult to teach children. So the groups of children who are most difficult to teach are taught by them for a period every day you know, mornings, they teach mornings so that they are never far away from what makes a difference in these schools that we support. They also visit a lot of other schools. ... They are encouraged to learn from other schools and bring it back here and because they are in the classroom they are very highly respected by other teachers.

Headteacher 6

This illustrates very clearly how Headteacher 6 has built the capacity in her 'home' school to ensure that specific teachers are available to work with other schools, are up to date and therefore have a high level of credibility with colleagues when supporting them in developing their pedagogy and curriculum.

Importantly, both examples also reveal that it is not about these headteachers carrying out the work themselves. As system leaders, they have recognised that it is about how they develop others and their organisation that then allows them to impact on the pedagogy and curriculum in other schools. They set the direction, which is enacted through the ongoing professional dialogue, but it is for those whom they lead to actually see this practice through. This relates directly to Southworth's (2004) model of direct and indirect influence and I will return to this when considering the implications from this research in Chapter 5.

4.4.2 Manage teaching and learning

As with the previous practice, the first two in this face of the pyramid have a lower number of references for the reasons mentioned previously.

Ensure high quality teaching and learning

All the 11 headteachers who referred to this leadership practice were consistent in drawing attention to the importance of linking this practice to that of setting high expectations. They all gave examples of ‘non-negotiables’ for teaching and learning that involved aspects of pedagogy. These were instrumental to all teachers achieving the high expectation held by all the headteachers ‘that every child has the right to an outstanding education taught by outstanding teachers’ (Headteacher 1).

All the headteachers demonstrated how ensuring high quality teaching and learning was part of their strategic role. This was in the fore front of one headteacher’s mind as she had moved into the role of executive head relatively recently. She remarked:

Actually I always felt guilty as a teaching head because you know you would always want to put up more displays, was my marking good enough, did I put enough hours in to my planning, did I have enough time to speak to children? And I think all those things you felt really guilty. And you know in the middle of lesson times my administrator would come in and say there is a really important phone call and trying to balance that is really difficult. It’s actually much easier just to do the headship role.

Headteacher 10

Headteacher 10 is demonstrating the benefit to her two schools of having someone that can concentrate solely on strategic leadership without having to worry if the operational aspects such as her own class teaching are of a high enough standard. Being freed to work at this level for this headteacher meant that her role had become much more sustainable. Throughout her interview she also showed that she had adapted well to being one step removed from the classroom. She talked about how excellent her team was and how they took on new ideas for improving teaching and learning readily and with enthusiasm. One can speculate that this would be as direct result of her own leadership of this area as she passed on her own in-depth understanding gained in the classroom.

This key leadership practice was often mentioned in conjunction with monitoring and evaluating the performance of leaders. I will draw out the links when analysing that section.

Share and extend best practice

This is the last of the leadership practices with a lower number of references by headteachers. All of the ten headteachers mentioning it did so in the context of explaining their approach to working with other schools. However, there was a range of leadership styles apparent in the different ways this was carried out. These also reflected the contexts in which their support of other schools occurred.

Ongoing support of other schools through leading continuing professional development or initial teacher training, as demonstrated when focusing on the practice of strengthening pedagogy and curriculum, was often seen as a two way process. The headteachers gave examples of their own staff learning from visiting other schools and working with teachers as much as they helped to improve those they worked with.

And the National Support School work gave staff the opportunity to go in, work with other staff and therefore become more effective in their practice. And probably as a consequence of that they are probably far better teachers and leaders than they would have been otherwise.

Headteacher 8

On the other hand, working with a school in Special Measures was seen, at least in the early days of their engagement, as more a one way process as the best practice from the NSS was 'imported' into the supported school in order for the effectiveness of teaching to improve as quickly as possible.

Headteacher 4 articulated some of the humility needed to avoid the supported school putting up barriers, when he said:

Well it's really interesting because I learned the hard way because we were Primary Consultant Leaders before NLE/NSS status umm and (name of LA) said we'd like you to go along and work alongside and they gave us a couple of days training. The view was then, although I was known and I think fairly well respected by my colleagues, the view was that big head (name of school) is coming and telling us what to do. And I was quite honest with the heads, from meetings that you've heard me talk at or unofficially over coffee that I've always said please help us when we've got problems and we'll share our expertise in some of the areas that we've got. And it's better that you and I work together and some of my staff maybe support some of your staff better than Ofsted comes and puts you in a category. And the hostility normally disappears.

Headteacher 4

He also shows an awareness of how the role of system leader has developed from its early days as an initiative within the National Strategies with the PSCL programme to his more autonomous position as an NLE and director of a TSA. His realisation that no matter how good his own school is that there will always be things that can be learned from elsewhere emerges strongly. If the best practice that he has in his school is to be incorporated into the day to day work of other schools, he recognises that humility will be instrumental in ensuring this happens. He has recognised that headteachers of supported schools do not want to feel done unto and this has permeated his approach to sharing best practice along with a pragmatic view that school to school support is more acceptable than direct intervention by government through Ofsted.

Monitor and evaluate the performance of leaders

As mentioned above, this leadership practice was often referred to in conjunction with ensuring the high quality of teaching and learning. Importantly, this was not because headteachers saw that they had the sole responsibility for monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning but rather, as noted by Headteacher 3:

You need to build in, not necessarily time to be monitoring the whole school, but time to be monitoring that upper tier of accountable leadership within the school that then they are with you coaching them, monitoring, working with them to ensure that they're on the right track on their own development. I've got a head of school here; last year her main focus for me was learning how to run the school.

This again shows the headteachers having a strategic view as they realise that their role is to ensure other senior leaders are held to account through monitoring and evaluation of their performance and that this links to their role in developing people as they coach and mentor these staff into leadership roles.

All the 11 headteachers mentioning this leadership practice placed it as a very high priority. They realised that the strength of senior leaders, whether in their 'home' school, other schools they were directly leading or in schools they were supporting was crucial to that school's success. This was not always an easy part of their work. Several headteachers talked about difficult conversations needing to take place with established senior leaders in schools that they had recently begun leading or were supporting. In these situations the headteachers brought many of the qualities identified previously to bear, particularly moral purpose and resilience as they maintained their focus on improving outcomes for children in the school.

This leadership practice also relied on headteachers 'letting go' as they put their trust in senior leaders to do what was needed, often in their absence as they worked with other schools. This could be taking over specific aspects such as pupil data, or as in the example above, learning the operational leadership of the school which included the senior leaders taking on the role of monitoring and evaluating the performance of class teachers. It was clear that the trust came about through rigorous accountability being put in place. Therefore, everyone involved was aware of the expectations and they had a shared understanding of the systems and structures that existed in each school. This links to the coaching and mentoring of staff into leadership roles which is part of the next set of practices.

4.4.3 Develop People

The leadership practices in the second and third layers of this face of the pyramid can be ones that are neglected by headteachers, particularly those that become immersed in the day to day operational needs of their school (NCSL, 2010).

Set high expectations

For the ten headteachers who mentioned this leadership practice its importance resided in the whole raison d'être of why they did their job: the children. They all saw setting high expectations as the baseline for providing an outstanding education for the children as it would ensure there were no limits put on their learning. As mentioned earlier, this was intrinsically linked to their vision, summarised by Headteacher 8 as:

creating a haven in which children flourish... and flourish being deliberately not just about achievement but wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, physical wellbeing, mental health, communities, families, all of that pulled together

This wide view of what was meant by high expectations was reinforced by all the heads. Although they had their focus firmly on pupils achieving high academic standards they also recognised that the way to ensure this was to set high expectations in all areas of the curriculum both within and beyond lessons to include the whole education of the pupils.

You do not narrow the curriculum, you know, and that's what most heads will do when they get into difficulty they will just concentrate on English and maths and a little bit of everything else and instead you keep everything as broad as possible.

Headteacher 2

In this way they ensured that teachers in the schools they supported, or became the leaders of, became highly skilled. The high expectations for the children translated directly into having high expectations for the staff in the schools.

So the baseline is always about having a good foundation and at the same time working on bringing people together. Establishing the strengths within a school,

establishing the need fairly quickly. The needs are usually the same but the people are different and so people will need erm some people will need more time for leadership to spend with them. Other people will just take on board really quickly.

Headteacher 2

It is clear from this headteacher that she saw it as a given that everyone could make the journey from whatever their starting point to good and outstanding teaching. What could be different was the amount of guidance and support they would need to get there.

Engage in succession planning

Succession planning was seen as essential by headteachers from two perspectives. Firstly, because they realised that without strong leadership in their 'home' school they could not go out and support other schools and so they needed to grow leaders that could stand in for them and ensure the school continued to work effectively.

Secondly, they realised that supporting other schools was not just about them, but about senior leaders in their school or schools working with other senior leaders and teachers in the supported schools. This links strongly to the leadership quality of humility mentioned previously.

If you look on the web site the Ofsted report from three years ago, they looked at leadership and management and at our impact on other schools and they were very pleased with what people were saying because it was about the shared leadership and shared vision and that's what all the leadership models say don't they that this one person this charismatic leader who leads it is only short term isn't it? If you want long term impact it has got to come from within hasn't it?

