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Research Associate Report

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Should I stay or should I go?

Perspectives on middle headship

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Background

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

The words from the 1982 song by The Clash! Lyrics to sum up perhaps the dilemma of modern headship. Even the album from which the song emanated – *Combat Rock* – has a certain resonance with the day-to-day life of the 21st-century school leader.

As a headteacher myself at an 11–18 secondary school in Hertfordshire, I am aware, as I enter the fifth year of headship, how I have changed as a school leader. It is this element of reflection and lack of awareness of what the future may hold for me that prompted this research. When am I likely to be at my best? How long should I stay? When will it be time for me to go? How do I plan my succession?

Such questions on a wider scale currently hold a particular national relevance as the number of school leaders about to leave the profession in the next eight years is expected to stretch the system. Demographically, over half our serving headteachers are currently aged over 50 (Howson 2005), and with the average length of headship decreasing from 10 to 7 years in the past decade, recruitment and retention will be crucial if schools of the future are to be effectively led. Indeed, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has provided advice to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills regarding this, and is currently in the process of leading on developing solutions.

Linked to this looming demographic crisis, sustainability is a key issue for serving headteachers. If existing headteachers are able to keep themselves enthusiastic, refreshed and focused for longer, not only might the crisis be partially alleviated but there is also very likely to be a positive impact on the school they lead. It is important to know where you are going and to have an understanding of how your role will change over time. From a personal point of view, this project has allowed me to reflect on what I have done and how I have behaved over the past four years. It has also given me some clues about my future and how I may change. There is a consensus, however, that these changes are both generic and unique: generic in that the patterns and routines follow a broad consensus, unique in that each head operates within an individual school climate utilising their own personal values and past experiences.

The annual HMCI (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector) reports based on Ofsted inspections continually remind us of the significance of the headteacher in terms of school improvement. An effective head can transform a failing school whereas an ineffective head can seriously impair school development. It is recognised that headteachers pass through different stages of headship – from early to middle, from middle to extended. Understanding how headteachers operate, how they contribute to school improvement and change themselves over this period of time is critical for serving headteachers, school governors, local authorities and policy makers. This understanding supports the recruitment of new headteachers, as well as sustains and reinvigorates experienced headteachers. Much has been written about effective leadership and strategic planning. Much less is documented about the experiences of school leaders today working in the wide variety of schools in the UK. This research focuses on real-life stories in an attempt to provide more pragmatic advice for other school leaders.

The review of literature below indicates that it is often half way through middle headship that the initial thought of staying or seeking pastures new comes into question. This case study research focuses on 'middle headship' – the perceptions and thoughts of a small sample of secondary headteachers, each of whom have served between three and nine years in post. What messages do they provide for us? Is there a pattern? Or are their stories simply unique?

A review of the literature

It is important, at this point, to summarise prior research into this topic area. It will allow comparisons to be made between a wider body of knowledge and views and perceptions of the six sample headteachers.

There is far less written about how leadership changes over time than there is written about leadership strategy and style. Table 1 below shows a summary from a selection of contemporary research into headship and how it changes over time. While there is some variation in terms of the length of early and middle headship, there is an undeniable pattern with early headship, middle headship and experienced headship all featuring as part of a generic model. While this research focuses on middle headship, research shows that there is a link between all three stages.

Table 1: Summary of contemporary research into different stages of headship

Phase	Timescale	Characteristics
Pre-headship	0–9 months prior to appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Importance of fit on appointment √ Initial visits to the school
Early headship	1–3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Initial short-term, high-impact strategies √ Feelings of exhaustion and isolation
Middle headship	3–9 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Tackling longer-term, deeper-rooted issues √ More on top of the job – making a real difference √ Reaching the summit √ Feeling the crunch – a time to review and plan for succession √ Consideration of second headship
Experienced headship	9 years and over	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Diversification √ Growing system leadership and networking √ Decline and withdrawal √ Exit strategy

For more detail, please refer to Appendix A.

Early headship

Evidence suggests that successful headship begins in the *pre-headship* phase (for example, Hobson et al 2003). Fidler and Atton (2004) explore the notion of ‘fit’. One of the prerequisites of successful headship is the need for school selection panels to appoint a headteacher whose values and ideals ‘fit’ those of the school. Ribbens and Marland (1994) believe that the suitability of a headteacher for any given school is more important than their age or career path to date.

Reeves et al (1997) outline the importance of the *warm-up* period after appointment and prior to taking up headship. Beyond the pre-headship phase, all 10 models cited in this review describe the next phase as an *initiation period* lasting between 0–3 years although 7 of the 10 models refer to this period as the first year in post.

In early headship, Earley and Weindling (1987) found that most initial activities undertaken by the headteacher did not have to involve others. There is a perceived need to act quickly and to make a mark. Fidler and Atton (2004) exemplify such actions as changing the school uniform, remodelling the school reception area and dealing firmly with pupil discipline.

Brighouse and Woods (1999) identified some generic early headship issues as:

- an initial honeymoon period
- inheriting problems from their predecessor
- feeling overwhelmed
- feeling excited and emotionally drained
- feeling isolated
- needing to be able to stamp some initial authority by tackling quick-fix strategies
- variable induction programmes.

What is clear from this research is that the seeds of success or failure are often laid in this very early period, a time that is recognised to be challenging and exhausting.

Middle headship

As noted in Table 1, research indicates that middle headship begins after 2–3 years and concludes after 7–9 years. This 5–6 year period of middle headship usually represents a phase when the successful head achieves the most significant gains.

Brighouse and Woods (1999) note some significant changes in terms of operation from early headship. There tends to be a focus on implementing an extended agenda of school improvement, an increasing willingness to involve others in school leadership and a more relaxed approach regarding risk taking. Distributive leadership evolves with items that originally needed daily attention now being undertaken from time to time. Brighouse and Woods stress that while middle headship is more controlled and less stressful, it does not appear that this second stage is as smooth, as the deeper-rooted problems now being tackled need grasping and are mostly personnel related – structural or competency based. Such ‘thorny’ issues need resilience and strength of character.

Interestingly a number of writers identify subdivisions of middle headship and these are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Subdivisions of middle headship

	Gabarro (1987)	Reeves et al (1997)	Fidler and Atton (2004)
The divisions of middle headship	Getting above the floor: 18 months–3 years	Getting above the floor: 18 months–3 years	Stabilisation: 3–4 years
	The crunch: 2–5 years	The crunch: 2–5 years	The crunch: 4–5 years
	Reaching the summit: 4–10 years	Reaching the summit: 4–10 years	At the summit/plateau: 6–8 years

Gabarro (1987), Reeves et al (1997) and Fidler and Atton (2004) divide the middle phase into three sections. All three pieces of research focus most particularly on the *crunch* period. Reeves et al describe this time as pivotal – addressing substantial school issues (dealing with resistance), resolving conflicts and sometimes compromising values and beliefs. Some headteachers described being stuck at this stage and feeling unable to move on. Fidler and Atton also stress that the crunch was a time where some heads re-evaluated, re-energised and reinvented themselves. Heads that recognise this phase will decide to move on to pastures new,

thus avoiding stagnation and decline. Research, however, also shows that some headteachers continue to reinvent themselves, elongating middle headship for the benefit of the institution they serve.

Plateauing and 'reaching the summit' represents the tail end of middle headship, suggesting the onset of disengagement, disenchantment and withdrawal. Fidler and Atton (2004) suggest that this is a period for reflection and career planning for many headteachers that further detracts from the job at hand.

Middle headship, therefore, appears to be the key to optimum school leader performance, whole school improvement and personal re-evaluation. In general, successful early headship is likely to be followed by a productive 5–6 years of middle headship. Conversely, a difficult early headship may be followed by limited middle headship and early withdrawal.

Experienced headship

"After 10 years, I'd given the school my best shots" (Earley 1989: 12). Even with the most successful of headteachers, the compelling evidence from this literary review is that effective leadership tends to either be cut short by resignation or tail off through retirement.

