

S P R I N G 2 0 0 3

# Does Size Matter?

Distributed leadership in small  
secondary schools

This research reflects upon the successes of five small secondary  
schools.

**Mike Kimber**, Deputy Headteacher, Oaklands School, Bethnal  
Green, London

## FULL PRACTITIONER ENQUIRY REPORT

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## Introduction

This small scale research project is to some extent a personal quest to reflect upon and understand the last 10 years of my working life. I am a deputy headteacher working in a small secondary school. I am, therefore, not a disinterested outsider looking in, but an insider trying to look outwards with as much objectivity as I can muster. Our school is now deemed to be successful. The achievements of our pupils are clearly the result of their individual and collective hard work, and reflect the considerable talents of the staff. But it has not always been like that, and in those rare quiet moments I have wondered:

- what has happened?
- what have we got right?
- what could we do to improve further?
- how much does the context of the school or its size hinder or contribute to these achievements?

This report seeks only to offer some tentative clues to possible answers. It is based upon a limited reading of recent and relevant research literature and upon interviews with 21 colleagues across five small secondary schools. The schools were chosen to illustrate a diversity of types, locations and contexts. The report is framed around the voices of the teachers interviewed and is in two main sections. The first section describes the nature of leadership found in the schools visited; the second describes the practical steps that have been taken to build capacity in these small secondary schools.

## **Distributed leadership**

The five schools on which this research is based are all successful schools. They have all achieved good examination results, are popular with parents and have had their leadership praised by OFSTED. In this section of my report I shall try to highlight the characteristics of this leadership because, although the schools all work in a variety of different contexts, it is clear that the fundamental approach of their headteachers and leadership teams is very similar.

In small schools there are the same kind of leadership posts as in larger schools, but there are fewer of them, and those holding them will be leading smaller teams and often be paid less. There is also a real temptation for leadership to be centralised. A strong 'charismatic' leader could quite easily dominate and run a successful school, though I would suggest such success would always be very fragile. Developing distributed leadership in small schools is thus as important as it is elsewhere. All of the schools in my sample stressed a commitment and desire to move further in this direction. As Brown and Rutherford (1999) noted:

The notion of distributed leadership (or shared power) among managers, at both senior and middle management levels in schools, is widely promoted as a factor contributing to school effectiveness and school improvement.

## **What is a 'small secondary school'?**

The term 'small secondary school' has been used to mean various different things. There is no generally accepted definition so for the purposes of this research an arbitrary decision was made to define a 'small secondary school' as being a school with fewer than 700 pupils on roll. This size was chosen because it would mean for an 11–16 school less than five forms on entry. It has been suggested that for comprehensive schools, "a school with five or fewer classes entering each year is unlikely to be able to offer a good curriculum without disproportionately generous staffing" (DES, 1985).

In 2001 there were 686 secondary schools in England (excluding middle schools) with less than 700 pupils (DfES, 2001). This was 22 per cent of all secondary schools and, although this number has declined over the last 10 years, small schools remain a significant, if rather diverse, constituency.

The size of the five schools providing the data for this research ranged in 2001 from 585 to 653. Though it should be noted that four of the schools were expanding because of LEA and parental pressures, and the fifth school was physically unable to take more pupils. None of the headteachers or teachers interviewed wanted their school to grow significantly as they felt the school size was a contributing factor to its success and distinctive ethos.

## **Does size matter?**

For many years there has been a debate about what is the optimum size of a secondary school. Large schools have been regarded as offering a wide and varied curriculum, and being cost effective; whereas small schools as more personal and community based. I

would suggest that this debate rather misses the point. The current political direction is for a variety of types of schools (comprehensive, grammar, mixed, single sex, CTC, specialist, faith, etc). Within this multiplicity there is surely a place for small schools. And in any case, many small schools will continue to thrive as a result of history or geography rather than specific design. The questions we should be asking are instead about what makes a successful small school and how such success can be maintained.

There seems to have been little research in the UK specifically on small secondary schools, although there have been some large scale studies in the US. The American studies do suggest that small schools are “more productive and effective than larger ones” (Raywid, 1999), but of course there may be doubts about how transferable their findings might be. These studies have also suggested that small schools have an enormous contribution to make to achievement, especially in disadvantaged communities (the Matthew Project – Howley, Strange and Bickel, 2000).

The only significant research into performance and school size in England (Spielhofer et al, 2002) found that:

Performance improved with size up to a certain school size, then declined. The best results were obtained in medium sized schools (with a cohort of approximately 180–200 pupils), and the worst in the very small or very large schools. The optimum size varied to some extent depending on certain key variables, such as sex of pupils, prior attainment and type of school (girls’, boys’ or mixed; grammar or comprehensive).

However, they cautioned that “the observed impact of school size, although statistically significant, is quite small”.

It has been suggested by Leonard et al (2001) that small schools do have an inherent predisposition towards effectiveness because they display:

1. a positive, caring, interpersonal school climate
2. greater community support and respect for the schools
3. more opportunities for student participation and leadership development and consequently fewer discipline problems
4. a more professional community
5. a more tightly linked community that facilitates the development of clearly articulated purposes and goals (Leonard, Leonard and Sackney, 2001)

But they stress that “there may be other extenuating circumstances that prevent realisation of that potential for success” and that “there is still the need for concerted commitment by those involved to cultivate those purported inherent small-school characteristics considered to have the capacity to create vibrant learning communities”.

So it is important to remember that, although the five schools included in this research have been successful, all small schools are not by definition successful, there are other key factors involved.

## Small school inclinations

The teachers who contributed to this research highlighted what I have called ‘small school inclinations’. These inclinations relate to leadership and the ability to build capacity. It is not being suggested that the leadership of smaller schools is somehow inherently different from leadership in larger schools. But the teachers did generally feel that the context of a small school did bring with it certain qualities, tensions, restriction and opportunities. An awareness of these ‘inclinations’ may, I hope, lead to a better understanding of what leadership within a small school context really entails and how leadership is experienced by those who take it on.

