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Leading school business

Dr Fiona Creaby, Independent Education Consultant and Academic/Researcher at The University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, reflecting on your feedback, offers her thoughts on professional growth and confidence in changing times.

Rapid reforms in the UK have placed school business professionals (SBPs) as 'key-players' in schools, yet there has been limited exploration into this important development across the education landscape. Indeed, the spotlight has predominantly been placed on the challenges that teachers and teaching-leaders, such as head teachers and principals, face in practice, often with a focus on how their future development can be supported. However, the increasing complexity of leading school business has highlighted issues of capacity, credibility and role development for SBPs in the wake of current policy shifts (Armstrong, 2016), yet this has received little attention despite the vital role played in school leadership and management (Woods et al, 2013).

Therefore, in June 2017, the Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL) commissioned research to explore professional growth and confidence in the wake of such rapid reforms across the education sector in the UK, seeking to gain insight into the thoughts and experiences of the SBPs via the membership. The research includes four key phases:

- phase 1: Survey to the membership (July – November 2017)
- phase 2: Focus groups at the National Conference (November 2017)
- phase 3: Individual interviews with 10 SBPs (November – December 2017)
- phase 4: Analysis and dissemination (January 2018 – April 2018)

Focusing on the initial analysis of phase 1 (survey results); the survey was distributed to ISBL's membership in July 2017 and received 258 responses, which is approximately a 10 per cent return rate.

Phase 1: Online Survey – initial analysis

Respondents' background, context and role

Respondents shared a general theme of substantial career length, with the majority indicating 21+ years and many having worked in a school/education setting for more than eight years. Seventy-nine per cent defined their gender as female. Presenting as well-qualified, 97 per cent of respondents held at least a Level 4 qualification, with 29 per cent also holding a Level 7 or Masters level qualification and 48 per cent holding at least one of the bespoke School Business Management diplomas. Twenty-two per cent indicated a financial qualification, with 13 per cent defining themselves as qualified accountants.

The respondents were spread across settings, with the majority based in either a Local Authority (LA) school (30 per cent) or a multi-academy trust (MAT, 30 per cent), with 13 per cent in a standalone academy. Nine per cent indicated a faith school setting, eight per cent a foundation/trust school and five

per cent a LA special school. The most common phases were primary education (37 per cent) and secondary education inclusive of 14 to 19 year olds (25 per cent), with 25 per cent of the respondents reporting the inclusion of early years provision in their setting. Presenting a theme of well-performing schools, 88 per cent of respondents reported their Ofsted judgement as either Grade 2 – Good (66 per cent) or Grade 1 – Outstanding (22 per cent). Interestingly, almost half of the respondents reported either a current deficit budget (18 per cent) or a predicted future deficit (30 per cent), with finance and budget presenting a major professional stressor in open-ended questions.

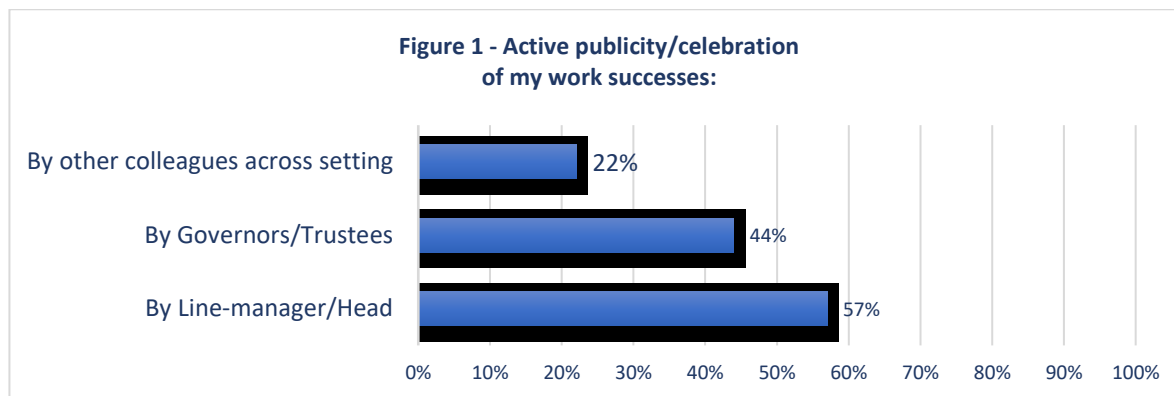
More than 75 per cent of respondents defined their role focus as a 'senior generalist in an individual school', with 70 per cent selecting the title of 'school business manager' to define their role. Almost half of the respondents had been in their current role for 1 to 3 years, with 75 per cent serving seven years or less. All respondents indicated line-managing staff, with the average being 10 direct-reports; however the range was from 2 to 65. Eighty-three per cent of respondents reported attending regular strategic meetings with senior staff, with the majority of respondents (93 per cent) attending governor/trustee meetings (64 per cent attending full meetings and relevant committees and 29 per cent attending relevant committees only).

