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# Research Associate Report

**Chris Hummerstone, Headteacher, The Arnewood School, New Milton**

Resource

## Leadership skills and behaviours of executive headteachers in secondary schools

Summer 2012

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## Disclaimer

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# Abstract

This study surveyed some of the current range of executive leadership roles that exist in English secondary schools, mostly under the title of executive headteacher. The study focused primarily on an investigation of the behaviours and skills associated with these posts.

The study recognises the well-practised skills associated with headship, but also the potential for different leadership skills and behaviours that may fall within the remit of an executive headteacher.

This report suggests there are significant similarities, but there are differences in skills, such as strategic planning and building stakeholder partnerships, that require a different emphasis. There is more detachment from the roles of operational leadership, including daily routines related to teaching and learning, the core purpose of schools.

It suggests that the fast-moving changes to secondary school leadership models that include, for example, the introduction of free schools and the growth of academies, teaching schools and national support schools have potential implications for the expansion of executive models of leadership. Accordingly, it suggests that having a greater understanding of the skills and behaviours associated with such roles will support their successful development.

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# Introduction

This study surveyed some of the current variety of executive leadership roles that exist in English secondary schools, mostly under the title of executive headteacher. The study focused primarily on an investigation of the behaviours and skills associated with the post.

There has, as yet, been no legal definition of executive headteacher, although in September 2011, in the *School Teachers' Pay and Conditions* document (Department for Education (DfE), 2011), there is formal recognition and guidance in relation to the salary calculations for headteachers leading 'more than one school on a permanent basis' (DfE, 2011:42) and headteachers who undertake a post with 'a school causing concern which is not the (head) teacher's normal place of work' (ibid:85).

In the 2010 report from the Hay Group in association with the National College, the role is defined as:

**Any headteacher role that has some kind of lead managerial responsibility for more than one school.**

Hay Group, 2010:6

This definition is also used as the basis for this study, although it does also include one single-school case.

There are significant numbers of executive headteacher posts already existing in England's secondary, special and primary schools (approximately 450 and increasing, according to the 2010 national survey conducted by the Hay Group).

The majority of executive headteacher posts so far have usually been created to meet a local need, rather than follow a nationally agreed format. The rationale for such posts is variable, partly driven by educational philosophy, but also pragmatic solutions to difficulties of headship recruitment, retention or schools in difficulty.

This figure, however, has the potential to increase due to a range of factors:

- a well-documented and publicised potential shortage of the next generation of headteachers, one solution to which may be to have fewer leaders of individual schools, but more executive headteachers responsible for greater system-wide leadership
- new models of leadership and partnerships that are invited by government reforms, including chains of schools, conversion academies, teaching schools and free schools. It is, for example, projected by the DfE that there will be 5,000 converted academies by 2013. In addition, the first 100 teaching schools were designated in September 2011 as well as 24 free schools and a second tranche of teaching schools was designated in 2012.
- significant opportunities, encouraged by the 2010 white paper *The Importance of Teaching* (HM Government, 2010) for successful school leaders to drive system-wide improvement, within a national framework such as national leaders of education (NLEs) or in a local context, with informal or formal arrangements, perhaps within areas where there is diminished local authority school improvement support
- the creation of cross-phase schools, including those co-located with other educational and/or other public service providers

With a more diverse educational system emerging, with a greater variety of school organisations and greater entrepreneurial opportunities afforded to more autonomous, independent organisations, it may be that the term 'executive' becomes even more frequently applied to represent a significant model of school leadership, primarily in leading more than one institution.

Moreover, there is, currently, no definitive and nationally recognised competency framework for executive headteachers, such as exists in the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) although both the National College and The Schools Network (formerly SSAT) offer training programmes targeted at such a role.

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This last point is particularly pertinent to professional development for the executive role as this research considers the nature of, and implications for, the skills and behaviours of executive headteachers with five key questions:

1. What was the context in which you took on the role of executive headteacher?
2. What were the particular challenges you faced in leading more than one organisation?
3. What specialist knowledge and behaviours did you require for leading different organisations?
4. What was the skill set you used that was both similar and different to that which you had used successfully in leading one school?
5. What do you see as the implications for succession planning and training for the next generation of executive headteachers?

Although this research distinguishes, where appropriate, between executive leadership behaviours and skills, there are examples where the two are closely interlinked and certainly not mutually exclusive.

This research therefore aims to offer an enhanced appreciation of the skills and behaviours required by those fulfilling an executive role, supporting this role in some form (such as leadership programme providers), those employing executive headteachers and those researching the role further.

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# Literature review

This review draws upon the literature from the last 12 years but also refers to late 20th century documents where relevant.

Although there is considerable variety within a model that may be termed executive headship, there is a general, if loose, recognition of its significance. The position of executive headteacher is arguably viewed in the literature, as well as in case studies in which it is represented, as potentially the zenith of a school leader's career, not only in terms of the range of responsibilities, but also in terms of the salary and status such posts command. For example, Davies (2011:7) states: 'The Executive Principal has a direct responsibility for the development of the federation or group and its strategic direction'. The logic seems to be that to be in charge of more than one organisation is more demanding than leading one institution and should have concomitant reward and status.

