SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN CHALLENGING CONTEXTS
INSIGHTS FROM TEN NEW HEADTEACHERS

RESEARCH
Christopher Downey
Damon Burg
Maria Kaparou
Anthony Kelly

Southampton Education School,
University of Southampton

COMMENTARY
Tom Rees
Jen Barker

Ambition Institute
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FOREWORD BY TOM REES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMENTARY BY TOM REES AND JEN BARKER</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of relevant literature</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAIN FINDINGS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRAND 1: SECURING CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Securing a consistent approach to safeguarding</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving Student behaviour</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRAND 2: IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving the quality of students’ learning and enhancement of the curriculum</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff restructuring</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving the quality of teaching</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRAND 3: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRAND 4: IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS:</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosing priorities for school improvement</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interdependent and iterative nature of core school improvement activity</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The layering of other key strands over the core improvement activity</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliance as necessary step to engagement</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further lessons from experience</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE RESEARCH</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for aspirant heads</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for novice heads</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Author biographies

Dr Chris Downey, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

Chris worked for twelve years in secondary schools as a science teacher, gaining experience in subject and school senior leadership roles, before working within a Knowledge Transfer Partnership between the University of Southampton and a LA School Improvement Service. The partnership focused on the use of data for school improvement. In his doctoral research, Chris applied the principles of school effectiveness research to evaluating class- and school-level effects to non-exam based outcomes of schooling. His main research interests include the use of data to inform educational evaluation and improvement, the tensions between educational accountability and enhancement, and the social capital of educators working in partnership networks.

Dr Maria Kaparou, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

Maria's doctoral thesis examined instructional leadership in high-performing secondary schools in England and Greece, focusing on the relationship between leadership and learning in enhancing student progress and teachers' professional development, for which she won the BELMAS Best Thesis Award, 2015. Maria recently led the project ‘System Instructional Leadership in Multi-Academy Trusts in England’. Her main research interests include school improvement research, educational leadership and management, capacity building for improvement, education policy, international and comparative education. Maria is the co-convenor for the Methods of Researching Educational Effectiveness and Improvement (MoREI) network for the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI).

Professor Anthony Kelly, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

Tony is a theoretician specialising in Educational Effectiveness and Improvement, as it relates to educational leadership, governance and policy analysis. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Physics and the Academy of Social Sciences. Tony has experience of school headship in Ireland where he was one of the leading figures in the movement to integrate and rationalise education in the border region, and developed new governance structures which have since become models for a number of schools. He has appeared as an expert witness before the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and his work has been cited in parliamentary debates.

Dr Damon Burg, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

Damon’s research is predominantly centred on international higher education. His research interests include internationalisation in higher education, university partnerships, the impact that public policy has had on universities, the academic profession, academic citizenship, higher education leadership and diversity in higher education. Within these areas, his research has explored how government policy has led to university internationalisation strategies and the economic impact of academic partnerships on individual universities. Other recent projects have focused on the academic leadership of women professors and the history of higher education studies.

Tom Rees, Executive Director of School Leadership

Tom is the Executive Director of School Leadership at Ambition Institute. He was a headteacher for 10 years in two Northamptonshire schools, most recently at Simon de Senlis Primary in Northampton. He is a founding trustee of a charity supporting families affected by Down’s syndrome.

Tom’s book, ‘Wholesome Leadership - the heart, head, hands and health of school leaders’, was published in 2018 by John Catt Educational.

Jen Barker, Dean of Learning Design

Ambition Institute

Jen is the Dean of Learning at Ambition Institute where she oversees the design of the leadership suite of programmes. Prior to working at Ambition Institute she led the design team at Teach First for nearly 6 years and before that spent 6 years in various senior leadership roles in school. She is currently studying for a Doctorate at the University of Manchester.
When I think back to the first day I stood at the school gate as a headteacher, I felt a huge sense of excitement and opportunity. I carried good intentions, had been successful in my teaching career to date, had completed all necessary professional qualifications and was buoyed by the confidence of the governing body who had appointed me into role.

I enjoyed every one of my ten years of headship, but those early days were particularly challenging. As those first weeks rolled by, I found myself immersed in a wealth of unfamiliar challenges. Once the September honeymoon period faded, I found myself increasingly out of my depth on many issues. I quickly came to realise that there was so much I simply didn’t know enough about; new problems I was unable to solve.

So how do we help headteachers to become expert at dealing with the challenges of their roles? Given the pressures on their time, what are the most important things we should make sure they know and are able to do? And if we know what is most important, how best should we organise their training and preparation for the role? I now have responsibility for training thousands of school leaders each year and it is these types of questions that keep me and my colleagues awake at night.

At Ambition Institute, expertise underpins our approach to helping school leaders to keep getting better. We can think of expertise as the ability to consistently and effectively tackle the persistent problems of a role. For headteachers, this means we are less concerned with generic approaches to leadership and management, leadership styles or personal traits and more interested in building competency around the education-specific and highest-leverage work they do in their school context.

The reason we talk about ‘problems’ is to emphasise the importance of problem diagnosis, alongside solution design and implementation. The measure of an expert is not just how well they find solutions, but how well they understand the problems they face and how well their solutions fit these problems.

In her 2014 paper, ‘Parsing the Practice of Teaching’, Mary Kennedy represents teaching through five ‘persistent problems’, using this term to represent an understanding of not just the behaviours or moves that teachers carry out, but the purpose behind these.

“We have misplaced our focus on the actions we see; when what is needed is a focus on the purposes those actions serve.” Kennedy (2006)

Over the last 12 months, we’ve applied this thinking to leadership and have carried out significant work to better understand the persistent problems that school leaders face in their work. This has involved scouring the literature, interviewing dozens of school leaders, reviewing what Ofsted reports say about school leadership and drawing from with the wealth of knowledge that exists right across the sector. Undertaking this work has allowed us to crystallise the persistent and specific challenges faced by school leaders, which we have used to build and design our leadership programmes. By doing this we have been able to build a fresh curriculum for leadership development around these areas.

Although a wealth of existing studies into school leadership exist, we wanted to commission this new research into headteachers working in English schools to understand more about the current and specific challenges faced by headteachers in this country.

In this report, researchers at the University of Southampton interviewed ten headteachers – five of whom are novices in their first year of headship; five of whom are in new roles but with previous headships under their belt. This has enabled us to observe how headteachers with different levels of expertise respond to similar challenges.
We were keen to understand the processes that our interviewees went through to deliver school improvement. We wanted to look beyond their practices and behaviours to examine the motivations, knowledge and skills that underpinned them.

This report shows us how headteachers used their knowledge to plan, prioritise and undertake school improvement. It is unique in its comparison of novice headteachers and experienced heads with a track record of school improvement, but who were also transitioning into a new role. By analysing their comparative approaches to school improvement in a new environment, the researchers have offered us a rare insight into this process.

While useful for gaining insights, this report highlights points that require careful consideration. That’s why I’m delighted to include a brief commentary on its strengths and areas for improvement, written by myself and my colleague Jen Barker.

In the section which follows, Jen and I dig deeper into the qualitative findings of this research, comparing some of the interviewees’ experiences, assumptions and analyses with our own. We hope that you’ll find plenty to think about, agree and disagree with.

To improve educational outcomes across the system, we have to ensure our training for educators is underpinned by research evidence and critical scrutiny. As a graduate school for teachers, school leaders and system leaders, Ambition Institute is committed to applying academic rigour to our programme design, so that we can help educators serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds to keep getting better.

I hope this report will be a useful addition to the canon of literature on school leadership and school improvement: supporting aspiring and current heads to build their expertise and develop their practice, so that more pupils can access the education and opportunities they deserve.

Tom Rees
Executive Director of School Leadership
Ambition Institute
The importance of headteachers in disadvantaged communities

Ambition Institute’s vision is of an education system where every child can thrive, no matter what their background. To achieve this, we help teachers and school leaders serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds to keep getting better.

Headteachers play a crucial role in the education system. Their leadership is vital to the success of school improvement (Leithwood et al. 2019). But recruiting and retaining expert headteachers is of particular concern in areas of social disadvantage (Branch, Rivkin & Hanushek, 2013) and unstable leadership can have detrimental consequences for a school that is trying to improve (Fink & Brayman, 2006).

Developing the expertise of headteachers serving in our toughest schools is vital in our mission to raise educational outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

What is expertise and how can we develop it in school leaders?

At Ambition Institute, developing expertise sits at the heart of our view of school leadership. Our work focuses on the knowledge and behaviours of educators and how these are utilised to respond to the complex tasks they face every day.

The headteachers in this research are all new-in-post; but there is an even split between those who are first-time heads and those with a track record of school improvement in a previous headship. The researchers asked each of the headteachers to explain how they identify, prioritise and solve school improvement problems. This exposes their ‘mental models’ (Craik, 1943). Mental models underpin expertise; they are what people know and how that knowledge is organised to guide action.

Gaining insight to the mental models of headteachers at work enables us to learn about the knowledge and beliefs that sit behind their behaviours and decisions. This, in turn, helps us to plan the effective training and development opportunities that can help headteachers improve and become experts in their roles.

We believe that the school system should value expertise in its leaders. Moreover, by better understanding how expertise develops, we can shift the rhetoric about leadership from the accepted orthodoxy of the charismatic and inspiring leader to one of the knowledgeable, competent or ‘expert’ leader.

Although clearly important and desirable in school leaders, experience alone does not necessarily lead to expertise. In all fields, expertise is thought of as something that is ‘effortfully acquired’ or to gain a competence “that would never have come about naturally” (Bereitner & Scardamalia, 1993, p4). This is important in our understanding of how we can prepare school leaders to be successful as headteachers. Becoming an expert school leader goes beyond the luck of having innate talents or personal traits and requires more than learning ‘on the job’ through trial and error.

Becoming an expert school leader requires a rich knowledge base, which informs the behaviours and actions that headteachers can use to effect change in their school.

This research

There is now a firm base of empirical evidence that tells us much about the behaviours and practices of school leaders (Leithwood et al 2019). Although this tells us quite a bit about what leaders do, it doesn’t necessarily tell us why or how. This challenge was posed earlier this year by researchers in their revised edition of ‘Seven Strong Claims about School Leadership’ (Leithwood et al. 2019):

“The future challenge for scholars in this field is to design empirical enquiries that move away from describing ‘what successful leaders do’ to illuminating ‘how they do it and measuring the resulting impact.”

(Leithwood and Sun 2018)
This study attempts to answer this question by uncovering why these school leaders behaved the way they did in their first year at a challenging school. By revealing the thinking of these headteachers we have gained further insight into the knowledge and skills that they deployed within the first year of headship and the ‘persistent problems’ they faced. This can now help us to develop the curriculum for future headteachers.

For some time, studies have also indicated the importance of establishing clear priorities for school improvement (Hopkins et al 1994). The processes by which such priorities are determined and the sequence in which they should be tackled has been less well studied. This study aims to address this gap by attempting to determine how new-in-post headteachers diagnose and prioritise school improvement in their first year and to examine how their school improvement strategies are sequenced.

**Our commentary**

There are several interesting findings within this research – after all, conversations with school leaders are always fascinating. Whilst reading, though, we found ourselves scrawling notes in the margins; marking points where we agreed and disagreed and recording the questions we would like to ask different headteachers if we had the chance. We also considered some of the findings in more depth – connecting them with our existing understandings of school improvement and the work that leaders do.

**Developing new models of school improvement**

We were interested in the variety of approaches to school evaluation and improvement within this research. Despite the small sample size, there were notable differences in both the approaches the ten headteachers took, and the theories of actions that sat behind these.

Context may well be a factor in this inconsistency. We think this shows that there is more to do in developing effective models of school improvement for headteachers. These can then be used in response to tackling the persistent problems which include; school evaluation, diagnosis and improvement strategies.

In their summary of the literature, the researchers note that “The literature on the work of headteachers in diagnosing priorities for school improvement is particularly sparse. This is despite long-standing acknowledgement (Keys et al., 2003: 11) that one of the key features of a leader’s role is an accurate diagnosis of the problems faced by the school, and their causes.” (Main report, p 19)

In this space, it has become common for schools to use the language of the Ofsted framework – both from an evaluation perspective and to drive their school improvement. Terms such as ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Good’, for example, are often assigned internally to describe departments and individuals, which can be problematic. Not only do we know that making judgements like this can be unreliable (Coe 2014), they do little to help diagnose the specific priorities in the school or prescribe any improvement activity. They can also drive unnecessary workload as schools build banks of evidence to prove their effectiveness, rather than investing that time on the improvement work itself. This has led Ofsted to actively discourage schools from using practices such as ‘Mocksteds’, graded lessons and taking the use of internal data out of the revised inspection framework.

In this context and with the curriculum playing a more central role in school improvement, we think there is an important place for curricular thought and leadership to be more central in future leadership training and preparation for headship.

**School improvement as a four-stage sequence**

In light of this need for new models, we were interested to read about the sequence in which new headteachers worked through different priorities in their schools. There is no ‘playbook’ to your first year in headship – nor should there be, as each school context demands different applications of strategies. Yet there are familiar challenges that all leaders must grapple with, particularly in their first year.

In line with previous research, we can see that headteachers’ work followed the main strands of: safeguarding, behaviour, curriculum and learning, quality of teaching, leadership development and parents and the community. Heads tackled strands simultaneously and with awareness that progress with one strand would affect progress with another, but placed stronger emphasis on different strands at different points:
“The study found that the strands of school improvement activity were often layered upon one another and undertaken simultaneously. There were key elements of interplay between the strands. These included the observation that securing improvement in student behaviour sometimes exposed shortcomings in the curriculum provision or the quality of teaching, and that creating good working relationships with parents could enable headteachers to implement new behaviour policies with less resistance.”

(Executive Summary, p 14)

The literature review within the research contains an interesting discussion of a number of four-stage models proposed by different researchers. The report recommends novice headteachers become familiar with these alongside the notion of ‘sequencing’ school improvement activity.

One of the most well-known models was written by our colleague, Sir David Carter, who proposes ‘four stages of improving a school’ as Stabilise, Repair, Improve, Sustain. Not only does this shift the school improvement narrative away from the language of the inspectorate, but the terms are helpful in determining the activity and behaviour of leaders within this phase. We think this is a helpful model for headteachers before they start in a new school to support their evaluation, diagnosis and strategy.

The pros and cons of compliance

The research highlights the common practice of headteachers achieving ‘compliance’, related to both behaviour and teacher practice, in their first year. Whilst we think this is sensible in some areas such as student behaviour, we see pros and cons to seeking compliance in teacher development. The report tells us that ‘non-negotiables’ were often established in schools and in those where the most urgent need was to address the quality of teaching, “heads usually began with a one size fits all approach during their first year of headship” (Executive Summary, p 12).

On the one hand, it’s clear from this research that headteachers were not looking to “settle” for compliance; rather, in the longer-term they set their sights on greater creativity and innovation in teacher development (Main report, p 50). It’s also pragmatic that there are common routines and expectations for teachers to follow in each school as part of a coherent culture and that novice teachers in particular, can benefit from more granular guidance.

But we also know that developing expert teachers does not happen simply by creating generic expectations for teachers to follow. And while a new headteacher is making their mark, there are likely to be effective and experienced teachers who don’t enjoy the constraints of ‘non-negotiables’ around their teaching approaches. We are increasingly persuaded by the arguments that pedagogy should be driven by the subject discipline, as opposed to generic approaches. With recruitment and retention an even bigger challenge for schools in disadvantaged communities, headteachers should pay close attention to their school being an attractive environment to work in, particularly for effective and experienced teachers (Allen & McInerny, 2019).

The small differences between novice and experienced heads

We know that experience and expertise are not to be conflated, but having enjoyed learning about the differences between novice and expert teachers through the work of Dylan William and David Berliner in recent years, we were still surprised that there was little to differentiate the strategies used by novice and experienced heads in this research. There were, however, differences in the timing and relative importance of these strategies.

The most marked differences were in areas of school management – such as developing fellow leaders – and in oversight and responsibility for finance, budgets and allocation of staff resources. All the headteachers in the study reflected on the need for aspiring heads to receive greater training, preparation or experience in managing school finances prior to taking their first headship.

Novice headteachers were particularly challenged by managing finances and allocation of staff resources in their first year and the report rightly recommends that colleagues gain experience of this before they take on headship. Although staffing and finance form part of any professional qualification for headship (NPQH), our experience is that unless leaders have an opportunity to apply this knowledge into practice in their senior roles, learning in this area can remain abstract and they are unlikely to arrive in headship with the necessary expertise.
Can we support novice heads to get the right senior leadership teams?

As a headteacher, you learn quickly that working effectively with your senior leadership team is crucial. So it makes sense that the experienced heads in the research, who had worked with an SLT before, were more likely to undertake an early diagnosis of the structure and skill balance of their leadership teams. They did this by drawing on external data such as Ofsted reports and triangulating with student outcomes.

They were then swifter to identify skills in the SLT and allocate responsibilities to members of the team from the outset of the year, enabling delegation of different strands of improvement. They were also seen to recruit new SLT from their existing professional networks.

The research shows the new headteachers were often cautious about the quality of existing leadership if they had over-estimated the historic performance of the school, which could create tensions when they needed to work collaboratively to drive improvement.

This is something we should think more about when considering how we help inexperienced headteachers, so that they are able to evaluate and then organise and delegate to their SLT swiftly and effectively when new-to-post. This could be through a combination of training and mentoring in a headteacher’s first year.

Securing behaviour helps both pupils and teachers learn

Unsurprisingly, the research finds that once basic safeguarding was in place, behaviour was usually considered the most urgent strand of school improvement, so that conditions for learning were in place.

Initially, our case-study headteachers sought compliance from students, but with the intention of pushing on to secure greater engagement from them over time. The enabling impact that well-managed behaviour can have on staff effectiveness and well-being should not be underestimated.

This chimes well with both our own experiences and research such as Kraft and Papay (2014), which shows the significant correlation between safe and calm professional environments, where teachers can focus on delivering the curriculum, and higher levels of student outcomes and teacher professional learning and retention.

In conclusion

This research offers further insight into the complex and challenging first year in post of headteachers in English schools. By questioning the headteachers’ rationale for their approaches, researchers have offered us a window into the mental models that headteachers use when responding to different challenges. Although complex, the problems new headteachers face are predictable and limited. We believe that development programmes centred on developing the necessary expertise to respond to these problems would better equip new headteachers for these roles.

As always, we’re keen to learn from any further research into the work of school leaders and we look forward to talking this conversation forward with educators in our growing network across the country.
References

Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris & David Hopkins (2019) Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited, School Leadership & Management, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077


Jen Barker,
Dean of Learning Design
Ambition Institute

Tom Rees
Executive Director of School Leadership
Ambition Institute
Working to secure school improvement is a priority for every headteacher. The task is made more complex when schools face challenging circumstances, such as high levels of disadvantage among students or low student performance. Despite concerted efforts over a number of years, many of these schools still lag behind in terms of outcomes, impacting the experience of students and staff within the schools. There is a key focus in the research literature on school improvement where schools face challenging circumstances. Much of this existing literature tends to concentrate on what headteachers did to secure school improvement rather than the processes by which they decided what strategies to employ and when to implement them. There is a dearth of literature that explores the differences in actions undertaken by novice headteachers, and those more experienced in the role of headship.

The research that supports this study is from ten embedded case studies of new-in-post headteachers working to secure school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances. The case study schools were selected on the basis that they provided a context with at least one element of challenge in terms of below average level of student progress, higher than average levels of deprivation or a judgment of ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’ by the school inspectorate, Ofsted. There was an equal mix of primary and secondary schools. The set of case study headteachers were all new-in-post but made up of an equal mix of those embarking on their first headship and those who were experienced headteachers with a track record of securing school improvement in a previous headship. The range of data collected was based on two rounds of qualitative interviews with the headteachers and members of their senior leadership teams. In the first round, participants were asked questions about how they diagnosed, prioritised and carried out school improvement strategies. The second round was designed as follow up with the participants and to inquire about the barriers to improvement that they experienced and their approaches to monitoring progress.

While each school had different needs and strategies based on their contexts, this study found that the headteachers’ strategies and priorities fell into the following main strands of school improvement activity: safeguarding, behaviour, curriculum and learning, quality of teaching, leadership development and parents and the community. The findings show that headteachers and senior leaders worked on multiple strands of improvement activity simultaneously, and that elements of the various strands impacted on each other. Thus, it is not the case that heads tackled one strand and then moved on to the next. However, patterns within and across these strands emerged.

Within these strands of improvement activity, a number of findings were identified as highly relevant to new-in-post headteachers working in similar contexts, as well as to those who endeavour to support headteachers working to secure school improvement. The main findings are summarised below under each main strand of school improvement activity identified from the research. These strands are listed in the sequence by which the majority of headteachers prioritised their school improvement activity during their first year in post.

**Securing conditions for learning: safeguarding and behaviour**

- New headteachers placed a strong emphasis on substantial audits to provide evidence of compliance with safeguarding policies and statutory processes.
- Effective systems were generally in place with the necessary staff and governors in the lead safeguarding roles.
- The main cause for concern was the need to ensure consistent implementation of safeguarding policies and procedures. This sometimes required specific training. Regular communication and monitoring was required to minimise the risk of future inconsistencies in safeguarding processes.
- Behaviour was usually considered to be the most urgent strand of school improvement after safeguarding. The rationale for this was that it played a major role in ensuring effective conditions for learning. Most of the focus was on behaviour in the classroom, but this was not exclusively the case.
- Existing, effective behaviour policies were a useful resource but needed to be drawn from schools in similarly challenging contexts.
Clear and consistent application of an effective behaviour policy was able to yield relatively rapid improvements in behaviour; but this, in turn, exposed shortcomings in teaching. The development of learning and teaching therefore needed to run in parallel in order to maximise the gains from improvement in students’ behaviour; to ensure more ambitious learning outcomes in terms of material covered in each lesson; and to secure better conditions for improvements in the quality of learning and teaching.

Most headteachers reported that they rapidly achieved compliance from students in terms of their behaviour. ‘Compliance’ was still the word used by heads to describe the position in most schools by the end of their first year of headship. Heads expressed dissatisfaction with this state of compliance and indicated their intention to push on to secure greater engagement from students, but recognised this may require comparatively more time to secure.

**Improving the quality of learning and teaching**

Detailed analysis of student outcomes was a key source of diagnostic evidence but there was some scepticism as to the value of internal assessment data and self-evaluation data; at least in part because these were schools with a pattern of low performance that had not been addressed. For this reason, external audits were also common in this area, from trusted peers in the headteacher’s network, and the LA/MAT.

