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## Research Associate Report

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# The challenges and opportunities of leading and managing an all-age school

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## Introduction and methodology

Four years ago I joined a senior team who were tasked with setting up a new, all-age academy in west London. Much of what we did was based on experimentation and guesswork as there was very little research or existing practice to base our practice on. It is within this context that the research project on leading and managing all-age schools evolved.

While there has been a tradition of all-age schooling within the private sector it has not, until recently, been typical in state schools. There is no definitive government policy on whether schools of the future should be all-age (Hann, 2006), nor is there currently an accurate official record of the number of all-age schools in existence. However, there appears to be a growing trend in which all-age schools have become more popular. For example, there was only one all-age school in 2002. This has now increased to five in 2007 and there are potential plans for another 51 to be created in the future (Bainbridge 2007).

The concept of all-age schools is also still relatively new and has recently only been defined by a Department for Education and Skills (DfES) publication for the Innovation Unit. The definition states that an all-age school is a school that comprises multiple phases (usually primary and secondary) in a single institution (DfES, p 4).

The increase in popularity of all-age schools appears to be borne out of the current educational climate in which schools have been encouraged to co-operate with one another. For example, former government Education Secretary Ruth Kelly announced that co-operation would be the “norm”. This was furthered through the introduction of the Education Act in 2002 that allowed schools the power to federate. In Arnold’s research on federations he proclaims:

The bounded stand alone school, as a factory of learning, will become a glaring anomaly in this organisational landscape. (Arnold 2006: 37)

This climate has influenced educational authorities to rethink their current provision. One of the most radical rethinks to educational provision to date appears to have come from Haverhill in Suffolk, where they announced that they believed their schools could not achieve the transformation required to make a real difference in terms of attainment and increase choice unless a sustained, consistent and integrated approach was taken (Lay 2001: 9). Plans are thus underway to federate schools within this area and a model for an all-age school seems to be one for serious consideration.

With this increase in popularity there appears to be an increase in need for potential and future leaders of all-age schools to have a framework for discussion and for existing leaders to share their experiences of leading an all-age school.

The research therefore aims to:

- share the experiences of those leading all-age schools
- identify the opportunities and challenges that these leaders face
- focus on how leadership has evolved as the organisation has developed and
- make recommendations to existing and future leaders to support the sharing of good practice

## Methodology

An initial literature review on all-age schools in Britain proved difficult. Searches using the academic search engine, Athens and EMIE (Educational Management Information Exchange) plus various university libraries did not reveal anything.

And neither has the government commissioned specific research on all-age schools. This is highlighted by the parliamentary question on the research evidence on all-age schools. Lord Adonis (Parliamentary Under Secretary, DfES) replied:

We have not commissioned a literature review of the benefits of all-age schools... We look at a large number of factors, which as a minimum, would need to show that the inclusion of primary provision in an academy would be likely to have a positive educational and social impact on both the primary and secondary pupils, without adverse impact on the wider school community. (House of Lords 2007)

The literature research was then extended to all-age schools overseas. The results of this search identified a few articles on all-age schools in Jamaica, Sweden and Australia. These schools had been established as a result of geographical factors, in communities in which there were too few students to create separate schools. The research conducted by the University of Wolverhampton on all-age schools in Jamaica showed that attendance among the students improved as did parental involvement. However, there was no analysis on student attainment (Jamaican All-Age Schools Project 2003: 8).

Other factors that influenced the research project included:

- the limited number of established all-age schools in the public sector in Britain. There are a number being planned for and/or participating in soft federations but there are very few single institutions in existence
- the lack of research on student achievement/outcomes in all-age schools as they are still relatively new (Gray et al, emails, February 2007)
- the commissioning body for the research (the NCSL Research Associateship programme) that means that there is a focus on leadership

As a consequence, a qualitative study was carried out, based on semi-structured interviews with senior and middle leaders from four out of the five all-age, single institution schools in Britain within the state sector.

As the number of the schools involved in the project was relatively small it was important to gain a larger sample within each of the schools and therefore interviews with four to five senior and middle leaders were set up.

Ethical considerations had to be taken into account as each school was approached. Permission was sought to interview staff and an outline of the topics for discussion and the ethical guidelines were shared.