Inclinations	Opportunities	Restrictions
<p><b>Leaders are more ‘hands on’</b></p>	<p><b>Leaders really know what is happening in the school.</b></p> <p>“I can walk around this school and put my nose in each lesson in a period. You can’t do it in another school... I know when the school is shaky.” (headteacher)</p> <p>“I know exactly what is going on in the department. I can tell you exactly the strengths and weaknesses of each individual.” (head of department)</p> <p><b>Leaders are more accessible.</b></p> <p>“I’m much more hands on than I would be able to be in a very large school, and if you like, the layers within the structure are fewer, flatter. I am easily accessible to the staff.” (headteacher)</p> <p>“Being smaller does mean more people actually know what is going on, because you’re not being passed from pillar to post, you know who to see.” (middle manager)</p>	<p><b>Delegation can be problematic.</b></p> <p>“There is a temptation not to delegate.” (headteacher)</p> <p>“The head kept a lot of things to himself and the SMT because most of the heads of departments were too busy keeping the show on the road.”</p> <p>“You’ve got fewer staff to delegate to. A smaller senior team to delegate to. And therefore more stuff will stay on the headteacher’s plate.”</p> <p><b>There are just as many jobs to do as there are in larger schools but fewer people to do them.</b></p> <p>“The problem is that everyone has to do everything... You get very small departments, even single person departments, they have to do everything.”</p> <p>“If you are planning a scheme of work, and whether you are actually sharing that with four teachers or 24 teachers, it is still a scheme of work and there are fewer people to take different parts of it. And that same sort of principle applies to every single management area of this school. There are things to be done and some things it doesn’t make any</p>

		<p>difference how many people.”</p> <p>‘Doing’ can overwhelm strategic thinking and planning.</p> <p>“I had to manage more in the larger school but I have to do more in the smaller school.”</p>
<p><b>Leaders ‘wear many hats’</b></p>	<p><b>There are more opportunities to take on school wide leadership roles.</b></p> <p>“The opportunities are there to take, it does encourage, because you might not just have two roles, but even three or four roles. Within the middle managers there aren’t enough people to take up all the new roles.”</p> <p>“I’m far more knowledgeable about how the school runs... I’ve had great opportunities here really, in the time that I have been here. Nothing has hindered my development.” (middle manager)</p> <p><b>Leaders have a more holistic whole school view.</b></p> <p>“A lot of people have fingers in a lot of pies. There is a lot of cross-fertilisation simply because someone who is head of careers is also a head of year... Because people have so many responsibilities they see the school in a holistic rather than reductionist way.”</p>	<p><b>Leaders experience ‘task overload’ and become less effective.</b></p> <p>“One disadvantage is a small number of people doing a large number of roles. So there is more pressure on them.”</p> <p>“The same person is trying to do too many things, and take on too many responsibilities. It is not necessarily just straightforward overload of work, its task overload.”</p> <p>“You are dealing with a lot more things but on a much smaller scale, the demands are completely different. In a large school you have a much narrower job description which you can spend time on doing more effectively. In a smaller school you spend time doing a lot of things, I don’t know, less well.”</p> <p><b>One person can struggle to balance several different responsibilities.</b></p> <p>“The head of ___ is also in charge of the Key Stage 3 project... those should be two separate jobs because doing the head of department job is a full time occupation and the Key Stage 3 job is virtually senior management... We’ve got heads of year who are also heads of departments. I don’t think you can combine those very effectively. What happens is people do their absolute best, people here work extraordinarily hard, but they tend to, as all human beings do, gravitate towards the one</p>

		they are better at.”
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<p><b>Leaders have to cope with limited finances and resources</b></p>	<p><b>Leaders have to look for creative solutions to develop resources, and to recruit and retain staff.</b></p> <p>“With the various initiatives, like the Gifted and Talented, and Key Stage 3 project, what the head has done, which has been quite clever I think, is open up a lot of posts for middle managers, to people like myself who are quite experienced.”</p> <p>“A small effective school if it can keep its people will always have people who are giving very good value for money.”</p>	<p><b>Some appointments may be too expensive to make.</b></p> <p>“There is never enough money in small schools; in fact not enough people, because there is not enough money. The government has got the funding formula fundamentally wrong.”</p> <p>“Because you don’t have economies of scale it means that there are certain key appointment that you’d like to have that you can’t.”</p> <p><b>As staff may be paid less they may come to the school with less experience.</b></p> <p>“In small schools you sometimes appoint people younger than you would elsewhere. You take a gamble, you hope to get a few really good years out of them before they move on.”</p> <p><b>The curriculum can be restricted and teachers may have to teach outside their area of expertise.</b></p> <p>“It restricts the curriculum... When GNVQs came along we had to say we don’t have the staffing to go down this particular avenue.”</p>
<p><b>Teams are smaller and more cohesive units</b></p>	<p><b>Smaller departmental or year teams can be more flexible and take on change more quickly.</b></p> <p>“It is easier to be flexible and try a new ideas on a small scale because of the closer contact between people.”</p> <p>“It is easier to make something happen.”</p>	<p><b>One or two person departments can become isolated and professional dialogue limited.</b></p> <p>“When you are in a ‘one man band’ it is very difficult on a day-to-day basis... for 90 per cent of the time you are on your own and it can be quite frightening sometimes... an audit for example can become a very daunting prospect... I didn’t have someone to bounce off, to check... someone to say ‘well we also do this’.”</p>

	<p><b>It is easier to establish cohesive and committed teams.</b></p> <p>“The creation of a team is much, much easier when you have three or four people rather than nine or 10... It is much easier in a small department to be collaborative in terms of sharing ideas and good practice.”</p> <p>“Everyone knows what you are doing here. I think it does gel a team, and by gelling a team you get a fierce loyalty.”</p>	<p>“You are in control... sometimes it is lonely making those decisions, but you make them and get on with it... that independence, that power, I suppose, that’s nice.”</p>
<p><b>An individual leader can become a ‘big fish in a small pond’</b></p>	<p><b>Key leaders can be very influential and move the school forward.</b></p> <p>“If you got certain personalities in certain posts they can have an enormous impact, whereas if they are one of 20 people in management they aren’t going to have the same impact.”</p> <p>“You can make a difference very, very quickly. That could be a negative as well... a small number of difficult pupils or difficult staff could have an impact way out of proportion to their numbers.”</p>	<p><b>Individuals can feel ‘straight jacketed’.</b></p> <p>“Some people would make very good leaders of big departments and, if they are in a small school and they only have themselves, how do you find an outlet for those people.”</p> <p>“I have sometimes felt restricted being in a small school... I am feeling constrained now.” (middle manager)</p> <p><b>If key leaders leave they can be difficult to replace.</b></p> <p>“You mustn’t become reliant on one person doing something... what happens if they leave, if you set up a system that is dependent on an individual being there that is not good leadership.”</p> <p>“As one person leaves they may not be replaced by someone who brings the same kind of elements to a leadership team.”</p> <p><b>Promotion could come too soon.</b></p> <p>“I think it can accelerate people quicker</p>

