

United we stand

A soft federation model for small primary schools

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

Jo Williams

Headteacher, Wilson's Endowed CE Primary School,
Over Kellet, Carnforth, Lancashire

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Background and introduction

The changing nature of rural school leadership

The boundaries are changing for patterns of school organisation, including that of rural schools. The idyllic image of a Mr Chips-style headteacher nurturing his or her charges in a ramshackle Victorian building surrounded by rolling countryside is a nostalgic view of rural headship, but one which remained relatively realistic in some contexts in the not too distant past, as Gervase Phinn, author and school inspector reflects:

Hawksrill School was a small stone building enclosed by a low, craggy limestone wall. It was surrounded by a vast expanse of pale and dark green fields which rose to the thick, now dead bracken slopes, long belts of woodland and the faraway, cold grey fells. The headteacher, Mrs Beighton, was a stout squarely built, ruddy complexioned woman with a wide friendly face and short cropped white hair. Her assistant, Mrs Brown was uncannily like her. They both wore rather old fashioned, floral-patterned dresses and cardigans and carried capacious handbags. (2001, pp 71–2)

However, a revolution of enormous proportions has taken place over the past 30 years, changing schools beyond all recognition. The Mrs Beightons of this world have been consigned to the history books. The impact on small rural schools in particular has been enormous. The nature and style of school leadership has changed and schools have shown themselves to be places that can embrace change and foster pioneering ideas, and this is no more evident than in small schools.

The organisation of such rural schools (and indeed schools in other contexts) is therefore changing and there are many examples of innovative new models and structures of leadership. In particular, much has been written on the challenges and successes of *federation* and how it meets the needs of pupil learning and leadership recruitment. For instance, the recent Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and PricewaterhouseCoopers' review of school leadership noted:

... [federation] can be shown to have a number of key benefits which, ultimately, impact positively on pupil performance, for example: greater capacity through more distributed leadership; economies of scale achieved through pooling resources; smoother transitions of pupils between phases; and improved progression opportunities for all members of the school workforce. The benefits of this can be manifested in the primary school sector where groups of schools are able to share resources and access services that would not be viable for individual schools. (2007, p xi)

The federation model provides a framework of shared leadership and joint governance. Federation is perhaps most commonly understood to involve one or more schools sharing a single headteacher under one governing body, with a legal framework in place. However, other models exist, besides this '*hard*' *federated* model. For instance, networks and clusters may be viewed as the most informal of federations, with schools working together for mutual benefit, for example in Primary Strategy Learning Networks. The DfES and PricewaterhouseCoopers report also acknowledged the benefits of less formal collaborations:

There are also more informal ways in which primaries or small schools could benefit from economies of scale by collaborating with each other more closely. Anecdotal evidence from stakeholders participating in this research has shown that there are benefits to sharing specialist staff (eg bursars, HR [human resources] managers or ECM [*Every Child Matters*] managers) across a number of schools. It should also be noted that this approach can work for facilities as well as people: schools could come together to share

access to IT [information technology] suites or sports or arts facilities for example. (2007, para 4.62)

Some schools have, however, sought out alternative approaches for different reasons. These are not always as formal as federation or as casual as informal clustering activities. *Soft federation* falls somewhere in between these two extremes described above and is the focus of this research study. In this model, one headteacher leads more than one school but the governance remains separate and joint activities are idiosyncratic to the needs of each school. Figure 1 describes a range of different approaches to federation and partnership. This is linked to ongoing legislation that supports school collaboration, most recently the 2007 School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations introduced in May 2007. The schools in this research project shift between the two middle definitions, soft federation and soft governance federation. Legislation has been supportive of different models of leadership and there is a framework to promote innovative approaches to leading more than one establishment. Regulations for collaboration came into being in September 2003 for soft governance federations and in August 2004 for full hard federations.

Figure 1 summarises the range of models of federations in existence. It shows how these progress in ‘hardness’ from informal collaborative activity, to models of hard governance federations, with a single shared governing body and a range of integrated systems.

Figure 1: Continuum of federation models

Collaborative federation continuum			
Collaborative	Soft federation	Soft governance federation	Hard governance federation
Non-statutory	Non-statutory	Statutory	Statutory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal • No joint governance • Loose arrangements • No joint budgetary decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of joint governance • Joint committees without delegated powers • Agreement on common goals through protocol • Common management positions and appointments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly formal • Fixed joint governance • Overarching strategic committees with delegated powers • Agreement on common goals through service level agreements • Joint appointments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single governing body • Integrated service provision • Integrated management, some with chief executive officer-type head • Joint budgetary decisions

Source: DfES and Innovations Unit (2005, p 6)

Aims of the study

The research set out to discover the benefits of less formal but nevertheless structured partnerships, where two schools share key staff but retain independent systems and structures. Such schools are best characterised as 'soft federations' on the schema outlined in Figure 1. This work focused on four such examples where small rural schools in one local authority area have adopted a similar model of cross-school, soft federated leadership, where decisions have been made to circumvent current federation styles.

Literature review

What do we know about effective leadership and management?

It is blindingly obvious that a good school needs a good head. (Blair, 2000)

This research set out to study the impact of sharing 'a good head' across more than one institution. Every school is completely unique with its own individual idiosyncrasies. The responsibilities of the headteacher differ from school to school. Two schools close together can have a very different intake, both in size and catchment area and require different approaches to leadership and management. Ofsted (2003) provides helpful guidance on differentiating between what can be viewed as effective leadership, and what constitutes effective practice.

Effective leadership is demonstrated when:

- there is clear vision, with a sense of purpose and high aspirations for the school, combined with a relentless focus on pupils' achievement;
- strategic planning reflects and promotes the school's ambitions and goals;
- leaders inspire, motivate and influence staff and pupils;
- leaders create effective teams;
- there is knowledge and innovative leadership of teaching and the curriculum;
- leaders are committed to running an equitable and inclusive school, in which each individual matters;
- leaders provide good role models for other staff and pupils (Ofsted 2003, pp 8–9).