In addition, these schools are currently under considerable pressure from government agencies, potential sponsors of all-age schools and other school leaders in terms of giving up their time to describe their experiences of working in a new type of school. This newness could also lead to pressures in terms of public expectations for these schools, and such pressures could potentially lead to bias in terms of how senior and middle leaders present themselves and their school. However, this is a risk of any research based solely on interviews. As Oakley highlights, interviews are:

... like a marriage: everyone knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, yet behind closed doors there is a world of secrets. (Oakley 1981: 41, in Quinn Patton 2000: 340)

Usually, this world of secrets could be further exposed or validated by using techniques such as the triangulation of other forms of evidence. However, without other data available such as student attainment, interviews with parents, children and teachers, this research only begins to touch the surface of the research topic. Is this a problem? Research theorists Morse and Field claim that a research theory or a hypothesis cannot be formulated if there is a lack of existing research. The theory begins as a 'hunch, a guess, a speculation', and it becomes 'more and more believable as it is tested and retested' (Morse and Field 2000: 4).

I hope that this research project, my hunch, will be a catalyst for other research projects so that a theory and practical guidelines for leading and managing all-age schools can be formulated more fully.

### **The schools and their context**

Leithwood comments:

Leadership is contextualised because one of the most robust findings is that where you are affects what you do as a leader. (Leithwood, in Davis 2003: 77)

This rings true for the leaders interviewed for this research project. The four schools that participated in the interview process varied considerably in terms of their context and their socio-economic make-up. The only one common factor is that they are or had been one single institution that educated both primary and secondary school-age children.

One of the schools in Nottinghamshire had been created from the merger of both a successful primary and secondary school. The driving force behind this merger was due to the existing leaders in the school and the local authority concern for improving transition. Two of the other schools, in Sheffield and London, emerged as a result of either a primary or a secondary school being deemed to be failing and the local authority or the Academies division supporting the creation of an all-age school to address this under-achievement. The fourth school included in the project had been an all-age school; however, due to issues with leadership and management it had now reverted to two single institutions.

The contexts of each of these schools have very much influenced the experiences of the leaders, the opportunities, the challenges and their recommendations.

## Leadership and management: the opportunities

All of the leaders interviewed, without exception, talked about the positive experiences and opportunities that they had had as leaders of all-age schools. These opportunities fall into five main categories:

- to be part of something new and exciting
- to have the ability to change and to develop as a leader, which in turn promotes distributed leadership
- to reduce the barriers to learning across the primary and secondary phases
- to improve the personal development and wellbeing of students and to gain a greater understanding of the community
- to gain greater value for money through economies of scale

### The opportunity of being part of something new and exciting

The publication *All-Age Schooling: A Resource*, commissioned by the Innovations Unit at the DfES, highlights the 'unique opportunities' that these schools provide and how people can work and learn in ways 'that had previously thought impossible, enabling true innovation' (DfES: 5). The leaders interviewed echoed these sentiments.

For example, interviewees commented on the excitement of working in an all-age school and how it was a new learning experience:

"I am finding it fascinating, exciting." (assistant principal, Sheffield)

"It's a real learning curve... You don't walk in with a list of things to do and get them all done because another ten things get in the way, no one day is the same in this school – I find that exciting. If I'd worked in a normal mainstream school some of the issues that I have had to deal with within this last year I probably wouldn't have had to deal with in my whole career in another school." (primary school principal, London)

In one of the schools this excitement appeared to create a huge amount of energy among the staff interviewed and indeed, the school principal reflected on his own practice by saying that the creation of this energy was one of his primary roles:

"I am tasked with producing the impetus, the energy. If you like I create the height of the water and do not control how or when the water comes flying down the hill." (principal, Nottinghamshire)

This excitement of working in an all-age school appears to be influenced by two main factors: firstly, as mentioned previously, because of the 'newness' of the idea or concept and secondly, because of the wide variety of people and experiences that these leaders worked with:

"You get to meet a wide range of professional who have very different views on education and that is really quite exciting. And with that obviously comes difference in culture, in approach, in practice, which can then be debated. We are fortunate to be able to have that debate under a single focus and that's learning: learning in an all-age school." (primary school principal, Nottinghamshire)

"I think that leadership is all about contrast of experiences, every day is different and I think that in an all age school, the contrast and experience that you have is even more enormous." (secondary school head, Essex)