While the behaviours and skills found within examples of executive headship are not seen as wholly discrete from general principles of effective school leadership, the emphasis that is given to the styles of leading more than one organisation may be different and subtly nuanced (Leithwood et al, 2006; Hay Group, 2002) and these in turn influence the behaviours and skills required.

## Executive headship: leadership or managerial behaviours and skills?

The original meaning of executive does not automatically imply high-quality leadership. The definition of 'executive' (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary volume 1) from the original Latin -'executivus' - means 'putting something into effect'.

This could imply more a managerial term than leadership, with the latter more often associated with taking charge, giving strategic direction or being at the head of an organisation. Certainly, executive headteacher roles in the literature (Barnes et al, 2006, National College, 2010) can represent a blend of both roles depending on the context, but, for those leading an established 'more than one school' arrangement, the role leans more towards a strategic and distributed model in which leadership and management are devolved.

Fullan notes a clear distinction between leadership and management:

**Leadership relates to mission, direction, inspiration. Management involves designing and carrying out plans, getting things done, working effectively with people.**

Fullan, 1991:158

However, he challenges the conventional wisdom that leadership skills are more important than those ascribed to management, since he states that effective leaders recognise that both leadership and management skills are essential for successful change and not mutually exclusive:

**The main point is that both sets of characteristics are essential and must be blended or otherwise attended to within the same person or team.**

ibid:158

This has implications for the behaviours demonstrated and skills used by executive headteachers: do they mirror those of the headteacher leading and managing one organisation, but on a larger scale, or is there a different set of skills and behaviours?

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Examining, for example, *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*, (Leithwood et al, 2006) helps us understand the eight key dimensions of successful leaders. It states that these are leaders who:

- define their values and vision to raise expectations, set direction and build trust
- reshape the conditions for teaching and learning
- restructure parts of the organisation and redesign leadership roles and responsibilities
- enrich the curriculum
- enhance teacher quality
- enhance the quality of teaching and learning
- build collaboration internally
- build strong relationships outside the school community

The authors further state:

Although the sequence, timing, order and combination of these strategies varies from school to school, the visions and values are strikingly similar.

Leithwood et al, 2008:7

There is a strong parallel here with the importance of context for executive leadership, with a number of these key dimensions displayed in the cases in this report (see, for example, cases A-F).

Collectively these may be seen as core strategies common to successful school leaders, but the focus and emphasis given to each in executive arrangements may be significantly different to those in non-executive arrangements. For example, the consideration of curriculum provision might be a leadership responsibility more likely distributed than assumed by an executive headteacher in an established arrangement (see, for example, case E).

Accordingly, the skills and behaviours associated with some dimensions may not be so much operationally applied, but strategically applied. For example, a consideration of everyday teaching may give way to a wider strategy for improved pedagogy (see, for example, cases A, B and E).

The research literature specifically about executive headship is currently sparse in comparison to that related to successful school leadership generally and this reflects the relatively new landscape of executive headteachers. As Chapman et al (2008) note:

The research literature currently available provides only a partial account of developments on the ground. [It] tends to be descriptive rather than analytic and has many gaps.

Chapman et al, 2008:14

This is now being addressed, more obviously in recent research about models of executive leadership, including Chapman et al (2008), National College (2010, 2012) and Davies (2011).

The literature related to the behaviours demonstrated and skills used has been equally under-represented. However, *Executive heads* (National College, 2010) identified eight skills of executive headship from its national survey:

- operating on a more strategic level
- getting the balance between standardisation and respecting difference
- being even-handed between schools
- staying focused on performance
- developing and practising interpersonal skills

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- working closely with governors
  - communicating effectively
  - developing personal resilience

It could be argued that all of these have some relevance to headteachers leading one school, but the third skill above clearly goes beyond one organisation. The scope and scale of different executive arrangements also vary in different contexts and these may also impact on the required behaviours and skills, for example those associated with creating and sustaining successful partnerships.

## System leadership and strategic thinking

The important connection between executive headship and system leadership has already been identified and this reinforces the emphasis on ‘operating at a more strategic level’. For example, Barnes et al (2006) draw on Fullan’s work to state:

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.

Barnes et al, 2006:3

Robert Hill, in *The importance of teaching and the role of system leadership*, cites an internal definition of system leaders as those:

Who work within and beyond their individual organisations; sharing and harnessing the best resources that the system can offer to bring about improvement in their own and other organisations; and influencing thinking, policy and practices so as to have a positive impact on the lives and life chances of all children and young people.

Hill, 2011:3

This has implications for the behaviours and skills of executive headteachers who assume such a role in school-to-school support. It could be argued that they need the intellectual capacity as sophisticated system thinkers to seek positive and alternative solutions to an even greater level than leaders of a single school, not least because the variety of stakeholders increases in complexity.

The Hay Group survey, *Maverick: Breakthrough Leadership That Transforms Schools*, which included within its sample some executive headteachers, uses the term ‘intellectual magpies’ for leaders seeking information from any source that might be useful:

Their talent lay in being open and receptive to new ideas, [and] a mode of thinking, a way of seeing the world. These leaders identified patterns or saw the big picture that was not obvious to others – the connections, the way things worked together as a system. This was helpful both in seeing where they could learn from other, similar systems and also for viewing their problems in terms of interconnected systems.

