National College for School Leadership

Primary Executive Headship

A study of six headteachers who are leading more than one school

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1. Introduction and parameters of the study

1.1. Background

Headteachers leading more than one school are becoming increasingly common. This is occurring in all phases and in some situations cross-phase[1]. Examples comprise hard federations in which formal written agreements are in place, including single or joint governance arrangements in line with guidance from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), as well as a range of other arrangements that are often 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 a more successful school is not a new model, but is one manifestation of what can be termed 'executive headship'.

The system-wide contribution that headteachers can make is of course at the core of a statement from the government's *Five Year Strategy* (DfES, 2004), of which an aim is to:

Bring benefits for leadership and management, for example through the sharing of bursars, or federating to share a single, strong governing body or even to appoint a single executive headteacher to run several schools. This will be an important way to make sure that good local schools can stay both local and viable even if they become much smaller as primary rolls fall. (DfES, 2004, p. 45)

Following on from this, the concept of system leadership is an increasingly emerging theme (Fullan, 2004). System leadership has been characterised as:

- willingness to take on system-wide leadership roles
- moral and strategic purpose – problem-solving the complexities of context
- focus on enhancing the quality of learning and achievement for all children
- ability to transform schools and networks into personal and professional learning communities
- commitment to building lateral capacity through collaboration and networking
- capacity to empower and develop leadership in others – and to plan for succession (Carter et al, 2006, p.34)

1.2. This study

This study is complementary to another published research paper (of which the author was a co-author) entitled *Executive Heads: A study of heads who are leading two or more secondary or special schools* (Barnes et al, 2005). The intention of this study was to investigate, on a similar small-scale approach and using an almost identical methodology, how executive headship manifested itself in primary school settings. Its purposes are to provide complementary data to the study above and to exemplify practice across a range of themes in order to:

- contribute to the field of knowledge relating to headteachers of primary schools leading more than one school

[1] Darlington Education Village is an example of 2-19 provision, Serlby Park, Nottinghamshire, 3-18 and Canterbury Campus, nursery to adult education (TES, 2005).

- provide information to those who now, or in the future might be leading more than one primary school, or are engaged in decision-making relating to such an arrangement
- explore to what extent executive headship relates to system leadership within the DfES definition above
- provide information to local authorities (LAs) and policy-makers on:
  - how the role is enacted in some contexts
  - how it is perceived by those fulfilling the role
  - what skills it requires
  - what implications from practice arise for policy

This small-scale study focuses on the experiences of six executive headteachers, five of whom are, at the time of writing, in such a post and one who had completed their role less than a year earlier. The length of tenure in this study ranges from two terms to more than five years.

The headteachers are from geographically diverse contexts that range from very small, rural primary schools to large, urban schools. All of the partner schools, i.e., that for which the executive headteacher assumed responsibility in addition to their own school, faced difficulty as a result of one or more of the following reasons:

1. inability to appoint a replacement headteacher.
2. sudden departure of the incumbent headteacher.
3. departure of the incumbent headteacher following an unsuccessful Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection.
4. departure of the incumbent headteacher following short-notice secondment.

The study was undertaken during 2005 and draws on, as its evidence base, six semi-structured interviews using the interview schedule attached at appendix 1. Each interview lasted on average one and a half hours and the interviewees were sent the schedule in advance.

Definitions

Executive headship can cover a range of roles both in primary and secondary settings and the title given to such a role may well differ between local authorities. Context is all-important and one executive headship is unlikely to be exactly the same as another. Of the executive heads interviewed, two were officially given that title by their local authority. 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) but outside a formal, hard federation.

Two schools were from one LEA’s partnership scheme, in which small, rural primary schools share a headteacher owing to recruitment difficulties. These problems are often due to the substantial teaching commitments required of such headship posts.

The themes that emerge in this study relate to the main areas of questioning:

- setting up the partnership
- the practice of executive headship
- the challenges of the role, transferability and impact

Under these main headings, sub-headings relate to what the heads themselves said about their experience. The report makes substantial use of quotes to provide readers with sufficient understanding of the individuals' perceptions.

2. Setting up the partnership

Typically, the procedure for appointing an executive head in five of the six schools followed the course of an initial approach by an LEA officer to the headteacher to ascertain their interest in leading another school in addition to their own. Chairs of the schools' governing bodies were then approached, either by the executive headteacher, the LEA officer or both. In church schools, there was also diocesan involvement. Consultation with the full governing bodies followed. Consultation with other stakeholders was variable depending on the context and in some cases was presented as a *fait accompli* to, for example, parents.

In the sixth instance, the governing body of the partner school was alerted by an LEA officer that a partnership arrangement with another local school might be possible. This opportunity arose following the departure of the partner school's headteacher. The school was facing difficulties and had a history of recruitment problems (it had had seven headteachers in seven years). The LEA officer, knowing the host school governing body had already shown interest in its partnership scheme, contacted it, with the headteacher's knowledge. Once the expression of interest had been confirmed, consultations with governors and parents followed and nine months later the partnership commenced.

Initial approaches were kept confidential in order to protect all parties should the arrangement not proceed for any reason, e.g. the unwillingness of a governing body to release their headteacher on a part-time basis. It was important that half-truths did not emerge so that stakeholders such as parents did not receive an incomplete or unrepresentative picture.

2.1. Governing bodies' decisions

Governing bodies of both host and partner schools were often initially uncertain about the proposed executive headship. They were specifically concerned to ensure that their school and its children would not be adversely affected by any such arrangements.

One executive head described how she met with a group of the partner school governors to go through what the arrangement would look like in practice. She was invited to a meal for an informal chat with the governors which ended up as a grilling — *"them making sure they were doing right by the school"*. Subsequently, in this case, the two governing bodies met together to determine for example, the executive headteacher's salary for what was a two-term contract.

Another executive head cited how the governing body of the host school was not in favour of the arrangement. The governors perceived him as a rival local head who might be engineering the situation to attract the partner school's children to his own school which was more popular. He described their perceptions as: *"Larger school down the road – exodus of pupils … a cuckoo in the nest, looking to asset-strip."* He considered the governors' perception of the arrangement was that it would *"add to their vulnerability, not support it*", but that they *"knew they couldn't go back but didn't know which way they wanted to go forward."*

Another head stated:

"The staff at [the partner] school thought the school was going to be closed and that I was being put in as a temporary measure … the governors were highly suspicious and the parents were beside themselves"

whilst another referred to her own governors' concerns:

"The governors here [were] very anxious about me not being here, particularly in the early stages."

Uncertainty, or even resistance, meant that some executive heads felt a need to prove to their governing body or bodies that the arrangement would operate successfully.

The approval of the host school governors was predicated on one or more of the following issues:

- the school's current level of stability
- their and the LEA's (and in some cases diocese's) confidence in the executive head
- confidence in the deputy head and other leadership staff to run the school in the executive head's absence
- the level of resources available from the LEA to support the school in the head's absence
- LEA assurances and support for the process
- potential advantages for the school and its children that might be gained through the arrangement
- the financial incentive for the school – for example 50 per cent payment by the partner school of the host school headteacher's costs within a partnership arrangement and the freeing up of finance this would afford
- altruism towards a school in difficulty and not adopting a stance of *"We're all right here"*
- retention of the executive head through permitting such extended professional experience, allied in some cases to a concern that the executive head would otherwise leave to take up a post elsewhere

The last point was one cited by more than one headteacher – that they were actively considering a potential move and that the professional excitement that the executive role offered was a retention issue for them. One executive head stated that the host school governors' perceptions were that rather than having a retaining effect, the arrangement might prompt him to seek other posts based on his experience. However, he felt that he would have been more likely to seek another post sooner had the arrangement not materialised.

Approval from the partner school's governors was more complex in that they were in all cases facing a difficult situation that needed resolution. Approval or acceptance was predicated on one or more of the following issues:

- the school's current level of instability or inadequacy
- the LEA's (and diocese's where relevant) confidence in the proposed arrangement as a solution, allied to the LEA's view that the existing senior staff of the partner school required executive head involvement to provide effective leadership
- LEA assurances and support for the process
- the executive head's credibility based on local knowledge and/or the success of their school
- inability to appoint a head

- failure of the previous head
- the perception that the executive head might become the school's new substantive headteacher

However, as noted above, uncertainty or resistance of the host as well as the partner school was encountered by the majority of executive heads.