The head of the secondary school in Essex, although stimulated by the uniqueness of working in all-age school, recognised that it was not so much the idea or the concept of all-age schooling that was important but the people who worked within them:

“It is certainly a unique challenge but, what is crucial is not the concept. New concepts and initiatives will always be there and in education and they often go in cycles. It is not the concept or the initiative but the people that make the concept or the initiative work.”  
(secondary school head, Essex)

### **The opportunity to change and develop as a leader and distributed leadership**

The uniqueness of these experiences appears to influence the leaders' concept of what it means to lead and to question their own leadership styles. The interviewees talked about having to reflect and question their leadership style:

“In terms of leading in a 3–18 school it makes you look at what your job is about, it stops you taking anything for granted. It makes you realise the different skills that people have.”  
(principal, Nottinghamshire)

Leaders highlighted how they have had to change in order to be more flexible, more open to others' ideas, opinions and expertise:

“You have to be very multi-skilled. It stretches your flexibility and styles of leadership beyond that of a normal headteacher role in a so called normal school would do.”  
(secondary school head, Essex)

“In something as complicated as an all-age school you have to realise that you cannot actually do everything. You cannot be an expert in all the fields, if you tried you would go mad!... It is your job to pull things together.” (principal, Nottinghamshire)

The leaders furthered this idea of the non-expert by commenting on how the knowledge base of teaching and learning in all-age schools could not be restricted to themselves as senior leaders:

“I think the key difference [leading in an all-age school as opposed to a traditional type of school] is accepting that you are not the font of all knowledge.” (principal, Sheffield)

For one principal, the pressure that is sometimes associated with having to be the sole expert on all aspects of the school life appeared to have been alleviated:

“I think it is very refreshing and empowering to realise that you do not have to be the expert. I think what that does is encourages you to say ‘I have no idea!’. People now come to me with fewer issues and quite frequently they present themselves as the expert and it is clear to them that I am not... I am not the font of all knowledge and would never want to be.” (principal, Nottinghamshire)

By expanding the knowledge base, leaders felt that leadership could be distributed and others more fully involved and empowered:

“I think that you have to accept that a proportion of your colleagues know a lot more about aspects of the school's work and you have to empower them to make decisions as leaders... It offers greater leadership opportunities particularly for primary colleagues who may have in the past have a more restricted sphere of influence.” (principal, Sheffield)

“I think that the leadership role is changing. It's more of a devolved leadership rather than an old fashioned one, where you are the head and you have the power – it is certainly not like that here ... more people are becoming more empowered to lead.” (infants school assistant principal, Nottinghamshire)

These comments about distributed leadership appear to be confirmed by colleagues working in the schools:

“I think the new approach to all-age school which can lead to a flatter structure allows anyone to become a leader... What’s good about 3–18 schools is that I have now have influence on secondary school staff that I would never of had before.” (primary school assistant principal, Nottinghamshire)

“My role has changed now, I now have a far larger remit as a leader because I have to consider the impact on children aged 3–18 and also the impact of the staff across the infants, primary and secondary phases.” (infants school assistant principal, Nottinghamshire)

## **The opportunity to reduce the barriers to learning**

Due to the relatively short time that all-age schools have been open (no one cohort of students has gone through an all-age school to date) this means that it is impossible to gather quantitative data to show how all-age schools affect attainment. However, the findings from the interviews seem to show that the all-age school environment can reduce barriers to learning and support better progression.

Three out of the four schools interviewed are, for example, involved in joint curriculum planning across the primary and secondary phase to ensure the barriers to learning are reduced. This includes activities such as cross-phase teaching in subjects such modern foreign languages, science and basic skills as well as the development of the school’s specialism. Two of the schools have adopted a primary style curriculum in Year 7 in which students are taught by one teacher the majority of the time.

