

S P R I N G 2 0 0 3

Reservoirs of Hope:

Spiritual and moral leadership in
headteachers

How headteachers sustain their schools and themselves through
spiritual and moral leadership based on hope.

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Introduction

The research concept

“The starting point is not policy, it’s hope. Because from hope comes change”
(Tony Blair, 2002)

This research study seeks to test this statement against the leadership stories of 25 serving headteachers drawn from a cross-section of school contexts, phases and geographical locations within England. It is based on the premise that a school cannot move forward without a clear vision of where its leaders want it to reach. Without such a vision, clearly articulated, it remains static at best or at worst regresses, for ‘without vision the people perish’. ‘Hope’ is what drives the institution forward towards achieving its vision, whilst allowing it to remain true to its values whatever the external pressures. The successful headteacher, through acting as the wellspring of values and vision for the school thus acts as the external ‘reservoir of hope’ for the institution. In the face of burgeoning demands for change, colleagues look to the headteacher for spiritual and moral leadership, to provide the necessary coherence and unity of vision and to maintain its underpinning integrity of values.

Whilst the primary task of the school must be learning-centred, that learning can only be achieved within the context of relationships. The headteacher therefore needs to be skilled in both learning-centred and interpersonal leadership. An NCSL Leading Edge seminar on interpersonal leadership (November 2001) suggested that these are “two sides of the same coin: good relationships without focus on the core business of teaching and learning will achieve little; a determined emphasis on pedagogy is unlikely to succeed without quality relationships”. It is the contention of this study that spiritual and moral leadership is ‘the edge of the coin’, the binding force that holds together its learning-centred and interpersonal facets, without which vision is fragmented, values sacrificed and development hindered.

It is important to stress from the outset however that the concept of spiritual and moral leadership being used in the context of this study does not have exclusively religious connotations or linkage to a specific set of beliefs. It is based on a wider concept of ‘secular spirituality’: whatever it is that gives the individual their foundations of ethical behaviour and bases of belief that have been described as “the fundamental motivation and purpose that distinguish leaders from efficient functionaries” (West-Burnham, 2001). Equally, the distinction needs to be drawn between the spiritual and moral management of the school, concerned with curriculum issues such as assemblies, religious education, citizenship, etc, and spiritual and moral leadership, concerned with the often intangible aspects of interpersonal engagement and quality of relationships, particularly when tested by the pressures of external events, yet preserved by a clearly articulated structure of moral and ethical values: a distinction between leadership and management neatly encapsulated as the difference between ‘being’ and ‘doing’.

It is spiritual and moral leadership so defined that in the words of one secondary head participant in the study is “the extra bit that makes the difference”. To display that type of

leadership requires not only the individual leader to act as the external reservoir of hope for the institution, preserving its collective self-belief and directional focus against the pressures of events, but also to maintain and sustain an internal 'personal reservoir of hope' (the phrase is from John West-Burnham (2002) and is used by kind permission), the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader from which their values and vision flow and which continues to enable effective interpersonal engagement and sustainability of personal self-belief in the face of not only day-to-day pressures but critical incidents in the life of the school. This analysis has been clearly validated by practitioner reflection on incidents from within personal leadership stories.

This personal reservoir of hope for the individual has to be periodically refilled by a variety of replenishment and sustainability strategies, without which the leader will either 'burn out' by being unable to sustain hope and energy levels in the face of relentless pressures for change, or 'drop out' and withdraw from the change arena and in the memorable words of one primary head participant "die a lingering death through managing from the stock cupboard". Headteachers interviewed for this study were able to describe a wide range of such replenishment strategies and assert their value in personal sustainability to act as the spiritual and moral leaders of their schools.

The headteachers in the study felt that there was a development of capacity in spiritual and moral leadership, grown over time and through experience. If, however, this is to be effectively sustained for new generations of headteachers and other leadership group members, mechanisms for transference need to be devised to allow this to happen. The headteachers in this study had significant proposals for support structures that would enable this to occur not only for newly-appointed and aspirant headteachers but for experienced ones too. It is felt that there are significant messages here for those charged with the ongoing professional development and support of school leaders.

The research aims

Within this conceptual framework of 'reservoirs of hope', the aim of this research study, through semi-structured and informal interview with serving headteacher colleagues, has been to:

- describe the perceived individual spiritual and moral bases of headship across a range of headteachers
- test the value of the concept of 'reservoirs of hope' as a metaphor for thinking about the role of the headteacher in spiritual and moral leadership
- codify identified strategies for individual headteacher sustainability and replenishment
- consider examples of how spiritual and moral leadership is displayed by reflection on critical incidents within leadership stories
- assess whether there is a development in capacity in this area as headship develops
- propose mechanisms for transference and support of a shared professional understanding of this facet of leadership

- articulate the authentic voice of reflective practitioners in this area

The research approach

Following a survey of the extant literature and previous work in the field including the outcomes of an NCSL Leading Edge seminar on leadership and spirituality (July 2002), a semi-structured interview schedule was drawn up. This allowed a cross-phase sample of 25 headteachers from a variety of school contexts, leadership experience, faith perspective and geographical location an open-ended 1:1 opportunity lasting approximately one hour to reflect on their leadership story within the context outlined above. (Full details of the composition of the sample and the interview schedule used are given in the Methodology section (page 36).)

Key to the research approach was the use of critical incident technique. This is a well-established method for evaluating systems in functioning work environments (Flanagan, 1954) which uses recollections of critical incidents – which may not necessarily be high level – captured through interviews with participants, as exemplars of the behaviour of a system under stress, even though that recollection may be personalised, distorted and non-triangulated.

Summary of findings

The 25 headteachers interviewed for this research were drawn from a wide cross-section of school phases, contexts and geographical areas, from Devon to Durham, Lancashire to London, and had varying lengths of headship experience ranging from one year to 20 years. It is hoped therefore that their comments reflect an authentic rendering of practitioner voice regarding spiritual and moral leadership in headteachers.

The following conclusions may be drawn from this study:

1. Although drawing from a variety of faith perspectives and belief systems, all were able to articulate an individual personal value system that underpinned their approach to school leadership. Defining spiritual and moral leadership not as a concern for the management of issues such as the citizenship curriculum or religious education, but in terms of the headteacher acting as the guardian of the vision of the school and as the consistent exponent of its value system not only on a day-to-day basis but when faced with critical situations, all recognised the importance of spiritual and moral leadership in their headship role.
2. Considering the metaphor of 'reservoirs of hope' as a descriptor of that role: an internal reservoir of hope as the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader from which their values and vision flow and which makes effective interpersonal engagement possible no matter what the external pressures, and the external reservoir of hope, where the head acts as the wellspring of self-belief and directional focus for the school, 23 of the 25 heads interviewed found the metaphor of 'reservoirs of hope' unarguably of value in thinking about their role in spiritual and moral leadership.
3. To replenish and refill their personal reservoir of hope, all heads were able to describe a range of sustainability strategies without which their effective functioning would be impaired. Such strategies included belief networks, sustained by high levels of self-belief in the rightness of their underlying value system, support networks, sustained by families, friends and colleagues, and external networks of engagement with interests and experiences beyond the world of education.
4. Asked to reflect on situations from their leadership stories, all were able to offer micro-narratives of critical incidents encompassing community tragedies, personnel problems and organisational crises, where their capacity for spiritual and moral leadership was tested. Headteachers interviewed found the opportunity to reflect and engage in discussion in this area an energising and liberating one. It is hoped that fellow practitioners may be enabled to reflect on and perhaps learn from these articulated experiences.
5. Heads were able to identify a development of capacity to act in a spiritual and moral leadership role as headship progresses, through a growth in confidence, self-awareness and willingness to use more creative and adventurous solutions whilst remaining true to their value system. There was a perceived development of a more reflective approach based on 'being a head' rather than 'doing headship'. This

growth can be linked with identified stages of development of personal authenticity as a leader.

