

Enchanted Headteachers:

Sustainability in primary school headship

This report celebrates the achievements of primary school headteachers who have successfully led their schools with commitment and enthusiasm and examines the characteristics that have made them successful

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1. Introduction

The literature on headship and leadership is littered with references to the essential role headteachers take in ensuring that schools are effective. Although the literature also talks about shared leadership and the need for collegiality, fundamental to all of the discussion about effective schools is the role of the headteacher.

Also widely referred to in the literature is the range of tasks that a modern headteacher must undertake, often wrestling with the dilemma of fulfilling the role of leading professional and that of chief administrator. What is portrayed is a multi-faceted role that is almost impossible to satisfactorily maintain in all aspects.

Researchers have been able to paint a picture of the characteristics of effective school leaders and the qualities they need to fill the role. Existing training for headteachers uses these insights to prepare and develop headteachers. However there is little in the research literature about how headteachers are able to maintain the level of drive and commitment necessary to manage this demanding role over a career span that could involve 20 to 25 years of headship in one school.

There are some studies that examine how a headteacher's career develops. Many of them see an inevitable decline; a descent into disenchantment and withdrawal. However there are suggestions that this is not necessarily so; there is a view that long-serving headteachers can be renewed and revitalised by new waves of energy; that there is a route to sustainability and enchantment.

What can we learn from headteachers who have managed to maintain their drive and commitment over a prolonged period of headship? Can we help other headteachers to remain enchanted throughout their headship?

2. The Career Lives of Headteachers

In the closing pages of Southworth's study of the working life of a primary headteacher over a number of months he concludes that:

“The idea of headteacher maturation warrants close examination. At present the idea of phases of headship is notional. It is unclear whether headteacher development occurs as a result of time in post, experience of different schools and/or life circumstances. Nor is it understood how professional development opportunities influence headteacher development. There is much to investigate here.” (Southworth, 1995, 219)

How does a headteacher's maturation occur? How do headteachers maintain their motivation over a prolonged period in post? What factors help them to sustain that motivation?

Brighouse and Woods (1999) describe a headteacher's life as having three phases. They suggest that during the first phase, 'initiation', the new head is wrestling with the unfamiliarity of being in the position of headteacher. During the 'development' phase the headteacher is established, has built up strong relationships and is able to drive forward new initiatives for school improvement. 'Decline and withdrawal', is described as 'a brief evening when they lose their power and cease to plan for tomorrow'. They go on to say that unfortunately for some this brief evening is not so brief and suggest that if this is not to be so headteachers need to be revitalised by 'new waves of energy and direction'.

Brighouse and Wood's book is written by two vastly experienced educational professionals. However, the statements they make are made as assertions, using quotes from practising teachers and headteachers in schools, to illustrate their points. Although their portrayal of the three phases of headship rings true, it is not overtly grounded in any research findings. What research findings are there upon which their statements may have drawn?

Discussion of a pattern in the career life of headteachers invariably quotes Mortimore and his colleagues and their research into junior schools. Their investigation into a number of schools over several years involved looking at the work of 50 headteachers. In the book that reports their findings there is a single paragraph (Mortimore, 1988, 222) that refers to this issue. They suggested that in schools where the head had been in post for less than three years, pupils' progress and development tended to be poorer than expected. Mid-term heads, those between three and seven years tended to have a positive impact upon their pupils' progress. However when heads had been in post more than 11 years school effects in a number of areas tended to be negative. This appears to be the seminal work but it makes no attempt to explore what lies behind the findings.

Day and Bakioglu (1996) researched the career lives of secondary headteachers and saw four phases in the career life of a head teacher. These were: initiation, development, autonomy and disenchantment.

Their study involved questionnaire data, followed up by interviews with a number of the headteachers involved. Their focus was upon the current career stage that each headteacher had reached when they were interviewed. This is interesting in the context of 1991, when the research was conducted. Headteachers in both the autonomous and disenchanted phases of their careers must all have been appointed in 'gentler times', before the Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988, and the implications of it were even on the horizon.

Pascal and Ribbins (1998) examined the career lives of primary headteachers. They utilised Day and Bakioglu's characterisation of four phases in analysing their data. However their interest extended beyond how headteachers currently saw their jobs. They explored the career lives of ten experienced primary headteachers. This included going back to look at their schooling, their initial training and how their careers evolved before headship. To examine this they used a classification of stages in a headteacher's career developed by Gronn (1993); formation, accession, incumbency and divestiture. They saw Day and Bakioglu's classification as sub-categories of the incumbency stage. However they disagreed with the perspective that disenchantment was inevitable, and suggested that there could be an alternative. They chose to describe the fourth phase as advancement and suggested that whilst some headteachers do become disenchanted and divest themselves of the job, others manage to remain enchanted through a process of reinvention. This has echoes of Brighouse and Wood's idea of revitalising new waves of energy.

Although suggesting that continued enchantment is possible and implying that at least some of their subjects fit this description Pascal and Ribbins do not really explore the idea of enchantment. Perhaps because the subjects of their work allowed themselves to be identified, they appear to allow the full transcripts of their interviews to speak for themselves, what is left unsaid is there to be read.

