

Leadership in action – talking heads: prepare to be surprised

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Everything [was different than expected]. There was no one to ask what to do, or to turn to when I had a problem. Everyone expected me to be in control all the time. It is having to manage everyone else and no one to manage you but yourself. (Female first school head from Bradford, England)

Taking up a first headship can be a daunting prospect, but preparation and anticipation can help. Opportunities for training are getting more sophisticated and more prevalent. Weindling (2000), for example, discusses several studies that looked at stages of headship, including issues about preparation for the job. Preparation can start very early in a head's life, and although training programmes are important there is more to preparation than attending courses. Weindling cites Duke (1987):

School leaders do not emerge from training programmes fully prepared and completely effective. Their development is a more involved and incremental process, beginning as early as their own schooling and extending through their first years on the job as leaders. Becoming a school leader is an ongoing process of socialisation. (p 261)

Leithwood and his colleagues researching Canadian heads point out that preparation can include a range of experiences from formal courses to dealing with the unplanned and unanticipated. Until very recently in England and Wales, preparation for one of the most important jobs in the educational sector used to be very hit-and-miss. For example, several of the primary heads who contributed to a book edited by Mortimore and Mortimore (1991(a)) felt they had not been adequately prepared for the job, and consequently believed in “the importance of providing their deputies with the opportunity to develop management expertise” (p 126). In an NFER study of a hundred English and Welsh heads who had been in post for over ten years, the heads also stressed the value of preparation prior to taking up the post. In particular they stressed:

the need for a wide variety of experience, especially as a deputy head; the value of a period as acting head; the importance of delegation by the head; the rotation of deputies' responsibilities; and the need to work with heads who saw deputy headship as preparation for headship.

Some heads spoke highly of management courses that they had attended as deputies, but most agreed that off-the-job training and development was a complement to the experiences gained as a deputy working with “a good practitioner”. The gulf from deputy to head was, nevertheless, seen as enormous, and “no course or reading matter can really prepare you for the job”. (Weindling, 2000, p 12)

Aspiring heads now have access to the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Recognition of the importance of preparation is long overdue, but much of this can happen on the job as well as on courses. As deputies become heads themselves and the baton

gets handed on, many see that an important part of their new job is to develop future leaders. This can be done by ensuring that there are a range of opportunities available, but also – and most importantly – by ‘giving permission’ for learning and development: making certain that this is seen as part of the job. Such opportunities can include:

- reflecting on practice
- asking for and giving feedback
- observing and being observed
- paired visits to classrooms and meetings in the school
- team meetings
- case study meetings
- job shadowing
- rotating responsibilities
- giving and receiving coaching
- mentoring
- collaborative projects
- action research
- reading

Many heads speak warmly of good experiences they received lower down the career ladder, and the importance of modelling comes up in several studies (Mortimore and Mortimore 1991(b); MacBeath and Myers, 1999; Ribbins, 1997). Unfortunately not everyone has good memories of the heads they have worked with. As an English female secondary head observed, “Some poor role models taught me how not to do things” (MacBeath and Myers, 1999, p 58), but even negative experiences can be useful preparation for the job.

Nevertheless, however much planned and unplanned preparation is undertaken there will always be some surprises. Twenty-seven head teachers interviewed for the TES column *Talking Heads* between 1995 and 1998 were asked “When you took up your headship, what if anything was different from what you expected?” The selection of heads interviewed was not a scientific sample. What they had in common was that someone, somewhere had recommended them as successful heads and worth interviewing. They came from all types of schools, eight different countries and many different cultures. Some were very experienced at the job (three were in their second headship), and some had just started. In spite of these differences they had a surprising amount in common – including what had surprised them.

Surprises started early on. On her first day, a female primary head from Tower Hamlets, inner London, “had to deal with a drunk dinner lady, and that wasn’t what I’d expected I’d be doing”.

This event may not have been typical, but what was not unusual was the sudden realisation that others had particular expectations of heads, even if the day before they took up post they were

colleagues. Living up to a stereotype of what a head should be and how they should behave was expected from the minute they took up the role, in spite of still being “the same person with the same feelings and emotions”, as a female primary head from Halifax, England lamented.

From Toronto, Canada a male secondary head made a similar point:

I could not believe the deference and how important people thought you were just because you were principal. It astounded me...as a principal you must never underestimate the impact you have.

And from a male primary head from Brighton, England:

[I was surprised at] how seriously people took you as soon as you became a head. You are no longer a colleague.

Some learnt quickly that they had to be careful about what they said, how they said it and to whom they said it. “People take great store by what you say, and so you have to be very careful about flippant comments” was the early discovery of a female secondary head from Birmingham, England.

Being in charge and expected to know everything

Although the theory was acknowledged, for a few the reality of being in charge, and consequently expected to know everything, was another surprise:

I was very daunted initially though they probably did not realise it. At first I also found it difficult to cope with the fact that there was no one after me – I was in charge. (Female primary head from Brixton, inner London, England)

This sentiment was reiterated by a male secondary head from Merthyr Tydfil, Wales:

In my first headship it was the realisation that the buck stops here and you have to do something about it. It’s different from any other job in school.

