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# The role of the teaching headteacher: A question of support?

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ABSTRACT

This article reports findings from a study of 100 headteachers of very small Scottish primary schools. The main aim of the research was to follow up a sample of those schools that had participated in a larger study of all small schools in Scotland in 1996 to explore the role of the *teaching headteacher*. Evidence for this follow up study was collected from a postal survey and from interviews in nine case study schools. The research found that although the dual role of the teaching headteacher remained largely unchanged, pressures have increased while the available support is still perceived to be inadequate.



## 1. Introduction

Providing support and development opportunities for headteachers of small primary schools is a large problem for the Scottish education system. Approximately a third of Scotland's 2194 primary schools are small and of these 431 (or 20%) are very small, each having fewer than 50 pupils (Scottish Executive, 2006: 10). Most of these very small schools are led by *teaching headteachers*, who, previous research had discovered, had adopted a unique style to lead and manage their schools (Wilson & McPake, 1998). This group of very small schools and the headteachers who lead them were included in an extensive study conducted between 1996 and 1998, and 100 of the very smallest schools were contacted again in September 2006 (Wilson, 2007). Although the research refers specifically to small schools in Scotland, the issues raised are of much wider concern. Many other small countries, such as Wales, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and New Zealand, have large numbers of small schools led by teaching headteachers, and small schools are also found in the rural areas of larger countries such as England, Australia and Canada. This article focuses on the duality of the role of a teaching headteacher, a role that is rarely discussed in academic literature. Its aim is two-fold: first, to explore the nature of the role of a teaching headteacher; and second, to identify the mechanisms that are in place to support teachers who take on this dual role. By way of discussion, questions related to the adequacy of the available support are raised.

## 2. Background

In 1996, there was a paucity of published literature on small schools and although more studies have been published since then, small schools are still relatively under researched, and many myths abound. For example, Wilson and Brundrett (2005) suggest that for many the term 'small rural primary school' would conjure up a vision of a tiny one- or two-teacher school housed in a Victorian building – a vision which they suggest no longer matches the changes that have occurred in small schools in England. However, with regard to Scottish small schools, the reality often matches the vision. In 1996, seventy schools in the research sample were single-teacher schools, which arguably can represent the most complex teacher management challenge, viz coping alone with a range of management innovations while at the same time organising a curriculum for the widest age range of pupils (aged 5–12 years). In addition, over 400 schools reported that no more than three teachers, including the headteacher, were employed in the school. By 2006, there were still over 400 very small schools (20% of all primary schools in Scotland) with fewer than 50 pupils each. Many are still housed in small Victorian buildings, typically with two interconnected classrooms and an attached school house, and although in many cases local authorities have upgraded classroom and toilet facilities, headteachers report that they often have to act as their own janitors by turning on the heating, mending toilets, clearing leaves from the school playground, and opening the school – activities that would be eschewed by headteachers in urban

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settings (Wilson, 2007). Over a half of these very small schools are classified as 'inaccessible rural' according to the Scottish Government's school census classification system (Scottish Executive, 2006), which in extreme cases can mean being connected to the mainland by a ferry which operates twice or three times per week. Ferry services can also be cancelled during the winter months, as I learnt to my cost while undertaking fieldwork in the Outer Hebrides.

A survey of published literature identified some research on small schools, when these were defined as ones with school rolls of up to 100 pupils each, however, much of it focused on English rather than Scottish schools, and much reflected continuing concerns about possible school closure (e.g. Bell & Sigsworth, 1987; Comber, 1981; Coopers & Lybrand, 1996; Galton, 1993) and little explored the role of the teaching headteacher per se, which one of Southworth's (2004: 31) respondents in an English small school had summed up as 'diverse – rich, varied and fragmented'. The published research that does exist (e.g. Galton, 1993; Wallace, 1988; Way, 1989) suggests that both managing and teaching in smaller schools are significantly different from that undertaken in larger schools. The duality of the role of teaching headteacher and vertical grouping of pupils are factors with which all small school headteachers must cope: this can give rise to role conflict. For example, Dunning (1993) summed up this 'double load' as 'the conflict that inevitably arises between the professional concerns of teaching, and the growing demands of management and leadership' (p. 83). This view is supported by Clarke (2002), who argued that in schools in Queensland 'the roles of teaching principal are numerous and diverse and likely to conflict with one another unless managed effectively' (p. 1). This is also a theme taken up by Wilson and Brundrett (2005), who challenge what they believe to be a popular misconception that leading a small school is considerably easier than managing a larger one. Many very small schools have only two or three multi-age/stage classes, therefore, headteachers must plan, prepare, teach and assess pupils in composite classes. Teaching such vertical groups can be demanding and requires to have fluid groups to be effective. However, those who are also headteachers will have little time for the reflection and concentrated thought that this requires during key times in the administrative cycle when developing school plans or setting budgets dominate their thinking. Small school headteachers can also feel marginalised in policy development because as other researchers (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Dunning, 1993; Southworth, 1995) point out, there is a tendency for policy-makers to equate size with importance, and base their policy assumptions on larger schools. These issues set the overarching context in which the two research projects (Wilson, 2007; Wilson & McPake, 1998) discussed in this article should be located.

