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The attraction of leadership

Chapter overview

This chapter explores what attracts people to the idea of becoming school leaders. This is pursued through reports of conversations with teachers at different stages of their career, including aspiring leaders and those who are already assistant head teachers or deputy head teachers.

In addition, the views are given of those who have attained headship and who are taking on fresh challenges, either in terms of improving their own school, or by taking on additional responsibilities.

In addition to the case studies, the chapter concludes with a mention of the newest type of academy, namely the free school.

The changing nature of school leadership

There is no doubt that demands on head teachers have increased steadily over the last two decades and the job itself has changed out of all recognition. Rising expectations of what schools will achieve, combined with the amount of bureaucracy and accountability involved, have made many teachers think twice about moving up the career ladder.

A group of head teachers who were discussing these changes recently, commented on how they had affected long-standing and newer heads differently, with those who were coming into the role knowing what they were taking on, while established heads have had to adjust to a way of life where change not only happens all the time, but occurs at an ever quicker pace. Despite the workload and the pressures, however, there are heads who not only take on the role, but who actively seek additional challenges.

Challenges and opportunities

Throughout this book, there are accounts of school leaders who have been proactive, and who never stop finding new ways of driving their schools forward, despite the sometimes overwhelming demands of the job.

Assistant and deputy head teachers

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the role of assistant head was introduced in September 2000, as part of a reorganisation of school leadership posts. As new staffing structures came into place, both primary and secondary schools were keen to appoint assistant head teachers. Between 2005 and 2009, assistant heads in primary schools doubled in number, while those in secondary schools increased by 21 per cent. At the same time, numbers of deputy heads decreased by 7 per cent, which was a cause of some concern, as it was felt that there might be fewer teachers ready to take up headships. However, there are plenty of examples of teachers moving on to headship without being deputies first.

The attraction of leading a school

In the following paragraphs, there are accounts of teachers who are aspiring heads and of assistant head teachers and deputy head teachers who explain the reasons why they took on their current role. Some are aiming for headship and some prefer to remain in their current role.

Aspiring heads

The Accelerate to Headship programmes, mentioned in the previous chapter, have proved to be an important route in trying to get more teachers interested in headship at a time when there is a bulge in the numbers due to retire. Two of the many teachers who have followed this route are now assistant heads in London. Both have followed the Future Leaders programme, but one took a more circuitous route by beginning the Teach First programme. (Teach First fast tracks promising graduates and places them in the classroom after six weeks of intensive training. They then spend two years in tough secondary schools.)

The first graduate had always wanted to teach, but after starting the Teach First programme, she was not sure that she had made the right decision and so she worked in the city for three years. She said that this confirmed to her that teaching was the right profession for her after all. Hearing about Future Leaders, she joined the programme and she is now working as an assistant head in a challenging secondary school in London. She intends to become a deputy and then a head and would want to stay in a similar type of school. One of her current projects is to evaluate the Opening Minds approach (which is featured in Chapter 4).

The second Future Leaders' entrant to the profession is a young man who never planned to be a teacher. However, after leaving university, he decided to take a post graduate certificate of education (PGCE) course in a shortage subject. After teaching for six years in two different schools, and having come across what he describes as some inspirational head teachers, he began applying for assistant head teacher posts. When he was not immediately successful, he decided to apply for the Future Leaders programme.

As part of his training, he went to Chicago, where he visited a range of charter schools and met some outstanding leaders. He took away from the experience the feeling that he would want to have a school that ensured students who were at risk of failure could have interventions very early. It also reinforced his view that relationships between teachers and students are at the heart of a successful school. He comments:

> Future Leaders has given me a range of skills to become a successful head teacher but most importantly, they have created a network of support for those days when things are tough and advice and support are needed.

Other routes to headship

Fifteen years ago, when looking for employment, a young lady with no experience of helping in school, took on a job as a temporary teaching assistant in a special school. She enjoyed the work and obtained a permanent post in the same school. Later, she decided to train as a teacher. As she already had a degree, she was able to get a place on the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP). Some years later, she became the key stage 3 coordinator and joined the senior leadership team (SLT). Although she is not an assistant head, she continues to plan for the next stage of her career, encouraged by her head who recognises her potential. She believes that headship would enable her to take responsibility for the well-being of staff, while having additional scope to put forward her own ideas for the school's development. She sees this, not so much as a career plan, but as part of her life plan, as she has tried all along to balance the needs of her family with what is right for her own development.