Brighouse and Woods (1999) point out that some school leaders never make their mark with the onset of 'decline and withdrawal' coming quickly. Other headteachers go through a natural chronology spanning over a decade. Towards the end of headship, they note that their sample were often appearing busy but were often involved in displacement activities putting off the big tasks. Brighouse and Woods refer to this as the 'decline into a bunker' stage, clearly outstaying their purpose but without a planned exit strategy.

Exit strategies

When analysing their reasons for giving up headship, Draper and McMichael (1998) found that there was a 'push' to leave headship and in others a 'pull' of other possibilities. Flintham (2003) developed this analysis and found that three exit strategies emerged:

- *Strider* heads who had clear future plans and stuck to them, including a proactive exit strategy.
- *Stroller* heads who literally walked away from headship due to concerns over work–life balance.
- *Stumbler* heads who suffered from burn-out/stress/ill health.

Second headship

Fidler and Atton (2004) point out that second headship may become the norm after 7–10 years in post for a successful headteacher. For a relatively young first-time headteacher, third and fourth headship may not be out of the question. Second headship, they state, is usually a result of a successful first headship but can be a result of poor performance and 'escapism' for a minority. Fidler and Atton also suggest that this fresh start can work if the 'fit' of school is better but evidence tends to suggest that the poor performing head tends to repeat mistakes made during first headship.

Fidler and Atton point to the fact that choosing a second headship becomes a far more discerning process than first headship. Heads are far more choosy about

location and type of school. Earley and Weindling's (2004) research into heads' attitudes suggested that most opted for an 'easier' school having learnt the hard way, whereas Fidler and Atton's (2004) research challenged this and in fact found some second headships more challenging – a conscious choice for some.

What are the current trends?

Current trend analysis shows that increasing numbers of serving headteachers are not retiring at the end of their careers. The 11th annual Howson Report (2005) provides a National Statistical perspective on these exit strategies:

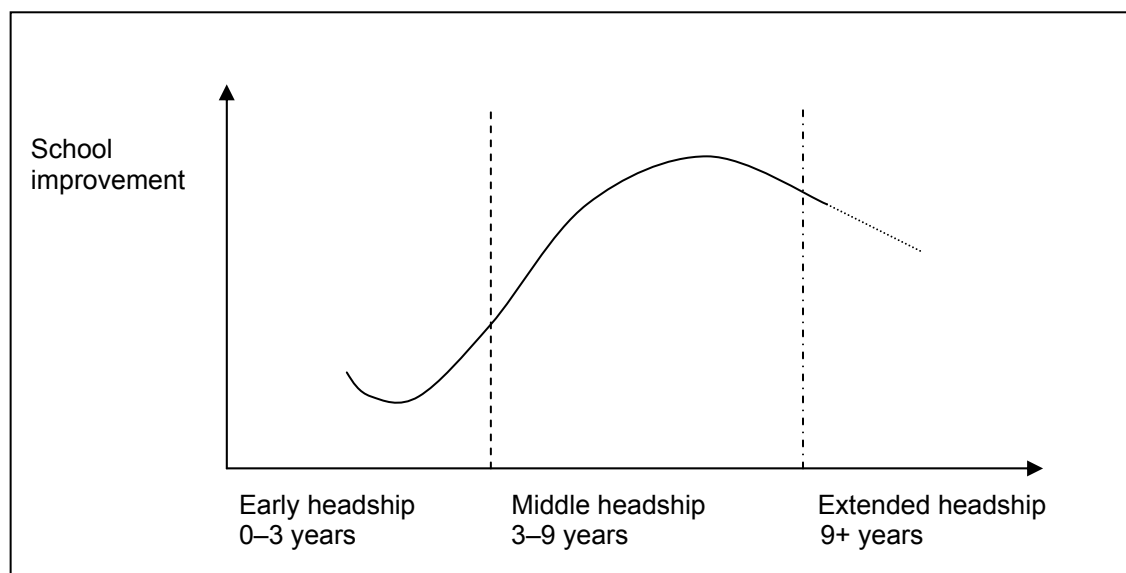
- Retirement at 60+ 14%
- Early retirement 33%
- Ill health 6%
- Second headship 26%
- Another educational post 15%
- Other 6%

Comparing this data to earlier Howson reports, only 14% appear to retire 'naturally' with increased numbers of early retirements linked to the stresses and strains of the job. Retirement on the grounds of ill health has remained fairly constant with second headships and other educational posts showing upward trends. Whatever the reasons, the decision to stay or go would appear to be stacking up in favour of the latter.

The sigmoid curve

The often cited sigmoid curve – a parabolic curve showing differential effectiveness, first applied to institutional management theory by Handy (1994) – adds a degree of coherence to this three-stage headship model.

Figure 1: Adaptation of Handy (1994) sigmoid curve in terms of school leadership



Leaving too early in middle headship could have a detrimental impact on school improvement as it is during middle headship that the most important gains are made. On the other hand, staying too long in post has a potentially detrimental effect too; it is a fine balance.

As previously stated, there are generic statements that can be made, drawn on the evidence base for the studies above, but there will also be individual, unique cases that disprove the 'norm'.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research methodology, using a semi-structured interview approach. The interview style allowed for further probing and a more detailed level of response, supported by a set of open-ended questions that allowed me to make comparisons between interviewees' responses.

A pilot interview was undertaken in December 2005 in order to test the questions. For example: did they make sense to the interviewee? Was there a logical order? How long would the interview last? How confident was I at interviewing? How should I record the outcomes? The pilot was very useful and led to the refinement of the key questions, as well as a number of changes to the approach used.

Sampling

The research focused on six serving secondary headteachers at different stages of middle headship. All respondents led non-selective specialist 11–18 co-educational state schools that have been described by Ofsted as 'improving' or 'successful'. Their experience varied from 3–9 years. Although this stratified sampling framework was narrow, it was important to establish the 'control' of school type in order to gauge comparisons between responses.

With school type held constant, the sample included two female headteachers and two headteachers who had started or were about to start second headship. For confidentiality, the names of the headteachers have been changed.

The following sections summarise the findings from interviews with each of the six respondents. By keeping each case study discrete, it is hoped that readers may be able to relate to at least one case study depending on their length of service or school context.

It should be recognised that these are the interviewees' stories as they told them and that they are reported anonymously as such. No external verification or triangulation of their responses was sought as the research focuses on individuals' perceptions of middle headship and the journey they have taken towards this.

Case study 1: Nigel (three years in post)

School context

Nigel had been headteacher for the past three years. His school was an 11–18 mixed secondary school that consistently achieved above 70% 5+ A*–C GCSE passes. It served a relatively affluent catchment area. Under the previous headteacher the school had received a very successful Ofsted inspection that reported that it had many strengths and no significant weaknesses. Under Nigel's leadership, a more recent inspection again commented that the school was good and had many outstanding features.

The school was already popular and high achieving and he felt as a first-time headteacher it was a school that he felt ready for as well as a school he felt he could make a difference to. It was also a school that was near his home so he did not have to relocate. He had not rushed into headship and had thought carefully about applying for this job as it met most of his criteria, emphasising the importance of school fit.

Before becoming a headteacher, Nigel had had both curriculum and pastoral responsibility before going into senior management. He was an assistant head for four years and then a deputy for five years prior to headship. He was glad that he had had this kind of grounding. "Being a headteacher is pretty demanding but most of the things I have had to deal with as a head I have experienced with the support of a headteacher elsewhere."

