



Leadership in Large Primary Schools

Executive summary

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The number of primary schools with more than 400 children has been steadily increasing over the last five years, and the heads in these large schools are now responsible for about 20% of all primary pupils.

This is the first study of leadership and management in large primary schools (defined as those with over 400 pupils) and we are very grateful for the funding from the Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation which made the project possible. One-day visits were made to 26 schools and the heads, deputies and assistant heads were interviewed. This detailed qualitative data was supported by a questionnaire survey of 404 heads (74% response rate).

We found some gender differences in our sample of large schools: 56.7% of the heads were men, which is a significantly higher proportion than the national figure, where 40% of the heads of all the English primary schools in 2001 were male. On average the men in our sample had held more headships and had been heads for longer than the women. A greater proportion of the women (23%) were internally appointed from deputy, compared with only 7.6% of the men.

Findings

- The heads said that they enjoyed leading large schools but the work was very demanding because of the large numbers of pupils, parents and staff. Some of the heads said that it was not a job for a first-time head.
- The advantages of large schools over smaller schools were seen as: much more staff expertise; more opportunities for peer support; and greater financial flexibility.
- The majority of heads saw the following disadvantages: that the head cannot know all the children; internal communication was a major challenge; and the head's leadership can become more detached.
- However, the majority of heads did not agree that: it was very hard to sustain a primary ethos; there was a danger of the school becoming impersonal; children can be overwhelmed by the size of the school; and parents were concerned by the size

of the school. The advantages were seen to out-weigh the disadvantages by the heads and deputies.

- The main differences between large and smaller schools were: there was a lot more delegation; a greater reliance on phase leaders and middle managers; teams were used to a far greater extent; there were more formal systems of communication; and the heads spent more time on site management.
- Although the majority of heads did not think that school improvement was more difficult in large schools, they did not know if primary schools with more than 400 children achieved better results.
- The senior management teams varied in size from two to nineteen people, with an average of about five. The heads expressed very positive views about the staff. Almost all the heads saw their SMTs as highly effective and playing a major role in strategic planning. The majority believed that they worked well with their deputies and they had effective key stage teams and year teams.
- The heads said that their management development occurred mainly from their experience of working as head in various schools and as a deputy. The majority thought they had learned how to work with people from their previous heads. But they were divided about the extent to which they learned from previous heads about how to lead school improvement; how to structure the school; how to use power and influence; and how to understand the school culture. It was clear that their previous heads were both positive and negative role models.
- The views of the deputies and assistant heads we interviewed closely matched those of their heads. While they enjoyed their job of deputy, less than a third said they wanted to become heads because of the pressures of headship. They needed time to do the job well and three quarters of the deputies did not have a regular teaching commitment. They confirmed the heads' views on the importance of structure, delegation, good communication and teamwork in large schools.

Conclusions

We draw four main conclusions at the end of the report:

- Leadership in large schools involves a blend of shared leadership (where the head works with a small number of senior staff), and distributed leadership (where lots of middle managers / leaders and the SMT are involved).
- In large schools there are many teams working alongside each other. Individual teachers are members of several teams and may be a leader in one and a follower in another – they have to be effective in both roles.
- Clearly there is greater organisational complexity in large schools which necessitates the need for a good structure and effective communication. Using Bolman and Deal's four organisational frames we found that most heads used the human resource (or interpersonal frame) and the symbolic (or cultural) frame to some extent. But the structural and political (or micropolitical) frames were used significantly more by the heads of the larger schools.
- These three themes lead to the fourth issue - leadership development. Heads and deputies need to be highly skilled at developing other leaders. We suggest that they should have internships in large schools, and be supported through mentoring and coaching. While this would be of direct help to the heads and deputies, they would also need to be trained in how to use these techniques to develop other leaders in their schools. We also recommend in-service training for groups of senior staff from the school.