6. Clear messages were articulated concerning the professional development needs of senior staff at these various stages of leadership development, ranging from in-house modelling of spiritual and moral approaches to leadership for existing leadership group members, to the provision of greater reflection opportunities on National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) courses, with a focus not simply on the mechanics of school management, but on the more intangible aspects of vision and personal values. For the more experienced headteacher, the retention of reflection opportunities within the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH), triangulated by the views of other members of the school community is urged because of their value in consolidating and enhancing self-awareness. Irrespective of length of experience, there is a strongly expressed need for the legitimisation and facilitation by LEAs, Diocesan officers, professional associations or small clusters of like-minded heads, of networked support for experienced headteachers through the availability of 'professional listening partners' and 'collaborative development supporters', to provide support and reflection opportunities either on a 1:1, small group or networked learning community basis. Very experienced heads have expressed the desire to put something back into the profession as consultant leaders to support such networking, but do equally themselves need opportunities to reflect on what they have achieved and how it might be shared, in a collaborative model of 'developing headteachers together'.

Main findings

1. The foundations of the reservoir: spiritual and moral bases of headship

When asked about their own faith perspective, having been reminded that the definition of spiritual leadership used in this study did not have exclusively religious connotations but sought to embrace a broader concept of 'secular spirituality', all the headteachers interviewed indicated that they felt they had a strong moral or spiritual underpinning to their work, if not a specifically religious one. As one male secondary head put it:

If this had been about religious spirituality, it would have been the shortest interview on record.

Nevertheless, there was a strong feeling about the value of the topic in the way it was being defined. As one female secondary head from a self-declared secular perspective put it:

The spiritual side of education is the important side... it embraces all backgrounds and all faiths.

This reflects a national picture of 'self-defined spirituality', a situation memorably termed 'believing not belonging' (Davie, 1994), where spirituality is accepted as a common human phenomenon which includes but is not defined by organised religion, and in which whilst less than nine per cent of the population are active churchgoers, opinion polls repeatedly reveal that whereas most people do not regard themselves as religious, only 12 per cent are willing to be put in the category 'not a spiritual person' (Harries, 2002).

The spiritual and moral bases of headship described by those interviewed fell into a variety of categories, with several heads indicating that more than one applied to their own value system.

The generational imperative

"How we work and how we lead depends to a significant extent on who we are, which in turn is a product of what we have been" (Parker, 2002). Amongst heads in this study, the foundation of basic values was laid down in often working class upbringings:

My working class background laid down my core values of inclusivity.
(male primary head)

This value system was thus coupled with a vision of education as "a passport out of deprivation", and the consequent desire similarly "to make a difference" to the life chances of future generations was a strong theme cited by a quarter of the heads interviewed, from all faith perspectives:

I came from a politically active family...I was the first from that (working class) family to reach higher education. That's given me a sense of duty to give

something back, to make a difference, like it made a difference to me.
(male secondary head)

Or more succinctly and movingly:

I'm here as a way of saying thank you to my Dad.
(female primary head)

The Christian imperative

Of the 25 headteachers interviewed, 15 of them cited a Christian value framework as influencing their professional practice. It is significant that this number is more than double the number of church schools in the sample, reflecting an expressed view that:

Church schools don't have a monopoly on Christian education. (male primary head, Christian faith perspective in secular school context)

Some heads with a Christian value system in non-church schools see themselves as, "Living out the message of the gospel to love one another" (female primary head), even in secular surroundings, although there is a clear and professional concern for the limits of this:

I will share my personal faith but not evangelise. I believe in parity of esteem for all faiths. This is a safe place for spirituality. It's OK to have a different faith or no faith. (female primary head, Christian faith perspective in high ethnic school)

For the headteachers of the eight church schools in the study, there was in addition the responsibility of a highly visible faith perspective:

Every decision has to stand the test of comparison against your (publicly avowed) Christian principles. (male secondary church school head)

However, this is also surely true of the professing Christian head in more secular surroundings.

The egalitarian imperative

A belief in "the essential goodness of humanity" and the consequent responsibilities that flow from that belief in terms of social justice, social inclusion and equality of opportunity was cited by six headteachers, almost exclusively from non-Christian standpoints and working in socially-deprived areas:

Everyone has the potential to lead a good life... the school's job is to realise that potential. (female secondary head, in a school with a high minority ethnic pupil population)

...and perhaps swimming against the tide of the target-oriented curriculum:

Deprived children are going to have difficult lives when they grow up. Our job is to make their childhood as enjoyable as possible...so they can experience success now. (male secondary head, socially deprived area)

However, this egalitarian approach is occasionally tinged with operational hard-headedness, allowing one set of values to override another:

I want all my students to get the best deal possible. I will rise above my principles if it gets a better deal for my students. (male secondary head, specialist school)

The vocational imperative

Three heads explicitly referred to a sense of vocation or calling underpinning their work:

I have a sense of doing the job I'm supposed to be doing. (male secondary church school head)

However, this sense of calling was not an exclusively religious one. The decision to enter teaching was sometimes a conscious 'political' act in order "to make a difference":

Children only get one chance and it needs to be as good as possible. If that's political, it's politics with a small p, although in my early days it was probably Politics with a capital P. (male primary head, inner city school)

There was also recognition that to discharge that calling might mean sacrifices:

I want to make a difference, even at the cost of having to go the extra mile. (female secondary head, socially deprived area)

The 'transference' imperative

Finally, two heads from more socially advantaged areas cited as their underlying principle that of 'do as you would be done by' and asserted that their decisions were constantly tested against the template of:

Would I be happy if this were happening to my own children? (male secondary head, rural area)

In other words, a simple 'transference' imperative that has strong echoes of the egalitarian overtones of many of the other value systems that were described.

It should be recognised that the belief system identified is often grounded in the social and cultural context out of which the individual headteacher developed and that it is therefore possible that this categorisation of spiritual and moral imperatives may be subject to change as new generations of heads arise from different contextual bases and backgrounds.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the belief system being articulated, all the headteachers in the present sample, regardless of background and length of experience, felt that they had a strong spiritual or moral base which they believed was necessary to sustain them

in their work and which provided a firm foundation for dealing with the day-to-day exigencies and crisis management necessities of school leadership, irrespective of its context.

2. Reservoirs of hope: towards a metaphor for spiritual and moral leadership

Possible metaphors

Establishing an agreed and workable definition of spiritual and moral leadership which can coexist with the variety of belief systems described above, is handicapped by the difficulty of finding agreement on what constitutes spirituality itself in the context of a post-modernist, non-professing pluralist culture. Most attempts therefore take refuge in the realm of metaphor:

Spirituality is the journey to find a sustainable, authentic and profound understanding of the existential self which informs personal and social action. (West-Burnham, 2002)

Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in our lives. It is this search that makes us the spiritual creatures that we are. (Zohar and Marshall, 2001)

Spirituality is a quality that goes beyond religious affiliation, that is striving for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose, even in those who do not believe in any God. The spiritual dimension tries to be in harmony with the universe, strives for answers about the infinite and comes into focus when the person faces emotional stress, physical illness and death. (Murray and Zentner, 1988)

All these are metaphors requiring not only awareness but also active engagement, and in the case of the latter definition, suggesting perhaps that this only comes into focus at critical life-changing moments. All perhaps also suffer from being couched into somewhat abstract or theoretical language, and thereby being seen as somewhat remote from the day-to-day exigencies of the headship round.

What could be more valuable for the serving headteacher is a somewhat more accessible and practical metaphor which can be focused on the spiritual and moral aspects of school leadership and which allows more easily a reflective understanding of that leadership and its impact on the internal wellbeing of the individual leader. It is this perceived need that the metaphor of the reservoir of hope seeks to meet: wherein the successful leader not only acts as the external reservoir of hope for the institution, maintaining and articulating its vision and values as the wellspring of self-belief and directional focus for the school, but also does this whilst retaining his or her own personal internal reservoir of hope, the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader from which those values and vision flow, enabling, through such intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1983), effective interpersonal engagement no matter what the external pressures.