Data analysis was usually supplemented by an extensive programme of observations, learning walks and review of students’ work, in order to triangulate the data analysis and provide additional insight into the reasons why the data indicated poor performance.

Strategies to enhance the quality of learning were usually focused on developing core aspects of the curriculum provision during the first year of headship. In some cases, a complete review of the curriculum was considered to be necessary; but this usually required commitment from experienced members of SLT, often supported by external contacts from the head’s network or the MAT.

For some schools, especially those with low student numbers and financial issues in terms of budget deficits, restructuring of staffing was sometimes required. This was driven, and rationalised, by a review of the curriculum provision; and was usually undertaken by the head/executive head in consultation with HR staff within the MAT/LA, and in consultation with representatives from teacher professional organisations.

Novice headteachers agreed that getting to grips with school budgets and managing finance was a considerable challenge during their first year in post.

The priority for curriculum development was meeting the learning needs of students. Once a framework for the curriculum was determined, the headteacher could begin organising staffing to fit those needs.

Many heads expressed the view that it was necessary to provide the right conditions for teaching and learning before valid assessments of the quality of teaching could be made. This involved addressing issues with student behaviour and developing curriculum provision so that it was coherent and well-resourced. All schools experienced issues with the quality of teaching to varying degrees. An extensive programme of CPD around a core set of teaching principles, or “non-negotiables”, was often established. For schools with the most urgent need to address the quality of teaching, heads usually began with a one-size-fits-all approach during their first year of headship. Ongoing monitoring sometimes indicated it was necessary to differentiate the approach to CPD.

Strategies for the development of teaching quality adopted from other schools were usually based on experience of previous programmes of CPD found to be effective. Novice heads, and some experienced heads, would consult trusted colleagues from previous schools for advice and support in identifying, and sometimes implementing, CPD programmes.

In the first year of headship there was a common theme of achieving compliance in many schools, both in terms of student attitudes toward learning, and teacher practice. This was usually viewed as a necessary stepping stone to further development of learning and teaching that would lead to more engaged students and staff.
Leadership development

> Both novice and experienced heads relied on their own judgments to diagnose issues related to leadership development, with less reliance on the other sources of evidence that were typically used to diagnose the other strands of improvement.

> The development of leadership was a key area that differentiated between experienced and novice heads. Experienced heads seemed more likely to undertake an early diagnosis of the structure and skills balance in their leadership teams. They did this by conducting preliminary analyses of external data such as Ofsted reports, and triangulating this with other data such as student outcomes in particular curriculum areas and for specific teachers.

> There seemed to be a high number of new SLT members in the case study schools. This was possibly due to the high turnover of staff that would have resulted from poor Ofsted inspection judgments in the years leading up to the new headship. Nevertheless, some experienced heads recruited a number of new SLT members from within their existing professional networks.

> Headteachers felt some continuing members of SLT had been caught up in an overrated and even complacent view of the previous performance of the school and the quality of teaching. This could create tensions when heads presented an alternative view on performance; but the difference in views had to be addressed in order for the SLT to work collaboratively towards improvement. Given the legacy of underperformance in many of the case study schools, experienced heads were particularly sceptical of evidence from internal perspectives of the school with respect to the quality of teaching and learning. They placed much greater weight on their own judgments, those of new leaders starting in the school, and external assessors invited to undertake audits.

> Experienced heads were generally swifter to identify skills in the SLT, and then to allocate responsibilities to members of the SLT from the outset of the academic year. This led to more effective leadership across the strands of school improvement at the outset of the year, with better channels for delegation of tasks. By contrast, novice headteachers usually made these discoveries at a later stage during the first year of headship.

> Efforts to develop middle leaders tended to lag behind the development of the SLT, possibly due to focusing on SLT developments as a priority. Development of middle leaders took place earlier where heads could delegate responsibility to members of SLT; or where experienced heads drew on their professional networks or external CPD providers to help them prioritise middle leadership development during their first year in post.

Improving relationships with parents and the wider community

> Although building stronger relations to the community was considered a lower priority, most heads engaged in activity in this area early on during their first year of headship and tended to maintain at least some level of activity in this area, even as they prioritised and devoted more time to other strands of school improvement.

> Understanding school context was important in order to build relationships. This was true for building relationships with parents and other local schools in order to understand the challenges that families and other schools face.

> Initiating and sustaining dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders was central to diagnosing issues and monitoring progress in this area and in other strands of school improvement. Heads valued the perspectives of external stakeholders on the role the school should play in the wider community and the extent to which it was doing so at present.

> New-in-post heads worked hard to raise their profile in the community and recognised that sustaining a high profile was a key aspect of their efforts to secure improvements in community relations.

> Heads sought out strategic links between work on core aspects of curriculum and behaviour, and opportunities to improve community engagement in student learning. To do this effectively they sought to understand the needs and priorities of organisations and businesses.

> Turning around negative perceptions of a school was a task that extended well beyond the first year of headship, and required a sustained and concerted effort.
The study found that the strands of school improvement activity were often layered upon one another and undertaken simultaneously. There were key elements of interplay between the strands. These included the observation that securing improvement in student behaviour sometimes exposed shortcomings in the curriculum provision or the quality of teaching; and that creating good working relationships with parents could enable headteachers to implement new behaviour policies with less resistance.

In addition, the findings show that in the core strands of improvement activity – improving student behaviour and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching – there was little to differentiate the strategies and priorities adopted by novice headteachers during their first year in a new post from those of their more experienced counterparts; though there were some differences in the timing and relative importance of these strategies.

One explanation for this is that novice headteachers indicated that they had previous leadership experience of improving behaviour, curriculum provision, and the quality of learning and teaching as they progressed through their careers in roles as assistant or deputy headteachers. However, clear differences emerged in aspects of school management, such as developing fellow leaders and in oversight and responsibility for finance, budgets and allocation of staff resources. All of the headteachers in the study reflected on the need for aspiring heads to receive greater training, preparation or experience in managing school finances prior to taking their first headship. Some experienced and novice heads expressed considerable gratitude to headteachers with whom they had worked who had intentionally provided opportunities for them to gain a breadth of leadership and management experience.

We conclude with eleven implications for the training and preparation of those approaching and in the early stages of headship.

**Recommendations for aspirant heads**

1. Be aware that novice headteachers often find managing budgets and finance particularly challenging and seek experience of this before you reach headship.

2. Consider how your development plans will give you the full range of knowledge and skills needed for headship.

3. Start building your professional network now; you will want to call on it when you reach headship.

**Recommendations for novice heads**

1. Begin your diagnosis of school improvement from your interview.

2. Look beyond internal evidence to confirm your priority areas for improvement.

3. The strands of school improvement are interdependent. Keep reviewing your priorities: they will shift as your improvement plan starts to deliver impact.

4. View compliance as a potential springboard as you seek to move from underperformance to engagement.

5. Focus on your senior leadership team early on: they will help you to unlock sustainable improvement.

6. Be honest with yourself, and others, about the support you need.

7. Anchor your school improvement plan to an over-arching vision for success.
INTRODUCTION
This report presents findings from ten qualitative case studies of headteachers working to secure school improvement after taking up a post in a school facing challenging circumstances. Contextual indicators of challenge meant the school was experiencing at least one of the following circumstances:

- Students experiencing above average levels of deprivation
- Students making below average levels of academic progress
- Evidence of school underperformance based on the most recently available Ofsted report

All of the headteachers in this study expressed the view that their new school was underperforming in some substantial way (even those with recent Ofsted judgments of ‘Good’), and many felt that the position of head had become vacant due to this low school performance.

Five of the headteachers were novices, in their first year of headship. Five had previous experience of headship, working in at least one other school, with a track record of securing school improvement in the previous school. The voices and experiences of these new-in-post headteachers are central to this study. Our understanding of the schools and their improvement journeys was supplemented by gathering views from members of the school senior leadership teams, and by engaging with school improvement plans and Ofsted inspection reports.

The purpose of the study was to develop a rich picture of how new-in-post headteachers and school leaders diagnose, prioritise, sequence, select and implement strategies for, and how they identified and overcame common barriers to, school improvement in challenging contexts. The study focused not just on the strategies that were selected in each key area of school improvement, but why headteachers selected them, the sequence in which they were implemented and how they were shaped to the context of the school.

By comparing the experience of novice and experienced headteachers, the study sought to highlight some nuance in the perspectives of heads working to secure school improvement at the start of their headship; while recognising that comparing differences in practice and purpose of such a modest number of headteachers would not necessarily differentiate best practice in school improvement.

This study makes an important contribution to our existing knowledge of school improvement in challenging contexts, as few previous studies have attempted to determine how new-in-post headteachers diagnose and prioritise school improvement. There are very few studies that have attempted to understand how school improvement strategies have been sequenced, and fewer still have compared the views of novice and experienced headteachers in this context.

The findings of this study indicate that multiple strands of school improvement activity were implemented concurrently, in a layered way. However, within the different strands of school improvement, many headteachers followed a common sequential set of steps to ensure those strands were working for the benefit of the students and staff in their school. The sequence of these main strands of school improvement activity were:

- Securing a consistent approach to safeguarding.
- Improving student behaviour.
- Improving the quality of learning and the curriculum.
- Improving the quality of teaching.
- A focus on leadership development.
- Improving relationships with parents and the community.
This report is based primarily on interviews undertaken with the ten primary and secondary headteachers. The findings highlight how leadership can impact on key strands of school improvement activity, and how headteachers have diagnosed and prioritised those strands during their first year in post in their school.

The findings and conclusions presented here will be of particular interest to current headteachers, prospective headteachers and others working in senior leadership positions in schools, particularly those facing similarly challenging circumstances in schools in England. The report is relevant to the work of headteachers leading schools in other countries, especially those with long-established school systems, where the characteristics of schools in challenging contexts are common, and new leaders are regularly brought in to help improve these schools (van de Grift and Houtveen, 2007; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). This report is also highly relevant to the work of anyone who supports headteachers in their leadership of schools, together with those who work to provide high-quality training and professional development for current headteachers; and especially those aspiring to headship.

Overview of relevant literature

This section of the report presents a brief overview of literature that is specifically relevant to the focus on diagnosing, prioritising and sequencing school improvement. It relates to a broader and more detailed thematic review of the literature on the leadership of school improvement undertaken for Ambition Institute in preparation for this piece of research. That broader, more detailed review also has a particular focus on the implications of working in schools facing challenging circumstances.

One of the few studies to consider the sequencing of school improvement activity in a UK context was the “Impact Study” (Day et al., 2009) which involved a three-year study of leadership practices and their impact on student outcomes in effective and improving primary schools across England. As part of the larger study the researchers undertook case studies of 20 schools in which they identified:

“Clear, interrelated phases in the schools’ improvement trajectories (reflecting the dynamic nature of improvement) and, within these, what we have termed, ‘the layering of leadership’.

(Day et al., 2016: 239-40)

The four phases of school improvement identified from the study were foundational, developmental, enrichment and renewal. The researchers identified these phases from the case studies based on how and why some aspects of leadership were considered appropriate at a specific point in time. The foundational phase is most relevant to the research reported here. Day and Sammons (2014: 47) had earlier argued that schools in challenging contexts had a particular tendency to focus efforts during this early phase of improvement on student behaviour, the physical environment and the quality of teaching and learning.

In the foundational phase Day et al. (2016: 240) identified “layered” leadership practices combining transformational and instructional leadership practice. Transformational practices were focused on motivating colleagues to invest in a shared vision and purpose, as well as developing a “core” senior leadership team. Instructional practices focused on specific elements of practice and processes that were fundamentally linked to the improvement of learning and teaching, such as raising expectations, improving pupil behaviour and using data and research. Earlier research evidence had provided the foundation for this perspective on the layering of transformational and instructional leadership practices to achieve school improvement, especially for schools facing challenging circumstances (Hopkins, 2001; Potter et al., 2002; Keys et al., 2003; Muijs et al., 2004; Jang et al., 2008; Day and Sammons, 2014).

Considering the sequencing and focus of improvement activities, Day et al. (2016) identified one case study school working in the foundational phase for as long as three years, although they also indicated that some schools took as little as six months to transition to the next phase. They indicated that some strategies, such as the restructuring of the SLT, did not extend beyond the early part of the foundational stage. Other strands of activity extended into later phases and even grew in importance, such as the use of data to inform decision making for school improvement. Some took on a different emphasis, such as student behaviour, which moved to a focus on student-centred learning and engagement in later phases. Distribution of leadership responsibilities to middle leaders and other members of staff came later in the developmental phase.
What is less clear from the “Impact Study” is how initial priorities were diagnosed. In their discussion of the layered nature of leadership practices they come closest to providing insights on how leaders diagnosed and prioritised their school improvement activity. They conclude by stating that, although context is important in providing nuance to headteachers actions, there are, nevertheless, a set of practices that are independent of context.

“[Headteachers] made judgments, according to their values and diagnoses of context, about the timing, selection, relevance, application, and continuation of strategies that created the optimal conditions for both the motivation, wellbeing, and commitment of staff and effective teaching, learning, and pupil achievement within and across broad development phases”.

(Day et al., 2016: 244)

Another UK-based study posited a similar phased-based approach to school improvement. Matthews, Rea, Hill and Gu (2014) focused on the work of headteachers in a core set of ten primary schools rated ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted with greater than 90% of students attaining level 4 and above in the 2012 end of KS2 national tests. There was no specific focus on diagnosing and prioritising school improvement activity within or across the phases, although the study identified the priorities of schools in some of the different phases, especially those in the rescue phase, which is the clearest parallel to our study.

Matthews et al. (2014: 50) also proposed a phased-based framework to improvement trajectory which they summarised as follows:

- **Rescue** - tackling underperformance.
- **Reinforcement** – securing good.
- **Refinement** – good to outstanding.
- **Renewal and Replication** – sustaining excellence and system improvement.

Overall, the researchers (ibid: 38) summarised the priorities of rescue schools as building a shared vision, aiming for high standards, reshaping the teaching and learning environment, establishing a pupil behaviour policy and appointing, developing and empowering teachers.

Two further multiphase frameworks for school improvement have been proposed by authors who, at least in part, were drawing on published work by Ofsted, summarising evidence across a wide range of school inspections. Each of these multiphase frameworks are summarised in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rescue</td>
<td>Foundational</td>
<td>Getting started</td>
<td>Stabilise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement</td>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>Moving to good</td>
<td>Repair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewal and replication</td>
<td>Enrichment</td>
<td>Sustaining the improvements</td>
<td>Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewal and replication</td>
<td>Renewal</td>
<td>Sustaining the improvements</td>
<td>Sustain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The literature on the work of headteachers in diagnosing priorities for school improvement is particularly sparse. This is despite longstanding acknowledgement (Keys et al., 2003: 11) that one of the key features of a leader’s role is an accurate diagnosis of the problems faced by the school, and their causes. Spillane and Coldren (2015) illustrate the importance of local diagnosis in leading and managing schools, particularly using student achievement and classroom teaching data. They view leaders as the agents for improving schools via their engagement in the retrospective (diagnostic) and predictive (prognostic) framing process. Similarly, in the “Impact Study”, the use of data to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to inform student target setting was an important feature in the improvement groups of schools in different improvement trajectories, and was considered to be especially important in the activity of schools improving from a base of low student attainment (Day and Sammons, 2013: 28). The ability of school leaders to diagnose improvement priorities relates to their personal qualities and traits (Day and Sammons, 2013: 26) and to their values, moral purpose and aspirations (Flintham, 2010: 13). Other authors have recognised the importance of policy contexts as critical in securing improvements in student outcomes (Keys et al., 2003).

One study which explicitly focuses on the issue of diagnosing priorities for school improvement is a study (Ross and Sibbald, 2010) of the work of four “external diagnosticians” identified by an Ontario school district to work with low-achieving primary schools. These schools had been judged as lacking the necessary capacity to diagnose their own school improvement priorities. The research compared the experience of headteachers and staff working to secure school improvement in schools that received the external advice from a diagnostician (n=33) with those schools that identified their own improvement priorities (n=47). Diagnosticians visited the schools to audit practice and resources over two days independent of the views of headteachers or staff.

Ross and Sibbald (2010) identified that classroom teachers would often vehemently dispute the fairness and accuracy of the external diagnosis. This sometimes led to teacher resistance and withdrawal, and to teachers having a diminished view of their own professionalism. School district staff, by contrast, tended to champion the content of the reports, and felt it was a vindication of their own long held perspective of some schools. The position of headteachers was intriguing. In some cases heads sought to mitigate the negative effects of the report on teachers. They did this by focusing on common behaviours raised in the report rather than on the actions of individual people. At other times heads used the reports as a source of pressure for change, even as a “rallying point” to create a source of cohesion for the staff team to gather for battle to show the external stakeholders what they could achieve. Both approaches tended to promote greater collaboration among staff in the school.

The reports led to greater consistency within and between schools and were also associated with improved student achievement. The effect size on three-year averaged outcomes in schools assigned a diagnostician was +0.58 compared to +0.18 for ‘business as usual’ in schools that did not receive an external report. Five schools that hired their own external diagnostician saw an effect size of +0.36 in their outcomes. The researchers point out that there are range of confounding variables that weren’t accounted for in the study such as the lower base of student outcomes in schools receiving external reports, and corresponding differences in resources provided by the district such as full-time literacy coaches in the low base schools, compared to part-time in the other schools.

Further research in this area around the diagnosis and prioritisation of school improvement activity would be extremely useful and timely, to inform developments in policy and leadership preparation, as well as school practice. This study seeks to make a contribution to the knowledge base, with a particular focus on schools in challenging contexts. It is timely to move beyond a list of characteristics of effective schools and leaders to examine whether a richer understanding of the processes of diagnosing and prioritising activity can shed light along the path to school improvement.
METHODOLOGY
Methodology

Literature review

In our search for relevant literature in this area we utilised a range of keywords in search terms including: school improvement, diagnose/diagnosing/diagnostic, sequence/sequencing, phase/phasing, priority/priorities/prioritising and their US English cognates. Searches using these keywords yielded very little primary research that was specifically focused on the diagnosing and sequencing of school improvement priorities. This is despite the fact that the importance of the sequence in which improvement behaviours are implemented was raised in the literature over two decades ago (Hopkins et al., 1994). This is coupled to a relative dearth of evidence on the resource, advice and support seeking interactions of leaders to facilitate the process of diagnosing and prioritising school improvement and reform.

Primary research

The research study utilised a multiple case study design (Yin, 2009). A total of ten new-in-post school leaders were recruited using the purposive sampling approach described below, as exemplars of headteachers seeking to secure school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances. The selected school leaders held a range of different titles, including headteacher or principal and executive headteacher or executive principal. We refer to all members of this group as headteachers for ease of reference.

The strategy for identifying and selecting the headteachers was designed to provide insight into school improvement in two key ways:

- All of the case headteachers were working in a challenging context for school improvement, defined in terms of low academic progress of students, high economic disadvantage or recent evidence of school underperformance.
- There was a mix of cases consisting of leaders who had recently entered their first post as headteacher, together with those who had previous experience of headship and a proven track record in securing school improvement.

An initial group of 130 new-in-post headteachers and their schools were identified using an extract from a larger dataset formerly known as “Edubase” (DfE, 2018). This was supplemented by Ambition Institute’s informal knowledge of the sector which added 15 more headteachers drawn from Ambition’s participant networks database, plus a further six that were suggested by multi-academy trusts in contact with Ambition’s school partnership team. This resulted in a pool of new-in-post headteachers working in 104 primary and 47 secondary schools. Each of these headteachers were contacted during participant recruitment and invited to participate in the study. A total of 22 school leaders indicated that they were willing to participate in the research and publicly available data were gathered from school performance tables, school websites and the Edubase extract about the level of experience of each headteacher and the context of her/his school. This allowed the criteria for leadership experience to be further narrowed so that the final group of case study heads would consist of leaders who were either:

- A novice headteacher, working within two years of securing their first headship.

- An experienced headteacher with at least two years in their previous headship that yielded evidence of school improvement, now working in their first year of headship in a new school during the 2017-18 academic year.

The school context characteristics were also narrowed down so that the contexts for school improvement would exhibit at least one of the following characteristics:

- Primary schools with significantly below average progress scores in reading, writing and maths during at least one of the last two years (2016, 2017); secondary schools with a significantly below average Progress 8 score in at least one of the last two years.
Above average entitlement to free school meals (defined as above 25%), with the priority for schools with the highest pupil disadvantage

An Ofsted rating of ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’ in their most recent inspection prior to the start of the 2017-18 academic year

From the set of headteachers and their schools that fulfilled the criteria above, ten were selected to provide an appropriate balance across a set of secondary selection criteria so that the final sample of cases was spread in terms of:

> School phase – five primary and five secondary headteachers were selected
> Headteacher experience – five novice and five experienced headteachers were selected
> Gender – seven female and three male headteachers were selected
> Leadership training – no more than four of the headteachers had received training from Ambition Institute, and no more than two of the heads were trained in Ambition’s programmes with a significant school improvement component
> School location – there was a geographic spread of schools across most of the Government Office Regions in England as follows:

- London: three schools
- South West: two schools
- East of England: two schools
- North East: one school
- East Midlands: one school
- Yorkshire and the Humber: one school

In the first phase of the study researchers visited each of the ten schools in order to interview the case study headteacher and other members of the school senior leadership team (SLT). This included participants in roles such as deputy headteachers and assistant headteachers. The number of interviews conducted in each school ranged from three to seven, usually dependent on the school size and the number of leaders within the SLT. A semi-structured approach to interviews was adopted using a framework developed in consultation with Ambition Institute. Six core questions were posed in each interview:

> What evidence was used during the initial diagnosis of core issues for school improvement?
> What sources did leaders turn to in order to obtain and make sense of the evidence?
> What were the main priorities established in the school improvement plan and how were these decided?
> What strategies were employed to secure improvement?
> What barriers were encountered during the year?
> What types of evidence were used to monitor improvement?

These core questions were supplemented with additional probe questions to support elicitation of rich responses. Copies of documents related to school improvement were also collected, such as school improvement plans and self-evaluation documents. Previous inspection reports also formed part of the data for the study.

