

The Barriers That Deputy Head Teachers in Secondary Schools Face on Their Journey to Headship

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Abstract

There has been a significant increase in interest in the recruitment crisis in the United Kingdom. Many schools have had to re-advertise jobs for head teachers. Therefore why are headship roles proving to be so difficult to fill? What are the possible barriers that deputy head teachers face on their journey to headship? This article explores the reasons why some deputies do not want to progress to headship. Barriers such as work life balance, being accountable and having low self-confidence interrupt the journeys of those deputies not seeking headship and those who are unsure. Whilst being subject to further research and development, the findings that this article discusses can be used to further understand the trajectory of deputy heads and has potential implications for the management of talent within organisations. This has important implications when developing potential leaders.

Keywords: deputy headship leadership headship career advancement talent management

Introduction

Shaw (2006) states that, 'one in three schools is failing to appoint a head teacher when they first advertise, indicating a deepening crisis in leadership recruitment' (p.6). Similarly Rhodes and Brundrett (2005, 2006, and 2009) also write about a 'looming recruitment and retention crisis in the United Kingdom (UK)' (p. 1). A key factor in the declining number of head teachers is the age profile of the profession – a demographic 'retirement bulge' (IPPR, 2002; LDR, 2004; Ward, 2004) as 45% of the over 50s will be retiring in the next ten years. In recent years, the number of people taking early retirement after fifty five has also increased due to the demanding nature of the job and failure to achieve a successful work-life balance (Bristow et al., 2007). At the same time, not enough new leaders are emerging to replace those departing (Hayes, 2005; Hartle and Smith, 2004; Draper and McMichael, 2003, NSCL (NCTL), 2007a; Bush, 2008b; Thomson, 2009; Thompson, 2010) state that given these trends, it is estimated that the number of school leaders retiring is likely to rise from 2,250 in 2004 to nearly 3,500 in 2009, dropping back to 2,500 in 2016. To address this shortfall, it is estimated that the number of school leaders will need to increase by 15 to 20 per cent by 2009. However the time taken to become a head teacher is typically twenty years as the average age of new heads is forty three, a figure that has not changed in over twenty five years (Earley and Weindling, 2004). This long 'apprenticeship' deters suitable candidates so by 'making the route to the top swifter would render it more appealing to younger teachers', is true (NCSL (NCTL) L, 2007c p.7). This suggests that if more head teachers are required the number of years it takes to progress to headship needs to be a lot shorter. This concern over leadership succession - especially the potential shortage of head teachers is reflected in the strategy of the National College of School Leadership (NCSL), which has made 'identifying and growing tomorrow's leaders' one of its key priorities (NCSL (NCTL), 2007b).

Therefore who will fill these posts? Deputy Head teachers are the obvious successors, but why aren't they coming forward? (Hayes, 2005; NSCL, 2010). They are behaving as 'sitting tenants' (Hayes, 2005) or 'career deputies' (MacBeath, 2011) which then has a 'knock on' effect on middle leaders not being able to progress to deputy headship. Therefore the aim of this article is ascertain why Deputy Head Teachers are not seeking headship and what the barriers are to their career progression. This article will therefore contribute to the on-going research agenda and help shed light upon possible support and interventions useful in facilitation of transition to headship. The findings may be of importance to head teacher trainers, people working in local authorities, networks and other partnerships who are addressing the challenge of retaining and recruiting talented leaders to our schools.

Deputy headship: tasks and responsibilities

One key assumption made about deputies is that they aspire to headship and that their current role is an important stage in their development as an aspirant head teacher (West, 1992). What exactly is the deputy's role in relation to a head teacher? To many staff, the deputy head teacher is the person appointed to the school staff to understudy and deputise for the head teacher whenever necessary. Coulson (1976) examines 'the conceptions of primary school heads and deputy heads for the role of the deputy head ... in order to discover how , and to what extent, staff leadership functions are divided between the head and the deputy' (p. 37). He states that:

In general, deputy heads agreed that leadership (behaviours concerned with organising, directing and evaluating) is more appropriate to the head and that administration is more appropriate to the deputy ... In most schools, delegation to the deputy head appears to be limited, mainly involving the performance of routine tasks on the head's behalf.

