National College
for School Leadership

Research Associate Report

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Resource

What attributes and skills are required for executive headship of federations?

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Contents

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Abstract

The role of executive headteacher is one that is expanding in the English education system as federations and other models of leadership that include collaboration develop. This study revisited an earlier piece of research undertaken by Barnes (2006) on the role of six executive headteachers within the primary phase. The research, conducted in six different federations across the country, built on Barnes's (2006) earlier research in order to gain a wider insight into the role of executive headship in these contexts, focusing on the skills and attributes used in this role. A member of the senior leadership team was also interviewed to add validity to the data gathered from the executive headteachers.

This study found that the first three of the six key skills and attributes identified by Barnes and listed below were still very evident. These were:

1. strategic thinking

2. exhibiting faith in others (trust)

3. developing positive relationships

4. optimism

5. resilience

6. modelling

The latter three while implicit in aspects of this study, were not explicitly stated. However, three more key skills and attributes were present, namely: communication, strong vision and self-belief. This report concludes that executive heads in this study demonstrated a common set of skills and attributes and there is some correlation between these, Barnes's study and those found in other relevant publications. It is hoped that this report's findings help develop knowledge and understanding of the executive headteacher role and the skills and attributes required by these leaders. Its findings might also inform future leadership development provision for executive headteachers of federations.

Introduction

Over the last eight years the number of executive headteachers[1] has grown substantially in England. A review of executive headship (National College, 2010:6) estimated that there were 25 executive headteachers in 2004 and that by January 2010 this number had grown to an estimated 450, meaning there are now 18 times more executive headteachers than there were 7 years ago.

The election of a coalition government in April 2010 shifted the educational landscape. In the education white paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (HM Government, 2010), the ongoing imperative to ensure the supply of headteachers was clearly stated:

> As one in four head teachers is due to retire in the next three years, it is vital that we secure the supply of head teachers in the future and give them the training and support that they need.

<div align="right">HM Government, 2010:26</div>

This aligns with the 'deterioration of appointments across the primary and special school sectors' highlighted in the 2010 Howson report in which unfilled headteacher posts in the primary sector rose from 26 per cent in 2009 to 34 per cent in 2010, and from 29 per cent in 2009 to 43 per cent in the special school sector (Howson & Sprigade, 2010:13).

With declining numbers of successful headteacher appointments in primary and special schools and 25 per cent of headteachers scheduled to retire in the next 3 years, the need for more school leaders whether these be headteachers of one school or executive headteachers leading more than one school appears evident. The government's acknowledgement that executive headteachers are part of the solution to this demographic challenge in primary schools is identified in the remit letter to the National College from the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, for 2011-12:

> I would like the College to consider how to identify and develop talented individuals in the primary sector who have the potential over time to take on headship and executive headship roles.

<div align="right">DfE, 2011:2</div>

Gove also mentions that the College should include in its focus, 'making the best use of existing school leaders who have the capacity and capability to run more than one school' (ibid:2).

There is dual imperative therefore to talent-spot future executive headteachers and deploy existing headteachers to take on positions that could include executive headteacher posts. This, it could be argued, requires in part a consideration of both the demands of such executive roles and the attributes and skills required of those filling them.

In order to understand the attributes and skills of an executive headteacher, we first need to consider the context in which these appointments are being made.

The National College publication, *School Leadership Today* (2009) explains the barriers potential headteachers feel about taking up the position. The report states that many teachers do not want to become heads 'because they are concerned about the stress, risk and time demands of the job' (National College, 2009:14). This view is further supported in the report, *What are we learning about... NPQH graduates* (National College, 2008), which gathered data on the views of leaders who have passed the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) but had not taken on a headship role.

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1   As in the National College (2010:6) report on executive headship, this title is defined here as 'Any headteacher role that has some kind of lead managerial responsibility for more than one school.'

Their report highlighted that the number one barrier to NPQH graduates taking on the role of headteacher was a concern that their work-life balance would be inhibited by the step up to headship.

The government's education white paper, *The Importance of Teaching* also highlights this issue, stating:

> And headteachers consistently tell us that their ability to lead their school is constrained by the burdens of bureaucracy, legislation and central guidance, making headship much less attractive for the next generation.

HM Government, 2010:20

However, could we just be seeing the end of the traditional role of headteacher as we know it? Certainly the role of executive headteacher seems to be here to stay and there is support for this assertion:

> The trend in the number of executive heads is likely to continue upwards rather than downwards. Executive headship is not some passing fad or transient policy initiative. It is becoming an integral feature of the school system in England.

National College, 2010:13

The Education Act 2002 (section 24) began the process of enabling schools to work more collaboratively with each other under the umbrella of federation. More often, hard federations (two or more schools sharing a single governing body) have been used to support one school when it is failing (Barnes, 2006:3), although there are other reasons for federating, including the inability to recruit a headteacher.

Since then, the system has witnessed the development of a range of models of leadership and school organisation including chains of schools (Hill, 2010) and trusts (National College, 2010). Some of these are characterised by being led by executive headteachers. However, what are the skills and attributes that such executive headteachers demonstrate in post? If there is, as has been stated, an imperative to talent-spot and develop such leaders, knowing the skills and attributes required would, one could argue, need to be at the core of this, as well as knowing the organisational and strategic demands that are likely be placed upon their leadership and management.

