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Executive Leadership in Academies
Brent Davies

'What I try and do is bring five years' experience and put it into place within a year.'

'It's more of a soft federation at the moment and a partnership.'

'It is the impact you can have!'

'We had to show we could turn it around within a year.'

'I wanted to make a difference, to really improve the lives of as many children as I could.'

'I wanted
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Contents

Research into the nature and dimensions of leadership in academies

Executive leadership in academies takes a number of forms and is developing rapidly. Initial models of executive leadership, where a successful school would support an underachieving school on a temporary or time-limited basis, have been expanded and extended to permanent arrangements.

These arrangements involve school leaders working across the system and in new and innovative ways. A simple definition of executive leadership is that a school leader takes overall strategic responsibility for more than one school or takes over the responsibility of different phases of education within one establishment. This is accompanied by the appointment of phase leaders or a site principal of the individual school reporting directly to the executive principal. This research project has undertaken a study of the differing forms of executive leadership in academies across England based on a qualitative approach.

The report is structured to consider the:

- Forms that executive leadership takes
- Roles and responsibilities of executive and site leaders
- Advantages of, and arguments for, executive leadership
- Key issues in successful implementation of executive leadership
- Future issues regarding academies
- Reasons executive leaders do the job

1 What forms does executive leadership take?

Executive leadership can be seen to be operating in a number of ways:

- An academy partnering a neighbouring one to achieve improvement, with both schools retaining their governing bodies and remaining independent (often called a 'soft federation')
- An academy partnering a neighbouring one to achieve improvement with one integrated governing body and administration and management system (often called a 'hard federation')
- A sponsor of academies setting up a significant number of academies under a 'brand or chain approach.' These multiple academies are sponsored by organisations such as ARK, Harris, Oasis, ULT and British Edutrust
- The establishment of mini-schools within a larger framework
- All-through academies, where an executive leader oversees both the primary and secondary phases and also, in some cases, the special provision

The report will now examine each in turn.

Executive principal – partnering a school to achieve improvement – soft federation

This is where the principal from one academy continues with an existing post and takes on additional responsibility as executive principal of a second academy. Initial examples of this were provided by individuals such as David Triggs who set up site leadership in their own school and by taking a more strategic role freed themselves to provide support for schools in challenging circumstances for a limited time period.

This has been superseded by longer term arrangements, where executive principals not only work to ensure the initial transformation but are part of a long-term framework for continuing support and a set of fixed relationships. In Bristol the successful John Cabot City Technology College had achieved academy status under the leadership of David Carter and the governors of John Cabot became the education sponsors of the new Bristol Brunel Academy which was established to replace an existing school.

In this case the two academies retained individual governing bodies, but, as the education sponsors, John Cabot governors had the majority of nominees on the Bristol Brunel Academy governing body. David Carter was appointed executive principal of both academies with site-based principals operating at the John Cabot and Brunel sites. This is seen as a long term arrangement.

The structure can be seen below:

John Cabot Academy Individual governing body	→	Bristol Brunel Academy Individual governing body
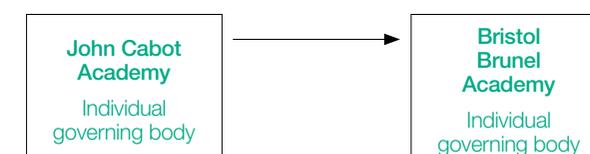
In September 2009 this arrangement will be extended to include a third academy, Bristol Metropolitan College. As they become an academy the hard federation will be created with a single trust creating an overarching structure. The academies will be accountable to the federation trust through David Carter in his role as executive principal and the federation trust will be accountable to the academies through the academy council representatives who will be nominated trustees. A federation leadership team made up of the executive principal and the academy principals will be responsible for the day to day delivery of the federation and academy vision, goals and objectives.

There will be four development hubs that will create the platform for creating and sharing best practice across the federation, with a hub leader appointed from within the federation in at least two cases and from outside in the other areas. The four hubs combine to meet the goal of developing a curriculum experience that meets the needs of every student, a leadership development programme that talent spots and develops the next cadre of school leaders, and the identification and sharing of the most effective practice taking place across the three schools. The four hubs that support this ambition are personalised learning and innovation, leadership and succession planning, student projects and community liaison and primary partnerships that will be led by a seconded primary headteacher.
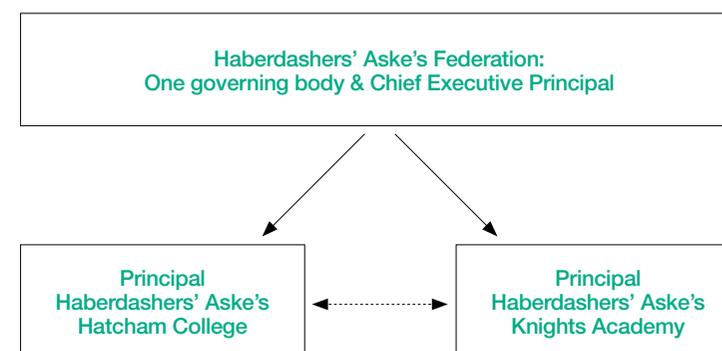
John Cabot Academy appoints directors to trust and raises funds

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
│ South west learning federation  │   │ Federation   │
│ trust accountable for the       │   │ strategic    │
│ federation                      │   │ leadership   │
│ EP/academy council reps         │   │ team         │
│ & national educationalists      │   └──────────────┘
└─────────────────────────────────┘
                                       ┌──────────────┐
                                       │ Federation   │
                                       │ hub leaders  │
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┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐
│ JCA      │   │ BBA      │   │ BMC      │
│ Academy  │   │ Academy  │   │ Academy  │
│ council  │   │ council  │   │ council  │
└──────────┘   └──────────┘   └──────────┘

┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
│ John     │   │ Bristol  │   │ Bristol      │
│ Cabot    │   │ Brunel   │   │ Metropolitan │
│ Academy  │   │ Academy  │   │ Academy      │
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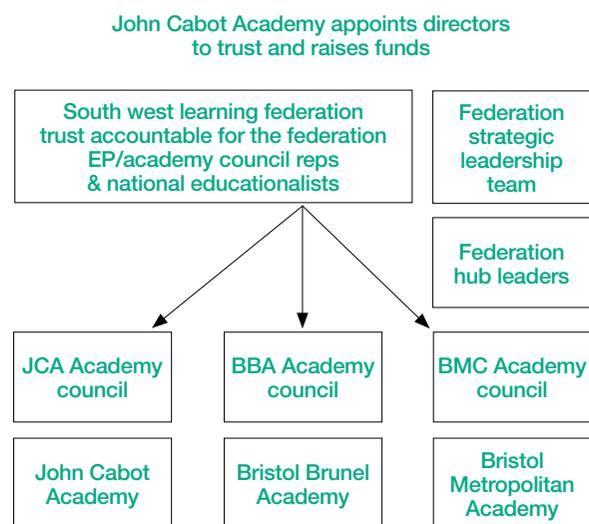
Executive principal – partnering a school to achieve improvement – hard federation

A good example of a 'hard federation' is provided by Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College, a former successful CTC, sponsored by the Haberdashers' Company in the City of London, which became an academy. Led by Dr Liz Sidwell, as part of its academy status agreement, it used its experience and commitment to school improvement to 'take on' a school with serious challenges: Malory School (9% A–C at GCSE). From the start, this was seen as a hard federation with a single governing body. Liz Sidwell took the role of Executive Principal of the two schools in the group and two of the vice-principals of the Haberdashers' Hatcham Academy became the Site Principals of the Hatcham College and the renamed Haberdashers' Aske's Knights Academy (Malory School). This was seen as a natural development for the Haberdashers' Aske's federation in its mission to contribute to the improvement of state education. It is foreseen that one or two other schools will be added to the federation.

With this hard federation there is a chair of governors and a governing body for the two schools with a Chief Executive Principal and chief financial officer for the federation. The 'ethos' and values of the sponsors, and the original school, are being applied to both schools. While the schools retain an individual principal and senior management group, the federation seeks to promote links at every level and share resources and best practice. The economies of scale are also seen as important when it comes to research and development and adopting creative solutions that will benefit all students. An example of this is the consolidation of sixth form provision.

This structure can be seen below:

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Haberdashers' Aske's Federation:            │
│ One governing body & Chief Executive        │
│ Principal                                   │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────┐
│ Principal        │        │ Principal        │
│ Haberdashers'    │<------->│ Haberdashers'    │
│ Aske's Hatcham   │        │ Aske's Knights   │
│ College          │        │ Academy          │
└──────────────────┘        └──────────────────┘
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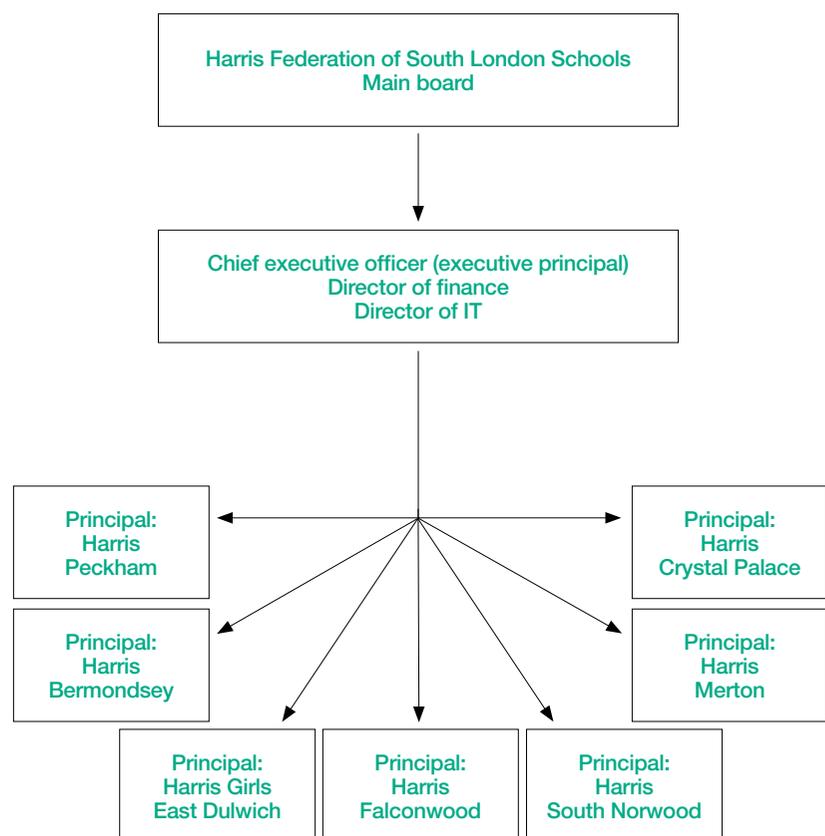
Executive principal – Brand or large group

Another form of executive leadership is where an organisation sets out to create a chain of academies by developing a 'brand' that is based on a set of values and operating to create a distinct ethos for the group. Examples are provided by: ARK, Harris, Oasis, ULT and British Edutrust. One of these organisations is the Harris group sponsored by Lord Harris. It seeks to develop a product in terms of the way it works and the expectations of staff and students. Based initially on Harris CTC the group currently operates as a federation of seven schools with the intention of expanding further. There is a federation governing body for all schools with a chief executive, Dan Moynihan, and a central federation Director of Finance and IT. Dan Moynihan is the previous principal of one of the CTCs and is the educational leader and chief executive of the group. Two percent of individual budgets are earmarked for central federation activities and support. Individual schools then operate individually within systems and procedures co-ordinated to represent best practice.