		<p>than they should be accelerated sometimes...I wasn't anything special. It was just that I didn't sink and the jobs were there and I got them. I think to an extent it worked for me, but it made me grow up very quickly. It worked against me because I found myself stuck. Got there far too early." (middle manager)</p>
<p><b>Relationships within the school community are good</b></p>	<p><b>Leaders know the pupils and other staff better.</b></p> <p>"I know them, and I knew them very fast and they knew me very quickly and I think that helped greatly. You know every single member of staff by name." (new headteacher)</p> <p>"The better you know the teachers and the students, the better it is going to work."</p> <p><b>Pupils feel valued.</b></p> <p>"The biggest positive effective of a small school is that I think I know the name of every single child in the school. Well almost... You are walking down the corridor and can say 'hi, ___' by name. It's an environment where kids feel very valued and positive."</p>	<p><b>It is harder for staff and pupils to break out of ways of acting.</b></p> <p>"You get stuck in a certain way of acting, both kids and the staff. People have a perception of how you are going to act in a small school. It is harder to break out of that."</p> <p>"Loyalty and acceptance by the group can be more important than doing the right thing."</p>
<p><b>Communication is easier.</b></p>	<p><b>Leaders can 'pop in' and sort things out.</b></p> <p>"The head was just passing and asked 'have you got a moment or two, can you look at this, do you think this is a good idea?' and then things happen."</p> <p>"It is easier to get to see the head, he doesn't mind you stopping him in the corridor if you want to discuss something." (middle</p>	<p><b>There is a lack of formal systems.</b></p> <p>"You go into the staffroom at lunchtime and everyone is in there and there is a lot of chat then... You do bump into people, we've been a bit complacent."</p> <p>"Because you can see the person, the systems aren't as tight as they should be. So we flounder around and we are not sure about the system."</p>

	<p>manager)</p> <p><b>Communication can be personal and there is less paper.</b></p> <p>“In a school this size you see most people most days. You don’t have to shuffle bits of paper; you have a more personal approach to it... because you can actually speak to them instead of email or bits of paper.”</p> <p>“You can bring the staff on board quickly... you can go around personally, I don’t use memos at all.” (headteacher)</p> <p><b>It is easier to support each other.</b></p> <p>“The staffroom is small and you can quite easily pick up on what is going on in other departments and support other staff.” (head of year)</p>	
<p><b>Professional development is crucial</b></p>	<p><b>Leaders can gain more experience of a range of issues.</b></p> <p>“A small school is ideal to begin leadership because you experience so much more. If I had taken up a role in a larger school, it would not have been as diverse as it is here, and therefore I would be quite restricted in what I was learning.” (newly appointed assistant headteacher)</p> <p><b>Leaders need to develop a wider knowledge of educational</b></p>	<p><b>There are fewer departmental role models for emergent leaders.</b></p> <p>“You don’t have people to learn from. In my first school it was a massive department and there were lots of people doing different things. So you could learn from all those people.”</p>

	<p><b>issues.</b></p> <p>“You have to be an expert in many fields. You have to be up to date with a number of things.”</p>	
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### **Learning-centred leadership**

All the headteachers in the schools visited had a strong vision directly related to learning and to achievement and, therefore, there were considerable efforts made to ensure that the main focus of any activity was teaching and learning.

We are clear about what we are trying to do, and in our documentation about the school we say we are committed to the success of each student, and it's not trite, that's really what we are about as a school. We are looking for individual strengths of students, giving them opportunities to develop them and we are looking at areas of support that individual students might need. So everything we do is focused on children, children's learning. (headteacher)

Everything we do in school is focused on teaching and learning. So the pastoral structure, for example... it's still geared towards teaching and learning. (middle manager)

All the senior managers including myself are just teachers. Our job is different, but we are ultimately doing the same job as our colleagues who are full time at the chalk face. (headteacher)

There was a climate which encourages learning and risk taking by teachers.

The head said... “I want the kind of environment where you will take risks and it doesn't matter if it doesn't work out because no effective and interesting change will come about unless we make mistakes and take risk”. You can make mistakes in this school and try things out. You can be adventurous and you will always be backed up. (middle manager)

### **People-centred leadership**

It was obvious that in the schools visited leadership was inclusive rather than exclusive. In general, staff felt they were listened to and valued.

There is a lot of inclusion in terms of how all members of staff have an opportunity to participate at some level in how the school runs... Most people feel free to participate... My view was asked for and was acted upon. (middle manager)

The management team are all very supportive of all members of staff, taking on board ideas that you might have, comments you might want to make. Very much a two-way process; it's not just all top down. (middle manager)

The emphasis was on collaboration, teamwork and enabling middle managers, in particular, to take on responsibilities.

The strengths are its collaboration... The strengths here are that it really is a team. The senior management are our colleagues not our superiors... There is an openness; it is very easy, if you are not happy with a certain situation to voice that. It is not a school where criticism is swept under the carpet. (middle manager)

Leadership is about facilitating other people... I try to be an enabler and allow other people to achieve things. That is quite difficult for me because my natural behaviour is to do everything and be quite controlling. But I don't think that is successful leadership so I try to be more 'hands off', to enable other people. (headteacher)

But with this sharing of leadership, there was a clear expectation that staff had to deliver on their responsibilities. It was accepted that there would be robust intervention if things went wrong; thus it was a strong, rather than weak leadership model.

Middle managers have become much more important... it's the first time I've known heads of department be really responsible for their areas. (middle manager)

It is about being quite tough sometimes... It is sometimes in conflict with this notion of shared leadership and trying to get other people to take responsibility. (headteacher)

Positive relationships were valued and there was an expectation that people should be treated well.