What are the key attributes and skills of an executive headteacher leading a federation?

The research presented here focuses on the role of the executive headteacher and looks to analyse the view that a separate set of skills is needed to enable an executive headteacher to become successful when leading a federated school. The earlier work of Barnes (2006:30) built on previous research to define six key attributes:

1. strategic thinking

2. exhibiting faith in others (trust)

3. developing positive relationships

4. optimism

5. resilience

6. modelling

This study builds on this work by revisiting these skills and attributes to ascertain whether they remain crucial and relevant in today's schools.

Literature review

There is a growing body of evidence and research on the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of federations, much of it by the National College. There is, however, very little on the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the executive headteacher. Federations and other collaborative arrangements are becoming increasingly common in organising schools in response to a range of government drives and contextual factors, including succession planning, small schools and addressing failing schools. This suggests there are 137 groups of institutions involved in collaboration, of which 15 are confirmed hard federations and 23 soft federations. A recent Freedom of Information request to the DfE confirmed there are now 202 school involved in confederations[2].

The former Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2009) provided guidance on federation which put the case for the benefits of federating schools and employing executive headteachers by suggesting:

> School collaboration is at the heart of the 21st century schools' vision of meeting the needs of every child, young person, their families and the wider community.

DCSF, 2009:10

The Independent Study into School Leadership by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) also highlighted the case for federating schools but adopts a more radical approach to executive headship by suggesting that future school leaders may not necessarily need to be from an educational background or even hold qualified teacher status.

The main focus of previous research into executive headship centred on defining the day-to-day skills needed by executive headteachers to run multiple schools. Michael Fullan (2003) supports identification of the key skills and attributes of executive headteachers and leaders in general. He developed the link between the skills and attributes needed by leaders in education and business when quoting the work of the Hay Group. He wrote:

> A study by the Hay Group compared the leadership characteristics of 100 highly successful leaders in business with 100 highly successful headteachers. The research revealed that both sets of leaders had a lot in common: "Headteachers perform well, both in comparison to their counterparts in private business and against the expectations of staff" (Hay Management Consultants, 2000, p3). From this study, the Hay Group identified five characteristics of effectiveness: teamwork and developing others; drive and confidence; vision and accountability; influencing tactics and politics; and thinking styles (i.e., the big picture).

Fullan, 2003:3

Fullan (2005) went on to make this link more explicit in his work on the key attributes of system leaders. He first defined the attributes of system leadership 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

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2   For the benefit of this study, confederated schools are defined as groups of local schools that work collectively.

- commitment to building lateral capacity through collaboration and networking

Although system leadership is not confined to executive headship, this set of attributes is helpful in our consideration of this role.

Kouzes and Posner (2007:64) defined five practices of exemplary leaders which, to some extent, correlate with those defined by Fullan, namely:

- model the way

- inspire a shared vision

- challenge the process

- enable others to act

- encourage the heart

The research of Barnes (2006) highlighted the key list of skills and attributes as defined by the executive headteachers:

- 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

This list formed the basis of Barnes's six key attributes (strategic thinking, optimism, resilience, modelling, exhibiting faith in others (trust), and developing positive relationships), but contains many other aspects, some of which were supported in the work of Leithwood et al (2006:6) in their research on *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*. They suggest that almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices and define them as four core practices:

- building vision and setting direction

- understanding and developing people

- redesigning the organisation

- managing the teaching and learning programme

In a report on the leadership of hard federations of small primary schools, Ireson (2007) mirrored some of Barnes's key attributes, stating that executive headteachers possessed the following attributes:

> These heads were certainly not 'hero' or 'heroine'-style characters, but each had very similar characteristics. They all had an extremely positive outlook; they looked for creative solutions to issues by regularly thinking 'outside the box'. They carefully, constantly and deliberately analysed their contexts and were comfortable and confident about 'letting go' of their leadership.

Ireson, 2007:9

The study also reported that all the executive headteachers interviewed held an 'overriding moral imperative that federating was the right thing to do.'(Ireson, 2007:9). This sentiment is echoed in nearly all of the research into federations and the reasons why headteachers chose to become executive heads, and clearly tells us something about their personality type.

More recently, the report into executive headship (National College, 2010) identified eight skills which executive headteachers interviewed highlighted themselves:

1. operating at a more strategic level

2. getting the balance right between standardisation and respecting difference

3. being even-handed between schools

4. staying focused on performance

5. developing and practising interpersonal skills

6. working closely with governors

7. communicating effectively

8. developing personal resilience

It is evident that, looking across the range of skills and attributes defined in these studies that there are strong similarities. This is shown in Table 1, in which similar key skills and attributes are compared (note – only those where there is evidence of similarity have been included).