Likewise effective management is evidenced when:

- the school undertakes rigorous self-evaluation and uses the findings effectively;
- the school monitors performance data, reviews patterns and takes appropriate action;
- performance management of staff, including support staff, is thorough and effective in bringing about improvement;
- a commitment to staff development is reflected in effective induction and professional development strategies and, where possible, the school's contribution to initial teacher training;
- the recruitment, retention, deployment and workload of staff are well managed, and support staff are well deployed to make teachers' work more effective;
- approaches to financial and resource management help the school to achieve its educational priorities;
- the principles of best value are central to the school's management and use of resources (Ofsted 2003, pp 9–10).

The Ofsted report concludes by highlighting the increased importance of both skills sets within the climate of increased delegation from national and local government to the individual school, noting that:

The increasing delegation of authority for managing schools to headteachers and governors, which began with the Education Reform Act 1988, has led to a greater level of challenge in the already very demanding tasks of leading and managing a school of any kind. The need for strong and inspiring leaders and for highly competent and effective managers is greater than ever before. (Ofsted 2003, p 35)

These themes are reiterated in a recent thinkpiece by West-Burnham for the National Association of Headteachers in which qualities are identified to match the challenges faced by school leaders in a changing role:

This means enhancing our understanding of the affective aspects of leadership – the issues of interpersonal relationships, personal responses to change, innovation and creativity and, perhaps most importantly, the development of the individual as a learner, the recognition of the importance of both the existential self as the basis of motivation and commitment and the need to enhance the whole person and not just train to do the job. (2007, p 7)

NCSL also stresses the changing nature of leadership and the need for leadership to respond to the demands of the specific context faced (NCSL 2008).

It is interesting to note that in discussing the future of leadership styles, terms such as ‘collaboration’ and ‘networking’ are more commonly used. Leaders have been given greater opportunities to experience this type of working practice at an informal level through Networked Learning Communities and Primary Strategy Learning Networks. In reviewing the implications of NCSL’s report on building capacity, Street notes:

There will be greater emphasis on team working, collaboration, influencing across networks and shared leadership. (2005, p 29)

Key findings in relation to school leaders’ roles and responsibilities

More recently, PricewaterhouseCoopers undertook a major review of headship on behalf of the then DfES (2007). The report reflects on the different aspects of headship, summarised in Table 1 below (pp vi and vii).

Roles and responsibilities* ie the key activities school leaders should be performing	Findings ie the evidence on the extent to which school leaders are currently meeting the demands being placed on them
Strategic direction and ethos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headteachers felt that lack of time impacted on engaging in strategic issues • Some school leaders preferred an operational role
Teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leaders expressed frustration in not being able to promote and develop the quality of teaching and learning as much as they would like • Leadership and management activities kept school leaders away from teaching
Developing and managing people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many school leaders have embraced the challenges in relation to people development • The research found that this area still required a higher profile from school leaders when compared to other sectors
Networking and collaboration – between schools and with other agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some schools had restructured to formally recognise the importance of interagency collaboration, ie by including professionals from other agencies on the leadership teams

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research findings show that this will become more common in other schools going forward • School leaders now have to be much more outward looking than they used to be
Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many school leaders are too involved in operational and delivery matters at the expense of embracing their more strategic imperatives. Research showed headteachers, for example, unblocking toilets, filling dishwashers and supervising pupils before and after school • Opportunities to delegate in the primary sector can be limited • Some school leaders were more comfortable with an operational than a strategic role
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability tasks were the most time consuming of all • Headteachers experienced frustration over conflicting policies and initiatives • School leaders need to embrace the fact that change, diversity and complexity are inevitable features of the current and future environments • School leaders can, however, legitimately expect such change to be managed coherently by government and other agencies

Each of these areas link closely to the expressed needs of the partnership headteachers in the present study and the strategies they implemented to promote effective leadership. The schools in the study have had to embrace these areas from governor level to the operational level and the day-to-day running of the schools within a complex management structure, finding context-relevant solutions to the inevitable challenges that would arise. The six points appear simple, the nuts and bolts of headship, but it is their skilful application that enables a school to build capacity and to serve its learners effectively.

In relation to collaborations, the School Standards Site (DCSF 2008) produced a useful checklist titled 'What are the likely conditions for a successful collaborative partnership?'. The list includes such established and prerequisite leadership responsibilities as commitment and trust but adds key ideas such as a system of review and strong management. It notes:

A collaborative partnership needs a strong cohesive leadership, and federations should be interested in developing and sustaining leadership across all levels of the schools. (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/federations/what_are_federations/conditions/?version=1)

What are the challenges associated with leading small schools?

In their study of the leadership of schools in times of change, Day et al (2000) highlight the particular tensions in leadership in small schools. In general, Day et al argue that leadership issues are very different for schools with less than 100 pupils and the small

number of staff employed present real issues of capacity. Foremost among these is the simple fact that there are fewer people to take on leadership responsibilities. A related issue centres on the continued existence of the 'teaching head' in many such schools. As Day et al note:

The fact that heads in small schools tend to have a significant classroom teaching commitment results in tensions between teaching, leadership and management which create unique sets of development issues. The teaching load of heads in very small schools leaves little time for managing or leading the school. (2000, p 145)

Support for Day et al's findings comes from Ofsted (2003) which notes that larger secondary schools are invariably run by a senior leadership team (SLT), which are a relative rarity in the primary sector. More recent research has gone as far as to note that a teaching headteacher experiences conflict between their classroom role and leadership role. Wilson and McPeake noted these challenges when reporting on small Scottish primary schools:

For some it may be that the difficulty of reconciling teaching and managing pushes them to consider a non-teaching appointment. Some interviewees pointed to this as a major source of stress: "I have to come to terms with whether I am the headteacher or the teacher". The most difficult task is dividing management time and teaching time. (1998, p 29)

Wilson undertook research in 2007 following up the themes covered in the earlier report. The teaching headteacher conflict remained but this was extended in that headteachers felt it affected their leadership style:

[Teachers] who are also headteachers will have little time for reflection and concentrated thought that this requires during key times in the administrative cycle when developing their school plans or setting budgets dominate their thinking. (2007, p 10)

The very nature of being small has its charm but also its challenges. There may be fewer pupils on role but this is also reflected in the size of the school budget. This impacts in different ways through staffing levels, resources and ultimately the possibility of limiting pupil opportunity. As early as 1967, the Plowden Report raised concerns regarding challenges faced by small schools:

Schools should be large enough to justify a staff with varied gifts and correct flexible organization, which does not force classes with a wide age range on teachers who are not convinced of their value. (1967, p 168)

