

# **BELMAS Research Programme: Leadership Preparation and Development**

## **An investigation into leadership preparation in two primary schools**

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### **Background and Theoretical Framework**

In a career of over thirty years in education, much of my work has focussed on the practice of leadership in developing high performing schools and colleges. Although my specialist area is secondary and further education, I have worked closely alongside heads primary schools of all sizes, and I am currently a member of the governing body of two primary schools. My experiences as a governor have caused me to think more deeply about the purpose, practice and preparation for primary school leadership in different settings. At a time when local authorities are diminishing in their role as 'supporters and challengers' of schools, and new forms of support, such as federations, chains and academy trusts, are developing, informal discussions with heads of very small schools have suggested concern that there is a lack of understanding about the role of leadership in a very small school and that leadership development for heads of very small schools is being overlooked. I therefore set out to consider in some detail at the nature of the headship role in two schools of very different sizes and to compare and contrast practice.

The study initially involved two schools: School S: a small rural primary school with 45 pupils on roll, judged outstanding by Ofsted in its inspection on 2012. The head had been in post for 4 years and this was her first headship. In addition to the head, there was one full time teacher, with aspirations for headship and one part time teacher. The school employed one part time office assistant, a teaching assistant and a part time cleaner. There were a number of volunteers, mainly parents who supported the school in a range of activities.

School L: a large urban primary school with 450 pupils on roll. The school received a 'good' rating in its inspection report at the end of 2011. The school's management structure included two assistant heads, heads of phase and subject coordinators. The total staffing amounted to over 35 posts. During the course of the research the head of school L retired and was replaced by a temporary executive head, who was also the head of another large primary school in the city. This head had previously been head of a small rural school and this provided an unplanned opportunity to investigate his experiences in very different sized schools.

The research project was also extended to include the management team of his substantive school.

Both schools serve a genuinely mixed socio economic intake.

## **Objectives and Research Questions**

The main objective was to undertake an in depth examination of the understanding of leadership, leadership preparation and leadership development of the current head teachers, and of aspiring leaders within the schools outlined above, with the intention of comparing and contrasting the understanding, experiences and opportunities for leadership development.

It was envisaged that this would lead to a consideration of the extent to which there are or could be similar principles, approaches and experiences across the schools and whether there are necessary differences.

The study also aimed to consider the extent to which existing approaches to leadership preparation are perceived to be relevant and effective for different school sizes and settings.

## **Key Research Questions**

1. What do the current and aspiring leaders understand as primary school leadership? In particular, the relationship between pedagogical leadership, organisational ( administrative ) leadership and people leadership.
2. What development opportunities are and have been available to them?
3. What opportunities are taken up and the reasons for take up/non take up of opportunities
4. The nature and role of externally provided leadership development opportunities ( eg NCSL, LA, other providers) and the responses to these.
5. The role of informal professional support and development including networks or communities both within and outside the school.
6. The role of the existing Head teacher in leadership preparation and development of aspiring leaders.
7. The impact of leadership development on the school ( what changes are introduced, if any) and on pupil outcomes.
8. A consideration of what works according to school size and context.
9. The relationship between leadership preparation activity and appointments to senior positions.

## **Methodology**

The main approach to data collection was through semi structured, in depth interviews with the head teacher, senior staff and aspiring leaders in each school. Interviews were focussed on the key research questions and were open ended in order to capture a wide range of relevant intelligence. Discussions with the heads focussed on their own experiences of the route to headship, and how they were supporting aspiring heads in their own leadership development. Much of the discussion, particularly in School S, focussed on the day to day work of the head and the nature of the role in comparison with headship in a larger school. In addition the most recent Ofsted reports of the schools were scrutinised and a brief desk based analysis of existing approaches to school leadership development was considered in the light of the research findings.

In depth interviews with the head teachers and senior staff were recorded and transcribed. The interviews revealed a rich source of information about the nature of headship in primary schools of different sizes and highlighted a number of themes to be explored.

For a period of over one year, and still continuing, close and regular contact was maintained with the schools. This included numerous meetings with the heads and senior staff, Chairs of Governors and the wider Governing body of each school, and local authority officers, including children's advocates, senior officer with responsibility for primary schools and a LA academies officer, as well as a representative from a multi academy trust. In addition, reports arising from the heads' performance reviews and action plans were scrutinised,

## **Key Findings**

The key findings from this research project can be summarised as follows:

- i. Findings from this small study suggest that, although the role of primary head has the same purpose and statutory responsibilities in schools of all sizes, the day to day enactment of the role differs enormously between schools of very different sizes. The head of the large school managed through systems and delegation, freeing himself up to concentrate on strategic issues, external relationships and 'political' positioning, and monitoring progress against the school plan. In contrast, the head of the small school was very 'hands on', answering the telephone, the doorbell, clearing snow, dealing with pupil illness, and whatever other small crisis arose during the day. However, because of the small number of pupils, she knew the abilities and performance of each of them

extremely well and was also able to monitor teaching, assessment and pupil progress on a day to day basis.