(The head is) an inspirational leader... The way he deals with you, the way he treats people... His belief that relationships have to be of a certain calibre, the belief that he has that you should treat people in a certain way... He doesn't always live up to what he says himself, but it is a rare occasion. (assistant headteacher)

There was a 'praise' culture where strengths were acknowledged and developed.

You do get a lot of praise here... And feedback is often given to the whole staff at our briefing – "well done to that dept, that went really well, thank you for everything". I find you get more praise that you are doing a good job here than I did in my old school which was bigger. You didn't get that sort of praise for doing a good job. It can be the head seeing you in the corridor and he will say "thank you for yesterday, that was great". (middle manager)

Good staff are rewarded and it is acknowledged when something has gone well. (middle manager)

And lastly, the importance of humour, as a significant part of social interactions, was recognised.

There is an awful lot of humour in this school... The head is very self-deprecating and then everyone else can be like that. (middle manager)

## Building capacity

A feature which all the schools in the sample shared was a commitment to embrace change and aim for continuous improvement. To achieve this, the schools are developing a variety of strategies to build capacity. A schools' capacity can be described as "the power to engage in and sustain continuous learning of teachers and the school itself for the purpose of enhancing student learning" (Stoll, 1999).

Not surprisingly, the schools are developing a variety of strategies that reflect their context, history and current capacity. So in this section of the report I offer not a menu for other schools to copy but instead some descriptions that are deliberately written to generate debate and stimulate further innovation. None of the strategies are new and other schools may have developed them to an even greater degree. The point is that these schools have highlighted them as being significant elements of their success and that they might offer ways forward for others.

The strategies relate to:

- developing more effective leadership teams and incorporating the relatively new post of assistant headteacher
- involving more staff in the leadership of the school by establishing an extended leadership team
- supporting and enhancing the role of middle managers as key players in school improvement
- considering what part advanced skills teachers might play in moving forward the teaching and learning agenda
- nurturing the leadership of teaching assistants and others support staff
- establishing meaningful and powerful school improvement groups
- extending the range of professional development activities
- evolving more rigorous and developmental departmental self evaluation

Before looking at each of these strategies in detail, it is worth noting one significant omission. If you compare this list with the 13 action-orientated principles for developing internal capacity outlined by Stoll (1999), all are covered to a greater or lesser extent but with one rather dramatic exception: listening to the pupils. Stoll states that, "The voice and involvement of students is essential to school improvement". Whether this omission reflects that the schools visited feel this has not been a significant element in their success or instead reflects inadequate interviewing on my part is difficult to judge. I did not directly prompt interviewees to consider the involvement of pupils, but then in the quite wide ranging and open conversations no one raised it as they did other issues. Perhaps it is important but the schools felt they had not made sufficient progress in that direction.

## Leadership teams

In all of the schools visited the structure of the leadership or senior management team has changed in recent years. As one headteacher remarked, "It was a very flat structure. There were about 12 on the management team. It was silly." The teams have instead become small, tightly focused groups with shared aims but often complimentary skills. Perhaps significantly all the schools have ended up with almost identical models. In these small schools the pattern has become the headteacher, one deputy headteacher, two assistant headteachers and a bursar. One school did have the variation of two deputies and one assistant headteacher. The impact of the relatively new post of assistant headteacher is still being worked through. Whereas the old senior teacher role often meant a middle manager with extra responsibilities, in these schools the posts involve key whole school responsibilities, for example inclusion or assessment.

The teams highlighted the following qualities that they felt made them effective.

1. Individually the team members were knowledgeable and committed.

Unless you have very able people you won't go anywhere. The people I'm surrounded with are very able and committed.

2. The team members have complimentary skills and experience.

It is very bad to have a school team with everyone the same. I specifically look for people who have different skills, gifts and aptitudes from me. But there are certain things that are really non-negotiable... a commitment to the ethos of the school. (headteacher)

3. There were strong professional relationships. They did like working together.

In terms of personalities I'm blessed with people I get on with. None of us are afraid to say if we don't think something is quite right. They are very easy to work with. (headteacher)

4. As a team they listened to each other. There was real debate and they did not always agree with each other.

I'm becoming more vocal... I have my say when they are talking about educational things. (bursar)

I think we work very well. I'm not saying we're the greatest of friends but as a working group we work extremely well. And the debate in our SMT meetings can be quite cut and thrust and meaningful. It's not too pal-y necessarily, I think that's a goodish thing with management teams because you need to feel everybody's point of view is worth hearing and it's taken on board. (deputy headteacher)

5. Within the teams there was real openness and flexibility.

The head shares everything with myself and the other deputy. Everything that comes into the school will be duplicated... we'll then decide who's going to pick it up... It's very collaborative... at 8am everyday we'll meet... There's no rigid "it's not my job so I'll pass it to someone else". (deputy headteacher)

6. Everyone was clear and reflective about their role within the team. The headteacher could perhaps be described as the 'first among equals', the deputy 'watched his or her back', and the assistants more easily bridged the gap with other staff.

I tend to be very consultative... I know how I want the school to go but I will consult with them about how we might go about doing it. (headteacher)

I'm often used as a sounding board and people will come and try out ideas... before they go on to the head or the deputy, they would sound ideas out at my level. (assistant headteacher)

7. The team support each other and present a 'common front' to the rest of the staff.

The SMT is very supportive of each other and so there is always someone watching each others back. No one on the management team feels isolated. If there is a problem to solve, a difficulty to overcome, then it is an SMT issue to overcome it. (assistant headteacher)

When the senior team operates, I like to have a cabinet system where we discuss things very openly – if we think we're each talking rubbish we'll say so, if we come up with better ideas we will say so. We toss it around quite actively in our meetings. Once we go out through the door everybody is singing the same song, and there is never any exception to that. That's not just something that has come about by accident but something that we've agreed. (headteacher)

### **An extended leadership team**

Four out of the five schools in the sample are trying to directly involve some middle managers in the work of the leadership team by adopting a two-tier approach.

One headteacher has experimented over the years with several different models and now is developing an extended management group which involves key middle managers as well as the senior management team. At another school there is a leadership team which the headteacher describes as "my closest advisors when it comes to strategy and planning", alongside the wider senior management team which "hits the school with a very broad brush". Both teams meet weekly.