Reflecting on his own leadership style, he considered the school's context when he took over, which allowed him to take his time and find out what was really going on. After the initial honeymoon period, Nigel recalls that despite being popular among the local community he felt it would not remain so unless he got to work on some specific issues. The issues he highlighted as particularly relevant were as follows:

- There had been a lot of work on teaching and learning already but there had been a big staff turnover that meant that he needed to return to this.
- There were issues within the governing body that created difficulties for him initially. However, the chair of governors promptly resigned and there was a fall-out of other governors when he took up his post. This allowed him to work with the new chair of governors to set up a new team that worked without friction.
- Some systems were not as rigorous as he would have liked: "I felt that behaviour was not right and that the school was a bit on edge. The leadership team spent most of their time fire-fighting".
- The senior leadership team whom he inherited were also undergoing change. The governing body appointed two new assistant heads just prior to his appointment that Nigel felt somewhat frustrated about. He felt that he now had an effective senior leadership team but unfortunately he had not had the opportunity to appoint somebody himself. Nevertheless he managed to work out their strengths and weaknesses and to develop their job roles accordingly. Nigel also restructured his senior leadership team away from their original Key Stage responsibilities to a more team-based approach.
- The final and rather significant difficulty was that the buildings were in a poor condition, in some cases over 50 years old with little or no investment from the local authority. Nigel spent considerable time revamping and acquiring financial support from his local authority to help deal with this problem but he recognised it was an ongoing problem.

In terms of induction, Nigel used his headship induction funding to enrol onto the NCSL New Visions programme. He enjoyed this as he felt there was a supportive cohort and the inter-visitations were really useful. The local authority support, however, was, in his view, non-existent. He really felt that he missed out on this as he was aware that a few years previously provision was available that was well received. He did, however, have a local mentor who gave him good practical advice. He described his induction to headship, therefore, as variable.

In terms of how he felt about headship now, Nigel felt more in control. In his first five terms he did not feel in control: "I was troubleshooting and all my senior leadership team were dragged into behavioural issues". He now knows the direction that the school needs to go in. "It is my head now, I know where we need to go. Nevertheless, I need to communicate this more clearly with staff and governors."

Regarding work–life balance, Nigel came into headship having been a deputy headteacher who worked under a headteacher who he perceived to be working too hard. As a result, Nigel was determined not to do this. "I think I have a good work–life balance and in fact I adopted this from the start. I have delegated and this comes naturally to me although it means you have dialogues with many more people to check the all those initiatives are running smoothly. It can become quite draining and sometimes I find it difficult to switch off." Furthermore, he has what he describes as an excellent personal assistant who makes a tremendous difference to his day-to-day administration demands.

Although Nigel had been headteacher for only three years, he really enjoyed working on a voluntary basis for the local authority secondary headteachers' association. "I am more onto networking now and linked closely with other establishments."

As far as the future is concerned, in three years time he would hope that he would still be headteacher at his school. "I think after six or seven years you will have achieved what you set out to do providing you keep yourself refreshed. I think sustainability is all about managing yourself." He was aware that he had done little about succession planning. Nigel was not sure whether any one of his existing team would like to take over as headteacher and he felt the governing body would appoint from outside whatever situation the school was in when he decided to leave.

Case study 2: Greg (five years in post)

School context

Greg had been headteacher for the past five years. The school he led had had problems in the past particularly associated with being surrounded by selective schools and an Ofsted inspection carried out before he took up post that judged the school to be under-achieving. This trend had been reversed and the school was now far more popular and results were improving, although Greg accepted there was still some way to go. Greg reflected that if the school had been placed in an Ofsted category this might have been preferable, providing a stronger imperative for school improvement.

When he arrived there was no strategic plan and the ethos was not one he felt comfortable with in terms of students' actions. To start with, as he got to know the school, Greg then sought solutions to the more deep-rooted problems. He felt it took 3–4 years to address these and was now happy with the school's direction. Its image, popularity, and staff morale were now far higher. He had seen results at Key Stage 3 improve although he was still waiting for these improvements to have a knock-on effect at GCSE level.

After having been initially appointed with its accompanying feeling of excitement, the period between the interview and taking up the post was mixed for Greg. He visited his new school several times and became increasingly concerned about the number of issues that needed immediate action. When he initially took over, many of the children at his school had not chosen to go there but were there by default as they had not got a place in neighbouring selective schools. Many of the staff he felt had low aspirations of what the students could achieve.

His senior leadership team was small and split in two factions. It took time to work with his team, to learn their different strengths and weaknesses and to get them to work effectively for him. This was a skill Greg believed he was good at. Unlike Nigel, he was able to expand his senior team subsequently and this helped tremendously. Both Greg and Nigel have had to work with inherited senior leadership teams yet have managed to reconfigure members' roles and responsibilities in these. Greg was passionate about the importance of being able to appoint his own additional team members.

When he started he recalled that he had no long-term plan, he just wanted to get the basics right. As is the norm in early headship, Greg went for solutions that had immediate impact such as improving the student image, dealing with poor discipline and marketing the school in a more effective manner. He believed that this had now happened, enabling him to focus more strategically, because students wanted to learn and they felt happy about being in the school. This pattern mirrors the changing actions of headteachers as they move from early to middle headship.

Prior to his headship, Greg spent considerable time in middle management. He moved on to become a deputy at what he described to be 'a pretty tough' secondary school where again he spent eight years. Did he see himself as a headteacher? "Yes, but some could argue that I took my time. I don't regret this. My family are important to me and I felt when they were young I did not overdo it. I also feel it is important to come into headship having experienced a length of time in both middle and senior management. It's a tough job being a headteacher but I do find that most things I have to deal with I have seen before." Like Nigel, there is satisfaction in becoming a grounded, experienced school leader before embarking on headship.

In terms of applying for headship, Greg remembers that he was fairly relaxed about his choice. "It was within travelling distance and it was the kind of school I felt I could make a difference to. The school had a poor reputation but one I thought I could solve." His choice of schools was therefore determined both geographically and in terms of his own personal capacity. With work–life balance at the forefront, Greg felt ready for the challenge.

In terms of induction, Greg was more positive than Nigel. "I think I was very fortunate. My local authority put on an excellent induction programme for new headteachers." He used his government funding to support this course through which he was able to network with other newly appointed headteachers within the same authority. He was also given a more experienced headteacher as a mentor. This one-to-one support was greatly appreciated and he felt that it was a shame that the local authority no longer ran this programme. "While other heads may go on the NCSL New Visions courses, nationally run training and induction programmes do not necessarily provide local support."

How is headship different now? Even when things were tough, Greg felt that he had always enjoyed being a headteacher. He had just completed the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH), which he found to be highly relevant and which allowed him to become more reflective and consider different leadership styles. "I think I'm a better headteacher now. However, the sense of accountability is massive and I still have not truly tackled the issue of under-achievement in my school as well as I would have wanted by this stage in my headship. School change takes a long time; five years at least. The notion of turning a failing school around in a year I believe is nonsense."

His natural leadership style was that of a pacesetter. He gradually let go, however; as he got to know his staff he began to trust and delegate far more effectively. "People still come to me for silly reasons nevertheless. Distributed leadership is easier but it is also incredibly difficult as you have to be aware all the time of the number of staff running key projects. Sometimes you feel it would be easier to do them yourself but you know that it isn't sustainable". This is a repeating theme across the six case studies.

Like Nigel, Greg thought that he had prioritised family and out-of-school interests so that his work–life balance was kept in check. He lived close to school and this made a big difference to his working day. Even when there were parents' evenings and governing body meetings he still went home to eat with his family and to hear about their day before returning to work. "I think I have had a routine. I have stuck to it and it works for me. I enjoy physical exercise too. It's good to de-stress. Going to the gym or playing football on a Thursday evening keeps me sane."

The job absorbed most of Greg's working week so that he had not felt there to be time to become involved in consultancy or consider system leadership. However, he would like to mentor a new headteacher and repay the help that he had when he became a new headteacher.

After five years of headship, Greg thought about going and taking up second headship. However his heart was still at his current school. He felt that there were still lots of things to do and he had invested a lot of emotional energy getting the school to where it was. "Perhaps I'll reconsider this in two to three years' time. I do not really understand some headteachers who only seem to work in the school for three or four years and continually move on."

In terms of succession planning, Greg had a strong conviction that headteachers should always be appointed externally. "It is good for the school to have new

impetus.” As a result, succession plans for members of his senior management team were important to him. Greg was concerned, however, that when governing bodies appointed new headteachers they rarely took on the view of the outgoing headteacher.