Decision-making and understanding of the SBP role by the school community

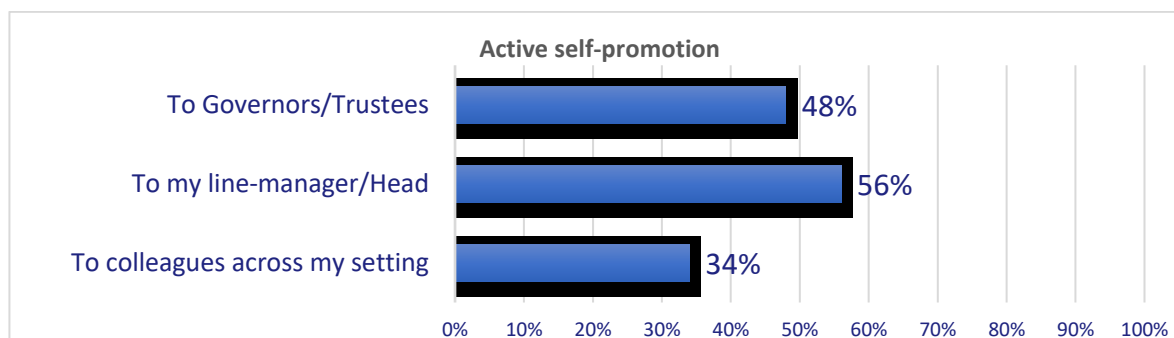
Most respondents felt that they took a lead role in decision-making in all or most business functions in their setting, also reporting that they feel encouraged to do so. The majority also agreed that their role was understood by senior management staff (69 per cent) and governors/trustees (74 per cent), with less (40 per cent) agreeing that this was the case with teaching staff; however, more than 81 per cent of respondents reported feeling that their role was perceived as 'essential' or 'valuable' to the senior leadership team.

Recognition of work successes

The majority of respondents felt recognised and valued for their professional contributions by their line-manager/head teacher, and in relation to governors/trustees. Only 22 per cent, however, felt that teaching staff understood their roles (see figure 1). This suggests there is some work to do in relation to raising the profile of SBPs across the wider school workforce.

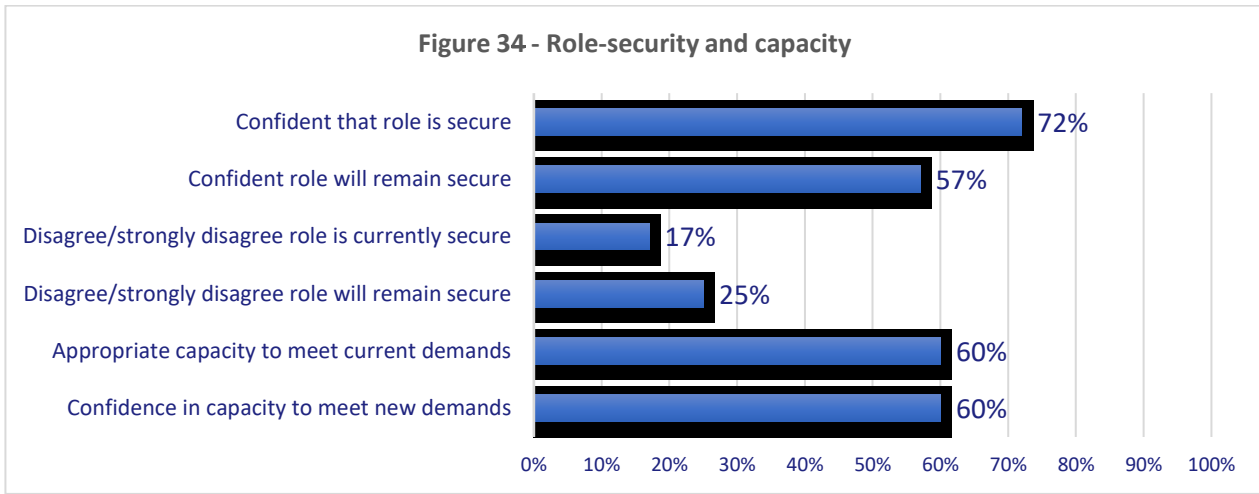


Furthermore, only 34 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they actively seek to publicise and celebrate their own work to colleagues across their setting, but active self-promotion rose in relation to head teacher/line manager and to governors/trustees (see figure 2).