The leaders interviewed commented on how teaching and learning could improve. All-age schools gave them a greater understanding of what it meant to learn at different ages and therefore they were able to cater for progression and continuity in a more effective way:

“We are lucky because we actually have the luxury of seeing progression first hand... We see learners develop across both the primary and secondary phase and as a result we are able to support that and respond to needs.” (principal, Sheffield)

“The reality of all-age schooling is that it takes away the straightjacket of teaching to certain year groups. If I was a Year 4 teacher I would traditionally have to plan around the Year 4 curriculum. That no longer needs to happen as I am exposed to a wider range of ages and progression. Students can now learn at their rate rather than the rate that is expected of them in Year 4.” (primary school principal, Nottinghamshire)

In addition, greater opportunities for sharing good practice and cross-fertilisation of ideas regarding teaching and learning were highlighted as an important feature:

“The set-up and structures of all-age schools have allowed discussion about teaching and learning across primary and secondary practitioners to happen more easily and frequently.” (middle leader, Sheffield)

“The ability to share staff, share expertise is of enormous benefit.” (secondary school head, London)

“We want to take the best bits from here [primary] and add them to the best bits from there [secondary] and from there we can push for better teaching and learning.” (primary school principal, Nottinghamshire)



## **The opportunity to improve the personal development and wellbeing of students and to gain a greater understanding of the community**

The all-age school appears, in terms of those interviewed, to have had a positive impact on the personal development and wellbeing of students and schools appear to have had greater access to parents and the community. Again, due to the paucity of quantitative data these findings are very much based on perception.

The positive impact appears to centre on inclusion and participation such as improved attendance, improved communication with parents and primary schools and an ability to build stronger relationships with students.

For example, in two of the schools attendance figures have risen. This has been accredited to the influence of certain staff such as attendance officers who work across both the primary and secondary phase:

“The family liaison officer has been excellent ... she is certainly building a lot of bridges because she knows the families of the primary school students and is able to influence them still when they reach secondary school ... she is able to give us the global perspective and better information.” (assistant head, Essex)

The relationships with students appear to be stronger:

“I think that the fact that 75% of the students from Year 6 do go onto the secondary section, gives the students and staff a sense of continuity... It gives us a good core of people who know us and particularly for students who have brothers and sisters in the high school then relationships can be built up over a longer period of time.” (principal, London)

Higher expectations in terms of behaviour and learning were also seen as a benefit:

“This school is in a challenging area, in a challenging area, dealing with challenging students is inherent – I won't say problems but they come with issues that living within this community comes with. So I think that being able to take them from the age of three and being able to 'mould' them into what you expect is a huge benefit.” (chief executive, London)

“Behaviour has improved because of the advice and support that primary staff can offer.” (primary school principal, Nottinghamshire)

Relationships with parents appeared to be stronger as the leaders were able to capitalise on the relationships that had been built over a number of years:

“As a parent it can be very daunting to send your child to a secondary school but if you know the school because your child has been in the primary section it is a lot easier, you know the staff and the other students. Some of our parents seem more prepared to support us.” (secondary school head, London)

“It gives you a greater opportunity to capitalise on parental involvement. You think about the children and their parents far more consciously. You have to think more carefully about the age specific dimension and the role of the parents and their involvement.” (principal, Sheffield)

## **The opportunity for improving value for money through economies of scale**

The all-age schools did appear to give greater value for money due to economies of scale. Those interviewed consistently supported the idea that resources could be more efficiently and effectively used. This was influenced by the more extensive facilities,

staffing expertise and equipment that tended to be on offer.

“There are lots of opportunities in terms of economies of scale, we have people working as human resource managers, special needs co-ordinators across the phases and we have a seclusion centre. So there is a huge benefit, you are able to run things that you might not have been able to if you were not in an all-age school.” (secondary school head, London)

“In terms of delivering modern foreign languages and ICT [information and communications technology] in the primary phase, we have the expertise ... we could teach all sorts of stuff, the stuff that we teach up here [secondary phase] that normal primary schools and not gain easy access to.” (chief executive, London)

In addition, leaders in these schools tended to see this as a beneficial influence on the way that they were able to lead and manage:

“Speaking as an ex-primary head the biggest difference coming here and the biggest benefit is having people to do the jobs that used to deflect me from my core business of influencing teaching and learning. Someone else does the finances and human resources! It really takes all the non-educational issues away.” (principal, London)

So, all the leaders interviewed confirmed that opportunities arose as a result of working in an all-age school. These opportunities included being part of something new and exciting, having the ability to change and develop as a leader, which in turn allowed for greater distributed leadership. The barriers to learning across the primary and secondary phases appear to have been reduced and improvements in personal development and wellbeing of their students was evident. Gaining a greater understanding of the community that they worked within also seemed to be a benefit, as did working in a larger organisation where they could access resources that traditionally they may not have had.