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Table 1: Skills and attributes defined in the literature

Barnes (2006)	Ireson (2007)	National College (2010)	Kouzes & Posner (2007)	Leithwood et al (2006)
Modelling			Model the way	
Strategic thinking		Operating at a more strategic level		
Optimism	Extremely positive outlook			
Resilience		Developing personal resilience		
Exhibiting faith in others (trust)	Comfortable and confident about 'letting go' of their leadership		Enable others to act	Understanding and developing people
Developing positive relationships		Developing and practising interpersonal skills	Encourage the heart	Understanding and developing people
Strong visioning abilities			Inspired a shared vision	Building vision and setting direction
Insightful and intuitive	They looked for creative solutions to issues by regularly thinking 'outside the box'		Challenge the process	Redesigning the organisation
Able to diagnose effectively	Carefully, constantly and deliberately analysed their contexts		Challenge the process	
Telling and selling skills – the ability to select appropriately to meet a situation's requirements Negotiation		Communicating effectively	Encourage the heart	

Note: Columns 1,2 and 3 refer to skills and attributes defined for executive headteachers.

This initial review of some of the relevant literature provides a basis to consider the skills and attributes that were found in this study.

Methodology

This research adopted an interview-based approach and attempts to understand the personal skills and attributes of the executive headteachers studied and how this affected their ability to lead their federations successfully. The data for this research was gathered by interviewing six executive headteachers from a range of different contexts nationally and comparing their responses with a range of questions based on their strategic and operational leadership and management, as well as their personal attributes.

As well as interviewing the executive headteacher at each of these schools, a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) was also interviewed to gather their views of the skills and attributes held by the executive headteachers. The SLT member was asked the same set of questions as the executive headteacher. The executive headteachers selected for this study are currently in charge of a wide range of different primary schools. There were two small village federations, one in the south west and one in Surrey, one large secondary–junior school federation in Kent, an infant school federation in Surrey, and a pioneering junior-infant school federation in Hampshire which was the first in the county.

Each of the six schools studied had a very different leadership structure and the executive headteachers spanned a range of ages and represented both genders.

Findings

Background: the distance to here

The procedure for appointing executive headteachers varies greatly depending on the local authority involved and the individual needs of the partner schools. It is clear from the research that there is very much a local model to hard federations and how they are formed and this is dependent on many contributing factors.

In order to fully understand the skills and attributes of the executive headteachers, it is important to understand the contexts in which these federations took place, so these are outlined below. For the six schools in this study, the hard federation process was initially instigated for one of two reasons. The first was geographical and based on an inability to successfully recruit a headteacher or a threat posed to the long-term survival of the school because of its rural location and lack of significant pupil numbers. The second was related to the performance in one of the schools. Each of these issues is explored in more detail below.

Headteacher recruitment

Difficulties with headteacher recruitment was the cause of three of the six schools studied becoming a hard federation. Each of these schools was located in a very different area but each found itself in the same position. All of the schools had tried to recruit a headteacher unsuccessfully and were small village schools in close proximity to a school in a similar position.

In each of these schools, the trigger to begin the federation process was the fear that one of the schools would close in order for the others to be maintained. This presented a major challenge for the headteachers in both schools as they were effectively unsure of the immediate future of their own school. In this situation, the pressure to recruit was even more immediate and as a result more problematic. One of the schools had advertised for more than a year and was unable to make an appointment. The school was seen very much as the centre of the local community and there was hesitancy from the governing body to go for a quick fix which did not have longevity and might create a more unsustainable situation than the one that currently existed. The governors considered they had to balance the long-term stability of the school with the future career development of any potential headteacher. They were unwilling to appoint a headteacher they judged would only be in post for a short space of time before moving on to another post.

In this scenario, the decision to federate was more straightforward and resulted in a win-win situation for both the school and the local authority. A local deputy headteacher with established links to the local community, who was working in a local junior school that had been judged good with outstanding features, was appointed headteacher to one of the schools with the specific intention that he would take on the executive headteacher role when the headteacher of the other school retired.

The process of this appointment clearly shows the emphasis placed on the development of leadership in both the local authority and the school's governing body. The foresight to make an appointment with a future federation in mind was uncommon in this research but demonstrated a clear and open view of leadership in the future.

In another case, the process of failing to recruit a headteacher was exacerbated by the close proximity of a very similar school. The school was located in a socially deprived town centre less than a mile from a similarly sized infant school. The headteachers in both schools left their posts within a term of each other and each school had been unable to recruit a replacement. The governing body of one of the schools suggested federation to the other and the appointment of an executive headteacher was made the following term.

This was a similar situation to another school in the study which was also very close to an almost identical school. Both were in a small village outside a large town and even though each school had a headteacher,

there was difficulty maintaining both schools due to their respective sizes. This led to the two schools temporarily hard federating with a view to the schools amalgamating during the next academic year.

Schools in difficult circumstances

The other schools used for this research were federated with schools close to them that were either in special measures or had been given a notice to improve by Ofsted. In these federations, the lead school had already had some input into the failing school, either through targeted support or the local confederation. In the three cases in which schools federated in such circumstances, the governing bodies were approached by the local authority and asked if they would consider federating with the failing school. The current headteachers were then approached to become executive headteachers and all accepted. In these three examples, it is important to note that the headteachers who were in the lead schools were already in post and did not need to be recruited externally.