A small staff not only limits expertise but also creates intense relationships and the possibility for conflicts. Wilson and McPeake noted:

Another feature of low staff numbers is close relationships among members of staff, including the headteacher.... Another headteacher indicates, closeness may be a particular strength of small schools, but it also represents a danger. Others suggested that: "one rogue individual could destroy the whole system"; "if staff weren't cohesive, it would be horrific"; and "a problem if there is a conflict of personalities". Thus, close relationships are not automatically good relationships. Unless carefully nurtured, they can turn sour and destructive. (1998, p 40)

Headteachers found that the various challenges they faced within their context directly influenced their leadership styles. Terms such as 'situational management' and 'contingent leadership' were identified in the two Scottish studies recognising the importance of context and its direct impact on leadership. Interestingly, when Barnes was researching executive headship linked to schools in difficult circumstances, the executive heads expressed a need to connect their leadership style to the context:

The selection of leadership style to suit the context was cited by a significant number of executive heads. More than one reported having to step outside their preferred style. (2006, p 17)

Likewise 'distributed leadership' is emerging as a style of leadership. The headteachers in the Wilson study (2007) resisted the term as they felt it implied further delegation onto an already stretched staff. However, a distributive leadership approach has provided support for headteachers in small schools in the development of effective collaborations and soft federations.

How can collaboration and soft federation help to address these challenges?

As early as 1995, Galton and Hargreaves' research outlined the benefits of collaboration describing clustering as a 'survival mechanism' for rural schools. He outlined how working together could support curriculum demands and other initiatives that challenge small schools due to the economies of scale. An evaluation of federations undertaken by Lindsay et al in 2005 noted the benefits to staff across two schools:

Skilled staff contribute to collaborative practice and the continuing professional development of their colleagues in the partner school. Hence, while there is strong leadership from the Executive Head there is also strong *distributed* leadership, generalised to the second school. (2005, p 9)

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) published a report by Arnold evaluating the different types of partnerships. His research commented on the challenges facing collaborative practice to ensure effective outcomes noting that:

Collaboration will only deliver if it becomes more radical and ambitious. It is not an attractive add on, but a different way to do the school's core job. (2006, p 37)

Likewise the leadership within those partnerships needs to be strong to succeed:

Partnerships of whatever kind depend crucially for success on the quality of leadership. (2006, p 37)

Although innovative models of leadership will always encounter new challenges, there are many benefits to sharing expertise and practices. In the same report Arnold (2006, p i) summarises the principal benefits in engaging in partnerships:

- It gives the opportunity for collective planning, with the strengths of each constituent school knowing no boundaries.
- It makes possible 'individual learning pathways', through which a student's needs and aspirations can be met by drawing on a wide range of expertise and specialisms.
- It allows a cost-effective and coherent curriculum, increasing the opportunity to fulfil individual students' needs.
- It creates joint staffing opportunities and wider career structures across the federation.
- It leads to improved senior and middle management.
- It has the advantage of economies of scale.
- It forms a basis for further partnerships with other providers, eg 14–19, community services.

When evaluating the impact of partnerships, whether it be an informal cluster or hard federation, Thorpe and Williams found that the history or journey leading to that union was key to its success. Well established federations had prior experiences of joint, shared practices which supported the transition to full federation:

With these stable federations there existed a prior history of collaboration between the schools, a common culture shared by the communities and the schools are in fairly close proximity to one another. (2002, p 16)

What factors are important in promoting federations?

A group of schools in Totnes were funded by their local authority to develop effective collaborative practices. This included a special school and the project lasted for three years but the benefits remain. The following statement was taken from their federation website (www.totnes-federation.org.uk):

Although the funding for this project ended, the good work continued informally and it was felt that the benefits to all three schools were such that the collaboration should not only continue, but grow, to incorporate other areas of school life. By joining the schools in a more formal way, as a federation, the headteachers involved have made a commitment to build on this firm foundation.

Thorpe and Williams also noted that federation created the advantage of being part of a larger unit while maintaining the small school ethos. They cited the example of teacher isolation:

Many of the disadvantages of professional isolation are addressed through close collaboration between schools in catchment or cluster groups where the provision of INSET and the sharing of curricular expertise is better catered for through a larger unit and therefore overcoming teacher isolation. (2002, p 8)

The DfES and Innovations Unit's introductory guide to federations also identifies key themes that are proven factors in establishing effective partnerships:

In our experience to date, we have found many of the factors below to be crucially important to the success of our partnerships:

- A sense of shared identity between the schools. Geographical proximity and having common aims in curricular and non-curricular activities are extremely beneficial.
- A common purpose. Schools need a shared sense of what needs to be done and how, with a joint vision for improving attainment and achievement levels.
- Leadership. Partnership working requires strong leadership and federations will benefit from developing and sustaining leadership at all levels.
- A strong management structure. Schools must understand and co-operate with this for effective partnerships to grow.
- Trust. Trust is fundamental to effective collaboration and should be fostered at every level of management. There has to be a real sense of openness and a willingness to operate in a joined-up way amongst governors, heads and all other staff.
- A system of review. We need to have good monitoring/evaluation systems to show that we are achieving the anticipated benefits of federation.
- Commitment. Both time and resources are needed to ensure that the federation is effective and sustainable.
- Communication. Excellent communication mechanisms are required when introducing change, particularly where lots of schools are involved. Many of us are developing intranets and various other e-forums.
- Sustainability. There must be a clear sustainability strategy in place to enable a collaboration to cope. For example: if the leadership of one of the schools changes; if additional schools wish to join in; if existing schools wish to leave. If committing to

contracts or expenditure for any length of time, financial sustainability is vital. (2005, p 9)

Although the themes outline what is required, it also highlights some of the benefits and these aspects could prove beneficial to small schools. Leadership of a federation has its challenges but there are also inherent benefits. Small school headships can be difficult to fill posts and Thorpe and Williams noted the benefits posed by federation:

Federation could be seen as a new challenge for many headteacher of small schools and could make the role more attractive because of the greater scope to be proactive and creative in the way the school is managed. (2002, p 22)

In the last decade decentralisation of education in the Netherlands has promoted the development of federations. The model varies slightly to the emerging format in England but recent research undertaken by NCSL was able to identify key advantages to both school leaders and their schools. The headteachers felt they had more time to lead; were more prepared; had the ability to transfer their skills; and had a greater sense of direction and an effective professional detachment. The federation model also provided opportunities for distributed leaders across the staff as well as financial benefits to the schools. Although leadership styles may differ there was a commitment to developing staff skills:

The leadership styles of more-school heads varied considerably within the federations studied. In some cases, the more-school heads distributed the leadership role and empowered location leaders to be the face of the school. In other cases, the more-school heads had a more direct leadership style and a visible presence within the school. There was a sense that many were forward-thinking and wanted to develop the concept of working together to move the schools forward.