Case study 3: Simon (five years in post and about to take up second headship)

School context

After five years of successful headship, Simon was relocating and taking a second headship in a school very different to his current post.

The most recent Ofsted inspection described Simon's school as excellent. Within three years he felt he had achieved his goal. "I know from talking to other headteacher colleagues, such school improvement takes a lot longer. I would like to think it was all down to me but I have to acknowledge I inherited a good senior leadership team and was able to appoint two new deputies relatively soon after my appointment." Many of the things he inherited were running effectively and he felt it was his job to refine and improve and turn 'good to great'. Simon's dilemma over the past year-and-a-half was, where did he go from here? There were no key issues emanating from the school's latest Ofsted inspection. "What do you do then? It plays on your mind and you feel a danger that you might end up just maintaining the school. I have always enjoyed working on school improvement. Perhaps this is why now I have chosen to move on to a second headship after only four-and-a-half years."

However, the main reason for Simon moving on was not his current school's circumstances, but linked to relocating to a different area where the cost of housing was not so expensive. He had carefully chosen a limited number of new locations that he would be prepared to move to with his family along with a need to take on a school very different to any other school experience he had had. When the post was advertised at his new school, everything seemed to fall in place. The school Simon was going to was very different. "I wanted something different as I get bored easily. Looking at my track history, this school will be not like anything else I have worked in."

Before becoming a headteacher, Simon started his teaching career in an inner-city comprehensive school. He was then promoted to a post at a school that at the time had been branded by the media as one of the worst in the country. The school taught him a lot of things. Many of the staff there did not readily volunteer or raise their hand to support school development; those who did found many doorways open. The school consequently allowed him to rapidly progress and within two-and-a-half years he was promoted as head of faculty and then worked on whole school projects.

He returned south to be appointed as deputy headteacher at a comprehensive with good academic standards. There he worked with someone he described as a supportive and creative headteacher and a strong senior leadership team, most of whom were now headteachers themselves. As he contemplated headship himself, a post came up working for the local authority. He applied and was appointed. However, he realised that his heart lay in a school environment that made him even more determined to be a headteacher.

What attracted Simon to his current school in the first place? When he applied for the post, it was very local for him. He did not apply purely because of this but because it had a reputation for being innovative. As a first-time headteacher, he felt it was the kind of school that already had a good reputation but one he could make excellent. The school had been unpopular in the past, but was then transformed by his predecessor who, for nine years, worked relentlessly to raise standards and improve the reputation of the school within the local community. When Simon took over the school, it was judged to be very good by a previous Ofsted inspection. He was able

to inherit a school with many good features, making it easy for him to further improve the school.

In terms of his induction, Simon felt that this was very good – a well-coordinated programme run by the local authority along with an appointed mentor and enrolment onto the New Visions programme. As a further point, Simon reflected that “most support came from my senior team I inherited and from the chair of governors. I think that preparations to help a senior team support a new head are often overlooked but are vital” – this was an interesting perspective not highlighted in the other cases.

In this interregnum period between finishing one headship and starting another, Simon was looking forward to starting his second headship and relocating his family. “I could have stayed at my school longer but something in me needed a change. When there is no longer the challenge, the job can overburden you. You keep looking to run the extra mile and is so difficult to find. Some of my senior colleagues have said to me that we should ease off the relentless process of change and enjoy the dividends of all our hard work.” Simon thought that the governors had made the right decision to appoint one of his deputy headteachers to replace him. He thought this meant they were happy with the direction the school had been run. It had been useful for him to work with somebody who would be taking over that he had appointed and trained. It would make it easier for him to leave.

Simon had always believed in distributed leadership although he remembered that his senior team, when he was first appointed, felt that he was always checking on what they were doing. He went for the pace-setting approach and on reflection did not think he was particularly democratic. Like many new heads he opted for strategies that yielded immediate dividends including short-term solutions to make an immediate impact. This is a repeating theme and re-enforces the findings in the literature review section. Now he found it much easier to let go. There were many things going on at his school that he did not have a handle on and he still wrestled with this. “I hope I encourage staff to have a go and not fear making mistakes. I would like to say that that allowing many people to make significant decisions about the school can be more wearing and stressful than doing it yourself. You find yourself thinking that you could have done it more quickly and more effectively yourself.” He even found himself going with other people's decisions that he did not entirely agree with “but they own it and that's important to me”.

These remarks repeat the inferences made by Greg, that distributed leadership grows naturally with time and while it is right for the staff as a whole, it changes the nature of headship. Less tasks and more coaching may sound more sustainable but it can be more demanding in some ways.

Finally, Simon was pleased with the planned leadership continuity at his school. Appointing an internal candidate meant that many of the strategies that he invested in would carry on. “They will clearly be modified and changed and this will be good for the school.”

Case study 4: Andy (one year in second headship following six years as a first-time headteacher)

School context

Andy's new school was popular among the local community and achieved results above the national average, although the intake profile was broadly average. It had a long history of achievement and innovation including leading edge, specialist college and training school status. In 2005, the school underwent an Ofsted inspection under the new framework. Andy had only just taken over the school, having been a successful headteacher in another school within the same local authority for the past six years. Although Andy had only half a term to prepare, inspectors commented that the school had a very strong ethos and a distinctive character. They also commented that the school believed it was good and the inspectors agreed with this, adding that students enjoyed coming to school and were proud of their achievements.

Already in the short time Andy had been at the helm, he felt that the school had gained a little more focus, direction and discipline. Staff and students had commented on the need to improve low-level disruption in the classroom and this was becoming a key priority. There had been a period before he arrived when the school did not have a permanent headteacher. While things were being held together well during this time, his new outlook on the school was helping to give the school fresh momentum.

Having completed six years in his first headship, Andy acknowledged that he could have easily stayed rather than moving on to second headship. It was just that the opportunity arose. When he began to look at second headship, he did consider relocating for family reasons, but they felt socially well established in the community.

Andy knew the school well as it was very local and he felt this would have a positive impact on his family, bearing in mind he would then live locally and be able to merge work and home more easily. He had always wanted to be a true community head, living in the area of the school and working in the wider environment. When he applied, the school had all the right credentials – well known, convenient, with high standards, extended community involvement, excellent staff, students and constant innovation. The plan was to lead what would be his second school and be able to spend a little more time with his family. Like the previous three case studies, while Andy's experience as a headteacher was greater, there was an emphasis on a personal set of criteria when looking for headship. Both Andy and Simon demonstrated, in terms of their second headships, an even more select set of conditions that had to be in place before the decision was made to apply. They had both experienced successful first headships in very different contexts. Andy's six-year first headship fitted within the common parameters found within the research findings whereas Simon's four years represented relatively short first headship.

During the 18 months before Andy's appointment the school had been without a permanent headteacher and the existing senior leadership team had been uncertain about their future. They had worked very well together with an excellent knowledge and understanding of pedagogy. The time was right for many to gain promotion, which they did to headship, deputy headship and many other senior positions. This gave Andy an opportunity to not only join the school but appoint his own team. This was unusual but he considered it instrumental in moving things on so rapidly. The 18-month period of uncertainty also led to a huge turnover of staff.

Andy did question his departure from his previous school. However, even after four years as a headteacher, when he could see his first headship going the way he

wanted it to he did consider alternative possibilities. But he decided to stay. “I did know that my heart was in working in a school environment and not working for the local authority or doing consultancy.” The only thing that vexed Andy now about his departure was that his successor was an external candidate rather than a strong internal candidate. “I felt the school would continue to grow and develop in the direction I had left it with an internal promotion but they clearly felt differently to me.” The issue of planned continuity or discontinuity was a major decision for governing bodies to consider. It was a repeating theme for both our second headship case studies.