These interviews form an interesting source of material for exploring what each of the phases in a headteacher's career might look like. The relaxed open ended interview reveals more than the subject realises about beliefs, attitudes and how individuals occupying the role of headteacher feel about their professional lives. Could a picture be drawn of what the phases in a headteacher's career life might look like by looking at biographical descriptions of headteachers and their work? Are there other similarly rich sources elsewhere in the research literature?

In exploring the literature I wanted to form a picture of what each phase of a headteacher's career life might look like, to examine when and how the phases occur, and to investigate why headteachers may become less effective in the later stages of their headship. I also wanted to begin to explore what some of the revitalising waves of new energy might look like.

a. Initiation

During this period, which can last up to three years Pascal and Ribbins suggest, 'The head is familiarized with the organisational and work place norms, and the new roles they are expected to play' (Pascal and Ribbins, 1998, 26). They also emphasise the wide range of circumstances in which this accession takes place. Woods *et al* (1997) in their study on changing work place cultures in primary schools use Pollard's idea of institutional bias (Pollard, 1985) to illuminate this phase in the career lives of three primary headteachers who are part of his study. They suggest that there is an existing culture, set of relationships and way of doing things in any organisation. This institutional bias is inevitably disturbed by the appointment of a new headteacher. In this analysis the early stages of a headship are when new incumbents are attempting to impose their vision for the school, to change the way things are done so that their values are incorporated into the values of the school. The visions of the three subjects of Woods' study were all very different but they all saw themselves changing the existing culture of the school in those early years.

Day and Bakioglu see this as a period of building relationships, gaining trust and respect. This is interesting since Mortimore suggests that it is length of time spent in the headteacher's current post that is important, implying that headteachers who are taking up their second headship will also encounter this initiation phase. Whenever a new headteacher is appointed, rather than initiation being learning to occupy the post, the contextual situation of each school and the need to build shared values and mutual trust and respect will create a period of turbulence within the school. Pascal and Ribbins draw a similar conclusion in their study.

b. Development

All of the research sees this phase as the headteacher's most productive time. It is a period of growing confidence, increased effectiveness and constructive self-criticism. Headteachers have their greatest gains, their biggest successes in this period. They are building teams, delegating responsibility, showing staff they are valued in the school. Headteachers, when questioned about their time in post, see this as their most active time, when the job is at its most satisfying and rewarding. However the research also suggests that this period of highest productivity cannot go on indefinitely. In MacBeath's study of leadership across three countries this phase of headship is described as 'The Crunch', when substantial issues which had a fundamental impact on the school were tackled (MacBeath, 1998). In fact they saw some headteachers in this phase acknowledging that they were settling for less, already showing signs of disenchantment.

c. Autonomy

Autonomous headteachers are well established and confident in their position. Importantly they have been in post long enough for 'the way things are done around here', Pollard's institutional bias, to be based upon values which they have worked hard to engender. Southworth's headteacher describes a sense of autonomy – of being the 'principal creator, maintainer and developer' (Southworth, 1995). They have become a potential force for conservatism rather than the force for change they were as their headship developed. Southworth, quoting the work of Nias *et al* (1989) suggests that beyond ten years in post, heads saw the school as congruent with their individual aspirations. Heads became sustainers not developers (Southworth, 1995). Two issues emerge out of this and in a way they potentially show how the seeds are sown for the next stage to be one of disenchantment or renewal. The first of these is related to management style, the second to job satisfaction.

The self-confidence autonomous headteachers have in their position can mean there is a tendency to move towards a more autocratic style of management. Teams have been built, responsibility delegated, but decisions lie with the head. Having been there before and done it, the autonomous head knows what is good for the school. One of Wood's experienced heads suggests that headteachers at this stage of their careers are also likely to have been in post longer than most of their staff and will have appointed many of them. In this situation the balance of power and influence perceived in Pollard's notion of institutional bias is very much with the headteacher. The crux of this is that a self-confidence which says 'I know what's best for my school' can be a force for conservatism, seeing change in a negative way. A feeling of almost arrogant self-confidence emerges from the words of the experienced headteachers in Pascal and Ribbin's study. However, also emerging from Pascal and Ribbin's account, is a self-confidence which allows leadership in others to blossom and grow, allowing revitalisation to come from below.

The other issue emerging from this phase of headship is one of job satisfaction. Headteachers in this phase of their career also perceive a lack of excitement. Their careers have seen them move upwards and onwards, often quite rapidly, always meeting new challenges and achieving new goals. But the challenges in this school are not what they were. Where do they go from here? Some move on to other work. Southworth's subject is about to take up an advisory post with an LEA after a third headship. In this analysis he has been continually revitalised by restarting the cycle.

