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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a small exploratory study of headteachers in England in 1997. Unstructured interviews were conducted with eight teachers who had been appointed to their first headship within the previous 2 years. The general theme of each interview was to explore the changes to individual perceptions that had occurred following teachers' transition to the headship. Headteachers worked at three elementary, three secondary, and two special education schools (one residential and one day school). None of the respondents had any formal preparation for the post, but seven of the eight demonstrated a career-development profile that was characterized by experiential learning through a number of senior-management positions. All respondents felt that they did not really know the breadth and scope of the headteacher role. They all had underestimated the personal resilience needed for the job, and all reported stress to a level beyond their expectations. These headteachers reported support from the local education agency to be minimal, with the support that was received concentrated on administrative and technical issues surrounding the headship. All of the headteachers reported that most useful personal support came from outside their immediate work environments. These British headteachers did not feel fully prepared for their roles because of their work experience. In contrast, studies of principals in the United States have shown that they do not feel fully prepared in spite of their academic training. The issue for real preparation would seem to be that of the appropriate blending of academic and work experience. (Contains seven references.) (SLD)

CROSSING THE BORDER INTO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY APPOINTED HEADTEACHERS IN ENGLAND

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CROSSING THE BORDER INTO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:

EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY APPOINTED

HEADTEACHERS IN ENGLAND

I don't think there was any one thing that made me feel that I was a headteacher, but for the first couple of terms I really felt that I wasn't me, and I was somebody else who was being forced to play a part in a play, and I didn't have the script. The curtain would keep going up and the music would start and I'd be shoved on to the stage and have to perform, and I kept thinking this isn't me! And all the rest of the people in the play kept on with their lines and I had to ad-lib all the way through it, and I think it was tiring. I had to keep darting off to the wings of the stage and flipping through books to find out what the district policy on this is or what the legal situation was and darting back in again...it was like putting on an act.

(Woman headteacher of an all-age primary school in England, 1997)

In the development of greater appreciation of the concept of "borders" serving as modes of separating individuals and groups, several different interpretations may be offered for that term. The most obvious concerns the notion of international borders, where political, social, economic, and cultural identities of different nations are said to be maintained by natural or created barriers preventing flow of people and goods from one country to another. Mozambique is separated from South Africa by mountains and a fence. Mexico is separated from the United States by the Rio Grande River and a fence in west Texas. Another application of the term "borders" concerns the separation of people on the basis of psychological, ideological, or social divisions of thought. Borders are said to exist between constructivists and critical theorists, though no physical barrier of

mountain or river is seen. A third conceptualization of borders, as developed in this paper, concerns the gulf that often exists within the personal experience of an individual as he or she proceeds through life and engages in career transitions from one role to another.

This paper reports a small scale exploratory study conducted of headteachers in England during the period from June to September, 1997. Unstructured interviews were conducted with eight respondents who had been appointed to their first headship within the previous two years. The general theme of each interview was to explore the changes to individual perceptions that had occurred following their transition to the headship. In keeping with qualitative research of this nature there were a number of emergent themes which merit further investigation. We report on the following themes in this paper:

- Preparation for headship;
- Culture shock from the transition into headship;
- Professional support received throughout the induction period

Methodology

The eight respondents who were involved in this study constitute an opportunity sample. Each individual was working with one of the researchers under the auspices of the central government funded Headteacher Leadership and Management Programme ("Headlamp") scheme. This scheme, introduced by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), provides a sum of £ 2500 (US$4000) across their first two years in post for every headteacher appointed to their first headship, and is meant to be supportive of individual continuing professional development. At the

time of the interviewing, the average tenure of the respondents was 17 months, with a range from 6 months to two years.

The headship positions ranged from an Infant school (K-2) of some 300 students and an annual budget of £0.5 m (US$ 0.8 m) to a Community school (Grades 6-13 with Adult Education provision) of 1300 school age children and an annual budget of £4.2m (US$ 6.3m). There were three primary (elementary) schools, three secondary (high) schools (one of which was single sex) and two special education schools (one residential for boys with emotional and behavioural difficulties and the other a day school for children with severe, profound, and multiple learning difficulties). the schools were located in four different Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in and around London.