More detailed information about the headteachers who lead small schools in Scotland emerged from the first study conducted between 1996 and 1998 (Wilson & McPake, 1998). It provided inter alia a profile of small school headteachers in Scotland, how they cope with the duality of the role of teaching headteacher and the training and support they had received to prepare them for that role. The overwhelming majority (81%) was female; most (68%) were aged between 35 and 50 years; the majority (85%) had attended a Scottish College of Education and 77% possessed a college diploma in Education. Just under half of the small school headteachers originated in rural areas and approximately a third had been educated in small primary schools. Relatively few (18%) had held management posts prior to their current appointment and just under half had been in post for 5 years or less. Most (79%) of the incumbents had received some form of management training at the time of the survey, but this tended to take place some time after their appointment to a headship. Two-thirds suggested that management training should be adapted to meet the specific needs of headteachers of small schools. Forty-four percent expected to remain in their current posts indefinitely, many enjoyed their work and expressed contentment with their current position. Some, however, reported difficulties in balancing the teaching and management elements of their job. There was some evidence that small school headteachers were a self-reliant group and their most frequently mentioned source of support overall was informal discussions with other small school headteachers (informal clustering with other schools was reported by 91%). Scottish Office Education Department's documentation and advice from Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (90% of respondents) provided support from a national Scottish level and local authority advisors at a local level (reported by up to 97% of the small schools in some authorities). Finally, 80% of small schools drew considerable support, both formal and informal, from parents and other members of their communities. However, this support tended to be practical in nature rather than related to either the curriculum or management. It is also significant that 71% of small school headteachers reported living outwith their school's catchment area, described by one as a desire to be beyond the small community's 'beck and call'. The research highlighted the complexity of the role of teaching headteacher and also the need for tailored development opportunities to help small school headteachers cope with their role. This is the background for the follow up study reported below.

## 3. Aims and method of research

The overarching aim of the 2006 study was to revisit a sample of the same very small schools that had been included in 1996 (Wilson, 2007). A very small school was defined as one with a pupil roll of 50 pupils or less, and which typically employed no more than three teachers. Specifically, the research sought to identify:

- whether there is still a particular leadership style evident in small schools;
- how leadership in small schools might be better supported.

The research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The first phase of the research was based upon interviews in nine case study primary schools located in three different local authorities in Scotland. The nine case study schools were purposefully chosen to provide a variety of schools. The smallest (Case Study 7) had a roll of 7 pupils and the largest (Case Study 9) had 50 pupils. The number of teachers in the sample schools ranged from 1 to 2.4; four were classified as remote rural and eight were led by female headteachers (Table 1). It subsequently emerged that four were led by acting headteachers, an indication of the difficulties that small schools are experiencing in recruiting headteachers who are willing to live and work in remote areas.

The second phase involved a postal survey of a sample of 100 very small schools with pupil rolls of 50 or less, 10 in each of 10 local authorities in which small schools formed more than 50% of the total number of primary schools. The sample schools were drawn from the school census returns submitted by local authorities in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2006) and represent approximately one in four of all very small schools. All 100 schools had also participated in the 1996 study and approximately, a third were still led by the headteachers who had been in post in 1996. Each school was sent a copy of the same questionnaire that had been used in 1996 and a 70% response rate was achieved (82% in 1996). Data were analysed thematically using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences and FileMakerPro. Wherever possible, comparisons were made between the two studies to show changes over time, however, some caution must be exercised as the timescale of each