One of the three schools federated in this way had been closed by the local authority and reopened under the then government's Fresh Start scheme. It was located in an area of high social deprivation and federated with an outstanding local infant school. Another was a large secondary school which federated with a local junior school in special measures. In this federation, the headteacher had been working as a school improvement partner (SIP) with the school before being asked to take on the executive headship. The final federation involved a very successful school in an area of substantial social deprivation. Initially, this school federated with a failing local junior school of equal size and demographic status but expanded this arrangement to include a second school the following year. The school has since added a third school so there are now four schools within the federation.

Interview analysis

The focus of the interviews was on three key areas:

— strategic leadership

— operational management

— personal skills and attributes required of an executive headteacher

The sections below focus on these in turn.

Strategic leadership

The focus of the first section of questions was to see if there were any significant differences between the role of executive headteacher as opposed to a single-school headteacher. Each of the six executive headteachers responded very similarly to this question. They all felt that essentially the job was the same but the way the job was carried out as an executive headteacher was significantly different to a substantive single-school headteacher.

There were four key areas that arose, in terms of strategic leadership, from the interviews undertaken and each of those is explored in the sub-sections below. These were:

— communication

— commitment to developing others

— strong vision

— self-belief

Again, it is relevant to consider the six key attributes, as identified by Barnes (2006), when examining the data gathered from the interviews. They were:

— strategic thinking

- optimism

- resilience

- modelling

- exhibiting faith in others (trust)

- developing positive relationships

The interviews with SLT members substantially mirrored the comments from the executive headteachers. This reflects a strong correlation between the two sets of interviewees throughout the interviews.

Communication

> "I try and be available as much as I can which means I can get very little work done during the day because I concentrate on meeting people and giving them some time. But that's everyone you know, from cleaners up to senior managers."

<div align="right">Executive headteacher 1</div>

For all the executive headteachers interviewed, the key to successful leadership of the federation was communication. Each spoke at length about being skilled at communicating with a range of different people and that they had to talk more than they did when they were a single-school headteacher. All had been headteachers for a number of years at a single school prior to taking on the role of executive headteacher. While communication was evident both at strategic and operational levels, it was raised by interviewees firstly in response to strategic-level questions and so is included in the findings at this level. It has therefore not been raised again in the later section on operational leadership, although it was a key element of this.

Heads reflected on the strategic nature of communication and how this led to a successful structure for their school situations. They felt they were able to establish systems of communications which were grounded not only in the day-to-day running of their schools but were focused on the strategic direction of the federation rather than just one individual school. The need for clear communication with the school leaders in each of the organisations they were responsible for was a key to their ongoing success:

> "The first and very important thing was for us to get a line of communication established, that worked and allowed us to talk to each other quickly."

<div align="right">Executive headteacher 2</div>

The value placed on this communication cannot be underestimated as it was the one thing that many of the executive headteachers said they prioritised above everything else. Often they would shift other meetings, courses or personal appointments to ensure meetings with key personnel happened regularly. In the case of one executive headteacher, this often meant three to four meetings a week with all the members of the SLTs from both schools. This was a huge commitment of time and he reported that he would often work 12 hours a day for 5 days a week to ensure he fulfilled his commitment to liaise with everyone thoroughly.

This communication was not solely undertaken through face-to-face meetings. All of the executive headteachers used the technology available to them to ensure they were available whenever they were needed. It was common for each to communicate with the head of school[3] by phone, text or email at least half a dozen times a day at each of the schools in their federation.

Commitment to developing others

> "Building the leadership capacity within the school was key to the success of our federation."

<div align="right">Executive headteacher 2</div>

The second key aspect to strategic leadership was developing leaders in the federated schools. All executive headteachers placed a huge emphasis on developing the leadership and management skills of the head of

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3   The term 'head of school' is used in the study to denote the operational leader of the school(s) for whom the executive headteacher was line manager. Each of the schools had this leadership system in place and the heads reflected that it enabled them to run the school they were based in more effectively.

school, and SLT of the partner school. Again, this raises an important issue in relation to the six attributes Barnes (2006) identified. Only two of the six executive headteachers had appointed their own head of school. The other four had inherited an existing member of staff during the federation process and in two of the cases, this leader was from the partner school and of whom the executive headteacher had no professional experience.

In the study by Barnes one of the six key attributes of being a successful executive headteacher was the ability to 'exhibit faith in others (trust)'. This was pivotal to the running of federations in this research. Each of the executive headteachers talked at length about the relationship they had not just with the head of school, but with the SLTs in both organisations. The strategic element of this relationship involved the executive headteacher sharing his or her vision for both schools as well as developing the leaders in each. In a traditional single-school model this typically applies to the headteacher-deputy headteacher relationship whereas it encompassed a broader range of leaders in federated models, with heads of school carrying out a wider role than a deputy would normally be expected to.