Headteacher 5

This headteacher talked about how the structure of the leadership in his 'home' school had changed dramatically over the last eight years, firstly as it became a NSS and then when it became a teaching school. He saw that it would continue to evolve to meet the needs of the schools in the federation and the schools they supported. This

evolution was in the minds of the headteachers as they recognised the significance of being able to respond quickly to staff changes:

...and you've got to be two steps ahead all the time and you've also got to be thinking what if Kate jumps and has a school of her own - have I got the next tier down ready for the head of school's job? Because I can't bring somebody necessarily from the outside to do it instantly, I need them to know this school inside out. So there is that tier as well that are (sic) being trained to ensure that they can step in to that role too.

Headteacher 3

This shows a strategic mindset and also one that sees change and people moving on and developing in a positive light. The headteachers all echoed this view and this led directly to them being very involved with the coaching and mentoring of staff into leadership roles. In this way their engagement in succession planning linked via the latter into the spread of school to school support as leaders and teachers that they worked with and developed moved out to work with more schools.

Coach and mentor staff into leadership roles

Headteachers often identified how they were filling a gap that existed locally for potential leaders to develop their leadership skills.

...what I find is that I like to extend the leaders we have so I think we have a lot of capable middle leaders and senior leaders that certainly in (county name) do not necessarily have the opportunity to extend that or do not necessarily have the skills initially to extend those skills into other schools. So what we do is we develop that leadership here but then give them the opportunity to practice if you like in another setting that is directly under my day to day eye and they can sort of take risks, they can sort of chance their arm, practice some of the things that they want to do with the security of I suppose my neck is on the line if anything goes wrong.

Headteacher 5

In a sense they are providing the opportunity that previously might have been supported by the LA brokering staff into acting leadership roles in schools. The headteachers all took the ultimate responsibility for the actions of their senior leaders as they 'experimented' in their new roles. The risk they were taking was a calculated

one as they knew their staff and the situation they were putting them into very well and they also maintained close contact with them therefore the risk of failure was very small.

Several headteachers used the term 'distributed leadership' as they described their encouragement of others into leadership roles. However, as one headteacher remarked:

..a lot of people talk about it but they actually do a lot more distributed management and a little bit of shared leadership. They distribute managerial tasks not the leadership tasks. Leadership is about solving problems, seeing what needs to be done, seeking solutions and carrying them through and being accountable and responsible for those decisions.

Headteacher 1

This links well to the point made by the previous headteacher. They are both making the same clear distinction between leadership and management as they recognise that the former comes from identifying priorities, taking initiatives forward, and being held to account for the outcomes. However, they are also both only referring to distributed leadership in the context of staff seen traditionally as leaders in school rather than the definition put forward by Harris (2010) where any member of staff, including the NQT or teaching assistant, can be a leader.

One positive outcome from their view of distributed leadership was that the headteachers all described how closely they worked with their senior leaders. This was a real change for some of the headteachers who had previously led small primary schools where they would not have had a senior leadership team. This group all appreciated the advantages of their new situation and this had a direct impact on how they viewed the challenge of developing the organisation that they led and those they supported.

4.4.4 Develop the organisation

This is the face of the pyramid that really sets apart the system leaders that participated in this research with those headteachers whose influence remains within one school. As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, setting direction, managing teaching and learning and developing people are well documented as key areas of effective school leadership (Day *et al*, 2010). The area that is exclusive to system leaders is that of working to improve the outcomes of pupils across more than one school (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009) and therefore seeking to extend their influence to develop the organisations in their charge or with whom they are working temporarily.

Build 'home' school capacity

This practice has already been mentioned when discussing some of the other leadership practices and that is because it is seen by the headteachers as having an absolutely central role to play in ensuring the sustainability of system leadership. It was commented on extensively by all the participants. Originally I had coded my analysis as simply 'building school capacity', but on re-reading I found that there was something more specific being referred to. All the headteachers realised that without everything being securely in place in the school in which they had originally demonstrated their outstanding leadership skills they would not be able to work outside that school as a system leader. As Headteacher 1 commented:

So I run the federation, they run their schools and I coach and mentor them as leaders of teachers and learning. That's my role, but my job is not to run a school. Now under that model I build myself capacity to have far more flexibility in my constraints on my time and my deployment. And also I have more time to read and have more head space - that's how I would describe it. So to keep my role sustainable as an NLE and an executive head of a federation is to actually build a system which is not like a single school system.

This awareness of the focus of the role in working across more than one school has not always been so apparent. When the position of executive headteacher first became

possible following the Education Act in 2002, many executive headteacher posts were created in crisis situations where a school was without its own headteacher, often because of an inability to recruit to a vacant post (Blackburn, 2012). In this situation, another headteacher in a successful local school would often be approached, either by the LA or the school's governing body, to provide temporary leadership. Sometimes, the urgency of the request meant that the position of the 'home' school was not thought through and it was left without clear leadership in place. This meant that sharing the strong leadership of the headteacher was potentially now putting two schools at risk. Similarly the creation of NLEs meant that headteachers needed to balance supporting another school in difficulty with ensuring that their 'home' school was still working effectively as the status of NLE was contingent with being the headteacher when the school was judged outstanding in its most recent Ofsted inspection (Hill and Matthews, 2008).

It's funny that before I came on the phone with you - five minutes before - I was on the phone to a headteacher from (region name) coaching them through the idea of how they are going to put some systems in place for their own school because they have gone out as an NLE. They are doing work as an NLE and they are finding that they are overrun because they are still having their day job as well.

Headteacher 3

This is an example of how even headteachers whose school's leadership and management has been judged outstanding by Ofsted can need support in adjusting to working as a system leader. I will return to this when discussing the recommendations from this research in Chapter 6.

In contrast, the headteachers who took part in this research were very clear about how they had ensured that their 'home' school was continuing to thrive following their move into a system leader role. Headteacher 7 said:

...so I have a head of school for (school name) and who is a very talented lady who basically runs it on a day to day basis, she is in charge of teaching and learning, she does all the main connection with parents and children, she does

assemblies, she's on the playground in the morning for parents, she is very much the face for (school name) for the children and the parents.

Not only could all the executive headteachers interviewed set out the key responsibilities of the person in charge on the 'home' site, but they realised that they had played a key role in ensuring that person had the skills and understanding to carry it out. The headteachers also recognised that the importance they had placed on developing a shared vision in their school was also fundamental to its success when they were not there.

Establish systems and structures in other schools

The headteachers' views on how they established systems and structures in other schools was directly related to the context that they were working in and to the needs of the school or schools they were working with.

NLEs supporting schools in the Ofsted category of requiring Special Measures recognised that certain 'non-negotiables' needed to be put in place immediately. One NLE focused first on 'quick wins' and talked about how these were imported from her 'home' school.

You put in new systems and structures that you know work and are just general things that children should have, you know a timetable which is reflective of the needs of the school. A timetable that gives a broad curriculum.

Headteacher 2

Although at first her example of importing a timetable that establishes pupils' entitlement to a broad curriculum could be seen as ignoring the school's own context, she does include that it should be 'reflective of the needs of the school'. This balance between realising there was a need to impose key systems or structures and yet still respond to the school's context was particularly evident when NLEs were talking about

working in schools in Ofsted categories where there was nothing in place or where what was there was completely ineffective.

Another NLE, again working in a school requiring Special Measures, decided that the best way to ensure that new systems and structures were established was to increase the capacity of the supported school through the addition of staff from her 'home' school.

We do a lot of seconding of staff, that's one of the things I was saying, for example the school I described at the moment supporting the head, I've got three members of staff seconded over there for various lengths of time. One was seconded for two years, another is there until August, another there until Christmas. They are all doing specific pieces of work.

Headteacher 6

This example demonstrates the connection to the other three leadership practices on that level of the pyramid. It requires succession planning to have been in place in the 'home' school so that the roles previously fulfilled by those members of staff can be backfilled by colleagues. It is also a way for the NLE to ensure the sharing and extending of best practice as the three seconded staff must be of a high calibre and therefore able to model effective teaching and learning. They will also therefore be likely to reinforce the professional dialogue that the NLE is engaging in with the school's headteacher and staff.

Again, this exemplifies that although all these leadership practices begin from the system leader, to have the highest impact on the outcomes for pupils in other schools they also need to be enacted by all staff, in that headteacher's 'home' school. This was intimated by Headteacher 5 in the section on succession planning above and can also be seen when Headteacher 11, an executive headteacher of two outstanding schools and one that currently has an Ofsted judgement of requiring improvement, talks about how the systems and structures were established in the latter school. At the time that school:

..went into special measures the day we took it over, we knew that was going to happen and those non-negotiables were basically shipped in very quickly because they weren't in place. ... And we have phase leaders, assistant heads and middle leaders and coordinators that say this is what we work to, this is how we monitor. So those routines quickly get established very quickly. ... so the only way I can sustain that is to make sure that I have a very strong team around me and in all the schools, working for the same principles and practices that I have put in place here over the years. To make sure that they are delivering the same key messages and we meet regularly to make sure if there are any problems that are cropping up we can pick up on those as they arise.