Often the question 'where do I go from here?' leads headteachers to turn outwards to other things and again a dilemma emerges. Experienced motivated people who have things to offer feel they need new challenges; Pascal and Ribbin's headteachers variously served on the council of the NAHT, the local council education committee and the General Synod of the Church of England. Their analysis does not explore whether these outside activities could lead to the headteacher neglecting the continued development of the school, appearing to assume these activities will have positive effects on the school. Such outside activities could also be portrayed in Brighouse and Wood's analysis as withdrawal. Could such withdrawals have been a factor in Mortimore's earlier suggestion that longer serving heads were less effective than those in mid-career? Headteacher professional enchantment must represent a revitalising wave of energy that feeds the continued development of both the head and the school.

d. Advancement

If the seeds of disenchantment, or otherwise, lie in the autonomous phase of headship, what does the outcome of this look like? The inevitable disenchantment in Day and Bakioglu's analysis sees declining energy levels, a distancing from the parts of the job which are uncomfortable and a withdrawal into the role of head as administrator rather than leading professional. The headteacher justifies this position by saying 'it's all in place, the team works well, I can withdraw, distance myself, find other outlets outside of school'. In this scenario the drive for school improvement, which should come from the head, lies elsewhere in the school.

In Pascal and Ribbins more optimistic analysis of the work of long serving heads they suggest that a major factor in the primary headteacher remaining enchanted is their relationship with the children in their care – the emotional involvement they have in their work. The subject of Southworth's study says of the job:

"It's extremely demanding, totally consuming of the person ... it's time consuming ... it's a way of life ... it looks like someone really not doing anything other than the things pertaining to headship. It's a hobby, it's everything." (Southworth, 1995, 135)

Pascal and Ribbins suggest that it is important not just to know what headteachers do but also what the job does to them. This is interesting because the literature also suggests that research into this affective side of the role of headship is relatively neglected. Does the continued enchantment of many long serving headteachers lie in the way they feel about the schools they work in?

e. Overview

The literature about the career development of headteachers appears to be quite limited and given the rapid pace of change in recent years quite dated. There does appear to be a point in the career life of headteachers when a divergence takes place. A divergence which some see as inevitable decline and withdrawal and others continued enchantment. This study attempts to add to the knowledge base in this field by exploring how headteachers remain enchanted, and how this enchantment manifests itself in the context of our rapidly changing education system.

3. Headship in a Changing World

Headteachers into and beyond the autonomous phase of headship will have inevitably seen vast changes. That some of these changes, and the sheer passage of time, have left some of these headteachers disenchanted is inevitable. However in the data rich environment which education has become we can identify a great number of headteachers who have spent considerable periods of time in their current post, who continue to be a force for school development and a major factor in the success of their schools. They have found 'waves of energy and direction' and remained enchanted. New technology, the changing world of work and wider global issues mean the pace of change in schools is unlikely to relent. In fact it is now a commonplace understanding that as MacBeath suggests '... from here on the only constant in our lives will be change.' (MacBeath, 1998,20).

The pace of change in recent years also means that the literature about headteachers' lives has dated quite quickly. Southworth (1995) acknowledges even as his work is published that it is a retrospective view on headship. Day and Bakioglu's (1996) subjects who were showing signs of disenchantment in the early nineties, had been appointed in a totally different world of education. The headteachers in Pascal and Ribbin's (1998) study had experienced the effects of ERA, and of Local Management of Schools (LMS) but OFSTED was still in its infancy and the accountability, which has flowed from publication of results and league tables, was still on the horizon. How do headteachers come to terms with these changes and remain enthused and committed to the continued development of their schools?

Any investigation into how headteachers have managed to remain effective and enthused throughout this period must include questions not only about how they feel about their job but how they have been affected by the fundamental changes that have taken place in the course of their headship. How have headteachers managed to successfully sustain their leadership in a culture of change?

a. Identifying Enchanted Headteachers

If, as Pascal and Ribbins suggest, decline and withdrawal are not inevitable, how do we identify those headteachers who have remained enchanted? There are three separate criteria: the first is longevity, time in post; the second continued effectiveness; and the third a less tangible but no less visible quality of enchantment. The people whom I identified as enchanted headteachers had been in post since before the 1988 Education Reform Act, and led schools which OFSTED considered to be good or better. OFSTED also identified their leadership as a factor in their school's success and discussion with colleagues within the LEA confirmed that they still remained enthused about being headteacher of a primary school. The criteria I applied and the open-ended questions I used in my interviews are appended to this report.

4. Main Findings: the Nature of Enchantment

Headteachers love to talk, especially about their own schools. Noone I contacted refused to talk to me. After an understandably nervy start all of the interviews flowed, with the headteachers enthusiastically sprinkling their answers to my questions with anecdotal tales of how things were in their schools. Listening to the tapes, there are a striking number of occasions when my question became an opportunity to enthuse about some aspect of the life of the school of which they were immensely proud. Although these diversions did not directly answer my question they repeatedly revealed an intense pride in what was being achieved in their schools.

a. Pride in the School

I feel that central to everything I learned about these people and the schools they worked in was the nature of this intense pride in the work of the school. Headteachers frequently said to me 'it's about personality':

"I guess it's the sort of person you are and how you view yourself"

However, enchanted headship is not about a personality who possesses a certain aura, or charismatic quality. Though there is undoubtedly a certain force of personality, the headteachers I interviewed were in fact quite self-effacing about their own achievements. Their pride was in the achievements of the children, their awe at the skill and craft of their teachers and the tremendous support they had received from parents and governors. Some talked with humility, even embarrassment, about how their school was being projected as something special. They all had a pride in doing the job well, in not letting themselves down. Sometimes this pride came over as competitive, but it was always expressed as a pride in the achievements of the people in the school.