## **Leadership and management: the challenges**

Throughout the interview process leaders were asked to comment on the challenges that they had experienced as a result of leading in an all-age school. These challenges included:

- changing the culture and addressing the context and the history of the school
- changing perceptions and raising awareness about what it means to be a primary or secondary school teacher
- time pressures and facilities

### **The challenge of changing the culture**

Cranwell-Ward states:

Sailing the boat is the easy bit – it's just getting people on board who are the problem. (Cranwell-Ward 2002: 308)

As a leader, getting people on board often requires a cultural shift and this cultural shift is, as previously stated, very much dependent on the context in which leaders work. Throughout the interviews it was apparent that the context impacted on the leaders' response to the question about what challenges they had experienced. For instance, the challenges that the leaders interviewed faced depended on the predecessor schools that they had inherited. The school in Nottinghamshire, for example, which had been created from a successful primary and secondary school, appeared to face less challenges in terms of merging the primary and secondary phases than those schools that had been created as a result of one or two failing schools being amalgamated in order to address the under-achievement.

The challenges that these leaders had to deal with included issues such as being new and innovative within a climate of educational tradition and inheriting a school that had been previously poorly managed and that was in an area of major social deprivation.

Leaders of three of the schools interviewed made particular reference to the challenges associated with being a new phenomena and innovative:

"When the school first opened there were problems over politics. The school was a little before its time, that was the problem, if it had been built today it wouldn't have been a problem as all-age schools are far more accepted as a model for educating young people." (secondary school head, Essex)

"The challenge is associated with reinventing yourself as a leader and being able to make sense of national and local frameworks that don't fit." (principal, Sheffield)

Such challenges were associated with educational law and practice that did not recognise the concept of all-age schools. For instance, there was a debate over the need to keep two governing bodies as opposed to three and the school evaluation framework required separate self-evaluation forms (SEFs) for each of the phases. As a result of these schools educational law and practice has now changed. The challenges were further exacerbated when one of the schools coupled their all-age status with becoming what, at the time, was another new phenomena, an academy:

"I think people were put off when they realised we were an academy ... they did not understand what we were and asked 'who are they?', 'what are they?' and 'don't get involved in that!'" (primary school head, London)

Leaders in these schools discussed the frustrations that they felt with being pioneers of new ideas. These frustrations were twofold: the first tended to be down to the fact that the school was being judged in ways that they felt were not appropriate and the second was the pressure that was placed on them to create something new that was not necessarily appropriate for the community that the school served.

Two leaders commented, for example:

“Education wants innovation but this country doesn’t. The challenge is that there is a push for innovation but the exam system and league table restrict this ... we are bound by conventional methods to measure unconventional aspects ... and this makes school leadership in the current climate very difficult.” (secondary school head, Essex)

“You don’t just impose an academy on a community ... particularly like us, what is supposed to be a high flying business academy where everyone is going off to Harvard. What was really required was a more vocational approach where we offered construction or engineering with a mix of academic awards. I don’t think there was any consultation with the community.” (chief executive officer, London)

The school that has become an academy also faced additional challenges that were associated with previous poor management and major social deprivation. The consequence of this resulted in the school having to concentrate on putting the basics into place such as ensuring there was appropriate teaching and learning, expectations for behaviour and improved attendance. This has impeded the pace of innovation and what they, as a fairly new leadership team, have been able to do in terms of developing the all-age aspect of the school:

“I think I probably spent my last year trying to undo the mess that was created by our previous CEO [chief executive officer] and the project management company and there is still a lot to do.” (chief executive officer, London)

“The interesting thing is that we talk about innovation but, one of the things that we’ve found is that you open and there is a big spirit of innovation but what you really need to do, especially if you take over a challenging predecessor school which was failing, is to get the basics in place.” (secondary school head, London)

The school is having to spend a huge amount of time and effort reengaging the community. It serves a community that appears to have little interest in education and one that is one of the most deprived in London. As one of the leaders comments:

“There are nice parts of this borough where you can go to grammar school and there is selection. But we don’t subscribe to that. There is a perception that this is a sink area and that it is not the good part of town.” (primary school head, London)

She goes on to say:

“The academy is here for a reason. We are not going to get the easiest of children with the top ability, we are not going to get the easiest parents. They all come with needs and issues that we need to support and deal with. We have to get over the fact that they are not always going to be grateful but ... it’s a job and we have chosen it for a reason and I think we are in this area for a reason – to make a difference. These children deserve the best ... we work for the needs of these children.” (primary school head, London)

In addition, one of the schools included in the study had been one of the very first all-age schools in Britain to open. However, due to irreconcilable differences between the previous primary head and secondary head the school reverted to two single institutions.

