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Were You Prepared?

Findings from a national survey of
headteachers

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Introduction

This is the summary of a report on an investigation of data first accumulated through a national survey of headteachers conducted by Trevor Male in 1999 (Male and Hvizdak, 2000). The survey was conducted by means of a self-completion postal questionnaire with a stratified random sample of 10 per cent of serving headteachers in England. Completed returns were received from 1405 headteachers, an overall response rate of 62 per cent.

The survey had three aims. The primary aim was to establish the respondents' perceived state of readiness for the demands of the headteacher position in a number of job categories and competencies. The secondary aims were to:

- allow respondents to attribute reasons to their state of readiness where they perceived it to be adequate or better
- seek opinion from the respondents as to what provision and support would be beneficial to headteachers in their first two years in post

Key findings

This survey provides the last set of data where the majority of beginning headteachers had no formal programme of preparation for the role, such as that now provided by the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH).

The results of the survey suggest clearly that what headteachers need in order to settle efficiently into a new job is someone to talk to. The need for support and mentoring from an experienced colleague when first starting headship was cited by nearly half of all respondents to the survey. Many wrote of the difficulties of settling into the job: the sense of isolation, the over whelming realisation that the 'buck stops here', how they felt ill-prepared by their previous educational experiences for this new and exacting role. They also wrote of the challenges and fulfilment that headship could eventually bring, but how getting to grips with the job in the first place was often done the hard way by learning from their mistakes. The survey also points the way clearly for the need for better management processes in selecting headteachers. It highlights the need for high quality training programmes for those preparing for, or in the process of undertaking, their first headship, a need that NCSL is attempting to meet with the revised NPQH qualification, and with new initiatives such as the New Visions programme.

Other findings from the survey

■ Primary schools

- The research suggested that the typical primary headteacher was 48 years old, had spent on average 25 years within the teaching profession and was in charge of a school with just over 240 pupils in his or her care. These averages, however, hid huge variations. For example, in one case a respondent became a headteacher at the age of 56 after 35 years as a classroom teacher while in another a head moved from newly qualified teacher to deputy head to headteacher in a little over three years.
- The smallest primary school involved in the survey had just 15 pupils whilst the largest had a total of 750 children. These large variations are perhaps one reason why 'one size fits all' type training courses are perceived to have had relatively little impact on this group of headteachers.
- While overall there was a slim majority of female respondents, the ratio gradually changed as schools got larger until with the very largest primary schools nearly 60 per cent had male headteachers. When one considers that well over 90 per cent of the primary school teaching force is female, this fact highlights the need to reappraise selection processes for headship and indeed to encourage preparation and application for headship from as wide a field as possible. Interestingly, it was the female headteachers, particularly in the larger schools, who felt most confident in their new role.
- Primary heads appointed before NCSL was operating generally felt poorly prepared through training for the role of headship. The head of a small school typically came across as someone who was swamped with the detail of everyday decision-making while coping with a significant teaching workload. Faced with such a scenario, the relevance of generic management training often passed these heads by. As schools got larger, new heads often found greater difficulties with influencing the direction of the school and affecting its core values.
- As schools got larger, respondents were better qualified academically and had spent less time as classroom teachers. It was clear also that respondents had arrived at headship via very different routes. In areas which are common to teaching in general, such as maintaining good discipline, headteachers felt very comfortable. But there were some areas where neither experience nor training

had prepared heads adequately for their new job. This particularly applied, for example, to the application of educational law and working with the under-performing teacher. Frequently these heads commented wistfully on the new training programmes that they had missed out on.

■ Secondary Schools

- The full report provides an aggregated profile of the secondary headteacher, drawn from the 176 respondents, with regard to age, experience, prior experience as a deputy headteacher and the size of school they lead and manage. There is no clear picture for either male or female which provides for a 'typical' profile for entry into headship.
- Seventy-one per cent of respondents had successfully completed an accredited course leading to a first or higher degree, with 52 per cent of the respondents completing a higher degree. There was no difference in the perception of readiness between those respondents who had an ordinary degree and those with a higher degree.
- Forty-three per cent of respondents did not feel as though they were ready for headship when they took up the post. Those respondents who believed that they were ready for the job attributed this to experience as opposed to training.
- The secondary school data suggests that:
 - deputy headteachers need to experience 'real-time' decision-making opportunities within the context of different organisations
 - the methods and traditional job specifications for the appointment of headteachers need review if we are to ensure those aspiring to the role are suitably prepared
 - support systems need to be available to the newly appointed headteacher, systems which are dynamic and not just there to provide a safety net
 - there needs to be an examination of the career progression of aspiring headteachers within a longer time frame and with more clearly defined staging posts or career markers

References

Male, T and Hvizdak, M (2000) **The effects of pre-service training and experience on preparation for the principalship in England**, paper presented at the annual meeting of American Educational Research Association, New Orleans

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Reservoirs of Hope: spiritual and moral leadership in headteachers,

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Summary and full reports of these and previous research associate studies are available from the NCSL web site at www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates

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We welcome enquiries about the Research Associates Programme. For details, please contact Martin Coles by emailing martin.coles@ncsl.org.uk

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