The academies are relatively close to one another which is helpful.

This structure can be seen as follows:

Another of these organisations is Oasis Community Learning, a charity based in London that has nine academies open from September 2008. Oasis Community Learning has a shared vision and set of key educational principles but does not seek to impose a single model of organisation on all its academies. There is an executive, including a CEO (who is a non-educationalist) and directors of strategic development, OD & HR, finance, education, ICT and governance, that report to a board of trustees. Academy principals report to the director of education. Each Oasis Academy (OA) has an academy council that fulfils the essential requirements of a governing body but aims to be more strategic in its work. Oasis Community Learning is committed to wider community engagement and to support the sharing of best practice across the chain of academies.
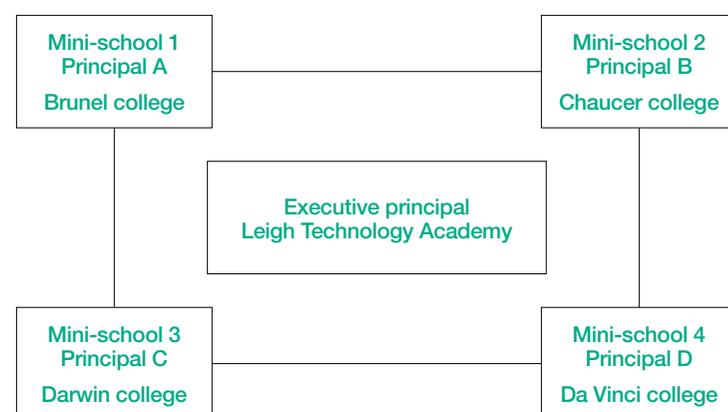
This structure can be seen as follows:

This is a developing structure
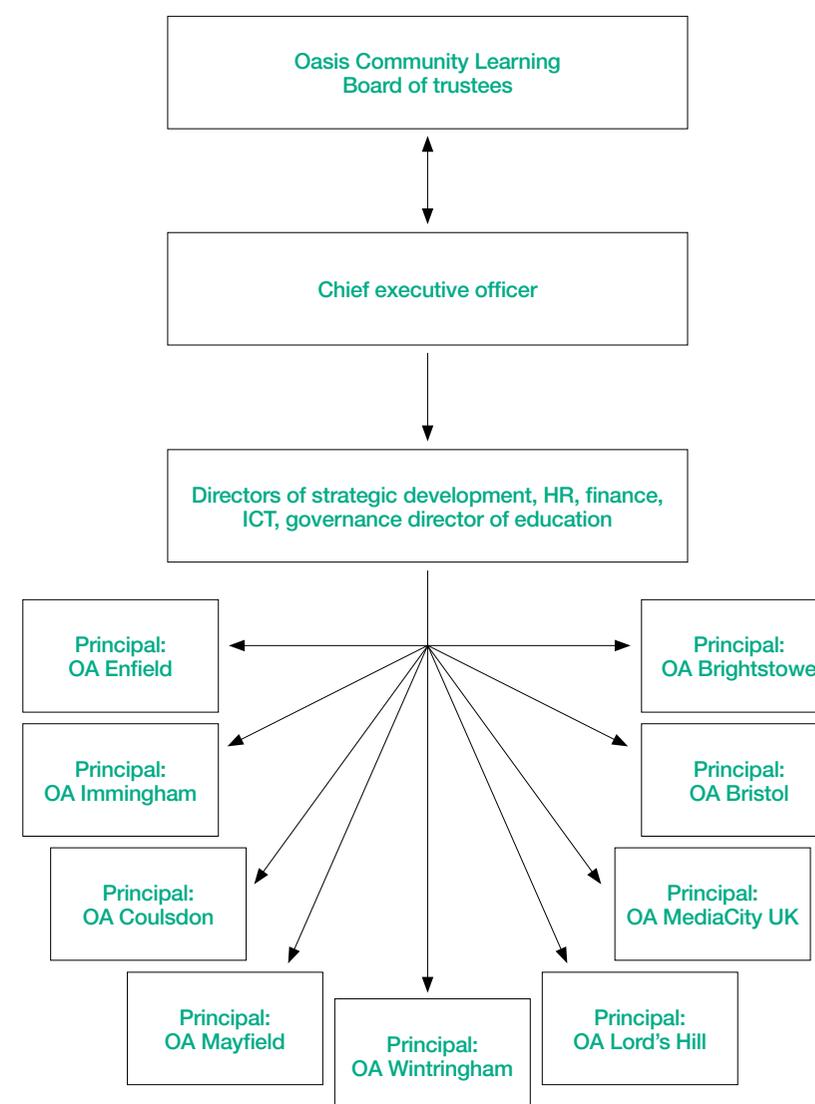
Executive principal – Mini-school configuration