All of the more-school heads spoke passionately about teaching and learning and many showed an obvious commitment to developing staff in their schools. Coaching appears to be an important leadership development area within the Dutch education system. (DfES and Innovations Unit, 2005, pp 20–1)

The Dutch model gives English schools exploring a federated option the opportunity to learn from their experiences. Within this context it is also important to remember that 'one size does not fit all'. There are regional variations, different political agendas from local authority to local authority and differing needs of individual schools. In terms of models of federation, this is particularly highlighted in a report by Glatter and Harvey (2006) in which new models of leadership are explored:

In terms of operation, the researchers found a striking lack of uniformity. There is a continuum rather than a dichotomy between hard and soft types, and there are wide variations in the role of federation leader. (2006, p 5)

What are the reported tensions of federated leadership?

Federated school leadership is a relatively new phenomenon and as such a source of considerable media interest. For example, in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Arkin reported a falling roll situation in the West Midlands resulting in two headteacher vacancies being advertised as a single post for two urban schools in Sandwell. The same article featured governors in rural Rutland who were hoping to appoint a 'cross between superman and Mary Poppins' for two small schools, where the federation head would have no teaching commitment, and '... the holder of the new post will be able to concentrate on running the two schools, while additional staff will pick up the head's teaching load' (Arkin 2003, p 26).

In the same article, however, the then General Secretary of the National Association of Headteachers', NAHT, expressed concerns over the growing number of headteacher vacancies and did not see federation as a way forward in solving the recruitment crisis. He warned that there could be potential conflict with one head serving two governing bodies.

The 2007 PricewaterhouseCoopers survey has had much press on the role of the headteacher. In a response to the report in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Barton noted:

When asked about heads' essential ingredients, teachers said they should be "approachable and visible throughout the school". It's not just not just pupils and staff who expect to see us stalking the corridors and leading assemblies: we're also under the gaze of parents, governors and other "stakeholders". That's what makes headship quite different from running a hospital or biscuit factory. (2007, p 23)

This need for a visible and accessible head is one source of potential tension in federated schools where the head is shared across establishments. Elsewhere the demand for 'one head, one school' remains as strong as ever. For instance, delegates at the NAHT 2007 annual conference reacted angrily to calls for schools to work more closely to overcome problems created by a lack of headteachers. They demanded the maintenance of the position that every school should have its own qualified headteacher, in 'an overt challenge to government moves towards groupings of schools headed by a chief executive' (Milne 2007, p 3).

However, contrary views have been expressed by some headteachers. In the same article by Milne different headteachers were interviewed and the benefits from collaboration and closer working practices were also highlighted. An Ipswich headteacher was linked with another school and saw the advantages of sharing staff and resources. She commented:

If the alternative is for a small school to close for want of a head, I think we would see this as a realistic alternative. (Milne 2007, p 3)

Thorpe and Williams found in their research into federations in Wales that parents primarily viewed federation as the preferred option to closing schools and that closure impacted on the broader community (2002, p 19).

There are tensions at school level as to the basic qualities needed to lead more than one establishment. The headteacher needs to be equipped with key leadership skills to ensure a successful partnership. Lindsay et al (2005, p 9) warned against the 'hero innovator' style of leadership, recommending an approach that draws on the skills of other senior colleagues. Barnes notes that it is not just the leadership capacity of the headteacher that is important but also that of staff left to lead in the headteacher's absence:

The need to have adequate leadership capacity in place at the partner school so that the executive had could return to the host school for part of the week was essential. (2006, p 10)

Similar issues were found in the Dutch research. Federations caused a time of uncertainty for the staff, which in time were resolved:

Two of the more-school heads commented that there were also some initial tensions with teaching staff. Some teachers were worried about losing the head "they thought that they were losing 50 per cent of a headteacher", yet the same head went on to say that "after a

couple of months, everyone could see the benefits and felt positive". (NCSL Research Group 2005, p 19)

Outside factors also contribute to the tensions of federation and directly impact on the partnership's success. The journey to partnership has been highlighted previously and Thorpe and Williams noted that inadequate development of a shared culture could cause difficulties. Likewise they found that different sized schools needed to be mindful of one another's needs in working towards federation. They cited one initiative that failed after a two-year trial:

The schools in this federation, whilst being geographically close and having a history of co-operation through the 'cluster' group of neighbouring schools, did not have a shared linguistic and cultural background and had separate parental and governing bodies. This made the likelihood of federation more difficult. (2002, p 20)

Key points

- Headteachers of small schools experience conflict in their two roles as teacher and leader.
- School leaders have an increasing range of roles and responsibilities.
- Tensions and difficulties have been encountered in developing partnerships but positive lessons are to be learnt, drawing on others' experiences.
- Collaborations and federation offer a variety of benefits to the staff and pupils in small schools.

Research methodology

This research study explores how some small rural primary schools facing similar leadership challenges have developed systems of soft federation. It took the form of a small-scale study in one geographical area. Four headteachers, a governor and a local authority representative were interviewed. All the schools represented were small schools and the headteachers each led two or more schools. Interviews took place during the autumn term 2006.

The aim of the interviews was to establish the journeys the schools and the headteachers had experienced to get them to their current point and then to examine the current leadership model. The interviews focused on key challenges and benefits of the soft federation model, exploring why these schools, their governing bodies and leaders wished to continue to work in partnership but without formal federation, and what the advantages and challenges were that they therefore faced.

Findings

The findings are grouped in terms of the reasons why the case study schools became soft federations in terms of the benefits they perceived would accrue; what factors drove the success of the soft federation leadership model adopted; and what challenges the schools continue to face.

Why did these schools become soft federations?

The motivations for entering into a soft federation centred on five areas.