Assistant heads

In one large primary school, as well as a deputy head, there are three assistant heads, who are given considerable responsibilities and scope for their own professional development.

One assistant head is an early years specialist, who, before taking on her current role, had always believed she would aim to be head of a nursery school or children's centre, or an early years adviser. However, since taking on a wider role, including that of being the school's SENCo, her interests and options have broadened, so she is not sure which direction she will take, but she remains keen to further her career.

A second assistant head has always been very ambitious and more or less assumed that headship would be her aim. However, having recently had her first child, she is more conscious of the workload attached to being a head and the impact this might have on family life. At present, she is thinking in terms of taking up a deputy head's post in a smaller primary school. In the longer term, she is still interested in becoming a head, but it would have to be at a time that was right for the family.

The third assistant head has also had a baby recently and is currently on maternity leave. Some time ago, she completed a Middle Managers' course,

which she found very valuable, particularly as it gave her an opportunity to meet other people in similar positions. At the time, she considered moving on to the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) quite quickly. Although she is still aiming for headship, she was concerned that the expectation that people would aim for headship within a specified timescale may have put off some teachers from applying to take the NPQH, and she is pleased this restriction has been lifted.

Deputy heads

By way of contrast to the three assistant heads, the next two people are already deputy heads and see it as a long-term role in its own right. They have both been in the position for over 10 years, one in a secondary special school and one in a large primary school. Their satisfaction with their present roles may be partly because they have been given plenty of scope to use and develop their talents where they are now, and are left to run their schools on a regular basis. And this is, perhaps, an indication of how the role is changing. So many heads now take on additional roles or responsibilities that they need to be able to rely on an experienced deputy to be in charge of the school while they are engaged in their wider role.

The special school deputy enjoys being involved in professional development and, if she were to change her current position, would be more likely to find a role in the field of professional development than in seeking a headship. She feels she already has plenty of opportunity to try out new ideas and suggests that headship could be more restricting than her current post. The other deputy head works in a primary school that has expanded considerably and so her responsibilities have increased while she has remained in the same post. As the head has many roles, including being a National Leader of Education (NLE), she enjoys being in the driving seat and feels no urge to be the person who is ultimately responsible for the whole school. Both these deputies are very active school leaders, without wanting to become head teachers.

The final deputy teaches in a primary school in Northern Ireland, where he is known as a deputy principal. Some years ago, he took a Middle Managers' course, which he found both helpful and enjoyable. He followed this by taking the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH), which is the equivalent of the NPQH in Northern Ireland. Despite finding the training useful, he believes his real training for headship has resulted from being in charge of his school for a year as acting principal.

Other school leaders

Although assistant and deputy headship are the more traditional routes to becoming a head teacher, with the diversification of leadership teams in schools, there are other pathways emerging. An example of this is Sue Street, who is currently director of e-learning at a high school in London.

Case study: Sue Street

Sue's rather unusual journey towards school leadership in England started 15 years ago in New Zealand, where she trained first as a doctor and then as an educational administrator. However, she realised belatedly that what she really wanted to do was to teach. After working in a school in her home country, she came to teach in England, originally for one year, but then decided she would like to stay here.

She worked in several schools in London before becoming a local authority adviser, where she gained experience of working with schools in difficult circumstances. She found that she relished a role that combined trouble shooting and problem solving with the opportunity to become an advocate for the professional development of all staff. This led to Sue being asked to take on a succession of management roles.

Last year, Sue completed the NPQH as she very much wants to become a head teacher. She has a clear idea about why she would like the role and what she would want to achieve. She sums this up as: putting teaching and learning at the heart of what the school does; seeing the professional development of staff as central to a school's ability to move forward; and improving the achievement of all pupils. Sue has been in schools where the head has not stayed long enough to make an impact and she says she would hope to remain in her first headship for at least five years.

Questions for reflection

1 Do you think every school should have a deputy head and what are your reasons?
2 What do you see as the balance of responsibilities between assistant heads and deputy heads?
3 Should the role of deputy head be seen as a valuable one in its own right or only as a stepping stone to becoming a head?
4 List some of the advantages and disadvantages of becoming a head teacher in today's climate.

