NCSL National College for School Leadership

New Models of Headship

Primary executive heads

A study of heads who are leading more than one primary school

Contents

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Key findings

* Executive heads in primary schools occur under a number of circumstances. In this study the term 'executive head' is used to denote leadership of another school (the partner school) by a headteacher who is also substantive head of their own school (the host school) outside of a formal, hard federation.

* Adaptability, valuing everyone in the school, high expectations and giving children the best deal possible were seen as important guiding principles in carrying out the role.

* Indications of their success included three executive heads leading their partner schools out of special measures or serious weaknesses. Other heads introduced measures that improved professional development (particularly in leadership roles) and raised standards.

* The need to consider systems and structures that support the executive head role is essential, both internally (eg staff roles and responsibilities across both schools) and externally (governance, inspection and budgets).

* Executive headship can offer much in securing improvement in a school facing challenges. In the longer term both schools can benefit from close collaboration.

Background and aims

Headteachers who lead more than one school are becoming increasingly common.

This arrangement is occurring in all phases and in some situations across phases. One example is a hard federation in which formal written agreements are in place, and there is a range of other arrangements, often arising as a consequence of schools being unable to appoint a headteacher, or finding themselves in a failing situation. The leadership of a school in difficulty by a headteacher from another school is not a new model, but is one manifestation of 'executive headship'.

Executive headship can cover a range of roles both in primary and secondary settings. In different local authorities the title given to such a role may well differ. Context is all-important and one executive headship is unlikely to be exactly the same as another.

In the study, the term 'executive head' is used to denote leadership of another school (the partner school) by a headteacher who is also substantive head of their own school (the host school) outside of a formal, hard federation.

The study complements another published research paper entitled *Executive Heads: A study of heads who are leading two or more secondary or special schools* (NCSL, 2005). The intention of this study was to investigate, on a similar small-scale approach and using an almost identical methodological approach, what executive headship looked like in primary school settings. Its purposes are to provide complementary data to the study above and to exemplify practice across a range of themes.

The research focuses on the experiences of six executive headteachers, five of whom were in such a post when the interviews were undertaken; one who had completed their role less than a year before. The length of tenure varied from two terms to more than five years.

They are from geographically diverse contexts ranging from very small rural primary schools to large urban schools. All of the partner schools were in need of support for one of a number of reasons.

The study was undertaken during 2005, and draws on six semi-structured interviews as its evidence base. The interviewees were sent an interview schedule in advance.

Preparation

Typically, the procedure for appointing an executive head in five of the six schools began through an initial approach by a local education authority (LEA) officer to the headteacher to ascertain their interest in leading another school in addition to their own.

Either the local education authority (LEA), the head or both, then approached the chairs of governing bodies of the respective schools. A consultation with the full governing bodies followed. Consultation with other stakeholders varied with the context and in some cases was presented as a *fait accompli* to, for example, parents.

The proposals often resulted in uncertainty expressed by both host and partner school governing bodies, who were keen to ensure that their school and its children would not be adversely affected by such arrangements. Governors' uncertainty was, according to some of the interviewees, exacerbated by the fact that there were no local examples of two schools operating under one head for them to draw upon.

The majority of executive heads encountered uncertainty or resistance from host and partner schools alike. An LEA officer was cited in all examples as being central to the negotiation process.

Motivation

In all instances, the heads perceived there to be personal and/or professional benefits to their assuming an executive post. The motivational factors included:

* altruism and the moral imperative

* professional and intellectual challenge

* career development

* salary increase (though not in all cases)

* the possibility of relinquishing teaching responsibilities (small school examples)

A number of interviewees were keen to dispel the idea that the role was about being a 'superhead'.

Setting the agenda

The length of time from consideration of executive headship arrangements to their being put into practice ranged from four weeks to nine months in the study schools. The immediacy or acuteness of partner school need was the single most determining factor.

Part of the lead-in time was spent negotiating the executive headteacher's contract, including pay and the time to be spent in both schools, as well as the back-up arrangements in both schools and the resources to secure these. With the primary schools in the study, there was no 'ready-made' team as evidenced in NCSL's secondary study (2005). Therefore the need to have adequate leadership capacity in place at the partner school, so that the executive head could return to the host school for part of the week, was essential.

The proportion of time the head spent in each school was negotiated with governors at an early stage. The size of the schools and level of vulnerability determined how the time was divided between the two.

Some executive heads were uncertain as to what the exit strategy would be. The practicalities of exiting from the arrangements needed to be thought through at both LEA and executive headteacher level.