An initial round of data analysis was used to produce school level summaries focusing on the experience of the headteacher during their first year in post. A visualisation summarising key aspects of the data was produced for each case in the form of a summary timeline for each headteacher, mapping out her/his school improvement activity across the year (an exemplar timeline is located in the appendix of this report).
### Table 1: Summary of context for each of the case study primary schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student outcomes</th>
<th>Primary 1</th>
<th>Primary 2</th>
<th>Primary 3</th>
<th>Primary 4</th>
<th>Primary 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prog Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prog maths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected standards</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Statement/EHCP</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ever FSM6</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% EAL</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Absence</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Persistent absence</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Summary of context for each of the case study secondary schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student outcomes</th>
<th>Secondary 1</th>
<th>Secondary 2</th>
<th>Secondary 3</th>
<th>Secondary 4</th>
<th>Secondary 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attainment 8</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade C+ inc EM</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5+ inc EM</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4+ inc EM</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Statement/EHCP</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ever FSM6</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% EAL</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Absence</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Persistent absence</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Key to tables:

- Well below average: Yellow
- Below average: Red
- Average: Orange
- Above average: Dark blue
- Well above average: Purple

**Ofsted inspection outcomes:**

1 - Outstanding  
2 - Good  
3 - Requires improvement  
4 - Inadequate
The improvement timelines summarised both the strategies employed and barriers encountered across the first year of headship for each of the core strands of school improvement determined at the initial interview. An estimate of the relative weighting of each improvement strand was captured in the timeline as an approximate proportion of the headteacher’s energies invested in each issue during that part of the year.

In the second phase of the study, a single follow-up interview was conducted with each of the headteachers to further explore some of the themes identified in the data generated from interviews in the first phase. The summary timelines were used as a visual stimulus for these interviews and headteachers were asked to check them for accuracy and completeness of content.

We were mindful of the limitations of using data drawn from the experience of only ten headteachers and have sought to draw out transferable findings and implications for practice and policy making rather than broad generalised conclusions. The study was also limited in scope to the views of school senior leaders. Interesting contrasts may have arisen if the range of participants had been expanded to include teachers, MAT or LA managers, school governors and other external stakeholders. Despite these limitations, we feel this study captures a fine-grained perspective that characterises the rich qualitative data that can be derived from a case study.

We are extremely grateful to all the headteachers and members of senior school leadership teams who participated in the project as well as staff at each case study school who helped us with arrangements for visits to each school and in obtaining copies of school improvement documents. We also appreciate the support of colleagues at Ambition Institute for their assistance in identifying schools and recruiting headteachers, and in refining aspects of the research from the initial design through to production of the final report.
MAIN FINDINGS
Main findings

This section of the research report summarises the main findings from the study. It is divided into the main strands of school improvement activity, each of which was undertaken by headteachers in at least half of the ten case study schools. These strands of activity were identified through analysis of the interview data and verified by engaging with school improvement documents obtained from the schools and through discussion with the heads during follow-up interviews.

The research project focuses predominantly on the operational aspects of securing school improvement in schools in challenging contexts. However, a number of the headteachers, including all the experienced heads, articulated the importance of tying school improvement planning and activity to a strong, well-communicated vision. This was perceived by heads as an essential precursor to diagnosing, sequencing and shaping the specific strategies that they employed during their first year in post. For some heads a well-articulated vision provided the foundation for improvement planning, prioritisation and implementation of the processes identified through the research.

“I’ve got a very set view on [learning] and so what we’ve done is we’ve mapped out a five-year plan. So we’ve said what does the school look like in 2022? What does it mean to be a student here? What does it mean to be an adult here? What does it mean for the community? What outcomes are we going to have secured for our children? How are we going to interact with our community? How are children going to behave themselves within the community? And what do our teachers look like, what do they do, how do they make decisions? What mental-models do they have to inform their practice in real time? How do we generate meaningful data about what the kids know to inform future teaching? And what are we teaching them, how is that sequenced, what does that culminate in?”

Experienced Secondary Headteacher

No single consensus emerged as to the common, single most effective sequence for school improvement activity. Nevertheless, some patterns were identifiable, along with a rationale as to why these strands of activity are important for leaders working to secure improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances. The order in which the strands are presented in this report is based on our interpretation of the headteachers’ responses as to how they sequenced school improvement activity in the schools. It represents a synthesis of the data gleaned from all ten of the case study schools. The sequencing of the strands was supported by the production of summary timelines for each school which headteachers were asked to verify during the follow-up interview (an exemplar timeline is located as an appendix to this report).

“Don’t have an action plan with 96 things… I do five key priorities. There will, obviously, be other actions behind that, but you’ve got to make sure that they’re set straight away, so everybody knows what the key actions are. So, you’re not diverting off. And then re-evaluate it termly. It might be that safeguarding is effective, so that goes on the back-burner and just keep coming back to revisit it.”

Experienced Secondary Headteacher
STRAND 1: SECURING CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING
This first major strand of activity focuses on issues that the majority of case study headteachers indicated were highest on their list of priorities during the first year of their headship. These issues were ensuring consistent application of safeguarding policies and improving student behaviour on and around the school site.

All of the secondary heads indicated that one of these two issues was their initial priority for the year, with most making explicit mention of the need to address some concerns regarding safeguarding as well as needing to secure improvements in student behaviour. Two of the five primary schools also stated that either safeguarding, or student behaviour, or both were among their most important issues to address to secure school improvement.

Where safeguarding was raised, it was considered to be the highest priority issue to tackle, but was usually dealt with swiftly, since the issues were often limited to ensuring that policies and processes were being consistently applied. By contrast, improving student behaviour was a strand of activity that required a much more sustained effort in order to secure improvement.

The following key points have been identified in this strand of school improvement.

- New headteachers placed a strong emphasis on substantial audits to provide evidence of compliance with safeguarding policies and statutory processes.

- Effective systems were generally in place with the necessary staff and governors in the lead safeguarding roles.

- The main cause for concern was the need to ensure consistent implementation of safeguarding policies and procedures. This sometimes required specific training.

- Regular communication and monitoring was required to minimise the risk of future inconsistencies in safeguarding processes.

- Behaviour was usually considered to be the most urgent strand of school improvement after safeguarding. The rationale for this was that it played a major role in ensuring effective conditions for learning. Most of the focus was on behaviour in the classroom, but this was not exclusively the case.

- Existing, effective behaviour policies were a useful resource but needed to be drawn from schools in similarly challenging contexts.

- Clear and consistent application of an effective behaviour policy was able to yield relative rapid improvements in behaviour, but this, in turn, exposed shortcomings in teaching. The development of learning and teaching therefore needed to run in parallel in order to maximise the gains from improvement in students’ behaviour, to ensure more ambitious learning outcomes in terms of material covered in each lesson, and to secure better conditions for improvements in the quality of learning and teaching.

- Most headteachers reported that they rapidly achieved compliance from students in terms of their behaviour. Compliance was still the word used by heads to describe the position in most schools by the end of their first year of headship. Heads expressed dissatisfaction with this state of compliance and indicated their intention to push on to secure greater engagement from students, but recognised this may require comparatively more time to secure.
**Strand 1a: Securing a consistent approach to safeguarding**

Effective safeguarding is clearly a fundamental legal requirement of the work of all schools, involving all members of staff.

> “Safeguarding compliance is as important as other things we have done this year.”
> 
> Novice Secondary Headteacher

Nevertheless, there was some discussion as to whether taking action on safeguarding should be viewed as a strand of school improvement.

> “My priority within the school would be safeguarding but not in my improvement plan. My improvement plan is different.”
> 
> Novice Secondary Headteacher

It has been included because more than half of the heads raised the issue of safeguarding as the initial priority for their first year in post and recognised that the school could not operate without safeguarding procedures in place and issues can arise that expose shortcomings in procedures:

> “Priority number one had to be the basics, it had to be the safeguarding really. Something arose in one of the schools in the first week... You just assume that no school can function without having these basic things.”
> 
> Experienced Secondary Headteacher

Where safeguarding was raised explicitly, the main concern was usually ensuring consistent application of safeguarding policies, as suitable procedures and policies were usually already in place. After scrutiny of Ofsted reports we identified only one case study primary school where a safeguarding issue had been explicitly identified during an inspection prior to the arrival of the new headteacher.

**Evidence**

The new headteacher’s initial visit to the school provided a key opportunity to identify and gather evidence of safeguarding issues. Headteachers drew evidence from conversations with teaching and non-teaching staff on how the school had been operating to identify issues.

Safeguarding audits and reviews of practice were a major means of collecting evidence in this area of practice. Audits were usually supported by the local authority or the MAT especially where schools had just joined a MAT. Experienced headteachers could sometimes supplement the audit team by calling on an external expert to be part of the review. This was usually a contact from the head’s professional network.

**Sources of evidence and support**

Many of the schools in this study belong to MATs that hired safeguarding experts or have Ofsted trained staff who can support schools in their trust when undertaking a safeguarding review.

> “So, when [a specific issue] was flagged, we did a full safeguarding review using one of the Ofsted inspectors and just said, ‘Okay, the basics need to be in place’... But that was something that you would have assumed would have been in there.”
> 
> Experienced Secondary Headteacher

Headteachers also found their teaching and non-teaching staff to be key sources of evidence. Conversations with a whole range of staff had informed one headteacher as to whether staff understood how policy related to practice.
Strategies

The headteachers indicated that their strategies for dealing with safeguarding issues generally required focused and rapid action at the start of the academic year. Some schools required development to the physical structures of the site, such as provision of adequate security fencing around the school.

“We spent a lot of money on fencing, so that I can know where the children are, and know where they are not. I can supervise them more efficiently, making sure they are safe.”

Experienced Secondary Headteacher

The other key set of strategies identified by heads were focused on raising awareness of the existing policies and systems for safeguarding. This was usually established through staff training undertaken by the headteacher or an external trainer. Training in the preparation and review of adequate risk assessments was also raised as an issue in one school, where the experienced headteacher drew on her previous leadership of this area to undertake a review and provide training herself. She then set up a new process so that future risk assessments for activities required sign-off from the school Business Manager. A further aspect of training related to familiarising staff with the internal reporting systems to ensure that the school’s designated safeguarding leads were made aware of any issues so that problems were addressed as swiftly as possible, and any incidents could be accurately recorded.

Sequencing

Many of the heads mentioned that addressing their initial safeguarding concerns required a quick turnaround in the early stages of their headship. The central importance of securing safeguarding, and the legal complexities involved, meant that the first step undertaken was usually a thorough review of policies, practice and systems, alongside and audit of physical aspects of the school site.

The second step mentioned was usually to work on addressing issues in the physical structure of the school site, such as securing outer walls and gates. The heads expressed their appreciation to their school governors, and to colleagues in the local authority or the MAT, for help in acquiring costings from local companies and reviewing budgets in light of the additional expenditure.

The next steps were usually more time consuming, but this time commitment tapered going forward. This involved strengthening and developing existing safeguarding policies and practices, followed by embedding the policy throughout the staff through training and awareness raising. Once this awareness was established, the key need was for effective and sustained monitoring to ensure that everything and everyone is working as intended. All heads who raised the issue of safeguarding indicated that they reached this monitoring stage well within the first term in post.

Barriers

Schools facing financial constraints through deficit budgets found it difficult to identify the necessary funds to implement physical changes to the school site. Due to the importance of safeguarding, heads were able to leverage support from their Governing Body and/or the Directors of their MAT in order to undertake the necessary spending for the changes they required. None of the heads in these circumstances reported any resistance to requests from those involved in governance of the school.

The potential for complacency sometimes proved to be a barrier. After provision of training on policies, systems and procedures the ongoing challenge became maintaining levels of vigilance and awareness. This was addressed by making safeguarding a regular item in staff and senior leadership team meetings, and by ensuring that staff had explicit opportunities to voice concerns in meetings and through reporting systems. For example, a novice secondary headteacher created a safeguarding display in a strategic position near the kettle in the kitchen. The display reminded staff to stay vigilant and offered a suggestion box to allow for reporting of problems or concerns.
Novice heads were usually reliant on support from the LA or their MAT to undertake reviews. Experienced heads indicated that they had existing contacts within their professional networks on whom they could call to ask for support and advice. Their experience of overseeing safeguarding from previous headships provided helpful benchmarks when making their initial observations and in conversations with staff. One novice secondary headteacher reflected that her previous leadership experience hadn’t provided sufficient direct experience of managing safeguarding issues.

“I wish that I’d spent my last term as a deputy getting to grips with what was going on with that side of things.”

Novice Secondary Headteacher

**Monitoring**

Regular monitoring and awareness raising were considered critical to ensuring that the developments in safeguarding were sustained. Some heads were able to delegate aspects of the day-to-day monitoring to trained admin staff within both the school and the MAT. There was a strong focus on embedding the policy and checking for its consistent application, along with constant communication with staff to identify problem areas or shortcomings in systems and processes.

This experienced primary head illustrated how aspects of this approach to monitoring worked out in her school, in the context of the wider work of securing school improvement.

“Safeguarding does come into your leadership. In my leadership meetings once a week, I will say to [named colleague who runs safeguarding team] ‘What do we know about the vulnerable pupils?’ Then that comes to the leadership forum. So it all links together”.

Novice Secondary Headteacher

**Strand 1b: Improving student behaviour**

“The least interesting part of running a school for me is behaviour, but you have to get it right”.

Experienced secondary headteacher

There was a clear emphasis from many of the case study headteachers on behaviour as a driving principle for addressing school improvement. All of the secondary schools in the study addressed behaviour directly early on in the first year of the new headship, while behaviour was only explicitly highlighted as a strand for school improvement in two of the five primary schools. This reflects some of the differences between the phases observed by Bennett (2017) in his review of behaviour in schools. The predominant focus was on securing what many heads referred to as “behaviour for learning” in and around the school, although most discussion was focussed on behaviour in the classroom. This was raised by each of the headteachers who indicated that behaviour was a key strand of their school improvement planning.

“There’s two real pillars for me. Behaviour is absolutely key. It’s not about the extremes of behaviour. It’s about that low-level disruption that disrupts learning and stops staff from doing their work. And then, of course, running in tandem to that it’s the teaching and learning”.

Experienced secondary headteacher

There was also an emphasis from a few schools on the reputational damage that might arise from poor student behaviour around and away from the school site. This included two schools in which pupils were instructed to go home and change before visiting any of the local shops. This aspect of those schools’ behaviour policy was monitored by patrols of SLT members around the school site and around the local roads where shops were located. The rationale for this approach was that there was clear evidence of reputational damage being caused by pupils in school uniform behaving very poorly in and around local shops and other public areas, evidenced by complaints from local shopkeepers and residents.
Evidence

The most powerful source of evidence for issues related to behaviour came from observation in classrooms, around the school, at transitions between lessons and break and lunchtimes, and while walking out and about in the local community. Schools also consulted behaviour records, such as data around fixed-term and permanent exclusions. In some cases, this data was considered subsidiary evidence, especially where the focus was on behaviour in lessons. That’s because “low-level disruption”, which was cited as a key issue in many schools, doesn’t always carry forward to data on exclusions or even to data on detentions.

Ofsted reports were used by many incoming heads to obtain a picture of potential behaviour issues in advance of arriving at the school. Interviews with classroom teachers and other staff members from the school community were other effective sources of evidence to build up a complete picture of the behavioural issues. Some new headteachers took advantage of visits before starting in post to make observations about their new school. This may have been with the advantage of relative anonymity among the students so that their presence did not alter student behaviour in the way that might be typical if students knew the headteacher was approaching them. This experienced secondary head describes his fact finding visit to his new school as follows:

“I then met almost all of the teachers one-on-one before I started and spoke to them. It wasn’t an interview. I was just trying to get a feel for the school and then I spent some time, looking around, horrified, feeling unsafe, and so I knew what I had to do in September”.

Experienced secondary headteacher

Some schools had arranged for audit teams to review a wide range of aspects of school processes and practices and behaviour was usually high on the agenda of these audits, due to its perceived importance. Sometimes these teams included external advisors with experience of systems and practices around improving student behaviour.

“We would bring somebody in to do some consultancy with us around behaviour and the pastoral team… we would be looking at the data around exclusions, the data on attendance and then having conversations with all of those people on senior leadership who lead and that then gives us sort of a baseline”.

Experienced secondary headteacher

Sources of evidence and support

Advice was often sought from fellow leaders in other schools and through visits to other schools to observe their behaviour systems in action. We found that generally, experienced headteachers were able to call on a wider set of supporters in this area than novice headteachers, due to the greater breadth and depth of their leadership experience.

“When I first arrived I carried out a full audit. I brought in a team of people that I really trust to go through the school and they had no loyalty to me there, no loyalty to the trust [MAT], no loyalty to the school. They’re totally impartial and I just said ‘No stone left unturned. I want to know everything that’s wrong with the school that needs to be fixed’. So, they kind of scoured the place, looking for issues, they brought me a big report”.

Experienced Secondary Headteacher

When asked how the team was chosen this experienced secondary head went on to provide some rationale for taking this approach of turning to his contacts outside of the school and outside the MAT:

“I think it’s very easy for headteachers to start to believe their own hype …and so every term in my previous school I brought in an external team to come into the school for a day, just to pick holes in the school for me so I never became blinkered. I’d worked with them for four years. So I decided who they were, and they already knew what I wanted but they also knew I could handle being told the truth”.

Experienced Secondary Headteacher
By contrast, those novice heads working as part of a MAT tended to rely more on support from within their trust to provide evidence in this area, although there were some exceptions to this. One novice primary head working in a LA school was able to draw on a professional network of aspiring leaders established during training meetings and NPQH sessions. Another novice secondary head drew on his longstanding network established from his days as a trainee teacher on the Teach First programme. This head also made regular use of consultants from organisations that he considered to be specialists in specific areas of school improvement. He went on to describe how a thorough analysis of the data on sanctions within the school identified inconsistencies in the numbers of students attending detentions. He felt it would be helpful to gather independent evidence of this via an audit, in order to validate his observations before challenging staff about the issue:

“How do we know it wasn’t working? Well you look at the data; the numbers of sanctions being set just seemed to be very high, but actually when we were triangulating it, they weren’t doing their detentions. So the system wasn’t working… An external behaviour audit was carried out that really validated everything I thought about it”.

Novice secondary headteacher

**Strategies**

Where possible, it was seen as beneficial to utilise approaches from within the MAT in order to facilitate visits to observe the behaviour policy and systems in action, and also to facilitate initial CPD opportunities. If schools were part of a more developed MAT, they were more likely to be able to identify existing models and policies within their trust. Nevertheless, some heads still looked outside their MAT, especially if they didn’t have another school in similar circumstances within their trust. Drawing strategies from a similar school context was viewed as more important than affiliation within the MAT, even if this meant having to pay teachers or leaders from the other school to assist with initial training of staff. The perception of a suitably tried and tested approach also helped to secure buy-in from teachers working with the new behaviour policy.

Even where context could be matched, the new policy may still require some degree of adaptation in order to make it suitable for implementation by one of the case study schools. This was considered to be necessary even when the school that provided the policy had been judged by Ofsted to be ‘Outstanding’ with regard to behaviour.

“I went to see an outstanding school for their behaviour, looked at their model. And then I wrote a new behaviour policy taking into account what our issues were, and also, from this ‘Outstanding’ school, adapted it to our context, and then delivered it.”

Novice secondary headteacher

The same headteacher went on to explain how these adaptations were linked to a focused period of monitoring of the new approach, based on a combination of sources of evidence:

“We ran it very specifically for a week then we looked at it, and then [a further] two weeks, but making sure all the people were in the right places. And then every week we were publishing the data about rewards and sanctions… and very clearly we could see it was working. [There were] teething problems about making sure people are doing their jobs”.

Novice secondary headteacher

Another head admitted that the modifications required to contextualise the policy were actually relatively minor:

“The person who supports us and has developed that system down at [other MAT school] would argue that it also has to be tweaked to individual schools, but if I’m honest we haven’t felt the need to, because the school is very similar.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
Some schools in less well-developed MATs found that their new behaviour polices were being taken up and utilised in other schools in their MAT. Many schools used staff training days at the beginning of term to introduce new behaviour policies and to ensure that new systems were well understood. In order to manage the challenge of introducing the new policy, one school took a highly-phased approach, with intensive staff training followed by a staggered return of pupils across a span of days.

The setting up of efficient systems to support the administration of any new approach was considered crucial in order to ensure the consistency of implementation necessary for the new policy to be successful. Effective systems for recording data related to attendance and behaviour (rewards and sanctions data as well as exclusions) were also crucial for monitoring improvement in this area.

Likewise, systems for communicating news of sanctions to parents were viewed as key aspects of practice, and sometimes resulted in the development of additional administrative roles for non-teaching staff.

Most schools opted for behaviour policies that placed a heavy emphasis on the role of SLT members to implement the sanctions associated with infringements of the behaviour policy. The implication was that classroom teachers need to be allowed to get on and teach. They would be the initiators of the sanctions process, but SLT members would be responsible for its implementation.

Many schools used staff training days at the beginning of term to introduce new behaviour policies and to ensure that new systems were well understood. In order to manage the challenge of introducing the new policy, one school took a highly-phased approach, with intensive staff training followed by a staggered return of pupils across a span of days.

The setting up of efficient systems to support the administration of any new approach was considered crucial in order to ensure the consistency of implementation necessary for the new policy to be successful. Effective systems for recording data related to attendance and behaviour (rewards and sanctions data as well as exclusions) were also crucial for monitoring improvement in this area. Likewise, systems for communicating news of sanctions to parents were viewed as key aspects of practice, and sometimes resulted in the development of additional administrative roles for non-teaching staff.

Most schools opted for behaviour policies that placed a heavy emphasis on the role of SLT members to implement the sanctions associated with infringements of the behaviour policy. The implication was that classroom teachers need to be allowed to get on and teach. They would be the initiators of the sanctions process, but SLT members would be responsible for its implementation.

**Sequencing**

There was some lively internal debate expressed during interviews as to whether behaviour had to be tackled before the quality of teaching, or vice versa. When pressed on this, the majority consensus was that behaviour was the priority issue, although all the headteachers who tackled behaviour issues during the first year of headship indicated that the two strands of improvement are inextricably linked.

“The one thing I’ve learned about teaching and learning is that it’s everything in a school, but you need good behaviour as a prerequisite, not the other way round… You need a certain level of compliance for teachers to be able to teach and for teaching and learning to move forward and that’s not always recognised… In challenging circumstances the behaviour isn’t addressed quickly enough.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
In one school, by contrast, the headteacher believed that quality of teaching and curriculum had to come first, so that it was only possible to make a judgment on behaviour once the teaching quality was nearer an optimal level.

“I just knew, yes behaviour had been raised as an issue, but if the teaching was right the behaviour would stop. I firmly believe that behaviour is a product of the teaching, or the support, or the challenge not being right.”

Novice primary headteacher

Many of the schools reported that behavioural issues were addressed far faster than SLT members had envisaged at the start of the academic year. Even some of the most challenged schools in terms of behaviour, often the secondary schools, reported that by the end of the autumn term, if not by the first half term, behaviour had improved markedly. In one school, a new assistant headteacher who was brought in to work with the school from January, reported the perception that behaviour in the school had already been transformed. Where this rapid turnaround occurred, it was always put down to the consistent and persistent application of systems by all staff, and to effective communication of the behaviour policies to students and their parents.

