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New Models of Headship

# Varieties of shared headship: a preliminary exploration

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## Key findings

- \* As yet, there is not sufficient evidence to confirm that the new models of headship emerging can contribute to improving the manageability and attractiveness of the role. More research is required in particular into how successful partnerships are sustained and the reasons why some partnerships do not survive.
- \* There is no single model of shared headship to suit all circumstances.
- \* Job redesign should be part of a larger educational vision, not simply an expedient to deal with a current problem.
- \* Support from all stakeholder groups is essential if an unconventional model of headship is to be introduced to a school.
- \* Research into introducing new models of headship should focus as much on governance – including local authorities – as on school leaders and should look closely at the interaction between them.



## Introduction

The model of single headship is under scrutiny. Schools in the 21st century are more complex and flexible organisations than ever before and the role of leading them is a multi-faceted one, demanding new skills and different approaches.

A parallel development is the looming recruitment challenge (Shaw, 2006): in England, 45 per cent of headteachers, deputy heads and assistant heads are aged over 50 and not enough new leaders are rising to fill the gap they will leave when they retire (Hartle and Thomas, 2003). A key problem here is that many of those with the potential for leadership are deterred by the increasingly relentless nature of the role, deputies as well as headteachers.

The School Teachers' Review Body (2005: 41) pinpointed the problem thus:

*Whilst pay is cited as a factor, it is the responsibilities and expectations of deputies and heads that are the biggest source of dissatisfaction to job-holders and the most significant deterrent to aspiring leaders. We suspect there may be issues about job design that are particularly pressing on these grades at this point of transition.*

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) is currently investigating the new models of headship that have emerged in recent years in response to the changing demands of the role. Our aim is two-fold; to:

- \* support school leaders already working in these new ways
- \* examine how far the new models can provide solutions to the succession planning problem

Overall, it is hoped that this research will begin the debate about what new models of leadership should look like in the future.

The series of studies published so far has examined the following topics:

### Executive heads

**Primary executive heads** – looking at heads who assume leadership of a partner school outside a formal federation.

**Secondary or special school executive heads** – examining their contribution to school improvement and system leadership.

### Federations

Examining lessons drawn from the experiences of federated schools in the Netherlands.

### Co-headship

Assessing the benefits and pitfalls of co-headship and its potential to tackle headteacher shortages.

## The research

This latest study, *Varieties of shared headship: a preliminary exploration* was undertaken by Ron Glatter and Janet A Harvey and examines what is already known about the concept of shared headship in the categories of:

- \* **executive heads** who have responsibility for more than one school
- \* **federations** in which groups of schools have a formal agreement to work together in part through structural changes in leadership and management
- \* **co- and dual headships** where two heads jobshare the leadership of the school or where two full-time heads lead the school

The report also examines collaboration as part of leadership, a concept that is implicit in all the shared headship models. This publication is a summary of the full research report, also available from [www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship).

By examining existing research in this area of school leadership, the intention was to explore whether there is enough evidence to prove that a particular style of shared headship can help to improve the manageability and attractiveness of the headteacher role and therefore help tackle the leadership succession problem. The implications for research, policy and practice are also discussed.

Sources for this report include 11 relevant research studies (only a few of which are referred to in this summary), non-research literature including online sources, and intelligence from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), professional associations and other national bodies.

One point is worth underlining: there is still relatively little research in this area and much of what there is has been done by NCSL itself.

## Leadership and collaboration

Collaboration between institutions in the interests of students is at the heart of much current educational policy, so before we look at specific models of shared headship, it is worth examining briefly the evidence for the benefits of collaboration per se.

While collaboration is an issue in both executive headship and federations, evidence about its impact is thin on the ground. The Select Committee on Education and Skills commented a few years ago that 'more evidence is required to establish the impact of collaborative models' (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2003: para 77). The Audit Commission (2005) has also noted the lack of evidence on the effectiveness of partnership working, while the leadership aspects are probably even less well understood.

A recent survey of school collaborative schemes (several of which were also reviewed for this project) concluded that the most successful cases 'are those which began and have been sustained in a spirit of common resolve and sensitivity to the needs of others' (Arnold, 2006: 38). Arnold's report for the Education Management Information Exchange (EMIE) at the National Foundation for Educational Research also highlights the challenges for partnership schemes of a policy context emphasising competition and choice and the need for counter-balancing incentives to promote collaborative working.

These conclusions largely support the findings of the studies we examined in this area, which came from both within and beyond education. From these, it appears that among the factors associated with successful leadership of collaborations are:

- \* establishing and maintaining trust
- \* managing tensions between collaboration and competition
- \* deploying both facilitative and more directive styles flexibly as appropriate
- \* recognising that collaboration is a dynamic process not a single event
- \* devoting significant leadership resources and energy to constant nurturing of the process

It is against this background that in the next section we examine the first of our specific areas of shared headship.





## 1. Executive headship

Executive headship is often associated with federations. However, federations do not necessarily have executive heads and the schools for which executive heads are responsible are not always in a federation.