In federated schools, the executive headteacher is often able to work with a larger group of leaders and have a wider strategic impact on their development. This model was clearly in evidence in the secondary-junior school federation used in this research. The model of leadership and management, implemented by the current executive headteacher, included an overarching transformation team, which had a brief across all three schools in the federation. This worked as a 'schools within schools' model and allowed for an 'economy of scale' among leadership staff. The transformation team met regularly with the executive headteacher to lead strategically across every aspect of the federation. The executive headteacher was able to work specifically with individual members of this team and shape the learning and development of its members as future leaders. The context of this school made this easier to facilitate than some of the smaller village schools used in this study but essentially the interviews showed the principle was the same. Leaders were developed through coaching from the headteacher allied to an increase in responsibility brought on by having a greater input into the strategic leadership of all schools in the federation. As one executive headteacher said:

"I see all of these senior leaders as potential headteachers, that's what I employed them on. They have to be forward thinking, all of them."

Executive headteacher 2

This point cannot be underestimated as it was a lengthy part of each interview. Another executive headteacher emphasised this point:

"I do think it all comes down to the people you have in your team. It is a team approach, not just me as an executive headteacher in that role. I could not do my job without a strong team around me. So I think growing your own leaders and sustainability has to be built in to what we do."

Executive headteacher 3

Developing leaders was a key strategy for all the executive headteachers interviewed. Their focus was in essence a simple one: they selected, where possible, leaders they felt they could trust to implement their strategic vision for the school on a day-to-day basis and recognised potential in order to develop them to become successful leaders. This allowed them to shape and develop the senior leaders within the federation. The ability to recognise this potential and then develop it was a skill all of the executive headteachers shared and was supported in the interviews by members of the SLTs. All of these senior leaders talked about the impact the executive headteacher had had on their own leadership and, more strategically, how they saw their future development within the system in which they currently worked. One in particular summed up this key skill as he saw it deployed by his executive headteacher:

"She has people in key positions of leadership who she works very well with and knows will be good leaders. There are people in the school who she has identified and said 'we can move that person onto leadership' and she's now working closely with them to achieve that."

SLT member

Strong vision

> "We are the kind of federation that isn't a personality driven federation, we are very much the lessons are the same, the timetables are the same, everything is the same. We are like Sainsbury's."

Executive headteacher 2

The third key factor relating to strategic leadership was sharing a vision. This was seen most clearly in one of the federations that included three schools. In this federation, there was one executive headteacher who held a very clear vision for each of the federated schools:

> "We are very explicit about how we want things done. When teachers get frustrated and when schools fail it is because teachers don't have a clear enough vision of what things should look like. What matters is that there is an order and everyone has to stick to that because the minute you deviate from that you'll start to fail the children."

Executive headteacher 2

This was a view shared by all the executive headteachers. In each school the vision was shared with the staff in a very similar way. This usually involved using an in-service training (Inset) day for all staff at the beginning of the autumn term, and focusing on the vision for all schools in the federation as well as setting targets for the year. In one of the federations this was a huge logistical undertaking as it involved every member of staff from all 3 schools which equated to well over 200 people. The importance of this approach was felt to be key to ensuring that expectations were clear and accountabilities were established for all to see.

Setting the vision was a key skill shared by all the executive headteachers. The most effective means through which they could judge the success of their vision's implementation also drew consensus. All pointed to the external validation which came through visits by external improvement partners and Ofsted inspections. However, they also agreed that face-to-face contact with staff members, parents and children alike gave them the greatest understanding of where the federation was succeeding and what the areas were for future development. One executive headteacher reflected on this, saying:

> "The executive headteacher's job is about having a vision for where you think the school and education should be, creating a structure, like the one we have here that will encourage that, then appointing people in those posts and making sure they do the job."

Executive headteacher 1

The executive headteacher's ability to create and share the vision was a vital skill that enabled them to make progress in what were sometimes very challenging situations. While the executive headteachers were very different in terms of vision, strategy and ideology, worked in very different areas of the country and had contrasting views of what education in their federations should look like, they all shared the same perspective on how the vision was created and how it was disseminated to staff. In addition, they recognised the importance of articulating their vision with all stakeholders and worked to make sure the vision was embedded.

Self-belief

Underpinning and contributing to these strongly held visions were high levels of personal and professional self-belief in the visions themselves and the methods and systems they created to fulfil these.

> "You've got to have quite strong beliefs that you can justify at a personal level."

Executive headteacher 6

Personal conviction was therefore central to the executive headteachers' strategic leadership. Such views came across very strongly in every interview when the executive headteachers were asked whether their model could be used in other schools locally and in the UK more generally. This fundamental belief in what they were doing was a key to both their personal motivation and also the passion they inspired among their

staff. When interviewing members of the SLT from different federations, it became clear that the executive headteachers' passion for what they were doing and how they were doing it was the single most important contributing factor to the motivation of the staff. One head of school reflected on this by saying:

> "He knows what we need to do to make it work and he is really confident in how we should move forward. That really feeds down to other people in the school as well that sense of being so driven, it really benefits everyone at the school and it gives everyone a certain amount of comfort."

<div align="right">Head of school</div>

This view was echoed by all the SLT members interviewed. In each federation, the way this belief was portrayed was different but ultimately, the outcome was the same. The executive headteachers were clear in their support for the vision and very keen to ensure this was felt by all members of the federation.

Operational management

> "I'm a very reflective person and if I'm not developing the relationships with parents I need to, I want to know why."