"...anything I have ever wanted people have provided. I have brilliant kids, a brilliant staff and great governors."

"I am in awe of my teachers and their craft."

"I hold my hands up to anyone and acclaim we have some fantastic governors here."

There was obvious emotion in much of what was said about the contributions people had made to the success of the school and a recurring emphasis that whatever they or anyone else had done it was for the sake of the children in the school. The suggestion in Pascal and Ribbin's work was that continued enchantment for long serving headteachers lay in their relationship with the children. I examined this proposition by discussing with these headteachers the opportunities they had to really know their children.

b. I Got Caught Teaching

Many headteachers were told at the advent of local management that they would no longer have time to be in the classroom teaching. In setting up my interviews I was struck by the number of times I could not speak to the head because they were in a class teaching. Common to all of these headteachers was a closeness to the children in their care. Several of my interviewees spoke at great length about the teaching they did

"I do most of my own covering for courses, because it's important that I know the children."

"I spend a lot of time in the nursery because time spent there pays dividends later."

Others talked about the unexpected calls on our time as headteachers and reluctance to be timetabled into a class because of that unreliability. However, they were also able to describe the opportunities they made to ensure they knew the children, their families, their strengths and their weaknesses. And once again they spoke with passion, about the achievements of their children.

“We get to know them (the children), and their parents even before they come to school. We are proud of them, we try to dispel the image that they are write offs, because they are from poor socio-economic circumstances. We try to capitalise on their strengths. They might not be good at everything but if they have a particular talent we need to celebrate that. I think the whole school is about recognising, supporting, developing talent.”

“I think a very, very important part of headship is knowing your families, knowing not just the child who is in school but knowing the child and the family from which it comes each day.”

c. A Builder of Teams, a Developer of People

In exploring our unreliability as timetabled teachers and the fact that primary headteachers are pulled in so many different directions, we discussed the tension between our role as administrator and that of leading professional. Interestingly, several were able to recall a changing pattern over time with regard to this issue. They could remember a time pre-National Curriculum when they felt they truly were the leading professional in the school. They decided the curriculum the school would offer, they wrote the schemes of work for that curriculum and directed the teachers as to what they were to teach in each subject area in every school year.

With the introduction of the National Curriculum and more especially the onset of LMS, many felt that they had been distanced from the curriculum and the children in the classrooms. Some talked of being deskilled, of it being no longer possible to be the expert in all curriculum areas. They then described a further phase when they came to terms with the new administrative demands and were able to re-focus upon children and reassert their professional leadership. They were most certainly leading professionals but in describing their passage through these stages they portrayed an ongoing process of sharing responsibility for the development of the school with other members of the teaching staff – in evolving into what might be described as the leading leader. Again and again heads talked about what they had learned from this member of staff who had gone onto headship or the contribution to the development of the school made by that member of staff who went on to deputy headship. In the same way they described the impact a bright young newly qualified teacher (NQT) had made on the place.

“I had a young deputy headteacher, quite a bright young man, he was only here a short while, he went on to become a headteacher quite quickly. He used to say things and I used to listen, and learn.”

“... one of my staff is about to go off to a deputy headship in another school. I feel as if I have helped him in doing that and I've offered my continued help. I have his replacement coming in as science co-ordinator and so there is a new motivation. Someone else to work with, to include in the senior management team.”

“They are just waiting for the opportunity (to be leaders), many of them are just waiting for the opportunity to give their views, some have to be coaxed and coerced and encouraged.”

“We lose someone good (to promotion) and look for experience to take their place but you find you take on an NQT who goes straight into the classroom and does a great job ... that sort of thing inspires you.”

These were schools where teachers grew and developed, were given opportunities to make a wider contribution to the school and were encouraged to move on when opportunity came. In discussing issues of staff turnover and revitalisation coming from a new member of staff joining the school, they did not see low staff turnover as problematic. As well as enthusing about the impact of a bright dazzling star who would burn for a while and move on to greater things, they also described how they valued the capable, long-serving, dependable teachers.

“They are great, they are never absent, they are here all the time, if you want them to go to a music festival or take the kids to a netball match they’ll turn up, what ever you ask they’ll deliver the goods.”

“I like high fliers and the energy they bring but you still have to have stable staff, the good, hard working staff, the ones who are ticking over the ideas.”

In all of this the headteachers I talked to repeatedly referred to the strength of the team, the support staff gave to the head and to one another, and the ability of the team to solve problems.