In reflecting on support as a new head, Andy reflected, “You clearly don’t need as much support in second headship. It helped I’m sure that my new school is in the same authority as my old school so I had a good network of fellow headteachers and local authority representatives to consult with if required”. Focusing on the issue of whether headship is generic or unique, Andy believed that the job was not necessarily predictable as school contexts vary so much: “Some people learn through stumbling and making mistakes. It’s kind of empirical learning”.

As a second-time head, Andy felt far more confident than he was first time round. “You’re able to bring all the good stuff from your first headship and apply it although you have to be careful about this as a school context is always different and what works in one school may not work in another. I think the fact that I knew what I was doing helped settle people quickly.” He also felt that he was definitely calmer, which was good because he reflected on the fact that he was easily frustrated: “I felt I was on top of things within nine months. It took me a lot longer first time around”. Research shows that the phases of headship come that much closer together in second headship. Early headship may only last six months. This accelerated phasing would appear to be the case with Andy.

He felt work–life patterns were now different. One major reason for applying was to achieve a better work–life balance. His new role included developing its extended school status and, in fact, he considered that he stayed longer at work than he did at his old school, but it was quick to get home and the boundaries between work and home had become blurred.

As far as system leadership is concerned, in his last headship, Andy had been very heavily involved with his local authority headteachers’ association and assisting the Learning and Skills Council. He decided not to undertake additional work at the moment such as becoming a school improvement partner (SIP) as he felt it was important to concentrate on getting his new school on track.

Andy saw himself working at his current school for the foreseeable future. “This may be my seventh year as a headteacher but it is only my first year here.”

Succession planning was clearly in its infancy but he believed he would consider this to be a higher priority than he did in his first headship. “I’m already looking at my senior leadership team, thinking about how they will develop and imagining how the school would carry on without me at some point in the future.”

Case study 5: Abigail (nine years in post)

School context

Abigail had been headteacher for the past nine years. Her school was a high achieving, over-subscribed state comprehensive where students annually achieved above 70% 5+ A*–C grades.

The school she took over already had a sound reputation within the local community. It was consistently achieving, at that time, above the local authority average in terms of its 60% GCSE 5+ A*–C headline figure and had a relatively large viable sixth form. The year before she was appointed, the school had received a good Ofsted report although one in six lessons were judged to be unsatisfactory. She recalled that it was a time when Ofsted focused more on outcomes such as attainment than what was going on in the classroom. Abigail inherited a number of strengths from her predecessor including school reputation, some school systems and good local financial management. She felt that the school, however, was not as inclusive as it might be, particularly the emphasis on the higher over the lower achievers in certain areas. There were factions within the senior leadership team, particularly with some of her male colleagues who had worked for a long time under the previous headteacher. Members of this team seemed to undertake tasks that they wanted to do and were resistant to change. There was, she considered, no line management system or sense of accountability in place. She felt teaching and learning could be a higher priority and that there were some basic problems with the ethos as well. “For example in assemblies children chatted and giggled. I felt uncomfortable with this.”

Prior to her headship, Abigail worked in a number schools, most of which were fairly low achieving. After a series of promotions, she was appointed to the post of deputy headteacher. On the question of career plan, “I did not set out to be headteacher. I had simply worked on the basis that I believed I was a good classroom teacher. I also tended to question the decisions of those above me.”

On interview for her current post, she was attracted by the ‘feel’ of the school, although she stated, “I think as a deputy headteacher going to interview for headship, one asks all the wrong questions whereas I believe that a headteacher going for a second headship is likely to ask more valid ones”. As a result she did not find out everything she needed to know during the course of her interviews.

When she was appointed, Abigail recalled that she was seen as very different to her predecessor. People she felt were initially suspicious of her, particularly as she was the first female headteacher the school had had. She remembers, to begin with, that she went about sorting things that could be dealt with and that had immediate results. She also got about, was high profile, talked to students and focused on their learning. She looked for staff champions, individuals Abigail knew she could delegate to. Unfortunately at the time this did not include several members of her senior management team who she had inherited. After a while she began to look for more deep-rooted problems, mostly focused on teaching and learning – a recurring theme throughout the six case studies.

In terms of her induction and support, Abigail was appointed prior to establishment of the National College. She did not feel that her induction was particularly effective and it was very much learnt on the job. Mentoring was very under-developed within her authority: “There are some real gems that should be shared with new headteachers from more experienced colleagues. Whether this is coaching or mentoring it is an area that I feel that was and still is very under-developed.”

Like her deputy headship, Abigail did not enjoy headship to begin with and there were times when she questioned why she had taken over the job. It seemed to take every minute of her working week and weekend. She believed very much that the role of the headteacher was to empower yet she found it difficult to empower others, exacerbated by the resistance to change. She had to carefully balance her life outside school. "I think this is particularly difficult for female school leaders where there is still this traditional responsibility to run the household, look after the family – as well as maintain a career. I felt quite alone to begin with although slowly things began to change. One of the most significant changes was about three years into post when I was able to point a new deputy headteacher." They quickly forged a strong partnership that caused some apprehension among other colleagues in her senior leadership team to begin with. From this period on, at the start of her middle headship, she began to believe that distributed leadership could work. She also learned increasingly to know herself, gain confidence and establish an effective work–life balance. She began to realise what was important and what wasn't. This period of her headship she felt proved to be both rewarding and challenging. This ties in with research into middle headship as being a paradox of job satisfaction along with one of 'grasping nettles'. Abigail recently received an Ofsted inspection that was a testimony to how she had transformed the school, now increasingly with the help of others. "After eight or nine years at this school, I felt that the Ofsted report had captured very much my values and beliefs."

The loss of her close ally, the deputy head, to promotion proved initially difficult but since then, Abigail had been able to restructure her senior leadership team and she was sure that the school would continue to improve and develop.

Abigail had noted significant changes to her leadership style over the past nine years. She became far more distributed in her approach. She believed that this showed a growing knowledge and understanding of her staff. "I feel I am far more collaborative taking on the ideas and views of others." With her newly formed senior leadership team, they had decided to work far more closely than before. Other staff were also invited regularly to join and present to the senior leadership team. "I feel that for headteachers who do not let go, in the long term it affects both their health, family life and sustainability. The importance of a stable home life, I feel, cannot be over emphasised. Headship is incredibly demanding job. It does get better with time."

In terms of workload, Abigail noted that she could shut down more easily. She could zone her time. She was also now more willing to cut corners. She felt she worked less hard but of better quality. "I know myself better now. The outlets such as keeping fit and going on holidays are important to me. More advice should be given to new headteachers about the importance of a routine."

As Abigail approached the end of what would be deemed to be her middle headship phase, she noted an increasing involvement in system leadership. She had been committed to her secondary headteachers' association and had in fact been seconded on one day a week to chair the group. She had enjoyed this role as it fitted naturally with her collaborative style. She acknowledged, nevertheless, that there were limits to the number of other things you might want to do outside school if you wanted to run your school successfully. She was interested in doing some research linked to her job, however.

Why am I still here Abigail asks herself? As stated, she did not really enjoy headship to begin with. After seven to eight years she felt that she had changed the school. After all the physical and mental energy spent on transforming the school why should she go anywhere else and find herself confronted with the same problems? If she did a second headship she would use a different approach unless the school was completely different.

With regards to succession, she believed that the most important thing was to make sure you had the right headteacher who fitted with the needs of the school. From her local authority-wide experience she felt that “all too often governing bodies get this wrong”. She was a big supporter of distributed leadership. As discussed she had had a couple of shuffles within her senior leadership team and she was now looking for her new team to bond. She believed they had the capacity to run the school within the next two to three years. “The problem here is the more effectively I train them to run the school the more risk I run of loosing them as they will be snapped up by any discerning school.” Here too lies a paradox of modern headship.

Case study 6: Sharon (nine years in post)

School context

Sharon's school was a very large secondary school with nearly 2,000 students on roll. She had been headteacher for the past nine years, following a period of deputy headship in the same school. Its most recent Ofsted inspection in 2005 described the school as very good. This contrasted with an earlier Ofsted inspection in 1997 where teaching and learning was only just satisfactory. Sharon had been instrumental in the transformation in the reputation of the school among the local community.