One development that has gained more attention over the last two decades is the small school or mini-school movement. This has been driven by the idea of creating organisations on a human scale so that individual students are in small enough units to connect with their teachers and the leadership in their academy. One way of achieving this is the creation of mini-schools where large schools are broken into smaller units to achieve a more personalised organisational size. An example of this is provided by Leigh Technology Academy which seeks to do this with the executive principal setting up four mini-schools, called colleges, each with 350/400 students and each with its own principal.
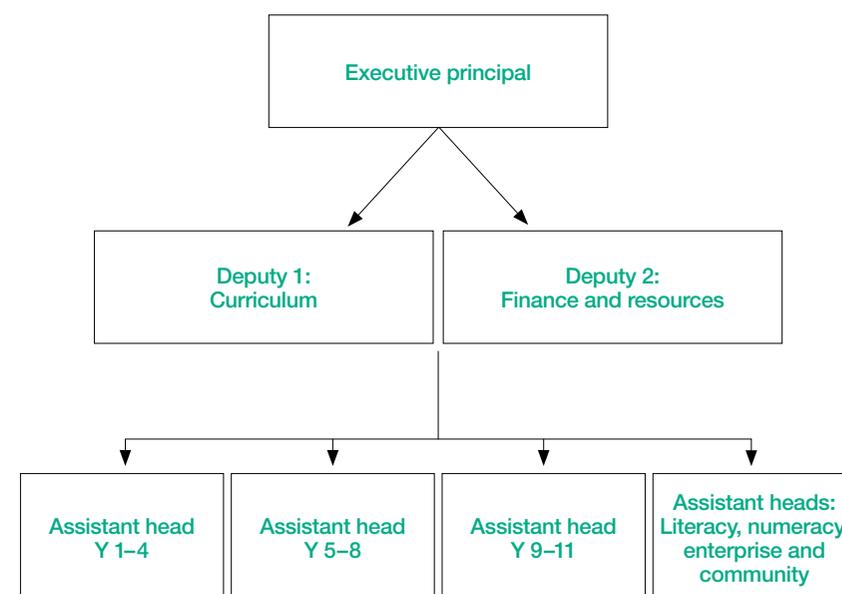
This organisational design can be seen as follows:

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Mini-school 1                          Mini-school 2
Principal A                            Principal B

Brunel college                         Chaucer college

              Executive principal
              Leigh Technology Academy

Mini-school 3                          Mini-school 4
Principal C                            Principal D

Darwin college                         Da Vinci college
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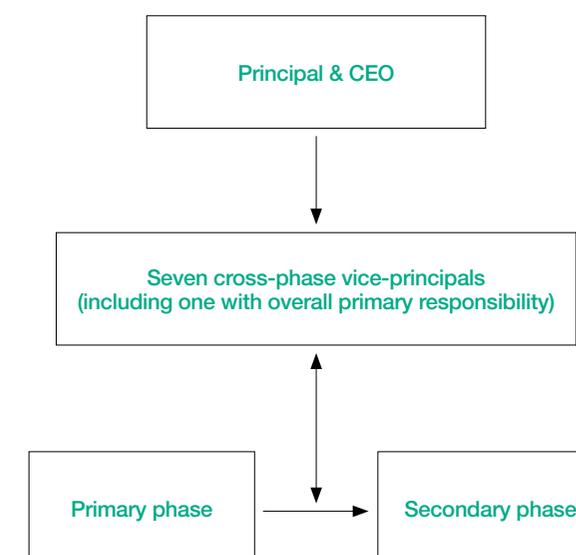
Executive principal – all-through school configuration

A final type of executive principal is of an all-through school, where an executive principal is responsible for all academy phases (3–18, 5–16, 5–18, or 3–16). Within this framework there can be educational phase leadership with primary and secondary principals or Key Stage leadership appointments. Samworth Enterprise Academy is built with primary and secondary phases integrated into one organisation. There are now fifteen all-through academies, with more planned. An example of such a structure follows:

Samworth Enterprise Academy, a 3–16 academy:

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                    Executive principal

         Deputy 1:                    Deputy 2:
         Curriculum                   Finance and resources

Assistant head   Assistant head   Assistant head   Assistant heads:
Y 1–4            Y 5–8            Y 9–11           Literacy, numeracy,
                                                   enterprise and
                                                   community
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West London Community Academy integrates its 3–19 leadership structure to achieve an integrated approach with staff working across all age groups as follows:

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              Principal & CEO

    Seven cross-phase vice-principals
    (including one with overall primary responsibility)

    Primary phase            Secondary phase
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The roles and responsibilities of the executive principal (sometimes called chief executive officer) and the academy principal (site principal) vary between academies but all have a number of common features. The executive principal has a distinct responsibility for the development of the federation or group and its strategic operation.

This is centred around establishing a shared identity and ethos across the group. It clearly involves core curriculum approaches and assessment procedures. The executive principal has quality control functions for monitoring standards and intervening as and when necessary. This is linked with a group responsibility for establishing common policies and sharing best practice. Key to the relationship is that the executive principal has line management responsibility for the site principal. One of the executive principals states when taking on another school:

'Fundamental in taking that responsibility on was I had to have authority over the school, I had to have authority over the headteacher.'

However, it is simplistic to assume that the executive principal does the strategic leadership part and the site principal the operational leadership part of running an academy. It is a common feature that the executive principal takes responsibility for group-wide policies and development. The strategic and operational part of the individual school development and how far the executive leader is 'hands on' in any particular school varies. As one interviewee articulated it:

'So the executive role is keeping tabs on the overall picture and walking that fine line between allowing autonomous units and ensuring some sort of collective responsibility, some sort of common approach, a core entitlement for kids.'