An alternative useful expression of the same point, without however the visual strength of the metaphor, is the definition of spirituality in terms of 'relationships': relationship with self, equivalent to the personal internal reservoir of hope, and relationship with others, equivalent to being the external reservoir of hope for the institution (Bell, 2002). "Spiritual and moral leaders must therefore be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups, especially with people different than themselves" (Fullan, 2001).

Leadership imbued with this spiritual and moral base is thus more than technical virtuosity. It is moral activity as well, in which the leader enters into what has been termed a 'covenanted relationship' with members of the organisation by renewing a collective understanding of its central meaning and values and then goes on to 'routinise' the vision and mission in organisational structures and procedures (Starratt, 1993).

Thus it is the preservation and articulation of one's own personal, moral and educational values and the building and maintenance of these interpersonal engagements through 'walking the talk' that have been shown to be the essence of successful headship (Earley et al, 2002) "by changing the root metaphor for schools from organisation to community" (Sergiovanni, 1997).

Testing the metaphor

The 25 headteachers interviewed in this study were asked if they found of value the concept of reservoirs of hope in thinking about their role in spiritual and moral leadership or whether there were alternative metaphors that would better describe their approach. Almost without exception, there was an enthusiastic resonance with the metaphor:

It is singing true... I was so excited by it I went home and talked to my wife about it and my deputies the next day. (male primary head, large inner city school)

A perfect metaphor... this is the future of headship in schools. (female rural primary head)

Heads who don't have such reservoirs, things don't work for them, or their schools. (female secondary head, high ethnic inner city school)

In all, 23 of the 25 heads interviewed found the metaphor of value. Indeed some were anxious to refine and develop it further:

Reservoirs always have movement. They're always filling up and emptying so it's a good metaphor because headship is dynamic. Reservoirs are open to the elements and gather rainwater, they are fed by a variety of springs, as heads need to be open to external influences and opportunities... and reservoirs unfilled lead to drought. (male secondary head, inner city area)

Of particular value was felt to be the concept of the internal 'reservoir of hope' in characterising the need to retain that inner centre of calm against the external pressures of the world:

If you feel OK inside, it gives you the courage so as not to compromise on your values when the going gets tough. (female secondary head, socially deprived area)

...and to preserve that calm consistently:

The head has to remain upbeat in his public face day after day if he is to create [sic] the reservoir of hope for others, otherwise it soon gets round. (male secondary school head)

There are echoes here of Oliver Goldsmith's schoolmaster. "Full well the busy whisper circling round, Conveyed the dismal tidings when he frowned". And one head articulated the need to guard against:

It's the Boy Scout motto. Smiling and whistling under all difficulties. You have to resist the martyrdom model. (female secondary head, inner city area)

This capacity in the headship role to remain upbeat under all circumstances chimes with some Australian research findings that if headteachers and teachers are questioned about the same situation, the headteachers are always more positive about it (Mulford, 2002). This concurs with the findings of the present study that many heads regard it as an essential part of their role to "exercise the choice to be positive, to maintain the smiley face" in order to continue to act as the external reservoir of hope for the school whilst preserving a personal internal reservoir of hope.

This inner calmness does not necessarily have to reveal itself in exterior remoteness, Olympian distance or having to appear larger than life:

I allow my humanity to show... I can get quite emotional, perhaps it's the internal reservoir overflowing. (female suburban secondary head)

Yet it was a perception that inner calm had to lead to the external impression of 'not being fazed by anything' that caused two heads to feel that the metaphor was not for them:

The model doesn't fit me. My staff say that we draw strength from you because you are ready to admit your own weaknesses. By showing your human frailty, you give us the courage to reveal our own... I prefer the metaphor of the channel, directing and facilitating, with different channels for different folk. (male rural primary head)

More difficult to counter was the perception of being the wrong sort of personality type for this style of leadership:

I'm not sure the phrase (reservoir of hope) is right for me... I wouldn't describe myself as the calm person at the heart of this. I'm very much a go-getter. It's impatience that drives me... it would be me that people turn to for inspiration... but I have identified that it's my deputy head who is much more of a calmer

person than me, so he would be much more the calm leader. (female suburban primary head, deprived area)

This complementary team approach has echoes of the distinction between task-oriented and emotional leadership (Richardson, 1973) and suggests the need to extend the scope of this study both into links with personality type and also into a consideration of the leadership styles, value systems and sustainability strategies of other members of the leadership group.

One experienced head, whilst finding the concept helpful, counselled of the dangers of post-event rationalisation and:

The need to ensure that the metaphor has credence in the eyes of others. (male secondary head, 19 years headship experience)

Another head, young in post and excited by the metaphor, had used the phrase at a gathering of local heads:

Some heads giggled when I used the phrase (reservoir of hope). It wasn't perceived as important to them like it is to me. (male secondary head, one year headship experience, socially deprived area)

This shows that the acceptance of the value of the metaphor in describing spiritual and moral leadership still has some way to go. This may be because of the intangible and non-quantifiable aspects of this facet of leadership reducing its credibility in the eyes of highly task-oriented school leaders, or the fact that opportunities for reflection on such matters are not embedded in the local prevailing culture of leadership.

Some colleagues interviewed, whilst valuing the metaphor of the reservoir of hope, suggested alternatives that they had found useful in reflecting on their leadership practice. Some spoke from a specifically Christian value system of the concept of the journey, an inner journey for the self and an external journey for the school:

We search for God within ourselves. As we discover more about ourselves we discover more about God, so we are on a journey of discovery. (male secondary church head)

Moreover it is a journey that is felt to be guided:

I hold out my hand (to God) and it will be taken (male secondary head, secular suburban context)

Three female heads all spoke independently of the concept of the 'well', with similar dynamic resonance to the metaphor of the reservoir in terms of the contents being used and having to be refilled. The concept was developed and articulated by one head in terms of a clear analysis of work-life balance:

I know I have six wells: intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual, creative and social, which need topping up and keeping in balance... and this has to be

planned rather than waiting for them to become empty. You can't run on empty.
(female primary head, inner city)

From the interviews conducted, it is clear that the concept of a sustaining and empowering reservoir of hope is one that headteachers can identify with, irrespective of gender, experience or faith perspective, although other metaphors could also be of use. However, irrespective of the precise metaphor adopted, it is felt to be the 'refilling' or replenishment and sustainability strategies used by heads that are crucial to their continued high levels of leadership performance.

3. Replenishing the reservoirs: sustainability strategies in headship

If, as it has been shown, the concept of the 'reservoirs of hope' has resonance and meaning for serving headteachers, then in order to act as reservoirs of hope for their schools, successful heads have to preserve and maintain their own personal reservoirs of hope and to have sustainability and replenishment strategies so to do. The number and range of such strategies is as wide as the number of heads interviewed, for these are personal and individual 'what works for me' approaches. Nevertheless, from a large number of declared strategies, each headteacher citing multiple approaches, it is possible to categorise the various types of sustainability strategy used in terms of belief networks, support networks and external networks.

Belief networks

Self-belief

Ten heads, of a variety of gender and experience, specifically cited being driven back to their core beliefs and finding support in standing firmly on that foundation in the face of external pressures. This was shown in the use of recurring phrases such as:

An innate belief in my own intelligence and ability to achieve. (female primary head)

A refusal to give in because of my own personal pride in myself. (male secondary head)

I'll not be beaten, because when the going gets tough, the tough get going.
(female primary head)

I'm not going to be at the mercy of tides of events. (female secondary head)

I've always thought I'd come out winning, I didn't search my soul, I know I can overcome. (male church school secondary head)

Faith

Sometimes this reservoir of self-belief is sustained by an active Christian faith, as cited by six headteachers not all working in church schools. It is perhaps significant however that this number is less than half of those citing a Christian value framework nor does it represent the totality of faith schools in the study.