When Sharon took over the school, she recalled that there was a lack of confidence in the school from the local community: "I didn't realise how big the problem was. Even though I had worked here as a deputy head and being the internal appointment, I did not realise what was really going on". Sharon felt that the school had taken its eye off the basics and most particularly teaching and learning. It was the only school in the town and had perhaps become complacent. Over the past nine years Sharon had worked hard to move the school from a situation of unpopularity to over-subscription.

Sharon started her career as a science teacher. Having done a variety of other roles, she was then appointed as deputy headteacher at the school before becoming the head. "This had some advantages when you succeed to headship in that you know the school; and some disadvantages too. The senior team that I took over was large but had some immediate turnover which allowed me to appoint and structure my own team fairly quickly." Sharon represented the only internal appointment in the sample. Research tends to show that internal candidates succeed usually when the outgoing headteacher had been effective and governors wanted to see the school continue to improve in the same direction. This was not the case for Sharon.

Sharon was happy with her school now. "If I had asked parents the question, 'Are you happy to send your son or daughter to the school?', in the early days the answer would have probably been no. Now it is yes. In fact I get asked by parents of children at primary school whether I will still be headteacher when their child goes through the school. They see me as the catalyst to this change although I have to say it is down to a host of other people. I'm just there spinning plates!" Sharon went on to describe, like other heads in the sample, moving from quick-fix to more strategic projects involving an ever increasing number of other people.

Sharon was pleased how the school in recent years had diversified and become more collaborative in its work with other schools and outside agencies. In fact, as the only school in the area, all the main child support services focused support at her school. "Looking back when I first started headship I did not imagine I would be so closely linked to all these other establishments and because of this it is easy to take your eye off attainment and teaching and learning."

Sharon described herself now as a mature headteacher and she was aware that she did things very differently now. "I'm not sure whether it's because the school has changed or whether I have changed. Perhaps it is a combination of both these factors." She stated that there was a lot of talk these days about distributed leadership and she thought this developed as you gained experience and got to know the school better. "I find myself these days finding out that things are going on that I'm not really aware of. This still bothers me to a certain extent but working in such a large organisation with over 250 people on the payroll, you have to let go and trust people. Sometimes I read the newsletter and I am pleasantly surprised!" One of her big challenges over the forthcoming year was to know what you had to do to

keep getting better all the time. She felt that there was a lot of pressure on schools to continue to improve and she was not sure whether this was possible.

Work–life balance had always been an issue for Sharon. She had always worked long days, often long into the evening. She had tried to change but felt unable to. “I think I would be more stressed if I didn’t. If I thought that by cutting corners somebody I was supporting was not being supported – this would stress me more than reducing my workload.” She added that if her in tray was thinned out too much maybe there would be important things and that she would not be aware of. Perhaps there was less paperwork but there were far more conversations. Taking a break by going on holiday was important for Sharon. It was her downtime.

“I don’t know how to keep reinventing myself and as you develop as a head you must never get arrogant or complacent.”

Recently, Sharon had enjoyed being a SIP and supporting colleagues in other schools. She had also been involved in supporting the county secondary headteachers’ association. Her school was also part of a consortium of school improvement that involved nine schools and there were plenty of networking opportunities for her. This portfolio of other responsibilities outside school had brought new challenges for Sharon that she felt kept her refreshed.

As far as the future is concerned, Sharon was acutely aware that you had to be aware of the right time to go. Every time she thought about this she remembered the journey the school had come on and how parents and the community now had confidence in the school. “When I decide to leave I am going to do something completely different. It won’t be second headship. Although I’ve done this job for nine years, there are still surprises and things that keep you on your toes.”

Succession planning was a key part of Sharon’s future planning. Her approach towards distributed leadership ensured that the momentum in the school was embedded and when she did eventually leave, hopefully the school would continue to steer in the right direction. “You need to keep an eye on the type of leadership required as I believe that different phases of school development require different types of leadership teams. The team I had when I set out on headship would not fit the needs of the school now.”

“I could leave here tomorrow but I am concerned about the confidence in the popularity the school now has with me at the helm. The school will need new leadership at some stage but to be an effective headteacher I believe is a long journey –10 years maybe.”

Lessons from the findings

What were the main trends of middle headship?

The trends exhibited by our sample reflected the pattern identified in table 1 appendix A:

- *Moving from quick-fix to more strategic planning*: this transition meant that middle headship 'felt better' than early headship, with a greater sense of control emerging following a period of more intense improvement activity and securing early wins.
- *Changing from hands-on to a more distributive leadership style*: this improved the capacity of the school while contributing to the sustainability of heads' own roles. This change also led to an enhanced focus on individual coaching and mentoring that was seen as both rewarding and demanding. It often coincided with the opportunity to appoint key leadership staff and this too strengthened capacity, but also increased sustainability for the head.
- *Greater involvement in external roles*: this included system leadership roles, for example, SIP work.
- *Future succession planning*: there was a growing awareness of the need for this among the more experienced headteachers.
- *Work-life balance*: this was seen to be an aspect of the role heads considered carefully, for example, time with family, time for self (such as taking part in sports), allied to a mindset of being in control of the role's demands on their time.
- *Greater efficiency*: some heads reported greater efficiency in their ways of working to ensure a better balance between time and task.

Other common strands

All six headteachers interviewed had made a significant difference to their schools. Clearly, there was a noticeable difference in terms of the kind of impact made if they had been at the helm for nine years compared to three. The consensus to stay rather than go appeared to be based on prior experience, careful choice and constant reflection.

Common strands across the case studies are as follows:

- The majority had already had considerable experience as senior leaders before becoming headteachers themselves.
- They were able to reflect on their career development to date, as well as being able to articulate how they had been influenced by headteachers they had worked for.
- They chose their prospective schools carefully. They took on a school that they either knew something about already or it fitted the type of school environment that they were used to.
- Each school was perceived to be in need of some level of improvement, whether it was from satisfactory to good or good to outstanding.
- These levels of improvement were perceived to be manageable by each of the headteachers interviewed.
- Those interviewed were committed to making a difference and understood that this would take a number of years.
- They demonstrated good people management skills. For example, "I encourage staff to have a go and not fear making mistakes" (Andy).

- Each of the heads were appointed to a school that was within travelling distance so that relocation was not required. Being pragmatic and not idealistic about their choice of school seems to have paid off.

What areas required improvement?

The following were perceptions that were seen as initial problems that needed overcoming (the number in bracket = number of times mentioned across the sample):

- Things were seen to have been left to slip prior to appointment (5/6).
- There were initial issues within the senior leadership team (5/6). The importance of getting your senior leadership team 'right' appeared to be the key 'change' factor for all headteachers in this sample.
- Legacies from the previous headteacher were felt to need resolving (4/6).
- Issues around ethos and behaviour required attention (4/6).
- Staff morale and expectations were low (4/6).
- There was poor headteacher support or variable induction (3/6).
- School image and popularity was poor among the local community (2/6).
- There were issues with the governing body on appointment (1/6).
- Building condition and deterioration was poor (1/6).

This list makes an interesting comparison with Brighouse and Woods' research (1999) in which they identified some early headship problems. The bullets listed above are reflections from the perspective of middle headship and show a greater level of analysis in terms of unpicking the theme of inherited problems.

These obstacles were seen as important factors affecting the speed of change. Where there were a number of these barriers in place – for example, where things had been left to slip, added to internal senior leadership team tensions and a poor reputation among the community – school improvement was seen as a much longer journey, up to 10 years in one case. In another example, where there were no significant obstacles, the speed of school improvement was rapid and resulted in the headteacher feeling that there was no further room for improvement within three-and-a-half years of appointment.

What were the main trends as the length of headship increased?

