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New Models of Headship

Co-headship

What is the place of co-headship in a profession facing headteacher shortages?

Key findings

More than 50 per cent of headteachers are aged over 50. With some schools finding it increasingly difficult to recruit a new head, why do others employ two heads? Paradoxically, co-headship may be part of the solution to predicted shortages of headteachers over the next 10 years. Our work with co-heads suggests a number of benefits and potential pitfalls:

Benefits:

- * Helps retain experienced headteachers.
- * Attracts more new headteachers.
- * Supports continuity of leadership.
- * More creative and collaborative leadership in the school.
- * Helps spread leadership expertise beyond the school.
- * Improved work-life balance.

Pitfalls:

- * Governors and LA staff may not support applications from co-heads.
- * Staff and parents may be sceptical.
- * Concerns about compromised accountability and decision-making.
- * Negotiating contractual, pay and pensions arrangements can be problematic.
- * Does the co-headship meet the needs of the school?



Background

There are at least 30 schools across the country with two headteachers. These co-headship arrangements vary enormously but are based around the same concept:

- * **job-share headship**, where two people work part-time as part of a single headteacher post. A school may organise the split as they wish but it must not exceed the equivalent of a single full-time post (1.0FTE).

Working arrangements are tailored to meet the requirements of the school and the headteachers.

In 2005 NCSL undertook a consultation in an attempt to find out more about how these arrangements worked in practice, what they might say about the demands of headship and their potential for tackling a looming shortage of new heads. NCSL continues to track schools with co-headships and conducted further research between 2006-2008.

This publication refreshes the earlier NCSL document *Co-headship: A call for consultation* (2005).

A short history of co-headship

The earliest example of co-headship in England emerged in 1995. This job-share arrangement was adopted in a primary school in Suffolk, and developed into a three way leadership partnership. In the period 2000-2002 three more primary job-share headships and four full-time joint arrangements in secondary schools were established and, between 2002 and 2005, a further 19 schools opted for co-headship arrangements.

In 2006 14 primary schools, one junior and five infant schools operated co-headship arrangements. The specific detail does vary from school to school, reflecting the local context.

To give an indication of the variety:

- * In three schools, the split is 50:50.
- * In three schools, the split is 60:40.
- * In one school, one co-head works two days as a second headteacher and three days as deputy.
- * One school is in a federation and the headship arrangements include an executive and an operational head.
- * One partnership was 'acting up' on three days a week each as an interim arrangement awaiting a full-time appointment.

In one secondary, a married couple operate as one full-time head in conjunction with a 0.4 post that provides extra leadership capacity. There are in total three married couples working as co-heads; arrangements which present additional benefits as well as some interesting issues and challenges.

Interestingly, co-headship appears to be predominantly a southern phenomenon in England. Although there are examples of co-headships as far north as Huddersfield and Manchester, and a number in Lincolnshire, Leicester and Nottingham, the majority of co-headships exist in the southern counties of Surrey, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire as well as in London.

Why has this phenomenon emerged?

Glatter and Harvey (2006, p.40) identify a number of reasons for co-headship arrangements. These include partnerships:

- * entered into at least partly for philosophical reasons (collaborative working and shared decision-making regarded as values in themselves)
- * based on previous job-share pairing, for example applications from job-sharing deputies
- * set up at least in part in order to retain a leader in the school (either a head wanting a reduction in hours or a deputy who would have left to gain promotion)
- * aimed at providing job enrichment (the co-heads pursuing wider work in education in the time they are not contributing to the headship)
- * based on husband-and-wife teams – often in the pursuance of work-family balance and well-being

Many co-heads say that this phenomenon has emerged because the requirements of headship are so complex that two people are better able to offer the appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise to fulfil the demands of the role. They argue that these arrangements offer schools greater flexibility to arrange their leadership patterns and develop creative solutions to problems.



What are the potential benefits?

Our work with co-heads suggests a number of potential benefits:

Retaining experienced headteachers

Co-headship offers great potential for refreshing the careers of experienced heads. It allows these heads to broaden their experience in roles beyond the school, and offer support across the educational system as School Improvement Partners (SIPs), consultant leaders etc whilst remaining at the helm of their own school. System leadership roles also create new knowledge, expertise and links as potential benefits to the school.

Attracting more new headteachers

Co-headship attracts leaders who may not previously have considered headship by:

- * offering enhanced work-life balance
- * supporting the demands of looking after a young family
- * sharing the accountability and responsibilities of the role
- * mitigating the complex demands of the role

Building capacity whilst sustaining continuity

Whilst the more experienced co-head is helping to lead the wider school system, less experienced or new co-heads can gain valuable headship experience 'under the wing' of the other. The school can also benefit from a continuity of leadership, at the same time profiting from new ideas and expertise. Co-headship can also support a more gradual departure of a retiring head.