An LEA officer was cited in all cases as being central to the negotiation process and in most cases as taking a role in explaining the situation to the schools' governors, though sometimes the executive head played a central role in convincing governors at the host school.

Governors' uncertainty was, according to some of the interviewees, exacerbated by the fact that there was a lack of local examples of two schools operating under one head for them to draw upon. One head reported that the only time a federation had been used within the county it had ended in a school closure. This, it was considered, had led to a public perception that federation equated with closure: *"There was no precedent for this kind of work".*

Another similarly commented:

"My governors wanted somebody to say, 'This is a model that's working with this school in this authority and this is how well it's working and there wasn't anywhere they could go to see that. It's that pioneering thing which is very difficult because you're asking people to jump off the edge into a black hole and not know what's in there really."

Two of the executive heads spoke of how in one case rumours in the community and in the other a letter to parents that had been altered from the agreed original, served to create uncertainty in a period of change. In the former case, owing to the size and proximity of the host school in relation to its partner school, the partner school's parents perceived that it would result in closure. In the latter case, a letter misleadingly conveyed to parents that:

"We have a potential headteacher and we think she will be our future headteacher and it's great because she's going to come over first and she can't be released from her school yet."

Although this was rectified, it did not help matters in the beginning and demonstrates the importance of good communication.

2.2. Executive heads' decisions

All the heads perceived there to be personal and/or professional benefits to their assuming the executive post. These benefits varied between individuals but the following were given as motivational factors by one or more of the interviewees:

- altruism and the moral imperative — helping a school in need and the opportunity to make a difference
- professional and intellectual challenge — what would leading two schools, a different school, a different team and different children be like?
- career development
- salary increase (where applicable)
- in the case of small schools, the possibility of relinquishing significant teaching responsibilities

- benefits to the host school, e.g. career development for others, especially senior leaders, and improved opportunities for pupils in small schools
- prior knowledge of the school due to proximity, e.g. one executive head had supported the partner school's previous headteacher prior to the latter's departure. Another had a staff member appointed to the partner school as deputy head prior to their involvement so knew this was with whom they would be working

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

"I'm not the knight on the white charger, but my motivation was in knowing the school and that they were in difficulties. Small change could bring about big rewards, so I knew that even in two terms I could make a big difference there."

The hero role was also countered by another interviewee:

"And it certainly doesn't fit the 'hero' model. The hero model has to go right out the window – if you're in it for ego you've got to let go of that, but in order to do that you've got to be ever so confident – really, really confident."

2.3. Lead-in time

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

One executive head described how she was contacted leading up to her own school's Ofsted inspection to consider a proposal about a school that had been placed in special measures shortly after it recruited a new headteacher. On the Wednesday of the inspection week she was contacted again to inform her that a decision was required as soon as possible as the partner school's head was going to leave on the coming Friday.

Part of the lead-in for some executive heads involved meetings with parents to explain the situation. In the same way that governors expressed uncertainty, so did parents:

"There was a meeting arranged for the parents with the authority and they were dreadful, there's no other word to describe them; they shouted, they stomped off, all kinds of things."

Another also described resistance as parents saw the move as a precursor to eventual closure, especially as the host school was larger and geographically very close. In one case some parents, having chosen the partner school in preference to the host school, found themselves being addressed by the host school's head as the new executive head of their child's school.

2.4. Contract negotiations

Part of the lead-in time was spent negotiating the executive headteacher's contract including pay and the time to be spent in each school, as well as the arrangements and resources to ensure adequacy of senior leadership in the executive head's absence.

One executive head described how poor the situation at the partner school was and that this caused her to delay taking on the role until there were assurances about securing the host school with the necessary resources:

"The school was in chaos really, there was no other way to describe it."

Examples of remuneration include one head negotiating a package with the LEA which took account of the increased workload and responsibility for both himself and his deputy. Another head similarly negotiated increased pay for her deputy as if he were the host school's substantive head. She also made the decision not to put in place an acting deputy to step up to his now associate head role but to provide each member of the school's leadership team with an additional management point and one day in non-contact time. However, with regard to her own pay, the LEA explained that the package constituted a finite pot of money and thus any pay increase for her would impact upon other monies. She took the stance that without the shoring-up arrangements outlined above, it would not work anyway and therefore accepted this.

Contract problems were also experienced by one executive head as it was new territory for the LEA:

"When it got to the nitty-gritty of the contract, nobody knew what to do. 'Is it an acting head, no it isn't an acting head, what is it?' I think I probably worked six months without a contract."

2.5. Time spent at each school

The proportion of time the head spent in each school was negotiated with governors at an early stage, although contextual circumstances led to these altering in some cases on a short- as well as long-term basis.

The size of the schools and level of vulnerability were determining factors as to how the time was divided between the two, as shown in the following examples in which the school number on roll is shown in brackets. For some, evolution occurred, e.g. as the partner school stabilised so time spent there could be reduced.

Example 1

- Host school 2 days (220) Partner school 3 days (450)

Example 2

- Host school 25% (420) Partner school 75% (160) *but evolved to*:
  Host school 40% Partner school 60% *and then to:*
  Host school 60% Partner school 40%

Example 3

- Host school 50% (35) Partner school 50% (35)

Example 4

- Host school 4 days (70) Partner school 1 day (30) *but evolved to:*
  Host school 3 days Partner school 2 days

The pattern of days was not rigidly adhered to as situations arose that dictated the executive heads' presence.

The examples of evolution were based upon reduced levels of vulnerability in the partner school allowing for the allocation of time to balance in a way that was more reflective of school size. In one case it was also a strategy to enable the deputy head at the host school to establish their credibility in fielding issues. Executive heads were conscious that in their allocation of time, *"both schools want their fair share."*

For one executive head, the arrangement was that she would spend four days at the partner school and one day at the host school. In the event this did not occur, beyond about twice, because the partner school was so needy and she could not afford to leave it as *"some kind of disaster would happen".* This was not a pattern repeated in other schools within the study but reflects the level of need sometimes encountered.

This particular model has evolved into one in which, although substantive head of the host school, the executive head has no role as such in the day-to-day management of the host school as this is devolved to the associate head. Discussions between herself and the associate head were based on the following:

"What we talk about is more strategic-type stuff: staffing, school improvement, raising achievement."

In one sense the role was more like a secondment but the executive head still held strategic responsibility:

"I could say to [the associate head], 'I want us to work together on this', and whilst I wanted to give him every opportunity to grow as a head, I could say that. That was the bottom line, that was the difference."

2.6. Back-up arrangements and leadership capacity

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. In all cases within this study, other than the one highlighted above, this was achieved through an existing staff member or members of suitable quality already being in place, or by appointing someone to this role from within the partner school. In one, more mature arrangement, a teacher from the host school was appointed as teacher-in-charge at the partner school. Table 1 illustrates how this was achieved in each case.

Table 1: Leadership back-up arrangements

School	Host school arrangement	Partner school arrangement	Relative size
A	Deputy head appointed as full-time associate head, with flat SMT support (each funded an additional day of non-contact time)	Executive head assumed full-time responsibility due to vulnerability of situation and lack of adequate senior leadership within the partner school	Host school: 350 Partner school: 330
B	Teacher appointed to assistant head	Teacher from host school appointed as teacher-in-charge	Host school: 70 Partner school: 30
C	Deputy head assumed leadership in executive head's absence	Partner school's deputy head was recently appointed from host school	Host school: 230 Partner school: 220
D	Deputy head assumed leadership in executive head's absence	Existing deputy head assumed leadership in executive head's absence	Host school: 220 Partner school: 450
E	Deputy head assumed leadership in executive head's absence on enhanced remuneration and non-contact time	Teacher promoted to assistant head with two days of non-contact time	Host school: 420 Partner school: 160
F	Teacher promoted to teacher-in-charge	Teacher promoted to teacher-in-charge	Host school: 40 Partner school: 35

In school E above, the assistant head in the partner school had been a part-time (0.4 contract) teacher in the previous academic year. The executive head identified her potential to take on the assistant head role as the first year progressed through her natural ability, propensity to learn quickly and as a result of his coaching. As with other schools, the executive head was able to spot leadership potential in others and grow this as part of the arrangements.