There is considerable policy debate about the merits of executive headships. In July 2005, David Bell, then HM Chief Inspector of Schools, was reported as saying that “the only way to improve failing and ‘coasting’ schools is to fast-track the government’s plan to create executive heads of more than one school” because there would never be enough outstanding heads to achieve the standard of excellence being sought (Hill, 2005).

The Secondary Heads Association (now the Association of School and College Leaders) disagreed, on the grounds that executive headship could have a negative impact on recruitment as it would exacerbate workload pressures.

NCSL gave advice to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills in September 2005 that pairing a school in serious trouble with a successful school, with the latter’s head acting as executive head, could be a very effective model. This led to the proposal to award the designation of ‘national leader of education’ to outstanding leaders who were willing to take lead responsibility for one or more schools in very challenging circumstances: national guidance about the skills and expertise needed would be published (Munby, 2005).

A less positive assessment was made by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2006) in its report on *Improving Poorly Performing Schools in England*. This said that while the model had worked in some schools, it carried risks of over-burdening the executive head and setting up unrealistic expectations. It urged the DfES ‘to commission research to identify the critical success factors associated with executive headteachers’ (NAO, 2006: 17).

An article about David Triggs, an executive headteacher, quoted him as saying: “I think a good head could run five schools” (Revell, 2004). However, a DfES source considered that there were perhaps only 50 heads nationally who could run more than one school of any size, though the potential number was greater in the case of small primary schools.

We looked at two studies in particular here, both carried out by NCSL: NCSL Research Group (2005) *Executive Headship: a study of heads who are leading two or more secondary or special schools* and Barnes (2005) *Primary Executive Headship: a study of six headteachers who have responsibility for more than one school*.

Both claimed a range of positive impacts including improved management structures, improved behaviour and attendance and the development of a can-do culture and, in the primaries study, removal of schools from special measures and serious weaknesses.

Other issues raised were a possibly limited supply of people and lead schools with the required characteristics for executive headship and the need to monitor sustainability.

### Conclusions

The clearest conclusion to emerge for us is the paucity of evidence available on this issue. We agree with the National Audit Office that more work on this role is urgently needed.

It seems particularly important to determine whether the role’s potential is restricted to turnaround interventions intended to deal with a school’s underperformance or whether it has a wider contribution to make in relation, for example, to easing recruitment problems, alleviating pressures faced by small schools or enabling two heads simultaneously to tackle long-standing barriers to change in schools in the toughest environments.

In the turnaround situations, it would be worth examining issues of leadership style. It seems possible that the ability to act both as a director and as a facilitator – and to manage the tensions between those contrasting roles – could be particularly important in this context.

## 2. Leadership of federations

The policy of promoting school federations dates from the Education Act 2002 (the Act), which allowed for the creation of a single governing body or a joint governing body committee across two or more maintained schools. Many different types of federation have developed, by no means all of them making use of the Act's provisions.

One distinction made has been between 'hard' and 'soft' federations, the former term referring to single legal entities, with a single governing body across all schools as permitted by the Act. Looser arrangements in which individual schools have a degree of autonomy are referred to as 'soft' federations.

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) originally funded the development of 37 federations but many others have grown up without DfES funding. There is apparently considerable interest currently in hard federations, particularly from the primary sector in response to falling rolls and, though that funding has now expired, the DfES is keen to encourage federation development. Its aspiration is for schools to create models that suit them in a 'bottom up' fashion. New targeted capital funding has recently been announced which can be bid for by federations which have a single governing body or a shared governors' committee with delegated powers.

The DfES Innovation Unit brought together a group of experienced federation heads to write a guide for those who might want to federate, identifying what they considered to be the conditions for a successful federation partnership (DfES, 2005: 9–10). Key points include:

- \* a sense of shared identity between the schools
- \* strong leadership at all levels
- \* trust – fundamental to effective collaboration and should be fostered at every level of management
- \* a system of review
- \* excellent communication, particularly where lots of schools are involved
- \* sustainability – a clear sustainability strategy in place to enable a collaboration to cope

An evaluation of DfES-funded federations is being carried out by the University of Warwick (Lindsay et al, 2005) and was one of three relevant studies we examined. It pinpoints three types of origin for federations: some grew from existing partnerships of various kinds, others from the need to address significant weaknesses in one or more schools and, in a third type, the local authority sought to improve buildings through developing a federation.

In terms of operation, the researchers found a striking lack of uniformity. There is a continuum rather than a dichotomy between hard and soft types, and there are wide variations in the role of the federation leader. The study highlights the importance of process factors: communications, trust and motivation and distributed leadership rather than leadership by a 'super head'.

An issue raised for further consideration is the sustainability of federations: what are they for? Are they only to nurse ailing schools back to health or is the model broader, for example to conserve scarce leadership resource?

### Conclusions

It seems clear that federating involves a sensitive and delicate process of change management. The potential for the scheme to collapse is ever-present. Movement into federation needs to be well led and well supported. Especially where the aim is to move to a hard federation, different staffing structures, working practices and cultures need to be integrated. Systems designed to support single institutions need to be re-thought to accommodate a federation.