For some, this faith was bolstered by a distinct sense of 'calling':

I was meant to do this job. (male primary church school head)

...and the support of prayer:

Daily prayer sustains me. (male Christian head, secular secondary school)

...with regular church attendance as a recharging agent:

Worship feeds me. (female Christian head, secular primary school)

I miss it if I don't go (to church). (female primary church school head)

This network of faith support is not necessarily specifically religious. Some heads drew strength from membership of secular political and humanitarian networks which reinforced their egalitarian and vocational belief systems which they had identified as imperatives when asked about the spiritual and moral bases of their headship:

I made a conscious decision to join in work for the homeless. I do a soup-run every three weeks... a way of putting something back. (male secondary head working a self-confessed 70 hour week)

Feedback

Self-belief, as cited by seven heads, predominantly male, is also sustained by affirmative feedback from what is felt to be the core of the job; the pupils. A number of secondary heads running large schools specifically cited the value of this:

I still teach... it gives a very special relationship with pupils. It's at the heart of what we do. I'm still good at it and draw support from that being recognised... like when a pupil tells you 'you're pretty good you', it gives you a buzz. (male secondary head, third headship)

I escape [sic] to the classroom – being with kids reaffirms my faith in the job. (male secondary head, one year experience)

Continuing to teach keeps you sane. (male secondary church school head)

This affirmative feedback from children is important even to heads who do not teach:

Children are 'a touchstone'. I walk round and draw strength from their reactions. (female secondary head)

Sometimes the feedback and consequent reinforcement of self-belief comes from unexpected sources:

OFSTED gave me the validation that I'd proved that I could do the job... and that refilled my personal reservoir. (male secondary head who had previously been deputy in the same school)

Support networks

Support of family and friends

Some 14 heads, more than half the sample and evenly balanced in terms of gender and experience, spontaneously cited the support of family, particularly that of a partner, and friends in sustaining their internal reservoir. Some used their partner as a 'sounding board', as a catharsis to verbalise the problems and offload the events of the day; others were adamant that they would not do this but knew nevertheless that the support was there:

In deep communication without words. (male secondary church school head)

One head was prepared to go as far as to avow that without such support:

I don't see how you can go home on your own at night and come back the next day sane. (male secondary head)

Two heads cited marriage break-up as a result of the unbalanced pressures of the job and one head admitted that following a relationship breakdown:

My reservoir is very low and being tested through lack of one now. (female primary head)

Others pointed to the need for a network of friends away from the educational world, to give a different perspective or simply a refreshing switching off from the intense world of the school, to allow:

Doing ordinary things with ordinary folk. (male secondary head)

Ironically however, to create a reservoir in the first place, great tracts of hinterland have to be submerged, external interests lost, relationships strained and friendships forsaken, in order to create a single-mindedness of vision thought necessary to succeed in the job of headship:

The job has taken over my life and when I look back, will I regret the sacrifice of family life? (male secondary head, five years experience)

...but then as experience is gained in the job, paradoxically it is these interests and friends that have to be reacquired or regenerated in order to produce the sustaining strategies needed for continuing survival against its pressures:

I now have a conscious management of the work-life balance, after bitter experience of a marriage break-up due to over-focus on school. (female primary head, 11 years experience)

Support of colleagues

A further 14 heads, again more than half the sample, also cited drawing on the support of colleagues within the school context in order to sustain them. Senior staff played a key role in this, on a day-to-day basis with:

Cathartic 'washing up sessions' [sic] with deputies at the end of the day when others have gone home. (male secondary head)

...with such mutual solidarity and support often extending into the social arena, and to leadership group support for the head throughout a crisis situation caused by sudden pupil death. Two experienced heads described this latter experience thus:

Two (senior) colleagues cared for me. They had the emotional intelligence to recognise and respond to my needs. (male secondary head)

I never thought it was just down to me to manage (the trauma). I was being managed too. (male secondary head)

But such caring support for the head is not restricted to senior colleagues. One head quoted:

The day-to-day support of the office staff providing tea, sympathy and laughter. (female primary head)

...and often unexpected care came from more junior staff or from colleagues outside the school such as feeder school heads or other headteacher colleagues offering explicit or implicit support beyond the stated agenda, and this is often reciprocal:

When a fellow head rings you up, you make time for him. (male secondary head)

Support networks

More established networks of support are also valued, with nine heads of significant experience indicating the value of belonging to such formal networks not simply as vehicles for information flow but as:

Gatherings of people who will ask and care how you are doing. (female primary head)

...and also informal networks of like-minded heads with a similar philosophy:

Jockeying to sit next to each other at conferences. (female primary head)

One church school head valued the termly meeting convened by the Diocesan director for its:

Chewing of the fat and pastoral support. (male secondary church school head)

...rather than a concern for organisational or accountability matters.

Another head of long experience valued the convivial contact with fellow heads in giving a sense of perspective:

So that trivia (that had been burdening you in your own school) becomes trivia again. (male secondary head, 19 years headship experience)

...and spoke of the sense of loss when that convivial collegiality was withdrawn as a result of a local political situation.

A primary head had engaged a coach in a relationship concerned not simply with educational issues but also matters of values, vision and work-life balance. She stressed that the relationship was not the same as in mentoring, which tended to be more concerned with identification of immediate situational strengths and weaknesses and the provision of ongoing feedback, advice and support from a more experienced practitioner. Rather it was on a deeper, more emotional level, providing an opportunity for guided reflection on:

Where I'm going personally and professionally... whether I'm achieving my vision and goals. (female primary head, seven years experience)

An experienced secondary head, at the start of a second headship, had used professional development funding to purchase consultancy support as a 'mirror' to allow such reflection from an external colleague who could understand the responsibilities but could be objective about the situation she faced and provide affirmation and support.

Two other experienced heads had found invaluable a 1:1 informal relationship with a fellow head of similar beliefs and values, as a sounding board to bounce ideas off:

A fellow listening head... not a mentor, not a coach but a listener, who can empathise from a position of mutual understanding. (male secondary head)

...and this was felt to be something that should be available to all school leaders, irrespective of length or context of experience.

Support from external sources

'Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?' – who cares for the carers? Or as one church-associated leader put it, "Who is the equivalent of the bishop, charged with the pastoral care of his clergy?" In other words, who acts as the headteacher's 'bishop' with an equivalent authorised concern for the pastoral care of the head?

Is it the chair of governors? Certainly that would be the government view, for governing bodies are now charged with a concern for the head's stress levels and work-life balance in the same way as the head is charged with a similar concern for his or her staff. Where the relationship with the chair is a strong one, strength can be drawn from it, as two heads attested:

In my darkest moments, I say thank goodness he is here with me. (male secondary head)

It made a difference (in a community conflict situation) when he told me “I believe in what you’re doing”. (male secondary church school head)

But what happens if the relationship with the chair is tense or distant? This difficulty was cited by two other secondary heads with long experience of involvement with governors.

Should it then be the chief education officer? Regrettably, the danger is that this relationship can be distant too if not consciously fostered and developed. One notable exception was what was described by two Birmingham heads as ‘the Brighthouse effect’, after the erstwhile CEO renowned for his frequent personal notes of support, his honest affirmation and listening interest, about which:

Every Birmingham head could tell a similar story. (Birmingham secondary head)

External networks

Heads also relied on networks, interests and experiences beyond the world of education, getting away from it all to ‘a world elsewhere’. Many valued what was called ‘open spaces, quiet places’, or took refuge in sporting or recreation activities, or specific relaxation or meditation techniques. Others took ‘busman’s holidays’, relishing the intellectual opportunity to engage in further study for higher degrees, savouring:

The oasis of calm of sitting in a university library. (male secondary head)

All were concerned to manage themselves to avoid burnout and accepted that such refreshment time also provided opportunities for reflection on professional vision and values, although it was recognised by one that:

It is difficult to write down the emerging ideas in a notebook during your daily swim! (male secondary head)

Some heads formalised these reflection opportunities, valued as a chance to allow:

A coming back to the centre, a re-focussing on what is important. (female primary head)

...by the setting aside of a specific time for the keeping of a reflective journal, often written at the end of the week which:

Helps me to put things in their place. (female secondary head)

A technique they would recommend to others, if even only on an occasional basis.