Reducing the risk of appointing new or temporary heads

As a head approaches retirement, co-headship offers the opportunity of smooth transitions between current and new headteachers. Governors can see how an aspiring head 'reacts under fire' whilst sharing the headship with the outgoing or retiring head.

More creative and collaborative leadership

Research suggests that co-headship offers:

- * a greater base of expertise and knowledge to draw upon for school development
- * more adaptable responses to the multiple demands, complexity and relentlessness of the role
- * two perspectives on difficult issues to promote better decision-making
- * more completed projects
- * improved instructional leadership
- * more opportunity for coaching and mentoring of staff
- * more consultation, shared decision-making and teamwork
- * increased shared leadership across staff
- * improved teacher morale
- * immediate cover in case of illness or absence
- * diminished role gender stereotyping where male-female partnerships occur

Whilst there are more and more positive Ofsted reports of schools with co-headship arrangements, as yet there is only limited evidence of the impact of co-headship on schools and pupil learning.

Potential pitfalls and challenges

Our research and work with co-heads suggests an number of potential pitfalls and challenges.

The perceptions of governors and LA staff

Whilst a number of local authorities (LAs) are supportive of co-headship applications, others are sceptical about such arrangements. In some cases prospective co-heads have persuaded school governors, staff, parents and the local community of its benefits, but the authority has proved to be a formidable barrier to progressing their application. School governors and local authority representatives express a range of concerns about employing job-share heads:

- * Decision-making will be inefficient or difficult.
- * Parents and staff will not know who to go to with concerns.
- * Accountability will be compromised.
- * The local community will not accept co-leaders.
- * The LA or governing body will not be supportive.
- * The heads will be unequally competent.

Where these issues have been overcome and co-heads appointed, over time these concerns are generally allayed and the benefits deemed more significant.

One governor said, “There was some unease from the wider school community about job-share – this has passed in the course of time as people have settled into the notion – and parents realised that issues raised with one will be picked up by the other. The excellent Ofsted report did away with any remnants of doubt. They are doing an excellent job”.

Accountability and decision-making

Beyond the over-arching requirements for headship spelled out in the School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Document, the DfES offers no further direction on responsibilities and accountabilities under job-share arrangements. As part of the drive to offer increasing autonomy to schools and heads, it appears that issues of accountability for co-heads can be resolved locally, based on individual circumstances.

NAHT (2005) guidance on job-share headship states that:

‘Provided that the headship is not left vacant for part of the week, this requirement can be met by job-share headship... job-share can occur on a 50-50 basis, with both partners *carrying equal responsibility*. However, it is possible for the substantive head to work for, say, 60 per cent of the time and to retain ultimate responsibility and accountability. The remaining vacancy is covered by the appointment of an acting head in accordance with legislation.’

Governors are empowered, therefore, to define the accountabilities of each co-head within the contract of employment that is created at appointment. Defining who is responsible for what, and which decision-making processes will be employed, particularly in the event of significant disagreement, will be part of the contractual undertaking. Co-heads will also take time to spell out their roles and responsibilities to pupils, staff and parents, and how communication and decision channels work in practice.

Appointment process

Some LAs explicitly welcome joint applications on grounds of equality of opportunity. However, both heads should be appointable to the headship in their own right. One LA uses the same appointment protocols with co-heads that are used for other job-share staff.



Although candidates may present and be interviewed separately (as well as perform separately in other selection exercises such as teaching a class or leading an assembly) they are also commonly interviewed together in order to demonstrate their suitability as a job-share pairing. The contract of employment is likely to specify co-heads' commitments should one head decide to move on or suffer an extended period of illness. This may require heads to step down in lieu of re-recruitment or to take up the role full-time. One LA has designated an independent arbitrator (the school's link inspector) to act in case of serious dispute between co-heads.

A human resources representative from one LA commented:

"We approached the job-share application from these two heads like we do any other job-share. We value job-share on the principle of equality of opportunity. The chair of governors checked that it was appropriate to invite (them) for interview, and we confirmed that the authority supports such applications at all levels – which I think he found reassuring. (The job-share applicants) were interviewed separately, like every other candidate was, to make sure they met the job criteria. We then interviewed them together about aspects of the job-sharing arrangements. It helped that they had a track record of working together in a previous post. We could have appointed either one of them to this post – this is what we were looking for. We simply adapted the usual headteacher contract for job-share purposes. We've had such a good experience of job-share headship we will certainly continue to support it – the results from the school demonstrate that. Not only that, (they) certainly work as a team – that helps make our job easy. You can talk to one person at the start of week and get a response from other at the end of the week."