Four respondents were women. Consistent with trends noted in the UK and internationally, only one of the women heads worked at a secondary school. That school, however, was the largest and most complex school in this study. Both the heads of the special education schools were men, as was the head of the single sex (boys') school. The average age of the respondents was 41 years, with a range from 38 to 44. All respondents were white and of European origin.

Face-to-face interviews lasting between one and two hours were conducted on the school premises. Each interview was tape recorded and subsequently recorded. Transcripts were returned to respondents who checked for accuracy, with the agreed transcript then analysed by one of the two researchers for emergent themes.

Relevant Background Information

The headship position in England has undergone radical change over the last decade as a series of government initiatives and legislative mandates have forced schools into a market place environment. The 1988 Education Reform Act heralded the introduction of locally managed schools working to a national curriculum, whilst other contemporary legislation has dramatically increased accountability designed to increase parent power, particularly through the transfer of power to individual school governing bodies. The outcome of this reality has been to increase the responsibility of the headteacher whose job has been transformed toward the image of the "Chief Executive" rather than the "Leading Professional" end of the continuum of role description offered by Hughes (1975).

There has not been a corresponding central government initiative for improving the management and leadership skills of headteachers and other senior professionals, however. The result has been that most in the post at the time of the transition to school based management had to learn "on the job." The history of management development for educators in England has been a series of disjointed and insubstantial attempts (Male, 1997) since the early 1980s. First attempts to provide support encompassed the establishment in 1983 of the National Development Centre for school management training (NDC) which developed training packages of either one school term or twenty days' duration for headteachers and other senior managers. By the end of the decade, however, only 11 percent of the target population had participated in such development opportunities (Creissen & Ellison, 1996), with the result that in 1990 the government

initiated an investigation into alternative approaches through the creation of the School Management Task Force (SMTF). During its short life, the SMTF undertook a national audit of school leaders, commissioned a number of key research projects and published a valuable and informative report which identified a range of key principles for management development. Funding to support these proposals did not follow, however, except in the form of a general grant for professional development which was also to cover a great many other central government-determined initiatives. At the end of its two year investigation, the SMTF was commissioned to oversee the Headteacher Mentoring Scheme, a new initiative designed to assist newly appointed headeteachers into post through the provision of a trained mentor, an experienced headteacher. Despite many valuable lessons (Bolam, McMahon, Pocklington & Weindling, 1993), this scheme folded after just one year due to a lack of funding.

The net result of this in terms of preparation for headship has been that the majority of prospective candidates have had to secure their own financial support and strategies for development, generally through school based experience supplemented by attendance at various formal training programmes. By no means has there been any consistency across the nation, and the sole determinant of headteacher role has been the hiring body which, since 1988, has been the governing body in all schools. Commonly, therefore, we can expect current candidates for headships to exhibit a portfolio of experience in senior management positions in one or more schools, together with evidence of continuing education, preferably in university courses in educational management

and administration. It is from this type of background we will find the respondents in this study.

In the search for the continuous improvement in schools, however, the newly elected Labour government has published in its White Paper *Excellence in Education* its intention for all prospective headteachers to have undertaken a formal preparation for the position. The purpose of such papers is to signal the shape of future legislation, so it is reasonable to suspect that there will be a mandatory obligation on future headteachers to have successfully engaged in training and development programmes designed to equip them for the job. It is also most probable that this desire will be fulfilled by the new qualification for headship currently being piloted by the TTA, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). This qualification builds upon previous development work by the NDC and the SMTF in defining the attributes, skills, professional knowledge, and understanding required of headteachers. Trials for the assessment and training and development required for the qualification were conducted earlier this year and a pilot scheme is now underway for some 3000 candidates. The first "graduates" of this qualification process have yet to appear.

The TTA, which was created by central government in 1994 to oversee all aspects of teacher education, has embedded the new qualifications within a framework of professional development of their own devising. The framework established a series of national standards for headteachers, serving and newly qualified teachers and identifies a series of vocational qualifications which will be administered by the TTA. The planned route through this framework envisaged for

headteachers will be one of preparation, induction, and consolidation represented by the NPQH, Headlamp, and a programme for those in post longer than five years. Headlamp was the first project introduced by TTA which is now advertising for a contractor to devise a programme of professional development for serving headteachers.