Headteacher 11

The middle and senior leadership structures that this executive headteacher describes are ones that are common in many primary schools. Rather than the structure itself being the key, it is how this is utilised by the headteacher. This is another example of how the qualities of these system leaders conjoin with their key leadership practices. This headteacher is working with integrity and humility with all the leaders in the three schools that she leads. She makes clear the principles she is working from and links these into practices that are followed consistently by herself and therefore everybody else. This is maintained by the ongoing professional dialogue which ensures the team of leaders work in a problem solving culture as the headteacher knows she could not do it without all their knowledge and skills.

The vast majority of the scenarios provided by the headteachers were wholly positive about this particular leadership practice; however there were some examples where the headteachers had encountered challenges in the areas of establishing systems and structures. For Headteacher 12 this came about for perhaps the opposite reason than would be expected. She said:

It was very clear I couldn't get the senior teacher on board and I had to have a couple of frank professional conversations. He felt that I should have gone in and changed everything. His opinion was that I hadn't changed anything. I did throw back at him equally that if I had gone in and changed everything in an outstanding school they would have been saying actually, you know, why are you coming in here and changing everything?

Headteacher 12

She had made the opposite decision to the previous two headteachers and not imposed new systems or structures. This was in direct response to taking into account the context of the school's current situation. She was already the headteacher of one school with a judgement of outstanding from Ofsted and had then moved to become the executive headteacher over another one that was also judged outstanding. Her response to the criticism from the senior leader shows her resilience in maintaining and justifying her decision even though it was not popular.

Spread school to school support

All the headteachers were committed to Hargreaves' (2010; 2011; 2012) vision for a self-improving school system. As the quotations throughout this chapter clearly demonstrate, they have taken on the mantle of system leadership in order to improve the outcomes for pupils in more than one school. In whatever context they are working in they have moved beyond seeing their responsibility as being solely for the pupils in one building and where they are the executive headteacher that has influenced to how they employ their staff. For Headteacher 1:

So everybody within the federation is employed by the federation so they can work in every school. So the whole idea of this being anchored to a school is broken within that system and that should extend out from that actually you know we are here for all children in the country. What we have to worry about is this moment in time. It doesn't matter what schools, area, setting we are in.

The emphasis was on the schools being organised and run to make the most difference to pupils' education, rather than to support the needs of the teachers or other staff. Therefore the focus of school to school support was on how to improve outcomes for pupils through whatever takes place rather than simply having the goal to provide PD for teachers.

So trying to look at, constantly coming back to what's in it for teaching and learning? What's in it for the children? And also how can we all work smarter? And make better outcomes for the children, that's the bottom line. So for example we have opportunities to plan together, train together, have staff development

together. We do residentials together, all more cost effective than doing them separately.

Headteacher 12

With the overarching objective of improving pupils' outcomes across schools driving whatever school to school support took place, the headteachers were also aware that this also made good sense from a financial point of view. The impact that these headteachers could evidence from the support they had provided would be directly related to the drive coming from their focus on pupils' learning needs. I will return to this area in Chapter 6 when considering the recommendations for LA J. Here, funding incentives offered by the LA to provide seed funding for school to school support projects have led some schools to collaborate more for financial gain. The result of this has then been that the focus of the joint working has been vague and therefore the benefits for pupils unclear.

All of the headteachers demonstrated their political awareness as they talked about the sustainability of their role as a system leader in providing school to school support and how they saw it within the education system in the future. Those headteachers who were also directors of teaching schools particularly emphasised what they saw as the fragility of the status of teaching school being linked to maintaining an outstanding judgement from Ofsted. As one remarked, 'our school is sort of live by the sword, die by the sword scenario that if your school goes down so does your system leadership'. They also recognised the financial fragility of the reduced funding formula from the DfE in the first four years of the teaching school meaning that it would ultimately become self-financing. These headteachers saw their role in providing school to school support on a much bigger scale than those who were purely executive headteachers. This became clear when Headteacher 4 discussed the implications of providing initial teacher training and professional development for NQTs and teachers in the early years of their career. He recognised that the teaching school cannot do this alone:

But I think in partnership we can... for example we are looking at (university name) will still send to us PGCEs and they will give us I think £600 per student to support that. Obviously if we go down the School Direct route they would have

to release some of the funding to place those students more in school. Which would obviously make it less expensive for them to run the courses. But then we would buy back with some of that money extended CPD from them for a teacher's second, third and fourth year of their career. At the moment it is very ad hoc isn't it once a NQT has qualified. I mean great heads ensure that that CPD continues, but there is not a lot of pedagogical support and I think universities could carry on providing this for the first five years of a teacher's career and it might stop the high percentage of teachers leaving within the first five years. A frightening statistic! So I think there is a lot of scope to have discussions with the DfE about funding streams.

Headteacher 4

The scenario that this headteacher described demonstrates how far his thinking has moved during his time as a system leader. As referred to earlier when talking about sharing and extending best practice, his first experience as a system leader had been as part of the PCSL programme. In a few years he had moved from working with one or two headteachers and their schools to providing a very significant amount of training and professional development for teachers in his and even neighbouring LAs.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter the research findings have been presented based around two conceptual models, one representing the connections between five leadership qualities following from theme mapping and the other providing a framework for 12 leadership practices derived from network analysis.

The leadership qualities emerging from the research findings reflect those found in research into leadership of one school (Southworth, 2004; Barber *et al*, 2010). However, within the leadership practices there are those which reflect research into effective leadership (Day *et al*, 2010; Leithwood, 2012) and a further six which have emerged from the interview evidence that are seen as particularly key to system leadership roles. These are highlighted in the conceptual model (Figure 4.2) through the bold text and dark grey background as:

Develop people

- Coach and mentor staff into leadership roles

Manage teaching and learning

- Monitor and evaluate the performance of leaders

Set direction

- Strengthen pedagogy and curriculum in other schools

Develop the organisation

- Build 'home' school capacity
- Establish systems and structures in other schools
- Spread school to school support

Whilst the first two could also be seen as important practices for the headteacher of one school, previous research has found that they can also be those which are neglected (NCSL, 2010) by school leaders. The responses of the system leaders interviewed in this research showed that they saw coaching and mentoring staff into leadership roles and then monitoring and evaluating their performance as essential practices that not only meant they had the capacity to carry out their roles, but also ensured that when they were not directly working with a particular school that its leaders were continuing to move it forward. These practices relate to another from the heading of 'develop the organisation', that of building 'home' school capacity. This emerged from the interview evidence as a prerequisite for the headteachers in this research to undertake a system leadership role. Without enacting this key practice they recognised that being absent from their original school would not be sustainable as others would not have the experience or expertise to take their place.

The other two practices under the heading of develop the organisation (establish systems and structures in other schools and spread school to school support) along with strengthen pedagogy and curriculum in other schools complete the key practices emerging from the interview evidence as being particularly key to the role of system leaders. These would seem to summarise the focus of the work narrated by these executive headteachers and NLEs as they supported other schools temporarily or became the substantive head of more than one school. Although the role of director of a TSA is seen as a distinctive system leadership role (Gu *et al*, 2015) additional leadership practices for headteachers enacting this role were not detected in the interview evidence. One reason for this may be that, with the exception of Headteachers 1 and 4, the other headteachers who were the director of a TSA at the time of being interviewed were relatively new to the role.

The following chapter provides further interpretation of the findings. It reflects on the original research questions and considers how specific qualities and practices identified from the interview responses influence or are part of the headteachers' motivation and strategic capability to carry out a system leadership role. This will lead to drawing conclusions from the research and offering recommendations in the final chapter.

Chapter 5: Summary, discussion and interpretation of findings

5.1 Introduction

Having presented and analysed the research findings, in this chapter I will discuss these in summary in relation to the literature and my research questions on the leadership qualities and practices needed by a headteacher in the primary phase to be an effective system leader.

I will begin by focusing on how the motivation of headteachers in this research to undertake a system leadership role appears to be linked to the leadership quality of moral purpose. I will then move on to how the leadership qualities and practices identified in this research seem to form part of the strategic capability of the headteachers acting as system leaders. This will be followed by a consideration of the influence that the specific system leadership role undertaken by a primary headteacher and the context in which they enact this has on their leadership qualities and practices. I will conclude the chapter by reflecting on how system leaders view their role and how this is then translated into the leadership qualities and practices to which their responses have been linked in this research.

5.2 Motivation of headteachers in this research to undertake a system leadership role

As presented in the analysis of the interviews in Chapter 4, moral purpose was found to be a key leadership quality emerging from the interviews. When asked what the appeal was of becoming a system leader, 11 of the 12 headteachers articulated in some way that ensuring improvements in pupils' education was motivating them to undertake a system leadership role. This links to Robinson's (2012) findings. When she began her research in 2005, system leadership was just emerging as a significant influence on the leadership landscape in schools. Her research question focused on whether headteachers were undertaking these system leader roles due to intrinsic or

extrinsic forms of motivation. As mentioned in Chapter 2, she identified three main reasons why headteachers undertook the new roles. The first of these was a sense of moral purpose along with the professional challenge and the financial benefits of being a system leader. Whilst one or two headteachers in this research talked about the latter two reasons, these did not figure highly in their interview responses. The NLEs who were also directors of TSAs did mention financial issues as they were aware of the increasing responsibility for them to be self-funding after four years, but these comments were linked to ensuring their work with other schools could continue rather than being a reason for doing the role.

