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National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

Experiences of new headteachers in cities

Executive summary

Resource

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Introduction

A team from the London Centre for Leadership in Learning (LCLL) at the Institute of Education was commissioned by the National College in March 2011 to undertake a three-month research study to investigate how urban school leaders are prepared for headship and the challenges and experiences they face during their first year in post.

This small-scale study investigates the experiences of five new heads from London and one new head from Midlands inner-city who were interviewed and observed for one day. Interview data was also derived from six more experienced heads (ie, those in post for between two and four years) who were asked to reflect on the early years of headship. An online discussion forum provided a small amount of additional data.

From these sources of data, which were collected only from the headteachers themselves, six case studies and four vignettes were written that illustrate the experiences of new heads in a variety of contexts in large cities. The case studies include a series of reflective prompts or questions for the reader to consider.

This research report also includes a review of current literature since 2000 into the training, development and support of newly appointed heads (part B).

Part C discusses the main findings of the research, especially in relation to challenges faced, preparation for headship, loneliness of headship, and mentoring and other forms of support. It also considers the practice of headship and heads' views of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and teaching schools.

Part D considers the implications of the findings for leadership and leader development.

Part E consists of the six case study accounts of the experiences of new heads within a variety of urban contexts whilst part F includes four vignettes of more experienced heads.

Key findings from the research

Challenges

The issues faced by new, urban heads in this study are consistent with previous research findings. The review of literature showed a consistent picture of the experiences of new heads regardless of location (in the UK or overseas) and regardless of context. The challenges experienced by newly appointed heads were many and varied.

Many of the new urban heads in this study were taking up headships where there was a need for the school to raise standards and for change to be introduced. They were very conscious of the high-stakes, accountability culture in which they operated.

The speed with which change was needed and the manner in which it was introduced was an issue. Decisions were influenced by the competence and capability of existing staff and the possibility of making new appointments, especially to the senior leadership team. Reading the context of the school and its capacity for change were key components of managing change.

The new heads wished to share and distribute leadership but did not know staff well enough to be able to do so with confidence. As a result, the early days were much harder and demanding for some than expected.

The experience of heads in managing their new situations and taking control was similar to the five stages of 'taking charge' described by Gabarro (1987). The new heads were still experiencing the first two stages and the more experienced heads were in the latter stages. Gabarro characterises the first six months as 'taking hold', which involves intense learning, understanding the problems, establishing priorities and taking corrective actions. The second six months or 'immersion' stage involves relatively little organisational change activity as leaders develop a better understanding of the basic issues and underlying problems. 'Reshaping', 'consolidation' and 'refining' of change follows over the next one or two years.

Preparation

New heads in the study felt that they had benefited most from a wealth of experience in assistant and deputy headship roles and referred to the benefits of working with heads who had been concerned with their professional and career development. Experience under heads who have seen it as part of their role to develop the deputy for headship by giving them stretching tasks and sharing responsibilities was very important.

Some new heads had had roles outside the school in their previous posts, for example as an advanced skills teacher (AST) or local authority adviser. They had found this valuable preparation in giving them experience of a range of schools and work with a variety of people.

There was a view that it was difficult to predict what would be met in the first year of headship and that no preparation programme could be sufficiently bespoke or comprehensive to cover every eventuality.

Loneliness

The loneliness that headship brings and the isolation of the role were recognised pre-appointment but nevertheless came as a shock to respondents. There was a feeling that it would be very hard to prepare heads for the felt experience of isolation, accountability and relentlessness although the literature did highlight examples of how pre-appointment programmes have successfully prepared participants for the shock of their first headship role.

Mentors and other forms of support

Mentoring was a very important form of support and critical friendship. Respondents referred to mentoring from a variety of sources - the National College (Head Start), the London Leadership Strategy (Moving to New Headship), the local authority, the diocese and elsewhere. Several heads continued to access support from their previous headteachers.

Different mentors were needed at different times for different purposes and heads spoke of requiring a range of people on whom they could call depending on the need or issue in question.

Networks are important in the support and development of headteachers. In this study, these were many and varied, more real than virtual, and often maintained from the past to support them in their new headships. Different networks were used for different purposes.

Some new heads had been able to spend time in their school in the term between appointment and taking up post and, where this was the case, they had found it very valuable. Time had been used to build an understanding of context and in identifying priorities for change and quick wins. Establishing a relationship with the chair of governors in the term before taking up post was mentioned several times. For posts where the opportunity to spend time in the school prior to appointment was not available, the new heads felt strongly that there should be an expectation of a proper handover before a new head takes up post.

Advice for new heads

Although the respondents were not specifically asked to offer advice to new heads, several of them did so. The following suggestions were made:

- Everything you do should be centred on outcomes for children.
- Make every child feel listened to.
- Don't change things too quickly, find out what's working and what's not working.
- Be strategic in everything you do, but you've got to be organised to be strategic.
- Give yourself time to reflect.
- Be friendly with staff, but don't expect to be friends with them.
- Use the most appropriate leadership style for the situation – sometimes democratic, but at other times more assertive.
- Deal with issues openly, honestly and directly with people.
- Praise and thank stakeholders to make people feel appreciated.
- Hold open meetings with parents to show that the head is accessible and interested in their views.