It is clear, however, that some LA personnel departments and advisory staff are less supportive than this example. Some LAs neither endorse co-headship as a response to school based succession planning, nor view it as an option for a local succession strategy. Governors considering co-headship want greater clarity from the DfES about regulations applying to co-headship appointment, particularly in cases where schools have identified someone to join an incumbent head in a job-share without recourse to a competitive application process.

Relationships and brokerage

The relationship between co-heads is clearly crucial to the success of the arrangements. Many co-headships spring from previous collaboration or job-share arrangements – such as job-sharing a deputy headship position. There are also examples of both more and less successful 'arranged marriage' co-headships – in which incumbent heads have been paired with an unknown partner. These arrangements have been brokered either by the LA or come about as part of a full appointment process. In some cases quite different personalities have been paired successfully under the guidance of governors or LA staff. A key factor, however, appears to be fully involving the incumbent head in this process. Situations in which the new co-head has been 'imposed' are unlikely to be sustainable.

Meeting the needs of the school

As with any new headteacher appointment, it is crucial to assess whether the skills and qualities of applicants match the needs of the school. Co-headship offers the potential of a wider knowledge and skills base to address school needs than single applicants, but there needs to be full consideration of how the nature of the arrangement and the relationship between co-heads and the staff, governors and parents impact upon school systems. Performance management of co-heads may include joint and differentiated targets that reflect these issues.

Success factors

International research by Marion Court (2003) into successful co-headship points to the following success factors:

- * the need to negotiate and be explicit about shared values and philosophy
- * the need for a shared vision for the future of the school
- * self awareness and acceptance of individual differences and acknowledgement of each other's strengths
- * using difference in personality and style to support individual staff needs in the most appropriate way
- * flexibility in working arrangements and a commitment to work together on key occasions – eg parents' evenings, governor meetings
- * ensuring management and administrative responsibilities are fully negotiated
- * ensuring staff are clear about the roles of both heads
- * ensuring leadership roles and tasks are shared beyond co-heads to other school leaders
- * flexibility – in order to reach balanced solutions when there are disagreements
- * trusting each other
- * the particular importance of winning the hearts and minds of staff (to the concept of co-headship)
- * the importance of gaining and maintaining the trust in both heads from staff, governors and parents
- * guarding against (perceived) status differences – based on roles or leadership style
- * firm and transparent decision-making – standing together
- * the need to accept joint responsibility for negotiated strategies and their outcomes
- * the importance of offering a high priority to clear, consistent and honest communication
- * commitment to regular meetings, phone discussions, updates and problem solving.
- * establishing clear routines for information sharing and providing clear pathways for internal communication
- * formal periodic review of the arrangement by a designated governor or LA staff



Conclusion

Given the interest that co-headship has generated amongst school leaders and in the media, we can be sure that it will continue to grow – although how widely it spreads remains to be seen. This will, in part, be determined by how co-headship is viewed by school governors, local authority staff, professional associations and the DfES. NCSL aims to help bring more clarity to our understanding of co-headship; its benefits, pitfalls and crucially the conditions that make it a viable option.

Clearly, co-headship is not necessarily a panacea. The suitability of the leadership pairing and their match with the needs of the school are crucial considerations. Nevertheless, co-headship appears to offer a creative response to the challenges of contemporary school leadership and looming headteacher shortages.

Next steps

Clear guidelines from the DfES, national employers and the Local Government Association that spell out the regulations, requirements and implications of job-sharing and joint arrangements for headteachers would offer an important step forward.

Whilst there are good examples, LA support for co-headship is variable and tends to be reactive to individual applications. NCSL's consultation group felt that LAs and professional associations could help by:

- * promoting job-share as a useful option within a local leadership succession planning strategy
- * ensuring recruitment policies refer to the options of job-share and joint headship
- * producing templates and guides for co-headship appointment and contracts
- * developing local databases of those willing to job-share

References and links

Court, M, 2003 *Different Approaches to Sharing School Leadership*, Nottingham, NCSL

Glatter, R and Harvey, J A, 2006, *Varieties of Shared Headship: A preliminary exploration*, Nottingham, NCSL

Paterson, F, 2005, *Co-headship: A call for consultation*, Nottingham, NCSL

NAHT, 2005, *Guidance on Job-share and Flexible Working*, available from **www.naht.org.uk**

NCSL publications are available to download from **www.ncsl.org.uk/publications**

A list of current co-headship arrangements and other resources can be found at **www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship**

NCSL is recruiting research associates to enquire further into the nature, impact, benefits and risks of co-headship arrangements. Further information can be found at **www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates**

Flexexecutive (**www.flexexecutiveclient.co.uk/education**) offer an online advertising facility specifically for job-share posts, a national job-share register bringing together education professionals interested in forming a job-share partnership and extensive information about effective flexible working. The service is free of charge to education professionals seeking flexible working opportunities and job-share partners.

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