Hay Group, 2002:12

Strategic skills and system thinking are therefore of key importance, as for example in Davies’ (2011) emphasis upon the former in *Executive Leadership in Academies*. To understand the complexities of one large organisation, let alone two or more as an executive headteacher, is therefore seen as a demanding leadership skill.



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This capacity for system thinking and its importance was defined by Senge over 30 years ago:

Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots'.

Senge, 1990:68

Fullan, in *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2005), identifies the importance of this skill for school leaders, which, in a later edition, he terms 'system leadership'. He argues:

A recent remarkable convergence of theories, knowledge bases, ideas, and strategies help us confront complex problems that do not have easy answers. This convergence creates a new mind-set – a framework for thinking about and leading complex change more powerfully than ever before.

Fullan, 2005:3

The essential point he makes is that leaders are required and expected to make sense of complexity and innovation for an organisation against a backdrop of rapid change, educational reform and often piecemeal implementation, which is not conducive to sustained, coherent, systemic change. It also makes systematic strategic planning more difficult.

### Executive headteacher: leadership behaviours

Jim Collins, in his influential research about the most successful companies *Good to Great* (2001) states that the most successful leaders are not necessarily the most heroic and charismatic figures, but rather those who consistently demonstrate what he judges to be the highest skill in the hierarchy of leadership competences; that which he terms level 5 leadership:

Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities who make headlines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders seem to have come from Mars. Self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy – these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates than Patton or Caesar.

Collins, 2001:12-13

There is, therefore, an interesting tension between the behaviours required of the executive headteacher, arguably viewed as the highest status role in headship, and potentially the most inspirational leader (what Fullan terms 'the flamboyant visionary') and the possible self-effacing prerequisite for significant success in the role, or as Olivier terms them in *Inspirational leadership*:

Ordinary human beings with extraordinary talents

Olivier, 2001:xix

So why is the heroic leader such a popular image?

Daniel Goleman et al, in *The New Leaders*, give one example as an explanation: people look to individual leaders, particularly in times of crisis, because:

... all eyes turn to the leader for emotional guidance. Because the leader's way of seeing things has special weight, leaders manage meaning for a group, offering a way to interpret or make sense of, and so react emotionally to, a given situation.

Goleman et al, 2002:xiii

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The concept of 'resonant leadership' or the power of 'primal leadership', Goleman et al argue, is developed further by a leader's sophisticated social awareness:

[Resonant leadership is driven] by being attuned to how others feel in the moment, a leader can say and do what's appropriate, whether that means calming fears, assuaging anger, or joining in good spirits. This attunement also lets a leader sense the shared values and priorities that can guide the group.

Goleman et al, 2002:38

It may be these are appropriate behaviours of an executive headteacher's role most obviously when she or he first takes over the leadership of another organisation which is not successful and needs swift improvement, although whatever the context, stating the direction of the organisation and being sensitive to its culture are widely recognised as essential leadership behaviours.

Having considered points related to the skills and behaviours of executive headteachers in the literature, this study now considers examples from the field of education.

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# Methodology

The study comprises seven cases explored using semi-structured interviews with executive headteachers or those that have had prior experience of leading more than one school. In addition, a semi-structured interview was conducted with a former secondary school leader who is now a national policy leader. Those interviewed included both males and females and interviews were carried out between 2009 and 2010. Table 1 sets out the range of arrangements led by those interviewed.

**Table 1: Interviewee structure and context**

Case	Type of executive headship	Context
A and B	Interim (two schools)	Secondments to support a second school
C, D, F	Permanent (two schools at least)	Leading at least two schools and/or other local public services
E	Permanent (one school)	Executive headteacher supporting head of school
G	Permanent (chain of schools)	Chief executive of sponsored academies as a large chain

The five core questions upon which the interview schedule was based were:

1. What was the context in which you took on the role of executive headteacher?
2. What were the particular challenges you faced in leading more than one organisation?
3. What specialist knowledge and behaviours did you require for leading different organisations?
4. What was the skill set you used that was both similar and different to that which you had used successfully in leading one school?
5. What do you see as the implications for succession planning and training for the next generation of executive headteachers?

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# Findings

The key findings explored in more detail below can be summarised as follows:

- The context is fundamental to the executive leadership approach deployed and therefore the behaviours demonstrated and skills used.
- The behaviours demonstrated and skills used by executive headteachers will depend on the timescale of their tenure, as part of this context.
- The challenges of leading more than one organisation bear some common features, but the context determines much of the approach, as well as the timescale to secure improvement.
- The skill set of executive headship may draw on many leadership skills gained as a headteacher, practised over a considerable period of time, but goes beyond this, particularly in relation to system leadership, strategic thinking and partnership building.
- The skills and behaviours demonstrate a keen awareness of when to delegate: ‘to steer and not to row’. The knowledge required as a successful executive headteacher is not all-consuming and exhaustive, because the reliance on delegated and distributed leadership is more necessary.