We have put in place now for several years an extended management group. For example, Mary who is charge of the Key Stage 3 strategy is part of the extended management group. That is something which has lots of scope, but we still have not got clear the difference between an extended manager and a senior manager. (School A)

We have the SMT, the head, two deputy heads and currently one of the assistant headteachers. Then there is the senior management group, those four plus the other two assistant head teachers... The SMT is the very top structure. The SMG has additional people in it. We changed last year... They all have line management responsibility for a department. (School B)

The Leadership Team focuses on the 'nitty gritty'... The SMT more on an educational overview, talking about the school management plan... whereas the leadership team is more focused on providing the resources or on how we are going to meet that need... We might discuss more confidential matters than we would at the SMT meeting. (School C)

The expansion of government initiatives coupled with increases in school budgets have created opportunities for new posts of responsibility. Some of the schools have established completely new posts, but more commonly it has meant 'topping up' middle managers.

With various initiatives like Gifted and Talented and the Key Stage 3 project what the head has done, which has been quite clever I think, is open up a lot of posts to middle managers. For example, people like myself who are quite experienced have been given the time and resources and training to take on the initiatives. And that has been very successful. So for example, I have been made a member of the extended management team. So he has been quite flexible in that respect and that has paid dividends in a number of areas... So that has opened up the middle management thing because before that it was waiting for 'dead man's shoes' before you could do any kind of initiatives.

From their experience of establishing such a group the schools felt that:

- It has to have a clear purpose and fit within the whole school leadership structure. It is essential that it does not just become a 'talking shop'. It may be important to maintain flexibility and vary the tasks undertaken from year to year.

(The extended management group)... meets just once a half term and has a project, a whole school project, to manage. That can work very well because when they are leading a project it makes it clear that the project is coming from the middle management. It is not something that is imposed by senior management.

- There is great potential for professional development and increasing staff motivation.

It is important, particularly now with recruitment and retention, that you want to motivate these young staff and give them things... It has meant that some staff are able to contribute very widely within the school.

From a professional development point of view (the broader leadership team) helps middle managers link with leadership, which is something I had no experience of before.

- Broadening leadership in this way can contribute significantly to changing the leadership style.

The school has become much more sort of collegiate and that was something the head wanted right from the time he was first made head. It has taken a substantial amount of time for that to happen. I would say it is getting very close to being genuinely collegiate, collaborative and participative.

## **Middle managers**

In all of the schools visited the role of the middle managers has been evolving rapidly and it has been recognised that they are the key players in school improvement, not just within their own areas but also across the whole school. Brown and Rutherford (1999), suggest that “the leadership of the head of department is the key to developing successful schools” and that “the climate in most secondary schools in the UK today would appear to empower middle managers to have the opportunity to contribute to school-wide policy, enabling them to have a significant impact on management concerns beyond the sphere of their individual responsibilities”. But such recognition is not enough. All of the headteachers in this study were as a priority wrestling with the thorny problem of how to recruit and retain these ‘star players’.

The schools stressed that:

- Middle managers must feel they are in control, taking real decision and accepting real responsibility for delivery.

(Middle managers) are now more able to say “this is the direction we’d like to take our department in”, before it was “this is where the school is going, you are coming with us aren’t you”. Now they are saying “this is what we want to do” and we’re looking at it and letting them do it. (deputy headteacher)

People are starting to feel like managers. They are feeling that they are potent in the school... by monitoring the curriculum, by actually saying “I am responsible for geography. Whatever happens in the school within geography is my responsibility.”... that sort of belonging and feeling of ownership. (middle manager)

- Such empowerment was sometimes in tension with the needs of senior managers.

The model of the charismatic, very successful headteacher... can be disempowering for other staff, and particularly middle managers.

- Creating extra paid responsibilities for middle managers was one way of extending their scope of influence as well as offering them an incentive to stay at the school. New government initiatives, with their additional funding, have helped to make this possible.

If a job comes up, for example, the educational visits co-ordinator, and if the budget allows, I’ll smack a point on that, or half a point and ask middle managers to apply. (headteacher)

- Extra responsibilities for middle managers was obviously also linked to personal growth and professional development.

Quite a lot of people have extra responsibilities, either paid or not. We try and have development roles; they might be temporary for one or two years. If there is something that needs doing we try to offer it as a development post, perhaps in the short term to get that job done, but it also develops that particular person.

- Empowering middle managers was about the little things that create an ethos of distributed leadership. And perhaps this ethos may in time filter down to include all staff.

It is the little things like the staff meetings are not chaired by the leadership team, middle managers running break duties, all little things that contribute to the message that we are trying to make which is that their leadership is important... I'm not convinced we have gone further than middle management level yet, but that is the next stage. I would hope what we model at one level about how we treat and enable our middle managers is picked up by the middle managers and they are enabling their own team as well... It happens in some departments. (headteacher)

- Middle managers had effective structures that allowed them to discuss and create policy. They need to feel they have collectively a significant voice in school affairs. In several of the schools, heads of departments and heads of years were regularly meeting together, rather than maintaining a curriculum-pastoral divide.

We have a head of departments forum, which the deputy head chairs. All the leadership team attend and a lot comes out of that, a very fertile meeting. (middle manager)

### **Advanced skills teachers**

Two of the schools visited had just appointed advanced skills teachers and were very much 'feeling their way' in how they might best be used to train other staff and thus improve standards of teaching and learning. Both teachers were very experienced heads of department.

One of the approaches is to work with the NQTs in terms of classroom practice... provide a model classroom for people within the school to come in and observe my lessons, and for me to go out and observe other people.

The next stage in the work is to work with other teachers in other departments... to look at, say... the start of every lesson... how do you deal with the first ten minutes? Then to raise that issue in terms of a documentary video of the way that people are teaching in that first ten minutes.

One specific thing that I'm looking at is one particular teacher in the school who is a very good teacher but the results that they are getting with certain groups aren't perhaps quite as high as they could be. Without meeting that head on, one of my roles is to support that teacher to look at what is happening there and how we can expand their teaching so that they can move on.

At one of the other study schools the idea of appointing advanced skills teachers had been rejected because it was felt that they did not have a distinctive role to play. It was felt instead that it was the role of heads of departments to focus on teaching and learning, rather than on administrative tasks.