Richardson (1973) in her study of Nailsea secondary schools found that deputies and head teachers within the study viewed themselves to be trapped in straitjackets – the one as 'the administrator', the other as the 'carer' (p. 218). Similarly Todd and Dennison (1980) make a similar point, they argue that the job of:

Deputy Head teacher has not been clearly defined, and in part this has arisen from a similar lack of role definition for head teachers, who have tended to exercise the powers of a paternalistic autocrat. As a result head teachers have viewed their deputies as extensions of themselves, and in doing so have deprived them of an authentic role ... many (complain) they were frequently reduced to carrying out a few minor technical or clerical duties which did not encourage, or even allow, the use of initiative and expertise (p. 304).

Having viewed these two points, it is hard to deny Coulson's (1976) claim that 'deputy headship often appears to be neither intrinsically satisfactory, nor an adequate preparation for headship, since the aspiring deputy rarely has the opportunity to make the type of decisions which will face him after promotion' (p. 46).

However Jayne (1996) talks more positively about the roles of head and deputy head as 'varyingly described as complementary, yin and yang, or the leadership partnership' (p. 317). She prefers using the word 'associate head' rather than 'deputy head' as (citing West, 1992) she claims that the word deputy can have many meanings such as: deputy as head's deputy (this is a more traditional role), deputy as prospective head (preparation for headship) and deputy as deputy-head-of-school (the emergent role). Jayne (1996) prefers the last definition to describe what the relationship should be between head teacher and deputy. West (1992) develops this idea and uses the analogy of head as pilot and deputy as co-pilot of the school.

Hayes (2005) also states that the ideal model for any relationship between head teacher and deputy should be a 'symbiotic one where the deputy and the head teacher draw on each other's strengths and each uses their own individual assets to augment the skills of the other' (p. 23).

The following four factors that underpin a successful relationship between the head teacher and deputy have been identified by Rutherford (2005), who has borrowed from Southworth (1995) and Hughes and James (1999): shared values and vision, close personal and professional relationships clarity about the boundaries between the two roles and provision of non-contact time for the deputy. Garret and McGeachie (1999) cite three additional factors: quality time, sufficient funding and the willingness and ability of the head teacher to support all aspects of a deputy's role.

In conclusion, there isn't really a clear and consistent definition of the deputy's role in school as the variety of tasks and responsibilities vary between primary and secondary deputies.

In Hausman et al.'s (2002) study, most beginning deputy headships did not understand the nature of their role and often lacked skills to perform it effectively. A universal definition of deputy and its underlying responsibilities is not achievable due to the dominant influence of the head. The role of the deputy is related to and heavily influenced by the head's role (Garrett and McGeachie, 1999; Ribbins, 1997) and the 'unequal power and authority distribution between the head and deputy has been retained' (Hughes and James, 1999 p. 85). Consequently the tasks and responsibilities of deputies vary from one school to another, and are assumed to be vague and unclear (Bush, 1981; Harris et al., 2003). The relationship that exists between a head teacher and deputy is likely to be very important to a deputy's progression.

Profile of applicants seeking headship

The following data is collated from the annual survey undertaken by the Education Data Surveys (EDS) on behalf of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). The survey tracks actual recruitment to school leadership roles each year, providing information about the candidates who are actually being appointed by governing bodies. The following table provides a snapshot of how the recruitment market is assessing how candidates meet headship standards (NCSL, 2010, p. 13).

Table 1: Age on appointment of secondary school head teachers in 2005-6

Age on appointment	Secondary Heads (%)
Under 35	2
35-39	10
40-44	23
45-49	39
50+	26

Table 2: Gender on appointment of secondary school head teachers in 2005-6

Gender	Secondary schools (%)
Female	38
Male	62

Table 3: Job role prior to appointment to head teacher in 2005-6

Job role prior to appointment	Secondary schools (%)
Substantive head teacher already	18
Acting head teacher	19
Deputy head teacher	54
Assistant head teacher	4
Other	10

Table 1 illustrates that more men than women were appointed as head teachers in secondary schools and that the majority had progressed from deputy head (see table 2 and 3). Candidates who have had a period as an acting head teacher also appear to do well. This may be due, in part, to the additional confidence that a candidate can gain from a period of acting headship, encouraging them to step up to a head teacher role on a permanent basis. The age profile shows that over 60% were aged between 40-50 years of age (see table 1). Draper and McMichael (2003) and James and Whiting (1998), also produce a profile of likely applicants for headship and in both studies they are: younger rather than older (younger being between 40-50 years of age) men rather than women (especially so in the secondary school sector); have been a shorter time in post; consider themselves ready; include headship in their career plans; take a strategic view of career development; do not fear the administrative burdens of headship; are undeterred by the possible effects of their quality of life; accept the loss of contact with children; have the positive encouragement of their head teachers and are confident individuals.