Executive headship in practice

The opportunity for executive heads to familiarise themselves with the school in advance of taking up post varied considerably but for all it was a pressured and intensive process. This was because they needed to carry out familiarisation and diagnosis whilst still leading their own school on a day-to-day basis.

Rigorous self-evaluation was an essential element of the executive heads' practice once they arrived in the partner school. They all shared an understanding of what effective practice looked like, based on their own school's practice, so an intuitive element of diagnosis complemented more formal procedures.

All of the executive heads found themselves working in partner schools that faced challenges. Each head brought a new dynamic to the situation and set about effecting change at a rapid pace. The interviews reflect a drive to secure improvement in the short-term and a development of capacity in the medium- to long-term.

For more than one executive head, the role involved moving away from a blame culture to one that encouraged participation, built stakeholder esteem and recognised success. They prioritised improving the culture and raising expectations. There was also a concerted effort not to attempt to replicate the host school in the partner school because they were different.

The executive heads expressed how they perceived their accountability to a range of stakeholders. This was more complex in that there were, for example, two sets of parents to be accountable to. The challenge of working with two sets of governors was seen to be a significant drawback in all the arrangements, partly because of the increased workload and the repetition of reporting.

Selecting the right leadership style for the context was cited by a significant number of executive heads. More than one reported having to step outside their preferred style; the one that they would readily adopt at the host school.

Almost inevitably, where underperformance was significantly challenged, this led in some cases to staff resignations from the partner schools. This created substantial challenge for the executive heads but also helped the school to move on and raise standards.

Listening to staff was frequently time-consuming but, at the same time, acknowledged to be imperative. The importance of being around to meet parents at the start and/or end of the school day was also seen as crucial by the executive heads.

Building capacity within the partner school was a key strategy and was achieved primarily through leadership development. The executive head would often reconfigure the senior leadership team within the partner school.

Personal organisation was another key feature of the role. The need to balance time and effort between the schools, and be able to maintain efficient approaches to administrative aspects of the job was fundamental, as was personal and professional support for the executive head from a range of individuals.

The physical and emotional demands of the role emerged very clearly through the interviews. The heads did not underestimate or shy away from the commitment but did not necessarily anticipate the strain this placed on them.

The personal attributes and skills of the headteachers largely agreed with those identified in the secondary/special school study (NCSL, 2005). The list included:

* being action-oriented
* having a strong vision
* time management
* strong relationship skills
* having the ability to prioritise
* being uncompromising

The executive heads themselves highlighted a number of guiding principles that they felt were important in carrying out the role. These included:

* adaptability
* valuing everyone in the school
* high expectations
* giving the children the best deal possible

Three executive heads led their partnership schools out of special measures or serious weaknesses, which was a clear indication of their success. Other heads introduced successful measures that improved professional development (particularly in leadership roles) and raised standards.

Implications

Because of falling rolls and the large number of heads set to retire soon, policy-makers must consider alternative future models for leadership in the primary sector. So could executive headship – headteachers leading their own school in addition to another – be one potential answer?

The Five Year Strategy (DfES, 2004) calls for better system-wide use of experienced, successful school leaders. This raises a number of questions:

* Will these be the same experienced, successful school leaders that are fulfilling a number of other system-wide roles, eg School Improvement Partners (SIPs) and Primary Strategy Consultant Leaders (PSCLs)? If so, the pool is likely to be limited, as the role can be unsustainable physically, intellectually and emotionally. If not, then the candidates would be those who will not carry out additional system leadership roles.

* How will this role be described? Will this require a rethink of how leadership in this context is conducted, as well as how it is to perceived by stakeholders?

* What will the impact be upon leadership development? Executive headship roles will need to be filled and succession planning addressed.

* Who will take the lead in establishing which schools and situations may best benefit from executive headship? Should it be governors and LEA officers as identified in this study, or should headteachers themselves take the initiative?

Conclusions

Although this is a small sample of executive heads and the lessons of this study cannot necessarily be used to generalise, there are nevertheless common features that emerge.
The need to consider systems and structures that support such school models is essential, both internally (eg the reconfiguring of staff roles and responsibilities across both schools if the arrangement is intended to be long-term), as well as externally (eg issues of governance, inspection and budgetary allocation).

With thanks

I should like to express my sincere thanks to the six interviewees for their time and assistance in contributing to this study.

Further information

For a copy of the full research report, please visit
www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship

NCSL is conducting further work on new models of headship, details of which will be available from
www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship

References

Barnes, I, Coleman, A, Creasy, J and Paterson, F, 2005, *Executive Heads: A study of heads who are leading two or more secondary or special schools,* Nottingham, NCSL

DfES, 2004, *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners: Putting people at the heart of public services,* CM 6272, Norwich, HMSO