All heads recognised the value of networks of support, both internal and external. Without them, they did not feel that they would be able to sustain the pressures of headship without burnout or dropout, but recognised that such replenishment and sustainability strategies had to change according to circumstances:

You use what is right for you at the time. (male experienced secondary head)

...be it against the day-to-day pressures of the role, or the sudden crises that come out of a clear sky and test the capacity of the reservoir of hope to withstand.

4. Testing the reservoirs: the response to critical incidents

Having accepted the value of the metaphor of sustained reservoirs of hope in thinking about spiritual and moral leadership, headteachers were then asked to reflect on critical incidents in their leadership story where they had acted as the reservoir of hope for the institution whilst preserving their own internal reservoir of hope. It was stressed in the interview that such recalled critical incidents did not necessarily have to be high level, but rather ones which could act as exemplars of more general principles of this facet of leadership.

Even with this caveat, the range, frequency and depth of reported critical incidents was staggering, and reflects the level of sustained high level leadership qualities that heads are called upon to display. Many heads articulated compelling autobiographical micro-narratives of situations they had been called upon to face. Whilst it would be inappropriate in this study to engage in precise situational detail, the incidents reported can be classified into a number of categories.

Community tragedies

Schools are long used to dealing with anticipated death: the loss of pupils or staff from long-term or congenital illness, or of parents of pupils, and three heads cited such events as critical incidents where their role as spiritual and moral leader was demonstrated by quietly keeping the school on emotional track:

You support by being there, by quietly watching, not by rushing in with solutions.
(male primary church school head)

This is high level emotional intelligence, for as Goleman (2002) has indicated, "If leaders fail in this primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could".

A further three heads reported having to deal with unexpected pupil death, through road accident or suspected self-harm, where there was a compelling need to display:

Instinctive emotional leadership at some self-cost. (male secondary head)

One head, speaking from a Christian perspective took refuge in his faith:

Faith kicks in, so I know that I won't be put to the test more than I can bear (and) that faith gave me confidence in the rightness of my decisions. (male secondary head)

...and this foundation of self-belief was also articulated by other non-Christian colleagues.

This inner confidence in the ability to cope, this personal reservoir of hope, whilst articulated in different ways and bolstered by the support of other senior colleagues, was a clear characteristic which enabled heads to deal with the aftermath of such tragedies, which whilst thankfully not on the scale of Soham, still called for high levels of emotional resilience and leadership in dealing with the community implications of such loss, not simply within the school community but in the wider community that the school serves. Such heads would echo the words of the CEO for Cambridgeshire following the Soham murders:

A school is not just a place where a range of public services can be provided to a community. It is a manifestation of that community, and structures and relationships must reflect and reinforce this. (Baxter, 2002)

Heads dealing with such tragedies on a greater or lesser scale have been in the front line of maintaining and restoring those relationships within their local communities.

This community dimension is also often engaged by world events beyond the immediate purview of the school. One primary head of a multicultural school post-September 11th had to deal with severe local community tensions arising from it. She spoke of enabling discussion within that context that “peace starts with ourselves in school”. Both she and the secondary head of a school in challenging circumstances serving an area of high social disadvantage spoke of:

The school providing an oasis of calm in a troubled community.

If this is so, then the oasis is clearly watered by the wellspring of values and self-belief displayed by these heads, as critical stabilising factors in contexts of ambiguity, uncertainty and turbulence, as they act not only as reservoirs of hope for their schools, but also for the communities they serve.

Personnel problems

Twelve heads cited critical incidents arising from personnel problems, some at a relatively low level involving inappropriate remarks or behaviour which had to be challenged if one was to remain true to one’s values, others at levels leading to the necessity to suspend staff because of child protection issues, in one case at 9.30am on the first day of headship! In these cases, and in others involving compulsory redundancies, much work was done unobtrusively to maintain staff morale when such staff could not be aware of the full details of the situation or of what was being done behind the scenes to resolve it. In such circumstances, the head’s aim was:

Restoring the community and leading it on. (male secondary head)

One head reported having to guard against her own judgmental instincts in such a case, having to manage her own internal anger at the situation in order to preserve external calm and so manage staff morale in an even-handed and ‘appropriately-toned’ way. As another head put it:

I needed others not to see that it was unsettling me, even though this was very draining of my own (internal) emotional energy. (female secondary head)

In spite of these understandable internal emotional responses, this first head rested firmly on a 'categoric clarity' about where she stood:

You know from your own internal value system what is right to be done straightaway, even though you might need thinking time about how to do it.
(female secondary head)

This head also recognised, and this was supported by other heads, that in such circumstances:

Acting as the external reservoir comes first. You can come back later and refill your own reservoir. (ibid)

...provided that the internal reservoir or self-belief system is 'full' in the first place. Heads collectively recognised the post-event draining caused by such necessary behaviour:

I spent my reservoir too much. (female primary head)

The well was getting quite dry. (male secondary head)

... and the consequent need to engage compensatory post-hoc replenishment strategies.

Other heads were drawn into the personal problems of their staff: serious illness of spouses, stress-related and competency issues. Here there was an underpinning of core internal values be they the philosophy of 'do as you would be done by':

I dealt with it as I would want to be dealt with. (male secondary head)

Or a Christian:

I dealt with it in a Christian way. (male secondary head)

Often there was support over and above the call of duty:

I spent Sundays with her, to win her back for the school. (female primary head)

This investment in an individual rather than writing them off is a hallmark of what has been called the 'emotionally intelligent school' (Harris and Chapman, 2002), where even in schools in the most challenging circumstances, investment in individuals and a premium placed on the quality of relationships rather than systems or structures brings about an 'empowerment through caring'. This sense of the value of the staff resource and the necessity to care for it was memorably summed up by the colleague who quoted the mission statement seen on the back of a delivery lorry, "He who cares, wins!"

Organisational crises

A further 12 heads quoted organisational crises as critical incidents. Of these, two were concerned with severe plant failure (school fire or boiler explosion) and four with operational decisions made in school (uniform, setting, exclusion or religious issues)

which had then received extreme negative publicity in the local and sometimes national media. The remaining six instances were of the impact of OFSTED on the school, either in the manner of its arrival, the conduct of its inspection or the fallout from its aftermath.

In all these cases, irrespective of cause, the heads perceived the need:

To pick up the community by its bootstraps. (male secondary head)

... and allow it to be sustained by a corporate verbalised belief in its underlying and unshakeable values, recognising that:

Articulation is empowering. (male secondary head)

Colleagues recognised that the role of the head was:

To keep one's nerve and to be proactive in standing up for what you know is right. (male secondary head)

... and thereby to act as the wellspring of continuing internal self-belief and the retainer of agreed institutional values even in the face of such pressures. There was the necessity to remain the perceived external centre of calm for other staff, for:

Calmness is infectious.

... even at some internal personal cost:

I didn't let go until a week later (after OFSTED), until I was sure that everyone else was alright. Then I went home that weekend and cracked up. It took the weekend to re-establish my value base but by Monday morning I was OK. (male primary head)

This is a further example of the capacity of the successful head acting as the external reservoir of hope as the first priority, and coming back thereafter to rebuild and refill the internal sustaining reservoir that makes such behaviour possible.

With hindsight, many heads found the testing of their reservoirs of hope through such critical incidents a learning and developmental experience, in terms of emotional resilience and leadership confidence:

I grew another skin. (female secondary head)

If I can deal with that, I can deal with anything! (male primary head)

There was a recognition that it was not only the head who was strengthened by the experience:

Because I faced it and came through the experience, I am stronger for it, and so are my deputies. (male secondary head)

There was a sense also that the school becomes stronger too:

Nothing succeeds like success against the odds, in building inner confidence and in building hope in the school. (male secondary head)

Most heads however were thankful that such unsought learning experiences had not come earlier in their headship careers:

I'm not sure I would have survived it if I'd been a less experienced head. (male secondary head)

5. Developing the reservoirs: the growth of capacity

So is there a development of capacity to exercise spiritual and moral leadership in the face of such critical incidents? Experienced heads (defined as over four years in post) in the study would answer unanimously in the affirmative. When asked however to what they attributed this and whether it can be linked to any perceived stages of headteacher development, the responses, whilst wide-ranging, had certain overall similarities in terms of reasons for such growth.