Evidence suggests, for example, that a significant number of school leaders have paused before headship – at deputy head and other senior leadership team level. Surveys of graduates of the old-style NPQH programme, for example, suggest that around half have not moved on to headship and a significant proportion have no immediate plans to do so (NCSL, 2003). Evidence also suggests that the longer an individual stays at deputy level, the more likely they are to assume the stance of being a 'career deputy'. In one survey, almost three quarters of deputies who reported no plans to take up headship had been in deputy roles for ten years or more (Mori, 2005). So if their aspiration for headship could be re-kindled, such a group could provide a valuable source of potential candidates.

Barriers to seeking headship?

Deputies who do not want to progress to headship have been described as settlers ‘deputy head teachers who have never applied for headship and do not envisage doing so in the future’ (James and Whiting, 1998 p. 356) or ‘career deputies’ who are becoming ‘sitting tenants’ (Hayes, 2005). The relationship that a deputy has with the head teacher and the types of experiences and opportunities that are given to them are key factors in deciding whether a deputy will go for promotion or not. Hartzell, Williams and Nelson (1995) suggest that deputies would be well advised to: know their head teacher, especially with regards to understanding the difficulties and role conflicts inherent to the position, the head teacher’s working practices character; understand the reciprocal nature of the head teacher and deputy relationship, in which the head teacher relies upon the deputy as well as vice versa; clarify explicitly their role and what is expected from them; take the initiative and deliver solutions along with problems. Evidence would suggest that where deputies build up strong relationships with their head teachers then the possibility for broadening leadership responsibilities and extending responsibility for developing the school is increased (Marcoulides and Heck, 1993).

Negative role models and a negative experience of working as a deputy can be detrimental. The head teacher remains the main gatekeeper to leadership functions in the school and if the head teacher does not support a strong leadership role for the deputy, it is unlikely this will happen (Southworth, 1995; Purvis and Dennison, 1993). Hayes (2005) demonstrates this by stating ‘some deputies are given low-grade tasks and do not receive the support and encouragement from their head teachers that will lead them towards headship’ (p. 3). Ribbins (1997) also makes a similar point by stating that the experience of being a deputy is not always helpful preparation because of the lack of direct leadership experience some deputies encounter in the role. In a secondary school, there can sometimes be up to four deputies who in itself can cause problems for the role of the individual deputies; roles may include ‘pastoral deputy’, ‘curriculum deputy’, ‘school improvement deputy’ and ‘professional development deputy’. If these roles are not rotated then each deputy may feel ‘trapped in a straightjacket’. However Draper and McMichael (2003) state that deputies in their research found that in larger schools there was a move away from the more authoritarian patterns of headship to more collaborative, participant management. This in turn gave deputies more opportunities to have influence over various school initiatives.

Consequently some potential heads find they already have the scope to put their ideas into practice and contribute to school developments. Thus there may be fewer incentives for people to seek headship itself. In a secondary school with a number of deputies, can all achieve headship? If a head teacher is expected to act as a ‘mentor’, can he/she do this successfully with three or four deputies? If a head teacher is absent then a deputy is expected to ‘step in’, thus giving valuable experience. However again this could be problematic, as which deputy would receive this valuable experience? It is all well and good that deputies receive as much training as possible whilst in post, but Ribbins (1997) makes the point that, ‘more deputies burn out than either heads or classroom teachers, despite the well-documented concern about these other groups. Deputies are the silent minority, the forgotten troops in the education army, suffering the most casualties, providing the most support and receiving none of the glory’ (p. 300). It would appear then that deputies might receive different experiences which all depends on the school that they are at and the head teacher they work with.

