Leadership in Large Primary Schools

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1. Introduction and methodology

Introduction

This project focuses on leadership and management in large primary schools. The study was necessary because there is a lack of research into primary school leadership, despite the fact that policy-makers believe leadership matters and have established national training programmes and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Also, an undifferentiated view of primary school leadership currently exists which takes no account of the differences between leading small, medium, large and very large schools, or of contextual factors such as urbanisation and the incidence of poverty in the communities the schools serve.

The need to study leadership in large primary schools also arises from the fact that primary schools are gradually increasing in size as the following table shows:

Changes in the Size of Primary Schools (1998 to 2001)

Number of Schools

NoR	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change 98 to 2001
401 to 500	1177	1210	1231	1252	75
501 to 600	235	244	229	240	5
601 to 700	82	101	108	123	41
701 to 800	14	12	15	12	-2
801 to 900	4	7	7	10	6
Over 900	0	0	0	0	
Total	1512	1574	1590	1637	125

Extracted from 'Statistics of Education - Schools in England'

NB: NoR is the number of full-time pupils only and therefore does not include children attending part-time nurseries attached to the school.

The DfES statistics also show that leaders in large primary schools (those with over 400 pupils) are now responsible for the education of about one in five of all pupils in primary schools. Indeed, today there is a group of very large primary schools that are as large or larger than half of all secondary schools. Yet no specific attention has been paid to the particular development needs of the heads and deputies who lead these primary schools. We are very grateful to the Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation who understood the need for the research and funded our two-year project.

The project began with interviews of the heads and deputies in approximately one third of the largest primary schools in England, to seek their views on how they have developed, the in-school structures and systems they use to develop themselves and one another, and to identify the characteristics they associate with successful leadership. From the analysis of the interview data, we constructed a questionnaire which was sent to all remaining heads in the largest schools (601+ pupils) to verify the generalisability of the interview findings and to extend our knowledge-base. The questionnaire was also despatched to a random sample of 25% of primary schools with

between 401–600 pupils to explore how the findings drawn from the very largest schools compared with this group of large primary schools.

Aims and objectives

The project had two aims:

1. to discover and explore how these school leaders have developed and continue to develop
2. to draw from the findings issues, insights and implications for headteacher and deputy headteacher developers

Given these aims the project had five specific objectives:

1. to identify from the heads' and deputies' testimonies the characteristics they associate with effective school leadership in large primary schools

2. to discover how these heads and deputies have been prepared for leadership and have developed their skills over time

3. to discern the respective roles of headteachers and deputy headteachers in large primary schools and to investigate how they work alongside one another

4. to compare and contrast these findings with the existing literature on effective school leadership and the national standards for headteachers

5. to highlight the implications for aspiring and experienced headteachers, in particular, noting the lessons to be learned about offering appropriate professional development opportunities on and off-site to enable them to become and remain successful school leaders and managers

Methodology

We used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods: interviews with heads and deputies, and a national survey of heads.

School visits

In total we visited 26 schools, spending a day in each school. We interviewed the heads and deputies in each of these schools and also toured the site and classrooms with the headteachers.

These primary schools ranged in size from 600 to 930 pupils. There are two methods of calculating the number of pupils on roll. One system is based on a head count - the number of children who actually attend the school. The other is the number of full time equivalent (FTE) pupils. The latter is used because many primary and infant schools have nursery units attached to them and these usually take in children for either the morning or afternoon sessions. A head count of these children would inflate the FTE figure. We chose to work on the FTE figure, which is the more conservative of the two systems.

The schools we visited were situated in eight outer London boroughs, a unitary authority in the South East of England and the city of Birmingham. Their intake was either three or four forms of entry (FE) and most also had a nursery offering half-day places. With three form entry (3 x 7 year groups x 30 per class), a primary school would have about 620 children, while a 4FE school has about 840 children.

The table below shows some background information about the schools and the heads:

Details of Schools Visited

LEA	NoR	Total Yrs as Head	HT at this school	No of H/ships
Barnet	600	10	3	2
Ealing	610	20	20	2**
Brent	620	9	9	1
Redbridge	620	12	12	2**
Redbridge	627	6	1	2
Newham	634	16	3	2
Brent	640	15	10	2
Bromley	650	4	4	1
Enfield	654	11	7	2
Birmingham	657	6	6	1
Birmingham	660	15	5	2
Bromley	698	28	20	2
Hillingdon	700	8	2	3
Bracknell	700	17	1	3
Brent	700	14	10	2
Bromley	703	19	13	2
Enfield	714	6	1	2
Newham	720	12	12	2**
Redbridge	733	12	12	2**
Hillingdon	740	18	2	3
Birmingham	750	18	10	2
Ealing	750	15	7	2**
Birmingham	761	11	3	3
Newham	865	12	3	3
Enfield	887	3	3	1
Newham	930	32	5	4

** Previously head of one of the schools on the site before amalgamation

Interviews

We used a semi-structured approach to the interviews. There was a common set of questions with probes and supplementary questions available if we wished to pursue points. The heads' and deputies responses were recorded using written notes of what they told us, trying, as much as possible, to capture what they said verbatim. We are experienced in this approach and felt comfortable with it. Moreover, we believe it was unthreatening for the respondents. We provided them with a copy of the questions we were asking in advance of our arrival and several had made preparatory notes to which they referred throughout the interviews. Without exception, we would characterise the interviews with the heads as being open, conversational and candid. The semi-structured approach generally ensured that the interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours.

Questionnaire

The DfES supplied us with a list of all the primary schools in England with more than 400 pupils. A total of 543 questionnaires were sent out to a 1 in 4 random sample of the schools with between 400 and 600 pupils, and to all the primary schools with over 601 pupils (apart from the 26 we had visited).

404 questionnaires were returned, giving a very high response rate of 74.4%. The achieved sample consisted of 302 schools with between 340 and 600 (a response rate of 72.6%), and 102 schools over 601 pupils (a response rate of 80.3%). The differential responses between the two groups were not statistically different.

We believe the high response was achieved because:

we had a topic of considerable direct interest and relevance to respondents
we mentioned the lack of research in this area and the policy implications
we stated that it would take just 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire
we included a single sheet summary of our qualitative findings

The high response means that we can be fairly certain that our findings accurately reflect the views of the majority of head teachers of the large primary schools in England.

Analytic variables

The five point scales used for most questions asked the heads to show their level of agreement or disagreement with each of the items:

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Don't Know, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Therefore, the higher the mean scores, the higher the levels of agreement with the statement. The tables of data for each item show the percentage of heads who agreed, disagreed and did not know.

The main variables used for analysis of the survey data were school size and the sex of the headteacher.

At first we constructed four size bands with about 100 schools in each:

Band 1	340 to 426 pupils on roll
Band 2	427 to 469
Band 3	470 to 599
Band 4	600 to 930

Although this showed some statistical differences, we found that a simpler size factor based on whether schools had over or under 600 pupils was more useful.

For each of the survey items we tested whether any of the differences were statistically significant, taking a probability value of below 5 per cent ($p<.05$) as the minimum level of significance. This means that the difference could have only occurred by chance less than one in twenty times, and it is therefore likely to be a real difference. Throughout the report it is important to remember that the smaller the value of 'p', the greater the statistical significance. If the tests were not significant they are shown as N.S.

School background variables

The schools in the survey varied in size from 340 to 930 with a mean of 512 pupils on roll. There was wider variation in the school sizes than intended because we encountered some schools with less than 400 pupils. Although this was a small number of schools, it shows how pupil FTE information changes, indeed, is rather fluid, and thus not 100% reliable.

Fifty per cent of the schools had two forms of entry, 8% had 2.5, 34% had three, and about 8% had four forms of entry or more. The 15 large Junior schools in the sample, which covered only four year groups (Years 3 to 6), had between three and seven forms of entry.

As anticipated, the overwhelming majority of large primary schools are located in urban areas. 87.4% of the schools were in mainly urban areas, only 1.7% were in mainly rural areas, and 10.9% had a catchment which was a mix of urban and rural areas.

The findings of the research are reported in the following four main parts: the views of the headteachers; the deputies' comments; the metaphors produced by the heads; and our discussion and conclusion.

2: The headteachers

Gender differences

At one time the majority of headteachers in UK primary schools were men. However, gradually the proportion of women heads has increased. The following table shows the changing gender pattern of primary headship:

Percentage of Male and Female Headteachers

All Primary Schools in England

Year	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Men	50.6	49.7	48.7	47.7	46.6	45.0	43.1	41.9	41.1	39.8
Women	49.4	50.3	51.3	52.3	53.4	55.0	56.9	58.1	58.9	60.2

Data extracted from DfES 'Statistics of Education: Schools In England'.

The picture over the last 10 years shows a clear and consistent year-on-year increase in the proportion of female headteachers for all primary schools.

In our sample of 404 headteachers of large primary schools, 56.7% were men and 43.3% were women. This compares with the national figures of 39.8% men and 60.2% women for the headteachers of all the 17,922 primary schools in England in January 2001. There is clearly a significant difference, with a higher proportion of male heads in our sample of large primary schools. It seems that although currently more women than men are heads of primary schools, this pattern is not reflected in larger primary schools, where the heads are still more likely to be male than female. Further analysis of our data showed that the proportion of male or female heads was not significantly different for schools with over or under 600 pupils.

In our sample of large primary schools the average number of years as a head was 12.7. But the men had an average of 14.9 total years as a headteacher, compared with 9.9 years for the women heads (p= .001). This means it is extremely significant, with a p value of one in a thousand). The total years as head was not significantly different by those schools with over or under 600 pupils.

The average number of years as head of their present school was 7.4 years. Men had been in post for more years than the women: an average of 8.4 for men and 6.1 years for the women (p= .001). The years as head at the present school was not significantly different for schools with over or under 600 pupils.

The average number of headships (including the present one) was 2.0. A gender difference was again shown: with an average of 2.14 headships for men and 1.87 for women (p= .005). A higher percentage of the women were in their first headship 37% of all the women heads vs. 20% men). This was a significant difference (p=.004).

Checking gender against whether the head was internally or externally appointed showed that 23% of the women heads were internally appointed, compared with only 7.6% of the male heads. This is extremely significant (p= .001). But internal or external appointments were not significantly related to the size of the schools in our sample.

Women headteachers were more likely to have been internal appointments than men. This may be indicative that women need greater encouragement to go forward for a headship. Some of the internally appointed women may not have been applying for posts outside the school where they were deputy, but when the headship became vacant, governors, staff and LEA officers may have encouraged them to apply. Such promotional 'sponsorship' may have been enough to signal to individuals that they were capable of headship and would have the 'psychological' support of significant others if they applied.

Combining the information above, suggests that a higher proportion of women were appointed to their first headship of these large primary schools from the post of resident deputy. This seems to be a recent trend.

A third of the heads said they had a regular teaching commitment which averaged four hours a week. There was no significant differences by gender. 36% of the heads of the schools with under 600 pupils said they had a regular teaching commitment. This compared with 25% of the heads with over 600 pupils ($p=.054$). The fact that a third of the respondents had a regular teaching commitment was higher than we anticipated.

Men had longer experience of headship than women and had been heads of more schools than women. These findings are in line with the fact that women generally become heads later in life than men and move around for jobs less than men.

It also seems to be the case from our data that a higher proportion of women were appointed to their first headship in larger schools than men.