'The executive role is keeping tabs on the overall picture.'

'It's more of a soft federation at the moment and a partnership.'

It is also the case that site principals cannot effectively just concern themselves with operational perspectives and not be part of building strategic capacity. This balance of responsibilities is reflected in the job descriptions of the participants and can be seen in the following extract from the job descriptions at Haberdashers' Aske's:

Example – Haberdashers' Aske's: part of job descriptions of executive and site principals

Executive principal	Academy (site) principal
To establish Haberdashers' ethos and shared sense of identity across all federation schools	To raise academic standards and be committed to continuous improvement
To bring schools together through joint activities	To have full responsibility for the day-to-day management of the academy
To identify future needs of the federation	To work in partnership with other federation principal(s) and federation leadership team(s) and to work within the context of the federation
To prepare a Federation Development Plan in tandem with Academy Development Plans	To prepare and review an Academy Development Plan and Department Development Plans that relate to the Federation Development Plan
To ensure collaboration of senior staff within a shared vision	To be appraised by the chief executive of the federation

One common theme in the role of executive principal is the degree of operational involvement linked to the development phase of the new academy. Clearly, at the start of a new academy, the executive principal is much more hands-on in the establishment of the academy and later is more strategic. One executive principal describes this as 'co-construction'. Bringing in established schools to a group is clearly different from taking in schools with weak performance which need a much greater degree of support. In both cases personal relationships are critical as one interviewee responded:

'There will always be the issue between the executive principal and site principal of how much the executive principal allows it to be moulded to the shape of the head that's in there.'

It is also important in the structure as one site principal stated:

'That the parents and students see me as principal and the executive principal does not confuse that.'

The strategic and operational role becomes more sharply focused within larger groups, as witnessed by this comment:

'Our philosophy is the principals run their schools, but we need to co-operate and collaborate because if we work together we can achieve a whole that is more than the sum of the parts. So my role is to interfere when interference is needed and to be direct about performance when that's needed on behalf of the sponsor. To report to the sponsor on performance of the schools, to get into the schools, if things are going wrong to support the staff and the heads to confront the reality and do something about it, but also to create a community of practice, to create a co-operating group of heads. Working groups, you know we've agreed to put a principal in charge of each working group.'

The degree of operational/strategic management involvement can therefore be seen to vary with the need in terms of transformation of the academy and of developing federation approaches. This relationship clearly varies with individual institutions.

Governance

Exemplars of governance arrangements are provided by the following case examples cited by the individual executive principals:

Case example 1: The John Cabot Academy

'In 2007 we began the partnership between John Cabot Academy (JCA) and Bristol Brunel Academy (BBA) as a soft federation with both academies retaining their own governing bodies. JCA became the educational sponsor of BBA which means that JCA has the majority of nominees on the BBA board. The nominees are not necessarily governors at JCA but are representatives nominated by the Cabot board. I am one of the representatives in my role as executive principal and of the 13 BBA governors, seven are Cabot nominees. This was important because we wanted the DNA of Cabot's success to be instrumental in the improvement in BBA. As BBA has become established and after a successful first year, it is clear that the partnership has much to learn from both schools. In the summer of 2008, both schools recorded their best ever exam results. At JCA, 87% of students gained 5 A*–C grades whilst at BBA 62% gained 5 A*–C grades. This had been 22% in 2006 and 30% in 2007.

As it became clear last year that Bristol Metropolitan College was to become an academy in 2009 as part of the federation, we pursued the idea of creating a single trust to provide an overarching support and leadership framework. Retaining autonomy within the academies is central to my vision and this is why each academy will continue to have its own academy council. My vision is for the three academies to be centres of excellence in their own right, not a single school on three sites.

Having a federation board made up of trustees appointed by both the sponsors and the academy councils, ensures that there is accountability of the schools and the federation from top down and bottom up. If we get this right over the next few years, then the academies will go from strength to strength, and if the need arises for a more assertive support structure to be implemented within any of the academies, then the model creates the means by which this can take place. This maintains the spirit of independence that has helped to make academies successful whilst at the same time introducing a new model of accountability that will support and challenge the school leadership teams and academy councils to maintain and improve the performance and life chances of students.'

Case example 2: Hard federation – three schools, one vision

'We wanted to take on another school, but rather than just another school in a loose federation, to trial a hard federation. I think we are the only ones currently to have a unique hard federation. Our aim was to replicate Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College because that was what parents told us that they wanted through 12:1 oversubscription. We could then use the senior team to double their opportunities in terms of development and run the Federation from a single point thus ensuring one message to all. We have an overarching governing body, with twenty five members, all of whom are trustees and having equal responsibility across both schools. There is a shortage of Governors nationally and I think this is one way that future governing bodies could be formed. With hundreds of years working in education, the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers have built a reputation for excellent governance. The federation is similar to a large business which takes on a number of divisional managers; we can take on a number of schools and operate in a similar fashion: One Governing Body with one Chief Executive and a Chief Financial Officer reporting to the Chairman. Our vision is to have three 3–18 schools in our hard federation.'

Case example 3: Hard federation – group

'From September we've set up one company, one single charitable trust and we've transferred all of the seven Harris schools into that, so now we operate this one federation and we have a strategic governing body or board of directors chaired by Lord Harris, and then we have the chair of governors of each local academy who sits on that board. So the local governing bodies do most of what they did before but they don't carry the legal responsibility as governors that rests with the board centrally. And the idea for that was clearly if we tried to have a federation so that the whole would be more than the sum of the parts under existing law people would have to be loyal absolutely to the charity that they're on and they wouldn't necessarily want to support the federation. Now the key governors are all in the federation and they have to think federation-wide.'