Another barrier that has been identified in the literature is the fear of failure that some deputies may face. Draper and McMichael (1998) talk of the ‘daunting elements to headship which may in themselves prevent even the well prepared and widely experienced deputy from applying for promotion’ (p. 165). James and Whiting (1998) also found in their survey of 366 deputies in England and Wales that deputies did not aspire to headship because of the ‘increasing concerns for the wide variety of expectations placed on head teachers today which can, in their view, be a major influence on job satisfaction and work performance’ (p. 359). The primary deputies in this survey didn’t like the ‘notion of the changing role of the head from leading practitioner to chief executive’ (p. 359), and this was a key inhibitor in not seeking headship. Smithers and Robinson (2007) also state that when asked how their role had changed during their time in post, English head teachers were able to cite fifty eight types of externally imposed demands. They were unable to think of any demands that had been taken away from them. It would appear that some deputies would rather ‘settle for the supportive role of deputy rather than the isolated and highly accountable position of head’ (Draper and McMichael, 1998, p. 161).

A further factor which arises as to why deputies may not go for headship are external factors such as the scale and pace of central government initiatives, which all have to be responded to. There are governors, parents, the government, the LEA (Local Education Authority) and Ofsted (Office in Standards in Education).

MacBeath (2011) states in his paper that in England and Wales the second main factor to recruitment difficulties was accountability, 'particularly in relation to the vulnerability of the heads to sacking in the light of poor results or a bad inspection (Ofsted) report' (p. 107). The Children Act 2004 followed the green paper 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) that was published in 2003 after the death of Victoria Climbié. The Act was accompanied by the publication of 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' in 2004 which suggested five 'outcomes' by which schools would be accountable and subject to inspection. These were: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing. A study for the National College on the impact of the ECM policy (Kirwan and MacBeath, 2008) identified eight key factors that head teachers would be accountable for; navigating national, local authority and community politics; engaging commitment of staff, students and partners in a vision of the purposes and ethos of the school; shaping school culture and ethos proactively around children's needs; creating structures that distribute leadership, spread responsibility and foster trusting relationships; managing workforce remodelling; placing high priority on the professional development of the whole staff; managing external relationships and ensuring sustainability of commitment, finance and resourcing.

Head teachers are not left alone to get on with the job and deputy head teachers may feel there is too much public accountability (Draper and McMichael, 1998; MacBeath, 2011). Crawford (2003) also makes a similar point where she states that the head teacher in particular is accountable, through such markers as inspection and league tables, for the success or failure of their school and takes everything as a very personal responsibility. Gronn (2003) views the past and current climate for educational leadership as 'greedy work', as it demands more and more of head teachers as individuals. James and Whiting (1998) in their study state that deputies didn't want the ultimate responsibility; they were 'apprehensive of failure and the public disclosure of mistakes, and dubiety or uncertainty, of their proficiency to fulfil the role of head teacher' (p. 360).

Self-belief

An individual can display leadership potential and once he/she has, then there is a responsibility to find ways to better attend to their development (Fink and Brayman, 2006). Southworth (2002) claims we should avoid adopting a one size fits all approach to leadership identification and development. Developing potential leadership can be made more difficult if the identified individual has low self-belief in their ability to take on a leadership role.

There are two sides to self-belief:

First, self-efficacy is the belief that individuals have in their own ability to succeed in specific situations. It plays a major role in how goals, tasks and challenges are approached. The concept of self-efficacy, as proposed by Bandura (1986, 1997) has served as the basis for most research on teacher efficacy. Bandura understood the expectation about one's efficacy to consist of 'people's judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attaining designated types of performances' (Bandura, 1986, p. 391; 1997, p. 3).

If an individual has a high self-efficacy then they are likely to believe they can perform well in all situations. Difficult tasks are viewed as challenges to be mastered rather than something to be avoided. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks. Failure is attributed to insufficient knowledge and skills which are acquirable. In contrast, individuals who doubt their capabilities may shy away from difficult tasks. When faced with difficulties they may dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they may encounter rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. They may be slower to recover their sense of efficacy following failure or setbacks (Bandura, 1994). In these terms, increasing an individual's feelings of self-efficacy appears to be potentially important element in talent management and the success of the leadership journey. Persistent low self-efficacy may lead to the avoidance or withdrawal from a leadership journey.

Second, self-esteem results from the way aspirant leaders and hence potentially deputies, compare themselves with others within the school. Self-esteem has been defined as a 'positive or negative attitude towards the self' (Rosenberg, 1965 p. 30). Deputies that compare themselves negatively are more likely to have low self-esteem and may not want to progress to headship. However, deputies who are confident in their own abilities accept their strengths and weaknesses, and who feel encouraged may have much higher self-esteem.