Taking the last two points together presents us with an interesting scenario. Men are more likely to go to smaller schools for their first headship, and after some success there, they move onto larger schools. This pattern has ensured they have experience of headship in rather more schools than their female counterparts. It may also imply that while some men are more confident than women in applying for headships at an earlier stage in their career, they are less likely to see themselves as ready for a large or very large school than women. Moreover, we would need to be confident that experience in smaller schools is relevant to headship in larger schools, for the male pattern to be advantageous. If it is not then the trajectory of (some) women heads may be more suited to preparing them for large headships.

In presenting our analysis we will look at the data from the heads under four sub-sections: leadership; management structures; management development; and external relations. Within each section we first provide information from the interviews and then use the survey findings to see how the qualitative and quantitative data compare.

Leadership

What is it like leading a very large primary school?

The answers to this interview question covered several aspects of headship. First, some of the heads explicitly said how much they enjoyed the role, as the following comments demonstrate:

> *I love this job.*
>
> *Very rewarding, I enjoy the job.*
>
> *Exciting, stimulating, tiring and stressful. There are very few days when I don't want to come in.*
>
> *It is very rewarding. You deal with such a lot of issues, but it does monopolise your life – half-terms and summer holidays go.*

As the last quote suggests, while many of the heads clearly revelled in the role, others were aware of the costs of the job:

> *There are heavy demands on your time.*

One of the main reasons the job requires such a lot of time was the fact that in very large schools there was much more to manage, in particular, people:

> *Everything you do is so much more time consuming because there are so many more people.*
>
> *Very exciting, complex and varied, because there are just so many relationships – year groups to one another, different groups of people.*

Dealing with so many people meant that the school had to be particularly well organised and managed as these heads emphasised:

> *You need to be very organised*
>
> *The thread which runs through this school is SYSTEMS, formal, clear systems. You cannot rely on informality. It is a primary school, but not informally so.*

One major reason for the need for organisational structures and systems was the fact that the heads realised that they had to involve other colleagues and delegate tasks to them because there was just too much management and leadership for a single person to handle. However, as the next two quotes show, not all the heads found 'letting go' easy:

> *I have kept the day-to-day stuff for me and I try and run it as a smaller school, but I have had to delegate lots – and I have had to learn to do that – I prefer the hands-on approach, but I cannot do as much as I did in my previous school. You also need lots of structures and systems.*

I want to be all things to all people, but you cannot. You have to delegate.

The demands are non-stop. You cannot have your finger on the pulse as much, it's much more distant leadership (than in smaller schools), you have to go through 'intermediaries' – the SMT and middle managers.

It is never boring, you have got to think of 101 things simultaneously and you are not in total control of everything, you have to delegate.

Three of the heads believed that it was important to have had experience of headship in a smaller school before taking on leadership of a very large school. This point was also raised by the heads at other places in their interviews:

I wouldn't like to come into a large school in my first headship.

You need to be a very experienced headteacher.

It is challenging and it helped to have been a headteacher before coming here.

Leading a large primary school was therefore seen as stimulating, yet demanding because of dealing with so many individuals and groups and the need to establish and maintain organisational systems which ensured the school ran smoothly because no one could provide sufficient 'hands-on' leadership by themselves. The following quote, from a head who had worked in two other schools summarises the heads' responses very neatly:

It is interesting and enjoyable. Issues hinge around size – numbers of pupils, staff and parents. You need very tight systems and structures and good people to manage them, so staff resourcing of systems is important. You cannot control everything, it is not 'my' school, you cannot know everything or everyone – you cannot know the names of every pupil. You have got to delegate, but first make sure you have got people in the team you are confident in. A good deputy is really essential here.

Survey data

In the questionnaire the heads were asked to indicate their feelings about leading a large primary school by marking a point on a set of seven-point 'semantic differential' scales which showed two adjectives at opposite ends. The scales and the mean scores of the heads are shown overleaf.

Leading a large primary school is:

Scales		Mean
Boring	Exciting	6.22
Unrewarding	Very rewarding	5.85
Tedious	Stimulating	5.16
Simple	Complex	6.41
Undemanding	Very demanding	6.61
Not tiring	Very tiring	5.48

Scores on each of the scales could range from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 7. To help explain the results, consider the first scale as an example. If a head thought the job was boring they would circle 1. If they thought the job was exciting they would circle the 7. So the mean, or average of 6.22 indicates that the large majority of heads thought the job was exciting.

The analysis showed that none of the items were significant by size bands or whether the school had over or under 600 pupils. No significant differences were found for the sex of the headteacher, the number of headships, the total years as head, or whether the head was internally or externally appointed.

So a simple summary of this data suggests that the heads thought the job of leading a large primary school was: very demanding, complex, exciting, very rewarding, very tiring, and stimulating (in that order). Their views do not seem to be dependant on the size of the school, the sex of the head, or other background factors, but are probably related to personality differences of the heads.

What are the advantages of leading a large primary school?

The heads' answers from the interviews concerning the perceived advantages of large schools fell into four sets of related ideas:

1. lots of staff expertise
2. many opportunities for peer support
3. greater financial flexibility
4. enhanced provision for the pupils

The heads repeatedly mentioned the fact that more staff increased the amount of teacher expertise in the school:

> *With a larger staff there is so much more expertise to share.*
>
> *The large numbers of staff mean there is more talent.*

The use and deployment of this expertise took several forms, including:

> *We have two people leading each curriculum subject.*
>
> *Curriculum leaders can take on responsibility.*

We have got large teams and staff can cover the whole of the curriculum. We can also create new, imaginative posts such as our curriculum manager post.

Consequently, there was: *"Much more potential for delegation"* and leadership could be delegated:

Year group leadership is also helpful and this leadership moves around as we rotate the responsibility.

The fact that there were many colleagues also meant that staff had greater opportunities for finding and receiving professional support:

Year groups of staff are very supportive to each other. Lots more opportunities for staff discussion and camaraderie.

The workload of planning can be shared.

Moreover, such support also facilitated professional growth because there was: *"The stimulation of so many colleagues"*. Indeed, professional development was seen as an important advantage. Several heads stressed that there were:

Far more staff development opportunities. Lots more staff sharing.

Expertise – you get a tremendous range of staff expertise and this can pull up staff weaknesses. Expertise is very evident in the planning and expertise helps development. Year group and phase planning is developmental – it is INSET.

There were also advantages from managing relatively larger school budgets. A range of benefits were mentioned, including:

The budget gives you lots of flexibility and scope.

There are internal promotional opportunities too.

The economies of scale. Music specialist, SENCO etc. are able to work with children out of class and with booster groups. You cannot do that in a smaller school.

What I can offer the children is greater than most primaries – we have an orchestra of 80 and lots of facilities.

Large budget gives flexibility. You can find £5k, £10k or even £20k for a project.

We have lots of different projects running, larger schools are dynamic places.

Taking on initiatives in small schools was very difficult – the staff wore too many hats. Here you are able to take on a new initiative because there are more people.

As some of the above responses suggest, a number of the heads believed that larger schools offered enhanced provision for pupils' learning. Further to this point two heads,

in schools which had been amalgamated, emphasised the advantages of working in primary schools compared to autonomous infant and junior schools:

> *Being a primary school means better continuity and greater consistency (than in separate infant and junior schools).*
>
> *Primary is better than separate junior and infant schools.*

Survey data

All the tables we present show the percentage of heads who: agreed, disagreed, or did not know. While the last column shows the mean, or average from the five point scale.

The first set of questions in the survey explored heads' perceptions about the advantages of large primary schools which had emerged from the interviews.

Advantages of large primary schools over smaller ones

Item	Percentages			
	Agree	Disagree	D/K	Mean
There is much more staff expertise available in the school	96	3	1	4.46
Many opportunities for peer support for teachers	99	1	0	4.58
There is enhanced curriculum provision for pupils	78	12	10	4.06
The specialist roles enable better pupil outcomes	51	24	25	3.39
There is more financial flexibility	76	19	5	3.91
It is easier to find internal cover for staff absences	45	51	4	2.96

None of the items showed statistical differences by size band or over/under 600 pupils.

While heads agree with most of the statements, many do not think it is easier to find internal cover for staff absence (51% disagreed, 45% agreed and 4% did not know). No significant difference was found when the question of cover was examined by type of school catchment area.

Mixed views showed for whether specialist roles enabled large schools to achieve better pupil outcomes (24% disagreed, 51% agreed, while 25% did not know).

These findings confirm the qualitative data. Four points come out strongly:

1. there is more staff expertise available in the school
2. many opportunities for peer support for teachers
3. there is enhanced curricular provision for pupils
4. there is more financial flexibility.

However, there were mixed views on whether finding internal cover for staff absence was easier than in smaller schools, and about specialist teaching roles enabling large schools to achieve better pupil outcomes. The last point touches on another important variable. While size was our independent variable, respondents probably included location / catchment considerations in answering the last item. In other words, because large schools are mainly found in urban areas, the challenges faced by urban schools may have figured in their thoughts too.

What are the disadvantages of leading a large school?

Responses to this interview question largely centred on issues of communication. However, the concerns voiced about communication, in turn, demonstrated the need for heads to work differently in very large primary schools compared to the norms of headship in relatively smaller schools.

The heads' comments about communication involved four aspects. First, many heads said they did not know the children as well as they used to when they worked in smaller schools, and in expressing this conveyed a sense of disappointment, or, even, loss:

> *You cannot know all the children as intimately.*
>
> *I don't know all the children's names – it is important to me – but I cannot do it.*

Second, some of the heads felt this was not only a communication problem inside the school which influenced head and pupil relations, but was connected to parents' perceptions of large schools, as this head stated:

> *Some parents think their child may get lost in a large primary school.*

This head was also quick to add that when the school was inspected by a team from OFSTED the inspectors said *"we ran the school like a smaller one"*. At other points in the interviews and during the tours of the schools, many of the heads explained how they were trying to ensure that children did not feel overwhelmed by the sheer scale and numbers of people on site. One of the heads said: *"You need to get a family feel in a large school"*; another said: *"ensure it is <u>never</u> a big school, try to create small units which are secure places and spaces"*. Hence, to be judged by the inspectors as providing a small school experience, was seen by the head as a commendation.

Third, some voiced worries about head and staff relations:

> *As a head I can't have the same intimate working relationships with the staff – I hear about things second-hand rather than first-hand. I cannot go round the school every morning and say hello and chat to everyone individually. The deputy and I are available for 30 minutes each morning, but it's not the same as in smaller schools.*
>
> *It is easier for staff to feel left out and under-valued. In a big school you need to spend <u>more</u> time dealing with the staff. You must keep personal contact.*
>
> *Staff and children can feel lost. Trying to meet everyone and know everyone is very difficult. We have 75 adults in school, plus our part-time tutors.*

These statements demonstrate a shared belief in the primacy of personal contact and face-to-face dealings with staff and pupils alike. This was also evident when the heads said that parental relations could be adversely affected by the size of the school:

> *I don't think I know the parents well enough. It takes a lot longer to know everyone.*

Fourth, several of the heads expanded on these concerns and their comments showed that they were uneasy about the possibility of the school becoming impersonal to staff and pupils alike and that they, as heads, might no longer be in touch with the human side of the school, which for all of them, was the core purpose of their work:

> *You can become detached. You can lose the 'hands-on' because you cannot get round the school enough (and so there is) not enough contact with the staff. Communication is a big issue and you have to review the procedures constantly.*
>
> *The headteacher can lose touch, so you need strong channels of communication.*
>
> *The fear that people will be anonymous. Big schools need to sustain intimacy and belonging. Big schools require different management styles to avoid becoming impersonal.*
>
> *Keeping in touch, direct touch with individuals – pupils, staff and the curriculum. You have to work hard at communication.*

Sustaining intimacy, contact and keeping in touch were such imperatives to these heads that they were very aware that their approaches to headship had shifted to ensure that these features remained attributes of the organisation, rather than becoming factors which were lost as the schools grew in size. The following comment suggests how one of the heads attempted to overcome these disadvantages:

> *As head you can only control through others, you have to let go – that is a very difficult thing to do. Also, you have to skill-up others to take control. For a primary head that is very hard because as a head in a smaller school you know every child, every member of staff, every parent and they all have access to you. In this school it's impossible. I have no part in some of these things now. So I cannot operate as I used to do. The deputy also has a very different role. You have to delegate a lot, especially to the deputy head.*

While concerns about communication were far and away the most common, other disadvantages were mentioned. Two heads said their LEA did not understand large primary schools and another thought they were disadvantageously funded by their LEA. One head emphasised that although the school was, *"as big as a secondary school…we do not have as large a support infrastructure"*.