The heads in many of the secondary schools spoke of this stage as achieving compliance from students. There was a clear sense of dissatisfaction with this stage and a desire to move beyond compliance to engagement, though many of the leaders still described the pupils as being at the compliant stage at the end of year, even where there had been rapid turn-around as described above. This compliance phase was seen, not as the end, but as a staging post to pupils being more engaged and taking initiative in their learning. There was a belief that this would require further adaptation on behaviour policies, with a shift to a focus on promoting positive, pro-active behaviours. No school expressed a view that they had been able to circumvent this compliance phase and jump straight to an engaged phase.

In schools where heads felt student behaviour had presented considerable levels of challenge to staff in the past, such rapid improvements provided considerable leverage for new heads and SLTs in their relationship with staff across the school. This gave them the authority to move other improvement initiatives through, especially in the areas of quality of teaching, staff development and performance management. Rapid reductions in low-level disruption often led to issues in the quality of teaching being “exposed”. One headteacher mentioned that the school’s behaviour policy:

“… does something in terms of getting compliance out of children, absolutely, but it doesn’t do anything to improve teaching and learning. In fact, it makes it worse actually because teachers can just teach very flatly and the kids have got to behave no matter what.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Teachers more accustomed to dealing with disruptive behaviour would find that their lesson plans did not take them through a whole lesson, with one member of a school SLT describing some teachers falling short by as much as 15 minutes of material out of an hour-long lesson. Thus, shortcomings were more likely to be exposed, both in terms of the quality of teaching, and in the planned quantity of material covered. Headteachers spoke of this turn-around in the classroom as providing better conditions for teachers to be able to shine and show what they are genuinely capable of, but these gains needed careful attention in order to realise the opportunities for enhancing learning.

Barriers

Some schools had to take specific action to deal with a small number of pupils exhibiting more extreme forms of behaviour. This was sometimes the legacy of low pupil numbers leading to a greater likelihood that the school would be on the receiving end of a process of managed-moves of students from other schools in the local authority. Some of the case study schools had taken on highly challenging pupils excluded, or at risk of permanent exclusion, from other local schools. One experienced secondary head even referred to the school as becoming something of a “dumping-ground” due to “woefully under-resourced” provision by the local authority to meet the needs of such challenging students. This headteacher worked to include these students within the new behaviour management plans and employed a number of additional student support officers in order to help deal with the level of complex behaviours and background issues inherited with some of these students.
Another experienced head, in this case of a primary school, spoke of similar issues resulting from having taken on challenging students, but from a basis of a more positive relationship with the local authority which meant they could address this issue in partnership:

“The inclusion deputy had a good relationship with the inclusion team at the LA. [The school] has always had a good reputation for the work that they do with extreme behaviours, but I think that was more around the fact that we took them in, sometimes through Fair Access Protocol (FAP), sometimes not through FAP but through the back-door, because sometimes another head had said ‘You need to leave our school or be permanently excluded’. And then they came to us because we have spaces. But the LA have been extremely supportive actually, so that’s positive.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

While the school had accepted these pupils, the new head felt it was not always possible for the school to meet their needs. In this case addressing the issue for a few students exhibiting the most extreme behaviours required an extended process of seeking an education and health (EHC) plan through consultation with parents and the Local Authority in order to seek more appropriate provision for students with challenging behaviours. Although this was a considerable investment of time and energy from senior leaders in the school, the headteacher indicated that they had been able to work with the parents to help them see that a mainstream setting was not the most appropriate provision for their child. This head also volunteered to be part of a local panel set up to address the needs of students exhibiting challenging behaviours, in order to maintain a positive relationship with the local authority.

Negative parental reaction to changes in the behaviour policy can be a significant barrier. In one school, the new behaviour policy led to a substantial amount of negative media attention focusing on comments from a number of discontented parents. The new headteacher indicated that some mistakes had been made in implementing the new policy, which contributed somewhat to the disaffection, and these were addressed during the early part of the academic year. Some schools felt the way to pre-empt this particular barrier was to engage with, and to consult parents during the initial writing and development of the new behaviour policy, and many heads conceded that clear channels of communication to parents during early implementation of the new policy were essential.

A further barrier was the challenge of achieving compliance from staff to ensure consistent implementation of any new behaviour policy. It takes time to change staff routines and their attitudes to behaviour, especially where they have become embedded as part of the culture of the school, as one experienced primary headteacher explained.

“We also had a core group of children with extreme behaviours. And when I started I was told ‘That’s how children behave here’… A previous head would tell me of incidents that he’d had, where children were on the roof flicking Vs at him because that’s what children did here.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Some leaders circumvented issues with inconsistency in the supervision and communication of sanctions by arranging for detentions to be supervised exclusively by members of the SLT, and for administrators to deal with the associated logging of attendance at the sanction and communication to parents. The heads recognised this was an investment – focusing valuable SLT time towards a somewhat administrative task – but felt it was worth making in order to streamline processes, ensure they were adhered to consistently, and so help secure the most rapid improvements to students’ behaviour. One experienced head also indicated that this approach helped to reduce workload around behaviour management as well as to increase efficiency.

“Everything is centralised. The whole behaviour system is centralised. Teachers don’t have to get involved in it. They sanction a kid for being naughty but then they don’t run the detention. They don’t follow up and make a phone call, or do any of that kind of stuff. So we’ve just put very tight structures in place. If this happens you do this, and then it is the consequence. It’s just simple.”

Experienced secondary head
Once the positive effects of the new behaviour policy began to be experienced, heads reported that it was usually easier to secure greater buy-in to the new policy by staff.

Monitoring

Early monitoring of this issue had a strong focus on maintenance of the approach and consistent application of the behaviour policy. SLT members indicated that gaining compliance from teachers, in terms of implementing the policy, could be an issue.

Later in the year, once behaviour had improved, pupil voice (such as student councils) tended to be seen as a mechanism to gather evidence to inform future development and adaption of the new behaviour policy. This was illustrated by commentary from the experienced head in one secondary school, where a complete overhaul of the behaviour policy had resulted in sweeping changes to dealing with student behaviour.

“You know I spoke to some students yesterday and they were saying, ‘In previous years, we were all stashing our knives, you know, around the site, and in the park just next to the school and stuff and that’s all stopped. Now we’re not bringing weapons on site… We feel much safer. The school is much calmer, with much better teaching… you now need to cut us some slack… we’re not as naughty as we used to be and you can trust us’. So a big thing for us next year is rolling back slightly the rigidity of the system.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
STRAJD 2:
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING TEACHING
Strand 2: Improving the quality of learning and teaching

Alongside addressing issues with student behaviour, this major strand of activity represents the other core focus for school improvement identified by the headteachers in the case study. It was a key strand of improvement activity for all ten of the case study schools. In each case, except where safeguarding was identified as the highest priority issue, behaviour was listed as either priority number 1 or number 2 by the new head. Even in schools that asserted that behaviour needed to be addressed before the quality of learning and teaching, many of the heads suggested that in reality the two core strands of school improvement were intertwined. This extended narrative from an interview with one head is typical of the internal debate, usually only made explicit as members of the research team probed more deeply on the specific sequencing of school improvement activity.

As the volume of material provided by the new heads and members of their SLT teams for this area was so substantial, this strand has been divided into the two core elements of improving the quality of learning and improving the quality of teaching. These two sub-strands are bridged by an intermediate section reporting work undertaken in a small number of schools, all secondary schools, which undertook a substantial restructuring of their staffing due to the financial constraints they had experienced. We have positioned this as a bridge between the sections on learning and teaching, as in every case where it was reported, any restructure of staffing was rationalised as a response to a review of the suitability of the curriculum to meet the needs of student learning.

The following key points have been identified in this strand of school improvement:

- Detailed analysis of student outcomes was a key source of diagnostic evidence but there was some scepticism as to the value of internal assessment data and self-evaluation data, at least in part because these were schools with a pattern of low performance that had not been addressed. For this reason, external audits were also common in this area, from trusted peers from the headteacher’s network of contacts, and the LA/MAT.

- Data analysis was usually supplemented by an extensive programme of observations, learning walks and review of students’ work in order to triangulate the data analysis and provide additional insight into the reasons why the data indicated poor performance.

- Strategies to enhance the quality of learning were usually focused on developing core aspects of the curriculum provision during the first year of headship. In some cases a complete review of the curriculum was considered to be necessary, but this usually required commitment from experienced members of SLT, often supported by external contacts from the heads network or the MAT.

- For some schools, especially those with low student numbers and financial issues in terms of budget deficits, restructuring of the staffing was sometimes required. This was driven, and rationalised, by a review of the curriculum provision, and was usually undertaken by the head/exec head in consultation with HR staff within the MAT/LA and in consultation with reps from teacher professional organisations.

- Novice headteachers agreed that getting to grips with school budgets and managing finance was a considerable challenge during their first year in post.

- The priority for curriculum development was meeting the learning needs of students. Once a framework for the curriculum was determined, the headteacher could begin organising staffing to fit those needs.

- Many heads expressed the view that it was necessary to provide the right conditions for teaching and learning before valid assessments of the quality of teaching could be made. This involved addressing issues with student behaviour and developing curriculum provision so that it was coherent and well-resourced.

- All schools experienced issues with the quality of teaching to varying degrees. An extensive programme of CPD around a core set of teaching principles, or “non-negotiables”, was often established. For schools with the most urgent need to address the quality of teaching, heads usually began with a one-size-fits-all approach during their first year of headship. Ongoing monitoring sometimes indicated it was necessary to differentiate the approach to CPD.
Strategies for the development of teaching quality adopted from other schools were usually based on experience of previous programmes of CPD found to be effective. Novice heads, and some experienced heads, would consult trusted colleagues from previous schools for advice and support in identifying and sometimes implementing CPD programmes.

In the first year of headship there was a common theme of achieving compliance in many schools, both in terms of student attitudes toward learning and teacher practice. This was usually viewed as a necessary stepping stone to further development of teaching and learning that would lead to more engaged students and staff.

**Strand 2a: Improving the quality of students’ learning and enhancement of the curriculum**

Analysis of data relating to students’ academic outcomes was universally viewed as the key form of evidence by which to judge the quality of student learning and the effectiveness of curriculum provision. Outcomes data were often triangulated by heads with evidence drawn from conversations with a range of stakeholders in order to fully understand the issues diagnosed through analysis of the data, and to appreciate the perceptions of others toward these issues.

“I started with data which is where I always, always, always start… You’ve got to get hold of the data and the patterns are there sitting in the data. And no matter what anybody, any other voice is telling you, you’ve got to listen to what that data is telling you… Then it’s doing lots of listening, lots and lots of conversations around the building. One after the other, after the other, until you get a full picture of, not just what you understand, but where everybody else is in it, because that’s what tells you what you’ve got to do next.”

Experience Secondary headteacher

Many headteachers spoke of the need to triangulate their judgments formed from analysis of outcomes data with other types of observational evidence.

“When you turn up on day one your judgment is teaching and learning must not be very good because these outcomes aren’t very good. Now, once you get a little bit deeper beneath the surface, actually you find some caveats to those outcomes…. I had to highlight those issues and make sure that people knew they were there… Whilst at the same time not panicking and rushing in, but taking the time to go and observe lessons, to go and watch teachers, and to look in books. And actually, you know, the picture wasn’t as bad there as the data painted it. Yes, there were some areas for improvement and tweaking, but we weren’t talking full-scale surgery.”

Novice primary headteacher

Novice headteachers were at their most confident when speaking of assessing and planning for improvement to the quality of learning, as this aspect of practice often lay within the job description of their previous leadership posts as members of a SLT. Both novice and experienced headteachers across the case study pointed to a lack of benchmarking of the performance of the school as a common shortcoming of the previous leadership and governance of their school. This was expressed by one of the secondary heads as having repercussions for the accountability role of School Governors.

“VA had always been below national average and has been for five years but it was never reported, and the governing body didn’t even know what VA was, so they only reported on the 5+ A*-C in maths and English. If you look back at the governing body reports across four years, there are no national averages in them. None. So they’ve got all the data but they had no idea how that compared with, nor what it should compare with… So it isn’t just curriculum, no there’s a real lack of leadership and management in terms of openness for the governing body so the governing body couldn’t hold to account. They didn’t know what was happening underneath”.

 Experienced Secondary headteacher
Recent Ofsted reports and curriculum and learning reviews were other key ways to gather evidence. Reviews were often conducted by external assessors commissioned by the new head, sometimes in collaboration with the LA (school improvement advisers) or with MAT CEOs. Financial audits provided evidence to judge the efficiency of curriculum provision, particularly in a number of the secondary schools with a falling or low number of students on roll. Some of the heads expressed concern that their schools were financing curriculum provision and associated staffing levels that were inappropriate for the students. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the section on restructuring below.

Sources of evidence

None of the heads required support from others to analyse publicly accessible student attainment and progress data for the headline year groups (Reception; Year 6; Year 11; 6th Form). They would use their analyses of student data to make judgments about the quality of learning and the effectiveness of existing curriculum provision. For this reason, assessment data and the associated systems devoted to storing and utilising assessment data featured prominently in discussions about the quality of learning. Novice headteachers made effective use of assessment data in order to identify specific gaps and shortcoming in curriculum provision for all students and in some cases for particular groups of students.

“The data very much tells you some of the underlying issues here. One of the biggest issues is about high achievers. There was a misunderstanding in the school that this was a challenging intake and therefore it was okay to get Cs/4s. And actually that isn’t the picture. Of all the [named MAT] schools this is the highest ability secondary school. 40% of last year’s cohort and 35% of this year are higher ability on entry, so should be getting 6s, 7s and 8s.”

Novice secondary head

By contrast, internal assessment data would sometimes create issues for new heads. This was especially the case when they questioned the validity or reliability of the data, or the utility of the assessment data management systems used to store and present the data.

“I was then looking for internal data for those in-between year groups and that was an issue here. The school was using a system… where teachers just made a summative judgment at the end of each term. So you’re either on track or you’re not. But there wasn’t any system in place to back up those judgments to say that child is on track because they can do X, Y and Z. And neither was there really good use of [the system] as a diagnostic tool to say this group are making good progress but that group aren’t. It was very much the teachers sort of gave this data over to the previous head and the admin staff and there was a sort of didactic return of ‘Well, this is what you need to do now’”.

Novice primary headteacher

There were varying degrees of scepticism expressed, particularly by experienced heads, about the validity of other forms of internal evidence and data. Information derived from other trusted external sources, often from the head’s network of previous contacts, would be given precedence over any previously collated and presented data already existing within the school.

“I didn’t trust anything that was written internally. I’ve no interest in the SEF or any of these kinds of things. I just didn’t trust it, rightly or wrongly. I’m not trying to deride other people’s work. I just didn’t want to be swayed by it, if that makes sense. So I just ignored everything that was written about the school, and I just brought in people that I trusted to go through it and tell me the truth, or their version of the truth”.

Novice primary headteacher

In terms of assessment systems and benchmarking, organisations like PIXL were seen as beneficial sources of additional evidence.

“Our children have done assessments which have then been compared and analysed against ten to fifteen thousand other children, and that’s been key for us to set our standards is knowing what it’s like everywhere else”.

Novice primary headteacher
An experienced secondary head spent three days during the summer to appoint a new deputy with a brief for curriculum, learning and teaching. At the beginning of the academic year she said their views were the only ones she trusted as she gathered and analysed the initial evidence. After a term she brought in an interim assistant headteacher, an experienced school leader working as a school improvement consultant, and with whom she had worked previously, with a specific brief to mentor the new deputy in conducting a full curriculum review.

Other heads also reported making use of external consultants and contacts from their professional networks to provide them and other school leaders with targeted advice and support to develop those aspects of the curriculum identified as in need of rapid improvement. Experienced heads indicated how they set the agenda for such external advisors in a more directed way than novice heads. One primary head articulated at length how she was very clear on the importance of setting out the agenda associated with the form of external support, from consultants to school improvement partners.

“Anybody who was walked through the door to do some work, I’ve given them very specific remits, sharing that teaching and learning expectation with them… because the last thing I want is two messages mixed up and then nothings done correctly... I’ve made sure I’ve spent the time before they’ve done any work articulating what I want, what are the outcomes that I want. So nothing can be misunderstood… It works because I’ve set the agenda very clearly, and I think heads need to be clear that they need to set agendas and drive improvement the way they want it to go”.

Experienced primary headteacher

Strategies

In order to address issues with assessment systems, both novice and experienced heads drew on their previous experience with efficient systems for storing and presenting internal assessment data. In addition, some turned to a range of sources within the LA or MAT, or to previous colleagues in their network, for support in order to address these issues.

“… [I was] working with the executive head who was here at the time, who had obviously spent some time looking at different systems. And there was no monitoring calendar, there was nothing that was tracking these children. There was no routine collection of clear data or accurate data. There were no checks to check that the data was what they were saying it was. So there was a whole raft of monitoring systems that we had to put in place… Later on the trust [MAT] employed a primary standards director who again could come in and challenge the data.”

Novice primary headteacher

One experienced secondary headteacher raised concerns with the frequency of collection of internal assessment data in the school. He did not believe that collecting internal data as many as six times each year would yield valid and reliable evidence for decision-making and so reduced the number of assessment points to two per year, which also eased workload issues.

Once the evidence from analysis of the data, curriculum audits and triangulation with perspectives from staff had been considered, the strategies for improving the quality of learning were generally focused on improving curriculum provision and coverage. Concerns about the quality of teaching were also identified through the analysis of evidence. This highlighted another area in which the sequence of school improvement activity was intertwined. Changes to the curriculum needed to be carefully linked to improvements in quality of teaching so that the benefits of curriculum development could be realised. Strategies utilised for improving the quality of teaching will be covered below in Strand 2c.

Many heads reported that the rationale for the development of curriculum was focused on meeting the needs of the student community that they serve. After initial analysis of the evidence and discussion with teachers, SLT members, governors and MAT leadership where appropriate, heads would set to work during their first year in post to address the specific areas of the curriculum, prioritising those areas highlighted by issues that emerged from the data on student outcomes. In primary schools the initial focus was usually on the core subjects of reading, writing and mathematics. This was especially where existing curriculum provision was considered to be weak.
For example, one primary school head found that reading schemes did not provide a coherent flow across key stages and so bought in a new scheme to address this. The decision on which new resources to purchase was usually informed by previous experience with high quality resources, and by consultation with colleagues in their professional network. For MAT schools, suitable curriculum resources were sometimes available within the MAT.

In a few cases the analysis of the evidence led the head to conclude that the needs were such that a root and branch revision of the curriculum was required. This occurred in two of the secondary schools. There was a perception that issues may have been created by the reaction of previous leadership and governance to changing central policy on the curriculum. Both schools had utilised a wide range of GCSE equivalent qualifications at KS4 in the past, and, particularly in one of the schools, some sweeping changes had been made in response to national changes to policy such as changes to the status of vocational qualifications in response to the Wolf Report and the introduction of the English Baccalaureate.

“Somebody had made a decision to go a hundred percent EBacc, which was always going to make it really quite difficult unless you genuinely had very high standards of teaching and learning there. If you did, it might well be the case that you’re going to do exceptionally well with the challenging cohort of children, but it wasn’t… I think it was a knee-jerk reaction to the Wolf Report, and they wouldn’t have been the only school that did it… They literally took the hair and beauty salon out of the building and replaced it with a standard classroom.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

This head was asked why she felt the school had implemented such a dramatic and rapid shift in their previous approach to the curriculum and she went on to say:

“I think they were hanging on to the one single measure like lots of schools did”.

Experienced secondary head

These concerns about the adequacy of the existing curriculum did not lead heads to focus on skills, or competency based approaches to the curriculum, but rather to make pragmatic decisions about curriculum coverage alongside the ability to provide sufficient quality teaching in all areas of the old curriculum. One head was disparaging of any curriculum design that favoured competency-based approaches over a focus on subject matter content and building knowledge.

“The vision for this school is to teach children things they can’t learn at home or can’t learn through a manual, a kind of powerful rather than procedural knowledge, and to help them orientate themselves within the world and within humanity by developing more powerful schemas to understand the world around them, which to me is disciplinary knowledge. So, knowledge situated within academic disciplines, and I think that’s their birth-right”.

Experienced secondary headteacher

The process of curriculum redesign in this school was initiated by staff training at the beginning of the year. There was a focus on subject mastery and the two members of SLT charged with leading the process began by asking teachers in each discipline to identify a small set of core concepts that students would need to master across the full five to seven years of secondary education. The redesign took up staff development time for much of the first term, and sometimes beyond. The newly designed curriculum also had a large component of adventure learning and off-site experiences which allowed students to apply the disciplinary knowledge gained from the academic element of the curriculum as well as to develop their self-awareness.

Where such a substantial redesign of the curriculum was required, the heads usually identified that benefits which arose from developments would come too late for those students in the older year groups. Less substantial but more rapid changes were required to tackle the needs of older students, especially those in Years 10 and 11. This usually focused on developing and implementing targeted interventions to address issues diagnosed through data analysis. As well as addressing curriculum coverage and implementing targeted interventions for these year groups, heads would also review teacher allocation to these classes. Some members of SLT, especially where they were new to the school, spent a large proportion of their allocated teaching time addressing the issues in the provision for students in these high-stakes year groups. Similarly, in some of the primary schools, the new heads identified the need for swift and intensive intervention for Year 6 students who wouldn’t be able to benefit from the curriculum.
changes lower down the school. In some cases, the new headteacher had engaged in teaching Year 6 students to supplement the work of colleagues. In both cases, this was viewed as allowing new heads/members of SLT to demonstrate good practice to colleagues. One headteacher spoke of the way intervening early with Year 6 would allow space to address a wider set of school improvement issues.

“We’re waiting for the external validation of KS2 SATS. Once we’ve got that, that will give us a bit of breathing-space to do the things that we perhaps we really want to do, but we need the breathing-space of the data first.”

Novice primary headteacher

Some of the schools operating within a MAT structure were able to draw on curriculum resources and knowledge of curriculum design. This was more likely to be the case in mature MATs or where the MAT included at least one other school in the same phase that was judged to be Good or Outstanding by Ofsted. As with the adoption of behaviour policies from within the MAT, it was usually seen as imperative that the school be in a similarly challenging context to the case study school, otherwise the resources or knowledge were considered to be far less relevant. Some procedural issues around curriculum, such as choice of exam boards in secondary schools, may have been harmonised across their MAT and this was usually viewed as enabling positive support in terms of sharing practice and resources. In some primary schools, such collaboration across the MAT allowed teachers to jointly plan experiences for students such as poetry or theatre days and so reap the benefits of shared planning for teachers, and a broader social learning experience for the students. The heads viewed these collaborative opportunities as a key means of expanding the horizons of their teachers.