2.7. Exit strategy

The practicalities of exiting from the arrangements needed to be thought through at both LEA and executive headteacher level. Only one executive headteacher interviewed had completed her period of responsibility; all the other interviewees were still in post. This was pre-determined as a two-term arrangement which, due to the appointment of a new substantive head at the partner school, did not need to be extended. For her, there were issues of signing off at the partner school and resuming her full-time post at the host school.

"I was still giving advice in the last few days. Even on that last day I was making those decisions. That last term really was a tough one because I was trying to re-establish myself at [the host school], even though I hadn't de-established myself."

The same executive head reflected on how she had maintained a confidential diary which contained records of discussions with parents, children and staff that might have implications for the new headteacher. She transcribed an edited version of this diary for the new appointee.

For some executive heads there was a level of uncertainty as to what the exit strategy would be. The contract for some executive headteachers had evolved and been extended through negotiation with the LEA and the schools' governors. In one case, the executive headteacher's contract was extended for longer than expected owing to an impending Ofsted inspection in the partner school.

3. Executive headship in practice

3.1. School familiarisation and diagnosis

The opportunity for executive heads to familiarise themselves with the school before taking up the post varied depending on the timeframes involved. For all, it was a pressurised and intensive process because they needed to carry out familiarisation and diagnosis while still leading their own school day-to-day. It was particularly intensive where there were short timescales.

In one case, a lead-in time in the summer term prior to a two-term contract enabled the executive head to build up an in-depth picture of the situation in the partner school. Nevertheless, as in other cases, holiday time was set aside for familiarisation, including data analysis which could be undertaken more easily at a distance. The executive head states:

"Prior to taking up the position in September I visited the school four times. I had a very formal idea of who I wanted to see. I spent time visiting the classrooms as well. I was trying to get as much information on board [as possible]. I spent the summer looking through this data … to inform the way forward in the following two terms."

Another head, whose partner school was subject to special measures, studied its HMI reports, Ofsted report and LEA inspector input. However, preliminary diagnosis prior to assuming the role was only part of the picture:

"You've just got to get in there and find out yourself ultimately. I think that what written papers don't ever tell you is about the ethos and the mechanics of how the school works … [for example] … low expectations."

Rigorous self-evaluation was an essential element of the executive heads' practice once they arrived in the partner school. With reference to the pattern of days at each school, one executive head decided that initially, she would not do set days as she wanted to see the whole school in action. Excluding some days would mean that she would miss seeing some part-time personnel.

One interviewee reflected on setting up, with the senior management team, what she describes as a "very rigorous monitoring programme":

"Classroom observations, looking at pupil data, looking at their work, talking to the children to get a really good picture of what was going on."

These classroom observations were initially weekly for all. Subsequently, some were observed fortnightly or monthly while for others it was more intensive.

One executive head identified that the partner school had very low standards as shown in the PANDA report, and that there was no provision in some foundation subjects i.e. music and PE. The buildings were described by the executive as 'abysmal'. The academic standards were so poor that the school was offered a DfES-funded intensive support programme. It meant that the executive head had the assistance of an LEA inspector to carry out a rigorous self-evaluation exercise at the start of the first term.

A self-evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) exercise was undertaken throughout the partner school by another executive head:

"I did it with governors, parents, children and staff … you can immediately find what's going well, what's going wrong. I walked in and said [to the teaching staff], 'How do you assess children's learning?' – silence."

For those schools close to each other and in similar contexts, comparisons were understandably made about their relative performance. For one executive head this served not only to judge the current level of achievement at the partner school as poor, but to make this underperformance clear to its staff:

"I was able to say to everyone [at the partner school], 'We're the bottom school in the county, yet there's a school across the road that's nearly the top school: same kids."

Another interviewee had been surprised by the degree of difference between two schools which were geographically and contextually close:

"You wouldn't believe that two schools, so near, could be so different. On paper they look similar - high free school meals, high mobility - but they are not."

For all executive heads, there was an understanding of what effective practice looked like based on their own school's practice. An intuitive element of diagnosis complemented more formal procedures.

3.2. Understanding the role

All the executive heads found themselves working in partner schools that faced difficulties. Most were fully aware of the problems but for others the situation at the partner school was more of an unknown quantity until self-evaluation revealed issues of concern:

"I remember talking to the governors about the PANDA and them not really being that interested and [me] saying, 'You have a D and an E - do you know what that means?'"

Each brought a new dynamic to the situation and set about effecting change at 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 one, whilst the contract was for two terms, she had informed the governors that if they wanted a caretaker role she was not the right person:

"I wasn't interested in doing that at all, I wanted to keep it moving forward. [I didn't want to] develop a massively long-term vision as I didn't think that was my role but to steer them towards achieving short-term goals. And making sure that things were in place for what was going to be quite an imminent Ofsted [inspection], and attending to some of the issues that were obvious to me but just hadn't been shared."

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. There was also a concerted effort not to attempt to replicate the host school in the partner school:

"They're different schools with different children … I knew I didn't have the [staff] capacity. It was what suited the school – I had to look at context."

Two others similarly recognised the contextual factor, commenting:

"There are bits of the [host school] model which I can apply directly, there are bits … I can apply with adaptation and there are bits of the model which I wouldn't even try and apply because it's just not suitable. You create systems and structures that work in an environment; you adapt and change things."

"What you really need is to see … and respond to the situation, and that's quite difficult, because you've been a successful head in another school and you think you're going to do exactly the same in a different school and that does not work. I very quickly realised that because I didn't have time to think beforehand about it."

Most executive heads felt it was important not to highlight the host school's success over the partner school's. Doing so, they believed, could have exacerbated any feeling staff may have had of being 'done to', heightened resistance to any efforts to use host school staff to support partner school development, and, as cited by a number of interviewees, would not give credit to those aspects of the partner school that were considered effective:

"I never used the words, 'At [host school] we do this' because there were still good things at [the partner school] and I didn't want them thinking that I wasn't appreciating the good things that they had."

Highlighting to host school staff that all was not bad in a special measures school was also mentioned by the head in the above example. This was to counter any notions of providing support for a totally deficit model, and to celebrate pockets of good practice. It meant executive headteachers had to adopt a differentiated approach to the targeting of improvement measures at staff:

"In a special measures school, there are some awful things going on, but there's also some brilliant things going on and where you've got key teachers who are doing an absolutely sterling job, you have to go to them and say, 'Forget what I'm about to say in the staff meeting about people not marking books, I know that you're doing this and I really value what you're doing but it's a message that has to be heard'."

Another executive head leading a special measures school drew on pockets of teaching strength within the host school to help improve standards:

"After we'd done the first round of lesson observations where we'd targeted the whole school, we then put in place a differentiated approach to professional development and said, 'Look, here are some key teachers who have identified excellent practice, go and watch them'."

Not all of the schools were in special measures however, although results at the partner school were in all instances lower than they should have been, according to the executive heads. However, there were elements of practice that were sometimes better than in the host school. One interviewee reflected on the fact that pupil independence in learning was far more evident at the partner school, something he felt pupils at his own school lacked.

The staff of the partner school were sometimes eager to adopt host school policies and other documentation on the assumption that they must be good and readily transferable to their own context. Executive heads took different approaches to this depending on time pressures and perceptions of transferability. According to one, the performance management structures could be directly transferred, whereas the curriculum model could not because of vertical grouping at the partner school. Where aspects were not transferred, this was not through a wish to be obstructive but to ensure that documentation was relevant to the context in which it was to be used:

"Because they were needy the tendency was for them to want to grab, but … I didn't want them to take on [host school] planning because they might have better ideas and ultimately come up with better planning – I wanted them to have ownership of it. So the processes to get to the successful outcomes were what I took with me rather than the outcomes. I wanted to build that collaborative culture; to get something they all believed in and wanted for the school."

