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## Thugs, Hooligans and Snotty Noses: the implications of leading and managing an all-age school

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**ABSTRACT** While there has been a tradition of all-age schooling within the private sector it has not, until recently, been typical in state schools. However, there appears to be a growing trend in which all-age schools, i.e. schools that comprise multiple phases (usually primary and secondary) are becoming more popular. This article summarises the main findings of research undertaken by the author into the implications for leading and managing all-age schools and suggests ideas for future research.

Four years ago I joined a senior team who were tasked with setting up a new, all-age school for students aged 3-18 in west London. Much of what we did was based on experimentation and guesswork as there was very little research or existing practice upon which to base our practice. Hence the research project.

While there has been a tradition of all-age schooling within the private sector and in special schools, it has not, until recently, been common in state schools. There is no definitive government policy on whether schools of the future should be all-age, nor is there currently an accurate official record of the number of such schools in England and Wales. However, there appears to be a growing trend where all-age schools have become more popular.

With this increase in popularity there is a greater need for potential and future leaders of all-age schools to have a framework for discussion. The research I conducted aimed to share the experiences of existing leaders by exploring the opportunities and challenges that current leaders of all-age schools face. It was also designed to provide advice, recommendations and practical suggestions to school leaders, sponsors and governors wanting to set up an all-age school. It focussed on five all-age schools in England. Interviews were conducted with four to five senior leaders from each school.

### **Leadership and Management: the opportunities**

Without exception, all of the senior leaders talked about the positive experiences and opportunities that they have had as leaders of all-age schools. Being part of something new and exciting was appealing. For example, interviewees commented on the excitement of working in an all-age school and how it is 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.  
(Primary Principal, London)

Another opportunity articulated was that of being able to change as a leader and develop distributed leadership. The uniqueness of these experiences appeared to influence the concept of what it means to lead. 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, and more open to others' ideas, opinions and expertise:

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

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

I think it is very refreshing and empowering to realise that you do not have to be the expert ... I am not the font of all knowledge and would never want to be. (Principal, Nottinghamshire)

By expanding the knowledge base, it was felt that that leadership could be distributed and others more fully involved and empowered. For example, when looking at how best to tackle primary/secondary transition, many staff from the different sectors were involved. This led to a better understanding of the issues and enabled common agreements regarding specific support strategies.

The opportunity to reduce the barriers to learning was also felt strongly by the leaders. The relatively short time that all-age schools have been open (in maintained schools in the UK, no one cohort of students has yet gone through an all-age school) means that it is impossible to gather quantitative data to show

how such schools affect attainment. However, the findings from the interviews showed all-age school environments can reduce barriers to learning and support better progression.

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)

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

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 Principal, Nottinghamshire)

Improving personal development and gaining a greater understanding of the community was also another opportunity articulated by school leaders. The positive impact appears to centre on inclusion and participation, potentially resulting in 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.

Relationships with parents appear to be stronger as the leaders are able to capitalise on the relationships which have 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. (Head of Secondary, London)

One further opportunity that all-age schools appear to have is their ability 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 has been influenced by the more extensive facilities, staffing expertise and equipment which tends 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 coordinators across the phases and we have a seclusion centre. (Head of Secondary, London)

In addition, leaders in these schools tend to see this as a beneficial influence on the way that they are 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!  
(Principal, London)

### **Leadership and Management: the challenges**

The challenges noted initially centred on changing the culture of the institution. Cranwell-Ward states, 'Sailing the boat is the easy bit – it's just getting people on board who are the problem' (2002, p. 308). '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 particularly impacted on the challenges experienced; for example, depending on the schools inherited – whether there were issues around falling rolls, staff recruitment, or poor leadership and management. The school in Nottinghamshire, which had been created from a successful primary and secondary school, appeared to face fewer challenges in terms of merging the phases than those schools which had been created as a result of one or two 'failing schools' being amalgamated in order to address the underachievement.

The challenges included being new and innovative within a climate of educational tradition and inheriting a school which had been previously poorly managed and which was in an area of major social deprivation. Leaders of three of the schools made particular reference to the challenges associated with being a new phenomenon and innovative:

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. For example, data returns and the school evaluation framework have only just recognised the need to update their pro formas so as to cater for all-age schools. (Principal, Sheffield)

Such challenges were associated with education law and practice which did not recognise the concept of all-age schools. For instance, there was debate over the need to keep two governing bodies as opposed to one, and whether there was a need for separate school evaluation frameworks for each of the phases. As a result of issues such as these, some aspects of education law and practice have now changed.