“So, I think there’s a real collaboration, a meeting of minds so that we don’t fall into historically into what’s been just ‘We’re fine here’ when we don’t know what’s going on out there.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Some of the case study schools, despite the fact that they were ‘Requires Improvement or Inadequate’ prior to the start of the new head, were held up as models of development for curriculum and/or assessment to other schools in their MAT. One experienced primary head had worked hard on developing a number of curriculum areas including the development of greater oracy skills in the development of writing in order to boost writing outcomes in the older year groups. The new CEO of the MAT within which the school operates was very eager to roll a number of these initiatives out across each of the schools in their Trust.

“The CEO said ‘That’s great that you’ve done that’… and he said because whatever you do in your school we want across the trust…Which is lovely, because it obviously shows that [the CEO] rates the impact that we’ve had on the things that we’ve put in place in this school.”

Experienced primary headteacher

The headteacher nevertheless went on to express some concern that the heads of other schools in their MAT might not be so eager to take on board these initiatives without prior consultation. Members of SLT in the school expressed their appreciation that their new but nonetheless experienced head was able to shield them somewhat from the enthusiasm and drive of the CEO so that they could focus on what they as leaders had agreed were the priorities for the school.
Sequencing

As identified in the strand on improving behaviour, there was some disagreement as to whether behaviour or learning and teaching should be viewed as the core initial strand for the focus of school improvement. Those that focused initially on learning and teaching would often point to the moral imperative of improving the academic outcomes of students in the school as expressed by this experienced primary head.

“It’s outcomes. It’s got to be about improving the lives of children. So you know it’s all about academic attainment because if we can set them up for future life, that’s really what we need to do.”

Experienced primary headteacher

The sequencing of each element of any new curriculum initiative was usually dictated by the need to address shortcomings in academic outcomes and gaps in student learning. An initial step, therefore, was to ensure that there was access to robust attainment and progress data in order to diagnose the issues and to inform the process of enhancing curriculum provision. The external data available for headline year groups was the usual starting point but that analysis might uncover the need to address issues with internal data systems.

“Well, reading was the lowest in the outcomes. So that had to be [priority] number one. And then really it kind of follows through in what were the lower outcomes. So writing was the next lowest one, the SPaG went along with the writing. Early years GLD was low so that became the next one. Assessment was tied in to all of those, so that became the next one. Maths was actually quite good in terms of outcomes last year, but I didn’t want that to sort of fall aside, and actually when we did begin to dig below the surface, this was going to become a bit of a problem.”

Novice primary headteacher

One novice head found that unfamiliarity with the server housing the assessment data management system was preventing him from making effective use of internal assessment data to track in year progress. The system was a tool provided by the LA, so he turned to an external company that produced the management system that he had worked with in a previous school and started afresh with the collection of internal assessment data. The head indicated that this was a priority:

“It’s outcomes. It’s got to be about improving the lives of children. So you know it’s all about academic attainment because if we can set them up for future life, that’s really what we need to do.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Once robust systems were in place it allowed the head to have accurate and useful data that allowed the school to begin concentrating on improving maths and English which aided in assessments and in helping the students access the wider curriculum. This proved to be timely as a monitoring visit from Ofsted during the year resulted in a positive judgment on capacity to improve based on the analysis of the internal data for the year.

Some of the sequencing of improvement activity was also dictated by particular models of the curriculum. One novice secondary head indicated that a specific pedagogical model had provided the basis for the development of the curriculum in several schools in their MAT. It had been adapted from an accelerated learning model utilised by a school, external to the MAT, which had been rated as ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted.

“There are four stages to that pedagogical framework. By February half term, we’ve done each of the stages. That’s one way of sequencing it.”

Novice Secondary headteacher

One secondary head spoke of the ideal situation that a well-sequenced curriculum might:

“... take the children from Year 7 to university... [and] never need to do an intervention”.

Experienced Secondary headteacher
However, the reality for schools in this case study was that, running alongside more deep-rooted curriculum change, some model of short-term intervention was necessary. This was especially for the older children in the school, who would not experience many or even any of the benefits of the long term gains through development of the curriculum and improvements to the quality of teaching.

**Barriers**

The inertia of staff in adopting new aspects of the curriculum created problems for improving the quality of learning, especially where this was coupled with inconsistencies in core teaching practices that stimulate learning. In the following detailed exchange, a headteacher reflected on this interplay between the barriers encountered and the consequences these barriers can have on sequencing school improvement priorities to improve the quality of learning.

HT: Is it because the teaching and learning isn’t inspiring and isn’t differentiated correctly, isn’t engaging all our children, isn’t at the right pitch, isn’t fast-paced enough? Is that why the behaviour’s poor? Or are teachers spending too much time behaviour managing, because of other issues, baggage and things that have been brought into school, and that’s why the learning and teaching isn’t good? So it’s a very, very quick unpicking of that to find out the reasons why.
I: What did you establish?
HT: Some teaching wasn’t right. There was very little differentiation. There was no specific provision for children with ASD, and in some of the classes it was boring. There was no thought or time put into actually what would engage the children. There were no learning objectives, nor success criteria, and however you want to frame that, the children weren’t aware of what they were learning and the reasons for it and the direction that their learning was going in.

Experienced primary headteacher

In order to overcome these barriers systematic attention was required throughout the year, with an intensive programme of staff development and training that is discussed in more detail in the parallel strand below on improving the quality of teaching.

Improvements to student behaviour helped, to a certain extent, address the issue of more-able students not demonstrating expected progress. However, issues with behaviour sometimes masked a lack of planning and attention to differentiation on the part of teachers which resulted in more-able students not being sufficiently challenged during lessons.

In some cases, intensive interventions with headline year groups such as Year 11 were hampered by the lack of students’ foundational knowledge from earlier parts of the curriculum at Key Stage 3. One example is the limited knowledge of foundational science concepts demonstrated by Year 11 students in one school, traced back to poor teaching of core topics as far back as the Year 7 science curriculum. This was addressed by implementing a more intensive and longer schedule of intervention work than was originally planned, as well as supplementing teaching in these areas with support from new members of senior leadership teams.

In another school, a head introduced a personal development element to the curriculum in which KS3 students had opportunities to develop social skills. This helped him to address what he saw as a barrier to learning; a lack of respect was exhibited by students toward one another that was affecting the learning climate.

**Monitoring**

Monitoring of the quality of learning and enhancement of the curriculum was based predominantly on analyses of students’ academic outcomes. During much of the year under the new headship this was focused on data derived from internal interim assessments, so it was critical to ensure that the quality of internal assessment data was high. This sometimes required development of the resources used to conduct internal assessments, and also of the systems used for storage and retrieval of assessment data.
Analyses of data were supplemented with regular learning walks, and review of students’ work, as well as via audits of learning by internal and external teams. A few schools utilised student surveys with questions about the quality of teaching and learning, including gathering their views on marking and feedback.

Monitoring the enhancement of the curriculum is a complex task and requires careful and on-going monitoring of the quality of teaching, learning, interventions and assessment. The monitoring of the effectiveness of these interventions, like the general monitoring of improvement, was through observations of lessons, review of students’ work and via learning walks.

**Strand 2b: Staff Restructuring**

Many of the case study headteachers engaged in at least some modest form of restructuring of the staffing within areas of their school, such as a subject department, or within the team supporting SEND provision, or the school administration team. Sometimes, these changes were implemented in response to the departure of staff from the school, either at the end of the previous academic year, or at an early stage during the first year of the new head. Occasionally, for MAT based schools, the gaps in staffing that resulted from such departures could be filled by moving teachers or other staff between MAT schools.

A number of the secondary heads had to undertake a more substantial review of staffing in their school during their first year in post. In each case there was a strong financial imperative for a major restructure of staffing. This was usually the result of the new head inheriting a substantial budget deficit, or if a projected shortfall had been indicated in the coming years.

I inherited a deficit budget. The school was in surplus, so now we’re about to go into deficit and actually a budget that was spiralling absolutely the wrong way. There’s been a big restructure this year to get the finances back on track.

**Experienced secondary headteacher**

Three of the four heads who undertook complete or almost complete restructuring of their staffing had previous experience of headship. We do not have sufficient evidence to be sure if this was a condition of their recruitment, but in each case these heads had made it clear that they valued being able to draw on previous experience of headship in order to successfully navigate the path to such large-scale changes in their school. In some cases substantial restructuring of school staffing was linked by heads to a review of the curriculum provision, and it seemed no coincidence, though not always explicitly mentioned, that the secondary schools which completely overhauled their curriculum provision were the same as those that undertook a complete restructuring of their staffing. In most cases the heads contacted representatives of teacher unions, prior to undertaking the restructuring, in order to discuss their approach. In each case the heads reported that unions had been supportive and affirmed the process that they had eventually implemented.

Even a modest restructuring of staffing, where necessary, was a difficult issue for novice headteachers to undertake, as it usually involved the application of detailed budgetary knowledge and financial acumen, coupled to an appreciation of how best to manage staffing resources so that the curriculum would be effective in meeting the learning needs of students.

**Evidence**

Thorough reviews of the financial and staffing resources of the school were necessary in order to determine if any level of staff restructuring was required. This would usually be coupled to evidence, described in Strand 2a above on developing the curriculum and quality of learning, of the extent to which the curriculum was meeting the learning needs of students.

A further type of evidence that headteachers have used was background information on their teaching staff. The challenge of recruiting specialist teachers is well recognised. However, where staffing gaps existed or new skills were needed, heads did not always assume they would have to recruit from outside. One headteacher found that reviewing staff CVs sometimes revealed hidden skills that were not always utilised by staff working in their current roles. This started as a task to better understand staff concerns by the head in question, but it led to a maths teacher teaching a foreign language and expanding the school’s curriculum. Another headteacher had conversations with staff to identify staff members’ skills that were currently lying dormant.
Sources of evidence and support

Many heads working in MAT schools mentioned that their MAT was helpful in providing budgetary advice linked to reviews of staffing. One novice secondary head who engaged in substantial restructuring indicated that the Finance Director of the MAT had been a frequent visitor to the school during the year.

The headteachers working within well-established MATs had greater opportunity to call on a range of experts who could help them and their schools when needed. This was predominantly in the areas of human resources and finance experts that help make sense of complex areas that some headteachers felt less comfortable with. This was something that novice heads particularly appreciated as part of their learning curve but that experienced heads also found very useful. Heads in less well established MATs and in LA schools were not so readily able to call on this level of expertise. For these heads it was particularly important to forge trusting relationships with school governors so that they could discuss the sensitive issue of staffing needs, and to find a mentor that had detailed experience of school budgets and finance. One novice primary headteacher, who had been allocated a mentor by the LA from among the group of local headteachers, eventually sought out a replacement mentor due to a lack of expertise in budget and finance issues in the skill set of the originally appointed mentor.

Strategies

In each major restructuring of staffing, clear links were established by headteachers to core curriculum provision. There was also a need to pare structures back to simplify lines of accountability, including those of staff in middle leadership positions.

“We’ve gone for a sensible structure: heads of department, with second in departments in the bigger areas. We’ve got rid of some of the anomalies, like the Head of Humanities, that doesn’t work because, again, it’s accountability. The historian just wants to look after history. We’ve got rid of things like the Head of Performing Arts, which might work in a bigger school, but it’s not necessary here.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Being part of a MAT often provided greater flexibility when making changes to staffing structures. One secondary headteacher was able to transfer teachers to other local schools in their trust, facilitating the filling of gaps in staffing and helping to find posts for teaching staff that might otherwise have been made redundant after restructuring. Some administration and support roles could also be rationalised across schools in a MAT.

“Within the Trust, a lot of the services can be delivered... we had to restructure two schools. We now have an ICT network manager, we have a joint finance person, we have joint HR.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

When undertaking more modest internal restructuring of staffing, heads reassigned teachers to work with different year groups during the year, based on perceived needs. One primary school head needed to reallocate teaching assignments by moving stronger teachers to the teaching of Year 6 at the mid-point of the academic year. The headteacher rationalised this in terms of a moral obligation to help “backfill” learning gaps that the Year 6 students had developed as a legacy of the school’s previous poor curriculum. There was also a clear imperative to secure short-term gains for the school in the form of improved outcomes at the end of Key Stage 2, before longer term developments in the curriculum and the quality of teaching could take hold. In this way schools could establish the “breathing space” in terms of outcomes for the headline year groups which was raised in the previous section.

Sequencing

Experienced headteachers were able to undertake a relatively rapid review of curriculum needs and current provision. Furthermore, they were able to take stock of the current and projected budgets to determine the state of the school’s finances, and where they were heading in the short to medium term. This provided the evidence base on which to reform and reorganise aspects of the staff structuring for teaching, support, and administrative staff. As the changes were based on available resources and curriculum requirements, heads felt they were able to move forward with pragmatic solutions to ensure staffing was restructured according to need. Where substantial restructuring was required, members of senior leadership teams told us that this was usually entirely within the brief of the new headteacher, working in consultation with MAT Directors. SLT members were grateful that they did not have to be directly involved in and responsible for aspects of this challenging task.
A number of the experienced headteachers in this study stressed the importance of meticulously checking and developing familiarity with the budget as early as possible in the first year of headship, as unexpected financial issues that emerged later in the year could impose considerable constraint on the capacity to address virtually every aspect of school improvement. One primary head reflected ruefully on an experience that occurred while she was head of a previous school. It is quoted here in some detail as she indicated it was a formative opportunity for her to learn from the experience, and was a lesson that she had carried with her into her current headship.

“In a previous school, I would have asked more questions and made sure that things were functioning, because if a school fails it usually fails right across the board. So ask the questions. Don’t get [overly] diverted by finance and health and safety, but do spend the time to ask the questions and get somebody to rectify that quickly, or get support for that because that could be a downfall in the school... You see I just concentrated on teaching and learning. I didn’t ask questions of the finance because it appeared that it was running, so that wasn’t my priority... Deep down there was a £60,000 error in the budget, because a figure had been inputted wrong. And I thought I’ve checked expenditure, but I hadn’t checked income. It put me £60,000 down, which directly had an impact on teaching and learning. I could have kicked myself about that.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Barriers

As well as being a stimulus for the restructuring of staffing, a lack of available financial resources was also a significant barrier to developing more supportive staffing structures. One novice secondary headteacher had restructured the staff responsible for pastoral care and behaviour in the school, but he indicated that this restructuring had been a major call on his time during the early part of the year.

Almost all of the novice headteachers mentioned that their inexperience in dealing with budgets and finance was one of the biggest challenges that they encountered during their first year of headship. By the end of their first year they reflected a desire to have got to grips sooner with the details and implications of their school budgets. This headteacher expressed how inexperience could lead to a false sense of security and an over reliance on the perspectives of others.

“I suppose the other thing which is more difficult to get hold of is details about the finance. The finance wasn’t in as good a position as I expected it to be when I took on the role... So I would say finance is a definitely an area where I believe there should be greater transparency about what you’re taking on as a head, because you only know what you’re told.”

Novice secondary headteacher

One of the other novice heads from the study indicated that a lack of financial knowledge had led to a delay in getting to grips with issues in the staffing structure as quickly as may have been necessary.

“I always knew finance was my weakness, as any new headteacher would say, I’m sure. I’ve been sat doing the budget over the last couple of weeks, and I know that I’m having to make people redundant at the end of next year. I think, in an ideal world, I would have made probably at least one person redundant at the end of this year, but it’s too late now. I can’t do that. I would have looked at that a little bit earlier. I started looking at it in March or April. If I’d started looking at the budget at Christmas, then I probably would have been able to see that things aren’t looking great and we’re going to need to cut something.”

Novice primary headteacher

Monitoring

Staff restructuring was primarily designed to secure efficient and effective processes within the constraints of appropriate financial expenditure. Heads, therefore, had to monitor the efficiency of any new structures in terms of outputs such as clearer lines of accountability within new middle leadership structures, a more efficiently staffed curriculum, or changes to roles within administrative or support staff. Monitoring, therefore, required data collection from the full range of available evidence types outlined in a number of other strands of improvement in the report. At the same time, careful monitoring of the effects of restructuring on projected budgets was necessary. The findings from the available data were then triangulated with an ongoing budgetary analysis.
**Strand 2c: Improving the quality of teaching**

The development of staff was viewed by all headteachers as an integral part of the work to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the school. The approach to tackling this issue during the first year of headship tended to be differentiated, with a core strand of training provided for all teachers, in order to achieve consistency and compliance across the whole body of teaching staff in respect of the core tasks of planning, teaching and assessment. Heads were very clear that they did not want to settle for compliance but also took a pragmatic view that this stage of compliance and consistency was a stepping stone to more sustainable improvement in the quality of teaching. For some schools this was linked to adopting policies and processes that were common across all schools in their MAT. This had the consequence of allowing at least some aspects of training provision to be collaborative across multiple schools in the MAT, and to draw on experienced staff from other MAT schools to help facilitate training provision.

This view expressed by a headteacher illustrates the central focus on the quality of teaching as fundamental to the wider effort to improve the quality of learning and teaching overall.

“As far as I’m concerned the school’s success is built upon teaching and learning. If you get that right, what’s happening in the classroom, everything else follows that makes a successful school. But if that’s not happening, then you can do all the lovely extra-curricular things, and various schemes and specialisms, but unless you’ve got that classroom routine, culture and ethos right it’s never going to be successful.”

Novice primary headteacher

**Evidence**

Ofsted reports, especially where a recent inspection report was available, were seen by all the new heads as key, externally-validated evidence, to help them glean an initial perspective on the quality of teaching in their school, prior to taking up the headship. Some schools had Ofsted visit during the first year, either for a Section 8 monitoring visit, or for a full inspection. In each case, these reports provided an external source of evidence to support assessments of the quality of teaching made by new heads. This was particularly critical in several of the case study schools where the previous school leadership had given a very different perception of the quality of teaching to staff from that gleaned by the new head after their initial round of lesson observations.

“I was getting to spend quite a lot of time talking to staff, and they’d got a very different perspective on things. They had been observed teaching across the year and had been told that over 90% of teaching was good or better. But then they were facing a progress eight score [well below average]. So that told me that there weren’t really open communications in the building… I knew that staff would be really, really shocked and it was a fairly massive job of work to do in terms of teaching and learning”.

Experienced secondary headteacher

Even with the external validity of Ofsted, some headteachers referred to staff taking a different view from that in the Ofsted report, or saying that it must be referring to the lessons of other teachers, and not their own. In this way the data from Ofsted reports was usually helpful to validate the scale of the issue regarding the quality of teaching, but not necessarily to identify where development was most needed. For this task, primary evidence was needed.

Lesson observations and learning walks were the key source of primary evidence on teaching quality. Review of students’ work was also undertaken to provide primary evidence on the quality of feedback and assessment provided by teachers. First and foremost, this was related to the frequency and regularity of feedback and to the quality of feedback.
Sources of evidence and support

While some heads had access to previous data on the quality of teaching, usually via lesson observations, all headteachers placed much greater emphasis on their own judgment about the quality of teaching.

“… the only views I would trust were mine and those of my newly appointed VP.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Where the new head's view was different from the view espoused by previous leadership in the school, external verification of the quality of teaching was welcomed. This might be in the form of an Ofsted report, but could also come from a more personal external source such as a trusted former colleague; the head from another local or MAT school; or the MAT CEO or an LA-appointed school improvement partner. Usually such an external audit was conducted early on during the year, as part of the external validation of the new head’s judgement described above; although in one school external audits were conducted on multiple occasions by a range of different teams. This was partially because it was part of the existing practice within the MAT (termly audit visits), but this novice head also invited additional external monitoring teams in to provide feedback on the improvements secured during his first year in post.

Strategies

The new-in-post headteachers in many schools spoke of the need to provide the right conditions for staff to be able to shine and show what they are capable of. This was viewed as a key step to securing sustainable improvement.

“At the end of the day, in schools like this, you will have some good, if not necessarily in Ofsted criteria, teachers who want to improve, who want to get it right and want to work extremely hard, but they have been misdirected; have been led up the garden path in terms of judgments around what good quality teaching and learning is.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

A key means of providing a climate conducive for teaching, especially in the case study secondary schools, was through addressing behavioural issues, especially reducing the volume of low-level disruption, as discussed in Strand 1b above. Other means by which a conducive teaching climate was created was through the rapid establishment of improvements to the quality of curriculum, which used the strategies related to those discussed in Strand 2a.

“The curriculum came first. I felt it only fair that I give teachers a curriculum that would allow them to be successful. So, we spend a lot of time making sure that we had built the curriculum up from year one to year six so that then we can give teachers the tools to deliver, and then if there were issues we deal with those as a separate thing.”

Novice primary headteacher

In a few schools, there was a specific focus on improving the wellbeing of staff. This was the case where staff were feeling particularly vulnerable due to the attitude of previous school leaders, or the aggressive nature of the pupils.

Once the conditions for learning were conducive to teaching, heads could focus on delivering CPD. The CPD programmes developed by schools usually focused on establishing a core set of teacher practices within the school. The aim was to establish both coherence and compliance in these core practices in order to establish consistent routines across the school. In turn, this consistent approach to routine aspects of teaching was also seen as a way of supporting improvements in the behaviour of pupils. In some cases, the approaches adopted to developing the quality of teaching focused on a set of core priorities shared by schools right across the MAT.

“If you go around all the schools in the Trust you’ll see the same posters on the walls with the same messages in terms of; this is how we mark; this is how we ask questions.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
For both novice and experienced heads the choice of strategies for the core CPD programmes was usually assigned to what had worked in a previous school. While it was often seen as ideal that these strategies were adopted from a school in a similar context, school context matching was not considered to be the same priority as it was for strategies to address behaviour and the quality of learning, possibly because of the transferability of core teaching skills.

Only one school explicitly referred to a wider body of evidence to support the choice of certain aspects and implementation of their CPD programme. This school happened to be partnered, via the MAT, to a school in the Education Endowment Foundation’s Research Schools network. A wider evidence-base was used to inform both the selection of interventions for teaching as well as to shape the approaches adopted for the implementation of teacher CPD around curriculum planning for example.