All of the challenges outlined so far represent challenges associated with changing culture and ethos either nationally or locally. The other schools interviewed also felt the

challenge regarding cultural change, although on a smaller scale. For one leader it was about highlighting to staff and students that primary and secondary practice have common themes and ideas:

“I think the challenge is about culture, I think it’s about getting people to realise that the culture of a primary and a secondary school can merge.” (executive principal, London)

For another leader it was more about developing people and supporting them as they were confronted with something new:

“The challenges have been in terms of taking people away from their comfort zone into new ways of thinking about issues, problems, challenges and having a different mind set.” (primary school principal, Nottinghamshire)

Retuning to Cranwell-Ward’s analogy of the sailing boat, these leaders did get people on board in order to bring about a cultural change (see ‘Recommendations’).

### **The challenge of changing perceptions and raising awareness of what it means to be a primary or secondary school teacher**

Covey states that effective school leaders require a good understanding of the school and the people they work with. He recommends that leaders:

... seek first to understand before seeking to be understood. (Covey, in Cranwell-Ward 2002: 91)

For the interviewees, understanding the school and the people that they lead has been vital in order to create a shared understanding of what it means to work in an all-age school and this is representative of yet another challenge for leaders of all-age schools.

The leaders interviewed talked about how some staff had pre-conceived ideas of what it meant to be a secondary teacher and what it meant to teach primary:

“Sometimes primary staff think that secondary schools are about dealing with thugs and hooligans and the secondary staff think it’s all about snotty noses in the primary school and it’s not and you learn a lot from each other.” (secondary school head, London)

“There is at times a lack of understanding of the pressures of different phases.” (infants school assistant principal, Nottinghamshire)

The lack of understanding experienced by some staff appears to be due to physical aspects such as the age and size of the students. For example, the secondary and primary heads in the London school talked about how some staff, in the primary phase, felt ‘intimidated’ by the size of the students.

The lack of understanding is also seen as a result of the lack of awareness regarding the appropriateness of certain policies or communications. An example of this is described by one of the principals of the primary phase in which he discussed the ‘no touching’ policy that the secondary phase wanted to introduce in the primary phase of the school. He states:

“The most ridiculous and most interesting was the no touching policy. It is completely and utterly ridiculous to transfer this policy into the primary phase of the school ... when you are working with primary age children there are times when it is appropriate to care for, or be close to a child just like it is when a parent cares for their child.” (primary school principal, Nottinghamshire)

Another example concerns the types of communication and language used with staff,

parents and students:

“It’s very easy to say something crass. For example, as a secondary trained teacher to me nursery, foundation and reception are all just words that refer to the younger end of the school. But, if you go and make this mistake and use the wrong word to describe for example the foundation stage that can mean an awful lot to the foundation expert. You actually offend through a lack of understanding.” (principal, Nottinghamshire)

One consequential issue arising from challenging perceptions of what it means to teach primary or secondary is due the pressure that is sometimes placed on primary colleagues because there are fewer of them. This is particularly apparent when trying to gain an understanding of the curriculum. For instance, there may be one Key Stage 2 co-ordinator who oversees many subjects; however, in contrast, the secondary phase usually has a co-ordinator for each subject. A primary colleague can be overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

The leaders interviewed did take the challenge regarding lack of understanding seriously and in ‘Recommendations’ it is highlighted how they have addressed this.

### **The challenge of time pressures and facilities**

The lack of time and facilities was also highlighted as one of the challenges that leaders experienced. Time pressures were particularly felt by those leaders with a heavy teaching commitment:

“The obvious challenge is that if you are teaching all day then you can’t actually gain very much understanding of what the job of a primary teacher is like.” (head of science, Sheffield)

“I am on a heavy teaching commitment and it’s really an issue that we need to be aware of ... I have many different foci because being a leader in a 3–18 school and we must be careful that we do not burn ourselves out.” (infants school assistant principal, Nottinghamshire)

The buildings and the shared facilities also proved to be challenging, at times. For instance, when students shared the same access routes into the school or used the same facilities there was sometimes a lack of understanding or knowledge of others.