Growth in confidence

A leitmotif through almost all the responses was a perception of a growth in confidence. There was a growth in:

Inner confidence that I can do this job. (male primary head, six years experience, second headship)

... born out of:

Confidence through experiencing success. (male secondary head, 16 years experience, second headship)

This growth in confidence had enabled a more studied attitude to headship and its decisions:

I have the confidence to think before I act. (female secondary head, eight years experience, second headship)

... through a learned awareness that:

Speed doesn't always equal effectiveness. (male secondary head, 19 years experience)

This then had a concomitant effect on the capacity to act in accordance with one's value system:

I no longer have the impatience – I can see the longer game and I won't be tempted to compromise my values with speed. (female secondary head, eight years experience, second headship)

Even a head young in post recognised a development in:

Confidence to articulate and use my values base. (male secondary head, one years experience)

... and this was supplemented by a growth in trust in others to follow a collective value system:

The confidence to trust others who have a greater knowledge base in a particular area than I have. (female primary head, four years experience, second headship)

Growth in self-awareness

Linked with this growth in confidence was a perceived growth in self-awareness, leading to greater self-belief, emotional resilience and stamina. Above all, there was a growth in confidence:

To keep things in perspective. (male secondary head, 19 years experience)

... and the growth of a capacity:

To have the confidence to follow your instincts. (female secondary head, 14 years experience)

... leading to:

The courage to take risks which are true to your values, knowing what is right. (female secondary head, eight years experience, second headship)

Growth in risk-taking capacity

A number of experienced heads were therefore conscious of now having the confidence to risk being more true to their value system than they had hitherto been in the actions they were prepared to take, showing what was called:

The bravery to deal more in absolutes. (female secondary head, five years experience)

This 'breakthrough leadership' (Hay Group/HTI 2002) is prepared to cross boundaries, question the status quo and take calculated risks in pursuit of improvement which remains true to the cultural values of the school, for:

In order to be a successful leader you have to take risks. (Leading Edge seminar participant)

Some were given more confidence in this by the support of leadership teams they had deliberately built up over the years, not to provide unthinking and unquestioning support, but to encourage 'thinking outside the box' by a stimulation of lateral thinking and right-brain discussion. Such teams had to be carefully balanced, as one secondary head put it:

A mixture of pragmatic bastards and visionary idealists.

This risk-taking is not the same as foolhardiness, as was well articulated by one head of some 18 years standing:

Early in your headship you toe the line, you accept external professional direction rather than have the confidence to go in the direction of your beliefs. Your lack of experience means that you don't always recognise the problems that can occur.

Later in headship, you have enough confidence to take risks, 'to be brave', yet paradoxically there's more of a 'fear factor' because you are more aware of what could go wrong if the risk doesn't come off. (male primary head, 18 years experience, second headship)

Or as another head succinctly put it:

No matter how long the headship, it could all go bang tomorrow. (male primary head, nine years experience)

Growth in 'being' rather than 'doing'

Several experienced heads described a 'sea change' in their headship after about five years, with a greater capacity to focus on principles and beliefs now that the mechanics have been mastered and it is felt that the logistics of headship can look after themselves:

I have served my time with the nuts and bolts; I can now be more overt about the values underpinning my actions. (male secondary head, seven years experience, embarking on third headship)

Not only did this experience base give more confidence in dealing with such 'nuts and bolts', it also gave a shift in focus from 'doing' headship to 'being' a head:

I now know how to be a head as opposed to doing the headship job. It's the difference between knowing the words and knowing the tune. (secondary head of eight years experience)

... and that in turn impacted on how she related to her staff:

Now being able to 'feel' the tune when you're working with people.

... or when the pressures of unexpected events turn leadership into:

More of a rap than an aria. (Leading Edge seminar participant)

Developing the capacity

When asked to account for the development of this capacity 'to feel the tune', many heads at first took refuge in Harold Macmillan's prime ministerial response, "Events, dear boy, Events!" When pressed, however, some spoke of having learned from the examples of experienced heads, both positively and negatively, and several applauded the opportunities that LPSH had provided for stimulus and particularly reflection:

Heads reach a plateau where they are confident with the mechanics of headship. LPSH gives the challenge and reinforcement to get over that plateau. (male primary head, 18 years experience, second headship)

There was a recognition of different developmental needs at different stages of headship and a consequent need for a bespoke training programme not a one size fits all model. Here both LEAs through specific secondment and senior staff exchange programmes, and NCSL through professional development opportunities and the involvement of consultant leaders, were felt to have roles to play.

Stages of headship development

In their comments on the growth of spiritual and moral leadership capacity in headship, headteachers are reflecting the stages of development of personal authenticity identified by John West-Burnham (2002):

External	
Stage 1	Dependency and acceptance
Stage 2	Power by association
Stage 3	Power by symbols
Internal	
Stage 4	Authenticity through reflection
Stage 5	Authenticity through ethical purpose
Stage 6	Authenticity through wisdom
Stage 7	Authenticity through transcendence

These stages represent a journey of development, with a pivotal movement from external authenticity derived from the trappings and symbols of power to internal authenticity through “the capacity to reflect on self – to move towards an authentic awareness and understanding – (so that) understanding of self allows the possibility of a life driven by a clear ethical purpose... and the pursuit of the ethical becomes the dominant purpose”. Putting this principle into practice “allows movement into the sixth stage, the development of wisdom – intuitive understanding that informs every aspect of life. Such wholeness and authenticity approaches transcendence – the fully authentic self”. (West-Burnham, 2002)

Whilst it would be simplistic to assume linear chronological growth in headship capability, the views of headteachers interviewed would support the West-Burnham analysis with a clear transition from the capacity to deal with the ‘nuts and bolts’ mechanics of early headship at the NPQH level as a Stage 3 phenomenon, to the five year ‘sea change’ and opportunities for reflection provided by LPSH as a Stage 4 phenomenon, to the ‘risk-

taking' confidence to be more true to one's value system in the pursuit of ethical purpose thereafter.

The development of confidence to follow one's instincts, 'knowing the tune', is then surely the development of Stage 6 wisdom, or 'intuitive understanding' as defined by West-Burnham, allowing thereafter the Stage 6 and Stage 7 head the qualities as an able and experienced leader to put something back into the profession in a supportive consultant leadership capacity.

6. Building new reservoirs: the transference of capacity

Given a refusal to subscribe fully to the view of the economist Anthony Jay that, "The only real training for leadership is leadership", the issue then becomes how the capacity for spiritual and moral leadership is transferred to other members of leadership teams, to aspirant and newly-appointed headteachers and indeed to more experienced headteachers where there is a clear thirst for support in this area, as evidenced by the gratitude expressed by several heads interviewed in this study for the 'reflective oasis' that the interview opportunity had enabled.

Transference to leadership teams

The transference of spiritual and moral leadership capacity to other members of an existing leadership team was felt by heads interviewed to be comparatively easy. Six experienced heads from a variety of backgrounds specifically spoke of internal transference through 'modelling' of leadership behaviour:

A day-to-day observation of my style in action. (female primary head, four years experience)

This allowed members of a leadership team the opportunity consciously or subconsciously to absorb a particular leadership modus operandi, to see:

This is how we deal with people here. How they see me behave with others is then how they behave. (female primary head, 11 years experience)

This is often a sustainability strategy in the affirmative feedback it gives to the modelling headteacher:

When I hear her (a deputy head) speaking, say to a parent, it could almost be me speaking.