## Context for behaviours and skills

It may seem self-evident that the context in which executive leaders operate will determine particular leadership behaviours and skills, yet there are some common themes that emerge from the cases.

It is not unusual for executive headteachers to be appointed, sometimes in an interim role, as a leader of two schools, where one is deemed to be less successful than the other, particularly in relation to outcomes against national attainment benchmarks in England and/or Ofsted with regard to inspection judgements. For example, a school that is judged to be ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted may be paired with one that is ‘satisfactory’, given a notice to improve, or placed in special measures, the rationale being that good or outstanding practice in one organisation can be transferred as successful system thinking to support another school to secure improvement. This model of school-to-school support is a well-established practice in different locations in England, but it is not a standardised one. It is not confined to executive arrangements, as there are national school improvement models for system leaders, such as national leaders of education (NLEs).

## Context: cases A and B: a support model

Cases A and B were of this kind, where successful headteachers, judged to be so by recent Ofsted inspections, as well as in their local community, were invited to support and lead two schools at the same time for up to two terms. With the increasing impact and intervention of both NLEs and local leaders of education (LLEs) as described in *The Importance of Teaching* (HM Government, 2010) there may be more invitations for the supporting headteacher to become more permanently involved with a school initially judged to be less successful. This has important implications for further professional development opportunities, whether school leaders move to an executive headship position or not.

The contexts in both cases were not dissimilar, in that both the lead partner schools had secure leadership capacity in place to cope with the substantive headteacher taking on the responsibilities of another school.

Both headteachers A and B faced some similar difficulties and challenges in taking on the executive role:

- Headteachers in the supported school were either no longer in post or absent for a lengthy period.
- There was a lack of obvious strategic direction, vision and purpose about the core activities of school life connected to effective teaching and learning.

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- Morale among some staff was low, with some significant personnel matters left unresolved.
  - There were some significant recruitment issues.
  - The financial position of the schools required attention and remedial action.
  - The governing bodies were not fully aware of the significant problems the school was facing, although the chair of governors in each supported school had more information about the difficulties.

Both executive headteachers A and B agreed that they were able to bring very substantial experience and expertise from over 25 years of headship experience between them. They had practised various leadership behaviours and skills in a variety of scenarios, so were both confident and optimistic about their abilities and capacity to effect change successfully. As both Gladwell in *Outliers* (2008) and Sayed in *Bounce* (2010) emphasise, it is the repeated practice of skills that makes for significant success, whether it takes up to 10,000 hours (Gladwell) or 10 years (Sayed).

Moreover, leading the second school was undoubtedly made easier by knowing the supporting school really well and, over a long period of time, having laid down very firm foundations for improvement that subsequent headteachers could build on.

The behaviours and skills were therefore determined by the context:

- Both headteachers were supporting schools in difficulties for at least a term and up to an academic year, with some flexibility in the duration of the appointment.
- Swift action was required to prevent further decline in standards of attainment and behaviour.
- A proactive response to personnel issues was required.
- A sustained and systematic approach to developing the capacity of existing leaders and recruiting new staff was needed.
- They had a clear view about rectifying budgetary difficulties.

On reflection, after their temporary executive roles had finished, both secondary leaders were able to identify the skills they had used to solve the main issues. These comprised those which they had previously gained in headship, but applied to meet certain contextual demands:

“You need the same skill set in general; however, you need to prioritise which particular skills are necessary for the situation you inherit.”

Executive headteacher A

“I’m not convinced that there is an easily defined skill set [for executive headship] because many of the skills that one has as headteacher are deployed in a particular context and indeed the context really defines how you respond as a leader.”

Executive headteacher B

Both accepted that it was more difficult to build a medium-term strategy for improvement, but knowing they were going to be there for a short time in some ways made for more urgency and rapid change to bring about immediate improvements. They knew they had a limited amount of time, but it did give them very clear parameters to resolve major issues in an energetic and robust way:

“Because the timing was relatively short, there was less opportunity to stop and reflect, but make a very swift and accurate evaluation of the problems and then act upon them promptly.”

Executive headteacher B

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Both leaders expressed professional pride in their determination to make the partnered school a better place for children and staff during their tenure and a clearly stated moral purpose that the new substantive headteacher, when appointed, would not have to inherit some of the major problems from the previous regime. As one executive headteacher stated:

*“If you’re going to leave any legacy, it’s got to be one that’s easily sustained by you not being there, even though you may be the catalyst and impetus for a lot of initial change.”*

Executive headteacher B

Experienced leaders in this context knew the role they had to play was chiefly one of trouble-shooter, with behaviours and skills used in a leadership approach which, sometimes by necessity, could be perceived as less democratic or affiliative, prompted by the need to arrest further decline immediately in a very direct way.

## Context: cases C, D and F: permanent executive headteachers

Three very experienced secondary leaders were interviewed who led at least two schools and were permanent rather than interim appointments. They worked in challenging urban locations, one pairing a successful secondary school with one that required significant improvement (C); another led a new-build 3-18 co-location of secondary, primary and early years under one governing body, at that time termed a ‘soft federation’ (D). The third (F) also led a new-build on a site with a large secondary school within which are four heads of school responsible for satellite organisations across the site. All three executive heads had system-wide responsibility across the organisations.