Managing change

Much has been written about the management of change and the need for school leaders to take staff with them in effecting change within a school. Michael Fullan began identifying change as an important theme in the early 1980s and has followed this through in his more recent writings, such as in his book *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2001), where he continues to stress the need for leaders to understand the process of change.

Some changes are forced on schools by events at national or local level. Others are changes that come about because a school, setting or service

wishes to move forward in a particular way. If the latter, then it is easier to control the process, but it is still necessary to realise how people are affected by, and respond to, change. Throughout this book, there are examples of school leaders who have managed significant changes, sometimes in response to changing circumstances and sometimes to bring about the change they wanted to see. How they handled those changes helps to demonstrate the way they lead.

Managing change within the same school

In the past, it was not particularly unusual to find teachers who were not necessarily aiming to become heads, but who, when a particular opportunity arose, decided to take it. In recent years, this approach has been less likely to work, as a decision had to be made as to whether or not to take the NPQH. The next case study involves a head teacher of a Catholic primary and nursery school, who has devoted her energies to seeing through changes within her own school rather than feeling the urge to move elsewhere.

Case study: Jane Faint

Jane took her first job as a class teacher in her present school, before later becoming the deputy head. Even then, she did not really consider headship, as she found the deputy's role sufficiently fulfilling. However, when the headship became vacant in her own school, she decided to apply, because she felt she was in a position to know how best to move the school forward.

During her time at the school, it has expanded from one- to two-form entry, with 468 pupils aged 3–11. It has had several refurbishments and extensions and these alterations, together with the change in the pupil population, has made it seem almost like running two different schools. To start with, the children were mainly White British, but now the second largest group are Black African pupils and 32 different languages are spoken. Because of the changing needs of the children, Jane has adjusted the curriculum from an emphasis on numeracy to concentrating on developing literacy.

When numeracy was the biggest issue, Jane started to run a maths surgery, so that any child in Year 6 could come to her for help. Now, other teachers have taken a similar approach for children wanting help with literacy. While there is more intensive intervention for pupils who need it, these surgeries are an imaginative way of ironing out smaller problems that arise.

Jane has employed the same practical approach to making sure every child feels included. When the school found it had a number of hearing impaired children, staff and children developed their signing skills. Similarly, when the first child using a wheelchair arrived, Jane took outside advice to ensure the pupil could be fully included in PE and Games lessons.

Jane says that 'the biggest challenge is to meet the constantly changing picture of what is expected of schools and balancing this with the needs of the children'. She knows that staff have to work that much harder to maintain standards.

Managing a change of status

The Academies Act (DfE, 2010a) saw a switch from 'failing' schools reopening as academies, to encouraging outstanding schools to take on this new status. The next case study is of an infant school head teacher in West Sussex, whose school was one of the first to become an academy for this age group.

Case study: Sue Winn

The school is a large, three-form entry infant school with 270 pupils. On the same site, there is a private nursery and a new junior academy. The infant and junior schools work closely together and are fund-raising jointly. A swimming pool was top of the pupils' recent wish list, together with a Pets Corner!

The children at the infant school are used to having their voices heard. The school council used the school's Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) and adapted eight questions from it to create a Children's SEF. The next step is going to be to use this as the basis for a Children's School Development Plan (SDP), which will become part of the school's SDP.

When asked why she wanted her school to become an academy, Sue gave the following reasons:

- more control over funding at a time of financial cutbacks
- greater ability to purchase services required without the budget being top sliced by the local authority
- greater freedom to make decisions.

As examples of the greater freedom she feels she enjoys, Sue quoted being able to knock down a wall in order to create more space without having to wait for permission, and arranging a 'Lunch on Wheels' service, rather than having to make hot meals on the premises.

Sue says: 'Stripping back bureaucracy and focusing on how to improve provision further is what it is about.'

The previous two examples were of heads who, in different ways, effected change while staying in the same school. The final case study in this chapter is of a special school head teacher who moved from East Anglia to South Yorkshire because she was drawn to the challenge of creating a new special school with a range of features that interested her.

Establishing a new school

Jan Wiggins was appointed in April 2011, before the school opened in the September of that year as a secondary school for pupils on the autism spectrum.

Case study: Jan Wiggins

Jan is another head who enjoys a challenge, so when she saw an opportunity to open a new school in Sheffield, she jumped at the chance. The school is part of Sheffield's reorganisation of its special schools to create nine new or refurbished schools, all of which will work very closely with mainstream schools.