1. Fearless federation

The schools in this study all had specific reasons as to why they had journeyed along a route that had resulted in a single headteacher running two more establishments but at the same time the schools had not federated. The common theme running among all the schools was the need for a leader and partnership provided the most effective solution. The local authority representative interviewed noted that collaboration could happen on many levels but that this type of partnership was more formal. The interviews revealed several barriers to federation. School governors felt their schools maintained a greater single identity and autonomy without full federation. Soft federation was a safe compromise that met the needs of the schools involved while ameliorating their fears.

The consensus of most of the headteachers interviewed was that the aim was to provide shared leadership and greater opportunities for collaboration and therefore there was no need for the schools to take that next step of being fully federated. In contrast, one school in the case study was working towards the next stage of federation as a result of the success of the partnership.

2. Strategic capacity of the headteacher

All the headteachers interviewed experienced dramatic changes through this new model of headship. It is very different. One headteacher noted that she was no longer at the school gate every night; she was *leading rather than managing*. There was a direct impact on the ability of the headteacher to lead strategically. The local authority representative had observed the partnership heads becoming more evaluative now they had the opportunity to stand back. The headteachers felt a significant shift in their leadership styles. Without a substantial teaching commitment, they had the opportunity to focus on a greater depth of leadership. Leading more than one establishment also required effective structures to be in place and this resulted in the effective delegation of management tasks. This again freed the headteacher to be strategic in their leadership. As one headteacher commented:

'I have a clear vision, time to be strategic and visionary. The school could run for six months without me. Management structures are in place and led by others.'

This freedom to be strategic was reiterated in the PricewaterhouseCoopers' research that found headteachers too burdened by day-to-day management tasks (2007, p vi):

The evidence suggests that many school leaders are too involved in operational and delivery matters and that this has been, to some extent, at the expense of embracing their more strategic imperatives. The research has generated numerous stories of headteachers, for example, unblocking toilets, filling dishwashers and supervising pupils before and after school.

3. Growing leaders for the future

The structure of the senior management teams varied across the partnerships. There were different levels of collaboration and different systems of leadership responsibility in place for when the headteacher was off site. Roles varied from a deputy headteacher with designated non-contact management time to teachers in charge and the use of teaching and learning responsibility points (TLRs). However, there was a similarity in ethos in that the partnership provided the opportunity to nurture school leaders for the future. The teacher in charge of one school was working towards the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) accreditation. In contrast one school struggled to appoint someone to the role of teacher in charge and was successful through an advert that promoted the opportunity to be 'a leader without bureaucracy'.

All schools were in agreement that for their partnerships to work then it was crucial that increased attention was placed on establishing a culture of trust and effectively distributing leadership. For instance, they felt that there needed to be key players, such as the school clerk and the teacher in charge, with skills in a range of areas. Examples of these included the ability of the school clerk showing parents around instead of the head and them being given greater responsibility and autonomy to deal with routine maintenance needs. Elsewhere teachers in charge had developed knowledge of how to deal with the many day-to-day issues addressed by the head and sources of support in relation to this. Teachers in charge were often part of the SLTs and also took on key delegated tasks such as attending Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, running the performance management of the school's teaching assistants and showing prospective parents around

Having established rigorous management structures that enabled others to lead in the absence of the head were also important in supporting this devolution of leadership.

Staff felt that the traditional role of the small school headteacher changed dramatically once the schools became a partnership. This had an impact on the nature of leadership across the school with shared and distributed leadership becoming a more accepted approach. As one headteacher observed:

'There were changes in the perception of the headteacher when they take over as a partnership headteacher because the role has changed.... Teachers take a greater leadership role, dealing with day-to-day responsibilities.'

4. Headteacher recruitment

Some of the partnerships had developed because one school had been struggling to recruit a teaching headteacher to their small school and a soft federated relationship with the neighbouring headteacher provided an effective solution.

Interesting dynamics have developed through this model in the region where this study took place. The local authority is recommending that governors consider entering into partnership when recruiting a headteacher to schools that have less than 60 pupils on roll. Single-school appointment was not seen as a cost-effective solution to leadership in these circumstances. The local authority representative felt that soft federation makes headship of a small school more attractive as well as reducing the isolation sometimes felt by headteachers in this role. In a similar way to empowering the headteachers to develop their strategic capacity, recruitment became focused on leadership without a regular class commitment. In surveys carried out as part of PricewaterhouseCoopers' research into leadership, the teaching commitment of small school headteachers was raised as an issue (2007, p 15):

'I believe that it is going to become harder to replace headteachers of small, rural schools given the balance between management, leadership and teaching. It is not realistic for a headteacher to have more than a 0.4 teaching commitment.' (headteacher survey)

'Heads, even of small schools, should not be expected to have a teaching role in addition to headship.' (headteacher survey)

'In small schools, the senior leadership team has an almost full time teaching role.' (headteacher survey)

'There should be a balance between teaching commitment and leadership time. The [present] expectation is that all tasks should be carried out after the school day has finished.' (senior leader survey)

All heads felt that their post would now be advertised as a partnership when they left. It was felt that the partnership post was a more attractive package and the local authority representative envisaged that more experienced leaders would possibly apply for the partnership posts rather than the 'new to leadership' candidates that often apply to small schools initially as their first headship.

5. Long-term sustainability

Since its completion, no headteachers involved in the study had changed job. One head said that it was the partnership that had kept her in post, saying that she felt she could actually continue now whereas otherwise she would have been actively seeking another post. Headteachers were remaining as leaders of small schools rather than moving to larger schools or to different posts.

The union between the two schools has been established for several years and a culture of trust and protocols has been established. This means that it is only a small step to federation should the schools so choose. This is another way in which there is capacity to develop long-term sustainability.

Roles within the school are more clearly defined with the headteacher's role now very clearly one of leadership, with the support of a teacher in charge. This scenario not only supports recruitment both at headteacher level in the immediate case but also grows leaders for the future in the development of the teacher in charge role. This will ultimately have an impact on the sustainability of the of the partnership model in that new dynamics have been created supporting recruitment and retention at all levels.

What drove the success of the soft-federation leadership model?

Four factors were identified by the interviewees as being key to the overall effectiveness of the federation.