Therefore, from the responses of the system leaders in this research, the moral purpose of enhancing the learning and achievement of all pupils appears to be the strongest motivator. This underpinned their wish to make a difference to pupils' education beyond their original or 'home' school. They talked about where colleague headteachers (and governing bodies) had been attracted into system leadership roles for either financial gain or due to a leadership crisis. They recognised that this could result in the role not being sustainable as the motives were not necessarily ones which would lead to long term commitment.

The building that the pupil happens to be in is not of concern to them as their moral purpose is focused on whole system transformation (Fullan, 2005).

I feel it is a moral imperative really because I'm looking at this from the point of view that the practice that we have been putting in place here and that the things that we've instilled here um, can quite easily be shared to improve the outcomes of other children's lives. And I don't think we ought to sit on this and that there's a little island of our own and look at us aren't we just fantastic.

Headteacher 3

I would argue that this response illustrates how the leadership practices identified in this research of 'engaging in professional dialogue to create shared understanding' and 'sharing and extending best practice' are rooted in this moral purpose and the

commitment to the learning of pupils in their community in whichever school they are in. This could be seen as demonstrating how these headteachers' responses showed them working as systems thinkers (Senge, 2006) and so likely to react positively to situations that present 'adaptive challenges' (Heifetz, 2003). These require leaders to adopt a problem solving approach in complex and new situations and engage others in changes that will make a significant difference to pupils' outcomes.

5.3 Leadership qualities and practices forming part of the strategic capability of system leaders

Identifying the leadership qualities and practices through analysis of the responses of 12 system leaders in the primary phase revealed that these headteachers were not only building learning organisations (Senge, 2006) through demonstrating school leadership as seen in significant research (Southworth, 2004; Day *et al*, 2010; Barber *et al*, 2010; Leithwood, 2012 and Matthews *et al*, 2014), but they were going beyond this. Their responses indicate that they were as concerned about the outcomes for pupils in other schools as they were in their 'home' school and saw their role as including developing the leaders of the future (Fullan, 2004).

The headteachers often began talking about how they started working with a school they were supporting or of which they had just become the executive headteacher by outlining their approach to developing systems and structures they identified as being needed in that particular setting. As noted by Headteacher 2 in Chapter 4, this could link to strengthening the pedagogy and curriculum in a school and could also be supported through school to school support, as seen in the quotation from Headteacher 12. These leadership practices, identified in the conclusion of Chapter 4 as three of the six emerging from this research as particularly key to the system leadership roles being fulfilled by the headteachers, I would argue form part of their strategic capability. The headteachers talked about the importance of not imposing systems and structures (which often included pedagogy and approaches to the

curriculum) on other schools just because they had worked successfully in their original schools. Their responses pointed to an awareness of the importance of appreciating the context of the school they were working with and needs of its pupils to shape the direction they took. This applied when they were talking about a school they were leading or when they were offering guidance and advice to school leaders in a school they were supporting. It also encompassed an appreciation of when and how school to school support would have a positive impact. Again, the headteachers' responses showed that they were able to stand back from situations in order to determine the best course of action, for example whether to organise joint PD for teachers with staff from their original school or involve individual staff in working in a school to model and share best practice. I see all these decisions as drawing on the headteachers' strategic capability as system leaders.

Their responses in the interviews also show them thinking strategically about the leadership of their 'home' school by developing people through coaching and mentoring into leadership roles. This is seen as essential to ensuring that there is the capacity for them to work as a leader improving outcomes for pupils in other schools. It links directly to research by Hill (2011) and Matthews *et al* (2014) and its importance as a practice for all headteachers can be seen in its inclusion in the 2015 standards for headteachers where it is given its own standard, 'Identify emerging talents, coaching current and aspiring leaders in a climate where excellence is the standard, leading to clear succession planning' (DfE, 2015, p. 6). However, it has also been found (NCSL, 2010) to be an area in which headteachers have not been as effective. Therefore it would seem possible that paying attention to the leadership development of others is an area that potentially sets headteachers acting as system leaders apart.

An area of interest emerging from the literature review in Chapter 2 that is linked to the leadership development of others, and is echoed in this research, is that headteachers can sometimes delegate management tasks to their senior leaders rather than involving them in leadership tasks. The interview responses showed that

the headteachers realised the importance of the latter to build both their 'home' school leadership capacity and that of the schools of which they were either executive headteacher or were currently supporting. As Headteacher 1 saw it, the difference between management and leadership tasks is that the latter 'is about solving problems', 'seeking solutions', and 'being accountable and responsible for those decisions'. The system leaders in this research talked eloquently about how they had ensured the development of senior and middle leaders through their forward thinking that meant they were always 'two steps ahead' (Headteacher 3) in planning for staff to learn knowledge and skills and develop understanding that would let them step into a future role. They saw their role in coaching and mentoring these staff as central and provided opportunities for them to experiment in a new role whilst still being in discussion with them so that they succeeded in it. In this way developing people led directly to developing the organisation as the 'new' leaders would often have these opportunities directly because of the role being undertaken by the system leader. This could require them to step up in their 'home' school as the headteacher was out of school more often working as an NLE with other schools, or it could involve them taking on the new role in a supported school or one with which their 'home' school had joined in partnership.

I would argue that this scenario shows the power of system leadership in extending the influence of headteachers and developing the next generation of leaders as found in previous research (NCSL, 2010; Hill and Matthews, 2010). It is also echoing the view of system leaders assuming the leadership of this area from national organisations and LAs as described by Taylor, Chief Executive of NCTL, in a blog begun in 2015 entitled 'A school-led system' (NCTL, 2015b). This has since been articulated more formally in the vision of the DfE set out in the White Paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' (DfE, 2016).

However, I also found in this research; that just because a headteacher has been judged to have outstanding leadership and management as part of their school's

Ofsted inspection, it should not be presumed that they see the need to work strategically as an essential part of becoming a system leader. This was revealed in several interviews, such as the example given by Headteacher 3 in Chapter 4 where the new NLE he was supporting either hadn't built the leadership capacity of their home school before becoming an NLE or hadn't seen the need to adapt their leadership approach to include more indirect influence. I will return to this in Chapter 6 as part of the recommendations arising from this research.

5.4 The impact of context on the leadership qualities and practices of system leaders

When embarking on this research, based on the literature (Southworth, 2004) and anecdotal examples from my own professional experience, I saw the context in which system leaders enact their role as an aspect worthy of consideration. Would there be a difference between the leadership qualities and practices of systems leaders working in schools in different circumstances? This could be between small primary schools as opposed to large ones or when working with schools judged outstanding as opposed to those in an Ofsted category of requiring special measures.

One of the surprises emerging from the analysis of the interviews is that this context did not appear to have a specific influence that affects the leadership qualities and practices as I interpreted them. This reflects Day and Sammons (2013) and Matthews *et al* (2014) view that if differences do occur it is in the way particular leadership practices are applied rather than in the practices themselves. This is reinforced through the examples given in the interviews, for example when the headteachers were talking about how they 'establish systems and structures in other schools' as part of 'developing the organisation'. How this key leadership practice looked in detail related directly to the context the system leaders were working in and the needs of the individual school. It could mean:

- importing non-negotiables for teaching and learning from the NLE's home school into a supported school in challenging circumstances;

- deploying additional staff to add capacity in another school and working with their leaders on developing specific systems together;
- the executive headteacher working directly with senior leaders in a school new to the partnership to redefine their roles within a new leadership structure.

I will return to how the system leaders personalised their practices when considering how they viewed their role.

Prior to carrying out the interviews I had also questioned whether I would see a difference in the leadership qualities and practices brought about by the role of NLE combined with being the director of a TSA and that of being an executive headteacher. My reading had drawn attention to the different origins of each role. That of NLE emerged from specific government funded programmes (Earley and Weindling, 2006) whereas that of director of a TSA grew from local decisions following the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). Similarly, that of executive headteacher grew from local decisions following the 2002 Education Act. This led to the decision to put forward two research questions that focused separately on the leadership qualities and practices needed by an executive headteacher and those required by a headteacher acting as an NLE and director of a TSA.

As described in Chapter 3, I selected this research sample according to whether the headteacher was both an NLE and director of a TSA or an executive headteacher of at least one school judged outstanding by Ofsted since September 2012 in the LAs considered statistical neighbours to LA J. However, in the introductory telephone calls I discovered that four of the six headteachers who were NLEs and directors of TSAs were also executive headteachers and two of the six executive headteachers were also NLEs. As mentioned earlier, this duplication of roles has been acknowledged in national surveys of system leaders (Hill, 2011).