3.3. Accountability

The executive heads expressed their perceived accountability to a range of stakeholders: the local authority (LA), school governors, staff, pupils and parents, as well as themselves. Accountability was made more complex in that there were, for example, two sets of parents to be accountable to. Executive heads were not just accountable for providing a high standard of education for every pupil in both host and partner schools, but for ensuring that, in respect of the host school parents, their taking on an executive role at another school did not dilute this high standard.

Accountability was expressed by a number of executive heads as follows:

"I used to think: 600 pupils, am I doing right by them all? And I had cold sweats occasionally about that. Even for two terms you don't want to let them down."

"I suppose I felt accountable to the staff and parents really, and certainly the children."

"I was accountable to myself … to give it the best possible amount of energy that I could. But I think I really felt that, because the staff were needy, that I was doing right by them, and consequently, as a result, doing right by the children."

"In amongst all this, all that matters is my kids and the deal that they get."

3.4. Working with governors

The challenge of working with two sets of governors was seen as a significant drawback in all the arrangements due to:

- increased workload, e.g. two sets of full and committee meetings and associated reports added to what were already difficult time-management issues.
- repetition of reporting, e.g. similar items were discussed at both schools' curriculum committee meetings.

Where arrangements had been in place for a period of time, some executive heads had made attempts to ameliorate this challenge. In one instance, within a partnership arrangement, the executive head had brought the two sets of governors to meet together, although they retained their individual identity. This both helped reduce the workload and repetition of issues as well as serving to increase cohesion and openness between the two governing bodies.

In another instance, the executive head had delegated responsibility to the deputy head of the host school to deputise for him at a number of full and committee meetings at the host school, including writing the headteacher's report. This same executive head had a host school governor who had been appointed to the partner school's governing body which also enhanced cohesion and openness.

In some of the schools where arrangements had been in place for some time, governing bodies were keen to retain their individual identity. Any change was seen by one interviewee to be a gradual process if it was to alter since it was about shifting embedded, parochial perceptions. Moreover, in this case, the partner school's governing body did not want it to become a clone of the host school.

3.5. Short-term versus long-term improvement

The balance between securing improvement in the short term versus the medium- to long-term was an issue faced by all executive heads. For some, this was dictated by the HMI monitoring reports and actions that needed to be taken as the partner school was in special measures:

"We only had one objective and that was to get out of special measures. All short term. There was no time for staff to work on long-term vision. However, the minute we came out of special measures it gave us some breathing space and we came up with a school development plan which said, 'We want to switch children on to learning'."

For others, although the partner school was in difficulties and required improvement, there was not the immediate imperative that special measures brought. For executive heads in this position, there were quick wins to be secured to gain stakeholder trust, especially parents, as well as short- to medium-term goals and related actions aimed at raising standards and building capacity for sustainable improvement.

Ongoing self-evaluation established a full picture of what the school required to take it forward, and who was in the best position to contribute to this. Having a short but focused improvement plan was seen by one interviewee as what was required:

"You read these development plans that are like a volume of Britannica and you think, 'Come on, it's a piece of paper, blow the dust off it'."

Quick wins

"There were small things that could be done – easy things I would call them, that actually superficially looked as though they were great and were good in terms of perceptions of the school."

An emphasis on increasing pupil participation in sport was a quick win strategy employed by one executive head as this had been previously underdeveloped. By actively coaching pupils and providing an outlet for competitive sport, his kudos was not only raised with pupils but also with parents.

3.6. Improving standards and building capacity

Leadership behaviours

More than one executive head expressed their perception that partner school staff would know of them as a 'hard taskmaster', and that there would be some concern and uncertainty as to what this would mean for them. For some on the staff it was felt that such an approach would be welcomed by those who:

"thought it would put people on the spot and pull things up quite quickly."

Altering the prevailing culture in a new setting was a difficult task. Modelling expected behaviours was imperative but added another layer of strain to the role:

"There were times when I was very conscious of role-playing and I don't mean that in any cynical way … I was modelling the role of the headteacher with a lot of authenticity, but there was a lot more [required than at the host school]. 7am I was in and into role straightaway – you do kind of act all things to all people and that was tough."

The selection of leadership style to suit the context was cited by a significant number of executive heads. More than one reported having to step outside their preferred style:

"I don't consider myself to be autocratic or coercive, but I was more autocratic and coercive at [the partner school]."

"*I also learnt that I could … be relentless and autocratic because I haven't needed to do that for a number of years."*

"Sometimes you have to be quite coercive and say, 'Look we're not arguing about this.'"

Improving the culture and raising expectations were also related to challenging the status quo: top of the list were teaching and learning and, where it was an issue, improving pupil behaviour.

"When I arrive, I deal with what's happening in the classroom, usually with the teaching staff and I deal with systems and structures throughout the school, making sure that [these] support the teaching."

Taking an overview of systems and practice related to these enabled executive heads to take a critical view of what could be done more effectively. Identifying and eliminating unnecessary and unhelpful practice was also cited by one executive head as part of her efforts to streamline staff efforts towards what really mattered:

"People are working really, really hard hour on hour on assessment systems that don't in the event help them. And you have to try and unpick all those things and pare it down to what really helps teachers."

The need to be able to focus on developments and think strategically required time and space however:

"This is going to sound really strange but what would have assisted is if we didn't have so many people coming in to help us. Because just managing the amount of people who wanted to come in and help us was just enormous, from school improvement officers to consultants to ASTs [advanced skills teachers] … and of course everyone wants to talk to you. We went into overload and so instead of coming in and setting the agenda for ourselves, you had all these people coming in and all of their agendas were not the same, and that was most probably the hardest thing to manage."

Improving behaviour

Not all executive heads had to deal with significant behavioural difficulties within the partner school when assuming the role. However, for one, the partner school was described by him as *"not one that you would want to send your own child to"*. Gaining control was essential and it involved much personal modelling of how to relate to both children and parents. Meeting and greeting in the playground became an important task to show parents as much as children what the accepted code should be: some parents would argue openly with one another prior to this approach. He also placed substantial emphasis on getting to know the pupils as individuals, and put a premium on liking them, caring for them and speaking to them.

Another executive head focused on behavioural systems to address this area, asking fundamental questions such as, *"How were we using our learning mentor, our SENCO [special educational needs co-ordinator] to support these children?"* In this school, in most year groups this turnaround was achieved, although challenging behaviour was more ingrained in the existing Year 6 and the changes needed to grow culturally through the years.

Intervention by external bodies, as referred to above, had an impact here as LEA behavioural support was provided:

"They all did it with the best will, but it was supply being booked and also people having to be out of classrooms, so it was this cycle of how could we improve behaviour if the teacher wasn't in there."

Challenging underperformance

Challenging underperformance and increasing expectations was a key role for all the executive heads. They had to judge whether underperformance and low expectations were a result of poor leadership, which had stifled the development of expectations in an otherwise capable and willing staff, or whether the staff were similarly culpable in developing a culture of low aspirations and were resistant to change, or a combination of these. Identifying individuals' strengths and weaknesses, and their capacity to carry out their role(s), learn, adapt and change, and to assess their willingness to do this was an essential, time-pressured and complex process.

Efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning were sometimes hampered:

"You tend to go along the line of putting your support into the weakest teachers and of course what happens is they get completely overloaded and the minute the literacy consultant comes in to work with them, they go off sick and that's understandable because they feel it's a pressure."

The imperative and mantra, 'Children first' was something that emerged in all interviews. Cultural movement from a status quo of 'teachers first' at one school to the former was stated as follows:

"It was a very comfortable existence for the adults there and really what was important was the existence of the adults there not the learning of the children … systems and structures were put in place because it was convenient for the adults working there not because it was in the best interests of the learners and that had to change to put the children first."

Fallout

Almost inevitably, where underperformance was significantly challenged this led to some staff leaving from the partner school through choice, although the departures were sometimes allied to the prospect of impending capability proceedings. This was an aspect of the role that created substantial challenge to the executive heads but had an impact on the school's ability to move on and raise standards.