1. Proven leadership skills

All the headteachers interviewed held headteacher posts in a single school before becoming a leader of more than one establishment. Some of the headteachers had previously been deputy heads and even local authority officers in previous posts. It was evident that they drew on a wide experience of leadership.

These headteachers were able to access a wealth of skills that they had gained during their time as leaders to deal with the day-to-day issues as well as the ability to focus on vision and strategy for the two schools. The local authority representative recognised the

complexity and specific demands of this model of headship and felt that to succeed it required a leader with existing knowledge of headship and leadership strategies.

The headteachers themselves felt that a maturity of leadership was essential and that there were key elements to success, and cited, for example:

- there are more people to manage and you become more of an executive head
- the headteacher needs to be flexible
- the leader must be secure in their principles
- it is important to be a people person
- good communication is essential
- you need to go with the idiosyncrasies of the school

Some of these examples are day-to-day management realities whereas others are long-term leadership strategies, and it was the recognition of key areas of strength that were already established within the leader that secured the success of this leadership model.

2. Capacity within the school

The school needs to be able to manage the process of sharing a headteacher with another school. In interviewing the headteachers it quickly became evident that there were key procedures and personnel that ensured the effective functioning of the school in the leader's absence.

The headteachers explained that there had to be effective systems in place to ensure the efficient running of both schools with a shared headteacher. This was most apparent in the use of distributed leadership. The deputy headteacher in one school showed prospective parents around and in another school, the teacher in charge undertook the performance management of the teaching assistants.

The local authority representative noted that there had to be capacity within the school as well as capacity within the head. The model proved to be successful only if well supported. As well as having systems in place, support also revolved around key personnel and their roles. One headteacher noted that the new TLR points did not actually support the needs of a school with a shared leader. In these circumstances it is the teacher in charge and the office staff that become the lynch pin in providing effective management in support of the leadership. As one headteacher commented:

'There needs to be key personnel with experience and key skills need to be in place. Essentially [you need] a reliable bursar and an experienced teacher who will be teacher in charge.'

3. Headteacher well-being

One headteacher commented on how governors monitor her work-life balance and there was a resounding consensus among the headteachers that their well-being was better as a partnership headteacher. This was even considering the doubling of attendance requirements at events such as governors meetings and school extra-curricular activities.

One headteacher had stayed in the role because she felt her working conditions had greatly improved. There was also an acknowledgement that leading a small school without the teaching commitment had kept the headteachers in post for longer. To achieve this effectively meant the headteachers being prepared to delegate.

Another headteacher recognised the challenge facing a headteacher of a small school with a significant teaching commitment and had planned to be in post for two years, then move on. The opportunity to be a headteacher of a partnership with no teaching commitment kept the headteacher in post for longer, and forced her to rethink her long-term career plans.

In addition to having no teaching commitment, headteacher well-being could also be linked to how the headteachers undertook their new role. They no longer felt torn between trying to deliver good quality lessons and at the same time being a successful leader. Focusing on their leadership enabled them to be strategic and more effective. One headteacher described taking a difficult telephone call at break time then rushing into the classroom to teach, feeling bad that she was unable to give her best lesson in those circumstances.

Greater responsibilities encompassed in the headteacher's new role also gave them the opportunity to access a wider band in terms of salary scale. They were pleased to be earning similar salaries to their larger school colleagues.

Headteacher well-being has been a key driver in the success of this model in these schools but the local authority representative highlighted the continued need to monitor headteacher workload. He was concerned about the way in which this model required the maintenance of two or more management structures and two or more governing bodies. The extra workload in comparison to that of a hard federation could be considered significant but the headteachers interviewed still found it better for their overall well-being than being a headteacher with a large teaching commitment.

4. Governor confidence

Each of the schools had maintained separate governing bodies and separate sub-committees, with the headteacher attending each. Respondents felt that by having totally separate governing bodies the school's individuality and identity remained undiluted and singular. The headteachers indicated that when the partnerships were being set up, the governors were weary of pressures towards full federation and saw soft federation as a way of accessing the benefits of collaborative working without the risks or commitment of full federation. It meant that the governors could operate as they had while exploring the opportunities of working together across the schools at their own pace and at a level of involvement in which they felt secure. The headteachers described how through this model the governors felt they had maintained control of 'their own school' and dealt with issues that were relevant to 'their own school'. It was *their* agenda for *their* school's benefit.

As the schools involved in the study were all small schools, the issue of the threat of closure had been in a concern to governors, either due to historical events over the past 50 years or recent recruitment issues. One school had advertised for a headteacher for three years before appointing a partnership headteacher. By using this model of partnership, respondents believed that governors' fears that their school would be taken over by a neighbouring institution had been reduced.

Respondents felt that governor confidence had been a facilitating factor in making this model a success for the schools, and believed this was demonstrated by subsequent developments since the establishment of the partnerships. They described how their schools had moved on from a culture of suspicion, with an inward focus to developing increasing levels of collaboration, for instance:

- one school was moving towards full federation
- joint governor sub-committees
- shared staff in key roles (eg IT technician)
- joint INSET
- shared subject leadership
- joint performance management of the headteacher

Without governor backing the soft federation model was not a feasible option. Governing bodies were being challenged to move out of their comfort zone and to agree to a different way of working. There were factors that helped this transition. Some of the schools involved were neighbouring church schools and the parishes were already used to sharing a clergyman as part of a united benefice. As the partnerships were created logically in terms of geographical location, the community members knew each other from the nearby village. In one partnership the two schools already had three governors in common, prior to the collaboration. This had eased the fear of change and facilitated the transition towards adopting a new model of soft federation that is predicated on confidence and trust.

What challenges do the schools face?

Respondents identified a number of key challenges that the school faced in relation to the soft federation.

1. Teacher in charge workload

One of the positive issues raised by the headteachers was that they believed this model allowed them to lead their schools more effectively. They were not rushing from teaching to make those essential telephone calls and then spending their evenings and weekends catching up on marking and paperwork. However, for this model to run efficiently there needs to be effective systems in place for when the headteacher is not on site. The concern is then raised that does the teacher in charge then face the challenges that were originally faced by the teaching headteacher, of trying to do both jobs at once?