In analysing the interviews, as can be seen in Table 4.1, the leadership practices were referred to by nearly all or every participant. This would seem to indicate that for this group of system leaders there was no significant difference in how they personally worked with other schools that was connected to their specific role as a system leader. This could be seen as surprising given the very different role that TSAs have in delivering the 'Big 6' (Gu *et al*, 2014) and the findings from the end of their two year study referred to in Chapter 1 (Gu *et al*, 2015). I will discuss this further in Chapter 6 when considering the potential limitations and suggestions for further research.

5.5 System leaders' view of their role

Considering the key leadership qualities and practices from the point of view of how the system leaders in this research see their role brings together the two models emerging from analysis of the interview responses with previous studies in this area. From this standpoint, I see the leadership qualities identified from the interviews as vital. They influence and inform the leadership practices as they establish 'authentic and deeply ingrained approaches to human engagement' (Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008, p87). These qualities provide the 'why' which informs the 'what' and ensures the leader is authentic (West-Burnham, 2013).

For instance, interview responses coded as humility (the quality coded most frequently in this research) indicated that they see their role as a system leader as about leading a team, not about them individually. The earlier quotations from Headteacher 3 and Headteacher 5 articulate their views that they do not have all the answers (Fullan, 2004) and that it will require a team effort to make the difference to pupils' life chances. This could be in the context of working across a federation, a multi-academy trust or through supporting other schools as a NSS or TSA. As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the responses of these system leaders refer on a number of occasions to their forward thinking. As quotations from Headteachers 1, 5 and 7 in Chapter 4 show, developing the staff in their home school has been a key priority

(Barber *et al*, 2010). Without the high level of skills and expertise of these colleagues the headteachers would not be able to work in the system leader roles as either their home school would suffer or they would not have the staff to deploy to support other schools.

Similarly, their responses coded as exemplifying the leadership practice of 'spreading school to school support' indicate that they personalise their approach according to the needs of each school as they plan with schools their individual way forward. However, as can be seen from the quotations from Headteachers 1 and 12 in Chapter 4, the goal is not the provision of PD for teachers. These system leaders clearly articulate that the focus of the school to school support is always driven by improving pupils' outcomes.

Other key responses from the headteachers which indicate their view of the role of a system leader occurred when they talked about the leadership practice of 'coaching and mentoring staff into leadership roles' and link this strongly to that of 'monitoring and evaluating the performance of leaders'. As illustrated earlier by Headteacher 3, this is because they saw their role as ensuring the development of leaders who can then take on the running of either a school that is receiving support or one within a group led by the executive headteacher. This links with the findings of Ofsted (2010) and NCSL (2010) in their respective surveys into the effectiveness of NLEs and executive headteachers in primary and secondary phases. In both these the focus by the system leaders on the professional development of teaching and support staff to undertake leadership roles was seen as a key factor in their success in supporting other schools to improve.

Lastly, the interview responses of the system leaders also referred to the benefits of working with others as never being just one way. Their reflective leadership quality meant they could articulate (as seen in quotations from Headteachers 6 and 8 in

Chapter 4) that supporting other schools ensured that the teachers and other staff in either the NSS or across the schools in a federation continued to develop as well. This supports the definition of the role of system leaders set out by NCSL (Hill, 2011) that improvements should be experienced by all schools with which the system leader is connected.

5.6 Conclusion

System leadership is seen as an essential element of the self-improving school system within which Hargreaves (2012) sees schools working successfully together in deep partnerships. The leadership qualities and practices identified in this research from the responses provided by the headteachers acting as system leaders link to Hargreaves' (2012) criteria for successful deep partnership working, 'joint practice development, high social capital, collective moral purpose and evaluation and challenge' (Hargreaves, 2012, p.20). This chapter has summarised how the headteachers' motivation to undertake a system leadership role appears to derive from their moral purpose, one of five leadership qualities identified in interview responses. It has also considered how six particular leadership practices emerging from the research are part of the strategic capability of the headteachers in their role as system leaders. I see these as contributing to the system leaders' ability to facilitate 'evaluation and challenge' between schools, which is one of the roles Hargreaves identifies for system leaders (Hargreaves, 2012, p.19).

Overall, I see the models developed from the interview responses as helping to inform the relatively new area of system leadership by highlighting the leadership qualities and practices indicated in the responses of these headteachers acting as system leaders in the primary phase. I see these as both upholding and adding to qualities and practices identified by previous research into system leadership. For instance, they relate to the eight skills needed by executive headteachers reported by NCSL (2010) and the conceptualization of the key capabilities of system leaders set out by Higham,

Hopkins and Matthews (2009). Their four core practices, originating from the research of Leithwood and Riehl (2003), into effective school leadership were extremely helpful in providing a starting point from which to analyse the leadership practices of the system leaders participating in this research.

I see the model developed from my interpretation of the headteachers' interview responses as useful to provide headteachers, whether existing or potential system leaders, with a summary of the key leadership practices. This could occur as part of the PD that is included in my recommendations. It is also hoped that the focus on the leadership practices of system leaders in the primary phase will in some way add to the picture nationally and therefore contribute to the wider sharing of knowledge.

The final chapter will provide recommendations for the future development of system leadership in the primary phase based on the findings from the research linked to the review of the literature.

Chapter 6: Recommendations and conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This research explores the leadership qualities and practices needed by a headteacher in the primary phase to be a system leader. More specifically it has sought to identify the qualities and practices needed by NLEs who are also directors of TSAs and executive headteachers to support other schools or lead more than one school. It is also hoped that the findings will contribute in a small way to the knowledge and understanding in the emerging area of system leadership more widely.

Firstly, I will draw out my learning from carrying out this research and relate this to the qualities and practices I employ in my professional role as a school improvement officer. The limitations of the research will then be considered along with suggestions for possible further studies. Lastly, the research findings will be evaluated leading to recommendations for policy and practice in LA J and where the research could contribute to the knowledge and understanding of system leadership in the primary phase more widely.

The participants in the research are 12 system leaders who are first and foremost headteachers of primary schools in LAs considered by the DfE to be statistical neighbours of LA J. They represented all but two of the headteachers in these ten LAs acting either as NLEs and directors of TSAs or as executive headteachers of schools where at least one had been given a judgement of outstanding by Ofsted during the 2012-2013 academic year. Reflecting my ontological view that developing knowledge and understanding occurs through interaction with others in a social context, I selected the method of semi-structured interviews as the appropriate approach for focusing on the research questions.

I see it as important that this research is specific to the primary phase as hitherto most research into system leadership has either focused on the secondary phase (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009) or generalised across both primary and secondary phases (Hill, 2011). The system leaders participating in this research work in large rural LAs. I would argue that the context could help to support the credibility of the research, when viewed by headteachers working in a similar situation to this. As some large rural LAs currently do not have the same system leadership capacity as other areas of England (Ofsted, 2014 a, b) this could make this research timely and hopefully of wider interest.

6.2 The contribution of this research to my professional role and development

I would now like to consider the qualities and practices which I use in my professional role that have developed as a result of carrying out this research. I see working as a school improvement professional as placing me alongside system leaders as another part of the currently varied middle tier (Parish *et al*, 2012). Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that the qualities and practices identified within the responses by primary headteachers acting as system leaders in this research have a resonance for me within my role.

This has caused me to reflect on how I approach working alongside the leaders, and particularly the headteachers, of the schools that I support. I have always sought to work honestly with colleagues in school, but hearing the approaches taken by the NLEs and directors of TSAs and executive headteachers has enhanced my ability to maintain this honest approach even when uncomfortable conversations which contain difficult messages have to take place. The mantra of improving education for all the children in their schools, and those that they supported, that the system leaders in this research displayed in their responses has helped to strengthen my resolve as I work with schools in challenging circumstances. I have improved my ability to maintain a clear focus to my work, inspired by the resilience I identified as emerging from the

headteachers' interview responses. Even when the situation in a school is complex and there are many distractions involving instances of the breakdown of in-school staff relationships or low leadership capacity I have been more confident at seeing the approach that I need to take to ensure that pupils' learning remains the priority. This has been assisted by the knowledge I have gained about the leadership practices that the system leaders employed.

Whilst my role within the LA has always involved training others, the focus on coaching has developed significantly in recent years. I feel that this has been particularly in response to the change in emphasis of the role of the school improvement service in the LA in which I work. In the last three years this has moved from the LA seeing its role as leading school improvement, which had the potential to create dependency in school leaders, to enabling and supporting schools to be at the forefront of leading improvement. This has required me to work in a coaching role. The examples the system leaders in this research gave of how they ensured that they listened and asked questions of school leaders they were working alongside as part of helping them develop their own way forward has definitely inspired the approach I now take. I see a school's leader's ownership of the actions they take and the systems and structures they put in place as crucial to their success. Whilst I offer examples of good practice from other schools, spreading that school to school support which also appeared as an important leadership practice from the responses of system leaders in this research, I am now very aware of the importance that a school leader believes in any approach that they lead on, linked to their overall vision for the school.