<div align="right">Executive headteacher 1</div>

This section of the interview was designed to develop an understanding of how the executive headteachers actually lead their federations on a day to day basis. Its focus was to see what management skills they employed in order to facilitate the running of multiple schools effectively and whether they were different to those encountered by a single-school headteacher.

Managing competing demands

All of the executive headteachers interviewed talked about the importance of being highly visible to parents, staff and children at all of the schools in their federation. This was also the biggest challenge most of them felt because it relied on a balance of timing and their inbuilt desire to give an equal share to each of their schools; what was termed 'being even-handed between schools' in the National College (2010) study of executive headteachers. This was also supported by the SLT members who were interviewed. For them, it was very important that the executive head was available to all the schools' stakeholders as often as possible. This high-profile role soon became unmanageable for the majority of executive headteachers and each one had to take what was perceived to be a difficult decision in allocating time in a different way. As one executive headteacher of a small village school commented:

> "That was fine for the first half-term but it was actually very wearing and you didn't feel like you achieved a lot when you actually got there. So I then changed it to a whole day on each site and three half-days."

<div align="right">Executive headteacher 4</div>

The consequence of this pressure of timing was a structured timetable being put in place for all the schools. Each executive headteacher talked about starting with a very fixed idea of how they would like to share their time between their schools. Initially, they all tried to be at one school for the morning to give people a chance to talk to them and then the afternoon at the other to allow the same opportunity for the other sets of parents. For many, this soon became untenable and a more formal timetabled structure needed to be introduced.

> "To start with, I went to each site every day. That was purely because I wanted the parents to see and the children to see that I was still their headteacher."

<div align="right">Executive headteacher 3</div>

This desire to be available to people as often as possible reflects a key personal attribute of the executive headteachers. There was a very obvious understanding of the importance of being high profile but also

a real awareness of the benefit it had on the school community and the success of the federation. When we refer back to the personal attributes as defined by Barnes (2006), it is clear that the skill of 'developing positive relationships' he defined is still as important today. The executive headteachers talked about the need for interpersonal skills that enabled them to create strong relationships with all the stakeholders in the federation. The executive headteachers were common in their view that having a high-profile presence on each of the sites was absolutely fundamental to enabling these relationships to develop. More formal timetable structures were therefore created, allied to an increased determination to provide everyone with access to the executive headteachers. This was clearly a system that had worked successfully in the federations that took part in this research. This approach was very strong among the executive headteachers and summed up by one:

"The visible head, which I'm having to be now, needs to be visible, needs to talk to people, needs to meet people, needs to be out and about for everyone to see."

Executive headteacher 2

Personal organisation

This key skill was referred to under each of the three areas addressed by the interview questionnaire and was closely linked to 'Managing competing demands' (discussed above). The executive headteachers were all very clear about the need for organisation when they discussed the challenges to their role. They talked about the need to be focused on the aims for each school in the federation and ensuring their personal organisation was at the level that would allow this to happen successfully. Some talked about ensuring routines were followed as much as possible in order to maintain continuity between schools.

Organisation is clearly very important to the running of any school but in these federations it was vital to their success. The wide variety of federations the executive headteachers were responsible for ensured there was a sliding scale of organisation that must be put in place in order for the organisation to function appropriately. This was more evident with the executive headteachers on two different sites. In many cases, these executive headteachers had two different offices and two different diaries. This meant they had to be very structured in their routines in order to fulfil commitments appropriately.

The second most important element of organisation the executive headteachers reflected on was time management. This came across very clearly in all of the interviews when they talked about meetings and how they ensured they were always physically and mentally prepared for each one. The federations all had different structures but many of the executive headteachers were working with a much larger governing body or in some cases two governing bodies. This resulted in a significant increase in meeting time or the amount of meetings taking place and was summed up by one executive headteacher:

"Time-wise, you have to be on top of it. We do have two separate budgets so we have to go to a finance meeting with one set of governors from each school. So we do one school, then the other for absolutely everything. It's the same with personnel… it's only really the curriculum committees that span both schools."

Executive headteacher 3

Personal skills and attributes

"I think being a headteacher for the last 10 years and executive head for the last 2 has changed me as a person. I know that in my personal life I don't carry on like I do at school. At school I am very much in charge, at home I very much am not."

Executive headteacher 6

This final section of the research was designed to elicit the personal attributes of the executive headteachers. It was seen as the most difficult set of questions for them to answer as they all commented on the fact that it was difficult to talk about themselves and their strengths as a person.

Enthusiasm

> "Enthusiasm and positivity, I am an optimist; I always look on the bright side. Always have a go at everything in all the roles I do. I think that's important in school and in life."
>
> Executive headteacher 4

The term 'enthusiasm' is used for this section but during the interviews it became very clear that the executive headteachers saw enthusiasm, passion and desire as being part of the same personal attribute. It should be noted therefore that all three are encompassed within this section as part of the same whole.