The term self-efficacy also relates to an understanding of self-belief.

Bandura (1997) states that people's beliefs about their efficacy can be developed by four main sources of influence; mastery experience, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and psychological arousal.

Mastery experiences are experiences that are gained when success is achieved. The perception that a performance has been successful raises efficacy beliefs and helps in the development of a strong sense of self-efficacy. Alternatively, failure lowers efficacy beliefs and contributes to the belief that future performances will also be low (Bandura, 1993).

Bandura's (1997) second source of efficacy beliefs is through the vicarious experiences provided by social models. Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by continuous effort raises observer's beliefs that they also possess the capabilities to succeed. However there is also a negative effect as if others are observed to fail even having tried extremely hard, this lowers observer's judgements of their own efficacy and undermines their efforts. The impact of modelling on perceived self-efficacy is strongly influenced by the perceived similarity to the models. Observers also seek models that possess the competences to which they aspire.

Social or verbal persuasion is a third way of strengthening people's beliefs that they have what it takes to succeed. It refers to the feedbacks from others (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1994) states that if people are persuaded verbally and that they possess capabilities to master given activities, they are more likely to exert greater effort and try to succeed. If people harbour self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when problems arise then they will not try hard to succeed and will avoid challenging activities and consequently give up quickly in the face of difficulties.

The fourth way of modifying self-beliefs of efficacy is to reduce people's stress elements at work and at home. Bandura (1997) termed it as physiological arousal which refers to the actual physical reaction an individual, would have to an event or action. People interpret their stress reactions and tension as signs of vulnerability to poor performance. He also stated that mood also affects people's judgement of their self-efficacy. Positive mood enhances perceived self-efficacy, whereas despondent mood diminishes it. Therefore in order to succeed people need to be able to perceive and interpret emotional and physical reactions and be able to deal with them effectively.

Bandura's (1994) thinking on self-efficacy and how it affects individuals either positively or negatively is beneficial to this study as I want to determine what factors demotivate deputy head teachers from progressing to headship. Possessing a high self-efficacy is an important aspect of Gronn's (1999) 'accession' stage, but what happens to those deputies who do not possess a high self-efficacy? Do they still see themselves as candidates for headship? Should head teachers be doing more to motivate their deputies to apply for headship? Deputies have made the journey from teacher to middle leader and then deputy having proved their credibility along the way. Therefore why are some deputies finding the transition to headship more of a challenge? Why don't they have more confidence in themselves?

The place of self-belief as a factor in the management of talent and the journey to leadership warrants further attention

Draper and McMichael (1998, 2003), Browne-Ferrigno (2003), Hayes (2005) and James and Whiting (1998) all explain the personal dimension as being a factor that might deter deputies from seeking headship. These other reasons include: impending retirement, family commitments, illness, relationship losses, dependant relatives, family relationships and relocation. All of these factors as well as the others discussed previously have had a part to play when a deputy decides whether to go for headship or not.

Finally, deputies also decide not to progress on further because that is as far as they want to go (Hayes, 2005; Draper and McMichael, 1998, 2003; Goldhaber et al., 2008 Oplatka and Tamir, 2009). Their career stops at deputy teacher level and it as far as they wish to go in career terms. The appreciation of this is not always easy for senior managers who themselves have been quite ambitious with their career decisions. It is clear that a number of people do not wish to keep going up the ladder. Bobbitt, Faufel, and Burns (1991) produced an early model of career patterns where they identified stayers, movers and leavers. This was further developed by Draper, Fraser, and Taylor (1998) who suggested there were three different career strategies from which teachers choose, staying (in the classroom), moving (continuing to apply for promotion) and leaving (teaching).

Research

Having referred to the wider frameworks of Ribbins and Gunter (2002), Wallace and Poulson (2003) and Habermas (1971), this research can be described as a practical interest, which relates to how we understand each other and relationships. It is also looking for knowledge for understanding, which focuses on understanding the reasons why deputies do/do not progress onto headship and can also be described as humanistic research.

My epistemological approach and research strategy for data gathering lies in the qualitative/subjective position which is one of description and interpretation rather than measurement and interpretation.