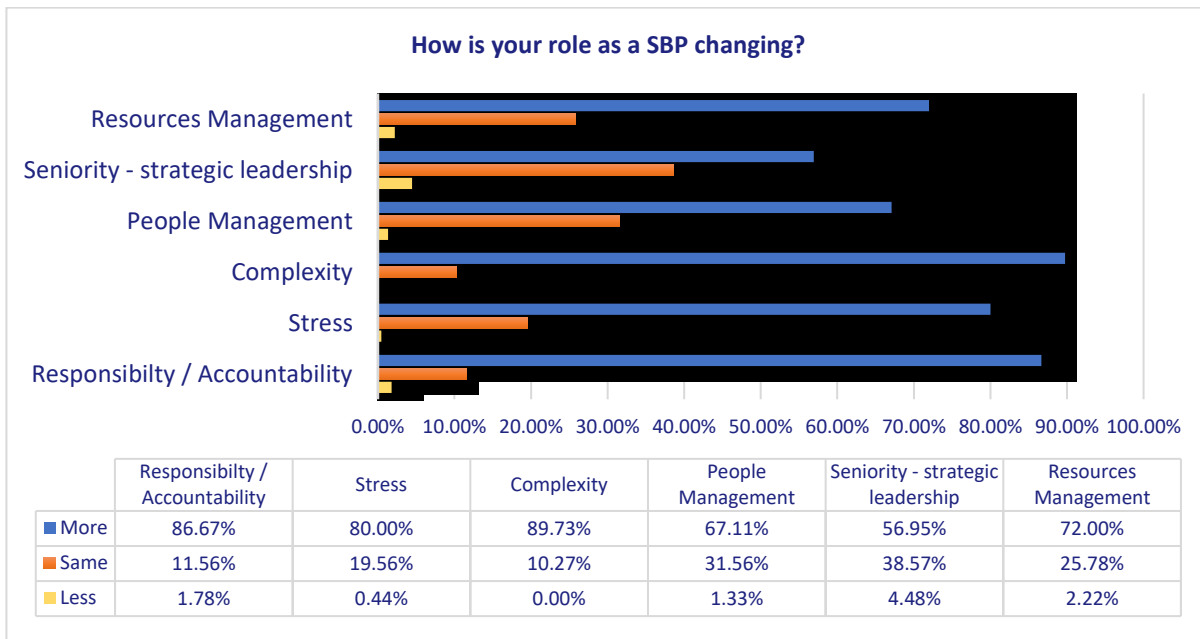
Role security and capacity

Moving to thoughts around role security and capacity, although there was a general trend that suggests respondents felt confident that their roles are currently secure (72 per cent), there appears less certainty of this for the future (57 per cent; see figure 3). However, it is also important to note that there are ‘neutral’ markers (11 per cent currently feel neutral about their security and 18 per cent feel neutral for the future), suggesting the potential for uncertainty in this area. This will be explored further in the next phases of research and in the final report.



Role development

The question ‘How is your role as a SBP changing?’ was useful in highlighting the growth of SBP roles in different areas, with a trend reflecting the continuation of increasing complexity and accountability highlighted by earlier research (e.g. Woods et al, 2013; Armstrong 2016).



Phase 1 summary

Overall, the results from the initial analysis of the survey suggest that a good level of self-confidence is present amongst those who responded to the survey, along with confidence in their ability to professionally grow in the future. However, this appears tempered with apprehensions regarding the changing nature of the role, concerns with capacity, and frustrations with the outlook of various colleagues regarding the contributions and value of the SBP role.

It is important to note that the majority of respondents were senior generalists with considerable experience and, therefore, further filtering of the data to explore the opinions of those with less experience and/or seniority will be extremely useful in considering the wide spectrum of practitioner contexts and roles. As further data analysis continues, and the research moves into the next phases, these areas will be explored.

The next steps

Following the discussion groups held at the National Conference and the interviews that took place in November to December 2017, all data collected will be analysed between January and April. This will inform an ISBL white paper discussing the findings, and it will contribute to an academic article via a conference presentation to leading researchers and scholars in the education leadership, management and administration field. An overall summary of the research will be shared through a further feature in *The Voice* Summer 2018 edition.

References

Armstrong, P. (2016) School Business Managers: The Negotiation of Professional Identity. Research Report October 2016. Coventry: NASBM.

Woods, C., Armstrong, P., Bragg, J. and Pearson, D. (2013) Perfect Partners or Uneasy Bedfellows? Competing Understandings of the Place of Business Management within Contemporary Education Partnerships. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*. 41(6): 751-766.