Survey data

The next set of questions from the questionnaire look at the possible disadvantages of large schools.

Disadvantages of large primary schools over smaller ones

Item	Percentages			
	Agree	Disagree	D/K	Mean
The head cannot know all the children	60	37	3	3.24
The head's leadership can become more detached	58	41	1	3.22
It is very hard to sustain the primary school ethos	15	82	3	2.04
Dangers of the school becoming impersonal	22	75	3	2.29
Children can be overwhelmed by the size of school	20	75	5	2.31
Parents are concerned by the size of the school	12	78	10	2.11
Communication within the school is a major challenge	59	40	1	3.23

Using the over/under 600 size showed the following significant items (where the items were seen as more of a problem in the largest schools):

The head cannot know all the children (p=.001)
The head's leadership can become more detached (p=.043)
Communication within the school is a major challenge (p=.001)
All other items N.S.

The lower means showed that the heads were less clear about the disadvantages compared with the advantages of large primary schools. With means of over 3, heads tended to agree that they could not know all the children, internal communication was a major challenge, the head's leadership can become more detached. The other four items had means below 3, which suggested that many heads did not agree that these were disadvantages of large schools.

In terms of the items about sustaining a primary school ethos, the dangers of the school becoming impersonal, children being overwhelmed by the size of the school, and parents being concerned about the size of the school, these were not generally supported by the respondents. Although a minority of heads thought these ideas were true, between 75% and 80% did not. We actually included them in the questionnaire because some of the interviewees suggested these were dangers, but they have not been borne out by the quantitative data.

By contrast, there was agreement, although only around the 60% mark, that:

1. heads cannot know all the children
2. the heads' leadership can become more detached
3. communication within the school is a major challenge

How does headship in a large school differ from your experiences in smaller schools?

The responses to this question during the interviews echoed some of the points made previously. Three points were made consistently: the importance of communication; delegation; and the need for strong management structures.

In line with answers to the previous question, the need for effective internal communication systems and processes was stressed by the heads. Similarly, the issue of delegation was repeatedly mentioned by almost all the heads in their interviews:

> *You delegate more than in smaller schools; you rely so much more on working through others.*
>
> *There is more delegation. I look to the middle managers to sustain personal contact for me, but it is not always possible with some managers. Training for the middle managers is vital. Much depends on the quality of middle managers and developing a common language, shared understandings, values and beliefs.*
>
> *Delegation, team work and lots of other managers.*
>
> *The differences are that you delegate far more and you must create small schools within the school, hence we have three phases – early years, which is the nursery and Yr. R, years 1, 2 and 3 and years 4, 5, and 6.*
>
> *The level of delegation (is different). You have to delegate in a large school and be clear about who is doing what. There are about 100 people to manage here, including all the support staff.*
>
> *You need to delegate complete areas in large schools. The deputy head has complete control of our induction and I am not the first point of contact for parents.*
>
> *I have upped the grade of the year co-ordinators. They deal with parents as the first line.*

Therefore, one of the big differences between very large and smaller schools was the degree to which leadership was more distributed in larger schools. Earlier comments about heads having to learn to 'let go' and not being as much a 'hands-on' leader and manager reinforce this observation. Some of those who had not made these points already took this question as an opportunity to express them here, as this statement illustrates:

> *The head's personal example is diluted, it is not as powerful. It is important for the head to be accessible and approachable although you are more a figurehead.*

As a consequence of high levels of delegation the quality of middle managers and their development needs were also mentioned by several of the heads, as the following sample of comments shows:

> *It is essential to have good phase (middle) managers. Year co-ordinators play a big role too. There is lots of teamwork too, but it is smaller units, not as a whole school.*

> *Delegation is fundamental. Staff do get management experience here. The year co-ordinators here manage the equivalent of small schools. Middle management is essential, and so too is training. They need training, especially dealing with adults/colleagues/relationships. Building teams is also important – it is vital and it is how year team co-ordinators develop.*

Given the need for both delegation and effective communication, the need for sound systems and organisational structures was again highlighted:

> *You have got to set up structures and systems.*

> *You need a good management structure. Communication is the root.*

One head also speculated that in her view the school was now so large, that if it grew much more there would have to be a major rethink and restructure of it. This school had 620 pupils in it and was formed from the amalgamation of three other schools. The head said:

> *This size is as big a stretch of the British primary school as you can or should stretch to. Any larger would require much different funding and a very different structure, such as a head of KS 1 and a head of KS 2 and another head of the whole school.*

Survey data

The results from the questionnaire concerning the heads' perceived differences between large and smaller schools are shown below.

In comparison with smaller schools the main differences are:

Item	Percentages			
	Agree	Disagree	D/K	Mean
There is a lot more delegation	90	6	4	4.04
You rely far more on phase leaders/middle managers	93	5	2	4.11
You must use teams to far a far greater extent	95	3	2	4.28
An effective SMT is essential	97	2	1	4.61
You must use more formal systems of	85	12	3	3.96

communication				
As head you spend a lot of time on site management	63	28	4	3.65
School improvement is more difficult	29	62	9	2.57
Primary schools with over 400 children achieve better results	5	37	58	2.60

Using the over/under 600 size showed the following significant items:
There is a lot more delegation (p=.026)
You rely far more on phase leaders/middle managers (p=.004)
You must use teams to far a far greater extent (p=.001)
You must use more formal systems of communication (p=.008)
All other items N.S.

The heads clearly show high levels of agreement with the first five items in the list. While the majority agree they spend a lot of time on site management, 28% do not agree. The majority do not agree that school improvement is more difficult in a large primary school, although a considerable minority of 29% agree, and another 9% don't know. It is clear that the majority of the heads did not know whether large schools achieve better results than smaller schools (58%), while another 37% thought they did not do better.

In comparison with smaller schools the main differences are:

1. there is a lot more delegation
2. you rely far more on phase leaders and middle managers
3. you must use teams to a far greater extent
4. an effective SMT is essential
5. you must use more formal systems of communication
6. as head you spend a lot of time on site management

The findings we have here further support the point that in larger schools there is believed to be more delegation and staff involvement, which occur through organisational structures e.g. SMTs, and the use of middle managers.

The emphasis placed on teams is significant - in terms of our interpretation, rather than its statistical significance - in that it shows how collaboration and interaction in large schools has to be 'managed', if not 'contrived' (Hargeaves, 1994).

In short, the perceived greater complexity of running larger organisations requires more formal and organised ways of working. This finding has implications for the preparation and training of senior staff and especially heads of large primary schools. They may well find it useful to consider school organisational strategies and approaches and especially, managing effective teams.

Bolman and Deal (1991) devised an instrument to explore how school principals and leaders in other organisations perceive their leadership style in terms of organisational frames. Their four frames are called political, human resource, structural, and symbolic, and they are described by Bolman and Deal as follows:

1. The Political frame points out the limits of authority and the inevitability that resources are too scarce to fulfill all demands. Organizations are arenas where groups jockey for power. Goals emerge from bargaining and compromise among different interests rather than from rational analysis at the top. Conflict becomes an inescapable by-product of everyday life. Handled properly, it is a source of constant energy and renewal.

2. The Human Resource frame highlights the importance of needs and motives. It holds that organizations work best when individual needs are met and the organization provides a caring, trusting work environment. Showing concern for others and providing the ample opportunities for participation and shared decision making are two of the ways that organizations enlist people's commitment and involvement at all levels.

3. The Structural frame emphasizes productivity and assumes that organizations work best when goals and roles are clear, and when the efforts of individuals and groups are well coordinated through both vertical (command, rule) and lateral (face-to-face, informal) strategies.

4. The Symbolic frame centers attention on symbols, meaning, and faith. Every human organization creates symbols to cultivate commitment, hope, and loyalty. Symbols govern behavior through informal, implicit, and shared rules, agreements, and understandings. The symbols are shown through stories, metaphors, heroes and heroines, ritual, ceremony, and play.

Lee Bolman kindly gave us permission to use the leadership frames questionnaire and 25 of the heads we visited completed the self-assessment instrument. As a comparison, we were also able to work with a group of 75 heads of smaller primary schools from a separate project. The data from the frame questionnaires was analysed for schools with over and under 400 pupils. As Bolman and Deal had previously found, the heads used all the frames. But the heads of the large schools had significantly higher mean scores than those of the smaller schools on the Political ($p=.006$), and Structural ($p=.003$) frames. The results for the Human Resource and Symbolic frames did not show significant differences for the size of the schools. This indicates that while all heads use the Human Resource, or interpersonal style, the most, the size and complexity of the larger schools means that the relative importance of the Structural, and the Political frame increases for these heads.

What do you see as the key characteristics of successful leadership in very large schools?

A number of characteristics were highlighted by the heads' responses to this question in their interviews, although the majority reflected ideas that have already emerged in the previous questions. There were four major, interrelated characteristics:

1. working through others
2. teamwork
3. vision
4. keeping in touch

Working through others was expressed in terms of delegation, letting go and trust:

> *The number one is real delegation and having the courage to do it.*
>
> *You have to let go and you must let others take responsibility. There is some risk in this though, because you are then at the mercy of others!! But if you do not let go, you will go under.*
>
> *You have to trust others.*

Teamwork involved team building and sustaining a sense of organisational cohesion:

> *Build teams within a whole school context and communicate on a personal level.*
>
> *You have got to build successful teams in all parts of the school and work hard at bringing all the parts together.*

Vision appeared to mean knowing where you and the school where going, ensuring others were prepared to travel in the same direction and maintaining a 'big' picture:

> *You must not get bogged down with detail – you need to be able to see the wood for the trees.*
>
> *Having the vision and all the staff subscribing to it.*
>
> *You need a clear structure and vision. You also need flexibility in a large school; the head cannot do it all. You need to get ideas from others.*
>
> *You have to be good at the big picture and you have got to understand how things relate to each other. You need a high energy level and a good memory to keep hold of all that is happening. It helps if you have a partner – here it is the deputy because dual leadership matters.*

Keeping in touch was, in part, about communication, but it was also about ensuring that leadership and management were informed by accurate knowledge about what was happening in the school:

Keep in touch with what is happening, it is easy to fail to recognise what is happening. You need the ability to think strategically and to translate them into workable, practical systems.

Keeping your finger on the pulse and knowing when to deal with an issue.