As well as the realisation that they were now at least perceived to be in charge, heads found they were supposed to know everything. According to a male special-school head, from Lewisham, inner London, England:

I’d had experience of being an acting head, but even so the most shocking thing when I first came here was that people expected me to know things. There were then 112 children aged between 2 and 19, and I didn’t know anyone. I had no mentor, no induction. I look back and wonder how I survived!

And from a female first school head, from Bradford:

...young teachers think I can resolve the problems of the universe. It is nice that they have so much confidence but...

Making changes and changing hats

Most of the heads were keen to make changes when they took up their new roles, but some were surprised how long it actually took to do this.

The female primary head from Tower Hamlets “was surprised how long it took to make a difference. To build up a good school takes a long time”.

A female secondary head from North Lanarkshire, Scotland felt similarly:

[It took me a long time to] understand that change cannot happen overnight, it is a longer, slower and ongoing process.

After a little while in post, a female primary head from Brent, outer London, learnt:

...not to expect changes to happen immediately. For example, changing the school's whole approach to the teaching of mathematics. I thought it would take at the most two terms – in the end it took two years.

And a female primary head from Ealing, also in outer London, was not the only one to find that her own enthusiasm for change was not automatically shared by all:

I thought the status of being a head would reduce other people's resistance to change, but this is not the case. You still have to convince people and take them with you.

From Cape Town, South Africa, a male primary school head made a somewhat poignant comment on this theme:

I thought that teachers would welcome playing a role in running their school. I think I underestimated the legacy of apartheid that enslaved so many of us. I thought that with democracy everything would become much easier, but it will take time – for example for teachers to become affirmed in meetings.

Illusions of being Mr Nice Guy were quickly dashed for a male primary head from Brighton:

I thought you could please everyone by being nice. I hadn't realised that any one action will displease someone.

The female primary head from Brent talked about her surprise at how her own role kept changing in order to keep up with the external agenda for change. She noted "how quickly your responsibilities change as new changes are introduced".

Another issue heads had not quite anticipated before they took up post was the number of audiences they had to relate to and roles they had to play.

A male secondary head from Camden, inner London, remembered that:

I underestimated the pressures that are generated from all the different audiences you have to respond to: staff, students, parents, the education authority, DfEE, Ofsted, the public generally, and local and national politicians. The job is more at the sharper end that I thought it might be.

As did the female primary head from Brent, in recalling "the number of hats you have to wear, from social worker to financial whiz kid, not all directly to do with education".

The female secondary head from North Lanarkshire had a similar experience:

[I was surprised by] the realisation of the constraints that heads work under, and the various audiences that have to be addressed and whose interests need to be managed. You cannot go on a training course for that, the skill has to evolve and develop – be honed on the job. Although I have been a head for 11 years, I'm still learning. When I stop is the day to pack it up.

The learning curve

Some of the heads had not anticipated how much they would not know, and that the only way to learn was by doing.

A female head of an all-age Maori school from Christchurch, New Zealand explained:

At first there were lots of headaches and heartaches. I was not au fait with the system things like legal everyday requirements, staffing, ratios, funding. I was so green. It was a crash course in learning!

From Western Australia, a female secondary head discovered that:

...a million things [were different than I expected]. I now realise it's not so easy. I often reflect and think I could have done something much better. In the end you can only learn by doing something. What you learn from other people is the way they do something, and in most cases that's the way it's always been done before.

A male primary head from Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA found:

There was nothing I didn't realise had to be done, but the picture was much bigger than anything I'd done before.

Other surprises

The reality of the pace and the demands of the job were important discoveries, and almost all the heads, when asked if they would have done anything differently knowing what they know now, mentioned pacing themselves differently, being more realistic – doing some things a little slower and others a little quicker. Two female secondary heads, the first from North Lanarkshire, and the second from Hounslow, outer London, came to slightly different conclusions from similar experiences:

[I would] pace myself a bit better. The first few years were very draining and demanding. I would learn not to be frustrated that you cannot do everything at once.

Be a bit less conscientious. When I came to the school it had to be changed, it was “do or die”, and extraordinary hard work. A lot of fun though! I'm not sure I could do it differently.

And a male primary head from Glasgow, Scotland knew he would:

...learn how to manage the system more quickly than I did in order to get more finance and support. I would be less quick in deciding who are the good and the bad teachers, and I would never get angry. I've been angry three times since I've been in the job and would never let it happen again.

The biggest surprise for the same head was:

Before I became one, I thought that teachers were there to serve the head, and it came as a big shock to realise that it was the other way round. Nothing was the same after that.

And for the male primary head from Albuquerque:

I found managing adults was more difficult and complicated than managing children.

And finally, a female secondary head from Hounslow summed up some unexpected and unanticipated highs and lows:

Nothing [was different from expected] in terms of the day-to-day job, but you get the credit for everything that's right, for example a good concert, when really the teachers involved should get the credit, and for everything that goes wrong, for example lost PE shorts.

Preparation for headship is vital, but however much is undertaken there will still be some surprises. The capacity for coping with surprises may one of the most important competencies of a successful head.

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Note: Some of the material in this paper appears in *Talking Heads*, a chapter in MacBeath, J and Myers, K, 1999, *Effective School Leaders. How to Evaluate and Improve Your Leadership Potential* Financial Times Prentice Hall