Leaders in these schools discuss the frustrations that they felt with being the pioneers of new ideas. These frustrations are twofold: the first tends to be down to the fact that the school is being judged in ways that they feel are not appropriate; the second is the pressure that is placed upon them to create something new which is not necessarily appropriate for the community the school serves. For example, one school has been strongly encouraged to adopt an enterprise specialism and become a business school. Staff commented that the parents in the surrounding area would have preferred to adopt a more vocational specialism as the world of business is meaningless to them.

One interviewee commented:

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 (5A\*-C grades at GCSE) to measure unconventional aspects such as teamwork, thinking skills, enterprise ... and this makes school leadership in the current climate very difficult. (Secondary Head, Essex)

Another stated:

You don't just impose a new type of school, 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 ... I don't think there was any consultation with the community. (Chief Executive Officer, London)

The school which has become an Academy also faced additional challenges that were associated with previous poor management and major social deprivation. The consequence of this has resulted in having to concentrate on putting the basics into place, such as ensuring there is 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.

The challenge regarding cultural change was also felt by the other schools, 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 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 Principal, Nottinghamshire)

In addition, 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; this is representative of yet another challenge for leaders of all-age schools. Those interviewed talked about how some staff have preconceived ideas of what it means to be a secondary teacher and what it means 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 Head, London)

There is at times a lack of understanding of the pressures of different phases. (Assistant Principal, Infants, Nottinghamshire)

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 which 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 Principal, Nottinghamshire)

Another example concerns the types of communication and language that are 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 terms that refer to the younger end of the school ... I initially did not recognise that they were actually all very different and staff had different skill sets to work with these children. You actually offend through a lack of understanding. (Principal, Nottinghamshire)

The buildings and the sharing of facilities also proved, at times, to be challenging. 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 past 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 Head, London)

In addition, when leaders are based in one particular area of the school, associated with a particular phase, they have commented that they do not know the staff as well and/or there is a perception that they have 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 which are not insurmountable.

### **Recommendations from the Leaders**

Various strategies and approaches have been used to address the challenges that the leaders face. The first is ensuring a stepped approach to change and then sharing the vision and developing people.

The head of the secondary school in London, for example, explains that change needs to happen ‘incrementally’ and at ‘the right pace for the school’. The reason for this change is to enable the leaders to work with staff, students and the community in terms of developing a shared understanding, and sense of purpose of why the school is all-age. All leaders talk about the importance of developing human relationships in order to create trust amongst their stakeholders.

For instance, in response to the question, ‘what recommendations would you 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.  
(Assistant Principal – Infants, Nottinghamshire)

These thoughts feed into well-documented academic research on effective leaders. For example, Arnold in his research on federations and collegiates 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, p. 3).

Leaders need to respect the diversity as well as the commonalities, to be a role model for change and ensure that the phases in their all-age school are allowed to retain some sense of their uniqueness or diversity. The primary 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 head of secondary in London who comments:

There has to be a shared philosophy but we have to allow a distinctiveness too. (Secondary Head, London)

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

Another recommendation given by the school leaders was to allow space and time for the school to evolve and to create a sense of passion. One 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 those interviewed was about heading up something new, something pioneering, something which has not to this day been *proven* to work. Despite this, the leaders of these all-age schools spoke 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)

Don't be afraid to do it, there are people out there who can help. (Primary Head, London)

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

In conclusion, the research aimed to explore the implications for leading and managing all-age schools. Personally, the research allowed me time to reflect on where my own school had come from and the major changes that have had to take place in order to merge a primary and a secondary school. It was good to know that we were not alone during this experimentation stage. However, I do believe that the research needs to continue if future leaders are to gain a true understanding of the benefits or drawbacks of all-age schooling.

We also recognise within my own school that the challenge is not yet over. We share the same building, the same policies, uniform and staff but work is still needed to create a culture in which all staff, students and parents recognise that we are one organisation, which shares the same values.

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