The five questions which focused on leadership were supplemented by some further questions which came at the end of the interview.

What advice would you give to the new head of a very large primary school?

Despite these questions being placed in the interviews at some distance from earlier ones focusing on leadership and management, the same issues and emphases reappeared, namely: delegation; structure; and communication. However, four of the heads also said that leading and managing a large school was not a post for someone new to headship:

Don't do it if you've not been a head before.

It isn't for a first headship.

You have got to be experienced as a head.

Delegation was mentioned in a number of ways, some direct, others indirect:

You need a structure and you have to delegate.

Don't try and do everything yourself.

Build up a sound management team – you do not run a large school on your own.

Find and create highly effective middle managers.

Make sure you have good structures and good communication.

As these answers show, delegation was closely associated with developing effective organisational structures, particularly in relation to teams and communication:

Make sure the structure is solid and aids communication in both directions. Teams are crucial and they have to work. The SMT is crucial.

Have a clear vision of what you want for the school, particularly the management structure, curricular organisation and care of the pupils.

Develop your managers to the utmost of their potential.

Communication is vital.

Be visible and accessible – so do the paperwork at home. Be careful with the staffing structure. Be realistic, you cannot do it all on your own – let people have their head. Curriculum co-ordinators in a large school have a lot of responsibility all

through the school so they are like a deputy head in a smaller school. You need to give recognition to them.

There were also three other comments which warrant attention here. The first relates to maintaining a 'primary school' feel and is probably related to the dangers of very large schools becoming impersonal places for the children, something many of the heads were acutely conscious of. The second was a point several of the heads said about the need to conduct an audit of the school's strengths and needs. The third is particularly pertinent because it suggests that leadership in very large primary schools is different to leadership in smaller schools.

Remember it is a primary school – maintain the primary ethos.

Take stock – look at the realities.

You have to rethink the role of head teacher if you come from a small school. There is a different kind of personal touch in a large school.

What are your main concerns today in leading and managing this large school?
About half the heads who were interviewed said they were particularly concerned about staff recruitment and retention. Most of the other answers related to challenges which were specific to individual schools. However, there was some degree of commonality concerning pressures on the schools' budgets, which six heads mentioned. The other comments included the following:

My frustration is that I'm not hands-on and observing in the classroom…My involvement with the children is much more remote than my first headship.

Having had an OFSTED inspection I feel that OFSTED has no knowledge of large primary schools. Teaching yes, but leadership and management issues in a large school they knew nothing about.

Management structure

The size, composition and even the title, of the senior management team (SMT) varied considerably across the schools we visited. The smallest consisted of a group of three (e.g. headteacher, deputy and senior teacher), while the largest numbered 11 people including head, deputies, assistant head, and senior teachers. Several of the schools used a two-tier system, so that in addition to the larger SMT, there was an 'inner cabinet', a 'star chamber' or a 'headship team', which consisted of the head and deputies who often met informally before school and sometimes more formally once a week. In some schools the senior teachers were also invited to these weekly meetings, but in other cases the SMT might meet monthly or three times a term.

The basic structural unit in the schools was the Year Team of three or four teachers plus their classroom assistants, who would meet weekly. Each team usually had a named leader but this was not always the case. In addition to this horizontal strand, the schools also had the vertical structure of the curriculum, where curriculum managers usually had whole school responsibility for their subject area. So in some ways this matrix model of management mirrored that commonly found in secondary schools. However, heads were generally insistent that they wanted to maintain the primary school ethos. Looking across

the schools it was difficult to find a clear pattern to the roles and titles allocated to the members of the SMT. The most frequent model was a phase structure, where each of the senior staff took responsibility for two year groups. But it was also common to divide the school into Key Stages. In addition, there were various combinations so that senior staff might have a curriculum responsibility and oversight of some of the year teams. The most unusual structure, found in one case, was to divide the school into three vertical teams so that each of the three senior staff had a team of seven teachers (one from each year).

It seems there has been a move from the past when the structure was based strongly on the curriculum, due to the introduction of the National Curriculum, to a structure which is now predominately based on the year, and the phase or key stage, (with the curriculum side taking a less prominent role in the structure).

In some cases the shape of the building (with a senior manager on each floor) or two separate buildings, influenced the structure and function of the SMT. A key decision was the amount of non-teaching time for the members of the SMT and the coordinators. This varied considerably across the schools and was not simply related to school size, but depended to some extent on historical precedent, and especially on the views of the head and the governors.

About half of the heads we visited thought that their SMT was very effective. They saw the importance of getting a good balance of youth and experience in the team, and they wanted 'ideas people' not just a group of 'yes men/women'. At one end of the continuum a head said; *"It's a bit too comfortable. Three long serving, non-ambitious staff. Not a major contribution to the school's development"*. In other schools there were new members of the SMT, *"who needed more experience of whole school management"*, before they could become fully effective. The heads also recognised the value of internal appointments which were good to show staff promotion, and external people who brought in new ideas to the team. They wanted the team members to have a range of experience from all phases. The best teams had complimentary skills, and were seen to be hard working with no negativity or disillusionment, who were respected by the staff. In all the schools the SMT needed to be seen to speak with one voice in public. As one head said: *"Agree in public, disagree and discuss in private". Another expressed the same point: "We work as a cabinet and have collective responsibility". A third head said: "Trust is essential. The SMT must be leak-proof*".

Two heads who were very happy with their SMT described them in the following ways:

> *A superb team. A cohesive group –very supportive of each other. The staff all know what one of us says is the same for all the SMT. The staff are very clear of our expectations and the structure.*

The other head expressed her views using a metaphor she had heard at a conference:

> *In the SMT we look after each other. It's like the flight of geese with each taking it in turns at the front.*

Finding time for the meetings was an issue. As one head commented it was not very productive to have meetings, *"at the end of a hard day's work when people were tired"*.

Some schools held their weekly SMT meetings during the lunch-hour, which was also not ideal. Additionally, a few schools held a planning day at a local hotel once a term.

About four of the newly appointed heads arrived to find a structure and some members of the SMT they were not very happy about. *"I didn't inherit a strong team. I took the opportunity to extend the SMT and the governors supported it"*. In one school the head found it difficult to work with the deputy and so expanded the SMT by appointing two assistant heads and two senior teachers. *"We are now very much a team but it has taken four years to establish the group"*.

All the heads wanted the SMT to undertake whole-school strategic planning as well as the day-to-day management for their areas of responsibility. Currently they were planning for 'Performance Management' and were allocating staff to each of the senior managers.

The heads wanted to be kept informed by the SMT, and they valued a member of the team who had 'the ear of the staff' and was able to bring their views to the meetings. The importance of two-way communication too and from the SMT to the staff was stressed by many of the heads.

Survey data

The questionnaire enabled us to look at the numbers of senior staff and the organisational structures of our sample of large primary schools.

Number of Senior Staff

	Percentage of Schools		
Numbers	**Deputy Heads**	**Assistant Heads**	**Senior Teachers**
Zero	4.2	73.0	50.3
1	83.4	12.9	10.4
2	11.4	10.1	14.1
3	0.7	3.5	10.8
4	-	0.5	8.1
5	0.2		4.7
6	-	-	1.5

The great majority of schools had one deputy head. This finding should be compared with secondary schools of similar size which often have more than one deputy head.

Examining the average number of senior staff by school size showed the following:

	Means	
	Schools Under 600	**Schools Over 600**
Deputies	0.93	0.99
Assistant Heads	0.22	0.42
Senior Teachers	0.50	0.48

As might be expected, the larger schools had more deputies and assistant heads, and the differences are statistically significant. However, the average number of senior

teachers was not significantly different in those schools with over or under 600 pupils on roll.

The use of assistant heads is uneven and difficult to interpret given the shift in terms in the last few years. Whereas some people have argued for deputies heads being called assistant heads, now assistant head is a position in own right, indicating the number two deputy. All of which means the position of deputies is even more unclear.

Size of the SMT

Number of people	Number of Schools	Percentage
2	8	2.0
3	42	10.4
4	91	22.6
5	99	24.6
6	82	20.4
7	49	12.2
8	22	5.5
9	5	1.2
10	1	0.2
12	2	0.5
19	1	0.2

N= 402 Missing data 2

The mean size of senior management teams across all the schools was 5.25. But schools with under 600 pupils had a average of 5.09 in their SMT, compared with 5.73 for the schools with over 600 pupils (p=.001). Thus, not surprisingly, larger schools had larger SMTs.

The figures we have suggest that primary school leadership and management is now more shared and distributed than some time ago. This is less about heads and deputies working together, than heads, deputies and other senior staff being involved. Thus there are, today, more staff involved in running the primary school than was formerly the case. However, it is unclear whether and how SMTs are involved in decision-making if they have an active role, or are a 'sounding board' and talking shop for the head.

Survey data

The questionnaire was used to look at various aspects of school management and to explore the heads' perceptions of their senior and middle managers.

School Management

Item	Percentages			
	Agree	Disagree	D/K	Mean
The SMT plays a major role in strategic planning	96	3	1	4.35
Senior posts are awarded for organisational rather than curricular responsibility.	60	37	3	3.34
Teachers in most of the year groups work effectively as teams	98	1	1	4.40
We have very effective phase/key stage leaders	89	9	2	4.15
The head and deputy/s work well as partners	95	3	2	4.54
The SMT is highly effective	90	3	7	4.20
Phase leaders need specific training for large schools	82	11	7	3.92

Using the over/under 600 size showed the following significant items:

The SMT plays a major role in strategic planning (p=.023)
We have very effective phase/key stage leaders (p=.046)
All other items N.S.

Heads were generally in agreement with these items as the means are all over three. The only item to show a division of opinion was whether posts were awarded for organisational rather than curricular responsibilities. 60% said they were, 37% disagreed and 3% did not know. It is interesting to note that only two of these items showed significant differences for the size of the schools.

Seven points show up clearly here:

1. the SMT plays a major role in strategic planning
2. senior posts are awarded for organisational rather than curriculum duties
3. teachers in most of the year groups work effectively as teams
4. we have very effective phase/key stage leaders
5. the head and deputy work well as partners
6. the SMT is highly effective
7. phase leaders need specific training for large schools

The large majority of heads clearly believe that they have good senior and middle managers. The results suggest a much more shared, distributed and interactive approach to leadership and management than is either case ‘traditionally’ or in medium and smaller schools.

Management development

Four of the interview questions sought to explore how the head teachers had developed the skills and knowledge to lead their schools:

1. What aspects of your previous posts have helped you in leading and managing this school?
2. What would you say has most helped you to lead such a large school?
3. What courses on leadership and management have you done?
4. What do you see as your future development needs?

Many of the answers to these questions over-lapped and frequently ran together so we will not treat the data separately, question-by-question, rather we shall simply report the findings across the four questions.