One executive head described how a particular member of the partner school's staff was very obstructive to the arrangement and would undermine the executive head when they were at the host school. This staff member eventually sought a post at another school once they realised the arrangement was going to be long term.

Another executive head described how voluntary movement of five teaching staff prevented her having to pursue capability procedures. The lead-up to those staff members' decisions, however, presented a significant challenge:

"I have to say that was an extremely difficult time. When you're trying to make people perform as you want them to, some people see that as being picked on. The staff very clearly fell into two camps: those that felt, 'This is fine, this is moving the school forward' and the others who felt that they were just being picked on and were being blamed for the school's failures."

Similar movement was described in a one-form entry school in which, within a term, resignations were received from three of its teaching staff including the deputy head. The expectations of another executive head and the impact of staff movement are also evident here:

"There were some people who would walk up at five to nine and those who would phone up at half past eight and say, 'I'm sorry, I'm not coming in', and you'd have to say, 'I'm sorry, I'm not having it, goodbye'. Even though that was painful in the short term, it's really paid dividends now. We've got stability and I think people begin to understand the new game plan."

According to one interviewee, positive parental opinion of some teachers added another dimension to fallout:

"It's hard, and it's often the teachers who parents really love who aren't effective and you can't say, 'Ah, but Mr So and So – he's a terrible teacher, he's got to go'. You've got to work round it."

As partner schools faced challenging circumstances, the ability to attract and retain staff was often problematic. One stated the need to *"stabilise staffing and prevent this revolving door thing"*.

Fallout also extended in one situation to pupils. The executive head described how, due to the partner school's poor reputation, it was losing pupils to a school in a nearby town. Remaining pupils felt left behind in a school of lower standing which resulted in significant perceived lowering of their self-esteem. Marketing the school therefore sat alongside improving it in an effort to increase its roll.

Developing positive relationships and trust

"You've got to trust people and they have got to trust you. Schools are built on relationships and that's got to permeate the whole school, child to child, parent to child; the whole lot is built on relationships."

Tackling underperformance and unprofessional staff behaviour was juxtaposed with the need to develop rapidly positive and productive staff relationships that supported others and sustained or improved morale. This required substantial interpersonal skills to achieve the balance between an uncompromising focus on pupil entitlement and being empathetic with those who were endeavouring to meet the challenge.

Listening to staff was frequently time-consuming, but at the same time acknowledged to be imperative if, as one interviewee stated, people were viewed as the most important part of the organisation. The time factor was exacerbated due to the distribution of hours between host and partner schools. One executive head described how there was a constant flow of staff seeking to speak to her upon her arrival as they all wanted to tell her things about the school. These conversations developed the sense of trust cited by all the executive heads as a crucial factor. There was also the need to bolster those whose morale was at a low ebb:

"I did a lot of counselling, they were in some respects a very needy staff and they needed affirmation … they were a team lacking in confidence."

Executive heads needed to make decisions that required the partner school's staff to trust that it would be the best for the school and primarily the pupils. Interviewees were very aware that extended trust would be based on the success of measures already taken. In working with a wide range of staff, one executive head acknowledged that some relationships were for the good of the children and that therefore behaviours exhibited towards these personnel were so that they would in turn do well for the children.

Getting it right all the time, however, was not always the case and having an honest approach in which errors could be made but accepted was something that one interviewee reflected upon:

"I learnt that I could completely get it wrong. I think when you're an experienced head you can accept that, when you're a new head it devastates you. I took that with good humour. Some of it was quite amusing really because I put my foot in it on a number of occasions."

Developing relationships within the same constraints applied above was also, of course, applicable to other stakeholders at the partner school, chiefly parents, pupils and governors.

The importance of being around to meet parents at the start and end of the school day was seen as crucial by the executive heads. This helped the development of a relationship and allayed potential or existing parental anxieties about the arrangement.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of visibility, the need to change perceptions of this particular role was seen as a gradual but necessary step by one executive head, as it was in the medium- to long-term unsustainable:

"It's a very important PR exercise for the parents [but] it's the way you try and change perceptions of headship in this role because you can't be the same kind of head as you are when you're an executive head, you still have to change those perceptions quite slowly."

Allied to this was the counter-demand of enabling the member of staff leading the host school in the executive head's absence to maintain a profile too. One executive head described how people at the host school were saving up their problems and not taking them to the associate head. She therefore used to see the associate head early in the morning, after school and also maintain daily phone and/or email contact to give the impression in the early stages that they were more than capable of dealing with the day-to-day demands. Over time, sustaining this level of consultation and coaching became unnecessary.

The borrowing of trust was the same for relationships with parents as it was for staff. The majority of interviewees would have been known as local headteachers to parents and consequently initial trust was founded upon their leadership of the local host school:

"The reason I've been successful here was because I came from a local school and partly I was known in the community, so there was that, 'Well she must be all right because she managed that school down the road and they seem to be doing all right'. It is about trust and you've got to get in there as soon as possible and get their trust."

3.7. Building capacity: developing others

Building capacity within the partner school was a key strategy employed by the executive heads and it focused primarily on leadership development. As stated earlier, there was an immediate imperative to concentrate on the short term; however there was also a need for sustainable improvement. For this and also for a satisfactory exit strategy to be achieved, a longer term vision of how staff might secure sustainability through the enhancement of their professional skills was required.

"I was really conscious that three years down the line we had to make sure those middle leaders, or those aspiring senior leaders, would be ready to take on a far more effective and proactive role. I was almost looking at the second layer down from the senior leadership team, to build capacity through those youngsters, if they were going to stay."

In one case middle leaders were paired with a senior leader to undertake projects. Sourcing externally provided professional development training opportunities was also used to develop the potential of these middle leaders.

Reconfiguring the senior leadership team within the partner school was a step often taken by the executive head because inadequate leadership was responsible for many of the school's problems. Identifying and nurturing potential leaders who could step into vacated positions or supplement the existing team to increase capacity was a key feature in all the partner schools. One situation was described thus:

"I knew that I was going to inherit quite an ineffective senior leadership team. I knew that I needed to dig into the wonderful reserves of the younger members of staff, the huge potential … that wasn't being realised."

Fallout sometimes provided both the impetus and opportunity to create a new leadership and management structure:

"The staff that left were senior teachers and so we were pretty much left with no senior management team. So it was just [the deputy] and me running the school. We advertised internally and appointed a teacher who is receiving training. She's just carried out a science audit week so [the deputy] and I have observed all the lessons with her and helped support her in giving teachers feedback, so that's built on the capacity for her to move up."

The messages sent out by the executive heads to staff through making such arrangements were as follows.

- Leadership is distributed.
- An investment is being made in developing staff.
- There are opportunities to develop as a leader within the school.

In small schools, the partnership arrangements provided the opportunity to create a leadership structure that had not been viable previously. One executive head had been able to appoint two teachers-in-charge, one at each school, and together the three now comprise the leadership team. The executive heads in these situations reported these new senior leaders to be flourishing under their new responsibilities which had benefits for the school as well as for themselves as professionals. These leaders were able to grow and develop and in both partnership schools there was evidence of senior leaders

undertaking the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), which realistically they wouldn't have been able to do before, according to the executive heads.

Extending the role of senior leaders was not always about creating new positions, but in some cases developing the existing role of senior leaders where this had previously been underplayed or even neglected. One executive head described how the partner school's deputy had not been given sufficient opportunity to develop:

"I had to 'big up' his role within the school, start to give him stuff to do. I gave him opportunities to develop himself … and I kept him involved every step of the way. He knew he had been stuck and was keen to move on. I felt he had potential to grow."

Using school-to-school links

As in the secondary and special school study of executive headship (Barnes et al, 2005), developing and exploiting school-to-school links played a substantial part in developing capacity within the partner school, although there was some evidence of reciprocity. Executive heads were often at pains to counter perceptions of a deficit model within the partner school. Whilst arrangements made were frequently to support improvement in the partner school, there was learning for both parties and opportunities were developed with this in mind.