“It’s about the kind of faithful adoption but intelligent adaptation.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Sequencing

As indicated above, improving the quality of teaching formed part of the wider core set of strands of improvement activity, alongside addressing concerns with student behaviour and improving the quality of learning. There was regular interplay between these parallel strands. One participant articulated the iterative nature of sequencing school improvement:

“We hit behaviour really, really hard and then it’s teaching, then we might go back to behaviour and then back to teaching.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

This head made it clear that delegation of responsibility for these areas across the SLT also allowed for several plates to be kept spinning at the same time. This ebb and flow of activity between the strands of school improvement would be dictated by the monitoring of improvement in these areas, and through consultation across the senior leadership team as to what strand required a particular focus at that time. This iterative approach was viewed in a number of schools as a key way to transition from a state of compliance on the part of both students and staff achieved during the first year of improvement, to a much more engaged approach to learning, on the part of both students and staff, as the school made plans to progress into years 2 and 3 of their improvement efforts.

In a number of schools, the CPD programme commenced with a focus on orientation for staff in the use of new processes and systems. These quick initiations were seen as essential to ensure smooth and consistent functioning of key systems such as attendance and assessment tracking tools.

“It’s not enough just to come in and bring in the new system, because without an understanding of why that system is important, you might get compliance but you won’t get quality.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

After this initial orientation, the sequence for teacher development quickly moved on to more detailed programmes focusing on shared approaches to teaching and learning. Often these were MAT based processes, and always about developing consistency of approach. Sometimes, this one size fits all approach was seen as a potential source of frustration for the staff already consistently teaching lessons ‘Good’ or better but this was sometimes seen as necessary collateral damage in the effort to establish consistency and compliance among staff.

“So we did start with a one-size-fits-all approach just to get it off the floor into RI.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

This reflects the challenge of lifting the quality of teaching across the whole staff body simultaneously to ensure that all students were getting access to a minimum standard of teaching. Some schools were prepared to live with the frustration of some staff during the first year on their road to improvement, in order to secure consistency,
with a view to transitioning to a more nuanced approach to development of teaching in the second year of the new headship, and beyond.

“(We) constructed in the beginning with staff the non-negotiables. So, it wasn’t really about getting great teaching and learning to start with, because that takes much more time to develop. It was about getting the basics right.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Many of the schools reflected on the fact that they were not yet offering specific CPD provision for teachers working at higher levels of proficiency in their classroom practice, although some asked those teachers to take on internal mentoring roles, or contribute to CPD provision alongside members of SLT.

“We’ve got some now who are consistently teaching good lessons who we’ve used to coach other members of staff and so it’s shifted across the year essentially. We’ve used different tools, at different times with different people now. So a one-size-fits-all through to a much more personalised programme of development.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

This is what another head described as “identifying good” in an explicit, and supportive way to foster the development of colleagues.

Alongside the core strand of CPD, many of the schools had established programmes of support for teachers who, via on-going lesson observations, were observed to be inconsistent in their teaching. In tune with the view of being given opportunity to shine, this would normally occur sometime after early improvement gains in the learning climate and/or the curriculum had been observed.

“...the reality is you can’t actually decide in November whether a teacher really is any good or not. What you do know is that’s how they’re performing at the time. Whether they’ve got the capacity to improve or not, you don’t really know until January, when you’ve started working with them for a bit.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Later in the process, staff morale and resistance to change could become an issue for moving forward with improvements through teacher development.

“You get a dip okay and that’s the point at which they don’t buy in. Actually, you get a real dip in morale and people fight for a little while as they then undertake the development that’s necessary. But then they begin to see improvement and they then start to buy in. And that typically takes about six months.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
These support programmes were usually run for a fixed period of time, typically in six-week blocks, presumably to correspond to approximately half a term of teaching. As part of the support programme the teacher would be assigned a mentor, but oversight of the support programme was usually under the remit of the head or another member of the SLT. Depending on evidence from further lesson observation, a further period of support might be offered. Heads often indicated that they would run at least two blocks of focused support, which reflects recommendations from teacher professional organisations for a fair process before moving toward capability. Heads adopting such an approach to supporting a specific group of teachers indicated that staff sometimes wrongly presumed that being placed on a support plan was merely an inevitable step toward capability procedures.

“Most people who have been on support plans actually have left, because they are the weakest and the worst staff and they just know the writing’s on the wall… so at the moment there’s a bit of a myth going around that if you’re on a support plan, or a mentoring plan, then that means you’re going out the door, because everybody who’s gone on one, has gone out of the door.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

The heads made it clear that support plans were a genuine offer to help teachers develop their practice and to secure improvements in the quality of their teaching; but if staff at the school chose to leave while on a programme of support, heads indicated it was always by their choice. As a result of this, heads reported that the number of staff who were moved through to formal capability processes was very small indeed.

**Barriers**

As mentioned above, in many schools the sense was that needing to address multiple issues in parallel, such as behavioural, curricular, or system issues, provided some initial inertia to taking steps to improve the quality of teaching.

“I think what surprised me most was when I actually started here was the lack of structure of anything. There were no routines, there were no procedures… it was chaotic and that’s what had led to the poor teaching and learning as well.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Staff having a different perspective on what constitutes a good lesson also acted as a barrier to improvement in this area.

“So the first job was obviously we had to get an understanding of what good teaching looks like, and what unfortunately comes with it is the understanding for you as an individual teacher that possibly you’re not good or, you know, your teaching isn’t good at that particular time.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

One head remarked that such a sharp change in the perception of the quality of teaching in the school could result in:

“… some very, very unhappy people in the building, but it happened at exactly the same time as the special measures became public as well. So there’s no getting round it, because essentially very publicly in the [local newspaper] it said teaching and learning at the Academy is Inadequate.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
The challenges of recruiting new, high-quality teachers were also seen as a potential barrier to being able to move teachers toward and through capability processes more quickly.

“Yeah, I might like to have a brilliant teacher in front of my children after six weeks or twelve, but that’s not the reality. And longer-term it’s not sustainable either because that’s a turbulence all of its own, isn’t it, with the chopping and changing.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Monitoring

These were largely the same as the primary diagnostic types of evidence methods, namely, lesson observations, learning walks, and review of students’ work. Through most, if not all, of the first year what was clear in many cases, was that key monitoring was usually retained as a responsibility for members of SLT, and could not yet be fully delegated to middle leaders. One headteacher indicated how a plan to delegate monitoring the quality of teaching to middle leaders would be essential in the year ahead due to changes in the SLT.

“The SLT are very clear what they do, but some of the ownership of the department isn’t there. The new deputy coming in has planned two-weekly meetings [with MLs]. They will be looking at the quality of teaching and learning. The department judgments will then feed into the SLT and actually it’s not going to be us doing all of the judging. We’ve missed out on middle leaders I think a little bit this year in the process, although they’ve got better and better, and we’ve seen them progress, but they couldn’t do what we’ve done this year.”

Novice secondary headteacher
STRAND 3:
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
Leadership development was identified as a school improvement priority by each of the ten case study headteachers, and so is clearly a key strand of activity in the effort to secure school improvement. Although this section covers leadership development at all levels within the school, during the interviews there was an emphasis on the need to secure an effective, united senior leadership team during their first year in post.

Leadership development is featured at this point in the findings because of its low prioritisation by the headteachers we interviewed. That said, we were struck by the number of new-in-post members of senior leadership teams that were present in the case study schools, especially in those schools led by experienced headteachers. In several case study schools this appeared to be due to members of SLT, as well as headteachers, choosing to leave after the schools received Ofsted judgments of ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’.

“The gentleman who was leading teaching and learning, after he read the Ofsted report, he actually just couldn’t carry on anymore, and said ‘That’s it. I’ve got to go’.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

This head expressed reluctance to see a capable colleague leave, reflecting that it presented a timely opportunity to appoint an interim assistant headteacher who had worked with the head in a previous school.

“That saved me quite a lot of time really because he already knows how I work… Not only did he come in with all the knowledge we had gained together but he’d worked in another special measures school and he brought with him some experience and some expertise from that school… and there were some fixes I hadn’t thought of that he brought in with him. He was also able to coach my newly appointed deputy in the in the bits of his new job that he didn’t know so well.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Some of the headteachers perceived their school was very much within the “rescue phase” (Matthews et al., 2014) in terms of diagnosing their school improvement priorities.

“So moving from rescue to reinforce would be most of the first term to be honest … You have this term of unpicking everything, putting everything in place, putting all the expectations in. And then we spent a term of absolutely hammering it in, supporting all of the staff to make sure we could get to where we want to be.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Another indicator of schools being in the “rescue phase” was the churn in leadership experienced in several schools. Some schools were having their third or even fourth new headteacher take up post in as many years, coupled with changes at other levels of senior leadership. This was captured by the following comment from an experienced primary head:

“One of the big things I had to do very quickly was get the team spirit going to motivate the staff because they’d had nine leaders in the last four years. So the first thing they wanted to know was: was I staying? “

Experienced primary headteacher

This high level of churn was particularly prevalent in those schools that had spent a longer period within the Ofsted RI or Inadequate categories.
A number of the experienced heads, especially those working in the case study secondary schools, were very open about initially adopting a top-down, directive approach to leadership in terms of setting up a leadership team, establishing the vision and expectations, and in the diagnosis of school improvement priorities. This was confirmed through interviews with members of SLTs who worked with experienced heads. They indicated that the early priorities of school improvement planning were usually established by the new head. They saw their role as implementing and embedding the plans to tackle these early priorities such as improving behaviour and the quality of learning and teaching. One experienced head exemplified this top-down approach to leadership:

“Whatever the school was doing was irrelevant anyway, because I was going to strip it right back. I was adamant about that. People might have a problem with this, but my kind of view was whatever they are currently doing was wrong. I don’t care what anyone else says, it does not work, because these children are being systematically failed.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

This head went on to explain that transitioning to a more consensual approach would be the aim from the second year of headship and beyond, after the initial improvements have been secured.

“I’m going to be very directive about what I expect, and what I require and what the systems are that I believe in, and then once that’s in place, we’ll go out and I will be far more consensual.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

By contrast, novice heads tended to be more consultative in their school improvement planning from the outset. This novice head describes her consultative approach to school improvement planning.

“It’s not just me. There’s a team of people at senior leadership level and middle leadership level. The way that we do a school improvement plan is that we will sit as a group and decide on our priorities. So there’s input from all the senior leaders. And we all draft [sections]... And then middle leaders will use the same Improvement plan as ours, but redraft it so that they are able to make sure that the strands of priority come through”.

Novice secondary headteacher

There were some exceptions in each category, typified by the following reflection from a novice secondary head, whose experience was perhaps atypical. As deputy head in a previous school, he had been given opportunities by the headteacher to tackle a very wide range of leadership roles while working in different positions on the SLT over a number of years. He expressed a considerable debt of gratitude to the headteacher who he described as someone who believed that it was essential for an aspiring head to experience “every facet of school leadership”.

“One of the early things that she did was, I had always done academic curriculum timetabling, running faculties. It was kind of my comfort zone. But my first job was as a deputy was as head of key stage four. So having not been a head of year before, the pastoral development was rapid. And then very soon after that, AEN/SEN is such a complex matter within schools, so I managed that for two or three years. So by the time I’d left she’d made sure that I had done every aspect.”

Novice secondary headteacher
While reflecting on leading change he went on to say the following.

“I think that there is a preferred way of doing things which is this consultative form. However, because we have to improve, sometimes it doesn’t work like that. It is just, ‘This needs to happen’… Sometimes we do need to shift things and change things. So we do just put out and say, ‘This is what needs to happen.’ I will always listen and take feedback, but it’s trust really. I think [the school] lacked staff trust last year, and we have built trust this year and actually we are all trying to do the same job here. Broadly staff are incredibly compliant and that should be the way you work. My HR stuff that I’ve done this year is just where we’re not aligned. Then a different approach is required, but the assumption which I think is important is that everybody is on board.”

Novice secondary headteacher

The following key points have been identified in this strand of school improvement.

➢ Both novice and experienced heads relied on their own judgments to diagnose issues related to leadership development, with less reliance on the other sources of evidence that were typically used to diagnose the other strands of improvement.

➢ The development of leadership was a key area that differentiated between experienced and novice heads. Experienced heads seemed more likely to undertake an earlier diagnosis of the structure and skills balance in their leadership teams. They did this by conducting preliminary analyses of external data such as Ofsted reports, triangulating this with other data such as student outcomes in certain curriculum areas, and for specific teachers.

➢ There seemed to be a high number of new SLT members in the case studies schools. This was possibly due to the high turnover of staff that would have resulted from low Ofsted inspection judgments in the years leading up to the new headship. Nevertheless, some experienced heads recruited a number of new SLT members from within their existing professional networks.

➢ Headteachers felt some continuing members of SLT had been caught up in an overrated and even complacent view of the previous performance of the school and the quality of teaching. This could create tensions when heads presented an alternative view on performance, but the difference in views had to be addressed in order for the SLT to work collaboratively towards improvement. Given the legacy of underperformance in many of the case study schools, experienced heads were sceptical of evidence from internal perspectives of the school, particularly with respect to the quality of teaching and learning. They placed much greater weight on their own judgments, those of new leaders starting in the school, and external assessors invited to undertake audits.

➢ Experienced heads were generally swifter to identify skills in the SLT and then to allocate responsibilities to members of the senior leadership team from the outset of the academic year. As such, they have more effective leadership across the strands of school improvement at the outset of the year, with better channels for delegation of tasks. By contrast, novice headteachers usually made these discoveries at a later stage during the first year of headship.

➢ Efforts to develop middle leaders tended to lag behind the development of the SLT, possibly due to focusing on SLT developments as a priority. Development of middle leaders took place earlier when heads could delegate responsibility to members of SLT, or where experienced heads drew on their professional networks or external CPD providers to help them prioritise this during their first year in post.
Evidence

Prior to arriving in post, the headteachers we interviewed drew on evidence from Ofsted reports. The focus was on those elements of the report that discussed inspectors’ judgments of the quality and effectiveness of school leadership and governance. Experienced headteachers and members of SLTs were able to draw out evidence on the wider leadership issues within the leadership sections of the Ofsted report, separating this from the focus that would have been devoted to the leadership of the previous headteacher.

“There is a lot of work to do with leadership at all levels, middle leaders as well... and that goes back to the Ofsted report, that middle leadership has been weak.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Heads used these prior insights to raise key questions in their early consultations with staff about the quality of leadership, and especially in similar discussions with wider stakeholders such as governors, MAT CEOs and LA advisers who knew the school.

Evidence on the quality of middle leadership was often derived from audits of learning and teaching described under the previous strand of school improvement. This was supplemented by evidence from lesson observations and learning walks. One experienced secondary headteacher expressed significant concern with what these observations revealed.

“We spent a lot of time working with MLT. What we found when we arrived was that the heads of department had never been trained on how to lead a department. They didn’t know what questions to ask and when to ask them, and what they should look for in their responses... It’s not that they were unwilling or unable to, they just didn’t have the technical knowledge to do the job.”

Novice secondary headteacher

In a primary school, the head indicated that members of the SLT were also not being vigilant in carrying out regular monitoring and review of students’ work.

“I’ve had to be a lot more direct in my expectations of what they’re going to do and when they’re doing it”.

Novice primary headteacher

Sources of evidence

Headteachers tended to rely on their own judgment in diagnosing issues within this strand of school improvement, more so than for the other strands discussed above. Where LA advisers or MAT CEOs were very familiar with the school, the opinions of such experienced stakeholders were usually sought, and their advice and insights appreciated, particularly by the novice heads within the case study group.

Some novice heads also valued the opinions of key people within their professional network, such as a headteacher with whom they had worked in their previous school, or a fellow new head known from previous leadership training events that they had attended. Advice sought from such external supporters was often related to the nature and timing of possible changes in leadership structures.

Chairs of Governors were also a key source of advice and guidance in developing leadership, although many of the schools had experienced turnover in their Governing body with a new Chair of Governors in post. One novice head in a primary school had to actively recruit a new Chair of Governors while attending local partnership meetings organised by the LA. His efforts were repaid when he managed to secure an offer from a National Lead governor to act as the interim Chair for his first year in headship.

As indicated above, especially among the experienced headteachers, there was a clear and consistent theme of scepticism shown toward information that could be gleaned from internal forms of evidence authored under the previous leadership. This included documents such as improvement plans and self-evaluation forms, which were considered potentially unreliable and even misleading sources of evidence. This was the prevailing view even when continuing members of the senior leadership team and the board of governors had been involved in gathering evidence for, and writing, such documents. The rationale for this scepticism was usually because the school had
clearly been underperforming under the previous leadership. Sometimes, this scepticism stemmed from early interactions that the new headteachers had with leaders, teachers and governors in the school.

“When I first looked at the data, now bearing in mind my catchment [at the head’s previous school] had been quite similar, and we worked really hard, our EYFS data was about 69% good level of development and that was pulling out all the stops. Here it was 88 to 92% for the last few years… And actually, the data they were providing does not fit with a catchment of children that we had in. And while on a school visit, what I was seeing in Year 1 did not reflect the data that was coming through either. So my concern was that the data was inflated, and I raised that with the governors straight away. So that’s why I didn’t use in-school data because I did not know how accurate would be.”

Experienced primary headteacher

An experienced secondary head recounted her experience around the application and interview process that raised a number of concerns in her mind as to whether those in leadership and governance positions could form an accurate view of the school’s position. The account is presented in detail here as it indicates how an experienced head was able to draw on previous headship experience, especially where that was in a school facing similarly challenging circumstances, in order to have the necessary degree of assertiveness to dig deeper, even while “on show” during the interview process.

“I then looked up their DfE data online which told you a whole other story, which certainly wasn’t the story that was being told in the advert. I could see that across a period of three years it had been in a period a decline, with two years of pretty poor examination results and you could see the base data which was around free school meals… and for me that was an okay thing actually because the previous school I’d taken on, that was in special measures as well; white working-class, really similar so that kind of didn’t put me off… When I came for interview I spent some of day one observing in classrooms and just sort of looking at what was there. I was also given the Academy Improvement Plan and the Academy SEF and it was clear from walking classrooms that the SEF wasn’t accurate. The school was rating itself as requires improvement and it was very clearly inadequate and was always going to fall into that inadequate category. So I started the process of unpacking it really during the course of the first two interview days. Because at the end of day one I nearly pulled out, because the school was describing itself as RI the Governing Body showed no inkling that they had any idea that it was inadequate. So I sat with the CEO at the end of the day and I said “Do you think this is RI?” and she looked at me and she said, “No, not really”… So it’s fairly clear that the CEO understood that it was inadequate and we talked a bit more about it then. I then spent the following day doing various panels with different people and I did lots of probing in order to make sure that I knew what it was I was getting into”.

Experienced secondary headteacher

The head went on to indicate that staff in the school had been led to believe that the vast majority of teaching in the school had been rated as good or better, which was an issue identified in other schools.

“Teaching and learning has been 70% ‘Good’ or better for the past three years and every governing body meeting, you can see that in the minutes. Nobody has ever challenged it.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

In one case the scepticism toward judgments of school performance made under previous leadership was based on evidence of dysfunctional relationships between members of the SLT under the previous headship.

“I actually agreed to cancel all of the performance management, because it was so flawed. It was based around personalities, it was based around ill-conceived judgments. It was causing a lot of friction and it simply wasn’t fair. The senior management didn’t work together, they worked in silos. They didn’t get on together. Meetings were so tense, they would prepare reports separately and then come up with three different documents that said different things… And the favourite phrase was “Well, I’ve been thrown under the bus here”. So I was trying to get them to understand that nobody’s throwing anybody under the bus, because the buck stops here”.

Experienced secondary headteacher
Strategies

As mentioned in the introduction to this strand of the findings, there were a relatively high number of new staff in SLT positions, especially in schools led by the experienced heads from the case study group. It is not clear whether this is associated with the churn in leadership experienced by these schools, which were usually those that had been in the ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’ category for a longer period of time. One experienced head was able to bring in new senior leaders from other schools in the MAT which had recently taken over sponsorship of the school. These members of the new SLT worked alongside a small number of existing members of the SLT to implement the school improvement plan. The experienced head reflected on how this led to opportunities to address a broader spectrum of strands of school improvement much more swiftly and effectively than in her previous headship.

“We were able to hit it all because we’ve got the expertise in that area. It wasn’t just me, whereas at [my previous school] I had to go in and do much of it myself… I didn’t have strong senior leaders in there or people who were going come with me… I’ve had this team to turn to. Teaching and learning has been [led by named colleagues] and they’ve driven that forward. And I’ve picked up the other bits and pieces.”

Novice secondary headteacher

In addition to mentoring, these opportunities to develop members of the SLT had come through training courses and the experience gained by sharing SLT meetings with other schools within the MAT, where this was possible.

In two of the smaller case study primary schools, both led by novice headteachers, the original intention was to establish a flat structure for a new SLT. In each case this was considered at the time to be the best fit for supporting responsibilities associated with the newly developed school improvement plan. In both schools a decision was made later in the year to introduce an element of hierarchy to the structure, in one case, inviting the assistant headteachers to apply for a new position of deputy head. The rationale for this change to structure was in part to do with practical concerns of who would deputise while the headteacher was attending meetings outside of the school.

Development of the middle leadership usually lagged behind the imperative to develop a strong and secure SLT. For some schools this remained a task to tackle in the second and third years of the new headship as by then the more secure SLT could take responsibility for development of middle leaders. Those heads that did address middle leadership development during their first year in post focused on upskilling staff to improve their technical knowledge, as well as developing their leadership and management skills. This was viewed as part of a strategy of succession planning. One headteacher tackled part of this development in-house by modelling to new members of the middle leadership various approaches to leadership. Another experienced head of a secondary school chose to buy-in a CPD package from a training consultancy that had a good reputation for middle leadership training, in order to address weaknesses diagnosed within the middle leadership of the school. This had the benefit of freeing up time for the head and SLT to focus on other areas of school improvement, as well as addressing issues of inconsistency in practice, especially across the group of Heads of Department.

In another secondary school, the head restructured the leadership both at senior and middle leadership levels. The new head perceived a resulting improvement in the way leadership was viewed by the staff at the school, after having “… flattened it all out and tidied it all up”.

A key driver for this restructuring, especially of the middle leadership, emerged from action that had been taken by the previous leadership in response to judgment of the school as Inadequate by Ofsted at the previous inspection.

“Virtually everybody in that [named] department are on leadership posts, and big leadership allowances, but it was having no impact. So you asked the previous head ‘Why did you do it?’ ‘Well we did it after the last Ofsted to try and improve standards’. But it hasn’t worked.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
The new head went on to describe how other teachers saw their colleagues with TLRs not making a difference to the quality of learning and student outcomes, leading to disillusionment and a negative atmosphere among the staff. The head also concluded that these allowances contributed to the school’s considerable overall budget deficit. As such, the restructuring of the middle leadership helped secure the long-term financial stability of the school as part of the overall restructuring, linking leadership structures to the issues covered above on finance and staff restructuring in Strand 2b.