There was a general belief that what helped an individual learn to be a headteacher was first-hand experience. On-the-job learning was far away the most cited example of development as the following sample of comments show:

> *The experience of first headship in a god-awful inner city school – that taught me resilience and strength. I learned that even in inauspicious circumstances I could get things done.*
>
> *There isn't a training package for schools of this size. Going through the transition from first headship (240 pupils), to second headship (500 pupils), to here (850 pupils). You can't walk into this school from an average sized headship (i.e. 234 children), nor is it a school for a first headship.*
>
> *I learned a lot in my first headship. I have learned a lot from all my previous heads. You have got to learn from experience – you must learn by doing the job.*

While first-hand experience of headship was highly prized, for one person the steepest learning curve occurred in his first headship:

> *The biggest leap and difference is when you are in your first headship – that is when you move from being in a group to being on your own.*

Alongside being a head, several cited deputy headship as a learning experience:

> *As deputy head and then as acting head of the juniors here I was managing the whole school.*
>
> *As a deputy head I went to a newly amalgamated school so that helped me with amalgamation here.*
>
> *I was deputy head with a forward thinking head – that was a big help.*
>
> *My five years as a deputy head, working with a head who made me see how to work as a team.*

Deputy headship, though, as other studies have found, is not always a positive learning opportunity, as this response shows:

> *I had two deputy headships but they did not prepare me for here because of the lack of management opportunities. I learned a lot of negative things – I learned what not to do.*

Other positive experiences where either related to a widening of awareness of practice in other schools, or developing academic knowledge and understanding. These comments show how some heads have broadened their awareness of schools and leadership and management:

> *I was released from my headship for a day a week for about two years to work on a school improvement project with a group of 21 schools. This was great for my development and gave me a real understanding of school improvement. It was also useful to see the management structures in the other schools.*
>
> *I was seconded as an advisory teacher for 2 years. I learned a lot and gained experience of working in lots of schools.*
>
> *The seconded role as LEA curriculum adviser – I got to see 20 to 30 schools and heads.*
>
> *My NAHT work has been invaluable.*
>
> *Being an Additional Inspector (for OFSTED) was very useful and being monitored by HMI was tough.*

The reason why these opportunities were valued was probably because the heads recognised that *"It is important to go beyond the school and have a sense of perspective"*.

The following comments show how some had benefited from academic courses:

> *I learned through academic pursuits: Open University Educational management course; 1985 OTTO (One term training opportunity), plus lots of local LEA courses.*
>
> *The best thing was a preparation for headship course I did at the local college. It was a brilliant course.*
>
> *I did a management diploma at the OU – this was really helpful.*

When asked which courses they had done we were told about MBAs, Masters programmes, OTTOs, the OFSTED school self-evaluation course, London Institute courses, and the National Professional Qualification for Headship (which only one of these 26 heads had taken), were cited and with the exception of the latter, all were favourably mentioned.

Many of the heads had done the national 'Leadership Programme for Serving Heads' (LPSH) course and they had mixed views about it:

I have done the first four days of the LPSH which were very good, but not terribly challenging.

LPSH was not that valuable really.

The LPSH was brilliant. It gave me time to think and helped to draw all the aspects of leadership together.

I did the LPSH last January, it was the best thing I have done, it was excellent. The 360 degree feedback was very helpful and interesting.

I did the LPSH about two years ago. I thought it was great, the 360 degree feedback made it for me.

I did LPSH – the 360 degree feedback was very interesting. I liked meeting the other heads too, who were very good and we spent a lot of time together.

In terms of future courses, five cited the LPSH as something they might do, others were interested in links with business, or were unsure what courses to do next. Some also took the question as a chance to reflect on where their careers might be heading:

I'm enjoying being here now, but after another five years, who knows? I'm not sure.

I'm unsure where I'm going and what to do next.

Survey data

The themes from the interviews formed the basis of a set of questionnaire items to examine the heads' views on management development and what they had learned from working with previous heads.

Management Development

Item	**Percentages**			
	Agree	**Disagree**	**D/K**	**Mean**
You learn your role as head by doing the job	88	11	1	4.02
I learned from previous heads: a) how to manage the curriculum	49	49	2	2.97
b) How to lead school improvement	42	54	4	2.86
c) How to structure the school	50	45	5	3.04
d) How to work with people	68	28	4	3.51
e) How to use power and influence	45	46	9	3.01
f) How to read and understand the school culture	50	41	9	3.13
Previous heads were positive role models	67	29	4	3.51

Previous heads were negative role models	74	19	7	3.71

Using the over/under 600 size showed the following significant items:

How to lead school improvement (p=.028)
How to structure the school (p=.006)
Previous heads were negative role models (p=.047)
All other items N.S.

The majority of heads agreed with the notion that you learned the role by doing the job. The majority also agreed that they had learned from their previous heads how to work with people. As other research has shown, the previous heads they had worked with had been both positive and negative role models. Their views on the other items were divided.

These suggest that on-the-job learning is highly valued and should be utilised in training. Heads need to be fully aware that they are role models for junior staff and that they have an important part to play in developing staff. While most of the on-the-job training is likely to be incidental, opportunistic, informal and ad hoc, some might be more formal.

Also perhaps heads need to take a little time, now and then, to explain to colleagues, especially those in the SMT, how and why they work as they do. Such explanations could be very instructive and instrumental in supplementing the osmotic way in which prospective heads learn from role incumbents.

External relations

Does the size of the school affect your work with the governors?

In their interviews most of the heads explicitly said that the size of the school did not significantly affect their work with the governors. Some dwelt on specific challenges they were experiencing in working with governors. For example these heads referred to the problems of recruiting governors in an inner city area, to the politics of the local community, to the "type" of governor, or to the high incidence of parental governors.

While the size of the school did not generally appear to alter the heads' relationships with the governors, the fact that there were so many classes in the school was seen as a challenge for the governors:

> *It's harder for the governors to be attached to classes because there are so many classes!*
>
> *Governor visits need to be time-tabled and they cannot see all the classes and some may not know all the teachers.*

How does the size of the school influence relations with parents?

The heads generally agreed that the sheer number of parents they were expected to deal with was the major issue. Yet how the heads dealt with the volume of parents appeared to be dependent on their priorities and the schools' reputations.

The major difference is in dealing with the number of parents. I must rely far more on appointments and I am not as immediately accessible (as in smaller schools).

I can't know all the parents. Some want to get to me more easily. I try to be out in the playground at the beginning and end of the day. The size of the school does make a difference.

There is double the number of parents compared to my previous school. It isn't a factor now as I have a structure of year team leader, assistant and deputy head. They are very good and can handle things with parents.

I have a more formal structure here than in my previous school.

There are more parents who want to see you (in a large school). I don't devolve parent issues (to other staff).

I have a high profile with the parents. I will see any parent within 24 hours. We also have a Parents' Forum every half term.

I cannot get to know all the parents. It is not the same feeling as in a small school - then there is a family feel. Here it is harder to have a family feel but we do, through PSHE, and playground pals, the school's council, the reception unit and a playground dedicated to the early years.

How does the size of the school affect your relations with the LEA?

Some heads felt that because of the size of the school they were more autonomous than smaller primary schools. Others believed they saw little enough of the LEA anyway.

I like being charge and I'm happy to be free of from the LEA, but the LEA is good, valuing.

I feel autonomous. I have more experience than many of the LEA staff. If I want to use the LEA I will, if not I don't. I don't feel I need the LEA to be there.

As headteacher of a large school I do feel you have more clout.

The LEA are reluctant to fund a non-teaching deputy head, yet we are bigger than two of our secondary schools and the LEA would not object to their deputies not teaching. I have battled with the LEA for years. I do think large primaries are under-funded.

The LEA do not understand our management costs. LEA help small schools, but don't comparably fund large ones.

I have fallen out with senior officers over the management and finance of large primaries. The officers do not know the schools, nor do the advisers. Light touch means they don't know, so decisions are made which are not grounded.

It is not the size of the school (which matters), it depends on how well you are doing.

I have always been an autonomous person so I do work independently, but I also believe in LEAs having a support role, so I want to work with them. LEAs serve a good purpose. We have a good link inspector and without her the isolation of the headteacher would be absolute!

Clearly, there was a wide range of experience in dealing with LEAs and an equally diverse set of expectations about the role of LEAs today. While a few were plainly critical and unhappy with their particular LEA they were in the minority, and most still wanted the LEA to play a support role to the schools.

It has been suggested that heads may be in a position of professional isolation. In what ways, if at all, do you feel a sense of isolation?

This question was asked of 24 of the heads. Thirteen said they did not feel a sense of isolation and eleven said they did. Those who did not feel isolated often emphasised the importance of the deputy head as a soul mate and confidante, while those who did feel isolated dwelt on the weight of responsibility and authority resting on their shoulders alone:

No (I don't feel isolated), because of the deputy and the teaching staff.

I know it can be isolating bit I don't feel it here. I work well with the deputy head.

It can be, but I don't feel lonely with the deputy head here. It is like working with a second head here.

Yes, in as much as the buck stops with me and I have the responsibility.

There are days when I feel lonely and isolated. Having two deputies means I can't be more informal or personal with one, so I'm not as open as if there was just one deputy.

Yes, because you cannot be a member of the staff team. However much you relate to the team you are also in charge of them.

Yes there is a sense of isolation. Sometimes you are on your own - you carry the can.

How much support do you get from other heads?

In response to this question mention was made of local headteacher groups, school clusters and consortia arrangements. Several of the heads were officers of the NAHT and this gave them contact with peers. Others were not particularly active in meeting colleague heads, but felt they could contact some if they needed to.

I probably give more support than I receive. I have been in the NAHT role for 15 years. I can phone a few professional friends and seek their views and ideas.

There is terrific local headteacher support through a cluster of large schools, plus I had an excellent mentor and I'm not afraid to ask local heads for support.

There is a patch group of heads. we can rely on each other...It is a very supportive group.

I am the chair of the LEA primary heads group.

We have a partnership of about 8 or 9 local schools and we help each other.

I'm not into it now. I have opted out. Now I'm not a whiz-kid, I have let go. I used to. I don't go to many meetings at all.

How do heads help the management development of senior staff?

The heads' answers to this question could be divided into internal and external help. Externally, heads said they encouraged staff to go on various courses. *"I get people out on courses for new information and ideas."*

In one school the head, deputy and assistant head had gone as a group to an NAHT course on Using Statistics which the head said was "brilliant".

But a few of the heads pointed out the difficulty of finding suitable courses:

There is very little out there for large primary schools. Sometimes secondary school courses are more relevant to us than the primary ones.

Another head said:

I often send staff on head's courses because the middle managers here are leaders and equivalent to heads in the smaller primary schools.

Internally, the key was seen to be on-the-job experience for the senior staff. The heads said they gave their senior staff lots of opportunities to take responsibility for initiatives and aspects of the school. Learning took place through problem solving, discussion and analysis among the heads and the SMT. One head said:

I give them the power to make decisions and allow them to make mistakes. Money is the power. We have clear delegation of budgets throughout the system e.g. to phase and curriculum co-ordinators.

Particular opportunities which were mentioned were: the monitoring of teaching and learning; using the autumn package of statistics; and currently in a number of schools, performance management.

Another aspect of internal development was in-house training. As an example, a head had bought in LEA advisers for six weekly sessions on monitoring teaching and learning. In another school 'Investors in People' had provided useful training. Some of the heads saw all the teachers for an annual professional development and career discussion.

To prepare deputies for promotion heads involved them in budgeting and working with the governing body. One head said:

> *The school is a good training ground – staff from here get headships and other promotions.*

3: The deputy heads

During our visits to the 26 schools we interviewed 33 deputy heads and assistant heads. In some schools the heads suggested that we interview several deputies or assistant heads. In two of the schools it was not possible to interview the deputy as they were covering for absent teachers.

Data on 32 of the deputies was available regarding their number of years in post at the school. The following table shows the distribution:

< 1 year	1–3 years	4–8 years	10–12 years	13–26 years
7	5	7	6	7

Two schools each had two new deputies, and two other schools had a deputy who had been in post just four months. But most schools had long serving deputies and the average number of years in post was found to be about seven and a half. Also, some people had recently been internally appointed as deputies, but had served the school for many years previously.