In responding to the request to list their key skills as a person and as a leader, in all the interviews conducted, the same set of personal attributes was discussed with only minor differences. Each of the executive headteachers talked about their enthusiasm and passion for their role. There was consensus that this personal outlook was responsible for their motivation for the role they were in as well as their determination to succeed. This view needed to be validated in the interviews with the SLT members and it was clear from the responses from all of the subsequent interviews that the enthusiasm of the executive headteachers had carried across to the other members of federation staff. One SLT member said of the executive headteacher:

> "Never once have I ever known of his dedication to be lacking in terms of the school. His passion for the school is what has allowed it to be a success. He is not afraid to tackle any new challenge and does it with real enthusiasm."
>
> SLT member

The enthusiasm the executive headteachers talked about so strongly was also balanced by one of the major challenges that came up in the majority of the interviews, work-life balance. It was clear that all spent a significant amount of time doing their work and all, without exception, talked about having an imbalance between home and school. They were all aware of this but their desire to do the best they could for their pupils was seen, at this stage, to be more important than restoring their work-life balance.

It is clear from this aspect of the research that this could be a potential issue in the recruitment of any future executive headteachers. Interestingly, all the executive headteachers interviewed ensured that their SLT members were aware of work-life balance and actively promoted it to all staff within their federation, whilst admitting they were currently unable to ensure they had an appropriate work-life balance themselves.

The enthusiasm the executive headteachers talked about was key to their desire to take on the roles they currently held. This was described by one through reflection on how he wished to be perceived by his staff:

> "Enthusiastic, I really hope that I come across as enthusiastic to the staff I lead. That would be my number one wish."
>
> Executive headteacher 2

Interpersonal skills

> "Being able to manage people, being able to manage teams. That's a skill that is vital to this job."
>
> Executive headteacher 2

Interpersonal skills has been used as the heading for this section as it covers a range of different aspects in forming relationships. All of the executive headteachers held the belief that the way they worked with the staff in their schools was the key to leading and managing their federations successfully. They all talked about the need to support people in their organisations and how giving time to them had allowed them to build a positive rapport that benefitted everyone, themselves included. The relationships that were formed were very important to the members of the SLT interviewed. Many of the SLT members reflected on the ability of the executive headteachers to bring out the best of the staff they supported. One said:

"She is a great people person. She cares a lot about her staff, about her children, her governors, her parents. In every decision she makes she will take into account the best interests of the staff and children, she's a fantastic people manager."

SLT member

This was a sentiment echoed in all the SLT interviews undertaken for this research. The success of the federation, as seen by the members of the SLT, was down to the willingness and ability of the executive headteacher to form positive relationships with everybody. This was also true in very difficult circumstances for one of the federations in which the executive headteacher was working in a school that had been placed in special measures and where the staff were not supportive of the federation. In this scenario, the executive headteacher was faced with a substantial number of staff resignations and teachers who were on capability proceedings. Interpersonal skills were important to manage the challenges and work with the remaining staff in order to ensure the children's education was not affected and that the school continued to make the required progress to satisfy Ofsted's inspectors.

There was evident congruence in the personal attributes of the executive headteachers who all held the same basic view about forming relationships.

Validation

A very important part of this research has been the corroboration by SLT members of the assertions made by executive headteachers. There was a high degree of consistency between the way in which executive headteachers viewed their skills and attributes and how these were viewed by their SLT colleagues.

Conclusions

The research completed for this study set out to answer what was in essence, a simple question: What skills and attributes are demonstrated by executive headteachers and to what extent do these reflect those previously identified by Barnes (2006)? It is clear from the interviews conducted that all of the executive headteachers shared the same set of skills and attributes and this was validated by the evidence provided by interviewing the senior leadership team members. The core skills and attributes identified in this research were similar to those defined by the research carried out by Barnes but also deviated in a very important way. The key skills and attributes as defined by Barnes's work were:

— strategic thinking

— optimism

— resilience

— modelling

— exhibiting faith in others (trust)

— developing positive relationships

It is important to categorise them for the purpose of comparison with the findings of this study. If we use the same core areas of strategic, operational and personal we can group them with the following results:

— **strategic:** exhibiting faith in others (trust, strategic thinking)

— **operational:** modelling

— **personal:** resilience, optimism, developing positive relationships

This grouping is not mutually exclusive as there is commonality in the application of these skills and attributes across these core areas. The operational grouping in particular draws in many of the other attributes as described by Barnes, but for the purposes of comparison this model will be used.

If we now compare the attributes identified by this study under the same headings we begin to see both a similarity and divergence in the attributes defined by the executive headteachers and members of their SLTs. The attributes as defined by this study are:

— **strategic:** communication, commitment to developing others, having a strong vision, belief

— **operational:** managing competing demands, personal organisation

— **personal:** enthusiasm, interpersonal skills

It is interesting to note the differences between the two sets of attributes but also the way in which they are classified.

Strategic

Many of the strategic attributes are similar in both studies. Both identified the importance of developing others and having a strategic vision. There was, however, a fundamental difference in regard to communication. This skill was not explicitly identified in the research carried out by Barnes, although aspects were implicit within the study. In the research carried out for this study, communication was the most commonly talked about skill by both the executive headteachers and SLT members. The interviews showed that strong communication between the executive headteachers and leadership teams inside the schools was vital to federations working at both strategic and operational levels. There was also a key attribute

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identified for this study which was not explicitly identified in Barnes's research, that of beliefs, although he does make reference to guiding principles (Barnes, 2006:30). A fuller explanation of this divergence is discussed under the heading 'Personal' below.