Across the six headteachers, there was a move from quick fix to more strategic long-term goals. The greater the length of time they had been in post, the greater the percentage of staff they had appointed – in particular senior staff – which made a difference in terms of school improvement. Their leadership style evolved and diversified over time. Pace-setting, hands-on leadership styles had transformed to more distributive leadership approaches – a transformation that was seen as natural and evolutionary as one's knowledge and understanding of the school grew with time. There was a feeling that early headship had been difficult and stressful with the exception of Andy who was in the first year of second headship. Middle headship definitely felt better and there was a greater sense of control: "I work less hard and it's of better quality" (Abigail). However, the shift to a more distributed leadership culture meant that there was less direct control particularly with new initiatives: "I'm just there spinning plates"; "Sometimes I read the newsletter and I am pleasantly surprised". Sharon demonstrates this shift in emphasis after nine years of successful headship. There was a universal sense of less 'doing' and more coaching. Although this was seen as more sustainable, it was also emotionally draining: "It can be more wearing and stressful than doing it yourself" (Simon).

After a while, the relentless process of change associated with the arrival of a new headteacher tends to die down and there is more focus on people development rather than task implementation.

The more experienced headteachers seemed more concerned with school diversification rather than the standards agenda that seemed to preoccupy less experienced heads, although Sharon in particular noted that it was now much easier to become distracted and lose sight of examination results and teaching and learning.

The more experienced headteachers were concerned about succession plans and the impact they would have when they decided to leave. They were convinced that the attention they were currently giving to their senior leadership team would ensure that the school would continue to improve and develop in the 'right' direction when they were no longer there. They were adamant that they were not going to leave the school to their successor with the number of problems that they had inherited themselves when they first started. To this extent, whether they recognised the 'crunch' period or not, they acknowledged that after five years in charge, painting a picture of how the school should perform without them was leading to both planned succession and capacity building within their senior leadership team.

In terms of system leadership, networking and being involved in consultancy or SIP work seemed to complement the work of the more experienced headteachers, giving them new challenges while still running their schools. They were able to build capacity into their leadership teams to cover this extra work.

Towards the end of middle headship, according to generic trends, both Abigail and Sharon should have been showing signs of plateauing and withdrawal but they were not. They remained steadfast and passionate about their schools. There was disengagement through their increasing focus on system leadership and this was seen as both refreshing and revitalising.

Conclusion

If we return to our original question – “middle headship – should I stay or should I go?” – from our sample of six headteachers, four are staying while two are going or have already gone. Both Andy and Simon are moving onto second headship and therefore all six continue to remain within the ‘system’ of school leadership. Our two most experienced headteachers still see themselves staying in post. They are both challenging the theory of disenchantment towards the end of this phase of headship. It is a positive story and one, if reflected nationwide, could provide a far less bleak view on the future leadership of schools in the UK.

Staying or going?

The headteachers’ own progression and decision to move or not were based on ‘go’ or ‘stay’ influences that, in part, relate to the points above. The following were cited by one or more interviewees and often act in conjunction:

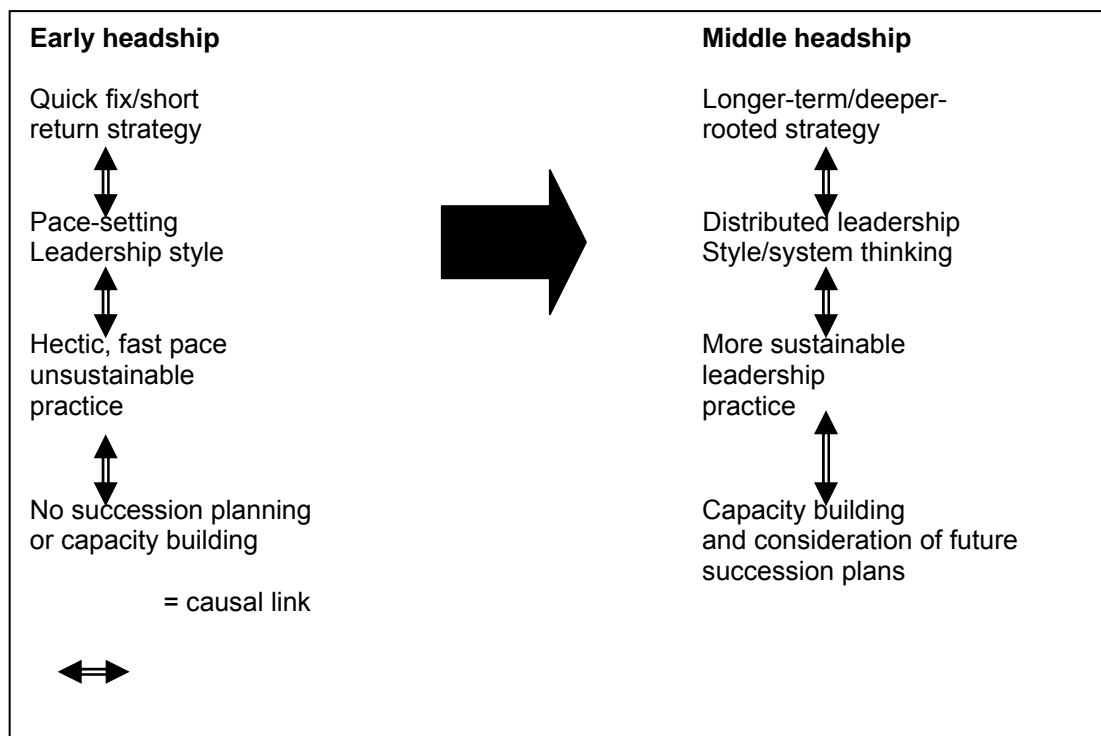
- ‘go’ influences:
 - a sense of having reached a plateau or achieving what they set out to
 - the lure of a new challenge
 - perceptions of potentially improved work–life balance
- ‘stay’ influences:
 - a feeling of still seeing how things could improve further
 - reflection on the high levels of personal investment to date and a sense of achievement at what has been accomplished
 - having the desire to continue
 - issues of work–life balance – feeling settled
 - perceptions of demands of having to do it all over again.

Generic patterns or unique situations?

As for the question of generic patterns or unique situations, I would argue that modern headship is a combination of both. Like the nature–nurture debate, we can unpick the similarities and differences between, for example, Abigail and Sharon’s accounts but whether they are more driven by common themes or school context is difficult to eschew. An example of this is Abigail who, being a female headteacher, presented a number of unique issues in her school that did not come across in Sharon’s experiences.

Unpicking the key emerging themes, there is a link between the changes within middle headship. There is an increasing reliance on distributed leadership strategy, sustainability and succession planning (see Figure 2).

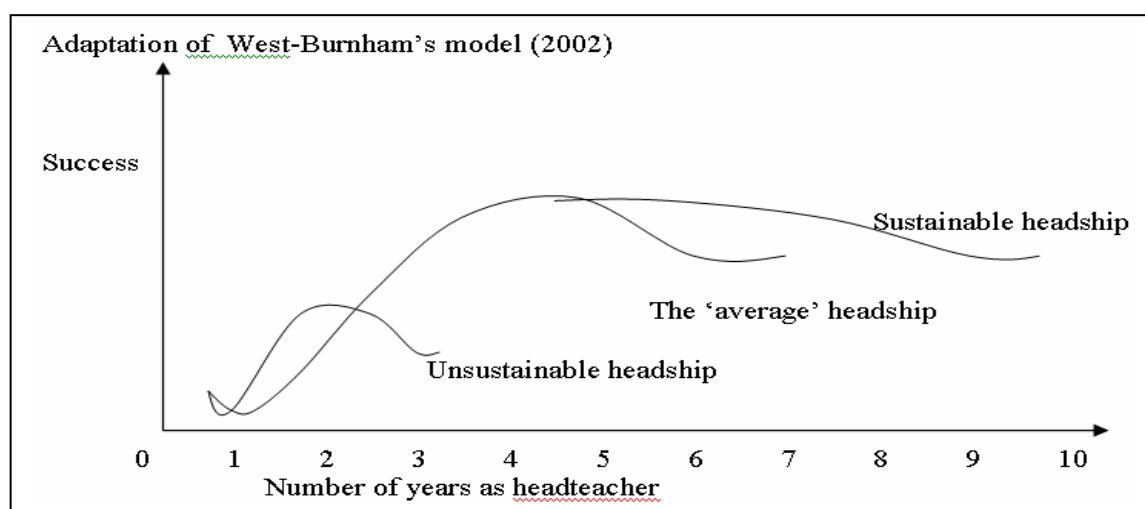
Figure 2: The subtle changes of Middle Headship compared to Early Headship



If we examine the factors behind the headteachers who are staying, many of the factors that led to their appointment in the first place supported a sustainable headship. Longevity was supported by relevant previous experience, school context and the perception that the challenges at each school were manageable and appropriate.