Headlamp, as it was devised in 1995, aims to support incoming headteachers by making use of at least 80 percent of allocated funds on providers registered with the TTA. There was no quality control measure associated with the programme. with the only proviso being that each prospective provider was to pay the TTA a registration fee of £100 (US$ 150). By the beginning of 1996, there were as many providers as candidates with the obvious result that many of the providers had no clear focus. Thus the major providers continued to be the LEA (Squire & Blandford, 1997). Headlamp, as it is envisaged for the future, will remain a key stage in the TTA framework aim to support the continuing development of the incoming headteacher within the context of a local school. In contrast to the findings of Squire and Blandsford, the eight respondents in this study had all chosen to undertake the Headlamp training with a university provider who followed the model suggested by TTA. Each had accepted an individualised programme of development, largely consisting of a mixture of consultancy and advice around based issues.

Findings

The Preparation for Headship

None of the respondents had access to the NPQH trials and consequently no formal preparation for the post. Seven of the eight demonstrated a career development profile that was characterised by experiential learning through a number of senior management positions, with the eighth transferring to headship from a university lecturing post. This was unusual in comparison to the rest of the study and is contingent upon a number of factors specific to the school: The school in question is a special education facility for children with severe and multiple learning difficulties, and the incoming head had not only taught there at the start of his career but was a leading figure in the field of associated research by the time of his appointment. Given the shortage of good quality candidates for such headships, it was not surprising to see this transition which would be unusual in other avenues of schooling which typically place a premium on practical experience.

Only one of the respondents had not taken part in a programme of advanced study, usually at higher degree level, but of the remaining seven only two had successfully completed their programme of study by the time of their appointment. Indeed it was a feature of several interviews to hear expressions of guilt at not gaining the respective award despite having been in their new post for upwards of a year. Nevertheless, all respondents who were engaged in programmes of advanced study highlighted the importance and usefulness of the theory base provided by these courses.

Four of the sample had at least one term as acting head in their previous or current school before taking up post. All, bar the head of the SLD school, had held the permanent position of deputy headteacher for a minimum of four terms before being appointed to the headship position. Two of these had been internal appointments to the headship from the deputy position within the school, one of whom had held another deputy position in another school prior to that. In all, three of the respondents had held more than deputy head post prior to their appointment as headteacher.

The general pattern of career progression, however, was characterised by significant experience at deputy head level or in senior management positions in more than one school. Higher degrees and formal programmes of training and development were considered important for shortlisting purposes and were deemed to be extremely helpful once in post, but practical experience at a senior level was voted a premium. The distinction is best summed up by a male headteacher in a secondary school who was asked to describe his continuing education en route to headship, and replied:

> *I think that continuing preparation came from the practice of what I was doing on a day-to-day basis. I think I've always been pretty clear in my mind that I did not particularly enjoy aspects of theory of education. What I was interested in was the practice of education, the practice of improving schools and I think that most of my own teaching about headship came from the experience of running my own mini version of it. And I think I've been conscious of doing that all the way back to running my first department--that is how you manage change, how you manage people, how you change things, how you affect things, how you persuade people, how you negotiate with people, how you produce cultural change. I think what's always interested me is producing cultural change within institutions [influencing] the way people behave and the way people think. Yes, I did find it interesting to do an Open University*

course on managing schools, but I think it is actually the practice of doing it which was more influential to me.

Nevertheless all respondents pointed to the importance of a high level of technical skills, particularly in the handling of finances, as an essential element of the preparation for headship, and made recommendations for their inclusion in future preparation programmes such as NPQH.

The Culture Shock of the Transition

Nothing could prepare the respondents, it seems, for the change of perceptions of others or for the intensity of the job. Typical is the response of a woman headteacher from an all-age primary school:

Even that I was deputy for a hell of a long time, and in two different schools, I really did not have much preparation for the job now. I thought that with those two experiences I knew what a head would have to cope with, but I didn't have a realistic perception of the whole range of things. I only saw the tip of the iceberg.