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3 What are the advantages of and arguments for executive leadership?

These can be grouped in the following categories:

First, is the ability to replicate success by identifying key criteria of a successful school and using those criteria to underpin the success of a second school or larger grouping of schools. This can be seen to operate in a number of dimensions:

1 Transference of effective school systems from the lead school. Many of the research responses talked about establishing a set of data sources that would enable the new academy to be more effectively managed. This was in two parts. First basic student tracking and performance data systems that were accessible and regular. Second, a pro-active response to the data when it was turned into management information. An executive principal in the research said:

'We are appointing a new head but also we are going to put our systems into that place because I've been in there, its woolly, they haven't got a fix on data, it's inconsistent between departments, they argue that characteristics of the kids are the reasons for low achievement, not the poor teaching. That is not the case. So we have a series of systems and whoever gets that job is getting those systems.'

2 Establishing a common culture and set of expectations was a common factor in all interviews. These centred around values and behaviour and often reflected the values and expectations of the sponsor. Challenging previous underperformance with a 'can do' achievement culture was a common thread in the research interviews, for example:

'For a kid it's you're coming into a 'can do' positive school. There's an expectation that you are going to do well and there's belief in you that you will do well so that's a feature. You know here the motto is 'all can achieve', so there's an almost fanatical focus on engaging students, getting them motivated and getting them to achieve, so I think we're really, really strong on that, really strong. And all of the schools are showing very strong improvements in results and where not in absolute terms, they are in value-added terms. They are inclusive places; the exclusion rates are not high.'

Andrew Adonis highlighted four criteria for a successful academy: 'Ethos – leadership – teaching – talent development' and the talent development criterion is one that resonates through several of the interview responses.

3 Building and enhancing staff capability and capacity. This was seen to operate in a number of ways. One initial approach was to share with the staff of the new academy what was possible as shown in the following response:

'We decided it was an important strategy for staff of the new academy to come and see us. We did this in two ways. First, we brought all the staff together on a joint training day for them to interact and to see that we were working together and not taking them over. Second, was to bring the staff in small groups to see the academy to show them that we were dealing with similar kids but, through our approaches and expectations, were getting high levels of achievement and commitment.'

Another example can be seen by building staff capacity at department level by working across two or more academies. This is shown by this response:

'We've also got a series of school improvement groups, and we get the heads of English together, the heads of maths and the heads of science, but not to just talk. The purpose is to improve teaching and learning so they're doing things like heads of maths and heads of English are all visiting a different academy each time, they're all going in to see lessons and then they're all discussing what's the effective practice here that we've seen, what's the stuff that's less effective. That's quite challenging and is outside the comfort zone, people don't like doing it and I've given them all a contextualised value added for all of the schools so you sit there and you know why your contextualised value added is this and why is mine that. It's not necessarily pleasant but its good professional work.'

Most significantly where there are two or more academies in a group a systematic development framework can be established. Professional development can take the form of planned staff moves to gain experience and promotion within different academies in the group. This allows academy groups to develop their own talent pool through an integrated career development approach. This was seen as a major area of activity for the executive principals as shown in this statement:

'What we want to do is create an internal market for promotion at different levels where we won't lose them but we'll prepare them for roles in our other academies and that's what we're about.'

Significantly there is a major opportunity for academies to develop their own principals by planned development.

4 Focus on learning and achievement with clear monitoring and accountability. This is the dominant theme in all the interviews, that of high quality teaching and learning systems and approaches. The pace of transformation of teaching and learning outcomes is linked to the experience of the executive principal as shown in this response:

'What I try and do is bring five years' experience and put it into place within a year, which as a newly appointed principal you simply cannot do because you don't have that experience. The expectation of rapid improvement means that experience is vital.'

'There's an most fanatical focus on engaging students, getting them motivated and getting them to achieve.'

'So we have a series of systems and whoever gets that job is getting those systems.'

'What I try and do is bring five years' experience and put it into place within a year.'

'The expectation of rapid improvement means that experience is vital.'

Second, by using the expertise of experienced and talented leaders from one school to develop new leadership talent by appointing site principals supported by executive leaders. There is a shortage of leaders and a reluctance to undertake leadership roles so this approach allows leaders to 'step up' but within a supportive framework.

Capacity building is a major issue here. As one executive principal articulated:

'They wouldn't have been an academy principal if they'd not been in the federation but they're very talented people and this has given them the opportunity.'

This is a recurrent theme in many of the interviews as witnessed by this statement:

'Both the guys who are doing the principals' jobs at the moment may not well have been appointed to those jobs had it been, you're going to run the whole shooting match, but I think because I was available and able to use my experience to support them and almost be like the permanent critical friend, I think that's enabled them to take on that role and do the things that they're really good at.'

The site principals also saw the benefits of having a supportive executive principal to work in a co-constructive way as shown in these two statements:

'I could work with him. Because I lack certain experiences and that I thought it would be good to have somebody working with me and supporting me. It's a stepping stone into headship in some ways. When I got into the role, it was co-leadership with someone with immense experience. It enabled me to focus on some key issues and let someone more experienced deal with others.'

'So we would look at what needed to be done, we would work out targets, we'd work out action points for the target. This was not me being told what to do but co-constructing what to do actually doing that. So we had action points for every half term, for almost every sort of fortnight at first, then we'd go back and review what I had achieved. Later it became broader in approach and based on quality assurance.'

Third, economies of scale across two or more academies provide considerable advantages.

