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Schools and academies

Research Associate Summary Report

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Resource

If I go there will be trouble...

Perspectives on sustainable headship

Spring 2010

Background

“Should I stay or should I go now?
Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go there will be trouble
An' if I stay it will be double
So come on and let me know
Should I stay or should I go?”

M Jones [Chorus from the 1982 song by
The Clash]

In 2006 my Research Associate report focused on the middle years of headship. Aptly titled *Should I Stay Or Should I Go?*, it explored the life stories of six headteachers with varying levels of experience, weighing up whether it was better to move on to new pastures or to stay for the long term. This follow-up report, *If I Go There Will Be Trouble*, develops the case for sustainable headship and the costs and benefits of staying at the same school. I continued to work with the six schools used in my 2006 report as part of a part-time doctoral research at the University of Cambridge.

This report summarises how two different schools have evolved over the past four years and, in particular, how the nature of headship has changed.

Demographics point to crisis. We are apparently running out of school leaders – 60 per cent of serving headteachers are coming up to retirement in the next five years. There has also been a reduction in the average tenure of headship in the last decade, from 10 to 7 years.

The year when things came to a ‘head’, so to speak, was supposed to be 2009 (Thomson 2009), and yet, the number of headteacher re-advertisements dropped for the first time (Howson 2009). It is difficult to tell whether this was because the quality of fields for headteacher appointments had improved or whether the job was becoming more sustainable.

This report explores the delicate issue of personal sustainability and effectiveness by asking those at the helm to talk about themselves and their schools over a three-year period. The full research report is available to download from www.nationalcollege.org.uk/researchassociates.

Staying or going? Two contrasting stories

Case Study 1: Abigail at Samuel Beckett School

Abigail is in her 12th year as headteacher. Under her leadership, the school has shown steady improvement. As an 11–18 mixed, non-selective school, it is now oversubscribed and achieves results that are significantly above national averages. At this point in her career (late headship), however, Abigail should have ‘theoretically’ been showing signs of disengagement (Fidler & Atton 2004). She admits to having thought of leaving but every time she gives this serious concern, there are far more reasons for staying:

“Every time I think about leaving, I am confronted by something which reminds me how good it is here. When I think of the alternatives, they leave me cold. This school is very much part of me. After all those struggles, when I look at the school now, it is unrecognisable from the one I inherited.”

How has Abigail kept herself re-vitalised over the last decade? Other staff interviewed as part of the research recognised the following key contributory factors:

- **Resilience and energy:** others recognised that Abigail had amazing ‘staying power’ and even when the school did well she was never happy to ‘rest on her laurels’.
- **Distributing leadership** to a senior leadership team (SLT) who were trusted to work with their initiative and who were supported when things went wrong.
- **Building capacity:** being considered and reflective, taking time to carefully evolve senior and middle leadership teams to reflect the changing needs of the school.

- **Involvement in system leadership:** Abigail had always believed in the importance of getting out of school, networking and finding out what was changing at a local and national level. As her SLT strengthened, she found more time to directly support new initiatives and her local headteacher association. This provided her with new challenges and an opportunity to think:

“Sometimes I have my best thoughts about my school ironically when I am somewhere else.”

Case Study 2: Chris at John Locke School

The transformation at John Locke School is an amazing story. Nearly closed 15 years ago due to its unpopularity, last year it achieved an outstanding Ofsted report and boasts one of the country’s highest CVA scores. This is a story of three headteachers who each succeeded in making the school what it is today. The current headteacher, Chris, is in her third year of headship, having been internally promoted following a period as deputy. Chris puts the school’s success down to the expertise of governors:

“We have had three headteachers in the last 10 years. This is supposed to bring instability but it didn’t. Governors here are very astute. It’s a great school and both my predecessors and I have been responsible for a lot of that and so from the governors’ point of view they didn’t want somebody to come in and massively turn things around...”

According to theory (Fidler & Atton 2004), Chris should have been entering a period of middle headship, leaving behind the quick fixes and autocratic style of early headship, entering a period of transformation and distributing leadership. Others at John Locke painted a very different picture. They accepted that Chris had changed some things but that she was broadly carrying on with the same approach as the previous headteacher, which most felt was the right thing for the school. Chris had found that she was able to distribute leadership immediately as she had worked with her SLT as deputy. This had given her the time to tackle some ‘annoying issues’ that she had inherited as well as become involved in collaboration and networking. Chris also clearly saw school leadership as a team effort:

“It will be difficult to keep on getting better and better. We do need to become different and change with the times, however. It is not just me who will keep this school ahead – it is everyone.”

Like Samuel Beckett School, the continuing success of John Locke has been about effective leadership. Unlike Abigail’s story, however, there has been considerable change at the top but this does not seem to have affected school momentum for the following reasons:

- Leadership was widely distributed with a **team approach** to the management of change.

- The emphasis on **building leadership capacity** and a strong SLT meant that the school was able to continue its momentum regardless of the change of headteacher.
- Chris was able to act as if she had been in charge for a lot longer (having been deputy) and was able to establish a sustainable work pattern that Abigail had taken a lot longer to fashion.

Conclusions

What can we learn from these two case studies? Abigail illustrates that staying for the long term can benefit both the individual and the school, challenging the negativity often associated with late headship. By spending time building a strong leadership team around her, she now feels able to let go and trust others to lead. This gives her the opportunity to help influence the wider educational agenda while providing stability and direction for a school she knows so well.

Conversely, Chris shows that continual school improvement does not have to be about stability at the top. Chris’s predecessor, having decided to leave for a second headship, seems to have made little difference. The school and its governors concentrated on appointing a strong SLT. Chris’s appointment was therefore the logical thing to do to maintain momentum, demonstrating that succession planning can focus on growing leaders from within rather than adopt a high risk strategy of appointing from outside.

These case studies are positive examples of schools continually improving and diversifying, but with very different leadership stories. Both paint a picture of sustainable headship, relying heavily on the establishment of distributed leadership cultures, capacity-building processes and system leadership involvement. The value of system leadership in both cases should not be ignored. Networking and consultancy offer headteachers of varying degrees of experience invaluable opportunities for others to lead while they are out of school. For the headteacher, apart from the change of scenery, system leadership allows school leaders to engage in a timely 'bottom-up' transformation agenda and to share emerging best practice.

References

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