### Shaping the vision: the challenges for leadership behaviours

A common understanding in all three models was a need for changing the status quo, where underperformance was seriously affecting the life-chances of children, with a perceptible impact on the local community.

All three executive headteachers were explicit about behaviours related to their moral purpose, but this was combined with a keen and pragmatic understanding of what had to be done; the leadership skills required; the ability to be a creative thinker and demonstrate political ‘nous’, defined by many years of educational experience; and awareness of the power of appropriate networking, negotiation and persuasion.

*“Our success was built upon relationships and a fully owned concept of what you are doing.”*

Executive headteacher F

The need for patience in achieving the desired outcomes was very significant: all three were very experienced school leaders but they all recognised how important it was to manage the pace of change appropriately, even if they would have preferred, on occasion, to have implemented plans more quickly. It was expressed by one as:

*“Having to be much more patient in engineering outcomes... having to take groups of people with you who are not as easily persuaded as in one institution you know well.”*

Executive headteacher F

### A discrete skill set for executive headship?

In all three cases, the executive headteachers recognised the skills and experiences they had gained as successful school leaders standing them in good stead, but the emphasis had changed owing to the context:

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“...working very closely with the local authority on a weekly basis, meeting regularly with political councillors, area trade union representatives, PFI consultants, national advisers – there was no established blueprint for the federation we were creating.”

Executive headteacher C

Whilst this context was seen by this interviewee as both exciting and energising, it was also very demanding; it was stated that:

“Being a very experienced head was not enough ... setting up something from scratch needs an intellectual capacity that is barely stretched by a conventional ‘build the vision.’”

Executive headteacher D

In addition to an enhanced intellectual capacity – the ‘intellectual magpies’ – the capacity for system thinking was emphasised, with all three leaders commenting on the skill of seeing an opportunity and developing it, often in an entrepreneurial way, taking defined risks and linking disparate ideas and scenarios into a coherent picture that many stakeholders could visualize and accept.

The flexibility of the new skill set was deemed essential to success; the expertise, confidence and experience already gained had to be:

“The knowledge how to do things rather than [of] what those things are – so it’s the transferable skill set that can be developed and adapted to meet all occasions.”

Executive headteacher D

## Context: case E: executive headteacher in a single school

This model may currently not be that common, and does not fit readily into the working definition of executive headteacher, because there is only one main school involved, but the role has some significant elements of a wider executive role that may be termed executive headteacher/principal. An executive position may be created, not necessarily full time, where there is a specific locally perceived need to emphasise a more outward-looking leadership approach, such as with an entrepreneurial imperative or for a school to be a national or international supporting organisation, or where more attention is deemed to be necessary to engage with stakeholders in the wider community without losing focus on the core business of teaching and learning in the leading school.

### Behaviour and skills

In this case, a very experienced headteacher, with experience of leading at least three schools and a national improvement project, succeeded a high-profile headteacher of a very large comprehensive, judged to be outstanding by Ofsted. The governing body not only wished to maintain the local profile, but to continue the supporting and developmental work beyond the school, including advising schools abroad. The commercial activities of the school had brought considerable financial benefit.

The new executive headteacher stated clearly a moral imperative to ensure the school did not falter in its development:

“Although there was an emotional attachment to the school, I feel the system needs to protect high-performing schools and look strategically where the school is going for the next five years.”

Executive headteacher E

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The main features of the role were to be strategic in the medium term, to sustain and develop the entrepreneurial income-generating activities of the school and to support the senior leadership in its development, challenging thinking in a robust but positive way and acting as the critical friend and experienced coach:

“I have never worked around the senior team. I’d never create a situation where people would come to me to work round the decisions of others. I work though the senior team, I work with them so that my main active involvement is with the senior team as a group and as individuals and with governors and after that I do very little in school.”

Executive headteacher E

This last comment was not a reflection of a light workload but more a sense that the executive headteacher was not the public face on a daily basis as in previous headship posts. This resonates with another comment made by the executive principal in case G, that he tended ‘to work in the shadows’. This was borne of an acknowledgement that the professional relationship with the head of school was an understanding that ‘I wasn’t going to intervene on a day-to-day basis and that helps the relationship’.

There was a mature, experienced perspective that a less public face in the role of executive headteacher required more sublimation of ego:

“You’ve got to convince yourself that you don’t need it for you and your personality... and that’s where you have to be quite strict with yourself, because you shouldn’t need to have that affirmation, but there is a danger that you might feel that you do.”

Executive headteacher E

Such leadership behaviours of modesty and humility have been highlighted by Collins (2001) as keys for success, but are also commented upon as features of break-through headteachers as observed by the Hay Group (2002). Not only is self-effacement an important executive behaviour and skill, particularly where a high profile and reputation could be counter-productive in negotiations, but it is seen as part of successful system leadership:

This ability to see the whole problem supports leaders in questioning common assumptions and taking the risks necessary to change them. It combines with their conviction that overcoming the problems they face is more important than careers or traditions.