This feeling of not really knowing the breadth and scope of the role was even echoed by the respondents who had previously had periods of acting headship and only realised the full extent of the job after they had taken up post. Even then, it seemed, there was a short, "honeymoon" period where some people held back on information and concerns until they had a clearer idea of the incoming headteacher's value system. It was not long before, however, they discovered vital and confidential information that was previously not open to them, or that they became aware of the number of items and issues that remained hidden from them as they were not perceived by other key players in the system as being in total charge whilst in the acting headteacher capacity. This later point

was brought home strongly by the respondent who was an internal appointment after eight years in the school as deputy. When asked what the essential difference was between the two roles, he answered:

> *You get treated differently and you treat people differently. There is a natural/inherent unease in every teacher in relation to their head, regardless of how good, bad, or indifferent they are. People are cautious with you, and in turn you can't behave in the way that maybe you would like to with them. Having been a deputy head for eight years, the deputy does act as a buffer for certain amounts of aggravation that doesn't actually come to you as head. What's frustrating is that people might be saying things, but they're not prepared to come to you and grumble to you. There's actually a bit of a comfort zone in that, but where there isn't a comfort zone is where I'm the absolute, ultimate responsibility. On more than one occasion I've heard people say, "Oh, I don't think [the head] would approve of that." People use you as the great disapprover, simply if they don't approve of something.*

This feeling of being put in a "slot" by other people was echoed by the woman head of the largest secondary school in the study and is representative of the changed perceptions of themselves experienced by the incoming headteachers. Similarly, his comments begin to highlight the changed perceptions of others, both within and outside the school, toward them as illustrated by the woman headteacher of a primary school when talking about her relationships outside of her job:

> *Away from school, people in the outside world have a perception of you which, for some reason, changes when you are a headteacher. Its almost as though your face has changed, you're a different person--you've got two heads on you. People expect you somehow to be different from one day to another. Now I know that's not how I felt as a head. It makes you step back and say, "Well, what is your idea of being a head?"*

Similarly they underestimated the levels of personal resilience needed within the job and all reported stress to a high level that exceeded their expectations. In one instance, and following a conflict with a governing board member, one of the new appointees ended up on a course of medication that included anti-depressant drugs. Happily, however, most respondents had strategies for dealing with this increased stress, including the determination expressed by both male secondary headteachers to take Friday evenings and Saturdays to themselves. Others reported similar "time-out" strategies from the role, mainly manifested as quality time with their family, and at least half the sample had a deliberate policy of engaging in sports or working out in a gym. Conversely, there was an increased level of alcohol intake reported by the respondents.

Professional Support Received Through the Induction Period

Although the Squire and Blandford (1997) study demonstrated LEAs to be the major provider under the Headlamp scheme, all respondents reported the level of professional support from this direction to be minimal. Mostly the LEA concentrated their support on the administrative and technical issues that surrounded the headship, although even then questions were raised over the efficacy of that expertise. One of the secondary headteachers, for example, found little support in his efforts to change the school intake:

> *I'm trying to change the culture of this institution, trying to break a pretty solidly white working class ethic of under achievement. I didn't find any real support from the LEA, not personal, but structural kinds of support like... "stop sending me excluded kids from other schools. I'd got acres of white working class disaffected boys, don't send me anymore, send them to a more privileged school, be a bit creative." I am certainly finding none of those layers of support in trying to get an ethnic base into the school. So certainly, I wouldn't and didn't turn to the turn to the LEA.*

Apart from the respondent who found herself faced with a highly politicised governing body, respondents tended to look toward professional colleagues other than LEA officers for personal support. All reported having a network of contemporaries, both within and external to the LEA, to whom they could turn for advice. Some distinction was drawn between the type of support they could call upon from fellow headteachers in the same LEA and from those without, mainly because under the terms of financial delegation there was some rivalry between LEA schools whose income is pupil related. Consequently there was some tension and some confidential issues the respondents did not feel able to discuss with a "rival."

Despite the legal framework, there seemed to be little support from the governing body. As noted above, two of the respondents had found themselves to be in an extremely tricky situation with governors shortly after taking up post. In one instance this was as a result of individual conflict, whereas the other found herself to be the subject of much political activity from a governing body who displayed an unusually high level of interest in micro management issues. These two response were not the norm, however, with the remaining members of the sample describing governing bodies as either generally benign or virtually invisible. The general situation is summed up by the headteacher of one of the secondary schools:

> *I do not get that type of [professional] support from the Governing Body. The Chairman is supportive to the extent that I can get on with my job and he doesn't trouble me, but I have not seen him in the school for the last six months. I would actually like the relationship to be a bit more proactive than that.*

There was no systematic use of a formally appointed mentor, although all LEAs offered one for the incoming headteacher--albeit in one case with a financial charge (an offer she was happy to refuse). Respondents did draw some support from colleagues on their own senior management team, but inevitably found themselves isolated because they were either viewed as the final arbiter on decision making or as they held confidential information that could not be revealed to others within the same institution. All reported finding the most useful personal support as coming from outside their immediate environment--either from a contemporary in another LEA or from a closely aligned professional colleague such as faculty members from their local university or colleagues within their professional association. There was strong support for the use of outside consultants as critical friends who could challenge and advise with the baggage of the local community or the current, internal circumstances.