The practice of headship

As in previous studies, heads found the work fast-paced, stressful, relentless, fragmented, involving a wide variety and range of activities, and responsive to the needs of others in the school. These heads spoke of the high-priority issues that could interrupt their planned days, with large amounts of time often required to sort out complex, urgent issues for the child and families. Liaison with other professionals such as the police and social services teams was involved as part of such cases. Heads were also keen to be seen as visible, open and accessible, devoting time to walkabouts, which included many interactions with pupils, parents and staff.

On the observation days for this study, new headteachers spent nearly half their time (46 per cent) on management. This was defined to include meetings with staff, budget and finance matters, behavioural issues, health and safety, premises, shortlisting and interviewing new staff, assessment and examination issues, walkabouts with management-centred interactions, playground and lunch duties, special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion, and parents and governors.

Approximately a third (32 per cent) of time was spent on leadership. This was defined to include strategic planning, leadership meetings, classroom observations, self-evaluation activity, school improvement planning, walkabouts with learning-centred interactions, staff development and the governing body.

Administration occupied 17 per cent of heads' time. All the heads started and ended the days by dealing with emails and general administration. Several arrived early, from 7am, in order to do this before the start of the school day and any unplanned interruptions.

The remainder of the time (5 per cent) was spent on teaching, continuing professional development (CPD) or as personal time.

NPQH

The research heads had taken NPQH at various times between 2003 and 2010 and thus had experienced different versions of the programme. Views regarding the experience of NPQH were varied, with most finding it interesting and helpful.

The practical opportunities for apprenticeship, visiting other schools and hands-on experience contributed most to the feeling of readiness to take on the headship role. However, heads felt that practical opportunities should be supported by opportunities for learning and reflection.

Face-to-face learning opportunities and networking were preferred to virtual contact.

Improvements suggested (some of which are already in place) were:

- team development and management skills, distributed leadership and the key concept of trust
- information and guidance about the statutory responsibilities of headteachers, for example in safeguarding
- how to set a budget and handle a deficit budget
- information about redundancy and capability procedures
- information about how faith schools work
- assignment of a personal mentor to support the journey to graduation and into a first headship
- ensuring that participants understand the importance of situational leadership, and its application in their new context
- scenario-based sessions to work out how to address the unexpected issues that arise (heating breakdown, closing the school, serious student pastoral or behavioural issues) and key learning from such situations
- development and support of existing staff and recruitment

Teaching schools

The heads were aware of the proposed introduction of teaching schools but several felt they needed more details and were unsure what they would look like in practice.

Most were supportive and many wished to be involved. They welcomed the opportunity for first-hand experience of teaching schools to improve training for teachers and for excellent schools to open up their practice.

Concerns were expressed by some heads in the study, for example the need to balance the needs of trainee teachers with those of children, especially within a context of high external accountability for test results. There was a concern that funding would be insufficient to deliver what was promised and fears that resources and opportunities would be taken away from other schools.

Implications of the research

Support during preparation, induction and beyond should be flexible, individualised and negotiable.

Pre-headship preparation programmes should include practical opportunities such as visiting other schools, observing good practice, project work that provides real-life insights, but there should be an appropriate balance with theory, learning and reflection.

Preparation programmes should make participants aware of the full extent of their statutory responsibilities and should offer practical sessions on finance, human resources and legal issues.

The time between being selected and taking up a headship should be used to ensure an effective handover, with a high priority given to allowing the incoming head time in school to gather information and build relationships with staff and governors. The National College is well placed to produce effective guidance on handovers.

Being assigned a personal mentor, preferably an experienced head, should be considered crucial during preparation, induction and the first few years of headship. Research evidence into effective selection of and matching between an experienced head and the context, needs and personality of the new head should be used, as well as what is known about preparation of both mentors and mentees. There should be a process of checks and corrections to ensure that a supportive mentor mentee relationship is maintained throughout induction and beyond.

Chairs of governors should be prepared for their role in ensuring effective support for new heads. Training programmes should provide expectations and guidance on the chair's role.

Membership of a range of effective networks is important in supporting new heads. The National College should continue to promote networks, especially those that encourage face-to-face interaction. It should use its influence to assist aspiring and new heads in securing access and socialisation into effective support networks.

The intended impact of remodelling and related initiatives on dedicated headship time warrants further research. What, if anything, has changed as a result of these initiatives?

Although headteachers gain confidence in their second year in post, the need for challenge and support, time for reflection and professional development and strategies to address the problem of loneliness remain. There is a continuing need for leadership development, mentoring/coaching and membership of networks. Being involved in the research, particularly the observation or shadowing component, was reported by the case study heads as being a valuable form of leadership development which encouraged reflection on practice.