**Sequencing**

Experienced headteachers tended to take more assertive and rapid action to address leadership development needs within their schools than novice heads. This may have been confounded with other contextual factors, such as school size, the number of leadership positions, or recent staff churn, especially at senior leadership level. Nevertheless, it is clear that experienced heads were able to draw lessons from any previous negative experiences that arose from a shortage of senior leadership expertise. As observed above, one experienced secondary headteacher expressed that with a SLT with the right schools she was able to “hit it all” in terms of school improvement activity, in contrast to her previous experience of starting out in headship. Another experienced secondary head reflected on the importance of that experience to her approach to succession planning. She reflected how important it has been to provide training opportunities for colleagues at all levels of the SLT and for middle leaders aspiring to senior leadership.

> “I think probably I’ve done that straight off because of my experiences previously. I didn’t do any succession planning in my first two years of my first headship. That wasn’t on my radar, but that left me with gaps… I was cleaning up the [school’s debt] and just attempting to get something done and I wasn’t thinking in the same way that I do now. When my two deputies left in year two in my first headship that put me in quite a difficult place. To be honest, I appointed two that I probably wouldn’t appoint here, and that left me later with even greater issues.”

**Experienced secondary headteacher**

For many of the schools the appointment of new leaders was a priority, either by intention to bring in tried and trusted former colleagues as a fast-track to building the base of leadership skills, or to fill vacancies left by previous senior leaders who had resigned their posts. Once the structure and personnel were in place the heads were then able to move to address the development needs of the SLT. Where capacity was in place, this would be through internal mentoring, and by providing external coaches and “buddies” for new and existing members of SLT, and occasionally to those in middle leadership positions. Where local capacity for leadership development was insufficient to address the volume or nature of the training needs, headteachers would then look to external sources of CPD through formal training programmes.

One novice headteacher contrasted the highly strategic approach to leadership development he had experienced as a deputy with that used within the MAT for his current school.

> “The model for [named MAT] isn’t a prescription that ‘This is how you go in. This is what you do term one, term two, term three’. I think there should be more standardisation because these are big jobs to turn around secondaries. We need to be doing it quickly. Having said that I have felt absolutely supported and whenever I’ve needed to ask for assistance it’s being there. But this has been more ‘You look at the problems, you come up with a solution’. If you need the support you get support and we move forward, there… Would it work with everyone? I’m not sure. And if it had been going badly wrong, hopefully the monitoring would have seen it, but you know there is the degree of risk in the model, I think, that we could mitigate against a bit.”

**Experienced secondary headteacher**
After reflecting on the importance of his professional networks as an additional source of support, he concluded these reflections by stating:

“The model for [named MAT] isn’t a prescription that ‘This is how you go in. This is what you do term one, term two, term three’. I think there should be more standardisation because these are big jobs to turn around secondaries. We need to be doing it quickly. Having said that I have felt absolutely supported and whenever I’ve needed to ask for assistance it’s being there. But this has been more ‘You look at the problems, you come up with a solution’. If you need the support you get support and we move forward, there… Would it work with everyone? I’m not sure. And if it had been going badly wrong, hopefully the monitoring would have seen it, but you know there is the degree of risk in the model, I think, that we could mitigate against a bit.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Another experienced secondary head expressed concerns about the freedom needing to be provided to members of SLT to provide genuine opportunities to engage in on the job training, and so enhance succession planning.

“Everyone talks about succession planning and it’s extremely complex because we’re trying to build someone up. You’re trying to let them run with something and let them make mistakes. At the same time, you know the mistakes we’re making can have an impact on a child’s life and so these are big mistakes, they’re high stakes… You need to let people have autonomy to make decisions and make mistakes, and then to sit down with them and talk them through those mistakes, while at the same time you don’t want them to make mistakes.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Barriers

Development of the leadership was sometimes impeded by reluctance among the existing staff to step up to new roles and responsibilities, especially where this may require them to challenge the practice of their colleagues. In one primary school, senior leaders did not want to take opportunities to undertake NPQSL training which was a source of considerable frustration to the new headteacher. In another primary school, the new SLT was relatively inexperienced, and lacking in confidence. Members of the team had difficulties in stepping up to leadership in terms of managing fellow staff and supporting their professional development. The headteacher had to implement a system of monitoring and performance management to ensure that the SLT were carrying out their duties:

“I don’t think this year they did effective line management of their faculties as they should do.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

This was coupled with informal training where the headteacher would model appropriate performance and help the SLT to develop the necessary skills and confidence. Headteachers also identified a potential lack of trust as a barrier in building leadership capacity, especially where previous leadership had taken less collegial approaches to managing members of the leadership team in the school.

Some headteachers found that existing SLT members sometimes lacked skills and initiative. One experienced secondary head was of the view that the SLT as a whole were not up to the task of securing school improvement, making the decision to remove one member of the SLT from the team within the first two months in post at the school.

“I started working with the existing members of the leadership team. In question and answer sessions you get to what they know essentially, and what they understand, and how capable they are. So I formed the judgment across the senior leadership team that really was inadequate really, both in terms of skills and in terms of knowledge… I removed the senior leader that was truly inadequate and couldn’t be improved… who remained in the school as a teacher, and that’s been quite successful, I think. Because this is the second time I’ve done it, I was able to get underneath the data and do the initial layer of digging around more quickly than the first time, because I’ve learnt the quick wins.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
Monitoring

Heads generally undertook monitoring the quality of leadership development themselves, especially in the case of SLT, as they worked directly with these colleagues. One novice headteacher felt that the addition of external monitoring through an audit process was helpful and necessary, providing an external view of the quality of the leadership. This also lent weight to the new head’s perception of the quality of leadership.

A key element of monitoring in this area was the indication senior and middle leaders were becoming increasingly effective in securing school improvement in their allocated areas of responsibility, something one experienced head described in detail.

“We identify the big issues or problems that need to be solved, then convert those problems into 12 statements that become like key performance indicators (KPI). Then we put them under four big areas of: curriculum, teacher effectiveness, leadership, co-curricular and active learning programmes. Each member of the SLT has a direct responsibility in one of those areas, and then we simply create seven targets or actions for each member of the senior team. If they implement fully those seven things, they meet the KPIs for their area. Their performance management targets are the same as the set targets.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Monitoring the work of those in leadership roles was often undertaken in regular meetings with the SLT, in which headteachers could check progress towards agreed improvement plan targets.
STRAAND 4: IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY
Strand 4: Improving relationships with parents and the wider community

This was identified as the final strand of school improvement that was common to at least half of the case study schools. Although the findings here do not represent an exhaustive set of the strands of improvement that were identified within each of the case study schools, other strands tended to be limited to issues diagnosed in just one or two schools. Two schools had a specific strand of activity on staff wellbeing, although this issue was also raised within other schools, especially around the discussion linked to improving quality of teaching. Other improvement strands included those focused on specific aspects of the curriculum, especially those outside the “core” subjects, which were given a lower priority as it was felt essential to secure improvements to core subjects first, especially as these are weighted within the current school performance measures. These strands focusing on the wider curriculum sometimes considered opportunities for enrichment through sport, the arts and computing, and raised opportunities for engaging the community and external partners in learning. The fact that these strands were usually considered to be later priorities during the year, after securing the core elements of the curriculum, may explain why Strand 4 is weighted toward developing relationships with parents more than to other community stakeholders. As these lagging strands of improvement activity come more to the fore during the second and third years under the new headship, the balance is likely to shift.

All of the case study primary schools diagnosed some aspect of relationship with the wider community as part of their school improvement planning. Additionally, at least two of the secondary schools made explicit mention of efforts to engage with parents, although each of the other secondary heads indicated that the good relations with parents were an important part of securing wider improvement initiatives, such as improving the behaviour of students. This balance may reflect the greater extent to which parents spend time in and around the school site of primary schools compared with secondary schools when parents were usually only seen if they wanted to raise a concern or complaint. In one primary school, the relationship with parents had deteriorated to near breaking point due to the actions of a previous headteacher. Thus, if the incoming headteacher was to get any time to improve other areas of the school, the relations to parents needed to be improved.

The rationales for engaging with other community stakeholders centred around two specific types of perceived need, namely, to work toward a common school improvement goal such as developing a particular aspect of the curriculum like sport or the performing arts, and to improve the school’s reputation within the wider community. Improving the school’s reputation has sometimes meant new heads seeking to forge relationships with other local schools and community groups in order to be seen as a community leader.

The following key points have been identified in this strand of school improvement.

> Although building stronger relations with the community was considered a lower priority, most heads engaged in activity in this area early on during their first year of headship and tended to maintain at least some level of activity in this area, even as they prioritised and devoted more time to other strands of school improvement.

> Understanding school context was important in order to build relationships. This was true for building relationships with parents and other local schools in order to understand the challenges that families and other schools face.

> Initiating and sustaining dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders was central to diagnosing issues and monitoring progress in this area and in other strands of school improvement. Heads valued the perspectives of external stakeholders on the role the school should play in the wider community and the extent to which it was doing so at present.

> New-in-post heads worked hard to raise their profile in the community and recognised that sustaining a high profile was a key aspect of their efforts to secure improvements in community relations.

> Heads sought out strategic links between work on core aspects of curriculum and behaviour and opportunities to improve community engagement in student learning. To do this effectively they sought to understand the needs and priorities of organisations and businesses.

> Turning around negative perceptions of a school was a task that extended well beyond the first year of headship and required a sustained and concerted effort.
Evidence

Many new heads had viewed the Ofsted “Parent View” website for their new school, prior to taking up their post. This provided a starting point for identifying issues among the parent stakeholder group.

“I’ll see what parents are thinking, so I think the most influential was … the Ofsted Parent View.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

Heads recognised the value of an overview of parental perceptions of the school across recent years, especially where this tied to changes in Ofsted judgments over the same period. A small number of schools undertook their own internal surveys of parents to ensure that they had more up to date evidence to diagnose issues in this area as data on Parent View may have been somewhat dated at the point the new head commenced in post.

The most significant type of evidence with which heads engaged was drawn from direct dialogue with stakeholders. This was usually facilitated through various opportunities to engage with community stakeholders, such as parents’ meetings, formal and special occasions in the school calendar, and particularly through informal conversations. For the primary heads there were regular opportunities for conversations with parents at the school gates, whereas secondary heads tended to be limited to those occasions when parents made a visit to the school.

Sources of evidence

Many of the new heads went out of their way to ensure they rapidly established a presence with the parents and families of their students. One head worked hard to engage with parents at the school gate. In addition, some headteachers forged relationships with other schools in the area and to community organisations, especially those that might be able to engage in supporting students’ learning, such as groups involved in sport and local theatres. Heads expressed that these exchanges with stakeholders could help them better understand the contextual challenges the school, the students and their families are facing.

“I’ve actually spoken a lot to other teachers who have an insight of the area, so, you know a local network as well as the national network because the more information you’ve got about an area, the more you know, the better chance you’ve got of turning things around.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Strategies

Once any issues have been diagnosed, the strategies adopted by the heads in their new schools were dependent on the nature of the stakeholder group and whether they were seeking simply to improve external perceptions of the school, or whether the desired outcome was greater involvement in the life of the school and engagement in students’ learning.

Many of the new headteachers worked hard to be visible within the wider community and usually chose not to delegate this task to others, as they felt that it was essential for them as new heads become known as more than a figure head for the school and to take responsibility for relationships in the community.

“That [external view of the school] was a very significant thing. I open the gate every morning and again at the end of the day, I have those constant interactions with the parents ... and when Ofsted came in for their inspections, the parents were coming up to me and saying that ‘we’ll fight in your corner’ ... and that has been so important for me to have people on-side going forward.”

Novice primary headteacher
This was especially important in turning around any negative perceptions in the mind of stakeholders due to the actions or inaction of a previous headteacher. Many of the case study heads in secondary schools and some of the primary heads reported that it was necessary to work hard to help parents feel their views were appreciated and respected, even when they had come to make a complaint. One primary head stressed how important improved relationships were to securing the overall effectiveness of the school:

“We’ve had performance difficulties for the school when you’ve had a negative impact on parents’ perceptions, so it’s been a battle to build up those relationships.”


  Novice primary headteacher

A primary head spoke of the need to ensure senior leadership have a strong presence at events such as sports days or concerts:

“It’s really key that the leaders are fronting the doors. I don’t want anybody else to do that because they’ve got to see that strong leader there, welcoming parents and they want to be able to engage with the leaders.”


  Experienced primary headteacher

Three of the five secondary case study schools had issues with low numbers of students on roll, well below their published admissions number (PAN). These heads worked hard to develop much stronger ties with local primary schools and created special events for the primary pupils and their parents such as offering to host primary school sports days, or by offering a technology day for primary and secondary students to learn together. For one experienced secondary head such activities provided an essential platform for improving long term perceptions of the school.

“We are only half full, because there is distrust. Parents do not think their kids will be safe here. It’s a big thing for us. It’s like a branding issue... We need to tap into all of the good things that being part of the Trust gives us. All the successes our Trust schools have and link those successes to [our school] to say ‘We are going on the same journey; your kids are going to get this here.”


  Experienced secondary headteacher

Another secondary head went out of his way to greet parents at the gates of the local primary schools in order to establish his presence in the community, in an effort to enhance the reputation of the school and encourage parents to consider the school as a good choice for their child.

In order to enhance parental involvement some schools engaged parents in the process of identifying school improvement needs, and one experienced primary head consulted a group of parents right at the start of the year in order to draw up a ten-year framework for the development of the school. Some headteachers have created special events such as parent-child fitness activities, a parent-child scooter disco evening, or a parent charity auction to build social relationships and to help break down potential barriers. The heads also worked to improve lines of communication to parents and to wider community members about activities in the school and developments during their first year in headship, as well as providing better signposting to the most suitable members of staff in order to address queries and concerns.

One primary head implemented a new web-based communication channel for parents, so that parents could feel part of the learning journey of their children. Other attempts to improve engagement in student learning were developed within a number of the case study primary schools through the introduction of workshops for parents. These were sometimes linked to specific aspects of curriculum development and enhancement that occurred during the year. In this way parents were also made more aware of the wider effort to secure improvements in the quality of students’ learning.
Some heads used the opportunity presented by a substantial review of their curriculum to introduce opportunities for learning with members of the wider community. This included outdoor activities and engaging in the performing arts.

“We do a lot of work with the [local theatre] with Year 7. It’s part of the cultural entitlement of students living here. All our Year 7s are set a performance. They are amazing. They were terrified to do that kind of thing. That’s good for community engagement.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

One head found it helpful to develop working relationships with non-school community organisations, such as the police and children’s services. These relationships helped to develop the context of what the students’ may experience living in the local estates, and to help understand what possible safeguarding problems may develop over time. She indicated that it was important for her to attend these meetings in her role as the headteacher:

“It’s important that you know all the stakeholders on the day, so you know what’s going on and we can tackle things together.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Many of the new headteachers initiated contact with leaders in other schools in order to develop stronger relationships. For cross-phase relationships with neighbouring schools, this sometimes began with general community-based issues, such as weather-related problems, or for specific issues such as in helping pupils move from one school to another through transition from primary to secondary. Some primary schools expressed frustration that representatives from local secondary schools were not always committed to meeting regularly in order to help smooth students’ transitions across phases.

For schools in the same phase, headteachers have more opportunity to work directly. Nevertheless, heads still needed to work strategically to build relationships that had a focus on supporting student learning and staff development, such as sharing good practice through systems of external moderation of students’ work. This has been especially helpful to schools that may be physically isolated from other schools in the LA or their MAT.

“We’re not close to any other schools. The cluster isn’t that strong. We’re not part of a MAT. So you’ve got to forge your own friendships with other schools. So we have done that this year with various different schools and I became conscious as the year has gone on, that my RQT has got a coach from this school, my early years teacher has got buddy from another school, and they were kind of going all over the place. So I was really grateful that through my school improvement partner we linked up with a school not so far away which is almost exactly the same size as us. The head there is another new head. They went into RI before Christmas. They were a bit harshly done by. But they’re not an outstanding school telling us what to do and neither are we telling them what to do and we’re now going to make a proper link between us so that we meet once a term all together as a whole staff to do writing moderation or whatever it might be. But I will feel that those relationships are a bit more secure then, because I think if you’re just one person going off to a school, it can be a bit hit and miss.”

Novice primary headteacher
The headteachers then built on these relationships in order to strengthen their professional networks and to better understand the working processes of other schools, so that they more aware of what types of support and resources they might be able to glean from their local colleagues.

“I still have to know who was doing what in each school and who was stronger in certain aspects of leadership so that I knew which head to call on to support me in different areas. For example, one school is really strong on supporting SEND children, one school had a very strong writing strategy… and another school was particularly strong on sport. So there was all that knowledge which allowed me to identify partners that I could work with to help build our strategies.”

Novice primary headteacher

Where these relationships involved teachers working together in the same phase, as well as leaders, they facilitated teachers gaining greater assurance of the level of work being produced by their students, through detailed moderation and benchmarking exercises.

“That involved working with other schools as well, so that our staff could see what a year four piece of writing looked like in another school. Because I think it been so entrenched here that people just assumed that was what it was. It was only when we exposed them to work from other schools that you could see why our children are being successful.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Sequencing

The development of better community relations was considered to be a lower priority for school improvement than the other strands discussed above simply because other strands of school improvement were considered to be more pressing, and community relationships have a more indirect effect on student outcomes, particularly in the short-term. Nevertheless, the case study heads often initiated some form of engagement with community stakeholders early on during their first year in post. For example, one novice primary headteacher included personal information about his family and hobbies in his introductory talk with parents, so that he would be seen as a fellow member of the community. Improving communication to external stakeholders was also seen as a chance for a ‘quick win’ in this area, and the maintenance of enhanced communications was something that could be quickly delegated to other members of the school staff.

With the exception of the few schools that had an urgent need to repair very poor relationships to parents, this was a consistent strand of activity tended to run over the top of other aspects of school improvement, sometimes relating directly to one or more of the other improvement strands. A good example of this was identified in those schools that opted to consult parents as part of the development, implementation and review of their new behaviour policy. This could help to foster an atmosphere of transparency and trust through open communication.

“Parents are very supportive … but they want to know what’s going on.”

Novice primary headteacher

Barriers

Many of the barriers experienced by heads in developing stronger relations with community stakeholders were related to how their school had previously been led. This was especially the case where relations with parents had deteriorated.

“I hate talking poorly about my predecessors. I’ve never met him, but I think it’s fair to say that relationships between him and the parents had probably soured.”

Novice primary headteacher
Sometimes the effects of a similar deterioration of relations was experienced with leaders in other schools. The case study heads reported that where this legacy of previous leadership was an issue, it led to scepticism, a lack of trust and negative working relationships. This situation was not easy to turn around. In such circumstances persistent and positive engagement was viewed to be the key to securing improvements, illustrated by this comment from a novice secondary head:

“The head from [nearby secondary school], which is up the road three miles away, he’d never been in this school till this year and he said he’d been there for 17 years. So we’re working really hard this year to establish those links in the local community with as many people as we can, because they’re all part of the strategy.”

Novice secondary headteacher

The extent that schools consulted stakeholders on proposed changes and how these changes were communicated sometimes led to barriers arising in developing relationships. This was especially the case when relationships were already strained or distant. One secondary school experienced a strongly negative reaction from parents toward the implementation of their new behaviour policy, despite providing a detailed breakdown of the new approach. Parents indicated that the rationale for the changes had not been well communicated. The experienced head went on to reflect that this may have been a legacy of relationships that were already strained:

“There were very adversarial relationships when I arrived here, and I haven’t broken down the barriers yet. There’s still a huge piece of work to do with the community... Conversations would take place in reception in the first few weeks where members of staff and parents would literally be having arguments in reception in public, and the approach was the parent is making a complaint and they were obviously wrong, and we will just batten down the hatches and defend everything we do no matter what.”

Experienced secondary headteacher

By contrast, other heads had sought to be more consultative when implementing such major changes:

“I invited parents to come in and talk to me about it, asking me questions. And made sure that the teachers knew my expectations.”

Novice primary headteacher

One headteacher mentioned that she is usually able to avoid situations like this by creating a good informal relationship with the parents on everyday issues, so the parents had trust in her abilities when potential problems arose.

“I have always had a good relationship with the parents, which I think has secured some of the difficulties.”

Novice primary headteacher

A key source of frustration for staff in schools was the lack of response when efforts were made to engage with the community. This was felt especially keenly where considerable effort was invested in providing opportunities for parents to become more involved in the life of the school and engaged in their child’s learning.

One secondary head working hard to improve admissions to Year 7 indicated that the slow pace of improvement in other strands, such as behaviour, sometimes made it difficult to retain the gains made in this area.

“We have one or two Year 7 quiet and nice boys for whom the right thing was to change schools. But if we actually had intervened earlier, we could have probably stopped it.”

Novice primary headteacher
In some cases, especially in more rural settings, relative isolation was a barrier to working between schools, even within the same MAT. This sometimes meant that only the heads or senior leaders might collaborate on a regular basis.

“It’s difficult because the trust is so disparate. The nearest school for me is about a 40 minute drive away… We do meet together to do the headteachers’ forums and we will work alongside each other to send people into school. I know that it is a priority of the trust to create a more collaborative model where we do have other heads who will come in and do those kinds of reviews… but the distance between schools is a challenge.”

Novice secondary headteacher

Even where schools were in more urban environments, relationships with other local schools might sometimes be strained, especially where previous leaders had taken a more isolationist approach.

“The trust as a whole has a terrible reputation [locally] because of the previous CEO who had made the trust completely insular. He wouldn’t be involved with [the LA] at all.”

Experienced primary headteacher

Monitoring

All heads were of the view that the most powerful source of evidence for monitoring was through regular, ongoing dialogue with stakeholders.

“We go to the bus stop every day. We are out and about, we are around, we are speaking to people.”

Experienced primary headteacher

In terms of the parent perspective, two of the most frequently used monitoring approaches were parent surveys and informal conversations with parents. A key challenge was ensuring that a wide range of views could be gathered and there was no easy answer as to how to engage with some hard-to-reach stakeholders. Attendance at community events and parent consultations was seen as a potential indicator of involvement and engagement, especially where it could be triangulated with evidence from dialogue. Heads and SLT members also monitored the number of visits and complaints made by community members and parents.

After reflecting on the means of monitoring progress in this area, one secondary head recognised that improving relations with parents would require a considerable shift in culture and attitudes and that there was still a lot of work that remained to be done to turn things around:

“We are better with the parents but there is still an edge to it which is all about we know best and we’ll tell you what you need to do with your children. It is shifting across time but they’ve suffered from the same very superior approach. And you’re not going to get the best out of your parents if most of the time you’re telling them that they’re not very good parents.”