Over time, the respondents were able to adapt and change in response to their growing maturity and changing school context. Sharon and Abigail are demonstrating sustainable headship as shown below as an adaptation of the sigmoid curve (Figure 3). Indications would show that Nigel and Greg are likely to follow this profile in time, as they begin to predict the future, consider capacity building and succession plans themselves.

Figure 3: Adaptation of West-Burnham's model (2002)



Simon's first headship that has just come to an end after five years provides us with the exception. Simon did not inherit the kind of barriers experienced by the other heads in the sample and was able to move his school from 'good to great' in only four years. This relatively quick success left Simon little room for manoeuvre other than seek second headship, although his main reason for moving was family related. It would be interesting to see how Andy's progress develops after such immediate progress in his second headship. Second headship seems to be a combination of needing a new challenge linked with personal reasons resulting in a far more selective application process. The phases of headship do appear to come much closer together second time around.

Whether each respondent had been in post for three, five, seven or nine years, there was an inherent understanding of the journey that they had been on. "I'm not sure whether it's because the school has changed or I have changed. Perhaps a combination of both." Sharon demonstrates this understanding of the interrelationship between leadership development and its impact on the changing nature of her school context.

The three heads who had been in post for five or more years considered second headship or alternative career development but decided against it. Both headteachers at the nine-year mark were still able to talk passionately about how their school continued to improve and diversify. They still had a burning ambition to lead their schools although they acknowledged that the nature and style of their leadership had changed. They were, however, conscious that there would be a time when the school would need new leadership and were keen to ensure that they did not outstay their usefulness. With these checks and balances in place, this research challenges to a certain extent the models put forward in the review of literature section. Similarly, Figure 2 highlights a number of more subtle changes taking place between early and middle headship that are also clearly interlinked.

Outcomes and recommendations

While this piece of research is limited to only six serving headteachers working in similar type schools, I do feel there are some general outcomes that may help to provide answers as we move into the uncertainties of future school leadership.

Headship is demanding and challenging, yet tremendously rewarding. Too many aspiring heads are put off applying as a result of the sense of accountability and impact on their own work–life balance. Hopefully, by reading these accounts, more will be encouraged to apply.

Arguably there is too much literature and professional development based on the theory of leadership styles and their effect. There does not appear to be enough pragmatic ‘grounded research’ on how headship ‘feels’. As children, we learnt from listening to stories. As school leaders, case studies provide us with real-life stories that help us identify and reflect on our own journeys and plan our futures more effectively. By supporting the Research Associate programme, the NCSL are actively supporting this type of grounded research helping to readdress this perceived imbalance.

1. The most important role for a governing body is to appoint the right headteacher. From the six case studies above, they reflected on when they departed that they hoped governors got things right. There is a certain fragility to this process and perhaps more needs to be done to ensure whether it is more appropriate to seek planned continuity or discontinuity for the sake of continuous school improvement.
2. Early headship is tricky – like a storm you have to go through to enjoy calmer waters on the other side. Although induction programmes have improved, greater support particularly in terms of coaching and mentoring needs to be in place during these first few years. There are experienced headteachers like Greg who would dearly like to support a less experienced colleague. Local authorities need to do more to promote and support this kind of practical support. Programmes such as New Visions could also include presentations and workshops with ‘middle headship’ colleagues. Yet these six headteachers have shown that, through careful choice, reflection and attention to their own work–life agendas, headship can be both sustainable and rewarding.
3. There is a pattern to headship. Understanding this pattern and applying it to your own unique situation may make headship seem less haphazard. Timescales are clearly variable, with four of our six headteachers exhibiting a more sustainable pattern. They all work in schools, despite being in different contexts, that are continuing to improve. Perhaps school improvement nurtures sustainable headship but this would be a separate piece of research in itself.
4. With the exception of Simon and Andy, headship done well appears to look like a 10-year journey at least with new opportunities to collaborate, diversify and become involved in network consultancy giving experienced headteachers new challenges to keep them afresh.
5. By focusing on strategies that make headship more sustainable, we would be able to part-solve the emerging recruitment and retention problem. If the right headteacher is appointed to the right school and they are effectively inducted and supported, the tenure of headship becomes potentially longer. Potentially also, middle headship elongates and what might otherwise be an inevitable demise is thwarted. With careful planning, our sample headteachers show that through distributed leadership, capacity building and emerging system leadership, they are able to continue to enjoy headship. Against the stark messages about a headteacher recruitment and retention crisis, perhaps

there is never a better time to become a school leader. Seeing headship as a marathon – demanding but at the same time tremendously rewarding – is a message worth spreading. While a more radical alternative solution may be that of executive headteachers running federations of schools, from my six respondents, they believed passionately about the need for their role to continue.

So if we return to the dilemma posed by The Clash, “So come on and let me know, Should I stay or should I go?”, it would appear from our sample that staying is the better option if there is a manageable challenge and a set of conditions that support a sustainable approach towards headship. Going only seems appropriate if there is little further room for manoeuvre or an opportunity arises that improves one’s work–life balance. If I had chosen a different sample – perhaps a set of first-time headteachers leading schools in special measures – the outcomes would have been different. The reason for choosing this sample was that each individual was making a difference to their school and would most likely continue to do so over time. At the end of the day, if you are making a difference, headship can be the best job in the world and can sustain both personal drive and ambition.

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Appendix A: Summary of main findings from selected research on the development of headteachers by length of time in post

	Huberman 1986	Gabarro 1987	Hart 1993	Ribbens & Marland 1994	Day & Bakioglu 1996	Reeves et al 1998	Wenger 1998	Brighouse & Wood 1999	Gronn 1999 & 2003
Pre-headship		Preparation				Liaison between appointment and post starting			Formation (personality/values)
0–1 year in post	Launching a career	Entry & encounter 0–3m Digging foundations 6m–1yr	Encounter, anticipation & confrontation	Entering headship	Initiation	Entry (0–6m) Digging foundations (6m–1 yr)	Peripheral learning – new and on the outside	Initiation	Accession – anticipation in readiness for leadership
1 year in post		Taking action 9m–2yrs	Adjustment, accommodation and clarity	Listening/ finding out / high profile		Taking action (9m–2 yrs)	Inbound learning – head struggles to become full member of the community		
2 years in post	Stabilising	Getting above the floor 18m–3 yrs	Stabilisation	Strategic planning/ confronting deeper-rooted problems	Development	Getting above the floor (18m–3 yrs)	Insider learning – when the headteacher has status	Development	Incumbency
3 years in post									
4 years in post	Diversifying	The crunch 2–5 years			Development	The crunch (2–5 years)	Boundary learning – multiple membership of communities challenges individual capacity to sustain	Decline and withdrawal	Divestiture
5 years in post									
6 years in post	Plateauing	Reaching the summit 4–10 years			Autonomy and disenchantment	Reaching the summit 4–10 yrs	Outbound learning – looking beyond to new horizons	Decline and withdrawal	Divestiture
7 years in post									
8 years in post	Dis-engagement	Time for a change 5–10 yrs			Autonomy and disenchantment	Time for a change 5–10+ years		Decline and withdrawal	Divestiture
9 years in post									
10+ years in post									

Key	 Pre-headship	 Early headship	 Middle headship
	 Extended headship	 Not covered by research	

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