Eight of the 26 schools had two deputies. While the relatively new position of assistant head was also found in eight schools, where there could be from one to three posts. Two of these schools had two deputies as well as a number of assistant head posts. One head pointed out that it only cost an additional £1,000 a year to make two assistant heads and this had raised their status. There was not a simple relationship between the size of school and the number of deputy and assistant heads posts, this seemed to have been determined by the head and the governing body.

The following section provides a summary and analysis of what the deputy heads said in their interviews. The data are presented using the questions we asked as the organisational framework.

What is it like to work as a deputy in a large primary school?

Overwhelmingly, the deputies said it was very hard work but they enjoyed it.

> *It is really exciting - challenging, rewarding, fun, draining.*
>
> *Brilliant, I love it. The school is just the right size. Three forms of entry means teams of three across the school with lots of expertise, who can work together and pool things.*

The key words in all the schools were ‘busy’, ‘challenging’ and ‘varied’.

> *No two days are the same.*

One difficulty was that the deputies tended to be at the beck and call of everyone. So they needed to be well organized and they tried to manage their time effectively. Here the most important factor for deputies was not having a full-time class responsibility.

Previously, I was a Year 6 teacher with no release time. I was starved of management experience and very frustrated at times.

While most of the deputies (24 out of 32 where we had data) had no regular teaching commitment, others wanted to maintain some teaching, but the size of the school was seen as a determining factor.

I do a lot of the day to day administration. Personally, I think that two days teaching a week is about right in a 3 FE school. It would not be possible to teach with four forms of entry.

The deputies had a lot of responsibility which several thought was similar to that of a head in a smaller school.

My job is equal to that of a head in a 250 school.

Being a deputy in a large school, in fact, seemed to put some people off applying for headship. As one deputy explained:

I enjoy it. I have been thinking of headship, but these are much smaller schools, and I think I prefer big schools with lots of variety and lots of people. I would find a small school claustrophobic.

What were the differences from their experience in smaller schools?

The most frequently mentioned point was the importance of delegation in a large school. Lots of tasks were passed on to other staff, so: *"You have to learn to let go"*.

The second clear message was the importance of good communication, which was seen to be more difficult in a large school. One deputy said:

You are not as close to people – the communication process distances you.

The value of teams in a large school was another common point. *"In a small school everyone was the team, now there are lots of teams"*. However, this highlighted the importance of good team leaders throughout the school. Generally these middle mangers were seen as more effective than those in smaller schools, and many went on to become deputies. Several deputies talked about the need for shared leadership from not just the head and SMT. The budget of a large school meant that good people could be offered an additional two or three points.

In small schools it was felt that staff were overloaded, especially with curriculum responsibilities, as there were not enough people to share out the workload. This was not the case in their present schools. There was lots of expertise in the large school which meant they were able to do more in-house INSET.

While most comments were very positive, one deputy rather ruefully pointed out:

You can never be a family though, in a large school.

Because there were more people to deal with, the deputies' day was very fragmented, with a large number of unanticipated events. There were also more meetings to attend.

The large schools were seen as more hierarchical and top-down than the small schools. One deputy said:

> *There is tension between the school size and a primary culture. I don't think a primary culture sits happily with the management structure. In a large school you need the organisation but you have to try to keep the personal culture of a primary school.*

Another deputy thought that decision-making was slower in a large school because there were more levels and processes to go through. *"Its quicker and more creative in a smaller school"*.

What are the key characteristics of successful leadership in very large primary schools?

Once again, just as the heads had said, the importance of delegation, good communication systems, and structure were frequently mentioned by the deputies.

> *Clear delegation is essential and then monitoring to see that it has happened.*

> *Feedback systems through the organisational structure, so that information flows up the school as well as down.*

An effective and clear structure was required,

> *So that people know how they fit into the spiders web.*

A number of deputies wanted heads to be good role models and to lead by example. Also important was an effective and productive relationship between the head and the senior staff, particularly the deputies. This was seen to include trust and honesty and,

> *A really good SMT who all sang the same song.*

Several deputies also stressed the importance for clarity of vision and a shared understanding by the staff, which was harder to achieve with so many people in a larger school. Linked with this was collective responsibility, so that the school worked together as a whole unit.

> *Staff must feel involved and not lose their identity.*

What has most influenced your role as deputy?

It was clear that many of the senior staff they had worked with, and especially their previous heads, had affected them. *"I have taken things from all the heads and deputies I have worked with"*. In other words, the deputies learned from both good and bad role models.

> *All previous experiences are developmental – positive and negative.*

The present head is a very positive role model. I have never worked with such a good all round head. He is exceptional, but he is not a megalomaniac.

I learned from the previous head's mistakes. He was a poor leader. He was happy to let me run the Infants, who were not his friends after the amalgamation.

The present head is very pupil focussed and has a 'hands on' approach. The previous head was very 'hands off' – she didn't go into a classroom for five years and didn't do things like the National Literacy strategy – it drove people mad.

Their comments showed that it was both the person's 'philosophy' and 'the ways of doing things', which was important.

My previous head was very encouraging to me and gave me lots of opportunities to experience a range of management things. She fostered and nurtured my development. We had the same views on education.

A good working relationship with the headteacher who involved the deputy was a deciding factor. As a young deputy said:

The present head here has taught me about things like finance and staff management. He has always talked to me as an equal and he has given me so much confidence.

I did a lot of practical things with the previous head e.g. appraisal and what to do if the boiler blows up!

What aspects of your previous posts has helped you in leading and managing in this school?

The answers to this question showed that experience of specific posts had helped the deputies' development. These included responsibility for leading a phase, coordinating INSET, and Special Educational Needs (SEN). The deputies said that they had learned how to delegate, to work with teams of staff, and to manage conflict. But they had to balance their class teaching responsibility with their other roles.

One of the deputies had been an advisory teacher and found it valuable to meet lots of heads and deputies. *"I learned about the range of heads' expectations and heard the moans and groans of teachers about the government reforms"*.

Other events which, in retrospect, had helped the deputies management development were school amalgamation, and OFSTED inspection.

In general, being given responsibility, together with a wide range of experience of different curriculum areas, teaching in various phases and different schools, were also seen as useful preparation for deputy headship. But several people pointed out that being a deputy was still a steep learning curve.

Courses on leadership and management

Most of the deputies had attended various LEA short courses and conferences which they generally found helpful.
In my previous LEA I did the five day Coverdale course which was most influential.

The LEA residential conference for deputies is very good. It is very practical, you meet other deputies, and there are good speakers.

On the negative side one deputy had attended a course to prepare people for deputy headship but found it 'very off-putting'. Another deputy was very critical of a local course for deputies which he considered, 'a waste of time'. As he explained:
I don't want a fun exercise with sugar paper and felt tips at the end of the day. I also resent being asked, 'what do you want to do?' We need help with the real job.

Six of the deputies had attended part-time management courses provided by various universities. All of these were valued. As one deputy said:
During my two year diploma course I was able to do action research in school and it was good to meet other deputies and heads. The link between theory and practice was challenging.

Six of the deputies had also recently attended a three day Ofsted courses on school self-evaluation with their heads, and most said that they found it useful.

Only two of the 33 deputies we interviewed were currently doing the NPQH. One person said:
My final assessment is still to come. I did it through the OU route. The materials are very good, but it is very demanding on time. Sometimes it felt like jumping through hoops. I learned familiarity and use of the National Standards.

The other deputy also found it very time consuming, but said that she found analysing styles of management was useful. An additional eight deputies said they were thinking about doing the NPQH.

Do you want to be a head?

Each of the deputies and assistant heads were asked if they wanted to became heads. Nineteen said "No", only nine said "Yes", and the remaining five were not sure.

Some of the deputies considered that it was now too late in their career to think about headship, and a few said they never wanted it. The reasons which deterred them from applying for headship were:

> *I don't want that much responsibility. It is lonely at the top.*
>
> *There is stress from all directions.*
>
> *The pay differential between the deputy of a large school and that of a head is not enough. It is not financially worth it.*
>
> *Too far removed from the children.*
>
> *I have enough fulfilment as deputy of this large school.*

I feel I am a good deputy and I will be acting head, but I am unsure whether I would be a good head.

Similar negative points were made by those people who had not made up their mind. In addition, it was noticeable that there were a number of personal issues which deterred their applications, such as having young children and being a single-parent. One deputy who said she wanted to be a head said:

Yes, I have been applying since last year. So I will do the NPQH. But I am divorced, remarried and now divorcing again! The breakdown in the marriage was due to working all hours.

Another said:

Yes. But there is a salary trap. I am a single parent with a young child and a big mortgage.

These comments suggest that the next generation of heads is unlikely to come from the deputies of these large primary schools – only nine of the 33 deputies said they wanted to become heads.

Future development needs?

The most commonly mentioned need by the deputies was to do more work on pupil data analysis. This was followed by ICT and finance. As mentioned earlier, a small group of people wanted to do the NPQH, either as preparation for headship or to improve their deputy skills. Interestingly, one deputy said: *"I would like to see how other deputies in large schools work"*.

What advice would you give to the new deputy of a very large primary school

In response to this question several of the deputies stressed the difficulties of time management:

Be strict about the use of your time. In a smaller school you can go into classes to help someone. If you do it in large school you will loose your planning and thinking time- you must protect it.

Don't expect a social life. There are long hours – 7.15 to 6.00. No breaks in the day and work at the weekends.

Don't try and do everything all at once, or be everything to everyone. Don't react to every problem. I go around with a notepad, write things down and say: "I'll get back to you." Manage your time. The whole thing is relationships and communication.

Developing a good working relationship with the head was also frequently mentioned:

First, be loyal to the head and work with them.

You have to realise the close relationship with the head.

Watch the headteacher - listen, look and observe. Build a partnership with the headteacher – make it work – and keep the trust of the staff. Be an able negotiator and mediator.

Some people stressed the adaptable role of the deputy:

You don't fit anywhere as a deputy. You are the 'spare tyre' - you must fit in everywhere and be prepared to turn your hand to whatever.

A number of deputies emphasised the need to establish yourself with the rest of the staff.

Build up staff relationships (with all staff, teaching and non-teaching) quickly. Work with someone: and develop partnerships – organisation in large schools is complicated, two of you can avoid errors.

Get into classes, find out what is happening in the school. Work on your credibility – prove yourself. Don't go in determined to change things. Work with the team.

Get a new initiative to manage to put your imprint on the school.

Find something you can focus on. People will test you out. There is the danger of trying to do too much and spreading yourself too thinly.

Listen, look and speak very carefully. Don't say "in my last school we did". Plan carefully. Expect surprises and probing questions.

Finally, one person suggested the following:

A new deputy head shouldn't be a first deputy head. It's too big a job and not having a class makes a difference to the role.

4: Metaphors

At the end of the questionnaire we asked the heads to provide a metaphor or simile to encapsulate what it felt like to be the headteacher of a large school. We also asked for some notes to explain why they had chosen the metaphor.

In this school the headteacher is like a ……

Of the 404 heads, 304 (75.2%) provided a metaphor, making this the largest study ever conducted. The following table shows the type of metaphors, the number and percentage, and some examples produced by the heads.