“I believe in the team, I believe within the four walls of this school I have the expertise to cope with any problem; to develop something in a particular area we sit down and get our heads together. We find a solution, a solution that will work in our school.”

d. Teaching and Learning: an Abiding Passion

Closeness to children, a continued commitment to their role as leading professional and an openness to be enthused by and learn from their teachers, add up very much to a passionate interest in issues about teaching and learning. It appears this, at least in part, is where their enchantment lies. It is not in a narrow view of teaching and learning that only focuses on test results. All of these schools had high academic expectations of their children but they also had high expectations of them in other ways – their behaviour, their cultural and sporting development and the way they related to other people. Central to their work, the building of relationships within the schools and with the families of their children, was the engendering of corporate pride throughout the whole school community.

How do headteachers engender this feeling of corporate pride, how does their influence create this environment? Visiting schools, having the privilege of being shown around the classrooms whilst the school is at work, what became most noticeable as the headteachers made introductions, interacted with children or enthused about the work in a particular class, was a feeling of respect, the respect the headteacher held for everyone in the school organisation. In their reactions to interruptions, their interactions with visitors, their responses to the requests of non-teaching staff, the heads were never less than respectful. They constantly modelled their own values, they constantly showed people were respected and valued. In response to my quoting a book I had read as part of my research to illustrate a point, one head teacher began his reply by saying, ‘I’m not a reader of books but I believe that ...’ If he were a reader of books he would recognise himself and the way he works in the descriptions of emotional intelligence and interpersonal leadership. In caring and in being passionate, my interviewees were also incredibly sensitive to the needs of others.

e. Optimism and the Challenge of Change

A passionately felt commitment to teaching and learning, with strongly held views about how best to develop the full potential of children, sound like dangerous traits in an age of direction in relation to both curriculum content and teaching methodology. One of my questions focussed upon the paradox we headteachers work with between, on the one hand greater freedom to act as a result of LMS, and on the other greater constraint in the matters closest to their hearts – what and how to teach.

There were complaints and frustrations about aspects of LMS, the time spent on making bids, the question of whether they were the people best qualified to be wrestling with some aspect of financial delegation. However, on the whole, headteachers were very positive about the opportunities delegated budgets had given them to enhance the work of the school and how staffing levels had risen over the last few years and the impact that made in the classrooms.

Most fascinating was their reaction to imposed curriculum change. Anyone party to the conversations and asides in headteachers' meetings as the literacy and numeracy strategies were put to us will know how strongly many headteachers felt about what they saw as the impositions. At the core of their passionate commitment are beliefs about how children learn. However the headteachers I talked to, despite their reservations, reacted positively to such impositions. Their reactions, though not uniform, were universally optimistic. Some were very positive. Referring to the introduction of the Numeracy Strategy:

“Someone has taken a decision at last, yes it's more prescriptive, but I like that prescription, because we are no longer doing things on our own.”

Others, although not so overtly enthusiastic about how the two strategies were introduced, saw merit in what they had to offer and appreciated that they were grounded in good practice. However in reacting to the demands made they all saw the successful implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies as a challenge to be overcome.

“I think you feel that you would respond to any initiative not because we feel we have to but I think there is a pride in the children and in wanting to do the job properly. We are determined to do that despite a lack of enthusiasm at times. We want to do the best we can for the school, for the children.”

These heads acknowledged problems, had doubts about certain things, admitted that compromises had to be made. They felt, for instance, that the standards agenda was tough on children from difficult backgrounds with low self-esteem, but that it was their job to make the best they could of it. However they were all willing to take on board the new strategies and make them work in their school for their children.

“I think one of the skills we develop is to take initiatives and mould them for your school. With experience you realise that just because it says in the file you have to do it that way you don't have to. You have to make it work in your school.”

“I react (to imposed change) by making best sense of anything that is asked of us. I won't take anything as it's written because at the end of the day we know better than anyone in government or anywhere else what is right for our children. So for instance when the Literacy Strategy came in and we were told to follow the strategy to the letter, we took on board the framework of the Literacy Strategy but we will made it fit what we know our children need.”

“We never see change as a threat, we wouldn't be bowed down by worry, we would be optimistic, and think if it's going to improve things, to make things better, let's do our best with it.”

The idea of viewing change optimistically, a challenge to be overcome, is significantly related to Brighouse and Wood's view of continued revitalisation coming from 'new waves of energy and direction'. I initiated discussion about this by suggesting that there might have been trigger points: initiatives, individuals, moments when something inspirational happened which was a source of personal renewal. However, although there were one or two tentative attempts to talk about a course they had been on, or an individual who had influenced them, there were no Damascene moments when they had seen the light. In discussing this idea they acknowledged that they had lows, when the pressures of the job dragged them down.

However their source of renewal was invariably the children.

“It would be crazy to say you didn’t have your lows but they don’t last long. The kids are the ones that fire you.”

“There are definitely lows, sometimes you get a little depressed by the knockers in the media who are criticising teachers and the work they do. But it passes when you see them first come in and their little faces and they are only with you for seven years and you know they depend upon you and it’s you who is moving them on, their futures are in your hands.”

They also suggested that rather than trigger points there were always initiatives to respond to, that the era through which they had led their schools was one in which a headteacher had to be able to respond to change successfully because he or she was constantly faced with it.