The methodology employed was a case study, which Denscombe (2003) describes 'is its focus on just one instance of the thing that is being investigated' (p. 30). This approach enabled me to delve into issues in more detail and discover facts that might not have become apparent through other types of research. The research method was semi-structured interviews in order to obtain fuller reasons as to what the barriers were to headship. A non-probability sample called purposive or judgemental sampling was used, which enabled me to select the cases which were in my view representative or typical. Thirteen secondary schools were approached and five were selected mainly due to the number of deputies that could be interviewed as the larger and medium sized schools were able to provide at least two to four deputies to interview. The sample included fourteen deputy head teachers and five head teachers who all worked in the Birmingham area. Before any interviews took place interviewees were given details about the research and asked to sign a consent form with detailed their contribution, the right to withdraw, confidentiality and the security of the data. Each semi-structured interview that took place lasted approximately sixty minutes and was then tape recorded and transcribed and sent to deputies for any additions, revisions, excisions and for factual accuracy. Once data had been collected and read it had to be analysed. Gunter's (1999) tabular format (matrix) with interviewees along the top and themes/issues that had been identified down the left hand side of the table was used. This method enabled me to see patterns forming which would help with analysing the results and then discussing any findings connected to the reasons of why deputies were not seeking headship.

Findings

Of the fourteen deputy head teachers that were interviewed six stated that they did not want to progress onto headship with a further four who were undecided about their progression. The main reasons include: accountability, work life balance and confidence in their ability.

Accountability – national challenge, litigation and Ofsted

One of the biggest barriers appeared to be the accountability that head teachers were under for everything that happened within a school. Deputies talked about the increasing pressure that head teachers were under e.g. being in a NTI school, National Challenge, fear of litigation and Ofsted were all major hurdles that had to be faced.

...increasing strains on heads, increasing pressures, the whole accountability thing. I knew a number of heads who seemed to be more nervous each day and I thought well I don't actually have to put myself through that pressure if I don't want to. (DHT 13)

There are so many different pressures on schools now particularly with the requirement to get whatever results happen to be the results of the day ... there are so many things that come in from central government – different initiatives that change their names. I think the job is in many ways quite overwhelming

These pressures appeared to overwhelm this group. They could only see the constant pressure that their head teacher was under and not the more enjoyable aspects of the job.

One talked about head teachers being in a vulnerable position:

... things like National Challenge and what that will bring might put more people off. Heads will become more vulnerable; their positions will become more vulnerable, so I think the headship crisis could get deeper. I know that there are quite a few people of my generation of deputies around Birmingham, who have made the same decision as I have. We create in some ways a twofold problem for the authority because not only are we not going for headship, we are also blocking deputy headship. (DHT 1)

Ofsted isn't an explicit barrier, but in terms of accountability obviously it is important and I think that given that nowadays if a school goes down, you go down with it with the Local Authority taking you on – getting you a nice job somewhere. (DHT 13)

The deputy continues to state that although Ofsted can 'get rid' of perceived failing head teachers, they themselves cannot 'get rid' of failing teachers as easily.

You've got hundreds of teachers that you can't get rid of that are bloody incompetent and yet in one foul swoop you can destroy a head teacher of a school. (DHT 6)

Work life balance/family

Deputies also cited families, especially children as a major deterrent to headship. They wanted a workable work life balance but were realistic about the commitment that was needed in becoming a head teacher.

... I'm not thinking of headship. I think the main reasons for that are partly family (sic!), still have two children. I had two female head teachers who both had children and I am very aware of the time commitment it takes, particularly in the first five years, it is very heavy especially if you want to turn the school around. (DHT 9)

That's a serious part of not going for headship – where do you get the job satisfaction from in that job? As you know I have a young second family and all those pressures deter me from thinking about headship. If I hadn't married again I might have been a head today – who knows? (DHT 4)

Another also reflected on why she hadn't gone for headship before

My daughter was younger then, and you know, on reflection there have been times during her life when I've gone for promotion and when I look back, it has been unfair on her. I think family plays a huge role in why some deputies might not go for headship. (DHT 1)

Two deputies comment on the breakdown of marriages that they have observed which have subsequently had an impact on their decision on becoming a head teacher.

On the home front it has been a negotiation, and I'm very lucky ... the fear for me about headship is that too many heads who are not married anymore, too many heads that have had marriages that have broken down ... I don't want my kids to grow up and say 'Mum, I never saw you. You were always ...'

I just think it is too much to ask (time commitment) ... but maybe you do need that level of commitment in order to then be able to say maybe those are the only sorts of people that make good heads.