All the executive leaders in the study talked about having a central finance officer to achieve economies of provision and avoid duplicating systems and this also was the case with a joint IT provision and strategy. Also mentioned was the ability to undertake joint staff development and see the group as a means of providing staff with varied developmental tracks in different schools in the group. In addition was the ability to have good heads of departments working across two or more schools where deficiencies in one school could be remedied by such an approach. For example, at departmental level one executive principal reported:

'Across the two schools we had two weak heads of maths and we could only shift so many people on the transfer. So what we've done there is rather than put up with that we found an outstanding head of maths who was ready to move into senior management and we made her an assistant head but she's the head of maths across two schools and we're trying to do that more and more. So we're growing our own ASTs and we're appointing them in and the idea is to create almost an advisory team but not like an advisory team who are out of schools.'

A significant economy of scale can enhance the 14–19 curriculum especially at post-16 provision as seen here:

'So we have a joint sixth form between three schools and we're the only schools in the country with a single exam centre number, there is nobody else and that's unique. And the reasoning there was we're going to have academy build for the sixth form centre. We're all within a circle of three miles, if we all have a capacity for 300 we can offer a sixth form of 900 and I don't want principals arguing about keeping the best students on site because it's good for their points score. So we've taken the hit, our point scores are reasonably high at A-Level, they have no tradition of sixth form so we've decided to sacrifice ours because our reported performance will drop but as you're aware, academies can be less strong in their post-16 inspections, so what we're doing is we're trying to inject expertise and systems and so we've created that.'

Also 'managed moves' for students with behavioural or other challenges is facilitated within two or more academies as shown in the following example:

'Another thing that's beneficial about having another school is that we've been able to have an intervention programme that we wouldn't have been able to have otherwise. So that we've got one student at this site for six weeks at the moment, but you know you can swap children both ways just to give them a little break from the school without it causing mountains of paperwork and trouble, you know and so you've got another little opportunity just to give children a break in a different environment.'

In the interviews with executive and site principals a number
of factors emerged when they related how they had built
successful organisations and relationships.

Organisational trust

The individual personality of the participants clearly also has an impact
and there needs to be a high degree of mutual trust and honest
communication. As shown in this comment:

*'You need to know them, you need to trust them absolutely and so they're
actually articulating the same values and building the same ethos.'*

This also links to the issue, when establishing a partner school, of who
is brought in and who leaves. This varied considerably in the case study
schools. Common among underperforming schools was that the
previous headteacher left. Also, in the re-organisation, members of
the senior leadership team were also not always transferred into the
new academy. The process of 'due diligence' in terms of assessing
the curriculum, staffing, and finances was seen as critical as was the
lead-in time to set up the new academy. This certainly has implications
for the fast-tracking of institutions.

Working with known people

This was a key factor in a number of the academies. Executive principals
talked of working with previous vice-principals who had been part of
the culture of the sponsoring school and had already both understood
the culture and ways of working and had established a sense of trust
with the executive principal. Vice-principals also saw this as a means
of stepping into headship with the requisite support.

*'Both principals were my deputies even though we went to external
interview, so that was interesting as well. But I think what we found
is that it works because you get this single message coming through
and everybody knows what they're buying in to.'*

Speed of implementation

The speed with which the new leadership could assess the situation
and confront underperformance and move to suitable action for
improvement was reported as critical. The ability to accept and
manage conflict and personal challenge was quoted by nearly all
executive principals as something they had to do. But there is also
a hard edge to this as shown in this comment:

*'We had to show we could turn it around within a year or everyone
would lose confidence in us.'*

'You need to know them,
you need to trust them
absolutely and so they're
actually articulating the
same values and building
the same ethos.'

'We had to show
we could turn it
around within
a year.'

Focus

The executive principals saw their role as allowing the site principal to
focus on teaching and learning and a positive behaviour culture. One
said they tried to ensure the site principal:

*'Did not get distracted by the other things such as dispute with the
community or unions or whatever, which can actually just suck the
energy out of you – that's my job.'*

Also the executive principal wanted the site principal to focus on
student performance as shown in this comment which demonstrates
the hard edge to performance:

*'At the end of the day it's about the performance of the children, it's
about building a moral purpose of education. That fundamental moral
purpose is that these young people have got to get the best possible
opportunities. That's the site principals' job, they're all paid well but
they all understand it's on performance. It isn't nasty, aggressive; it's
simply saying if we're not getting into the level of progress, if you start
to get complacent its time to move on.'*

Establishing commitment

Working to ensure any initial resentment of the partner school being
'taken over' and winning over the new staff to enable them to 'buy in'
and be committed to the new culture was seen as a key issue. As
shown by this quote:

'Getting everyone on side as soon as possible was a key priority.'

Capacity for continuous improvement

While executive principals often took a responsibility for rapid improvement
of an underperforming school they saw their role not just as immediate
remedial action. This is demonstrated by the following:

*'There was a lot of immediate problems but as well as sorting them out
the key task was building capacity to improve and keep on improving in
the long-term'.*

Key to this process was the on-going educational conversation
between site and executive leaders.

Leading and managing powerful personalities

The relationships between executive and site principals and between individual site principals in one that is significant for the successful development of partner academies. For example these comments outline some of the dimensions of the situation:

'They are like that, they are very competitive but they've all been appointed and it's all been made clear that this is a federation, we are expected to work together and if you don't want to do that then don't come here. So that's the first thing. Secondly the sponsor is very committed to the federation and he is a major figure and they know that he's committed to it so I have that behind me supporting, which is really really good. He wants a federation, he wants it to work together so that's a big help. Without the sponsor I think it would be a lot more difficult.'