School-to-school links in the study schools included examples such as:

- shared themes addressed in joint staff meetings, e.g. guided reading
- visiting between schools with host staff observing partner school staff and vice versa; these were predominantly teaching and learning oriented
- joint SMT meetings between the schools: in the example where this was used it helped move the situation on at the partner school because it enabled the modelling of what an effective SMT looked like and what it did
- using LEA-recognised lead teachers from the host school to support teachers at the partner school
- using a Year 6 teacher from the host school to support a new teacher in Key Stage 2 testing at the partner school
- a jointly planned closure day to host parent and pupil consultation meetings

The extent to which schools could work on similar areas of need, e.g. through joint staff meetings, was variable as in most cases the partner school needed to develop practice that was already evident within the host school. However, executive heads did create opportunities in many instances and those who had been in post for a longer period had developed this shared approach more. Others identified that it would be more achievable in the future:

"It won't take long for [the partner school] to catch up … give it another year and there'll be a lot more parity between the two schools."

In terms of governorship, one executive head had appointed a governor at the partner school who is also a governor at the host school. In addition, he meets the chairs individually every fortnight and the two together every month to keep the thinking about future developments shared and moving forward.

Planned future examples from one arrangement included:

- bringing three newly qualified teachers (NQTs) at the host school and another from the partner school together on a joint induction programme

- bringing together participants on NCSL's Leading from the Middle programme - two middle leaders from the host school with two from the partner school – together on a cross-curricular project, using the host school's deputy head to coach the two partner school staff
- appointing a joint assessment co-ordinator and a joint SENCO

In one instance, where a partnership arrangement was to be extended, the executive head promoted a member of the host school's staff to become an assistant head and seconded another to be teacher-in-charge at the partner school. This arrangement, it was felt, enabled the host school to influence the partner school positively as well as develop constructive links between the two.

In a partnership arrangement, the decision was made to deploy staff across both schools. This made the point that working at one or the other of the schools was not a demarcated experience. With future appointees it would be made clear that this would be an expectation upon appointment.

3.8. Supportive relationships

Working with known colleagues

Unlike the secondary and special school study (Barnes et al, 2005), the executive heads did not take up post on condition that they took a known team of colleagues with them: these were very much solo arrangements. However, more than one executive head was able to work with a known colleague or colleagues at the partner school in addition to the school-to-school links established. This arose through:

- prior work with the partner school on a supportive basis
- coming from a local school and meeting partner school staff through, for example training events
- staff at the partner school previously being employed at the host school

In all instances where this occurred, it was largely seen to be helpful as it provided the executive head with leverage and/or ready-made support.

In one instance, the executive head found herself working with the newly appointed deputy head at the partner school, who was previously a teacher at the host school. This created more of a ready-formed partnership which had evident benefits:

"I think that was a strength of this partnership because he knows how I work, I know how he works, he knows the expectations and he's got relationships with staff at [the host school] so that I say, 'Phone [x]' and he phones her because he's got a relationship with her."

In terms of the arrangements to ensure adequate senior leadership in the executive head's absence, what emerged strongly from interviewees was the need for a competent and confident colleague providing leadership within the host school. The executive head needed to have high levels of confidence in this relationship and trust in the individual and their capacity to lead in their absence. This, it was felt by one executive head, would not suit all heads:

"I know a lot of heads that wouldn't cope with the decision-making and autonomy that [my deputy] has within this school because they'd see it as undermining their position."

Having colleagues that complemented their perceived skills was identified by more than one executive head as an important factor in the strength of the relationship. In two cases, the deputy or assistant head possessed skills in developing teaching and learning that could be used to improve practice and promote curriculum innovation. One of these executive heads also reported that the deputy and assistant heads with whom he worked in the two schools possessed high-level organisational skills, which complemented his more ideas-oriented style.

The confidante

Where there was an absence of a known colleague within the partner school, some executive heads developed a relationship with a trusted staff member with whom they could share aspects of the role and discuss issues with as a sounding board:

"I developed a role where I could say, 'Look do you think that's all right?' I could let off a bit of steam and I never needed to do that at [the host school]. And she'd say, 'Well, this is what they're saying or not saying'".

This reflects upon the pressures of the role, of wanting to gauge staff perception and also needing someone with whom frustrations can be shared confidentially. Allied to this was this interviewee's opinion that such frustrations could not be aired at the host school as that would have been unprofessional.

4. Challenges of the role

A number of challenges the role brought have already been established in the sections above. These most notably relate to:

- confronting underperformance and managing challenge and dissent
- rapidly establishing relationships with stakeholders
- managing host school and partner school demands
- dealing with fallout and its consequences
- managing partner staff vulnerability
- managing short-term versus longer term development and building capacity for this
- stepping outside one's natural leadership style
- consciously modelling ways of relating and working to change cultural norms

In addition to these eight points, other challenges included the following.

Personal organisation

Personal organisation was a key feature of the role for many. 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. Comments on this came from a number of the interviewees:

"Really high levels of organisational skills, you could not do it if you didn't have a good sense of how to organise your day."

"I'm going to [have] Friday as an admin day because I can't keep up the level of paperwork for the two schools unless I set myself some time to do that. I'll be based in

school … either here or there but it will be admin day where I won't have appointments etc."

Time-pressures: developing relationships with staff

The importance of establishing and developing relationships with all the partner school's stakeholders, but primarily staff, has been attested to throughout this study. The time constraints involved impacted upon the way in which executive heads set about securing these:

"Trying to build relationships quickly and knowing that you had a limited amount of time to get your team on board with you. That involved a lot of energy and a lot of time spent with people. Investing a lot of time in the human side of the job, which for me is the most important part of the job, because if you get that right, it impacts positively on the learning."

Support

Personal as well as professional support for the executive head was provided through a range of individuals, including LEA inspectors and advisers, chairs of governing bodies, deputy head or associate head and a confidante within the partner school:

"You need someone to externally support or validate what you're doing and be the critical friend. But you also need an internal sympathetic shoulder. It's isolating enough as a job, but with running two schools, you could almost feel that you're not winning either if you're trying to be all things to all people."

Workload

The physical and emotional demands of the role emerged very clearly through the interviews. One executive head described how colleagues commented on how drained she looked physically, whilst another reflected on how the chair of the governing body had noted how much the role was taking out of them. The levels of commitment needed were not underestimated or shied away from but the strain this placed upon them was not necessarily anticipated.

"High levels of energy – the mental as well as the physical – because it's tough, it's a tough old slog, it's long, long days and many weekends working."

"If I think back, I was here very early, I was leaving very late and that was partly because people were desperate to come and tell me things, and it was a time when I was working probably much too hard."

Networking was seen as an important part of the role by one executive head, largely to secure a range of resources and opportunities for the schools. One executive head described himself as a *"furious networker … seizing opportunities".*

However, such was the workload for one executive headteacher that she saw her role, which was over two terms, as not conducive to networking:

"I tell you what I did miss – I didn't network. I don't think I stepped outside the front doors. Primary learning networks - they set them up in the area and I got missed out! I lost a bit of my own learning. I wasn't reading as much, researching as much – that went out of the window and that was tough."

The contrast between these two examples might be attributed to their respective lengths of tenure. The former executive head had been in post for more than three years and had extended his role significantly since relinquishing a substantial teaching commitment. The latter was in post for two terms and as such had concentrated upon the role within this tight parameter as opposed to a more paced response over an extended period.

One executive head felt that the role to be one that suits a particular kind of person. It requires, he considered, very efficient time-management, with regular 70-hour weeks.

The most significant aspect relating to workload was that the executive heads were dealing with double the amount of work in a number of respects. This is highlighted in section 5 below.

Compromising principles

"I'm a very visible leader and therefore taking myself away from that was difficult."

Having to adapt ways of working to meet the pressures of executive headship was something that emerged clearly in some situations. What one head perceived to be an effective method of ongoing monitoring and self-evaluation was, in practice, squeezed out:

"I have my lunch out on the playground, chatting with the children – 'What's been happening in your class today?' You learn more about what happens in that class than anything. And it's a powerful form of management and monitoring the work of your schools – that goes, that time with my kids is not getting done and that really pulls me apart because I can't get there."