... although there is a healthy recognition that this is not a process of automatic cloning:

Leadership is about who you are, and some can be resistant to change. (female primary head, 11 years experience)

Modelling is not only about how to deal with people; it is also modelling by the head of an open, honest and human style of leadership where:

It is acceptable to express felt needs and OK to admit doubts and mistakes
(female primary head, seven years experience)

... both by the headteacher and ipso facto other members of the leadership team.

Such implicit modelling for leadership team members:

I am mentoring them without them being aware of it. (male secondary head, 18 years experience)

... is supplemented in a number of cases by specific group opportunities for reflection, where the underlying values and reasoning behind a course of action are the focus rather than incidental to the logistics of the course of action itself.

We have leadership meetings not management meetings

... said a deputy head in a school where her experienced headteacher operated this system, a piece of useful independent triangulation of its value, which was reinforced by the practice of a relatively new headteacher:

I build in reflective time with my leadership team... (concerned with) not 'doing' but 'why doing'... not 'doing' but 'being'. (male secondary head, one years experience)

... and by a more experienced colleague:

When you articulate practice with others, you reflect on it and so you learn together. (male secondary head, seven years experience)

Such reflective practice has certain practical requirements, not only time, motivation and a willingness to share experience honestly within an open communication, no-blame, supportive culture where:

You can display and admit your humanity and failure even when falling short is hard, deep and personal. (male secondary head, seven years experience)

... but it also needs the development of a shared language of leadership and a mutually synthesised 'leadership toolbox' for future collective use.

Transference to aspirant heads

Several heads saw it as part of their role through such mechanisms to ensure the growth of their leadership team members not only as members of the team but as aspirant heads:

Working with your deputy to prepare him for headship compared to disempowering him by doing it all yourself. (female secondary head, eight years experience)

On occasion, there was a recognition of the fallibility of this approach. As an experienced secondary head remarked:

You can delegate, but sometimes despite your best endeavours, if I'm not here, things sometimes don't happen. (male secondary head, 18 years experience)

This was countered by a primary head's comment that one way round this was to take the head out of school for an extended period of secondment:

And you get better teamwork and progress which is continued when he returns. (male primary head, 18 years experience)

These implicit growth opportunities are supplemented by explicit external professional development provision, not just for deputies through exchange and work-shadowing provision, but across the whole staff (one secondary school studied presently has 12 members of staff at all levels following MBA courses) and also for pupils, with one primary school having introduced an explicit values curriculum to further this approach.

In terms of the definitive professional development training for headship, NPQH, significant concerns were expressed about perceived lack of sufficient opportunities to reflect on and develop the spiritual and moral aspects of leadership and an imbalance between the time devoted to reflection on vision and values and that towards more operational and logistical matters.

Some of the criticism was hardhitting and reinforces the negative balance of opinion found by a previous small-scale research study of new secondary heads who had experienced NPQH in its earlier format (Sieber, 2002) in terms of the perceived lack of opportunities for reflection on vision and values rather than the mechanics of headship:

NPQH turns out clones... we have lost the human dimension of headship; the people person is being replaced by the targeting accountant. (male secondary head, five years experience)

This perceived "crushing of the spiritual by the mechanistic" was felt even by a recent NPQH graduate:

NPQH was concerned with being a manager, not about knowing yourself and your values. (male secondary head, one years experience)

Two primary heads independently expressed concern about the amount of training delivered online, asking:

Where's the interpersonal in this? (female primary heads, four years and 20 years experience respectively)

Even if these criticisms are not fully supported:

NPQH does give some opportunity for self-reflection, both to the participant and to the incumbent headteacher who also gives and learns. (male secondary head, 13 years experience)

... and in many respects relate to an earlier incarnation of NPQH, there is still clearly a problem of ongoing negative perceptions of NPQH amongst existing school leaders to be surmounted. There remains a need to answer the expressed concerns that there are insufficient reflection opportunities within it and to satisfy its critics that:

It should develop people first, leadership second, and tasks third... and not the other way round. (female primary head, seven years experience)

Across both primary and secondary phases there was sometimes almost a messianic zeal to spread the message of the importance of spiritual and moral leadership in headship rather than a task-oriented or target-driven approach, be it through NPQH content or the more intangible mechanisms of in-house preparation for headship:

I have trained many deputies through walking the talk, mutual reflection opportunities, listening and empowering. They then carry the message of this philosophy out into other schools when they become heads. (female primary head, 20 years experience, third headship)

But this 'missionary' role is not confined to aspirant heads:

I have trained my deputies and my staff through three-dimensional modelling of this style of leadership, that is displaying leadership with added depth, warmth of spirit, openness and humanity. They will then go out and spread this as disciples... as leaders not just practitioners. (male primary church school head, nine years experience)

Transference to newly-qualified headteachers

For the head new in post who has successfully surmounted NPQH, colleagues felt that mentoring opportunities with experienced heads should be provided, not necessarily in terms of coaching or even only on a 1:1 basis, but:

The opportunity to see other heads tick... reflecting, talking through, listening to others (about) not what they would do but how they would do it. (female primary head, four years experience)

Such opportunities to engage in mentoring should be:

Part of the package of leadership. (female secondary head, five years experience)

... and as such should be made mandatory and not as at present voluntary, for:

Accepting mentoring can be seen as an admission of weakness. (female primary head, two years experience)

... and therefore even if not directly refused, effective participation can be compromised by the excuse of other pressures on time.

In addition to such mentoring, the opportunity to be involved in ongoing participative networking would provide valuable continuing professional development. A number of heads felt that this would work best by researching together on a common theme such as an aspect of school improvement to the mutual benefit of all the participants, experienced and inexperienced alike, and to the benefit of the profession as a whole, a model of:

Successful practitioners working alongside new heads in active research to find out something together, and grow it... developing headteachers together (male secondary head, 19 years experience)

... so that 'communities of mutual support' also become 'communities of best practice'.

Transference to experienced heads

Such networking opportunities were felt to be valuable not only for new heads:

If it is good enough for new heads, it should be good enough for all heads.
(female primary head, six years experience)

Whilst LPSH had provided for some an opportunity for bonding and reflection across phases and the triangulation of one's self-analysis against the perceptions of others, there was still a hunger for ongoing small group or 1:1 support.

Some heads argued the case for mentoring or coaching support even for experienced heads, and two had indeed proactively employed consultancy to provide it. Others said that what was needed was:

A fellow listening head, not a mentor, not a coach but a listener, who can empathise from a position of mutual understanding. (male secondary head, nine years experience)

Terminology for such support varied from 'executive coach' to 'spiritual guide' (from those heads coming from a church background). These terms suffer however from the suggestion that this is guidance from a more experienced professional, even if that guidance is:

Self-discovery through guided reflection. (male secondary church school head, seven years experience)

... or:

A catalyst to allow a focus on a specific area and to ask 'the killer question' [sic] to stimulate reflection on it. (female secondary head, five years experience)

Perhaps better, more neutral terms would be:

A 'sounding board' to bounce ideas off. (male secondary head, nine years experience)

... or:

A 'mirror' to facilitate self-reflection. (female secondary head, eight years experience)

... or even the portmanteau, if less catchy term, 'professional listening partners'.

Irrespective of the terminology, there was a strongly expressed desire for such support from experienced heads in the study. Heads felt the need not for mentoring (a term which has in their eyes associations with new headteachers) nor coaching per se, but mutual reflective support. They felt that it should not be necessary for a head to be proactive in seeking out and building such networks of support, but that it should be provided as part of an entitlement within a leadership package for those who wish to access it.

There are clear messages here being sent to LEA and Diocesan officers, professional associations and policy-makers of an expressed need for networked support for experienced heads on a 1:1, small group or networked learning community basis, with 'professional listening partners' and 'collaborative development supporters' concerned not with management issues but with support for reflection and renewal, for all heads irrespective of their levels of experience and whether or not their school is of a particular phase, character or faith perspective.