And:

'They are competitive but I don't find that a problem, they're quite strong willed and I'm quite strong willed and you know if it's a question of taking people aside and saying look for the benefit of the federation you need to do this and then if they say I'm not, which has happened once or twice, then it's down to the sponsor and he usually supports me and says yeah you need to do this, so it works like that a bit really.'

Respect for all sections of the learning community

With all-through (all age academies) the respect for the contribution of all the sections of the learning community needs to be ensured. There is considerable concern that the larger secondary school will 'take over' the primary school and not recognise its unique insights and contributions.

Number of academies in a grouping

What is the ideal size to share good practice and build innovative and creative solutions without being too large and bureaucratic? This seems to be one of the key issues for the future development of executive leadership.

Academies which had started from one school partnering another and then taken on one or two additional schools had different perspectives from academy organisations which from the start had envisaged having a chain of schools.

The academies that had partnered a local school and envisaged taking on one or two more made these comments:

'I know how long it takes with these things from an expression of interest to working through to opening, it takes about eighteen months to get another school going, so that's why I know we should be starting now to expand. We want another London secondary so we're ready now to take on another school and the interesting thing is people say, "Well, how many could you do?" and my chairman and I decided that the best thing to say is we know we can do one more, when we've done one more you know. But I can't imagine it could be more than four or five because then you can't do the operational and keep involved...'

And:

'I mean we're talking with the LA about the fourth academy and I think that's it, I think four has the balance between being the right economies of scale, it gives you the whole fabric around succession planning and training that you've got within enough local schools, but I think it still enables you to work with people on an individual basis. So you know if we were working in a model where there were three or four schools but they were all over the country, I don't think that would work for me because I don't think I'm ready to be an administrator.'

But the chief executive of a group of academies made this comment:

'I wanted to stay on six until we got those consolidated and now we've got the seventh. But the sponsor has a target of a dozen, I think we can probably manage a dozen but it just depends on the sequencing of them.'

Clearly some academy groups believe they can run chains of twelve to twenty academies without taking on too many bureaucratic features, this it would seem is a key area to see how the practice works.

> **'But I can't imagine it could be more than four or five because then you can't do the operational and keep involved.'**

What happens when the original executive principal moves on?

Using experienced leaders as executive principals to guide others in developing their skills and abilities is a valuable strategy. However, there must be some concern that if we are short of headteachers once the crop of executive leaders retires will there still be talented leaders to take their place? One informed observer in the field commented:

'My fear for the continuing role of the executive head is that's fine and we are building schools across the UK. That's fine as long as you have people of the right calibre who can run those sorts of organisations. What happens when they retire? Do we have a stream of people coming through who are trained as executive heads?'

The development of a cadre of leaders with the skill set to take on this new and demanding role is one that needs continual focus and development.

How sustainable can change be?

Embedding change and continuous improvement is a challenge once the initial improvement and progress has been established. How academies can develop their own research and development programmes to improve teaching and learning and subsequent outcomes as an on-going process is very important. Also sharing of good practice across academies should mean in the long term performance is ratcheted up so that parents are happy to choose any academy in a partnership or group. As one executive principal put it:

'It's because its how the public perceive us. If parents were going to apply for their child to join and say I don't want to go to 'x' academy I only want to go to 'y' academy we have to seriously address those issues.'

Sponsors – keeping them involved and contributing

Sponsors have and do play an invaluable role in bringing expertise and support to academies. This is witnessed by this outstanding comment:

'He's a very demanding sponsor, he doesn't interfere, he doesn't tell us what to do, and he doesn't do that. He visits regularly and wanders the site which is great. He'll talk to kids and he'll ask kids what's going on, what do you like, what don't you like, then he'll come back and he'll tell us. That's fine, so he keeps us on our toes and has a common sense approach to understanding how schools work. So he's really good because he has this perspective that you know you just overcome difficulties and that means that we've been very successful at opening new academies.'

The challenge occurs when that individual retires or can no longer fulfil that role. When academies are supported by sponsoring organisations, succession planning for those involved at the sponsoring organisation as well as succession planning for individual academies needs a high priority if this invaluable support is not to be lost.

Over-rapid expansion

There must be some concern regarding the pool of leadership talent that can support the rapid expansion of both academies and executive leadership within the academy movement.

As a last word, when interviewing executive principals about why they did the job, here are some of the responses:

'A lot of the kids don't get a good chance in life we have to do all we can across schools in this area to get a consistently high level of education achievement to make it an outstanding chance.'

'I wanted to make a difference, to really improve the lives of as many children as I could.'

'I have learnt so much from so many fantastic leaders I've worked with it's a great opportunity to put that together and share it to the benefit of all our academies and not just one.'

'It is the impact you can have, I mean this project is absolutely fantastic, you know the impact on 4000 kids and all those staff is really, really exciting.'

'It is the impact you can have!'

'I wanted to make a difference, to really improve the lives of as many children as I could.'

'We have to do all we can across schools in this area.'

A final thanks

I would like to thank the numerous leaders in the academy movement who gave so generously of their time to help me and to Lesley King for her support in seeing this research project to its conclusion.

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Executive Headteachers Programme

The SSAT runs a high impact leadership programme for headteachers who have taken on, or are likely to take on, an executive headship role. Focusing on the skills and requirements that are needed, participants visit leading specialist schools and academies engaging with educators who are leading on innovation and change. For further information please visit www.ssatrust.org.uk, email leadership@ssatrust.org.uk or call 01823 446 900.

'I wanted to make a difference...

...to really improve the lives of as many children as I could.'