No.	%	Metaphor	Examples
45	14.8%	Juggler and plate spinner	
			Juggler trying to juggle with porridge
			Juggler with cross eyes
			Juggler with heavy cannon balls
6	2%	Other performers	
			Tight rope walker
			Circus ringmaster
			Quick change artist
40	13.2%	Captains	
			Captain of a ship or a large oil tanker
			Cricket or football captain
			Captain Furrillo in Hill Street Blues
23	7.6%	Animals	
			Hamster on a treadmill
			Octopus
			Swan
			Chameleon
			Lead dolphin – Flipper
			Mere cat
21	6.9%	All things or Jack of all trades	
			All things to all people
18	5.9%	Dealing with adversity	
			Headless chicken
			Whirling dervish
			One-armed paper hanger
			Knight without a sword
16	5.3%	Conductor / band leader	
			Conductor of an orchestra
			Leader of a marching band

12	3.9%	Pilots or navigators	
			Helmsman at the wheel of a large ship
			Pilot of an aircraft
			Helicopter pilot
			Cox on a rowing team
11	3.6%	Energisers	
			Dynamo
			Every ready battery
			Bundle of dynamite
			Yeast
8	2.6%	Growth and gardeners	
			Roots of a tree
			Chief gardener
8	2.6%	Guiding the journey	
			Lighthouse
			Leader of expedition to Mount Everest
8	2.6%	Swimming / water	
			Surfer
			Cross channel swimmer attached to piece of elastic
			Bubbling spa
7	2.3%	Parent	
			Father of a large family
			Penniless Godfather
			Single parent to a family of 50
7	2.3%	Central linkage or hub	
			Cog at the centre of a wheel
			An important link in a web
7	2.3%	Sponge	
			A rolling sponge
5	1.6%	Roller coaster/ big dipper	
			Mountain biking down a roller coaster
			Riding the big dipper
5	1.6%	Chief executive / managing director	
			Managing director of a company
5	1.6%	Fountain of knowledge	
			Fount of knowledge
4	1.3%	Visionary	
			Oracle
			Visionary at prow of boat
4	1.3%	Ball	
			Ping pong ball
			Rubber ball

3	1.3%	Magnet	
			Magnet attracting everything nobody wants
			Magnet, gleaning ideas and solutions from a variety of sources
3	1.3%	Cars	
			Formula 1 racing car
			VW Beetle car
35	11.5%	Other	
			Benevolent autocrat
			Chess player
			Data processor
			Fast food outlet
			Prime minister (delusions of grandeur eh!)
			Wizard in Harry Potter

The key factors expressed in the metaphors are to do with 'performing on stage', coordination, steering and guiding, motivating, absorbing problems, and dealing with adversity. Many of the images show the intensity and pressure on the heads and the need for constant activity switching.

The most common metaphors, such as the juggler who has to keep lots of plates spinning, and the captain of the ship, are perhaps not unexpected, as people have often used these images for headteachers. As heads of large schools the image of trying to steer the large oil tanker, which is not easy to turn quickly, is revealing.

There are surprisingly few examples of the parent (father or mother), the visionary, or the chief executive, despite their prevalence in the literature.

5: Discussion and conclusions

Here we want to set out our reflections and interpretations of the findings previously presented. This part is organised into a number of sections which focus on a range of issues: school size and pupil achievement; whether size is significant; school structures; site management; the importance of context upon leadership; leadership development; and headteachers' influence on teaching and learning. In the light of these discussions we then move on to offer our conclusions in the final section.

School size and pupil achievement

It is interesting that when asked whether they think schools with over 400 pupils achieve better results the majority of our heads said they do not know (58%), another 37% did not agree, leaving only 5% who thought they do achieve better results than smaller schools. Perhaps it is not surprising that the heads do not really know the answer to this question, as we found it difficult to find published data on the relationship between overall primary school size and pupil achievement.

An early study by Mortimore et al. (1988) looked at 50 London Junior schools (Years 3 to 6) which varied in size from 73 to 519 pupils on roll (with an average of 159). Best results were achieved in middle to small sized junior schools with around 160 pupils – but note that no figures or statistical significance are given in their book.

Considerable debate has occurred in the US about the optimum size for schools. However, almost all the research has been conducted on high (secondary) schools where the evidence favours smaller schools. One of the few studies which looked at elementary or primary schools, was undertaken by Lee and Loeb (2000) with student data from 264 schools in Chicago. These varied in size from 150 to 1,950 students on roll with a modal size of 500. The results showed that small schools (those with under 400 students), had a small but significant advantage over the medium and large schools.

In England we have not had sufficient information to examine the effects of school size. Recently, however, some important data has appeared and the following table shows pupil cohort size and the national Key Stage 2 results:

Key Stage 2: Percentage of pupils at Level 4 or above, by school cohort size

	Cohort size						
Subject	**Up to 10**	**11 - 20**	**21 - 40**	**41 - 80**	**81 - 100**	**100 +**	**All Schools**
English	56	74	77	74	75	76	75
Maths	53	70	73	70	70	69	71
Science	66	84	88	87	88	89	87
No. Schools	1,739	2,543	5,752	5,217	819	450	16,520

From: Statistics of Education: National Assessment of 7, 11, and 14 year olds in England 2001

The percentage of pupils who reach the expected level (Level 4) in school cohorts with less than 10 children is considerably lower than the national average. But this is due to the higher proportion of special schools (a third) in this group. The small variations in achievement across the other size cohorts is not statistically significant. Therefore, on

the available data it appears that larger schools do not achieve better or worse results than smaller schools. (The same is true for Key Stages 1 and 3.)

A new NFER study (Spielhofer et al. 2002) has also explored the issue of pupils achievement and school size. The important difference from the raw data in the DfES table above is that the NFER used the progress of individual children at each key stage to obtain 'value-added scores', which were analysed by multilevel modelling. Using information from 2,954 secondary schools and looking at pupils progress from KS3 to GCSE, the analysis showed a curvilinear relationship – that is, medium sized secondary schools obtained better results than very large or very small schools. But as the report points out, although statistically significant, the difference between schools of optimum size (with cohorts of about 180–200 pupils) and the other schools was no more than 0.15 of a GCSE grade.

Unfortunately, the national value-added data for primary schools was only available for 979 schools and the NFER analysis did not find any significant differences for pupils' progress between KS1 and KS2 and the size of the school.

In past there were few large schools, today there are 1,637 with over 400 pupils (of these 145 schools have over 600 on roll). These large schools account for 9% of all the primary schools but about 20% of pupils. What can we conclude from our study of these large schools?

Size matters

Once a school reaches a certain size – probably above 400 pupils – it affects school organisation. We believe that an important point occurs when the school increases from two forms of entry to three forms of entry - this results in a fundamental change in group dynamics as the year teams change from two to three people who have to work productively together. This in turn, stimulates a need for year team leaders and thus the schools move towards the use of a matrix structure, which emphasises the role of middle managers alongside those of subject leaders.

Is there a tension between maintaining the primary culture/ethos and large size; and at what point is it stretched to its maximum? It is interesting to note that the majority of heads in the survey did not think this was a major disadvantage for large schools. It is impossible to know if this is true, or is it a case of cognitive dissonance – where they are unable to accept this uncomfortable fact. The heads were clearly aware of this potential problem and they stressed the importance of personal contact and building a culture to overcome the impersonal for the children, their parents and the staff.

The heads recognised that the main disadvantages for large schools were: that the head cannot know all the children; the head's leadership can become more detached; and that communication within the school is a major challenge. Heads need to keep these in mind and develop structures and strategies to minimise the problems.

School structure

There was no simple relationship between school size and the number and role of the deputies, particularly whether they teach or not. In the survey only eight schools had the traditional SMT of two (the head and deputy), while at the other extreme one school had nineteen people in the SMT. The average size of the SMT was about five people.

Most schools had adopted a form of matrix structure – built around the basic unit of the year team and the curriculum subject leaders there were now the key stage or phase leaders. There is no ideal structure. The organisational charts we collected were complicated and messy – and reflected multiple variables such as school history, salary scales, available personnel and individual peoples' skills and abilities. Is it people into structure, or structure to fit individuals? Probably it is a bit of both.

The relationship between size and structure is probably most noticeable in terms of communications. All the heads we interviewed stressed the importance and the challenge of managing effective communication systems. Daily newsletters, briefings, meetings, notice boards and other mechanisms were explained to us. These mechanisms were used to ensure staff knew what was happening in the school.

These systems were largely 'formal' ones and many of the heads and deputies we interviewed made it plain that in a large school it was inadvisable to rely on informal communication channels. Staff communications also had to be formalised as well. This finding was validated by the results of the survey, where 85% of the respondents agreed that there was a need to use more formal systems of communication in large schools compared to smaller ones.

Site management

In the interviews the heads talked about their building projects and plans, past, present and future. Two thirds of the heads in the survey said they spent a considerable amount of time on site management. These findings suggest that headship in large schools involves many examples of the entrepreneurial aspects of leadership which Hall and Southworth (1997) saw as necessary for school leaders in today's world. That is, they saw themselves as campaigning and fighting to win additional resources and funds to ensure the school building and the site met the needs of the pupils and the staff.

Context matters

Although school size was the particular variable we were looking at in this study, there are, of course, lots of other context variables. For example, the school's performance level is a important factor today, and all the heads we interviewed were acutely aware of how well the school was performing, how much it had developed and its future development needs. Equally we were told much about the local communities and how home backgrounds and socio-economic factors influenced the school. Teacher recruitment problems, pupil mobility, the incidence of refugees' children and multiple languages were also features we came across. Other factors to note included the school buildings and the site – especially whether there were playing fields or not.

Nor should we omit the fact that many of the large primary schools had been formed from the amalgamation of an infant and junior school. For some this was now history, for

others it had a lingered presence. Combining separate schools can take time and needs careful management and sensitive leadership. In some cases it had been a major and challenging period in the schools' development.

In other words, although we have concentrated on just one variable, school leaders need to attend to all of them, often simultaneously. Moreover, they also need to understand how they work in combinations. If leadership is contingent upon the context in which you operate, then understanding the context and how it changes over time is an important leadership skill. Indeed, it may be a vital and central skill upon which effective leadership hangs or falls.

Leadership development

Running a large school was generally not seen to be something for a first headship, but how do you gain appropriate experience? We suggest that future heads need internships in large and very large primary schools – to learn about delegation, middle management, organisational structures, SMTs and perhaps more importantly, leadership teams. Even when the incoming head and deputy has experience of working in large schools there is a case for them to look at how other schools of similar size are organised and led. Several times we were told by heads that one of the challenges they faced was in determining an appropriate management and staff structure. Opportunities to draw upon a wider frame of reference are needed to support senior staff in making the right choices.

It was not surprising to find that leadership and management are more distributed in larger schools than smaller ones. While this is an anticipated finding, it has implications for primary school leadership development and training. The traditional approach to headship in primary schools is that of the head dominating decision-making. Previous research, over the last 25 years (Coulson, 1976; Southworth, 1994; Hall and Southworth, 1997; Southworth, 1998) shows that the prevailing pattern is that of lone leadership, with heads having the first and last say on most things. Moreover, management tasks may have been more shared in the 1990s, but leadership may not. Research into deputies suggests this conclusion.

Of course, our large schools data does not discriminate between leadership and management and thus what we have here may only be a more exaggerated trend in that heads in large schools do share more management, but not necessarily more leadership. However, our qualitative data shows greater willingness on the part of heads to involve others in leadership roles. This could be true in respect of the middle managers, who may, in primary school terms, be more 'middle leaders'.