Part of the time-management conundrum for one executive head was letting go of tasks within the host school that the deputy could take on such as writing the newsletter and governors' reports and reading pupils' reports:

"I had to really stretch my hand off it and let go. It's not because I didn't trust [the deputy] it was just another erosion, and as secure as you are in your position … there was an insecurity in it which you're fighting all the time … I still have to go round and slap my hands."

5. Reflections on replicability and transferability

The executive heads were all able to reflect upon the role and the perceived benefits of the arrangements, whether they had completed their tenure or were still in post. Executive heads leading schools out of special measures having brought them out in all study cases, were able to identify that, in this respect, such provision had evident potential. One, however, expressed that this was a short-term approach only and that the role and arrangement had greater potential than this, given the freedom to develop:

"I could see that if you could have what we've got now – two schools that have had Ofsted [inspections] and come out as good schools, another school that's quite happy to work with us; what you've got is huge capacity to support one another, to drive say for instance, a creative curriculum agenda forward together.

"I think it's about being able to appoint someone between the three schools. What that does for you as a head is give you two other people to bounce ideas off [and] a very large management team of people who are very different in perspective and skills.

"I do think it's transferable; I think that two schools is probably not enough. I'm not after taking over another school, but three people sitting round a table has a better feel than sitting round with two."

The executive head in this example believes that the three schools alluded to, which are geographically very close, should not be working in competition with each other. The schools have now collectively appointed a standards leader on assistant head scale and now work together on this agenda. The executive head is taking the lead in such areas to work strategically across the three schools. This reflects a mature arrangement in which the stabilising of the partner school and the strategic leadership across both schools (host and partner) has led to a vision of what these schools may achieve in collaboration with another for their community.

Needing to perceive headship in a different way was both a challenge and an opportunity and this duality was expressed by all those interviewed. They saw the potential in the arrangements, especially in how school-to-school links could be a powerful model for change, developing pupil and staff learning and extending opportunities for both. The challenge was to make this extended role manageable as single school headship was in itself challenging.

"I think that if this model becomes more prevalent, especially in one-form entry schools, people's fears and perceptions about it will change … they'll be more open to working across two schools."

Reconfiguring how they carried out headship, often in difficult situations, called for a reassessment of what they did, why and who else might do aspects of the role. Executive headship, if it was to be effective and make the most of the schools' collective potential, had to evolve from a traditional headship model into a more strategic role that focused upon:

- Identifying the potential for bringing the schools together to raise standards and develop extended opportunities
- Identifying and growing the potential of staff within the school, especially the leaders, including reconfiguring leadership structures to develop sustainability and coaching new and emerging leaders

Underpinning these was the need to demonstrate and select both appropriate leadership styles as cited earlier, but also a range of higher order people skills.

Seeing the executive head's role as one job, rather than two, was highlighted by some as another requirement. One interviewee felt that if one was appointed into the position, it might be more readily possible to perceive it in this manner, but that having one substantive post and then moving to a role in which additional responsibility for another school was, effectively bolted-on, made it seem like two jobs:

"I don't feel I'm doing either job well. Always seems two jobs, two sets of governors, two sets of headteacher targets."

The doubling of demands was one that affected all those interviewed in some shape or form, most notably in relation to governance because working with two sets of governors was the most time-consuming aspect. However, two sets of headteacher targets,

budgets and administrative emails from external bodies were all factors that served to complicate an already complex role. As a postscript, the executive heads would now be in a position where they are dealing with the expectation that two self-evaluation forms (SEFs) would be completed. Indeed, one interviewee, in responding to the draft report, reported that in addition to this, two church schools' SEFs also needed to be completed. The schools would of course receive separate Ofsted inspections when due. If such arrangements were to become more widespread, the streamlining of such aspects to make it a more realistic, achievable role would be required.

However, the concept of headship as it presently exists was seen by one executive head to be at odds with demands of the role within a federated system, in this case a federation (though not a hard federation) totalling 580 pupils across the two schools, as the numbers were too high.

5.1. Personal attributes

"Enthusiasm and passion. I still wanted to make sure that the school was moving forward even though I knew I was going at Easter. I think as an executive head that's really important – and don't let things slide."

The personal attributes the headteachers possessed emerge through the interviews to provide a composite list. However, as one executive head stated, this did not mean that there was some identifiable stereotype:

"If you look at the people in [LEA X] who have been executive heads they are very different."

Those attributes identified show strong concordance with those identified with the secondary and special school study (Barnes et al, 2005). The composite list of executive heads' attributes from that study would apply as well to those reflected in the findings from this group of six heads:

- action-oriented due to the volatility of the situation encountered
- focused
- telling and selling skills – the ability to select appropriately to meet a situation's requirements
- negotiation
- strong sense of self-preservation – the ability to deal with personal challenge
- strong sense of social justice
- high levels of confidence and self-belief – mental strength
- time-management skills and role awareness
- strong visioning abilities
- ability to be uncompromising
- ability to prioritise
- insightful and intuitive
- able to diagnose effectively
- an open-minded learner, able to be a focused and single-minded operator

Relationships skills

Relationship skills included:

- confident communication skills
- emotional intelligence, authenticity

- humility
- good at building and working through teams
- ability to let go and to know when to do this
- ability to see potential in others and grow this through coaching, and to match individuals to roles
- ability to deal with conflict effectively and manage people
- ability to secure affiliation of colleagues – strong interpersonal skills – winning hearts and minds, bestowing faith
- self-knowledge of strengths and weaknesses and how to accommodate these
- ability to acknowledge to others when wrong
- ability to coach and mentor – giving

The guiding principles offered by the executive heads highlight what to them is important in the way they carry out their role, and these shed light on the skills and attributes required:

- adaptability
- an unshakeable belief in working together
- giving responsibility to get back a return for the school
- inclusivity – *"championing the underdog"*
- valuing everyone in the school
- giving children the best deal possible – *"Is it right for my pupils?"*
- trusting in people
- working hard at relationships – *"The whole lot is built on relationships."*
- high expectations – *"kids, staff, self"*
- empowering others – *"I love developing people."*

In responding to the draft report, one executive head reflected that in connection with the sixth bullet point above, the concept of which school was 'theirs' was being reconceptualised in their view, in that their affiliation towards the partner school had grown:

"I think for me my view of which school is mine has altered … the underlying realisation that in fact I am in it for all the children makes the 'ownership' issue of one school over another blurred … both are now 'my' schools."

Certainly the six attributes and skills described below emerged as fundamental:

- strategic thinking
- optimism
- resilience
- modelling
- exhibiting faith in others – trust
- developing positive relationships

The potential need to grow people into this role was highlighted by one interviewee:

"I think you have to examine the kind of person and the preparation that you give them for this role. In the same way as NPQH, something needs to prepare people for that."

5.2. Perceived successes

For those executive heads leading partner schools in special measures or serious weaknesses, a clear indicator of their success was their removal from this which happened in both cases.

For others, the introduction and subsequent success of a range of measures that impacted upon areas such as professional development and progress in standards were indicators of success (for example those areas identified as benefits of the host-partner school relationship in the next section). Validation from stakeholders – external and internal - also served to inform executive heads that they were heading in the right direction:

In one partner school, another marker of success had been that staff recruitment was now much easier. In this case, 28 applications had been received for a main-scale post where previously, the executive head had to phone supply agencies for days to get staff.

5.3. Impact on host school

For those operating within a small-school partnership arrangement, the perceived benefits for the host school were substantial. These included:

- improved professional development opportunities for all staff
- enhanced leadership development potential within the schools, the creation of senior leadership positions and senior leadership teams, as well as associated development for individuals, e.g. NPQH
- opportunities to deploy the workforce across institutions
- enhanced curricular and extra-curricular provision and opportunities for pupils to work with partner school peers – this similarly had positive implications for the teaching of single-year groups which would otherwise have been too small
- opportunities to reduce subject leadership or other role responsibilities through cross-school approaches
- the reduction in the teaching commitment time for the executive headteacher

In one case, an interviewee saw that the impact on the host school, whilst not significantly negative, had nevertheless been evident in some respects.