Jan was appointed before the school opened, so that she would have time to plan for a school taking 162 pupils aged 11–19, with a diagnosis of autism. The school will be open for 52 weeks a year. Jan will head a multi-agency team who will be able to support the students' health, therapy and care needs. Jan says that what interested her could be summed up as the opportunity to:

- establish a 52-week residential provision
- provide an extended day with respite provision
- run an outreach team to offer advice to other schools and to support transition arrangements.

Jan says that the lure of a new school building with the facilities these children need on one site and the opportunity to lead a multi-professional staff team, made her decide that this was the right move for her.

Heads taking on additional roles

As mentioned in the opening chapter, the government is keen to increase the number of Local Leaders in Education (LLEs) and National Leaders of Education (NLEs). Rekha Bhakoo is head of a primary school in London. As she is an NLE, her school is a National Support School (NSS). She says she enjoys the challenge of supporting other schools and finds that most schools welcome the contact with someone from outside the school. With some, it can take longer to establish a relationship. So far, Rekha has worked with schools in her own local authority but she is now being asked to work further afield as well.

The rest of her leadership team, including the deputy head and bursar, are already involved in working with other schools, and so she is delighted that their contribution can be recognised in future, not just through being part of an NSS, but by being seen as Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs). Rekha feels that this will give them proper recognition for the work that they do beyond her school. She is committed to the idea that, with the pace of change in education, leaders need to stay ahead of the game. She says: 'To develop you have to be innovative and to think outside the box, not just for today and tomorrow, but for the next five years.'

Writing for the NCSL, David Hargreaves (2010) suggested that leaders of outstanding schools fall into two categories: those who want to work with other schools, and those who do not have an interest in system leadership. (System leadership is described more fully in the next chapter.) For the former, it is this extra dimension to their work that maintains their interest in headship.

Free schools: a new type of challenge

As well as all the opportunities open to heads and their leadership teams, an entirely different kind of option has now arrived. This is the advent of the academies known as *free schools*, the first tranche of which opened in September 2011.

While development of the academies has not been without controversy, free schools have attracted even more concerns about who will be running them, how accountable they will be, and their impact on the schools around them. When the government invited groups to apply to set up a free school, there were 323 applications, with 24 having opened in September 2011: 17 primary schools, five secondary schools and two all-age schools.

One of the first to open was the Norwich Free School, where Tania Sidney-Roberts is the founder and principal. She has 20 years' teaching experience behind her, has been a deputy head and holds the NPQH. Tania always wanted to run her own school. As soon as she knew she was in with a chance of being in the first tranche of free schools, she gathered together a group that included a solicitor and a building consultant, as well as people with expertise in the fields of finance, ICT and PR. This has helped her to form a Board of Governors with committees for: Premises, Finance, Curriculum, Personnel, Admissions and PR. The governing body also includes local councillors from the main political parties.

Tania says she had no difficulty in attracting enough pupils or appointing staff. The school will be open for 51 weeks a year and will include a child-care facility. Although she describes the last year as very hard work, she says she has enjoyed the process and the school was ready to open as planned in September 2011.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you agree with the move to allow (i) primary schools and (ii) special schools and PRUs to become academies?
2. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of becoming an academy?
3. If the present trend of having more academies continues, what do you think the impact will be on local authorities?
4. How do you feel about free schools? What might prove to be their strengths and weaknesses?

Although it is too early to judge the effects of having an increasing proportion of schools breaking away from LA control, as most schools want to work collaboratively, it is to be hoped that partnership working will continue to flourish. In his analysis, *Achieving More Together: Adding value through partnership* (2008), Robert Hill is clear that partnerships are the way to enable the school system to continue to improve.

While some teachers may be put off by the size and complexity of the modern school leader's role, others are attracted to leadership because of the chance to put into practice their ideas on how to enhance teaching and learning, and to support staff in developing the skills they need to work in an ever-changing and increasingly complex environment.

Further reading

Fullan, M. (2001) *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Hargreaves, D. (2010) *Creating a Self-improving School System.* Nottingham: NCSL.
Hill, R. (2008) *Achieving More Together: Adding value through partnership.* Leicester: ASCL.
Tutt, R. (2010) *Partnership Working to Support Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*. London: Sage.