Where one or more of the schools is struggling, additional considerations arise, such as the need for high calibre leadership, both of the federation and within the individual schools, and proper recognition and resources for the lead school.

Moreover, institutional autonomy and separateness are deeply rooted in this country's history and culture, so any substantive form of federation is a considerable challenge. If it is to work and bring the benefits hoped for, it must be viewed as a process of major institutional and cultural change and be led and managed accordingly.



### 3. Co- and dual headship

Traditionally, a single headteacher has been identified with an individual school. The concept of shared headship questions whether the tradition is either necessary or inevitable.

There may be a single position of headteacher, though the precise functions and responsibilities involved may vary from context to context, but it may be shared between two or more people. A single school may also share its headteacher with one or more other schools.

Even in the latter case involving executive headships, there is often another head at the level of the individual school so that the headship of that school is shared in two senses.

In addition, in a collaborative arrangement such as a federation, there may be an aspiration that heads of individual schools should also feel a responsibility for other schools in the federation and their pupils.

The term ‘co-headship’ refers to a situation in which two heads share the headship of a school, while ‘dual headship’ indicates two full-time heads leading a school, but we did not find this distinction maintained consistently. Dual headship seems relatively rare, perhaps not surprisingly in view of the likely cost and the constraints in the regulations.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), which supports such arrangements, refers to ‘jobshare headship’ and there has been a considerable growth in enquiries to the NAHT from its members about opportunities of this kind. Feedback to the NAHT suggests that jobshare headship works well and that governors who were initially sceptical have been pleasantly surprised.

NCSL is developing a database of co- and dual headship arrangements, adding to it as new examples come to light. At the time of writing, of the 32 schools included, 9 are secondaries and 23 are primaries. Arrangements reflect local circumstances, so there are no obvious patterns.

#### Conclusions

Given the wide variety of schemes, it is not possible to draw general conclusions but some noteworthy points emerge.

- \* Some partnerships are entered into at least partly for philosophical reasons (collaborative working and shared decision-making being regarded as values in themselves).
- \* Some are based on existing jobshare teams, for example as deputies or in other posts of responsibility.
- \* Some are set up in part in order to retain a leader in the school (either a head wanting a reduction in hours or a deputy who would have left to gain promotion), some are aimed at providing job enrichment and there are also at least two husband-and-wife teams.

The evidence from research into co-headships indicates that they can succeed and bring benefits to the individuals concerned and to their schools. However, research on this topic tends to be conducted by advocates of such arrangements, so there is a need for caution about whether a balanced picture is being presented. If co-headship is to make a significant contribution to the future development of the headship role, it is important to understand the possible pitfalls as well as the potential benefits.



## Final conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this report was to determine whether there is sufficient evidence that the new models of headship we have examined can help to make the school leader role more manageable and attractive to potential candidates.

So far, there is not enough evidence to answer this question. What we can say is:

- \* There is no one model of headship to suit all circumstances.
- \* Job redesign should be part of a larger educational vision, not simply an expedient to deal with a current problem.
- \* With unconventional models of headship, it is particularly important to secure support from all stakeholders, including staff, students, families and the community.

More research is needed into specific areas. We need to understand more about how partnerships, including support for the leadership roles involved, can be sustained. Rather than embark upon completely new studies, which would involve long timescales, research could look at partnerships that have survived over a substantial period and apparently brought a range of identifiable benefits, as well as examining partnerships that have not survived.

Few schemes appear to have been evaluated, so forms of shared headship should be studied at local level in order to gather evidence about their effectiveness. Factors that need to be examined include the nature of the context, the impact of influential headteachers, and the significance of different governance arrangements.

Future enquiries on new models of headship should include stakeholder views as a prominent feature and examine a range of evidence beyond the views of the main participants. Only four of the 11 studies we scrutinised included stakeholder groups.

The implications for leadership of the development of chains and brands of schools should be examined.

Research should focus as much on governance – including local authorities – as on the leadership of the heads and senior operational teams and should look closely at the interaction between them.

As a next step, therefore, NCSL might commission a more detailed evaluation of different models of shared headship concentrating on:

- \* sustainability of partnerships
- \* local dynamics and transferable lessons
- \* stakeholder views
- \* a range of measures of impact and outcomes
- \* the effects of different approaches to governance
- \* implications for headship of the development of chains or brands of schools

The proposed independent review to be undertaken for the School Teachers' Review Body (School Teachers' Review Body, 2005: 43), plus work set in motion by NCSL and the DfES Innovation Unit on leadership beyond a single institution, should add considerably to our understanding.

As well as experimenting with ways of redesigning the job to accommodate new requirements, it would be important to examine how the total demands on the role might be reduced in order to make the school system capable of attracting and retaining some 25,000 able and effective headteachers.



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## Further information

For a copy of the full research report, please visit **[www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship](http://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](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship)**

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