“At the end of the day when school kicks out and you have the secondary students going passed parents with buggies, we inevitably get people tutting, there is a kind of view that if you are 14 and you laugh loudly then you are a hooligan.” (secondary school head, London)

In addition, when leaders were based in one particular area of the school, associated with a particular phase, they commented that they did not know the staff as well and/or there was a perception that they had more interest in a particular age group:

“My office is in the high school section of the school so I don’t really know the staff as well in the primary section.” (chief executive officer, London)

Once again, these challenges are seen as just that – challenges that are not insurmountable. The next section highlights how the leaders sought to address them.

## Recommendations

Various strategies and approaches have been used to address the challenges that the leaders face. These have included:

- ensuring a stepped and systematic approach to change
- creating a shared vision, understanding and developing people
- respecting diversity as well as commonalities and being a role model for change
- allowing space and time for the school to evolve and having a sense of passion

### **Recommendation 1: Ensuring a stepped and systematic approach to change**

Southworth states that:

Culture is not shaped by leaders saying what they think should happen ... culture changes by them putting into place certain processes and by restructuring the school through certain systems. (Southworth, in Davis 2003: 85)

The leaders who participated in the research echoed this belief:

“Things need to be thought through, it is more than just presenting a vision. Yes, you have to have vision but you also need systems and the right people in place to implement the vision.” (secondary school head, Essex)

The secondary school head in London develops this further by saying change needs to happen “incrementally” and at “the right pace for the school”.

### **Recommendation 2: Creating a shared vision, understanding and developing people**

The reason given for incremental change is to enable the leaders to work with staff, students and the community in terms of developing a shared understanding and a shared sense of purpose of why the school is all-age. All of the leaders talk about the importance of developing human relationships in order to create trust among their stakeholders.

For instance, in response to the question about what recommendations you would make to a leader of a new all-age school, the interviewees said:

“Talk with others.” (principal, Nottinghamshire)

“Get to know everybody and create a sense of purpose with them. (principal, Sheffield)

“Create strong teams.” (chief executive officer, London)

“Gain representation from all of the phases. Emotional intelligence is more important than anything.” (infants school assistant principal, Nottinghamshire)

These thoughts feed into already well-documented academic research on effective leaders. For example, Cranwell-Ward et al explain:

Effective leadership ... and high performance is about systematically developing each of their people.” (Cranwell-Ward et al 2002: 55)

In his research on federations and collegiates, Arnold states that the effective leader is able to ‘orchestrate the skills of others’ and is in turn able to draw them into the decision-

making process. Arnold sees this as even more important for schools where collaboration and/or mergers exist. They require the nurturing of even more trust if one of the partners in the organisation is to avoid being perceived as the 'superior institution' (Arnold 2006: 3).

### **Recommendation 3: Respecting diversity as well as commonalities and being a role model for change**

The leaders also recommend that the phases in their all-age school are allowed to retain some sense of their uniqueness or diversity. The primary school principal in Nottinghamshire summarises this as creating "riches in niches". Primary and secondary students and practitioners are different and they should be able to express themselves in different ways. This is reiterated by the secondary school head in London who comments:

"There has to be a shared philosophy but we have to allow a distinctiveness too."  
(secondary school head, London)

This distinctiveness is represented in various forms within the schools. For instance, a shared philosophy around the theme of behaviour but distinct strategies to deal with it and a theme regarding uniform but a slight difference in style have been implemented.

Creating this shared philosophy has, in one leader's case, been closely linked to modelling her practice, her beliefs publicly. For example, she states:

"When you are a leader, talking about good teaching and learning, is about putting your money where your mouth is. If you are telling someone in the secondary phase how to do something which you do in the primary phase, you have to show them that you can do it too." (primary school head, London)

Role modelling, as Southworth purports, is about the 'power of example' (Southworth, in Davis 2003: 78), and it is this power of example that future and potential leaders of all-age schools will need to engage with.