Operational

This attribute is perhaps the most stark in terms of contrast. In Barnes's research, the operational attribute was confined, using the core areas model above, to modelling. This again, it could be argued, is related to the necessity of ensuring the federations worked, especially in their early stages. In the interviews completed for this research, the operational element of the executive headship role was absolutely key. The executive headteachers saw managing competing demands and, allied to this, personal organisation, as vital to the everyday running of the school and to developing relationships with all stakeholders. This disparity may be owing to this focusing on every aspect of the role of executive headteacher whereas Barnes's research focused more on the early stages of development in terms of working across two schools.

Personal

In Barnes's research, developing relationships was defined as a personal attribute but for a more organisational purpose in that it was deployed to allow the schools to move forward when the federation or two-school model was first introduced. The executive headteachers interviewed for this study saw forming relationships as a personal attribute that allowed them to progress the schools strategically rather than just enable them to function. This difference may look trivial at first glance but has a different emphasis that potentially impacts upon the strategic development of the federations.

It is also important to discuss the attributes of resilience and optimism which were identified by Barnes. During the interviews carried out for this research it became clear that there is still that same optimism and resilience in each of the executive headteachers but they have defined it in a very different way. The interviews showed that the executive headteachers saw these elements as part of a wider belief in both what they were doing and the educational impact and value it had. Moreover, these personal attributes were bundled together along with other important personal attributes such as moral purpose and desire for equality of opportunity. The executive headteachers interviewed for this study clearly placed this collection of attributes under a heading of belief and saw it very much as a strategic rather than a personal attribute.

Although some aspects are common between both bodies of work, there are very clear and significant differences which may have an impact for our consideration of the executive headteacher role and how this is supported and developed. The skills identified in this research reflect the need to build relationships, develop a high profile among staff, children and parents and to communicate effectively. It is logical to deduce that these skills were also required during Barnes's research but that they have come much more into focus in this study. This is validated by the high priority placed on these attributes by both the executive headteachers and the members of their SLTs.

Table 2 shows how the skills and attributes identified in this study link to those discussed in the literature review. This enables us to consider comparisons not just with Barnes's study but Ireson's (2007) and the National College's (2010) as well as those more broadly focused on leadership. It shows evident consistencies as well as some inconsistencies between these and, although such comparisons are not a precise art, it provides interesting similarities. Notable for example is that both this study and the recent National College study identify communication and managing competing demands ('being even-handed between schools') as skills.

Table 2: Skills and attributes defined in the literature and suggested by this report

Barnes (2006)	Ireson (2007)	National College (2010)	Kouzes & Posner (2007)	Leithwood et al (2006)	Current study (Blackburn, 2012)
Modelling			Model the way		
Strategic thinking		Operating at a more strategic level			
Optimism	Extremely positive outlook				Enthusiasm
resilience		Developing personal resilience			
Exhibiting faith in others (trust)	Comfortable and confident about 'letting go' of their leadership		Enable others to act	Understanding and developing people	Commitment to developing others
Developing positive relationships		Developing and practising interpersonal skills	Encourage the heart	Understanding and developing people	Interpersonal skills
Strong visioning abilities			Inspired a shared vision	Building vision and setting direction	Having a strong vision
Insightful and intuitive	They looked for creative solutions to issues by regularly thinking 'outside the box'		Challenge the process	Redesigning the organisation	
Able to diagnose effectively	Carefully, constantly and deliberately analysed their contexts		Challenge the process		
		Communicating effectively	Encourage the heart		Communication
					Personal organisation
		Being even-handed between schools			Managing competing demands
					Belief

Note: Columns 1,2,3 and 6 refer to skills and attributes defined for executive headteachers.

In conclusion, this research has indicated that there is a set of skills and attributes that is common to all the executive headteachers interviewed for this study. Many of those identified by Barnes's research are still evident today and some may have been more implicitly included in his study. Table 2 adds to our understanding and the distinctions are interesting to consider. It is hoped that these contribute to our understanding of the nature of executive headship and will inform current and/or future development programmes.

It is also important to reflect on the individual schools used for this study. Each is a high-performing federation. Had executive headteachers from less successful federations been interviewed, then the skills may have been different again. Similarly, this study focused on more established federations than those studies by Barnes and it may be that certain skills and attributes are more explicit at particular phases of development. Further research may improve our understanding of this.

What is clear is that anyone seeking to apply for an executive headship position needs to have a variety of skills and attributes which enable them to lead the organisation they work in, reflecting its particular context. This study helps give a clear indication of what those skills and attributes are, and more importantly, how they can be used to develop a successful federation.

Recommendations

As this report highlights in Table 2, although similar skills and attributes are identified in this and other reports on executive headteachers, there are also some interesting inconsistencies. A recommendation of this study is therefore for a more comprehensive and thorough research project to be undertaken into the role of the executive headteacher. This might potentially test the skills and attributes already identified within this and other studies with a wider sample of executive headteachers. This proposed study might involve a range of school leaders both domestically and internationally. This would help confirm the skills and attributes used by them and influence professional development for current and future executive headteachers.

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