“I think it’s (change) constant. Anything that comes along, there’s always a new challenge that we have to address and take on board and implement. There is always something to revitalise us.”

“The reason we have kept fairly enthusiastic is that there has been so much going on in education. If I started when I started in 1982 and stayed the same now as I was then, I would be dead. The fact is that all these initiatives came from the government, you had to rise to the challenge or you would have gone under.”

f. Well-established, Experienced, Conservative?

Perhaps the most provocative idea I put to the headteachers I spoke to was that in being long serving, well-established, almost impregnable, were they not in danger of being a force for conservatism in the school? The individual who is largely responsible for the way the school is, can feel threatened and become defensive when others challenge that. This suggestion always provoked a forceful response, and although the answers varied greatly, all recognised that there had to be open debate and opportunities for their decisions to come under scrutiny.

“My deputy head and my lower school co-ordinator are two people who I respect very, very highly and neither of those people are slow at coming to tell me when they think something needs changing, something needs doing, or that I’ve got it wrong.”

“There’s a different generation of governors, they’re more involved and they’ve had training ... it’s nice to have a critical friend to say why are you doing that and why should we do this? There is a public accountability to them.”

The suggestion that governors have a role to play in challenging the headteacher is an interesting one. This has been an area of controversy since additional powers were delegated to governing bodies. All of the headteachers I spoke to, spoke very positively about the role of the governing body in the work of the school, the strengths they brought and the opportunities they provided.

This relationship between headteacher and governing body is interesting because these headteachers had all been in post when governors had a much more peripheral influence on the work of the school. This was one of a number of issues which emerged which are best described a generational. In interviewing headteachers in their current situation we need to remember where their careers started:

“We came out of college hoping we could change lives, that we would make a difference to these children. We wanted education to make a difference to the lives of children. I suppose I am still in the job because I still think education can be fantastic for children and change their lives.”

All of the headteachers I interviewed trained in the '60s or '70s, the high point of child-centred education. They had all come from relatively humble backgrounds and all had been in the first generation of their families to go on to higher education. They had also successfully led schools through probably the most tempestuous era in the evolution of our education system.

As common character traits emerged from my interviews they led me to question the part that socio-economic and family background has played in the ability of these teachers to sustain headship successfully over a prolonged period. I do not know how one could unravel this connection, but it seems to be that their respect for others and their humility about their contribution to the success of the school is not unconnected to their background. They all have an appreciation of the privileged position they have earned as the headteacher of a primary school. We cannot recreate these circumstances for future generations of headteachers, but undoubtedly we need to take this factor into account when considering the enchanted heads studied here.

g. Sustainability: Staying Enchanted

One danger in enthusing about the work of these headteachers is that in doing so one creates the impression that modern headship is in some way easier than is often portrayed. Throughout my interviews there was recognition that headship is very demanding, and it is almost impossible to do full justice to it. We talked about the demands placed upon us and the compromises we make.

Many of my subjects talked of the job affecting home life, of administrative tasks which 'just have to be done after school or at home', of staying on for school functions when they 'should have been at home'. Several talked of compartmentalising their lives, of precious time at home which school was not allowed to intrude upon. Some talked of 'not being very good at this', indicating a pile of paperwork on their desk. They also talked of the confidence experience gave them to know what was important and what could be neglected for the time being. What was always important was teaching and learning and the needs of children. What's going on out there in the classrooms.

These are very able people, who have successfully come to terms with a very demanding job and have managed to sustain their commitment and enthusiasm for that job over a long period. I asked them whether there had not been opportunities to move on, to try something else, perhaps another headship or work within the LEA? Some had done other things: Ofsted inspection, periodic secondment to the LEA, headteacher mentoring, but always with a focus on how will this work that would feed back into the school. Others had been asked by the LEA to help in various ways. There was some scepticism about being out of school. A feeling that:

"We need to be there, to know what's going on, we are there to solve problems, to make sure they don't get shelved and become big issues."

One way in which their expertise had been sought was in 'trouble-shooting' in schools that were encountering difficulties. In explaining their refusal to do this, their self-effacing modesty came through

"I've been asked by a senior LEA officer to be a trouble-shooter head but there's nothing to say that I would be a good headteacher outside of here. There's nothing to say I would be as effective outside of here, because part of my effectiveness is the team I've built, both teaching and non-teaching and the relationships I have built with the parent body, the friends of the school. "

In the same vein, when asked if there was ever a moment when they thought about moving on to another school, the usual reply was:

“Yes I’ve thought about it, but I’m confident I can do a good job in this context because of the relationships and support systems I have built up. I’m reluctant to start all over again building this network of support, and besides this job isn’t finished, there are still things we have got to do.”

“I decided there were still so many challenges here, I decided that I wanted finish to here. I mean it will never be the way you envisage, the perfect institution, but I felt there were still enough challenges here to satisfy me.”

Perhaps what we can learn from these people isn’t a way to ‘do’ headship, but about the context sensitivity of headship. Sharing leadership is essential to this process but there is also a passionate commitment to ‘my school’.