I think heads of departments are advanced skills teachers. That's why they are heads of departments and we expect them to take a lead on teaching and learning. If we have advanced skills teachers, how does this sit with the role of the heads of department? We give heads of department non-contact time for curriculum development, to monitor their department and to encourage good teaching and learning. So the role of advanced skills teachers would seem to cut across that. (headteacher)

### **Teaching assistants**

In two of the schools the role of teaching assistants and other support staff was highlighted as being particularly significant in helping to raise achievement.

The role of teaching assistants has attracted much government and media attention, but the study schools are still trying to define exactly how best to use the talents of their teaching assistants. Some local education authorities (LEAs) have begun to offer specific training for teaching assistants and we may be seeing the beginnings of a second tier of educators developing within our schools. Perhaps, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and as e-learning takes hold, we should be looking at new models for staffing our schools. New models, not to save money or because of teacher shortages, but because learning now requires teams of educators with different skills and experiences, not solitary teachers in their own individual classrooms.

The teaching assistants have developed their own expertise, for example with disabled pupils, particular learning difficulties, English as a second language. So what we have tried to do is let the teaching assistants be seen as the experts... that has added to their kudos and generated respect in the staffroom.

In some schools teaching assistants work only as part of the learning support department. In others, teaching assistants have been attached to subject departments. This has helped them to develop specialised skills and integrated their work more closely with that of the teachers. Just, as in many primary schools, the line between teacher and teaching assistant has become blurred.

We used to have them all spread all over the place... No one knew what was going on, and quite frankly sometimes the teaching assistants were going around and they weren't doing much. So we decided to have a particular person linked to each major department. And that is working extremely well, because they are in the department all the time and they work closely with all of us.

The study schools emphasised that:

- Like all members of staff, teaching assistants should be deeply involved learning themselves.

The teaching assistants “have been encouraged to take part in lessons as learners and there is now a history of them taking GCSEs alongside the pupils. It is very empowering... and about their leadership and confidence... it is tremendous. (headteacher)

- It is important to develop career opportunities for teaching assistants, just as it is for teachers.

We now have senior teaching assistants and this gives a career structure and a path... Otherwise they have nowhere to go; they come as a teaching assistant and stay as a teaching assistant.

- Teaching assistants not only help raise the attainment of less able pupils, but also have a significant role to play in improving their self esteem.

Teaching assistants help our less able by showing that... people are interested in them... I think in some secondary schools the less able, probably by Year 9, are disillusioned because they are not getting quite what they want. But here... they are getting more help, more time, more one to one, and I think they appreciate that. It provides the evidence for them that when it says in the mission statement we want the best for everyone that we are actually helping them along as well.

Some schools visited were also using other support staff in imaginative ways to support learning. In one school, a school keeper who spoke French had helped Year 11 pupils prepare for their oral exams.

### **School improvement group**

In one of the schools, a new headteacher wanted to involve staff in developing what was already a successful school. She set up a policy and management group, but was “shocked” and “immensely disappointed” that the group failed to take things forward. She admitted that she hadn’t realised that the teachers didn’t think they could be part of the change process. The previous headteacher had been a ‘benevolent autocrat’ and ‘staff did not expect to be making decisions’. She ‘let it go for a bit’, then changed the group into a school improvement group that was much more involved with the school improvement plan and took charge of the introduction of the Key Stage 3 strategy. The group is now led by the Key Stage 3 manager and has the power to allocate money for particular projects through a development fund.

But the schools were clear that:

- Working groups need a tight focus and real ‘power’ to initiate change.

They are just an incredibly powerful group, but not only powerful but positive. Although they are primarily focused on Key Stage 3 and development, if there are other issues, for example they have dealt with a staff questionnaire about satisfaction at different levels. And then if things have come up via the questionnaire they have analysed them and they have had the power to change things and to do things. That’s why I think it is successful because people have started to say “how can I get on that group”. And when you have teachers saying

can I get on a group that has meetings you know that it is a successful group.  
(headteacher)

- Headteachers must have the confidence to let go and allow a successful group to make significant decisions.

... we suddenly got this money come in... I got a little idea in my head that there was a little hole in the budget I could use it for. But before you knew it (the chair of the school improvement group) had seen everybody. They'd sorted it out and then she said I'd better tell you how we're spending that money. That's the difference. And isn't that good. (headteacher)

- Personalities and relationships are the key to success. Structures and procedures are probably less important.

I think it's only a change of personnel which has made it work this time round. I think if you change the personnel again you might find it dips or it might get better. I'm not sure it's the structure, it's personalities, that make that sort of a group work.

## **Professional development**

All of the schools stressed the importance of professional development, both for improving the standards of teaching and learning and for ensuring teachers' career progression.

Whenever I appoint a member of staff I make it clear to them that one of the things I enjoy most is career development. That I am going to be keeping an eye on them in respect of the needs of the school and in respect of the needs of their career. And that in terms of them progressing up the ladder, I'm always ready to listen to them and advise them. (headteacher)

And professional development was not seen as just attendance at a course, it was seen as embracing a much wider range of activities.

It is about finding opportunities for people to work together; about viewing professional development in its widest sense. Moving away from the notion of sending one person on a course and hoping that they will come back and be able to do something. We know they won't, it doesn't work. Instead, if say we have two people who are interested in developing something, then we must say "go away and do it". We must facilitate it in some way, make it happen. (headteacher)

A variety of strategies for extending the range of professional development activities were described, including:

- Delegating much of the responsibility and finance for professional development to heads of development so that it can be more carefully tailored to individual and departmental needs and more thoroughly monitored and evaluated.

The heads of departments have an INSET budget as well, which they are free to use... for themselves or for members of their department. The heads of department do fulfil this crucial role in being able to identify the training that they and their department need to support the responsibilities they have for the academic performance of their department.

- Sending small working groups on 'away days'. By allowing staff quality time, a day or morning, out of school to think through some issue or produce a presentation for a staff meeting this not only 'gets the job done' but is a powerful professional development opportunity.

When we were thinking about the future of study support... it helped me with my development and being more involved in the curriculum. We went off for a day to decide about what would happen... as a result the Key Stage 4 study support evening was started... it was only on that day that I thought of that idea. (head of year)

- Establishing links so that teachers could do some A-level teaching. None of the schools had sixth forms but two were developing links with others schools or the local sixth form college. Not only did this allow for individual professional development but it was also proving to be a good recruitment and retention incentive.