The local authority representative questioned what the school's expectations of the teacher in charge role should be. He raised points such as what is actually expected of the teacher in charge? When talking with the headteachers at the schools it became clear that this role was very much idiosyncratic to the individual establishments. One school employed a deputy headteacher who had non-contact time for leadership and management, whereas other schools had had difficulties in recruiting to this position. What was common across the schools was that this role, on a day-to-day basis in the headteacher's absence, was one of management rather than leadership. Conversely the teacher in charge also tended to be part of the school's SLT where they would operate strategically.

The headteachers interviewed all recognised the difficulties faced by their teachers in charge but saw the role as essential to the success of the model. In recognition of these challenges the schools had developed systems to support the teacher in charge. Non-contact time was available to all teachers in this role at each of the schools visited. One post had been advertised as 'leadership without the bureaucracy' and another school had used the TLR post to support the school's need for a teacher to engage with day-to-day management issues while not having responsibility for full-blown strategic leadership matters. Each school had developed a job description for its teacher in

charge, which was specific to that school's needs. One school employed a deputy headteacher while another added to the TLR job description. It was evident that this role was tasked with the day-to-day dealings of issues which may arise such as talking to parents at the school gate and liaising with the headteacher over more pressing matters. In addition to this one school had created a more line-managed model where the teacher in charge undertook all the performance management of the support staff.

Whatever the teacher in charge's job description or varying roles, what was very clear was the headteachers' commitment to monitoring the individual's workload and giving support where necessary was essential.

2. Appointing a deputy

As with other aspects of partnership, schools approached the need for a deputy headteacher from different perspectives and with differing needs. The largest school visited already had a deputy headteacher in place and another introduced the deputy's role as part of the partnership.

The teachers in charge across the partnerships became part of newly formed SLTs and their roles were clearly defined. Some of the partnership schools did not feel the need to employ a deputy headteacher and compared the absence of the headteacher from the site as similar to the head being on a course. In the majority of schools visited, it was felt that the teachers in charge could work effectively as part of an SLT and not have the full responsibility of a deputy headteacher. Within the partnership set-up, the teachers in charge were acting as the key person in the head's absence: a focal contact for parents, providing effective liaison and open lines of communication. It is very much a management role on a day-to-day basis. Although the teachers in charge supported the strategic leadership and vision for the school as members of an SLT, they were not expected to take on the level of responsibility expected from a deputy headteacher. The local authority representative questioned what it was schools actually needed in the absence of a headteacher, especially as they are contactable just down the road. "What does 'deputise' actually mean?" he asked. The majority of the school saw the deputy head role as a way to provide efficient systems to enable the partnerships to function effectively.

As the partnerships have evolved independently over time from different starting points, it became clear that the decision to appoint a deputy headteacher was very dependent on both the past circumstances and context of each school as well as the perceived needs for the future.

3. Headteacher workload

Headteachers interviewed felt their workload had decreased and that they had an improved work-life balance by relinquishing their teaching commitment. However, they did acknowledge that this model of partnership increased workload in some areas, particularly governors meetings. In spite of the workload increase in some areas, they still felt that they had stayed in post because of better working conditions and because they were no longer a teaching head.

There are similarities to any federation or collaboration in that the headteacher would wish to be present at any key events in both the schools they lead, such as Christmas plays, sports days, PTA events and so on.

The difference lies in that the requirement to attend 'double everything' extends to governors meetings. The key difference in the soft federation model as opposed to full

federation is separate governance. Without full federation headteachers have double the amount of governors meetings to attend and many can be in the evening. The termly full governors meeting plus any number of sub-committee meetings can soon mount up. The local authority was concerned over the extra pressure this might put on headteachers and were monitoring the situation with respect to headteacher workload.

Different headteachers within the partnership used different strategies to support them through this aspect of their role. One school delegated PTA meetings to the teacher in charge and another partnership introduced a joint curriculum committee across the two schools. Another headteacher held all the sub-committee meetings on the same evening as they felt it used the time more efficiently.

Again different partnerships governed in different ways. One headteacher found that she could have up to three evenings of governors meetings in any one week. Another headteacher commented on the repetition of the governors meetings agenda from one school to another. As a result, one established partnership is now moving towards full federation as the next stage to working more closely in a formalised way.

4. Headteacher experience

As well as the perceived benefits that this model of leadership provides in terms of recruitment, it also has its challenges in finding a leader with established leadership skills and qualities.

The headteachers interviewed agreed with the local authority representative, who had overseen all the appointments to partnerships local to the case study, that it would be wrong to appoint someone new to headship to partnership schools. They felt that the partnership headteacher role had some very specific challenges that required prospective candidates to provide evidence of existing, proven effective leadership. As yet, none of the partnerships have faced a further headship appointment as the nature of the partnerships has meant that the existing headteachers have remained in post.

The local authority representative drew on recent experience of appointing an experienced headteacher to a newly formed partnership. This provided the headteacher with new specific challenges as they had to 'learn' two established school cultures as well as develop an ethos for collaboration. He felt that had the partnership already been established, then the head would have had fewer challenges to face. It was this experience that had confirmed his opinion that partnership headteachers needed to be experienced in leadership.

5. Size matters!

When the head of one school takes on the headship of another school, questions are inevitably asked. In a climate of falling pupil rolls, especially in rural areas and compounded by some local decisions historically, the partnership headteachers often faced suspicions and worries from different stakeholders as to the reasons behind the governors' decision to share a headteacher.

The headteachers who had particularly focused on such challenges were those who already held a substantive headship in a larger school. The larger school felt they were "losing their head to smaller school, with no benefit to themselves". Conversely, the smaller schools expressed how they felt the larger school's motive was predatory and that there was a hidden agenda of a 'takeover' or even a step towards future closure.

The mismatch in numbers on roll also meant that decision had to be made regarding the allocation of the headteachers' time. This tended to be organised on a pro rata system. In one situation this meant that the headteacher spent four days in the larger school and only one in the smaller school. It became evident when interviewing the headteachers that these have been difficult issues to manage. One headteacher felt that she and the governors of the larger school felt a philanthropic responsibility to support the needs of a neighbouring school and its community but having experienced the challenges through trying to partner different sized schools, they now felt a better solution would have been to create partnerships of similar sized schools.

6. Mixed media

Many of the partnerships appeared to have evolved in response to local need. Geographical location was a prime consideration alongside the proven abilities of a nearby substantive headteacher.