Hay Group, 2002:13

## Context: case G: chief executive

This case considers a chief executive role for a chain of schools with academy status and an international company as the sponsor. Each academy has a principal and executive principal. The chief executive monitors and evaluates the performance of not only every individual academy, but also quality assures the performance of the executive principals and their appointment:

“It is the longevity of the executive principals as the critical coach/friend that is bringing some stability to the academies, many of whom are working in very challenging circumstances.”

Chief executive G

The executive principals work directly with the governing body, rather than at a detached distance and have the authority to intervene directly if they feel appropriate progress is not being made. There is a clear template for improvement across the group of schools, with sophisticated data analysis and a significant level of prescription to ensure consistent application of quality systems. The comparability of data also ensures good practice can be disseminated across the group.



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In relation to executive leadership behaviours, it was acknowledged by the chief executive that when first there was more allowance for individual discretion within institutions, the performance became more variable across the group:

“It’s clear that a headteacher going to lead another school must be careful in the initial analysis not to assume that what worked in one school will work elsewhere... one has to have an open mind about the particular context and consider the kind of approaches that are necessary for that specific organisation.”

Chief executive G

## Behaviours and skill set for a chief executive

In this case study the chief executive was very clear about the experiences and skills that had contributed significantly to the current professional role:

“I talk to people about four key concepts: moral, legal, ethical and professional. If planned actions don’t tick all four of these, you should seriously query if [they] should be undertaken.”

Chief executive G

The importance of networking appropriately and successfully throughout a career ensured professional confidence with a variety of contexts and audiences:

“I have worked with business people from an early stage in my teaching career and learnt a lot from commercial, business and public sector practices, as well as drawing on the expertise of a large company sponsor. This has built up my portfolio of skills, such as change management, and consultancy to establish a framework to measure the executive process.”

Chief executive G

The concept that Collins (2001) terms level 5 leadership was acknowledged, as knowing when to step back from the limelight:

“I go in the dark and leave in the dark.”

Chief executive G

This behaviour related to being the figurehead and leaving operational matters to other colleagues. This chief executive also articulated the role for executive leaders in the phrase, ‘We steer, not row’.

This metaphor suggests key executive behaviours and skills: a guiding hand, checking alignment and ensuring the right direction is maintained.

This delegated responsibility was very necessary in such a large group of schools and this chief executive frequently reiterated the need to trust senior leaders in the organisation.

The chief executive also referred to two important 2010 publications available from the National College informing some of the executive thinking, for example about future opportunities for executive leaders. Robert Hill’s *Chain Reactions* (2010) suggests that significant clusters of schools, including free schools, across the country may develop formal partnerships, with common aims and stated values, a similar curriculum, assessment procedures, quality assurance and governance.

David Hargreaves in *Creating a self-improving school system* (2010) gives a slightly different perspective for local accountability by suggesting that clusters and families of schools may be formed to meet local needs to ensure there is effective and efficient provision in a locality to sustain improvement. His pooling of resource and expertise is particularly significant at a time of public sector financial cutbacks as part of a wider government strategy of radical efficiencies and austerity measures.

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Moreover, in a subsequent publication, *Leading a self-improving school system* (2011), Hargreaves identifies the importance of what he terms 'nodal leaders' – those who are key advocates for change in developing strategies across organisations with the necessary vision.

## Common themes

Across the cases, some common themes emerged which are outlined below.

### **Executive headship behaviours and the culture of the organisation: 'can do'**

A common theme of leadership behaviour from the cases was one of optimism and a clear message to all stakeholders that 'we can work together and move forward' (executive headteacher B). The executive headteachers were not ingenuous but realistic about what could be achieved and open about their approaches: in three of the cases, they noticed how staff were pleased to be able to speak freely about their concerns, a situation that they felt had not been encouraged in the past:

"A key skill was to take staff with me. They were suspicious; as you would expect and they were wondering why has this guy come in from outside and what's so wonderful about him? So you just have to show them that there's nothing wonderful about you, you're just an ordinary human being who wants to work with them."

Executive headteacher A

This refers back to Collins's (2001) view that often the most effective leaders show humility and a relentless desire to seek improvement. It is, one could argue, a higher order leadership behaviour, as germane to leaders in education as it would be to the business world. There is a delicate balance, therefore, in being optimistic, steadfastly purposeful and shaping change on a larger scale, without losing and devaluing the positive differences of the institutions that are led.

With the complexity of leading different organisations, often with different cultures and starting points for improvement, executive headteachers in the cases here recognised they needed heightened skills of negotiation and assertive behaviour to challenge poor performance and weak judgement in different cultures, the ability and aptitude to engage in what Susan Scott (2002) terms 'fierce conversations' across the board. These are not aggressive or confrontational, but robust, truthful discussions that get to the nub of a matter, 'where learning can be provoked' (Scott, 2002:35).

The extreme alternative, management by ignoring the problem and hoping it will go away, is clearly not tenable and as Scott states, 'As a leader you get what you tolerate' (Scott, 2002:60). If you also accept the proverb 'the fish rots from the head', the leader of an organisation – or organisations as the executive headteacher has to be particularly well versed and skilled to ensure that nothing is rotten in the ingredients of the organisation since 'the breadcrumbs always lead back to the CEO' (Scott, 2002:60).