Getting involved in a partnership with a school that has a sixth form has allowed a few staff to teach A-level. That has been very helpful to them; it is another string to their bow. (headteacher)

- Using meeting time for professional development and sharing good practice. One school starts all its staff and middle manager meetings with an item of sharing good practice. This is sometimes difficult to sustain but the knock-on effect of starting such a meeting by directly thinking about teaching and learning cannot be underestimated.

We do have agenda items that are genuine INSET around an initiative, not the administration of that initiative, but for example around its philosophy.

- Creating opportunities for staff to visit other schools, in the UK or abroad.

We have bursaries that are sponsored by our business links, for teachers who have been here a certain length of time. One teacher used the money to visit schools in New York.

- Using money from 'initiatives' to fund tailor-made conferences. Quality time, at a nice venue, when staff can think, network and hopefully 'be inspired' can really be money well spent. Conferences designed to meet the schools' current agenda and needs may be a considerable undertaking for those organising them, but perhaps that is yet another professional development opportunity?

We are having a massive conference here on learning styles and we've invited all the teachers and LSAs from the primary schools. We've got one of these motivational speakers coming in for the morning. Everyone is getting a free lunch that day. I think that is important.

Another school had held a Leadership Conference. It was residential, Friday evening to Saturday lunchtime, for middle and senior managers and governors.

- Becoming involved with educational research projects.

There are things that we have done to make it more interesting to stay here. We've tried to get involved in things that add extra stimulus to people. For example, the international learning project.

### **Departmental self-evaluation**

The schools visited understood that effective departments are the essential ingredients of any successful school. And, therefore, the development of the leadership skills of heads of departments or faculties is of paramount importance. Robust and thoughtful departmental self-evaluation can offer significant professional development to this end. Not surprisingly several schools in the sample cited this as a key element of their school improvement.

It was stressed that:

- Self-evaluation should be based upon careful and honest analysis of strengths and weaknesses. Obviously for some staff this may seem threatening so this must be recognised and a climate of trust nurtured.

We've got a very good self-evaluation process and the attitude of the teachers in the school is "yeah, we do some things well, but we are not doing everything well, and how do we move on?" And as part of that evaluation process we do very rigorous departmental reviews which include lesson observations, looking at documentation. But a thing that is getting better and better, and I think is the most important part about it, is that everyone in the department will do a SWOT analysis, and we'd bring that together and that really crystallises what we are trying to do. The staff feel much better at actually identifying weaknesses, we still call them weaknesses, we don't think they are things to be frightened of. (headteacher)

You're under pressure because you want to make sure that you have got everything in place, It's like a mini OFSTED, I suppose, but it's good, it should happen. I think it helps us to update our work, to stop us from being stale... I think we all need to have someone in just every now and again. You get complacent... It's not meant to be destructive in any way, it is meant to be constructive. We sit down in the department and say "well these are the issues" and have a little whinge about it, but then we say "OK let's see what can be done about that" and move it on. But it doesn't feel threatening. (middle manager)

- A direct link between departmental self-evaluation and the school and departmental development plans must be established.

We have key school objectives in the (school development) plan. Each department has to say how they are addressing those aspects of the plan. That's the audit of the department, strengths and weaknesses.

- There is a tension between the benefits of self-evaluation and the workload involved.

We're going to amend (the annual cycle) because the schedule is immensely tight. During the review each teacher is observed twice... And you've got to be careful because some poor soul who teaches in three departments could be observed to death... We thought we'd go to once every two years for departments, and the heads of departments seemed to quite like that. Part of that is because it is a killer on the SMT, and you know you're constantly doing reviews and writing, and... seeing people.

- A direct link between departmental self-evaluation and the allocation of resources is not only good management but adds purpose and motivation.

The head of department, the support governor, the line manager meet with me following the review. We go through it and make recommendations from it... Sometimes there are things we can do immediately because of the development fund; it depends on what it is. Sometimes they know it goes, if you like, on the waiting list. It depends what money is available. (headteacher)

We've borrowed, begged, did anything we could to get money to make a new science lab and prep room, and that came out of the review.

- There could be a role for school governors in department self-evaluations.

Every member of the governing body is (involved in departmental reviews). Well not every single one but we expect them to... They are a support governor for that particular department so they are expected to know what is going on in the department. So in one way it is the governor's way of exercising their legal responsibility for the curriculum... They can come in at different times of the year but the support governor does come in during the review week and they will sit in lessons. They are not part of the lesson observation judgement. (They are) observing to see what sort of things are happening in school because I've got a strong view that governors shouldn't be making decisions about the school if they don't know what it is like in there and what they do. And they talk to the head of department and then they are also involved in the final review where we talk through issues. (headteacher)

The governors come in that are attached to each department. So if we have a problem we can say that it is resources. We need that for this, please plead for us and on our behalf, which again works very, very well. (middle manager)

There were different models of departmental self-evaluation, but in all the schools it involved much more than just observing the teachers teach. All possible sources of data were looked at. One school expects:

- all full time teachers will be observed twice
- the work of six pupils from two year groups will be scrutinised in two year groups
- a department meeting will be observed – as close to the review as possible

- all paper work (schemes of work for the relevant half term, the departmental improvement plan, the departmental handbook) will be returned to the lead senior management team person  
(from the school's framework for self-evaluation)

And at another school:

We have teaching assistants attached to departments and so we involve them in the review. How they work, what they are doing.

## Endnote

It is not surprising that of the five schools visited, four have already increased their size and within a few years may no longer be regarded as small. The fifth school has physically no more space and so already has reached its capacity. One school had embarked on a building programme to create extra classrooms.

Whilst it is understandable that parents and LEAs would wish there to be more places in successful schools, there may be a danger of 'throwing out the baby with the bath water'. Certainly, one element of the success of these schools would seem to be their size. The leaders have enthusiastically grasped the opportunities and frequently overcome the restrictions that are typically placed on small secondary schools.

Perhaps the most lasting memory for me of my visits to the schools involved in this research was that despite their different contexts and histories, and the very divergent personalities involved, there were some fundamental aspects of the leadership that were clearly the same. So returning to the questions I posed at the beginning of this report it is now useful to summarise the answers I have been able to offer.