Is enchanted the right word to describe these headteachers? In my group interview I asked if enchanted was not the right word, what was? The reply from a head of 20 years’ experience was:

“I still like the job (interjections Yeah, Yeah), I think it’s the best job in the world (further interjections Yeah, Yeah). Some days I come into school for our 8 o’clock breakfast club feeling so low then a small child rushes up to me ...”

There was a passionate outpouring from him and his colleagues – anecdotes about the joy of being with children and seeing them thrive, especially in demanding social circumstances. I believe enchanted is the right word.

5. Learning Lessons from Enchanted Heads

This study does not make grand claims or attempt generalising conclusions. Within the time scale of the project in which I have been involved there are inevitably limits to the lessons we can learn. Interestingly, throughout the project, whenever I shared my work anecdotal descriptions were made of headteachers who people recognised as enchanted. The group of people I identified as enchanted heads and interviewed, lead successful schools; have continued to do so for some considerable time; and their effectiveness is recognised as unabated. As the interviews progressed emerging ideas were gradually confirmed. What emerges from the interviews is a group of common characteristics – characteristics of the individuals, the way they work, and the schools they lead. In identifying these characteristics, the question begged is what might we learn from them for other leaders, present and future?

What does enchanted headship look like, how can it be characterised?

Pride, a selfless pride, a generosity of spirit, a pride in their people and their achievements.

Closeness to the children and an acute awareness of their needs and where they come from. A belief that their school is making a huge difference to children’s lives.

Passionate commitment to teaching and learning; to the quality of provision, to maintaining high standards, to the development of fully rounded individuals, well prepared for the next stage of their lives. They know what is going on, and everyone knows they know.

Respect for, and sensitivity to, the needs of others, placing a high value upon quality of relationships throughout the school community. This respect and sensitivity is modelled strongly in all they say and do. A builder of teams, a developer of people.

An optimistic view of change as challenge. Not a blind acceptance of change but a view that the school must keep moving forward, can always improve further. Imposed change is to be taken, adapted and made to work in their schools

Good at listening, encouraging the contribution of others, accepting of constructive criticism and able to admit mistakes. And in doing so to be self-reflective.

View themselves as nothing special. Acutely conscious that much of what they do and how they do it is context sensitive.

In learning lessons from this work it is important be aware that a long-term incumbency in one post may not be for everyone. There are many able and committed heads who, having successfully led a school, choose to move on to something else. In fact these people are an almost self-selecting group. When I searched for my sample I found that there are very few headteachers who fulfil the criteria – of longevity and continued effectiveness - and those who do, almost invariably appear to exhibit the enchantment characteristic. It seems that in the high pressure, highly regulated world we now work in, to continue successfully to lead a school for a decade and more, there must be some degree of enchantment; that, unlike the school systems which previous researchers described, there is no hiding place, no scope for decline and withdrawal. Those who fail to maintain their enchantment fall by the wayside or find a way to escape.

The characteristics I have described are characteristics that identify people who are able to sustain their effectiveness and the continued success of the school. Does the absence of some or all of these characteristics make that sustainability very difficult? Are there key characteristics? It does seem likely that the foundations upon which enchanted headship appears to be built – pride, caring, respect, sensitivity, optimism and an overriding passion that their work makes a difference to children – if absent would make sustained effectiveness for headteachers very difficult. If they are not there short-term gains may be made but can they be maintained? Are they fundamental foundations upon which to build sustainable successful headship and has this got implications for the early stages of headship? Could they form the basis of a reflective audit tool for headteachers or LEA officers supporting headteachers?

One of the complexities in identifying and developing these qualities in people who are potential future leaders is that, by the admission of several of my interviewees, they perceived their success to be highly context sensitive. The circumstances of headteacher succession are incredibly varied. The 'all in it together' siege mentality that can be engendered by a new head going into a struggling school will not work if your headship means inheriting the position of an enchanted headteacher. How do you successfully follow these people? What an act to follow! In preparing prospective or newly appointed headteachers, perhaps a consideration of the circumstances in which they will succeed needs to be part of any programme.

Brighouse and Woods suggest that some headteachers miss out on the second, development, phase of career maturation, that during their induction phase they fail to establish the high quality relationships necessary for successful headship and move directly into decline and withdrawal. Similarly, McBeath describes failure to make 'the crunch'. What might support for these heads look like? The Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) explores leadership styles, quality of relationships, and their effect upon the context for school improvement (DfEE, 1998). If the data generated after five years of headship shows acute shortcomings how is this to be tackled? How can we support headteachers in mending damaged relationships? Who can provide this support? Perhaps enchanted headteachers.

How to utilise this potential support is problematical though. The humility means they are unlikely to want to stand up in a conference and tell people how they work, or how good their school is. Their insistence that their success is context sensitive, that they are good at being headteacher of that school only because of the support they have within their school makes them reluctant trouble-shooters. How do we harness their expertise for the benefit of less experienced headteachers?