- ii. The role of the head teacher in supporting the development of future and aspiring school leaders was deemed to be critical, and increasingly so in a context which has seen the diminution of the role of local authorities as providers of development opportunities. The interest, support and commitment of the head was seen by all interviewees as being the most critical factor in preparing staff for leadership. Where there was no support for this, or no real commitment to enable aspiring heads to try out their developing leadership skills, the development of aspiring leaders was severely limited.
- iii. The head teacher was seen by all senior staff as the key player in leadership development because it is they who act as a role model, mentor, gatekeeper, professional expert, coach and is a powerful determinant in relation to an individual's future career
- iv. Although both heads had themselves experienced professional development opportunities, such as NPQH and local authority courses, both reported that they had gained the most benefit from being coached and mentored by their own head teachers in previous schools. This was said to be particularly useful when the possibility was given to take on new responsibilities with the knowledge that they would be supported by their heads. In one case, this was linked to the undertaking of a management course through a local university which enabled the head to reflect on theoretical aspects of headship at the same time as undertaking practical leadership tasks.
- v. The role of the head in a very small school is in many ways comparable with that of a head of a family. The head of school S described her position as 'a sort of 'mother' role' where relationships were key to success. Indeed, the emotional dimension of leadership was seen as a key and necessary component of the role by both heads, but there was a greater emphasis on close working relationships in the very small school.
- vi. The head of school L saw his role as being more similar to that of a chief executive and compared this with his previous headship position in a small rural school where he felt that relationships were more important but that there was a need to retain professional distance.
- vii. In both schools, the heads' values and vision were seen by the heads themselves and by senior staff as critical to the success of the school, and essential for the morale and commitment of the staff, their development and the quality of the pupils' learning.
- viii. There was very a strong and shared view across all interviewees that an understanding of learning and teaching is central to the role of the head. Both heads placed a great deal of emphasis on the leadership of learning and saw this as the prime focus of their role. This was echoed by the senior staff in both schools.

- ix. The 'technical' organisational aspects of school leadership are relevant in all settings and are necessary regardless of school size. These include budgets and financial management, estates, governance, health and safety etc. Aspiring heads from both schools recognised that, as teachers, even after several years of management experience, they were not equipped for the technical aspects of the role and needed to be tutored or coached in such areas. Since technical skills were not covered in leadership development programmes, such as those offered by NCSL, and local authority provision had been dramatically reduced, the heads of both schools saw it necessary to develop their staff internally.
- iv. Both heads took the view that the position of head of a very small school was seen as less prestigious than headship of a large school, and that there was insufficient understanding, across the wider community of the specific pressures of very small school leadership.
- v. Both heads reported that there was no specific development to prepare for headship in a very small school.
- vi. There appears to be no clear career progression for heads of very small schools. A frequent practice is to move to the headship of a larger school, although this has the potential to leave small schools in a vulnerable position, with a stream of new heads 'cutting their teeth' and then moving on. The head of School S expressed a strong wish to ensure that her school continued to improve and had set this as her career goal. It is evident that, particularly in very small schools, there is a potential conflict between personal ambition and ambition for the school.
- vii. Very small schools are likely to have difficulty in finding sufficient staff resource to enable them to participate in developments such as teaching schools alliances or collaborative partnerships which require attendance at meetings during the day. The acute lack of resources (in terms of time and money) in the very small school meant that there was effectively no flexibility to release a staff member to undertake leadership development. The only full time teacher, herself an aspiring head, had full responsibility for Key Stage 2 pupils, in addition to various curriculum leadership responsibilities, and spent every evening running 'after school' activities. If she were to be released from teaching duties, the head would have to step in to cover the teaching as there were insufficient resources to pay for cover. There was also a commitment to avoid pupil disruption where possible. This made it extremely difficult for the head and aspiring leader to spend time together during the working day and beyond on professional development activity, such as coaching, or on technical management aspects such as the school budget, or HR requirements.
- viii. The lack of flexibility in the very small school prevented the school from engaging in collaborative or network activity with other schools for the reasons stated above. In a context of tight financial constraints, the local authority was encouraging schools to collaborate in order to explore opportunities for shared services, and increased curriculum opportunities. However, the resources required for collaboration are often overlooked; collaboration requires a

considerable investment of time in order to build solid relationships where developments will succeed. Opportunities to be part of development such as 'teaching schools' were severely limited owing to resource constraints.

