New Models of Headship - summary report

Secondary or special school executive heads

A study of heads who are leading two
or more secondary or special schools

NCSL National College for
School Leadership

Background and aims

The concept of 'system leadership' is increasingly seen as a critical element in sustainable, system-wide educational reform and, as a growing number of school leaders extend their sphere of influence beyond the immediate environment of their own school, there is a developing picture of the various forms that system leadership might take.

Although the term 'executive head' has a number of meanings it appears to be a concept that has come of age. A preliminary review of the field, undertaken during autumn 2004 by NCSL's Research Group, identified more than 25 headteachers who held such a title.

This study contributes to that emerging picture by studying the work of a small number of secondary/special school heads who have taken on the 'executive' responsibility for more than one school. We recognise that this is only one manifestation of 'executive headship' and are seeking to gain further insights into this area of school leadership. The relationship between the schools in this study was of a supportive capacity in all but one instance.

The study aimed to investigate the ways in which executive headship contributes to school improvement and system leadership. The overarching research questions for the project were:

- In what ways does executive headship build leadership capacity?
- What can our sample of eight individuals tell us about developing system level leadership?
- Is this approach to leadership transferable?
- As a feature of 'system leadership', what does executive headship offer?
- What conditions are necessary for success?
- What does the work of executive headship involve?

A team from the College's research department investigated these questions through semi-structured interviews with eight executive heads in English schools. The NCSL team comprised two former headteachers and two experienced researchers.

Preparation

All but one of the executive heads in this study was approached to take on the role in response to significant weakness, or loss of confidence in the 'partner' school. In some circumstances the association was linked with reorganisation and/or a move to create an academy to replace the failing school. Almost all approaches therefore came from the LEA, although there was also DfES involvement in some cases.

One common factor was that, for most of the partner schools, the situation was so extreme that, without some strategic support in the form of executive head/team role, necessary changes would be unachievable within the necessary timescales. All respondents took time to consider the proposal in relation to the specific partner school. One had taken his existing leadership team to look at the school before considering and agreeing. Another had sent in a team to prepare a report which he then considered with them. This arrangement enabled him to retain objective optimism unmuddied by direct observation.

The pre-conditions for involvement related both to the respondents' personal capacities, records, reputations and state of professional readiness; and to the readiness of their own schools.

Motivation

The reasons given for taking on an executive role varied from a strong altruistic drive; the need for new challenges and/or the need for more development and fulfilment opportunities beyond their own headship; a way of staying 'at the cutting edge'; and pupil achievement and 'doing it for the kids'. The financial incentive did not emerge as the prime reason for their participation.

Setting the agenda

It is in the way that the executive heads have set conditions for their involvement that the group of respondents show very strong convergence. Examples of these conditions related to their own school, how they will work, money and whom they will or will not work. Without exception, they have been explicit about certain things they will, or will not accept. In some cases, this has involved some hard-edged negotiating.

None of them were prepared to work alone. Moreover in all but one instance, they were not prepared to undertake executive headship without a well-known and trusted colleague or team. This

is a powerful and recurrent theme which could be highly significant. Another important condition was about *who leaves*.

Two issues over which a number of the interviewees had been dogmatic in their setting of terms were *resources* and *freedom to act.* A final point of negotiation was about the time-limited nature of the arrangement in that they were all quite clear that a timescale and an exit strategy needed to be agreed at the outset.

Executive headship in practice

All of the executive heads viewed the purpose of their involvement to be a capacity-building role with a prime responsibility to develop a leadership team capable of transforming practice and outcomes within the partner school. While problem-solving was a significant part of their role, their responsibilities extended to developing, through coaching, the capacity of key staff to problem-solve themselves within a distributed model.

As the partner schools were predominantly seen to be failing or at least without effective leadership, the executive heads' remit was to initiate and develop the capacity for change so that key performance indicators such as results, attendance and behaviour improved to an acceptable or better level.

There was a clear statement from those interviewed that executive headship, for them, was not about 'superheadship'. Those interviewed favoured a team-based approach ensuring appropriate distribution of roles and a model in which each team member could operate effectively and be buffered from matters that would otherwise divert their attention from their core purpose. For many of those interviewed, maintaining a strategic, as opposed to an operational model was the desired approach.

A number of the executive heads described the relationship between their own school and the second school as one of adoption. Their strategic role was therefore to look at how their own school could most effectively support and build capacity within the adopted school. The use of informed networks of contacts was identified by a significant majority of executive heads as of great importance.

An assessment of the quality of learning and teaching within the school upon arrival was essential, given, in general, the schools' attainment levels. Through conducting this audit approach, decisions about how to tackle the weaknesses discovered could be addressed. Also high on their list of

priorities was the need to establish a culture of openness and trust. This often involved including others within the decision making process and taking steps to create a blame-free culture, where the mistakes of the past were recognised but seen as a basis for learning and moving forward.

Winning hearts and minds was a key theme identified by most executive heads. This was achieved through a variety of means, including celebrating success, investing in staff, coaching, making things happen, and connecting through positive but focused, relationships.

Practical support offered by the LEA was frequently accessed by the executive heads. Indeed many of these individuals clearly articulated their needs and were happy to draw upon the advice of those more knowledgeable in these areas.

Key findings

Many themes have emerged from the study, some of which have policy relevance or give rise to further enquiries. In relation to our original research questions, we found the following, based on the interviews we undertook:

In what ways does executive headship build leadership capacity?
All of the heads interviewed involved a team approach and we found considerable evidence of their development of leadership capacity across the schools they were involved in. While they recognised that their prime task was short-to-medium-term improvement, they all placed priority on developing and mobilising others in ways which suggested longer term capacity building.

What can our sample of eight individuals tell us about developing system-level leadership? Is this approach to leadership transferable?
Although limited in size, our study of executive heads enabled us to draw tentative conclusions about transferability and system impact.

It is apparent that, when certain conditions are met, this model can be a constructive and powerful form of school improvement that brings benefits to schools, their leaders, staff and pupils. It certainly appears to develop an ability to think big and act in larger terms, and particularly to work in the interests of pupils across a wider system, rather than for more parochial school self-interest.

However, questions remain about how appropriate or feasible it would be to apply this model widely. At this stage, it seems valid to suggest that, with clarity around the set-up agreements, a commitment both within the schools and the relevant authority, and capacity to deploy appropriate

resources, this is a potentially important way of providing significant support for schools that might otherwise need even more drastic action.

Given the characteristics of the heads we interviewed, it seems likely that there would be a limited number of such leaders who could expand their responsibilities in this way.

What conditions are necessary for success?

Critical factors for a successful operation of this model include a very clearly worked out agreement at the beginning of the relationship, the involvement of a team approach rather than an individual contribution, a time-limited arrangement and capacity within both the executive head and their school.

What does the work of executive headship involve?

From the responses it seems that it is important for heads to step out from day-to-day engagement with the school, and to make use of both external networking skills and internal coaching and mentoring approaches. This is combined with a clarity or simplicity of focus. While it may seem that these are features of good leadership generally, the study suggests that there is greater focus on these aspects in the work of executive heads.

This report serves therefore to raise awareness of executive headship and its enactment. While small-scale in scope, it nevertheless raises issues for consideration in relation to the nature of the role, the contexts in which it is located, the individuals attracted to undertake it, and its relationship to both models of school improvement and system leadership. It serves further as a springboard for advice/guidance which could be made more widely available.

With thanks

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References

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Further reading

DfES Federations website: http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/federations/