Some Final Reflections

It is impossible not to have a number of afterthoughts following the conclusion of a project such as the one described in this paper. For example, in any small-scale investigation, one often is left with a sense of accomplishment related to what was found, but perhaps even more significantly, an accompanying sense that more questions need to be asked in the future if the immediate investigation has any clear value. While we know the reactions of a relatively small group of headteachers regarding their professional development experiences and newly provided training, we will need to maintain contact with these leaders over the next several years to determine continuing effects of the learning activities to

which they have been exposed. While it is fairly evident that management training had an immediate (although not necessarily profound) impact on the respondents, the more critical assessment will be when the same heads are interviewed three, five, or even ten years from now. Did a different beginning shape a different path over time? Furthermore, the most critical issue is one that needs to be addressed in more intensive analyses in the future. Does focused preservice training provided to headteachers at the beginning (or prior to the beginning) of their careers have any impact on the quality of teaching and learning in schools? Will there be any indication that children learn more effectively when headteachers receive training which is more focused and directed toward the improvement of professional practice? Lastly, to what extent might the standards and expectations of the NPQH might be modified in ways that may match the findings of studies related to these last questions?

Finally, since this was an investigation carried out by researchers from both sides of the Atlantic, one can reflect on what the British experience described here may say about professional development opportunities for aspiring, beginning, and experienced American school principals. While headteachers in the UK are more experienced with such efforts to reform schools by moving toward private sector-driven practices such as complete site-based management, open enrolment, and the use of standardised achievement testing as measures of overall program effectiveness, their US counterparts are the products of a long-standing tradition of viewing the work of school administrators as something for which people may be prepared through preservice training ("certification") programs. For years, the

debate between scholars and practitioners in the UK and US has often centred on the issue of whether or not people could receive adequate preparation through academic experiences to make them ready to become effective heads or principals. Clearly, the British view has traditionally been that there is no preparation for the headship better than practical, on-the-job experience as a head of department, member of senior management, and deputy headship. Preservice training, therefore, was not something that could take place in a classroom on a university campus or anywhere else. The American position has been as fixed with a contrasting perspective. The route to the principalship is one which can only take place through the completion of university courses, academic degrees, and governmental licensure and certification. The findings of this small study suggest strongly the same things that similar studies of beginning principals in the United States have shown for years. British headteachers do not feel as if they were prepared totally for their posts simply because they had years of experience in roles similar to but not the same as headteachers. And American principals report that academic preservice training does not prepare them totally for their jobs. The issue, therefore, is not one of suggesting that one is prepared either by previous practice or by courses. It is an issue of appropriate blending.

In addition, and perhaps even more critical to the success of either beginning heads or novice principals is the recognition that, whatever the blend between theory and practice, there must be a strong ongoing commitment to the need for those stepping into school site leadership roles to spend time reflecting on personal values, ethical stances, and other similar matters which may help them

appreciate the single most critical issue facing all who step into a new role. The interviews of headteachers described here echoes findings of other research (Daresh, 1986; Daresh & Playko, 1994) which notes that people often do not appreciate the way in which taking on a principalship or headship will be a life-transforming experience. One's personal control of time and priorities is altered drastically. The reactions of peers is changed. largely because one soon learns that "peers" are suddenly no longer present when one takes a place on the "hot seat."

In summary, then, it seems that while the current efforts to improve the preparation of school leaders in the UK (through the measures noted in this review) or the US (through well-documented efforts to reform administrator preparation for the past several years), neither approach will result in better leadership for children in schools if there is not a constant recognition that the true focus of reform must always be on the transformation of individuals who will move into complex and demanding roles. And the roles of headteachers and principals will share the same central reality: Both jobs are becoming more visible and critical to effective schools, and the roles become increasingly complex with each new effort to reform schools.

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