Inter alia, there are concomitant opportunities for those very experienced heads who expressed a desire 'to put something back' from their accumulated experience as consultant leaders, not simply in the mentoring, coaching and training of less experienced heads, but in the support of serving headteachers irrespective of their level of experience, either on an informal local basis or as part of a wider facilitated network of heads learning and developing together. In order to do this, as a study of so-called 'enchanted heads' of long and successful experience has observed:

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. (Woods, 2002)

Such reflection opportunities for experienced heads, no matter how 'enchanted', equally need facilitation and support.

The legitimisation and facilitation of such networking, and indeed its terms of reference, for heads at all levels of experience, should not be left to chance encounter or individual proactivity. Rather it needs to be actively managed and supported at both local and national levels in order that the 'reservoir of hope' of the individual school leader can continue to be sustained, built up and renewed in an ongoing 'triumph of hope over experience'.

Endnote

This study has worked to the principle that school leaders develop best when given the opportunity to reflect on their existing practice, to analyse in detail critical incidents within their ongoing leadership story with a view to identifying strengths and weaknesses, to examine alternative models of good practice and to identify developmental ways forward appropriate to the existing contextual situation.

Successful engagement with this principle enables development of leadership qualities not by directive input but by reflective awareness and consensual agreement, leading to ownership of action and a thirst for further engagement. All these facets have been visible in this study of spiritual and moral leadership in headteachers, which it is hoped through the articulation of an authentic rendering of practitioner voice will inform not only fellow practitioners but also those charged with meeting their ongoing developmental needs.

Methodology

The research sample

A cross-sectional sample of 25 serving headteachers was constructed, drawn from all phases of compulsory-age education from infant school to independent school, from a variety of contexts from inner city deprivation (free school meal indicator 45%) to suburban social advantage (free school mean indicator 2%) and a range of school sizes ranging from 60 to 1600 pupils on roll, and from a wide geographical area from Devon to Durham, Lancashire to London.

The initial sample base was drawn from participants in an NCSL Leading Edge seminar on leadership and spirituality held in July 2002. This opportunity sample of 14 headteachers, including three from church schools was then supplemented from other networks using recommendations from Diocesan directors of education, LEA advisors and personal knowledge to produce a more representative sample. The headteachers interviewed ranged in experience of headship from one year in post to 20 years, with an age range from mid 30s to late 50s. A number of colleagues were in their second headship, with two into their third headship. Three colleagues had previously been deputy head in the same school as their eventual headship, including one who had also held a middle management post, a length of service to the same school thus totalling almost 28 years.

The detailed composition of the sample of 25 heads was as follows:

School type		School area		School headteacher	
Primary:		Inner city	10	Male	14
Infants	2	Suburban	9	Female	11
First school	1	Rural	6		
Junior	1				
All-through	7	Free school meal indicator:		Length of headship:	
Total	11	0–9%	7	1–4 years	5
		10–19%	9	5–8 years	8
Secondary:		20–29%	2	9–12 years	4
11–16	3	30–39%	3	13–16 years	3
11–18	8	40–49%	4	17–20 years	5
CTC	1				
EBD	1	School faith perspective:		Previous experience:	
Independent	1	Church	8	2nd headship	5
Total	14	Secular	13	3rd headship	2
Sample total	25	High ethnic	4	Same school	3

Thanks are due to the participating headteachers (who are identified by name and school in the Acknowledgements section) for their generosity in finding the time to be interviewed and their warmth and openness whilst doing so. It is significant that of some 27 invitations to participate sent out, 25 were returned positively and often with alacrity. This high response rate of almost 93 per cent was explained by one headteacher as follows:

It's very rare in a lonely job to have the time and be encouraged to talk about yourself, and not to an inspector or advisor or deputy, but to a fellow head... and for the first time in over 16 years of headship to feel that it's legitimate to do so. (male secondary head)

The interview schedule

Colleagues were asked to respond to the areas of questioning indicated below, which had been sent to them in advance. Interviews were conducted over a four week period and as interviewing progressed, supplementary questioning regarding the emerging themes took place. The main areas of focus were as follows, as specified on the provided interview schedule:

- Please give some background about yourself: length of headship, type and character of school, faith perspective if any (remembering that the definition of spiritual leadership being used does not have exclusively religious connotations but seeks to embrace a broader concept of secular spirituality). Where would you say you derive your own spiritual/moral base from?
- Do you find of value the concepts of an internal 'personal reservoir of hope' (the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader from which their values and vision flows and which enables effective interpersonal engagement no matter what the external pressures) and the external 'reservoir of hope' for the institution (where the head acts as the wellspring of self-belief and directional focus for the school) in thinking about your role in spiritual and moral leadership, or are there alternative metaphors that would better describe your own approach to spiritual and moral leadership?
- Could you give examples of sustainability strategies you use to preserve and replenish your personal reservoir of hope in the face of external pressures? How does the success of these strategies manifest itself internally for you personally/externally for the school?
- Could you give examples of critical incidents in your leadership story of how you have acted as the reservoir of hope for the institution yet preserved your own internal reservoir of hope?
- Has there been a development of your capacity to do this as your headship has gone on, and if so, to what do you attribute this? Does this link to any perceived stages of headteacher development?
- What mechanisms do you think are possible for the transference of your spiritual and moral leadership qualities to other members of your leadership team, and to aspirant and newly-appointed headteachers?

The interview outcomes

Interviews were tape-recorded with the agreement of participants to supplement contemporaneous notes. These were used to analyse emerging themes from the study and to provide the source of the quotations cited, as the authentic reflection of practitioner voice. Supplementary evidence was drawn from content and participant

evaluations of the NCSL Leading Edge seminar on leadership and spirituality. This total evidence base informed the outcomes and conclusions of this study as previously described earlier in this paper.

It is recognised however that further work would be valuable in extending the range of the study to encompass other members of the leadership group in schools, not only to provide a triangulation of the expressed views of headteachers but as a valuable analysis in its own right. In addition, it would be interesting to explore whether there is any linkage between headteacher personality type and effective spiritual and moral leadership, an area of development which is beyond the limited scope of this present research.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to the headteachers who participated in this study and through their co-operation and openness have made possible this rendering of practitioner voice and have validated its outcomes.

Ann Anderson	Hatfield Manor CE Junior School, Doncaster
David Atton	The Park Community School, Barnstaple
June Austin	Manor Lees Infants School, Lincoln
Dianne Barker	Violet Lane Infants School, Burton-on-Trent
David Bowes	Tapton School, Sheffield
Tom Clark	George Spencer Foundation School and Technology School, Nottingham
Harry Goddard	Derby High School for Girls, Littleover, Derby
John Grove	Belleville Primary School, London SW11
Carole Gumbley	Shenley Court Specialist Arts College, Birmingham
David Hall	Aughton Town Green Primary School, Aughton, Lancashire
Vanessa Huws Jones	Easingwold Primary School, Easingwold, North Yorkshire
Max Kay	The Nottingham Bluecoat CE School and Technology College, Nottingham
Janet Lewis	Sandringham School, St Albans
Jackie Mills	Netherthong Junior and Infants School, Holmfirth
Gerard Moran	St John's RC Comprehensive School, Bishop Auckland
Richard Parker	Lodge Park Technology College, Corby
Maria Parr	Newbold CE Primary School, Chesterfield
Rosemary Potter	Djanogly City Technology College, Nottingham
Christopher Reynolds	St Benedict Catholic School and Performing Arts College, Derby
Steve Robinson	Chaucer School, Sheffield
Linda Rockey	St John's CE Primary School, Sparkhill, Birmingham
Martin Sutton	Beech Hill Special School, Mansfield
David Taylor	Tysoe CE Primary School, Warwickshire
Lindsey Weimers	Windmill First School, Headington, Oxford
Neil Whitehead	Canon Williamson CE High School, Eccles

Thanks are also due to Dr Martin Coles of the National College for School Leadership and in particular to Professor John West-Burnham of the London Leadership Centre for support and advice throughout this study.

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