### **Systems thinking and practice: a different skill set for executive headship?**

The skills identified by the permanent executive headteachers (cases C-F) were similar to those of cases A and B, but the permanence of the position brought out some different emphases, particularly in relation to system thinking. In cases C-F the sense of an established post afforded a longer period of time – in theory, at least not only to analyse the problem, but to build greater capacity for distributed leadership, bringing in high-quality staff over time to complement the strategic leadership vision in the medium term.

Since some of the executive headteachers in the cases were the earliest appointed secondary executive headteachers in England, from 2003 onwards, they acknowledged there was no real blueprint to follow, which gave some flexibility but also meant steps into previously largely uncharted leadership territory. It was frequently stated by most that the skills they had gained from headship were invaluable but not enough for the new challenges:

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“All the component parts need to be conceived of simultaneously and, in very challenging contexts, they need to be delivered simultaneously.”

Executive headteacher D

A feature of the cases was the desire to make the complex less abstract, and simple to comprehend for the majority of stakeholders. It was not dumbing down, but came from an understanding that simplicity, without being simplistic, has many merits.

The complexity of different organisations brought together in an innovative model in a very short time caused excitement, but also uncertainty; if all the energy was perceived to come from only one strategic thinker and there were not others to share the workload to the same intensity, it was seen to place a heavy burden on the individual and make the capacity to see through the vision more vulnerable.

“What is needed is a strategic capacity that can grasp some of the reality on the ground and develop strategy quickly and persuasively. Again, I think the immediacy of the context means that these skills need to be so well honed that they can work very fast under great pressure to deliver.”

Executive headteacher D

An analogy was drawn with the effectiveness of NLEs and the requirement to make a difference quickly in a supporting role and determine, as part of this, how much will be hands-on intervention, and what emphasis will be on coaching others to have the desired leadership skills for improvement to assure the necessary quality. It may be one reason why executive headteachers bring their own senior staff who are tried and tested with them.

An interesting parallel would be the world of football management, a multi-million pound, international business, where it is common practice for a new manager to bring a well-established coaching team with him, in part because of the necessity to get improved results very quickly.

The advantage of a successful team that has been together is that a common understanding already exists of successful leadership and the skills required for this. This means swift action is not hindered, since a good team will be complementary in skills and with sufficient diversity to be fully effective, but trusted not to stray from the core purpose, nor require constant monitoring.

“I say to my team when you’re appointed, don’t come and agree with me because I could always buy a mirror and talk to myself. Bring solutions to the problems.”

Executive headteacher C

The executive headteacher in case C was in a slightly different position because she was already a well-known and established figure in the local community; she had more control of the initiative, a mature team of senior leaders and the proposed vision for the model, because she had taken it initially to the local authority director and the officers of the diocese and DfE. It is also her behaviours of resilience and tenacity: ‘I have got a reputation of not letting things go’. This was not said in an aggressive way, but rather in recognition of firm principles followed through to a finish:

“I will just say – how can we compromise so you can get what you want and I can too?”

Executive headteacher C

This willingness to negotiate and recognise the limits of one’s powers in a particular context were skills executive headteachers not only recognised but accepted as ones that did not come automatically with the headship of one school. It was essentially a different perception of power as established headteachers in the hierarchy of one school are generally used to significant autonomy and agreement. The skills of persuasion in an executive context are highlighted because more consultation with different stakeholders and power brokers is likely. Although successful school leaders recognise the need to be outward-facing in a perspective of the wider community, the strategic nature of the executive role necessitates far more discussion with other vested interests that cannot be automatically assumed to be aligned to those of the executive headteacher.

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This means the contexts for strategic leadership can be those not always associated with leading a single school. In all the cases there were comments on the regular meetings with local politicians, press, senior professional association representatives and officers from the local councils, who may be associated with children's services, but others who have a wider remit or a brief that was not explicit to education, whether in public service or private enterprise. 'You need to be effective and confident in any context' (executive headteacher D).

## Entrepreneurism and opportunism

All the executive headteachers identified the importance of system thinking in leading across a variety of different organisations, but they also noted skills allied to this that were both entrepreneurial and slightly unorthodox:

"I think I've got the ability to think outside the box. There's part of me that can see a situation and can then say we could go on and stare at this forever, or stop there, audit it and then do something about it."

Executive headteacher C

"I think entrepreneurial skills are really useful – the difference to [single] headship is that as an executive headteacher of the kinds of organisation you may be involved with, there are no hard and fast limits in terms of ambition or scale and it's often all new ground."

Executive headteacher D

The Hay Group (2002) noted how some of the most successful leaders in the study were independently minded, not particularly compliant if national policy did not match their values and sought and recognised opportunities for improving standards under their particular purview. One of the conclusions was that:

*Pursuing an idiosyncratic vision can itself be a recipe for success if it gives you the conviction to question assumptions and take risks... No one gave these heads their mission. They brought it with them, often formed as part of their earliest experiences and values.*

Hay Group, 2002:25 (author emphasis)

The Hay Group survey identifies six key themes for investigation that are common factors for the maverick headteachers of the title, and may be helpfully applied to behaviours and skills of executive headteachers:

- crossing the line
- taking risks
- connected thinking
- making enemies
- the business of learning
- sharing leadership

In considering the fifth theme, the business of learning, it is noted that headteachers share with traditional entrepreneurs 'the ability to pursue, marshal and manage resources (financial, material, human) in the execution of their ideas' (Hay Group, 2002:16).