Experienced secondary headteacher
CONCLUSIONS
Conclusions

This report was based on ten case studies of new-in-post headteachers, either novice or experienced headteachers, working to secure lasting school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances.

The purpose of the study was to develop our understanding of how new-in-post headteachers and school leaders diagnosed, prioritised, sequenced, selected and implemented strategies for improvement, and to identify and overcome the barriers to school improvement that are a feature of challenging contexts. A key aim was to determine why headteachers prioritised the various strands of school improvement and how they were implemented and shaped to and by the context of the school.

By comparing novice and experienced headteachers, the aim was to highlight differences in behaviour, mind set and action of heads with a proven track record of school improvement, while also recognising that simple comparisons between these two groups would not necessarily serve to identify best practice in securing school improvement. This is contrast to other in-depth case studies, such as Day et al. (2016) and Matthews et al. (2014), which focus on retrospective narratives of heads looking back over three or more years, and who all had established records of securing school improvement.

It was striking that in many case study schools there was a high number of new staff in leadership positions within school senior leadership teams. This was sometimes because the new-in-post headteacher had brought in new people specifically to work in the SLT or where joining a MAT facilitated teachers with the necessary experience and expertise to join the existing leadership team. There was evidence that it was also the consequence of a turnover among staff in senior leadership positions as a consequence of schools receiving Ofsted judgments of ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’. This churn in senior leadership might be a cause for concern, since previous research (see Mascall and Leithwood, 2010 for a summary) has suggested that well distributed leadership can have a buffering effect on the negative consequences of headteacher turnover, but as Branch et al. (2013) point out, the quality and abilities of the senior leaders who are leaving compared to those joining the school must also be taken into account.

Although some of the case study schools had received low Ofsted judgments (RI or Inadequate) on multiple occasions, other schools had received higher inspection judgments in the past, suggesting evidence of recent This report was based on ten case studies of new-in-post headteachers, either novice or experienced headteachers, working to secure lasting school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances.

The purpose of the study was to develop our understanding of how new-in-post headteachers and school leaders diagnosed, prioritised, sequenced, selected and implemented strategies for improvement, and to identify and overcome the barriers to school improvement that are a feature of challenging contexts. A key aim was to determine why headteachers prioritised the various strands of school improvement and how they were implemented and shaped to and by the context of the school.

By comparing novice and experienced headteachers, the aim was to highlight differences in behaviour, mind set and action of heads with a proven track record of school improvement, while also recognising that simple comparisons between these two groups would not necessarily serve to identify best practice in securing school improvement. This is contrast to other in-depth case studies, such as Day et al. (2016) and Matthews et al. (2014), which focus on retrospective narratives of heads looking back over three or more years, and who all had established records of securing school improvement.

It was striking that in many case study schools there was a high number of new staff in leadership positions within school senior leadership teams. This was sometimes because the new-in-post headteacher had brought in new people specifically to work in the SLT or where joining a MAT facilitated teachers with the necessary experience and expertise to join the existing leadership team. There was evidence that it was also the consequence of a turnover among staff in senior leadership positions as a consequence of schools receiving Ofsted judgments of RI or Inadequate. This churn in senior leadership might be a cause for concern, since previous research (see Mascall and Leithwood, 2010 for a summary) has suggested that well distributed leadership can have a buffering effect on the negative consequences of headteacher turnover, but as Branch et al. (2013) point out, the quality and abilities of the senior leaders who are leaving compared to those joining the school must also be taken into account.
Although some of the case study schools had received low Ofsted judgments (RI or Inadequate) on multiple occasions, other schools had received higher inspection judgments in the past, suggesting evidence of recent decline in school performance and effectiveness. A pattern of decline could also be traced for these schools through tracking previous data from school performance tables. An explanation for elements of this decline came through in comments that headteachers made about the lack of appropriate benchmarking of the school’s performance against a relevant set of other schools. Some schools had become fixated on specific measures of performance such as threshold attainment measures. Other schools only benchmarked internally against their previous outcomes or compared outcomes to a fixed set of other local schools without consideration of whether the benchmarking set of schools was the most appropriate.

We identified a relatively small set of strands of school improvement activity that were common across all ten, or at least a majority of the case study schools during the first year of new headship. These strands were safeguarding and behaviour, the quality of learning and teaching and the curriculum, the development of leadership and improving relationships with parents and the community. Other strands of improvement activity were highlighted by individual schools.

We found evidence of layering of leadership actions (Day et al., 2016) and interplay within and between these strands of improvement activity, with schools working on many or even all of these strands of activity in parallel, with a sense of ebb and flow in terms of the time and energy required to address each strand. There was clear evidence that school improvement is an iterative process in the case study schools, as development in one strand would lead to consequences for the work in other strands of improvement.

The report concludes by focusing on a number of overarching themes that spanned across these strands of school improvement activity that relate to the aims of the study.

1: Diagnosing priorities for school improvement

A wide array of types of evidence were utilised by headteachers, and by members of their SLTs, both for initial diagnosis of priorities, and for the ongoing monitoring of improvements. All the heads diagnosed significant issues with student outcomes across a number of areas of the curriculum. This analysis placed the spotlight firmly on the need to develop learning, teaching and the curriculum as the priority. However, those schools that experienced more extreme negative behaviours from students tended to prioritise behaviour over learning and teaching. Within these core improvement strands novice and experienced heads tended to draw similar conclusions. One reason for this was that novice heads in the case study had been involved in these core aspects of improvement during their time as members of the senior leadership team in a previous school (see McAleavy and Riggall, 2016: 59-64).

How headteachers decided which strand to emphasise at a given time during the year was dependent on their initial diagnosis and close monitoring of the evidence that was available to them. This was triangulated against the store of evidence drawn from their previous leadership positions.

Many heads drew on a range of external as well as internal sources of data. Experienced heads in particular were likely to treat existing internal sources of evidence with a heavy degree of scepticism, especially where internal stakeholders had given a more positive perspective on the school than the headline data and Ofsted reports suggested was merited. This accords with findings from McAleavy and Riggall’s survey (2016: 74). By contrast Draper and McMichael (2000) found that novice heads were likely to view the perspectives of existing SLT members as a source of invaluable insight into the context of the school and relationships to various stakeholders.

A number of heads arranged for external reviews of various aspects of practice within their school. They often utilised contacts from their external professional networks to undertake such reviews and to supplement reviews undertaken by MAT or LA staff. These external voices were seen as important verification for the perspective of the new Headteacher and thus became a powerful source of evidence for change, similar to the effects of ‘external diagnosticians’ reported by Ross and Sibbald (2010). At the start of the year these external voices would normally carry greater weight, especially where they came from a trusted source such as a former colleague from a previous school. Weindling and Dimmock (2006) have indicated that the legacy effects of the previous leadership of a school can prevent new heads from approaching their work with a blank canvass and the perspectives of external experts provided greater leverage for change within established cultures and practice.
2: The interdependent and iterative nature of core school improvement activity

As a legal requirement, headteachers prioritised safeguarding above all other concerns. However, once that was secure, the headteachers assessed how to balance between two priorities: improving student behaviour and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. This corresponds very well with findings from other case study research such as Day et al. (2016) and Matthews et al. (2014), both of which emphasised a similar “back to basics” approach focusing on core strands of improvement activity in order to improve the conditions for learning. In contrast to some of the findings from these same studies, very few of our case study schools made reference to any improvements to the physical environment of the school.

In this study, the majority of heads, especially in secondary schools, made behaviour the leading strand of activity before working to improve the quality of learning and teaching, because they felt that teachers were not provided with a proper foundation to demonstrate good teaching practice if there was constant disruption in the classroom. This sequencing contrasts with the recent survey findings of McAleavy et al. (2016), but echoes the experience of case study schools in the Impact Study (Day et al., 2009: 154). Headteachers also prioritised behaviour as an opportunity to secure early evidence of improvement across the school which parallels to the experience of “low start” schools working on improvement within the Impact Study (Day et al., 2009: 42). Even where behaviour was made the initial priority, there was clear recognition that addressing poor quality teaching and poor curriculum provision needed to follow up quickly behind the action to improve student behaviour, in order to prevent gains from one strand exacerbating the shortcomings in another core strand. In summary, the findings combine to indicate that the core strands of improvement were interdependent and needed to be addressed in parallel. The iterative nature of securing improvement in these strands required careful and regular monitoring designed to identify how cycles of improvement were developing (Day and Sammons, 2013; 2014; McAleavy et al., 2016).

3: The layering of other key strands over the core improvement activity

The remaining two strands of improvement activity that emerged from this study were the development of leadership and improving relationships with parents and the community. In almost all cases headteachers indicated that, in terms or priority, these two strands lagged behind the need to address the core school improvement issues. Nevertheless, experienced heads in particular addressed at least some aspects within each of these strands of improvement toward the start of their first year in post, especially in the development of leadership which has been identified in other case studies as a priority for rapid school improvement (Day and Sammons, 2013; McAleavy & Riggall, 2016). This was because initial diagnosis of key priorities within the core strands of behaviour and learning and teaching had implications for the skill set required within members of the senior leadership team. Experienced heads anticipated these needs at an earlier stage of the year, and were more likely to seize opportunities to develop the necessary skill sets by drawing on experienced teachers and leaders from their wider professional networks to supplement the skills of existing members of their SLT.

Some headteachers held back on the development of senior leaders until later in the first year. Any leadership problems that later emerged created barriers to addressing other strands of school improvement, as the school’s improvement strategies were not as effectively implemented and monitored. Irregular monitoring in turn led to some improvement initiatives losing focus. As a result, headteachers would have to spend extra time to monitor the SLT, or have fewer opportunities to delegate responsibility to the SLT, or require investment of time and money into further training to enhance skills and develop confidence (McAleavy et al., 2016). Where the skill set of senior leadership did not fit priorities for improvement, headteachers took the decision to restructure the SLT during their first year. Day et al. (2016: 241) found that this was a priority for schools in the foundational phase of school improvement, but one that rarely extended beyond the early part of this phase. While restructuring took time away from addressing other improvement strategies, the short term investment to ensure that lines of communication and accountability across the SLT were efficient was viewed as worthwhile in order to secure and sustain improvement.
The development of middle leadership tended to lag behind that of senior leadership. Some heads indicated that it would be more of a focus for the second or third years of their headship. This corresponds to survey findings by McAleevy et al. (2016), and also to findings from the Impact Study (Day et al., 2009; 2016) which found that the distribution of leadership was usually a feature of later phases of school improvement. Nevertheless, experienced heads in particular recognised the gains that could be made by addressing the development of middle leadership, especially in strategic areas to secure gains in student outcomes. Where SLTs were strong enough to support middle leaders this task was delegated to them. Otherwise, heads sought training for middle leaders from their MAT, by partnering with fellow middle leaders in local schools, or through training from an external provider. Experienced heads also identified that this development was strategic for sustainability and succession planning (see Day et al., 2009: 30).

Some heads also engaged parents and the community early on during the year. They set initiatives in train that could be quickly delegated to other staff, but worked themselves to maintain a high profile with external stakeholders which they felt was critical to ensure that their vision and expectations could be clearly communicated. As a result they reported that parents appreciated that changes were necessary there were valid reasons behind them (Campbell, 2011). Experienced heads were able to identify opportunities that curriculum developments presented in order to elicit the support of parents and the community and so fostered greater parental or community engagement in the learning of students (see Harris and Goodall, 2007; Day et al., 2009). Heads found that building relationships with other local schools provided important support for school improvement as they shared successful practice and benchmarked progress.

4: Compliance as a necessary step to engagement

It was striking how often headteachers and senior leaders reported that they had been able to establish a state of compliance during their first year in post. The term was most often used to describe improvements observed in student behaviour, but was also applied to the work of teachers adapting to change during the year. It was also applied by heads to the work of members of middle and senior leadership. Reaching a state of compliance was seen as a sign of progress on the journey to improvement. Maguire et al. (2010) refer to a state of compliance, particularly with reference to the adoption of behaviour policies.

Compliance was viewed as a signal that the improvement strategy was being adhered to, and that barriers to improvement were being removed. Headteachers made clear that compliance was only a stepping stone to the intended goal of greater engagement by staff and students. For students this meant moving from the state of compliance to a much more pro-active and engaged approach to their learning. Day et al. (2016: 250) indicated that student behaviour was a strand of school improvement activity that spanned across all four stages of school improvement in their phase-based framework, moving from dealing with misbehaviour through greater student voice and on to a focus on student centred learning. For staff this meant moving from compliance with non-negotiables and standard operating procedures for core activities such as lesson planning to greater creativity and innovation while retaining the essence of effective lesson structures. For those in leadership positions this meant taking increased accountability for delegated responsibilities and demonstrating greater initiative in future improvement planning. Headteachers expressed an awareness that the steps toward greater engagement would take time and effort to secure.

5: Further lessons from experience

A key objective of this study was to consider differences in the way novice and experienced headteachers undertook diagnosis and leadership of their school improvement priorities. A number of points of similarity and contrast have already been highlighted in the concluding points above. As headteachers carry ultimate responsibility for every strand of school improvement activity a head needs to be a highly effective manager and leader across the full gamut of roles and responsibilities. Novice heads reported the most marked shortcomings in their experience and existing skill set when faced with tasks involving the management of resources. The steepest learning curves were related to understanding school finance and getting to grips with existing budgets. Many of the experienced headteachers reported a similar lack of expertise in this area when they had worked in their first headships.
Another area of management where novice headteachers reported particular challenge was in managing staff, especially where school improvement plans required complex decision-making with regard to staffing and leadership structures. Novice heads tended to tackle these issues later in their first year, sometimes only after problems started to arise. Experienced heads on the other hand, began looking at SLT leadership from their first days in their new headteacher roles and were more likely to take on substantial restructuring of staffing in their school, although this may be a result of governors or MAT directors recruiting experienced heads where they felt such substantive change was necessary.

Each of the novice heads indicated that they would have appreciated more training in these areas prior to taking on their first headship. One clear exception to this was a novice head who, under the leadership of a former head, had been given opportunities to undertake the full array of roles of a headteacher. These particular challenges for novice heads around finance and staff management confirm previous findings within an English context in survey research by Holligan et al. (2006) of primary and secondary headteachers’ aspirations and training needs prior to joining an induction programme.

All the case study headteachers made reference to the importance of having a strong professional network as a source of advice and support for their work to secure school improvement, something that accords with longstanding studies of school leadership (Hallinger and Heck, 1998). Experienced heads tended to have a wider set of colleagues to whom they could turn for advice and support during this important first year of headship in a new school, and their networks included those with a wider range of school leadership experience (see Moolenaar et al., 2012; Moolenaar and Sleegers, 2015). Experienced heads were also more directive in setting the agenda for the work of contacts, consultants and former colleagues with whom they had worked in the past which in turn helped broker advice through to others in the school (Wohlstetter et al., 2003). Novice heads were more likely to encounter gaps in their network and sometimes had to be strategic in managing and developing their networks, even loosening or cutting ties to others in order to foster links with those who could provide the support needed.

Recommendations from the research

We have drawn out a number of implications for practice which are relevant to those involved in the training and preparation of school leaders, as well as to policy makers and those researching school leadership and school improvement.

Recommendations for aspirant heads:

1. Be aware that novice headteachers often find managing budgets and finance particularly challenging and seek experience of this before you reach headship.

The novice heads in this research found it challenging to manage finances given their lack of experience in this area, echoing the findings of previous research (Briggs et al, 2006; Earley & Bubb, 2013; Hobson et al, 2003). Experienced heads were usually able to move more quickly than novices to evaluate their school’s financial position, through confidence drawn from their previous headship, and an awareness that hidden issues could create problems later down the line.

2. Consider how your development plans will give you the full range of knowledge and skills needed for headship.

A lack of knowledge and prior experience of any aspect of the broad and complex work of a headteacher presents a barrier to securing improvement. Aspirant heads need to proactively seek opportunities to broaden and develop their knowledge and skills across all areas of headship, particularly those to which deputies are rarely exposed.

3. Start building your professional network now; you will want to call on it when you reach headship.

School leaders aspiring to headship need to devote time and energy to developing their professional networks in a strategic way. Leaders who enter their first headship with a wide range of experienced supporters are able to respond swiftly to the demands of addressing multiple school improvement priorities, especially when their school faces challenging circumstances. Drawing on professional networks helps to provide extra capacity at critical points in the first year of headship, and setting a clear agenda for the work of external supporters ensures that the benefits of experience are brokered across the school in a coherent way. Building good relationships with external stakeholders helps to create a group of supporters fighting in the head’s corner who can assist in driving core areas of school improvement forward.
Recommendations for novice heads:

1. Be aware that novice headteachers often find managing budgets and finance particularly challenging and seek experience of this before you reach headship.

The novice heads in this research found it challenging to manage finances given their lack of experience in this area, echoing the findings of previous research (Briggs et al, 2006; Earley & Bubb, 2013; Hobson et al, 2003). Experienced heads were usually able to move more quickly than novices to evaluate their school’s financial position, through confidence drawn from their previous headship, and an awareness that hidden issues could create problems later down the line.

2. Look beyond internal evidence to confirm your priority areas for improvement.

Heads taking up a post in a school which requires substantial improvement need to consider carefully the validity and reliability of the evidence that informs their initial improvement plans. Heads should be cautious when utilising existing internal evidence, especially where there is a mismatch between the perceptions of internal stakeholders (teachers, SLT and governors), and evidence from Ofsted or headline data. Drawing in trusted, external voices can provide heads with an independent judgment of current performance and can help to justify the changes required to drive improvement. It is important to continue engaging with critical friends and benchmarking the school’s performance, to maintain a realistic view of the school’s improvement trajectory over time.

3. The strands of school improvement are interdependent. Keep reviewing your priorities: they will shift as your improvement plan starts to deliver impact.

The core strands of school improvement - especially behaviour, the quality of teaching and learning and the curriculum - are all interrelated, and heads need to address them concurrently, albeit with a different level of emphasis placed on different strands. An issue in one strand may mask problems in the others. Heads therefore need to adopt an iterative approach, switching emphasis between the core strands of activity as improvements are secured. They need to be vigilant through constant assessment and monitoring to pick up on the potential problems as they emerge. Aspiring and novice heads need knowledge of, and training in, methods for strategic analysis of a complex array of evidence to enable them to diagnose priorities and to monitor cycles of improvement as they progress.

4. View compliance as a potential springboard as you seek to move from underperformance to engagement.

Headteachers will have a vision for the way that staff and pupils should engage in teaching and learning in their school. However, it is not possible to move straight from under-performance to engagement. When heads implement new policies and processes in their school, their first step should be to look for compliance by students and staff. Compliance is an early sign of progress and of barriers to improvement coming down. As a sign of progress, it can also generate buy-in from staff and students to transition to the next phase of school improvement. This transition often marks the point at which heads must switch away from being directive toward a more consensual approach. No head in this research believed compliance was the end goal, but recognised it was a vital step before pupils could become truly engaged in learning and teachers could develop excellent practice.

5. Give yourself breathing space by demonstrating impact through data and securing parents’ support.

All heads should have a vision for the long term, sustainable improvement of their school. However, they must balance this with short term accountability pressures and the need to demonstrate improvement to Ofsted and other external stakeholders such as multi-academy trust leaders. Heads in this research cited a number of strategies that provided this breathing space: engaging parents in the improvement process and gaining their trust, so that they were supportive during external inspections; ensuring that internal assessment data was reliable, so it acted as evidence of improvement before headline results had shifted; targeting intensive interventions towards examination years to compensate for previous poor teaching and achieve improvements in headline results. Importantly, heads did not view this focus on pupils in examination years as being purely about demonstrating school improvement, but also about a moral imperative to ‘do what they could’ for the children in their last year at the school, to mitigate the impact of the low quality teaching they had experienced in earlier years. These children would leave before they could benefit from the more sustainable, long term improvements the heads were pursuing.
6. **Focus on your senior leadership team early on: they will help you to unlock sustainable improvement.**

   Experienced heads were quicker to assess the quality of the senior leadership team and to take action if they felt it needed to be restructured. This was on the basis that they had to be able to delegate actions to an effective senior leadership team in order to achieve sustainable improvement. Hindsight had shown them the importance of having a strong team in place: sustainable improvement cannot be delivered by a headteacher acting alone. Where restructuring of leadership is required at any level, support from MATs or the LA can be invaluable to help address skills and capacity gaps through training, strategic secondments and recruitment processes.

7. **Be honest with yourself, and others, about the support you need.**

   A number of novice heads referred to having the support of a coach or mentor in their first year. However, one head explained how the first mentor they were assigned did not have the experience that they needed, so they requested someone different. As a novice head it is vital to identify your knowledge and skill gaps and the extent to which you have support structures available to fill them. You may need to pro-actively seek the right support where it has not been offered. This principle extends to the support you might introduce for other staff in your school. Experienced heads were confident and intentional in directing any external support they brought in to address the specific development needs they had identified.

8. **Anchor your school improvement plan to an over-arching vision for success.**

   While this research focused on the individual strands of school improvement, the process of diagnosis and prioritisation relies on heads referring back to a clear, over-arching vision of what a successful school is like. This provides heads with a sense of that scale and nature of change needed. For example, the extent to which the head sees the curriculum as fit for purpose depends on what children are expected to know and be able to do when they leave the school. It is vital to take all individual decisions with this overarching vision of success in mind.
References


Exemplar school improvement timeline

Visualisations of the priorities for school improvement were produced for case study schools in the form of a timeline. The timelines provided stimulus for discussion at follow-up interviews with headteachers. An exemplar school improvement timeline is provided below.

The text in green summarises the main strategies that were implemented during the year.

The text in red indicates barriers to school improvement that were identified during the year.

The text in orange designates support provided by the MAT or LA.

### Exemplar school improvement timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restructuring</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Development of leadership</th>
<th>Teaching and learning</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Structures</th>
<th>Safeguarding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Union concern</td>
<td>Develop appropriate budget</td>
<td>Share new structure</td>
<td>No proper budget</td>
<td>Low trust and morale</td>
<td>Fractured SLT</td>
<td>Full safeguarding review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restructure staffing</td>
<td>Consult union reps</td>
<td>Delaying agreement of roles</td>
<td>Staff unsettled by restructuring</td>
<td>Manage morale and shared responsibility</td>
<td>Flatten leadership structure</td>
<td>Implement new safeguarding process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Chair of Govs</td>
<td>Develop SLT</td>
<td>Develop MLs</td>
<td>Appoint DHTs with T&amp;L focus</td>
<td>Develop SLT</td>
<td>Develop MLs</td>
<td>Restructured SEND process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared SLT meetings with other trust school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>