I would acknowledge that a quality that was evident in the responses of the system leaders interviewed for this research that I am still conscious of the need to develop further is that of humility. I was humbled by the reluctance of the headteachers to attribute any positive impact coming from their role as a system leader to themselves alone. As mentioned in Chapter 4, they often used 'we' and talked about the importance of the team that they worked with in achieving improvements for children

in schools. This close team working is an area which is currently a focus in LA J, particularly ensuring all those working with families through social care or linked to vulnerable children are fully engaged with other professionals, like me, who work with schools. I can see that this will need a similar approach to that taken by the system leaders, which is to consider what will bring the best outcome for the children rather than our own professional pride.

6.3 Potential limitations and suggestions for further research

This is an example of interpretivist research (Robson, 2002), and therefore it is important to acknowledge that the knowledge and understanding gained of the leadership qualities and practices of system leaders in the primary phase relate specifically to the 12 headteachers that participated in the study. When using the models as part of the PD that will be outlined in the recommendations I realise that these should not be presented as necessarily being completely applicable to a wider field. It would be interesting to consider the same research questions either with a larger number of system leaders drawn from the national pool or those from another specific group of LAs to see if other qualities and practices were evidenced or similar ones were found.

As set out in Chapter 3, I see this research as an example of insider research (Scott and Usher, 1999) due to the level of knowledge and understanding I possess through my role as a school improvement professional. This also led to me to recognise that my positionality (Thomas, 2013) was a factor of which I needed to be aware so as not to influence the answers of the research participants. As stated previously, by not declaring my professional role unless asked by the participant and assuming the stance of 'qualified naiveté' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) I sought to minimise the possible negative impact of my situated knowledge. However, it is still an aspect of which it is important to be mindful when considering the research limitations.

The difficulties involved in defining and spotting leadership qualities, as discussed by West-Burnham (2013), have already been acknowledged. When focusing on leadership practices I have particularly sought to describe them as precisely as possible. Although descriptions in previous research into system leadership are helpful, for example by Higham, Hopkins Matthews (2009), they are written in quite generic terms that not all headteachers would necessarily be able to translate into actions. However, although quotations from the research participants have been provided to illuminate each practice, if space in this thesis allowed this could be developed further to exemplify the range of actions that accompany each one.

The new standards for headteachers published in January 2015 (DfE) do not explicitly include reference to system leadership. Although they are described as being for guidance applicable to all headship situations, I see it as important for future research to revisit this area. This could build on those begun at the session with system leaders funded by NCSL and the Innovations Unit of the DfES in 2005 (Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008) as listed in Appendix 2. Specific standards for system leaders would be useful as part of the induction of headteachers into the role and also support accountability, an area which is undefined at present and beyond the scope of this thesis.

There are opportunities for further research into the roles of system leaders. Several of the headteachers in this research fulfilled multiple roles and it would be interesting to focus explicitly on the potential differences between the individual roles of NLE, director of a TSA and executive headteacher. The case studies focusing on leadership of great pedagogy (Rea *et al*, 2015) as part of a wider research project across TSAs (Stoll, 2015) offer key messages for leaders of TSAs. This is a useful beginning which could be explored further through a focus on the leadership qualities and practices needed for each of the 'Big 6' areas.

Lastly, the role of co-headship of a group of schools in a formal partnership such as a federation or MAT could be of interest. It is at present a more unusual development in school leadership and one which I will return to in my recommendations. However, in order to encourage other headteachers and governing bodies to consider this new leadership arrangement it would be helpful if there were more case studies available nationally like that of the Primary Academies Trust, Devon (2014).

I made a conscious decision not to include a detailed discussion of government policy regarding MATs and the influence this may be exerting on the development of executive headship in the literature review for this research as I wanted to retain a focus on the individual headteacher. However, I do see this as an interesting area for further research, particularly given the government's vision for all schools to become academies by 2022, with primary schools seen as achieving this mostly through MATs (DfE, 2016).

Lastly, I regard the area of debate on the role of the middle tier as being open to further research. I have touched on this lightly, but I am aware that this is part of the discussion of wider concerns as to the sustainability of the system leadership model and its function in enabling a wider range of stakeholders, including parents and teachers to be more directly involved in policy decision making (Hatcher, 2014).

6.5 Recommendations for policy and practice

Following comment on the unequal spread of system leaders nationally which holds implications for policy, I will make recommendations that relate to suggestions for their PD and the role of the middle tier (whether this is through a TSA, academy chain or LA) in providing this.

As referred to in Chapter 2, for the last two years the Chief Inspector of Schools in his annual report (Ofsted, 2013 and 2014) has highlighted the fact that specific parts of

the country have a lower number of system leaders. Whilst there has been some attempt through government policy to remediate this situation, this is as yet to have any significant impact. In May 2014, NCTL targeted Cohort 5 TSA applications (DfE, 2014c) on LAs with low numbers of teaching schools. Although the government plans to increase the number of NLEs nationally from 800 to 1000 in 2015, in the application round that opened in January 2015 there was no similar targeting of NLE development on geographical areas with low numbers. It may encourage more primary headteachers to undertake a system leadership role if they are approached to become NLEs rather than their schools as TSAs in the first instance. They would then be able to develop their expertise in supporting other schools, as did many of the system leaders in this research, and move on to lead a TSA if and when the time was right for them and their school.

Where these were headteachers of small schools, this would link with the government's current policy of offering fully funded scholarships to leaders in small schools for the National Professional Qualification of Senior Leaders (NPQSL) (DfE, 2014b). This policy decision relates directly to the research finding of the importance of system leaders building capacity in their 'home' school. The need to offer PD to potential Heads of School was identified in LA J at a federation strategy meeting in summer 2014. This was in recognition that in some collaborations between schools with shared leadership of an executive headteacher the lack of development of senior leaders, particularly in small schools, has meant one or more schools in the collaboration were not well led or managed. PD is needed for these senior leaders that includes information on federation strategy, their leadership role, managing change and shadowing Heads of School in existing federations. This government policy of bursaries to pay for the NPQSL course therefore simultaneously supports the federation of small schools as well as the potential for headteachers of small schools with an outstanding judgement being able to act as NLEs.

Whilst it is hard for central government to have an impact in a distributed system (Bush 2011), never the less there is an important part to play in sharing best practice. Therefore, the last aspect of government policy that I see as requiring development is to further develop the role of NCTL in disseminating the thinking and practice of system leaders across the system. Previously this was carried out by NCSL, but since the formation of NCTL, the impetus has been somewhat lost. The blog that started in January 2015 on 'the school-led system' (NCTL, 2015) is a start, however I would argue that it is essential for this role of central government to develop further as it is an important part of ensuring whole system transformation (Fullan, 2005). Without a comprehensive system for sharing best practice in system leadership, there is a risk that the visions of school leaders (headteachers and governing bodies) are limited to the ways of working that they see locally and do not respond to the adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 2003) with further innovation. As mentioned above, there is a particular need for further recent case studies that exemplify how other leadership organisation, such as co-headship of a group of schools, works in practice. Some headteachers could benefit from working within a co-headship as they would have the opportunity to work closely with another leader and gain confidence from this collaboration. This would help bring more headteachers into working within the new roles in the evolving leadership landscape (Cooke, Bush and Malek, 2015).

The biggest question that still remains is posed by Parish (2012) in considering the evolving role of the LA in ensuring good outcomes for children and young people and promoting high standards:

How to ensure that a school-to-school support model is coherent and comprehensive and not piecemeal; that every school has a wide range of high quality support to draw upon and they every school receives the informed external support and challenge that is crucial in securing improvement or sustaining outstanding quality.

(Parish *et al*, 2012, p7)

Hargreaves' vision for a self-improving school system is entirely possible where there are sufficient excellent school leaders working in a local area, but as can be seen

currently in some parts of England, particularly the rural and coastal areas, there is a flaw when there is not sufficient capacity through system leadership to ensure all schools can access the high quality support and challenge they require. Even when there are sufficient NLEs and LLEs, the 'local intelligence' and hard data that an LA possesses means there can still be a role as a facilitator (Abbott *et al*, 2014).

One of the approaches LA J has implemented to encourage further school-to-school support reflects one of the ideas proposed by Greany (2014), that of local funding incentives. The difficulty is that some schools join groups with their thinking focused more on how they can spend the grant funding than developing the deep partnership working Hargreaves (2012) proposes. The impact of this collaborative working on improving pupils' progress in learning has therefore in some cases been limited. I see this as further demonstration that some headteachers require PD so that they are able to appreciate the benefits of close working with other schools on improving the education of all pupils and recognise the range of ways in which this can be achieved.