It is not a preoccupation with money, but ensuring there is sufficient funding to assist the implementation of the vision. The survey suggests it is a significant tribute to the leaders' influencing skills, 'to their conviction that they are morally right, and to their questioning of assumptions about where money comes from and what a school can "make do with"' (Hay Group, 2002:16).

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## Future professional development

A key question for future potential executive headteachers is whether a temporary placement or secondment is necessary to be successful in such a post and if so, whether this can be presented to them as a systematic, strategic opportunity to practise key skills, rather than as ad-hoc openings. The system leadership work of NLEs, LLEs, specialist leaders of education (SLEs) and advanced skills teachers (ASTs), and the influence of teaching schools all have a place in developing further the skills for potential future executive headteachers.

If it is a desirable, planned development, who is able to broker and organise this, particularly if local authorities do not have significant influence across a locality? This places significant responsibility on the training for governing bodies to understand the implications of a potential executive headteacher position, the role profile and appropriate management structures across more than one organisation.

This has been recognised by the National College, with an initial Models and Partnerships programme of advice from 2008 (subsequently modified and updated) and training specifically for chairs of governing bodies, with regional workshops, for example, made available in early 2012.

## Developing the skills and behaviours of systems leadership

Among the recommendations of *The new landscape for schools and school leadership* is that:

Changes should be made to the way in which headteachers are recruited, appointed and supported to ensure that they all have the capacity for system leadership and that it is not the exclusive preserve of a small group.

National College, 2012:4

The intention is clearly that these skills are not for executive headteachers alone, but that a systematic approach is required to develop this skill set for many senior school leaders. It will require existing system leaders to support this development across schools, the 'nodal' leaders that Hargreaves (2011) identifies.

The systematic delivery of a coherent theory and practice is not currently embedded in educational practice, yet there are some significant developments in this field. The work of Margaret J Wheatley in *Leadership and the New Science* (2006:158) (subtitled *Discovering order in a chaotic world*) presents systematic ways and further states:

We participate in a world of exquisite interconnectedness. We are learning to see systems rather than isolated parts and players. Under the austere title of systems thinking... we are discovering many things worthy of wonder. We can now see the webs of interconnections that weave the worlds together; we are more aware that we live in relationships, connected to everything else; we are learning that profoundly different processes explain how living systems emerge and change.

Wheatley, 2006:158

The graduate school of education at a major university has developed an approach to system leadership and now offers an MSc in systems learning and leadership. It may be that executive headteachers and other future senior school leaders will benefit from developing the skills of system thinking as both a science and an art.

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# Conclusions and recommendations

This study offers the following conclusions and, included within these, some recommendations:

1. A defined skill set of leadership behaviours and skills for executive headteachers is helpful, but there is no current competency framework that fits all situations because of current rapid educational change and different contexts. This study identified the following set of skills and behaviours as those required in executive headship:

**System leadership skills:** A very significant skill set for not only seeing interconnected links in complex situations, but also leading successful improvements across systems and organisations.

**High-level strategic thinking:** The role of executive headteacher heightens the move from operational management to thinking more strategically, developing 'a framework for thinking about and leading complex change more powerfully than ever before' (Fullan, 2005:3).

**Shaping direction and aligning cultures in complex contexts:** Creating and sustaining the vision is given added complexity because of the need to match the needs of individual organisations and the wider moral purpose for system improvement.

**Entrepreneurial and political skill to build and sustain partnerships:** The skills of persuasion, making new creative opportunities, networks and partnerships in an executive headteacher context are highlighted, because more consultation with different stakeholders and power brokers is likely.

**Mature behaviours of self-worth, patience and genuine humility:** The strategic nature of the executive role necessitates far more awareness of other vested interests that cannot be automatically assumed to be aligned to those of the executive headteacher. A mature, successful acceptance of this approach can lead to behaviours of level 5 leadership (Collins, 2001).

2. Opportunities for entrepreneurial leadership may be enhanced in the executive position, but skills needed to take full advantage of these opportunities are not automatically part of a school leader's professional development. These could be developed more systematically in professional development programmes.
3. It may be possible to become an executive headteacher without previous headship experience, but the skills practised as a headteacher of one organisation are very valuable practice for the complexity and scale of leading more than one institution.
4. Executive headship posts may assist succession planning and leadership roles in hard-to-fill headship appointments, but the behaviours and skills for the position are not systematically defined at a national level. Defining these may help training and development of executive headteachers and their recruitment.
5. There are some key skills and behaviours for professional development for future school leaders, whether they are looking to move into executive headship or not: system leadership, considerable capacity for strategic thinking and the emotional intelligence to build successful, effective partnerships are key skills and behaviours.

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Triumph Road  
Nottingham NG8 1DH  
**T** 0845 609 0009  
**F** 0115 872 2001  
**E** [college.enquiries@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:college.enquiries@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk)  
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