- **What have these schools got right?**

They have strong leadership that is focused upon learning, values people and is inclusive.

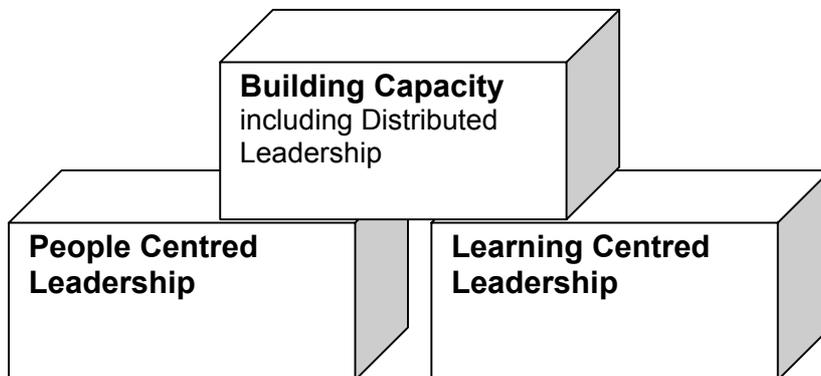
- **How are they going to improve further?**

They are committed to building the capacity of individuals, teams and the school as an institution. They are still evolving, taking risks and embracing change. They are trying to share or 'distribute' leadership (Gronn, 2000).

- **How has the size of the school contributed to its achievements?**

The leadership of smaller schools is not inherently different from leadership in larger schools. However, there are 'small school inclinations' that present both opportunities and restrictions.

Perhaps, even more simply these are the building blocks for success noted in this research:



## Methodology

There is not the space here to fully detail and justify the research methodology. However, it must be acknowledged that as an example of participant observation my interpretation of the data may be affected by my close involvement with the subject of the study. I work in one of the schools on which the research is based. This ‘insider knowledge’ may make me sensitive to the implications of trying to run a successful small school, but it may also at times have influenced my judgement. To try to alleviate such pitfalls and to ensure a systematic checking of my interpretations, I sought to adopt a strategy that owes much to ‘grounded theory’. This approach “allows theory to emerge from the data, so that it does not lose touch with its empirical referent: it provides a framework for the qualitative researcher to cope with the unstructured complexity of social reality and so render it manageable; and it allows the development of theories and categories which are meaningful to the subjects of the research...” (Bryman 1988). As part of the process I also undertook focused reading into issues surrounding leadership, small schools and the role of middle managers.

## Schools

All five of the schools upon which this research is based were small, 11–16, comprehensive schools. They were selected because they are successful schools, in terms of GCSE results, and have been described by OFSTED as having good leadership. They cannot be regarded as a representative sample but as the table below suggests they do illustrate a variety of contexts and situations.

	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
<b>Status</b>	Community	Voluntary aided	Community	Community	Foundation
<b>Mixed/ single sex</b>	Mixed	Mixed	Single sex	Mixed	Mixed
<b>Location</b>	Rural	Urban	Urban	Urban	Rural
<b>Size (Jan 2001)</b>	645	585	601	584	653
<b>5+ A*–Cs (2001)</b>	72%	69%	29%	41%	58%
<b>Compared with similar</b>	A*	A*	A	A	B (1999, A)

<b>schools</b>					
<b>Leadership as described by OFSTED</b>	“The school is led and managed highly effectively.”	“Highly effective leadership... sets a clear direction for the school to enable pupils to achieve high standards.”	“The strong leadership... is resulting in improved standards and the increasing popularity of the school.”	“The school is strongly led: there is an obvious commitment to continuous improvement.”	“The management team provides strong leadership.”
<b>Other factors</b>	“No areas of the school’s work need significant improvement.” (OFSTED)	Faith school – admission criteria that child must be ‘fully practising’.	Previously in special measures.	Set up as new school in 1991.	Beacon status.

Four out of the five schools were at the time of my visits applying for specialist school status.

## Interviews

Once the schools were chosen the headteachers were asked to select the teachers to be interviewed. The guidance given was as follows:

Your school has been selected as part of a sample because the school’s last OFSTED report highlighted the strength of the leadership within the school. I would like to visit the school to carry out four interviews:

- with yourself
- with a deputy headteacher or assistant headteacher
- with a middle manager who you feel has demonstrated good leadership both within their department/year/house and within the wider school agenda
- with a second middle manager who you feel has demonstrated similar qualities

Each interview will take no longer than 35 minutes and I would like to record them so that an accurate transcript can be made. The interviews will focus on issues of leadership within small schools, the role of middle managers as well as the senior managers, and the differences there might be with leadership in large schools.

The questions asked during the interview were adapted according to the role of the interviewee and to allow the interview to flow as a 'professional conversation'. However, the questions were based upon the following model:

- What is your role, main responsibilities? How long have you been in this role? How long have you been teaching? This is a small school. What experience do you have of working in a large school?
- Can you describe the structure of the leadership within this school? What are its qualities and characteristics that you feel make it so effective? What is your contribution to/ role in this leadership?
- What do you think are the differences in leadership here from that in a large school? As a leader what are the additional challenges you face because this is a small school? What are the advantages of this being a small school?
- Could you describe how the school involves middle managers in the overall leadership of the school? Which of the strategies you have described have been particularly successful? Why is that?

The tapes of the interviews were interrogated to discern key patterns and shared perspectives. Large parts were transcribed and to illustrate the 'voices' of the interviewees quotes were chosen for inclusion in the text of the report.

## Teachers

Twenty teachers and one bursar were interviewed. They all unselfishly gave of their time during the normal hectic school day. As the table below illustrates, these teachers represent a body of considerable knowledge and experience who have all contributed enormously to the success of their schools.

	<b>Number interviewed</b>	<b>Teaching experience</b>	<b>Experience in current role</b>	<b>Experience in larger schools</b>
<b>Headteachers</b>	5	Range from 19–34 years	Range from 1–11 years	All had previously worked in larger schools
<b>Deputy/ assistant headteachers</b>	7	Range from 10–32 years	Range from 5 months to 11 years	Only one had not previously worked in a larger school
<b>Middle managers</b>	8	Range from 5–27 years	Range from 2–14 years	Two had not previously worked in a larger school

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