Making the best use of available funding sources available to TSAs is another area where officers in LA J are involved in supporting school-to-school support. They are working closely with the directors of TSAs to secure funding which they are able to apply for from the DfE. This is to support schools currently judged inadequate or requiring improvement by Ofsted and LA involvement is ensuring that the funding is focused on school improvement priorities that will support the schools in moving forward. As three of the TSAs are led by secondary schools and the two primary TSAs are recently formed, it is the LA officers who at present have the detailed understanding of the position of primary schools needing support and can assist in its brokerage. This illustrates the 'mixed economy' in which LA J is working where its role as part of the middle tier partly still reflects that prior to the White Paper (2010). At present, what is important is for LA J to work closely alongside the system leaders, whether they are TSAs, NLEs or executive headteachers and maintain a dialogue that ensures no school becomes isolated (Sandals and Bryant, 2014). This priority is

reflected in Greany's (2014) concern that what might be developing is a 'two-tier system' (Greany, 2015, p.19) where stronger schools develop partnerships with each other and continue to improve and those that are weaker miss the opportunities offered in the self-improving system (Coldron *et al*, 2014). As Hargreaves states, the highest risk of this taking place is in geographical areas where 'the local authorities often lack the expertise and personnel to support the necessary cultural change' (2014, p.708). I see his point that focusing on cultural change is more important than considering structural change as highly significant and argue that as there is insufficient capacity within nationally identified leaders of the self-improving system such as TSAs and NLEs locally, that therefore the LA has a role to play to ensure all schools are part of partnerships which support their continued improvement.

This leads me into the last recommendation, which is for LA J to develop PD for existing and potential system leaders in partnership with TSAs. This is primarily needed to ensure that this key area is not left to chance due to insufficient existing system leaders fulfilling national roles to lead on the PD of their colleagues. There is also currently no specific development for NLEs themselves nationally so the professional development of this group is also a concern. The last factor to take into account is that the Learning Partnership in LA J is also in its very early stages and so is not in a position to lead on this area.

Although this recommendation is in response to the situation in LA J it is hoped that it will also be of interest more widely. In the recommendations from her research Robinson included 'CPD to encourage the recruitment and retention of system leaders' (2012, p180). This was because she had found that the majority of headteachers who had taken on system leader roles over the five years during which she carried out interviews had benefited from specific leadership training, often connected to roles such as PSCL or through the London Challenge which had enabled them to carry out a system leader role.

There is little doubt that providing appropriate PD for this group is not easy. As referred to in Chapter 2, Hill (2011) found that system leaders valued an induction process for the role, access to a coach or mentor and networking with others undertaking a similar role. As Headteacher 1 said in her interview, 'It's very interesting, when you become an NLE there is not any real training. You go to an NLE meeting, but not specific training and I agree with that because it is a very fluid organisational structure.' However, as was seen in the example provided earlier by Headteacher 3, not all headteachers are able to adjust to the role of NLE immediately. This difficulty with adjusting to a new role has also been the case in LA J with headteachers moving into a range of system leader roles. It is also important to ensure the sustainability of a headteacher within the role (Fullan, 2006). Headteacher 7 talked about how she was able to maintain her drive and energy through seeking out a coach with extensive national experience to be an on-going mentor, but this is not open to everyone. There are also organisations offering courses for system leaders, such as that for executive headteachers run by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (2015), however the cost of these is prohibitive for many primary schools and also for school leaders in LA J, these courses are not available locally.

LA J is currently putting in place new ways of working with schools requiring additional support and challenge. This involves headteachers working with the leaders of these schools in the role of Associate Standards and Excellence Officers (ASEOs) to provide advice and guidance on school improvement. In this context, I argue that locally organised PD would support the development of system leaders as they move to working in this role. This may then also encourage more to apply for nationally organised system leader roles. It is also seen as important to offer PD to executive heads as they work across more than one school as many will have had no opportunity to focus on how to work in this role. The last group of headteachers I see as benefiting from PD are those heads that have the potential to fulfil a system leader role in the near future as this will support succession planning.

The outline in Table 6.1 of PD for system leaders, and those with the potential to undertake this role, is under three headings acknowledging the practical, intellectual and personal elements which have been identified as important for leadership PD (Day *et al*, 2010). It also reflects the comments from the focus group of headteachers mentioned in Chapter 1 who are currently working in system leadership roles in LA J. They identified the need for PD to support them in undertaking the role of

| Leadership role in LA J | Practical | Intellectual | Personal |
|---|---|--------------|----------|
| ASEO (previously Challenge Partners, LLEs) and existing executive heads | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on school improvement skills, systems and protocols • Planned input and facilitated discussion based on the qualities and practices of system leaders • Networking promoting sharing best practice and joint working between system leaders • Access to coaching/mentor support | | |
| Potential system leader (head 2+ years in school with good or outstanding Ofsted judgement) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on school improvement skills, systems and protocols • Executive headteacher course • Shadowing existing system leaders | | |

Table 6.1: Outline of professional development for system leaders and those with the potential for fulfilling this role

executive headteacher or LLE in the LA as they recognised that their understanding of the leadership qualities and practices needed were not fully developed. This PD model extends the current offer to system leaders in LA J. Previously, this has focused on the practical aspects of school improvement skills and protocols put in place by the school improvement service in LA J. However, this has left many headteachers not being explicitly aware of the leadership qualities and practices that are essential to carrying out a system leader role.

Although I agree with Hargreaves (2014) that it is important for headteachers not to just copy parts of the way of working of system leaders, but rather to focus on transforming the culture of their own schools into one that ‘embeds JPD, high social

capital, collective moral purpose and evaluation and challenge' (Hargreaves, 2014, p.706), I would argue that this needs to be grounded in examples of practical situations to which the theory is linked. PD focusing on key leadership qualities and practices through planned input and facilitated discussion will both ensure that the tacit understanding system leaders possess becomes explicit and also extend their awareness. For instance, their role in developing others to ensure they contribute to developing more leaders who can successfully lead more schools is an area which it would be important to emphasise. These sessions can then be built on through networking that supports the sharing of their best practice as well as further joint development. There would also be the opportunity for coaching or mentoring of individuals by NLEs or LA officers. It is essential that this includes engaging with existing system leaders, potentially from outside LA J, who recognise that the current changing leadership landscape in England requires leaders to be involved in learning in order to approach the 'adaptive challenges' (Heifetz, 2003) with which they are likely to be presented. This coaching approach would ensure there is a place 'where they can discuss and reflect on the personal and emotional' (Crawford, 2009, p. 108) aspects of being a system leader.

6.6 Conclusion

The inequality across England in the availability of sufficient headteachers acting as system leaders to support the further development of the self-improving school system (Hargreaves, 2012) is widely acknowledged (Ofsted, 2014b). This places some LAs as part of the middle tier, in the position of needing to continue to provide direct support to school leaders. Whilst working closely alongside other parts of the middle tier such as TSAs, MATs and academy chains, I would argue that at present there is still a place for LAs to continue to work with system leaders. This includes providing PD that will enable a greater proportion of primary headteachers to make a successful transition into becoming system leaders who are concerned for the success of pupils in more than one school.

The findings from this research into the leadership qualities and practices of a group of primary headteachers who are undertaking system leadership roles as both a NLE and director of a TSA or an executive headteacher align with those from previous studies into school and system leadership. In addition, the model developed from the interviewees' responses seeks to add to the knowledge of specific leadership practices that are employed by system leaders working in the primary phase. This is seen as supportive to the further development of system leadership in England, which the government views as crucial to continued school improvement (DfE, 2016).

As acknowledged when discussing the limitations of this research earlier in this chapter, the new understanding and knowledge regarding the practices articulated by these primary headteachers acting as system leaders relates specifically to their situation. However, it is hoped that the model presented in Figure 4.2 can support further discussion of the practices that a system leader employs which go beyond those normally undertaken by a headteacher in the primary phase. In highlighting the following six practices as specific to the system leadership roles of the headteachers in this research, namely:

- Strengthen pedagogy and curriculum in other schools
- Monitor and evaluate the performance of leaders
- Coach and mentor staff into leadership roles
- Build 'home' school capacity
- Establish systems and structures in other schools
- Spread school to school support.

I hope to contribute to PD discussions which I see as an important part of ensuring that there are sufficient headteachers in the primary phase willing and able to undertake a system leadership role.

Appendix 1

Numbers of headteachers engaged in formal system leadership roles 2004-2014

Sources: (Barber, Whelan and Clarke, 2010); (Earley, 2013); (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009); (Howson, 2012); (NCSL, 2010) and (NCTL, 2014). The totals include primary, secondary, nursery and special settings. Where figures are available separately for the primary phase of education these are included in parenthesis.

| System Leader Role | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Executive Headteacher | 25 | | 101 | 450 | 410 | | | |
| Primary Consultant Leader | | | 134 | | | | | |
| School Improvement Partner | | | 255 | | | | | |
| Local Leader of Education | | | | | | | 1959 | 1617 (1312 primary) |
| National Leader of Education | | 68 | 200 | 431 | | 800 | 878 (465 primary) | 941 (504 Primary) |
| Teaching schools | | | | | 97 | 183 | 357 (156 primary) | 600 (274 primary) |

Appendix 2

Towards a National Standard for System Leadership

Notes from Executive Leadership Programme pilot group, 2005 in Collarbone, P. and West-Burnham, J. (2008). *Understanding Systems Leadership: Securing Equity and Excellence in Education*. London: Network Continuum. P83-84

Knowledge:

System leaders will know about:

- a range of leadership models that will impact on system change
- strategies which bring about system transformation, change and improvement
- how culture and context influence system leadership
- the complexities of the system and the policy making process
- the organic nature of complex organisations, clusters, networks and federations
- the global perspective and the local, national, international trends and their impact on schools and education generally
- the current political, social, economic infrastructure and education's place within it.