Confidence – having a positive self-concept

Having self confidence in their own ability appeared to be the main barrier for these deputies. One interviewee still didn't feel she had enough knowledge of all aspects of a HT's role.

It would be about not being ready, not being wise enough in enough different areas although my knowledge is growing I still know there are large areas I don't have a handle on. (DHT 9)

Further on into the interview she states that a co-headship role could be the answer as decisions would have to be shared between two people. 'I think women are naturally inclined to share and not build power, it's not about the power or personality it's all about the best, then I would love it, I would absolutely love to do it like that'. Self-doubt as well as self-confidence also was the main reason deterring the following deputy.

I'm not so good at the administration and jumping through hoops and responding to problems, all those sorts of things that heads are called on to do, lots and lots of meetings, lots going on after school. (DHT 4)

Some also appeared to need somebody behind them, a mentor, guiding them to make that ultimate decision.

I've actually allowed myself to think I'm no good, I can't do this, so I've got to inflate that balloon again, I've got to get myself back – I'm partly there now. (DHT 2)

This deputy had been persuaded to take on an acting post of head teacher at her present school whilst her head teacher was asked to help another school within the consortium. She described her head teacher as being dynamic, charismatic and inspirational; all things she felt she was not. Her character was very different to her head teacher's and she felt colleagues within her school would compare styles and that she would not come out well.

Having to stay at the same school and not move on can influence a person's self-confidence, especially if he has been a very good leader – stepping into another person's shoes can be very daunting. (DHT 3)

Another deputy felt that her head teacher was at fault because he hadn't rotated posts so she felt under prepared for headship. She felt that roles should be swapped at regular intervals so that different skills could be developed, 'otherwise you lose self-confidence thinking that you haven't really acquired all skills to become a head teacher.'

I think the main barrier for me is that I've always been able to work in my comfort zone and within my area of expertise which is pastoral inclusion, students, parents, staff and that sort of thing. I'm definitely not a data person. The school's I have worked in have allowed me to work in my comfort zone – I need leadership that is more spread where people rotate posts. If I was made to work with data/curriculum I would feel more confident to move forward. (DHT 5)

Discussion and conclusion

Hayes (2005) describes deputies not seeking headship as an interesting phenomenon - a group who are often capable and effective deputies who have made the decision not to progress further. He also describes this group as 'sitting tenants' and states that this group have serious consequences for the profession as they block the route to headship for others. This is reiterated by Draper, Fraser and Taylor (1998) who also describe this groups career strategy as stopping others applying for promotion.

Alternatively Bobbitt, Faufel and Burns (1991) class this group as stayers. Those who choose to stay in the classroom are not going to apply for headship.

Accountability

One explanation given by deputies for not seeking headship was the role that the head teacher played of being accountable for everything that went on in a school. Deputies talked about the increasing pressure that heads were under e.g. being in a NTI (notice to improve) school, National Challenge, fear of litigation and Ofsted. These were all major hurdles that had to be faced. Draper and McMichael (2003) also found this to be the case for the falling level of interest amongst experienced staff in applying for headship. James and Whiting (1998) found in their research that for deputy heads who did not aspire to headship, that one of the primary reasons was that they would find the public accountability too risky. With the introduction of site-based performance management (now appraisal), the tasks that have to be completed by heads have changed beyond just the language of leadership and having a vision. There is not just more work to do, but there has been a qualitative shift in the type of responsibilities (Craig with Rayner, 1999).

Head teachers have had to delegate more which can be a risky business at a time when head teachers can suffer a loss of livelihood through 'the consequences of failure or the politicking around what is regarded as failure' (Hayes, 2005; Wallace and Hall, 1994; Wallace and Huckman, 1996). This group of deputies were very much aware that society had changed with more demands being put on schools and society also becoming litigious. (Gray, 1997) They also doubted their capabilities and shied away from difficult tasks and appeared to have no confidence in their own ability to manage a school.

Work life balance

This was another important barrier to headship and correlates with James and Whiting's research, (1998) and Draper and McMichael (2003) who found that the reasons deputies did not seek headship was because of the personal dimension. Deputies in this study all cited families, especially children as a major deterrent to headship. They wanted a workable work life balance but were realistic about the commitment that was needed in becoming a head teacher: Draper and McMichael (2003) also found no real difference between male and female deputies interviewed which also correlates with findings from this research as both male and female deputies talked about family life as one of the barriers.