Observing a gifted and experienced teacher after watching a student on school practice one is struck by the accumulated craft of the teacher. However, most teachers find it extremely difficult to articulate that craft. Enchanted headteachers appear to possess a similarly almost unconsciously acquired accumulated craft for successfully leading a school. The characteristics I have identified, are unlikely to be articulated if you were to ask these people directly how they did their jobs, nor would they be able to describe how they acquired them. In sharing what they have and what they know there needs to be some external articulation of the qualities, the characteristics which distinguish them.

I met a relatively small group of enchanted headteachers in the North East of England. I am sure they are only a few of the many dozens who are doing just as good a job all over the country. I put it to one group that they were all doing a 'damn fine job', the reply was:

“It's possible to feel you are not doing a fine job because the measures of success are sometimes so unrealistic.”

They talked about lows, of periods of anxiety, of feeling isolated and of having to 'find their own salvation'. Their success, their achievements and their ability to sustain that success is seldom celebrated. These heads, like all of us, need to be told they are doing a good job, to be shown that the expertise and skills they have acquired, almost intuitively, might be applied to other schools. Perhaps we might help these headteachers achieve a coherent understanding of their achievements so that they can share them with others.

Enchanted headteachers can fill the role of consultant headteacher for the next generation of headteachers but in order to do so they need opportunities to reflect upon what they have achieved and how it might be shared.

a. Celebrating Enchanted Headship

Modern headship means leading a highly accountable, closely scrutinised public service. That individuals manage to remain committed enthused and successful in this high pressure situation needs to be acclaimed. The headteachers in this study lead successful schools that are improving the life chances of the children in their care. In celebrating their achievements we can also provide an antidote to some of the scepticism and cynicism that pervades debate within and about our schools.

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7. Appendix

a. Ways and Means

i. Identifying enchanted headteachers

The criteria for identifying interviewees who could be described as enchanted headteachers have to include length of service in post, continued effectiveness and some acknowledgement of their continued commitment and enthusiasm. That there are people who fit this description there can be no doubt. In any gathering of headteachers there are respected long-serving headteachers whose enthusiasm is there for everyone to see. In ensuring that their identification is more systematic and most importantly grounded in an assurance of their effectiveness I applied the following criteria:

- Headteacher in current post since before the Education Reform Act of 1988
- Ofsted report and statistical data suggest that their's is a 'good school'
- The Ofsted report on the school states that the leadership of the headteacher is an important factor in the success of the school
- Confirmation within the LEA of the headteacher's effectiveness and their continued commitment and enthusiasm

A sample balanced:

- for:gender
- age range of pupils
- school size
- socio-economic circumstances of the school
- in different LEA's.

Using these criteria I identified a group of headteachers within one LEA whom I invited to a 'focus group' meeting. I then interviewed eight more headteachers in three different LEA's.

ii. Interviewing Enchanted Headteachers

In investigating how primary headteachers have maintained their effectiveness and enthusiasm over a long period of time the semi-structured interviews were organised around:

- Issues identified in the descriptions of the career lives of headteachers
- The issues identified in looking at headship in a changing world which might make sustainability difficult.

The interviews included discussion around the following areas:

iii. Introduction and Opening Question

- Start with my privilege of being given the time to read about the issues of headteacher sustainability. Opportunity for me, and those I interview, to say this is what makes the job worth doing and perhaps, this is what gets in the way. Awareness of ability to project this to a potentially, wide audience.

- Describe the phases of headship and introduce the idea of the autonomous phase when the headteacher is well established and confident and has made a substantial impact on the way the school works.
- Describe a parting of ways, disenchantment/enchantment, use Pascal and Ribbins idea that enchantment for primary heads comes from the affective side, their closeness to the children and the feedback that gives them. Can you recognise this in your situation?

B. Topics and Issues to Develop

i. Fragmentation:

- Diversity of roles and responsibilities
- Managing the mundane which is essential to projecting the vision
- Creating time to think strategically
- Demands of diversity
- Remaining optimistic.

ii. Leading professional or administrator:

- Your involvement in the classroom
- How well you know the children
- Do you teach regularly
- How do you know what goes on in the classrooms
- What involvement do you have in curriculum development

iii. Changing relationships:

- managing the demands of externally imposed change
- contradictory demands
- fostering collegiality whilst asserting leadership
- confidence of experience
- danger that established heads become 'conservative'

iv. Shared leadership:

- Leadership teams and devolving responsibility
- Involvement in external activities
- Other sources of inspiration
- Staff turn over and revitalisation

v. Challenge:

- Paradox of greater freedom of action in some areas and imposed constraints in others
- Opportunity or compromise
- How individuals view different aspects of this paradox

vi. Job satisfaction:

- 'Revitalising waves of energy'
- Opportunities grasped
- Trigger points for further development

vii. Emotional involvement:

- Personal investment in the job of being headteacher
- Idea of it being my school; my staff; my kids
- Pressure and support
- Who says well done to the headteacher.

C. Emerging issues:

- Opportunity to open up the floor
- To allow interviewees to give any additional insight or perspective to the debate.

The focus group meeting informed the next interview and as each subsequent interview took place part of the discussion was grounded in the issues which were emerging from previous interviews.