Professional qualities

System leaders will demonstrate:

- commitment to leadership in a wider context
- commitment to developing local, national and international policy
- commitment to raising standards across the system
- the ability to continually re-shape and articulate a vision
- confidence in developing evidence based strategies for change
- confidence in challenging current thinking and orthodoxy
- understanding of the concept of moral leadership and its relationship with whole system responsibility
- sustained enthusiasm and energy in complex and challenging circumstances
- understanding of the need for critical and reflective thinking and sustained personal learning and development

- the interpersonal skills needed to influence and facilitate change, communication and connectivity.

Actions

System leaders will work to:

- promote an understanding of system level leadership at local and national level
- seek ways of influencing policy and decision making at all levels
- work collaboratively with all stakeholders to bring about system change
- change the working environment to reflect new ways of learning and leading
- ensure professional growth for all in the system
- collaborate with others to build leadership capacity
- work effectively to support and encourage teams to develop and challenge their vision
- work across the infrastructure to develop integrated approaches
- identify the need for system change or new systems and drive change forward
- engage in futures thinking
- analyse the impact of change on the system
- collaborate and develop others beyond their own environment
- manage projects to successful completion
- monitor, review and evaluate to demonstrate impact.

Appendix 3

Extract from 'A Conceptualization of the key capabilities for system leaders'

Source: adapted from Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009), p. 28

| Core practices | System leadership implications |
|---|---|
| <i>1 Setting direction</i> | <i>Translation of vision into whole-school programmes that extend the impact of pedagogic and curricular developments into other classrooms and schools.</i> |
| <i>2 Managing teaching and learning</i> | <i>Development of a high degree of clarity about and consistency of teaching quality, both to create the regularities of practice that sustain improvement and to enable sharing of best practice and innovation across the system.</i> |
| <i>3 Developing people</i> | <i>Development of 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.</i> |
| <i>4 Developing the organization</i> | <i>Extending 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 doing so, building a school's capacity to support wider system leadership roles.</i> |

Appendix 4

Information provided to research participants

An investigation into the leadership qualities and practices needed by a headteacher in the primary phase to be a system leader.

Researcher: Sally Wilkinson, completing a Doctorate in Education at the Institute of Education in London.

Contact details:

Email (email provided)

Mobile phone (number provided)

Aims and purpose of the research

This research will seek to develop further insight into and understanding of the leadership skills required by a headteacher in the primary phase to be a system leader. This role is defined as being a headteacher who provides significant support to other primary schools and/or leads and manages more than one school.

It is hoped that the insights and understanding gained through the research process and findings will inform professional development provided by a local authority for headteachers of outstanding schools who are considering moving into a system leadership role and those either considering or undertaking executive headship of two or more small primary schools. It will also contribute to guidance for governing bodies in the authority whose headteacher is considering applying as an NLE, who are considering appointing an executive headteacher for a group of small schools or considering Teaching school status.

Selection of schools, respondents and the research process

You are one of seven NLEs who are also leaders of a teaching school alliance and seven executive headteachers that have been selected to be part of this study. Participation is entirely voluntary and anyone taking part will have the right of withdrawal at any point in the research process.

I would like to interview you either in person or over the telephone. Each interview will last up to forty minutes and be recorded using a digital audio recorder. To ensure being interviewed does not become onerous or uncomfortable, I would be pleased if you would select the most appropriate time for the interview to take place.

After the interviews and analysis are complete, I will ensure that the final published thesis uses pseudonyms when talking about you and that a letter is used to identify your school(s). All audio recordings and transcripts will be retained solely in electronic format on a computer with a password security system. A back up copy will be placed on a secure space on the Institute of Education's N drive. I hope this approach and the nature of the study will give everyone involved the confidence to put their trust in me as a researcher.

Sally Wilkinson

September 2013

Appendix 5

Semi-structured interview questions used in the research

Questions for a NLE and director of a TSA

What was the appeal of becoming a NLE and director of a TSA?

Can you tell me about the shared values and ethos on which your school is based?

Can you tell me about your approach to leading and managing change?

How would characterise your approach to working with another school?

How do ensure your role as a NLE and director of a TSA is sustainable?

Questions for an executive head

What was the appeal of becoming an executive head?

Can you tell me about the shared values and ethos on which your schools are based?

Can you tell me about your approach to leading and managing change?

How would characterise your approach to working with another school?

How do ensure your role as an executive headteacher is sustainable?

Appendix 6

Extract from beginning of interview with Headteacher 6

S: Lovely thanks for giving me some of your time and hopefully no more than half an hour. You'll have seen the questions I sent through on the email.

HT 6: I didn't get your email? Otherwise I would have emailed you back. Who was it from? Give me your name and I'll go through from my listing and see if it's there anywhere.

S: Sally Wilkinson, S Wilkinson.

HT 6: (Searching in email inbox) Well it's not here. Well don't worry. It means I haven't thought about them though.

S: I do apologise. I'm happy to try sending it again and ring back another day?

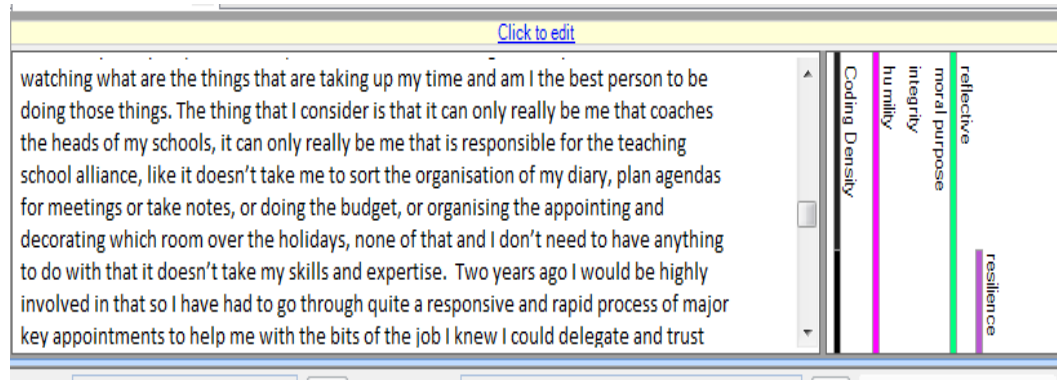
HT 6: I don't know. You know more than me how much thought the questions require. If you'll get better responses from me then I'm happy to do that.

S: It's a difficult one because sometimes off the cuff thinking actually gets to the heart of things.

HT 6: Ok, well let's do that and if I can't answer anything I'll say I need to think about that and I'll let you know that and I'll try and answer it by email.

Appendix 7

Extract from theme mapping of leadership qualities in NVivo 10



watching what are the things that are taking up my time and am I the best person to be doing those things. The thing that I consider is that it can only really be me that coaches the heads of my schools, it can only really be me that is responsible for the teaching school alliance, like it doesn't take me to sort the organisation of my diary, plan agendas for meetings or take notes, or doing the budget, or organising the appointing and decorating which room over the holidays, none of that and I don't need to have anything to do with that it doesn't take my skills and expertise. Two years ago I would be highly involved in that so I have had to go through quite a responsive and rapid process of major key appointments to help me with the bits of the job I knew I could delegate and trust

[Click to edit](#)

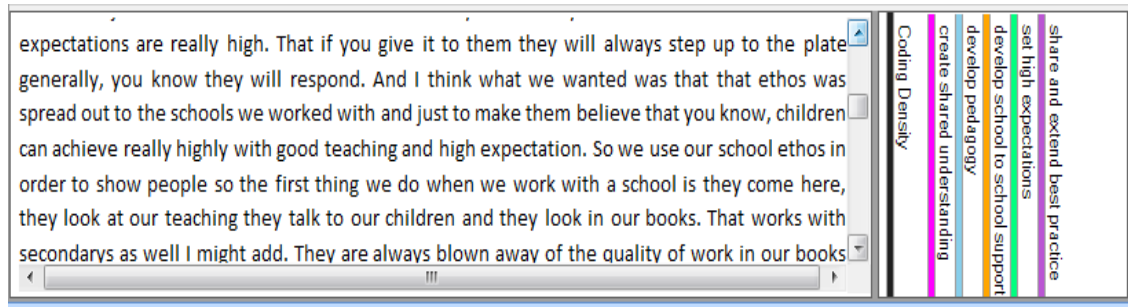
Coding Density

reflective
moral purpose
integrity
humility

resilience

Appendix 8

Example of leadership practices constant comparative analysis



expectations are really high. That if you give it to them they will always step up to the plate generally, you know they will respond. And I think what we wanted was that that ethos was spread out to the schools we worked with and just to make them believe that you know, children can achieve really highly with good teaching and high expectation. So we use our school ethos in order to show people so the first thing we do when we work with a school is they come here, they look at our teaching they talk to our children and they look in our books. That works with secondaries as well I might add. They are always blown away of the quality of work in our books

Coding Density

- share and extend best practice
- set high expectations
- develop school to school support
- develop pedagogy
- create shared understanding

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