This arrangement has the potential to become more complex if one or more of the schools was a church school. Church boundaries and county boundaries differ and there is the prospect that more than one diocese may be involved in negotiations as to the appointment of one partnership headteacher. Many of the schools in the partnerships were church schools and the diocese had played a key role. This situation creates some potential problems both in creating the partnerships and in their recruitment of headteachers to the partnerships in the future. Some of the partnerships contained church schools with a mix of voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled status. The local authority representative expressed concerns over future appointments if there was a partnership between a community school and a voluntary-aided school. The different governing bodies would have different priorities for the leader of their individual schools. Religious commitment would be more relevant to one school than the other. There is also the potential to be working with more than one diocese within a local authority.

Such issues would not be a concern in a full federation model as there would only be one governing body. Equally, at the other end of the spectrum, although differing church backgrounds might be perceived to be a barrier to full federation, it would still be possible to enable an effective collaboration through partnership.

Conclusions

Although small in scale, this research has identified a range of issues and two key opportunities for schools in relation to soft federation. The interviews explored many different aspects of leadership but with a keen focus on context. Firstly, in many respects the school leaders interviewed faced similar challenges to any headteacher leading more than one establishment. It is therefore clear that the potential exists for leaders of schools that collaborate through federation or one of the alternative models, to share knowledge and good practice. Secondly, the project enabled questions to be asked as to why this particular soft federation model worked for these schools. What was it about a partnership rather than a full federation that made it the best fit in their context?

The conclusions drawn below are synthesised from a leadership perspective and were messages that were reiterated throughout the interviews with school leaders, governors and local authority representatives.

Growing leaders for the future

Some of the schools had faced difficult times before becoming a partnership. These included long-term staff illness, falling rolls and recruitment. The local authority where much of the research took place had made a decision to encourage governing bodies to opt for a partnership rather than try to appoint a new headteacher if the numbers on roll were 60 or less. As a result there were an increasing number of partnerships. This in itself created more teachers in charge.

It was encouraging that at one school the teacher in charge had embarked on NPQH as a result and another school had advertised for a teacher in charge as a leader without the bureaucracy.

The teacher in charge role provides an excellent prospect to develop leaders for the future. They have the opportunity to lead with a resident and experienced mentor. They can be part of an SLT, placed in a situation of trust and delegated key responsibilities. This structure has not previously been open to small schools in such a way.

Opportunities for high-calibre individuals to provide effective leadership in small schools

Too often small schools are viewed as a stepping-stone to something bigger or avoided altogether. Small school leadership has its own very specific challenges and all the leaders interviewed spoke of the rigors of being a teaching headteacher and the impact that had on the capacity for effective strategic leadership.

Many of the headteachers interviewed remarked that they would have sought other posts had their schools not embarked on a partnership. Headteachers of two schools expressed their new-found enjoyment of the leadership role, acknowledging their ability to lead rather than manage as a result of effective partnerships. This has benefits in that high-calibre individuals were able to bring their knowledge and experience of small schools and their mature leadership skills to create effective partnerships.

Those interviewed indicated that they believed this model was sustainable and good for small schools. The role of headteacher was more akin to that of their colleagues in

larger schools. There was a better work–life balance on offer. When advertising a partnership post, it was felt that it would attract a much wider range of candidates as well as those with relevant experience and expertise.

In all, small schools would be the winners, with a higher calibre of leadership and more time to lead effectively.

A toe-dipping exercise for federation

For some governors, there is a fear attached to the term ‘federation’. The schools in the project all came into partnerships from different starting points and at that time federation was not felt to be right for them. Each school was keen to maintain its own identity both as a school but also as a community of which the school was the heart.

As the partnerships have become more established collaboration has increased. This has been at all levels and varied between the schools. It has ranged from enhanced activities with the children to shared staff and joint governor sub-committees. This collaboration and connectivity continued to grow and develop. One partnership in the project was working towards federation. The stakeholders within those two schools had recognised the benefits of collaboration and wished to take it a stage further.

Partnerships were described as ‘an engagement rather than a marriage’. There is a commitment to one another but it is not yet legally binding. Partnerships give schools the opportunity to explore the potential of federation at their own pace and level and involvement. It gives the chance for all to test the water and decide which bits are right for their context at that time. The lack of boundaries actually seems to be driving greater collaboration as the partnerships grow, leaving the future open to new opportunity.

One size does not fit all

What has been most interesting about this project is witnessing how these schools chose a route that was felt to be right for them at the time. They are still on a journey, still learning and developing but it is a supportive journey together with mutual benefits. The structures may not be as formal and clear as federation but that is the issue. The partnerships provided an effective specific solution for all concerned at time when it was most needed.

The future road ahead

There are exciting and changing times ahead for schools, not least in pioneering differing models of leadership. Schools continue to embrace the benefits of working collaboratively at all levels, from sharing good practice to sharing a leader. It is interesting to note (DfES and PricewaterhouseCoopers 2007, p 94) that only 20% of all primary schools do not have any kind of collaborative activities and that conversely 61% have some experience of working collaboratively. Likewise it is also significant that whereas full federation has only been adopted by 1% of primary schools, soft federations and soft governance federations collectively account for 6% of all primary schools.

What this study has explored is a model that has been successful for a group of schools in their context. They have embraced change and look to the future with hope. As Dalton et al, have noted:

A key feature of the school of the future is the capacity to innovate, to create a culture in which changing is the norm, to create strategies to improve and to translate the vision and moral aspirations of the school into actual practice. (2001, p 142)

Schools need to be supported in following their vision for the future along a route that best meets the needs of their particular circumstances and context. Arnold concluded from his research that:

The future development of federations and partnerships is by no means a straightforward matter, and its success will depend on the right answers to certain questions ... they turn on the issue of freedom of choice, an enthusiasm for shared progress, and a willing acceptance of some dilution of autonomy. No school should be forced into partnership, and no partnership be subject to dictate in its membership ... some partnerships have gone beyond the notion of common curricula and shared resources, and have argued for common accountability, in terms both of inspection and performance data, and a common admissions policy. Anything that damps down such aspirations, or makes it more difficult to fulfil them, will be a backward step. (2007, p 38)

By 'daring to be different' in a way applauded by Arnold (2006), these schools involved in pioneering soft federations stand united in playing their part in translating those visionary aspirations into concrete practice.

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