### **Recommendation 4: Allowing space and time for the school to evolve and a having a sense of passion**

In his research on school improvement, Green recommends that:

The good enough leader is one that will sometimes fail, who is not heroic but someone who is prepared to take risks. (Green 2002: 7)

This also resonates with one of the leaders interviewed. For instance, she says:

"I don't believe there is a blueprint for the all-age school. This means you have to, as a leader, accept that you don't know everything. Be prepared to take calculated risks and make sure that you see the development of an all-age school as evolutionary not a 'wham, bam, done! I don't think it works like that'." (principal, Sheffield)

The risk for many of the leaders interviewed is about heading up something new, something pioneering, something that has not to this day been proven to work. Despite this, the leaders of these all-age schools speak with enthusiasm, with energy and with passion about leading their schools:

"It is a remarkably exciting project, it makes you remind yourself why you are in education." (principal, Nottinghamshire)



“It is a fantastic opportunity, it does demand a lot because of the nature and size of the workload but it is an amazing opportunity.” (chief executive officer, London)

“The concept of all-age schools is absolutely wonderful and I am very passionate about it.” (assistant principal, Nottinghamshire)

“Don’t be afraid to do it, there are people out there who can help.” (primary school head, London)

“Go for it! Be brave!” (primary school assistant principal, Nottinghamshire)

The enthusiasm, energy and passion displayed by these leaders appears to be the driving force in terms of bringing about a change that will influence the future of schooling in Britain.

## **A leader's guide to supporting integration and transition across the primary and secondary phases**

This section gives specific examples provided by the leaders of the all-age schools regarding activities and organisational structure for the leadership team that could further support the integration of the primary and secondary phases and/or transition activities.

### **Activities to support integration and transition**

- Adapt the Year 7 curriculum and base it around a traditional primary model, for example, having 'home teachers' who teach the Year 7 students the majority of the time or introducing curriculum models based around themes such as those outlined in the RSA Opening Minds projects.
- Set up tracking and assessment systems that go across the two phases.
- Be aware of correspondence and communications and adapt them accordingly; for example, newsletters and website pages for primary-age students need to be different than those aimed at secondary-age children.
- Develop opportunities for joint planning and team teaching across the two phases.
- Set up joint monitoring systems such as book looks, work sampling, standardisation of writing or art work.
- Create key appointments that work across the two phases such as attendance officers, teachers who must develop learning and teaching across both primary and secondary.
- Ensure team-building events occur for the children, the staff and the parents.
- Establish one communication system to ease the information flow and to keep everyone in the loop, for example, one email or telephone system.
- Create a common identity through uniform, logos and letterheads.
- Set up buddying systems for students and staff across the age range.
- Deliver professional development programmes, for example, training on how to lead change, develop writing or observing lessons as appropriate for primary and secondary staff.
- Take advantage of the opportunities that extended schools can offer such as parenting classes.
- Collapse timetables occasionally and allow for flexibility.
- Be aware of the impact of timings of the school day for parents and students.
- Challenge institutions – without challenge the all-age SEF would not have been produced.

## **Conclusion and recommendations for future research**

The research aimed to explore the implications for leading and managing all-age schools. Its purpose was to allow existing leaders to share their experiences with potential leaders and policy makers who may be interested in implementing all-age schools in the future. The research highlighted both the opportunities and the challenges that these leaders experienced.

The opportunities were bountiful and appeared to feed the passion and excitement that the all-age school leaders displayed during the interviews. They included being able to be part of something new and exciting, being allowed to develop further as a leader and promoting distributed leadership. All-age schooling also presented opportunities for ensuring barriers to learning across the primary and secondary phases were addressed and personal development and wellbeing of students improved.

The challenges that the leaders experienced centred round bringing about cultural change particularly in schools that were plagued by historical problems and changing the perceptions regarding what primary and secondary education meant.

All of the leaders were able to offer practical examples of how to improve integration and transition within the all-age context, some of which could be used outside of these settings.

In addition, the leaders offered sound advice about how to manage change that focused on the need to ensure a stepped approach to change, creating a shared vision and understanding as well as developing people, by allowing risks to be taken and the school to evolve at an appropriate pace. Above all, however, the most significant piece of advice about leading and managing an all-age school was about having the energy, enthusiasm and passion to make it work.

### **Recommendations for future research**

Finally, as stated in the 'Introduction', it is hoped that this research will be a catalyst for other research so that theories and practical guidelines for leading and managing all-age schools can be developed further.

Ideas for future research projects on all-age schooling could include:

- a longitudinal study assessing student academic achievement and progress
- research into the views of parents, students and/or the community
- research on the impact of all-age schooling on other staff within the schools

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