- ix. The aspiring head in school S undertook development opportunities in her own time: this included meetings with heads of other small schools and moderating for the local authority.
- x. Small schools are often favoured by parents who are keen that their children are taught in small classes, with personalised attention. School S was an excellent example of how to provide individualised pupil support, and had been judged by Ofsted to be 'outstanding'. This endorsement from Ofsted positioned the school favourably to attract additional pupils and therefore more funding. In reality this was limited by the physical capacity of the school building, so that an additional one or two pupils added to the workload of the teaching staff without offering any significant additional flexibility for professional development.
- xi. There appears to be insufficient understanding, across the wider education profession, of the day to day work of a head in a very small school, and the range of opportunities for leadership development in very small schools are extremely limited in comparison with large primary schools.
- xii. An investigation into the career opportunities and pathway of very small school heads merits further enquiry. The head of School S believes that heads of small schools are less valued than heads of larger school, and that the only means of career progression has been to move to a larger school. However, she sees progression in terms of moving forward and developing her current school - her career intention is about keeping the school at the top and ahead.
- xiii. Governing bodies in very small schools should play a stronger role in ensuring that there are appropriate leadership preparation and development opportunities both for heads and aspiring heads, especially in assisting them to develop a more strategic overview of headship.
- xiv. The transition from small school headship to that in a larger school ( and vice versa) will require the leader to adopt a different approach in the day to day enactment of the leadership role. The head of School L had successfully made the transition from a very small to a large school, but in doing so found it necessary to change his leadership approach and style, becoming more 'hands off' and strategic. Whilst there may be an element of personal preference in terms of leadership style it would appear to be virtually impossible for the head of a very small school, such as the one in this study, to take a more strategic and less hands off approach.

### **Implications for Theory and Policy**

Over the last ten years or so, there has been a decline in the number of primary schools with fewer than 100 pupils and an increase in the numbers of very large primary schools. Southworth reports that in the 1990s very many small primary

schools were under threat of closure, and indeed many did close, particularly in rural areas.

Nevertheless some local authorities retained a policy of trying to keep open small primary schools and School S in this study was one that escaped closure and has over the last 15 years or so doubled in size, owing to an increase in the birthrate within the immediate local area.

In choosing a primary schools, some parents look for a very small school, on the basis that it can offer a better and more personalised experience to individual pupils. Certainly, the small school head in this study was able to do this and further work is required to determine the extent to which the head's high visibility within school, personal knowledge and relationship with individual pupils, and the intense focus on individual pupil performance is a key factor in the high achievement of pupils. If so, how far is this replicable, and are there leadership lessons for large primary schools?

The findings also raise questions about future approaches to leadership development in small schools in the light of current policy. As local authorities lose their traditional roles as convenors of small school head teacher networks and providers of support and development, there appears to be a danger that small schools will lose leadership support because they do not (yet?) easily fit into emerging arrangements such as teaching schools alliances, multi academy trusts and federations. Evidence from this study indicates that the culture, focus and understanding of these emerging organisations do not encompass that of a very small school. Consideration, therefore, needs to be given to the most effective and efficient means of preparing for leadership of a very small school and for future progression pathways.

Finally, in the light of developments arising from the performance of each school in the Key Stage 2 performance tables ( see below), it is evident that the reputation of the school head and the future of the school can be determined on the basis of an unfair and uninformed comparison in national media. This is an important issue for all school leaders, and as it may be a contributory factor in the shortage of primary school heads , it should be considered carefully at national level.

## **Future Plans**

I began with the intention of comparing and contrasting the approach to and practice of leadership, and its preparation and development in two schools of very contrasting sizes. It is clear that there are significant differences both in leadership practice and in the perception of leadership and I became keen to research this in more depth, particularly since there appears to be little focus on leadership in extremely small schools, which currently do not feature prominently in the unfolding educational landscape.

However, as the research progressed, events unfolded, summarised below, which have refocussed my attention towards school leadership and the roles of key players in the context of the current political agenda.

At the commencement of the research School L had been judged by Ofsted to be good and School L had been judged as outstanding. These grades included judgements about leadership.

An external 'Ofsted type' review of school L, which was commissioned by the executive head shortly after his arrival found serious failings in teaching, pupil progress and achievement, and serious weaknesses in leadership across the school. End of Key Stage results for summer 2013 were very poor resulting in the school being placed on the Secretary of State's list of failing schools. The local authority now insists that the school become a sponsored academy and threatens to remove the governing body if they do not agree to this. The executive head, by now under immense pressure, not least because his own school is becoming vulnerable to failure, owing to the prolonged absence of senior staff and under pressure from his governing body to return, has decided that he is no longer in a position to continue at school L. However, despite a number of 'searches' a replacement head has not yet been identified and the current arrangement will continue at least until the end of January.

At the same time School S has gained national recognition for its outstanding pupil achievement and is top of the primary school performance tables. This has created considerable media attention and pressure on the school ( and particularly the head) to maintain its position in the future.

The project forms a good basis for a longitudinal study, to track the development of leaders and the schools as they respond to policy and media pressures as well as to examine the nature and impact of leadership preparation, development and enactment in different school sizes and settings over a longer period, which may attract other sources of funding

### **Related Papers and Presentations**

Paper to BELMAS August 2013. It is intended that a more detailed paper be produced and disseminated to BELMAS members, Local Authorities and other interested organisations.

### **Bibliography**

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