

Enchanted Headteachers:

Sustainability in primary school headship

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

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This study is based upon interviews with primary school headteachers who have been in post since before the 1988 Education Reform Act, and are judged by OFSTED to lead successful schools. OFSTED reports confirm that the success of the school results from their effective leadership. These headteachers have also managed to remain committed and enthusiastic despite the pressures and strains. They are in short ‘enchanted’.

Introduction

Having been headteacher of a primary school for almost 10 years, I was made to reflect upon my position by a suggestion in a book by Brighouse and Woods (1999) that there were three phases to headship:

- an initiation stage which lasts three to four years
- a developmental phase when we are at our most dynamic and forceful and then
- beyond about 10 to 12 years, a phase which they describe as decline and withdrawal

They do not see the final phase as inevitable, offering the possibility of continued effectiveness through revitalising new waves of energy and direction. I find myself potentially on the cusp of decline and withdrawal. This study examines how headteachers manage to maintain their enthusiasm and effectiveness for periods far in excess of my 10 years.

The Context

Research into phases in the career lives of headteachers by and large confirms the pattern suggested by Brighouse and Woods. Day and Bakioglu (1996) studying the career lives of secondary headteachers saw a similar pattern but they identified four phases in headship.

The initiation phase, rather than being about learning to do the job is seen very much as a period of building mutual trust and respect, consequently the research suggests that upon taking up a second headship the cycle begins once again.

The developmental phase is the headteacher's most productive time. It's a period of growing confidence, increased effectiveness and constructive self-criticism. Headteachers have their greatest gains, their biggest successes in this period. They are building teams, delegating responsibility and showing staff they are valued in the school.

The autonomous phase sees headteachers well established and confident in their position. They are still effective and their confidence is a source of strength to the school. However the seeds for potential decline can also be sown in this phase. In being confident, almost comfortable, there is a danger that rather than being a creator or developer, the head becomes a maintainer, a potential source for conservatism, resistant to change. This established position also makes them difficult to challenge.

Rather than decline and withdrawal, Day and Bakioglu choose to call the final phase advancement. This is portrayed as a time of declining energy levels and a withdrawal from the aspects of the job which are uncomfortable. The headteacher justifies this position by saying: "It's all in place, the team works well, I can withdraw, distance myself, find other outlets outside of school." In this scenario, the drive for school improvement which should come from the headteacher hopefully lies elsewhere in the school.

Much of the research sees the final phase as inevitable, however Pascal and Ribbins (1998) suggest that there could be an alternative. In their research into the career lives of primary school headteachers they suggest that some headteachers manage to remain enchanted. Although their study does not explore the nature of this enchantment they do suggest that it lies in the emotional involvement they have in their work, and their closeness to the children. How does the possibility of continued enchantment relate to the idea of renewal through waves of new energy and direction?

Talking with Enchanted Headteachers

Taking Pascal and Ribbins' proposition that there is the prospect of continued enchantment in primary school headship I went looking for enchanted headteachers. Using the criteria of longevity and, in OFSTED's judgement, continued effectiveness, I identified a number of headteachers who continued to be a leading force in their schools (this judgment was confirmed within their LEAs). The interviews included discussion of aspects of their work that helped to sustain their enthusiasm as well as a consideration of issues which make the job so demanding.

Characteristics of Enchanted Headteachers

What emerged from my discussions were a group of common characteristics – characteristics of the individuals, the way they work and the schools they lead.

- Pride, a selfless pride, a generosity of spirit, a pride in their people and their achievements. *“I have brilliant kids, a brilliant staff and great governors.”*
- Closeness to the children and an acute awareness of their needs and where they come from. They believe that their school is making a huge difference to children’s lives. They demonstrate a passionate commitment to teaching and learning, to the quality of provision, to maintaining high standards, to developing fully rounded individuals well prepared for the next stage of their lives. They know what is going on, and everyone knows they know. *“I think a very, very important part of headship is knowing your families, knowing not just the child who is in school but knowing the child and the family from which it comes each day.”*
- Respect for and sensitivity to the needs of others, placing a high value upon quality of relationships throughout the school community. This respect and sensitivity is modelled strongly in all they say and do. They are builders of teams and developers of people. *“I believe in the team. I believe within the four walls of this school I have the expertise to cope with any problem. To develop something in a particular area we sit down and get our heads together. We find a solution, a solution that will work in our school.”*
- An optimistic view of change as challenge – not a blind acceptance of change but a view that the school must keep moving forward, can always improve further. Imposed change is to be taken, adapted and made to work in their schools. *“We never see change as a threat, we wouldn’t be bowed down by worry. We would be optimistic, and think if it’s going to improve things, to make things better, let’s do our best with it.”*

- Good at listening, encouraging the contribution of others, accepting constructive criticism and admitting mistakes. And being self-reflective in doing so. *“My deputy head and my lower school co-ordinator are two people I respect very, very highly and neither of them are slow at telling me when they think something needs changing, something needs doing, or that I’ve got it wrong.”*
- View of themselves as nothing special. They are acutely conscious that much of what they do and how they do it is context sensitive.

Learning from Enchanted Headteachers

The characteristics I have described identify people who are able to sustain their effectiveness and the continued success of the school. These findings give rise to a number of questions. Does the absence of some or all of these characteristics make that sustainability difficult?

It does seem probable that if the foundations upon which enchanted headship appears to be built – pride, caring, respect, sensitivity, optimism and an overriding passion that their work makes a difference to children – are absent, it makes sustained effectiveness for headteachers very difficult.

Are these fundamental foundations upon which to build sustainable successful headship? What are the implications for headship training? Could the characteristics identified in the enchanted heads form the basis of a reflective audit tool for headteachers or LEA officers supporting headteachers?

Utilising the support of enchanted headteachers might be difficult. They insist that their success is context sensitive, that they are good at being headteacher of that school only because of the support they have within their school. How do we harness their expertise for the benefit of less experienced headteachers?

One way of utilising this expertise might be though helping enchanted headteachers articulate their contribution to the success of their school, to give them a coherent understanding of their achievements so that they can share it with others. In this way their success, their achievements and their ability to sustain that success is celebrated.

Celebrating Enchanted Headship

Modern headship means leading a highly accountable, closely scrutinised, public service. That individuals manage to remain committed, enthused and successful in this high pressure situation needs to be acclaimed. The headteachers interviewed for this study lead successful schools that are improving the life chances of the children in their care.

We need to celebrate their achievements and that of others like them. In doing so we can also provide an antidote to some of the scepticism and cynicism that sometimes pervades debate within and about our schools.

References

Brighouse T. and P. Woods. (1999) **How to Improve Your School**, Routledge, London

Day C. and A. Bakioglu. (1996) **'Development and Disenchantment, in the Professional Lives of Headteachers'**. In: Goodson I and Hargreaves A, Teachers Professional Lives, Falmer Press, London

Pascal C. and P. Ribbins. (1998) **Understanding Primary Headteachers**, Cassell, London

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