"I don't think [the host school] went back, or suffered, but I don't think it really went forward in the two terms as much as it would have done with me. And I don't mean that in any arrogant way, it just means that I'm very focused and I know exactly what needs to be done and when. And there were probably times when I focused more on [the partner school], where I spent a huge amount of time working on the SIP [school improvement plan] with senior leaders … the SIP at [the host school] was not a patch on what it had been in previous years."

Another reflected that there needed to be a measured and appropriate view applied in relation to the impact on the host school, and that there might be a tendency for those at the host school to ascribe difficulties to the absence of the executive head:

"Oh, it's because the headteacher isn't there – you wouldn't want that."

6. Conclusions

These conclusions should be viewed as tentative due to the study's scope. Analysis and synthesis of the data have been filtered through the authors' own interpretations and data have only been provided by the executive headteachers. While veracity is not in question, other sources of data would help create a richer and more reliable picture.

Findings are briefly summarised in each of the sub-sections below and the questions raised would benefit from further exploration. The list is not necessarily exhaustive and is largely based upon that found within the secondary and special school study (Barnes et al, 2005).

6.1. Benefits for partner schools

The positive outcomes for the partner schools were very evident, based on the interview data. These included:

- transformation achieved through an experienced and successful head applying their knowledge and understanding in a new setting, knowing what it looks like and setting out to achieve it
- transference of effective school systems from the host school, or the generation of new ones based on an understanding of effectiveness
- opportunities for senior and middle leaders to:
  - be coached by the executive head
  - assume positions of increased responsibility
  - learn from host school leaders
- improved management structures
- improved behaviour where this was applicable
- a rigorous focus on learning and achievement:
  - high expectations
  - professional development
- improved clarity of focus for all staff and mechanisms to support this
- a challenging approach to underperformance
- the development of a can-do culture
- enhanced school community confidence in the potential of the school to secure improvement

6.2. Questions that could be raised which would provide further data

- How did or do others within the school community view the arrangements and their impact – staff, pupils, parents, governors?
- How do the standards of achievement reflect on the executive head's tenure?
- What do the external reports have to say about the school's development?
- Post-executive head involvement, how is improvement sustained?

6.3. Benefits for host schools

In addition to those highlighted previously as benefits for the partnership schools involved, other benefits were:

- opportunities for professional development through providing partner school support and through staff assuming new leadership roles
- extended reputation of the school
- opportunities to learn from the partner school's experience, particularly where practice was perceived to be better than that of the host school
- increased leadership experience, knowledge and understanding of the executive head and leaders from the host school, contributing to increased host school capacity following exit

Strengths and limitations of this model as a contributor to school improvement and system change

While many of the strengths have been highlighted in the benefits above, the main strength was the school-to-school arrangements. These could be used to increase capacity within the partner school and to provide efficient and effective professional development under the direction of the executive head and based on good practice.

The limitations, in contrast, were:

- the need for the executive head to balance their responsibilities between their own school and the partner school – this involved sometimes complicated time-management and onerous hours
- the personal investment of self into emotionally and intellectually demanding situations
- sustainability of the traditional headship model. Established executive heads shaped their practice and the systems and structures they and others employed to create greater sustainability. Those looking to the longer term were considering ways to develop this with fewer demands on themselves. This meant reconfiguring the traditional headship role while attempting to revise stakeholders' perceptions of what the role entailed. It also meant looking creatively at the distribution of leadership especially across the schools and exploring ways in which it could be grown; executive headship is different from being a substantive head times two, as the latter is unsustainable in the long term
- potential issues of sustainability once the executive head had exited – growing leadership from within to maintain capacity was essential to prevent problems returning
- the need to leave the host school for extended periods. Although left in capable hands, there was evidence that this led to:
    - weakened school improvement planning and focus in one instance
    - decreased knowledge of the school's progress
    - diminished personal profile within the school community

6.4. Questions that could be raised which would provide further data

- How is sustainability managed prior to and following the exit of the executive head?
- Would extended secondment be a more effective approach than dual leadership responsibilities?
- Can executive heads be developed or are there particular characteristics that are required, and thus only relatively few may achieve such a role?
- To what extent does the practice of executive headship reflect system leadership in action?
- To what extent does a model based predominantly on schools in difficulty transfer to other settings?
- What similarities and differences are there with other models of executive headship, e.g. federations?
- What lessons can be learnt from unsuccessful executive headship?

6.5. Key learning

Presently, school leadership is facing three issues:

- falling rolls nationally
- the retirement of larger than average numbers of headteachers and deputies
- the need for the most effective headteachers to work beyond their own school to improve the school system

Benefits might be that, as the Five Year Strategy (DfES, 2004) states, it might achieve better system-wide use of experienced, successful school leaders. But there are caveats to this.

- Will these be the same experienced, successful school leaders that are already fulfilling a number of other system-wide roles such as school improvement partners (SIPs) and primary strategy consultant leaders (PSCLs)? If so, the pool is likely to be limited. If not, then the pool is likely to be made up of those who will not carry out additional system leadership roles.
- Will this role require a re-think of how leadership in this context is undertaken, and how it is perceived by stakeholders?
- What will the impact be on future leadership development and succession planning?
- Who will take the lead in establishing which situations may best benefit from executive headship - governors and LA officers or headteachers themselves? Information on how these models might work would be needed for:

    - governors
    - local authorities
    - parents
    - trusts (DfES, 2005)
    - headteachers

The need to consider systems and structures that support such school models is essential, both internally, e.g. the reconfiguring of staff roles and responsibilities across both schools if the arrangement is intended to be long term, as well as externally, e.g. what systems of governance, inspection and budgetary allocation would best fit these?

In the short term, governors would also benefit from being able to access information about models of existing or recent practice on which to base their decisions. These

decisions relate not just to whether to adopt such an arrangement but also, for example, contractual arrangements including exit strategies and how to communicate arrangements with stakeholders.

Alternative models of headship appear to demand alternative models of governance and this study indicates that existing structures have their limitations. Joint governance in a form best suited to the context would appear to be a necessity for arrangements such as those investigated here to work successfully. Hence the importance of gathering governor perceptions.

Altruism versus self-interest is also an evident tension. In an age when system leadership implies that the most effective headteachers are encouraged to contribute to the development of other schools, governors need to be open to such ways of working.

School governors' priorities currently lie first and foremost with their own school, not others locally or more widely in the system. This has been fuelled by years of competition. A move towards a more altruistic approach will require changing attitudes, if not changes in the system of school governance itself.

Executive headship has, based on the schools used in this report, much to offer in terms of school improvement to a school in difficulty, and in the longer term, potentially much to offer both schools working in close collaboration – particularly very small ones.

Making the role manageable, and learning therefore from those who have made it so will, arguably, be the key challenge.

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9. Appendix 1

Interview schedule

There are four areas of questioning

Context of school and conditions for involvement – 20mins

1. What was the background to your involvement with the school?
2. What were the mechanics of your appointment?

How they work – role and practice – 30mins

1. How do you go about diagnosing what is required for the school and required of you?
2. How do you balance your time and effort between the different schools?
3. How do you spend your time in this role, and with whom do you work?
4. What are the challenges of this role? How do they differ from 'regular headship?

Sustainability Replicability/ transferability into the broader school system – 20mins

1. What's the balance between achieving the short-term goals and the longer term vision?
2. How do you think your work builds capacity in the school?
3. Do you believe what you've achieved here can be a achieved elsewhere?
4. What is needed to make that possible?
5. Do you think this work provides us with any lessons about the nature of headship in the 21st century?

Impact – school, system*, self – 20mins

1. What are the key things that have been achieved through your involvement with the school as executive head? How do you judge whether you are making a difference?
2. What defines a 'successful' executive head?
3. How do you know when the job is done?
4. What have you learnt? (about ways of working, about self, broader school improvement).
5. What would you say are your three guiding principles for this work?