There may be gender issues here too. It is assumed that women managers are generally more disposed to shared leadership than men. However, given the proportions and ratios we have in our sample that does not look to be the case. Rather, it looks as if organisational complexity necessitates more shared approaches than otherwise.

It is also important to draw a distinction between shared and distributed leadership. In many primary schools today, there is evidence of shared leadership. Head and deputy partnerships are the most obvious example of this, with the head sharing leadership and management tasks with the deputy, with whom they work closely. This picture is by no means universal, but neither is it uncommon (see Southworth, 1998). As schools

increase in size, the incidence of senior management teams appears to increase. Thus shared leadership can extend to the deputy and key stage leaders or one or two subject leaders.

However, in large and very large schools, reliance on the deputy and one or two assistant heads is no longer enough; other leaders are needed. Year and key stage leaders become key players too. When these individuals begin to 'lead from the middle' then the school adopts a more distributed approach to leadership. Shared leadership is confined to the head and one, two or three others. Distributed leadership embraces many more individuals.

What we can see in these large and very large schools is distributed leadership being used. This is not to say it is effective, rather we simply wish to acknowledge its presence. If this interpretation is valid, then it also adds to the idea touched on earlier about school structures. Distributed leadership adds to the complexity of the school as an organisation because now there are many more leaders to 'manage' and to develop. These demands, in turn, may alter the focus of the heads' and deputies' leadership because in the very large schools they may have to attend more than in smaller schools to developing leadership amongst many more individuals.

If, then, there is a case for saying in large schools heads distribute leadership more than in smaller schools, then heads will need to be prepared for this role since it runs counter to role conventions and orthodoxies.

Much the same applies to the finding that there are high levels of teamwork in large schools. Heads, and other staff, particularly deputies and key stage leaders need to be skilled in managing teams and group dynamics. They should be aware of the need to build teams and sustain them. Moreover, teamwork is likely to be more formal than in small schools.

Given the importance attached by our respondents to on-the-job learning and role modelling, there may be a strong case for highlighting these elements in professional development and role learning. In particular, existing heads may need to consider explaining their actions to colleagues so that those who work alongside and observe experienced heads at work, can have greater access to their reasoning and thinking. This is not to suggest that heads always do this. Nor is this a case for heads becoming self-justifying or offering post-hoc defences for their actions. Rather, it is to promote greater understanding about how and why heads chose their courses of actions and make decisions.

It is clear from the data that heads of large primary schools need to be able to develop lots of leaders. Given the relatively high numbers of leaders and managers in their schools, it is imperative that they encourage, establish and sustain distributed leadership. It is important to stress that heads in large primary schools may have to spend quite a lot of their time developing leadership across the school. Certainly a case could be made that what matters in large primary schools is less the leadership of the individual head and more their ability to create and develop other leaders.

Heads of large primary schools may need to be highly effective at 'growing' other leaders, and it may be important to emphasise this by evaluating them not as conventional primary school leaders, but as developers of others. How they achieve this

requirement is rather unclear, although the fact that they appear to provide so many opportunities for others to lead is clearly a significant factor.

Heads influence on teaching and learning

One third of our heads claimed to have a 'regular teaching commitment'. Although it is unclear exactly what this means, it is nevertheless a rather surprising finding, in that it is higher than we expected. A head's teaching commitment could mean covering for absent teachers, but since the heads said regular commitment, it is more likely to mean they are involved in releasing other staff on a weekly basis, teaching groups of children for specialist subjects (e.g. music), or involved in the literacy and numeracy hours. Some may also have included their taking of assemblies too.

However, while just over a third of heads in the 400 - 600 sized schools taught, this compares with one quarter of heads in the largest schools. So the overall view that the larger the school, the less likely it is for heads to teach, appears to hold true.

The importance placed upon middle leaders and teams shows that heads in large schools exercise many more indirect leadership effects than direct ones. Their role is contingent upon their ability to work through others. Indeed, their success in improving teaching and learning is strongly dependent upon their ability to ensure that the ways in which they influence others, in turn, has an impact on classrooms.

Like heads of small schools, they need to apply themselves directly to their indirect effects. But unlike small school heads, they cannot do all of this by themselves. They must also ensure that other leaders apply indirect effects on others too. Thus the 'chain of influence' in large schools is more extended than in small schools.

Heads of large schools need leadership teams - the SMT (deputies, assistant heads and key stage leaders) - to exercise influence on the middle managers / leaders - namely the year group leaders and curriculum leaders, so that their influence and that of the head's spreads across the school. Nor should it be ignored that members of the leadership team will also exert influence on one another too. There will be lots of leadership peer pressure and support in large schools.

In turn, heads need to ensure that all leadership efforts are 'congruent'. The need for clear and consistent messages to be broadcast by the senior leaders is crucial, otherwise confusion, borne out of inconsistent and contradictory messages, may occur. Thus, heads should not only develop lots of leaders, but they also need to create consistency and coherence in the way these senior leaders work with other staff.

Headship in large primary schools is therefore doubly mediated. Heads exercise indirect influence on the leadership team, who in turn, exercise influence on other leaders and colleagues. This is the chain of influence alluded to above.

Our findings show that the differences between headship in the 400 - 600 group of schools and those with over 601 pupils are subtle and relative, rather than absolute. There are clear similarities as well as differences.

Conclusion

When we look at all the findings and the interpretations we have begun to develop we can see four sets of issues which we will now to set out as our main conclusions. However before doing so it is important to say that there is further work needed before we can be confident that these conclusions are valid and sound. There are two reasons for this proviso. First, our fieldwork and the survey produced a large volume of data. We have analysed these data carefully but we know there is more we could do with them if only we had more time. Second, we have not yet trialled our ideas and conclusions with heads of large schools to ascertain whether our interpretations have face validity with those who lead large schools.

Thanks to additional support we secured from NCSL, in February 2002, we will be able to continue the analysis further; and test out our conclusions with groups of heads who will attend four NCSL seminars which we will lead. Therefore, what now follows has still be refined and tested and this will happen during the 2002–03 academic year.

There are four major conclusions which emerge from this research. These conclusions begin to uncover what leadership in large and very large primary schools is like in general terms and so help to identify some of the key elements in leading and managing such schools.

First, leadership in large and very large schools involves a blend of shared and distributed leadership. It is shared in the sense that heads must work closely and collaboratively with their deputy heads and assistant heads, as well as, two or three other senior teachers. These sets of four, five or six individuals form the SMT and we know from our data that such sized groups together constitute 67% of the range of sizes of SMTs. The SMT is formed of the leading players in the school, with the head being something like the director of them. Shared leadership is common in many primary schools, including those smaller in size than those we studied here. Many schools with 200–400 pupils on roll have SMTs and heads typically work in partnership with the deputy and a few senior teachers.

However, in large schools, given the size of the staff group and the scale of the responsibilities and tasks (staff development, performance management, curriculum development, monitoring and review, school improvement etc), there need to be many other, additional leaders. So leadership is extended to year group leaders, key stage and curriculum leaders, if they are not already part of the SMT. Thus leadership is distributed across the school. The importance of this is that it is relatively common in large and very large schools, that many more individuals perform a leadership role, albeit sometimes clearly defined and task related, and that leadership becomes a capacity issue in the school. When leadership is distributed across the school there is a need to consider how it influences and impacts on the school's performance.

Second, in large and very large schools there are a number of teams working alongside one another. There is the SMT, year teams and, sometimes, key stage teams, or lower, middle and upper school teams. Individuals may be members of two or more teams. They may lead one team and be a member / follower in another. Thus individuals need to be able to be effective leaders and followers, at different times. However, the major issue here is that while in smaller schools team work is equally important as in larger schools, in the latter there are several teams.

In medium sized schools (with 200–350 pupils on roll) there is much talk of developing and sustaining a 'whole school'. Usually this means creating a sense of unity amongst the staff and common purposes and goals. There may be some sub-units in these schools, such as key stage teams (formerly infant and junior departments). Yet there is also much time devoted to everyone working together too, so that the balance of time spent in small units and working with everyone as a whole team is either equal or split in favour of working together as a whole group.

In large and very large primary schools there are many more teams. For one thing, the year group teams form seven separate ones (Years R–6) and we know from our study that these year teams are a major organisational unit in three and four form entry schools. For another, there are likely to be two key stage units as well. Together these comprise nine teams. In these circumstances leaders, particularly heads, deputies and assistant heads need to ensure that not only do staff work well within their teams, but that the teams also work well and gel together. In large schools leaders need to ensure that there is a sense of unity amongst the teams, otherwise the teams may create organisational fragmentation. Thus, bringing the teams together takes on much greater significance than in smaller schools. In short, leaders need to enable team work and teams working together.

Third, it follows from the second point that there is more organisational complexity in large schools, compared to smaller ones. This was evident in the emphasis which the interviewed heads and deputies placed on structures and teams. It is reflected in the outcomes of the Bolman and Deal questionnaire we administered. While the human resource frame was the most popular style, in the largest schools the emphasis on the structural and political frames were higher than for heads in smaller schools. The metaphors provided by the heads also give a flavour of the complexity of large schools. Probably the most obvious indicator though is the emphasis respondents placed on communication. The need to ensure everyone knew what was happening, that staff were kept informed and no one was left out or felt neglected, were issues highlighted by many heads and deputies. The heads were also concerned the school remained a human scale organisation, where individuals felt a sense of belonging and where anonymity was avoided at all costs.

Clearly organisational complexity was a challenge for the school leaders we studied. Yet it would be wrong to paint it as a purely negative feature of large schools. The heads plainly saw major advantages including the fact that there was lots of staff expertise, many opportunities for peer support, greater financial flexibility and enhanced provision for pupils.

One reason for highlighting complexity here is that it relates to the fourth conclusion, which centres on leadership development. There are a number of aspects to this issue. First, heads and deputies need to be able to develop other leaders, if they are to create and sustain a distributed model of leadership. Second, they need to be able to lead and manage a SMT, or possibly a leadership team. Third, they need to be able to support other leaders, particularly in enabling them to make sure the teams they lead are in harmony with all the others in the school. Fourth, leaders need to be able to manage organisational complexity, teamwork and teams working together. Fifth, leadership traditions and role orthodoxies in medium and small primary schools do not necessarily prepare and develop heads and deputies to do this when they move to work in large and very large schools. On-the-job learning thus becomes an imperative, but so too does the

capacity of the individual to be a continuous learner and to be a learner in terms of their leadership.

It seems from the five points outlined here that the development needs of heads of large primary schools needs to be re-thought. Rather than leaving them to learn how to lead on their own, or trusting that they will pick it up in post or from their previous posts, a more explicit approach or approaches may be advisable. Here we can see value in thinking about internships, mentoring and coaching, both for heads and deputies to 'receive' and for them to be trained in using these techniques to develop others in their schools. They may also benefit from in-service provision which focused on teamwork and where the whole SMT was involved in the training. In addition, there is a strong case for them being enabled to look at how other schools are organised and for them to discuss school structures and systems with their peers. Nor should it be overlooked that all of this has to be done with an awareness that many of these leaders are not just leading large schools, but very large schools in challenging circumstances. This aspect of their work also warrants greater support and development.

These are but an initial menu of possibilities and it is not our intention to exclude other ideas. As we refine our ideas, given our respective involvements with the NCSL we shall be developing our insights and making proposals to the College.

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