Even those who were keen to apply considered their applications carefully and would be highly selective as a consequence of domestic pressures and preferences. (Draper and McMichael, 1998 p. 192)

Reasons also centred on concerns over not wanting to disrupt their children's education, or not wishing to re-locate to a different area. Draper and McMichael (1998) also found that having children settled was a key motivator for going for headship and that they did not want their quality of life diminished. Many had already felt the relationship losses with children when becoming a deputy whom they felt would only increase if they became head teachers.

Confidence

Another factor that appeared to deter deputies was that they did not possess confidence and self-belief in themselves and consequently doubted their own abilities. This is reiterated by Oplatka and Tamir (2009) who state:

Holding unenthusiastic views about headship coupled with what seems to be low confidence in their ability to perform effectively in the head's role appear to make them feel that the transition from deputy headship to school headship would be moving to a different level (p. 228)

Deputies in this study focussed on what they could not do and not on what they could.

They found it more difficult to recover their sense of self confidence if they had been unsuccessful with any of their job roles. This accord with Bandura's (1997) 'mastery experience' where failure lowers efficacy beliefs and contributes to the belief that future performance will also be low. Deputies also revealed that they were consciously waiting for their head teachers to identify their senior leadership potential and to receive confirmation that they were ready to progress internally or elsewhere. This Bandura (1997) states is 'social or verbal persuasion' where others provide 'feedback' on performance (Bandura, 1986). He states that if people are persuaded verbally that they possess capabilities to master given activities, they are more likely to want to succeed. Deputies needed their confidence to be raised by their head, and sought feedback, recognition and advice. Without these being addressed by their head teachers the frustration set in which hindered their progress (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2008). This also concurs with the view of Pascal and Ribbins (1998):

It doesn't matter how many courses you've been on, and how much you know intellectually about the process of being a head if you don't develop an appreciation of yourself as a person ... you will never make a good head. (p. 22)

James and Whiting (1998) also cite 'dubiety' or uncertainty of their proficiency to fulfil the role of head teacher. They state that within their study typical comments such as 'I don't know my own worth' and 'I'm not sure I could do it' (p. 360) were made.

Deputies made ambiguous subjective assessments about their professional competence and retained fluctuating levels of confidence.

In conclusion, the perceived prize of headship did not tempt all deputies with the demands of the 'top job' being regarded more of a 'poisoned chalice' than a 'positive challenge'. (James and Whiting, 1998) Deputies also did not like the fact that head teachers were accountable for everything that went on in a school. This public accountability they viewed as far too risky which also accords with work carried out by Draper and McMichael (2003); James and Whiting (1998); Crawford (2003); Oplatka and Tamir. (2009) The personal dimension also played a part in the reasons why deputies did not seek headship with concerns centring on family commitments, relationship losses, dependent relatives, family relationships and relocation. Other work life factors included illness and impending retirement. This concurs with work carried out by Draper and McMichael (1998, 2003); Browne-Ferrigno (2003); Hayes (2005) and James and Whiting (1998).

Finally, deputies own professional abilities were also of concern where they felt they did not possess confidence and self-belief in themselves. They considered themselves 'unready' for headship even having gone through the NPQH, which should be a validation of the fact, that their head teacher thinks they are ready for headship within the next 18 months. Allowing and encouraging deputies to continue with their professional development was not enough confirmation of their ability, a verbal declaration was also needed. This correlates with Bandura (1986, 1997) who suggests that verbal persuasion constitutes a potential potent source of self-efficacy. Verbal persuasion is associated with the verbal feedback on performance received from colleagues and other stakeholders. This could be highly relevant to aspirant leaders and to the management of their talent. This 'dubiety' or uncertainty of their proficiency to fulfil the role of head teacher is also cited by James and Whiting (1998) and Pascal and Ribbins (1998). Findings from the study confirmed previous work (Rhodes and Brundrett 2006; Cowie and Crawford 2009) showing that deputies need to foster self-confidence and self-belief at all stages of the journey to headship. A pre-qualification in advance of the NPQH could be the answer, at the right time in a deputy's career development, which would hopefully raise confidence. More research needs to be carried out on how leaders acquire the skills and confidence to take up leadership roles and a deeper understanding of leadership development from the time of entry to the profession through to headship.

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