Early Headship: negotiating the emotional landscape

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Introduction

In the conversations I have had with prospective head teachers, they are generally interested in my personal experience of the job, and my 'story'. This 'human interest' relates to the narrative of my experience. As a serving head teacher, I am conscious that this narrative of headship does not begin on being appointed to a post. Rather, the appointment is but a step on the journey to actually 'becoming' a head teacher; it is a point of departure rather than arrival. Fidler and Atton (2004: 159) contend that the 'moment of conception for a head is when the decision is taken to apply for headship'. I would suggest, following Gronn (1999), that the conception of a head teacher begins in the formation stages from birth, and includes all experiences and influences, which shape character development and personal values. 'Becoming' a head teacher encapsulates the sense of being a head teacher. This is more than a question of identity or an individual being defined by their job title. In my experience, being a head teacher is not just about a role or a position. Headship is all consuming, not simply in terms of the workload or the tasks and responsibilities associated with the post, but in terms of my 'person'- the intertwining of the role and who I am as an individual. I am the head teacher of the school I lead, but my personality, vision and values are different to those of the head teacher in a neighbouring school.

This thought piece is intended to elucidate early experiences in headship which contribute to 'becoming' a head teacher once appointment has been secured.

REFLECTION POINT 1: How will your formative experiences shape the head teacher you will become?

'Becoming' a Head Teacher: Growing into the role

As an individual moves to the post of head teacher in a new school, she[1] moves into a challenging situation where she usually has little or no currency in her 'emotional bank account' (Covey 1992: 188) with the school community from which can draw if required.

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[1] I will use the feminine form throughout this thought piece.

As well as this, she is assuming a role where the expectation is that she is in charge and therefore knows everything about the school and being a head teacher. Little recognition is taken of the fact that she may be in charge, but if appointed to a new school, she may well have no experience of that particular institution and this can result in organisational socialisation at its most testing, where the leader is the least experienced person in the school, in terms of her knowledge of that particular institution. Although mentors and friends may offer advice, they are not living in the context of this specific school with its own particular characteristics, nor can they share the weight of responsibility for any decisions the head teacher makes. Thus, there is a degree of dissonance between a novice head teacher's perceived competence of herself in previous roles to the temporary 'incompetence' experienced in being a new head teacher. Fidler and Atton (2004) indicate that making discoveries, finding issues which require decisions, as well as managing the expectations of staff can result in feelings of inadequacy, where survival becomes the main priority (p153).

Head Teacher Socialisation

There is an inherent complexity in the most senior post holder within the institution (head teacher) being inducted into a new school through the process of organisational socialisation. Much of the literature relating to the socialisation of head teachers examines early career experiences and influences (both reported at the time by new head teachers through journals or recalled for later interview), professional development or preparation for headship and the contemporaneous experience of 'becoming' a Head teacher (Barrett-Baxendale and Burton 2009; Weindling & Dimmock 2006; Cowie & Crawford 2008). Within these, a number of constructs of socialisation are evident.

Firstly, Weindling & Dimmock (2006) cite Merton's (1963) socialisation theory, which includes, professional socialisation (learning what it is to be a head teacher prior to taking on the role) and organisational socialisation (learning how to perform the role in a specific context, which begins on appointment). They contend that 'post-appointment processes, dominated by organisational socialisation, create the interactions that legitimate and validate a new school leader within a school, preparing the way for her or him to exert influence' (2006: 334). Crow (2007: 52) indicates that professional and organisational socialisation may generate conflict for the new head teacher as they frequently have conflicting values. It

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is in this legitimisation process, or conflict, that a key issue in headship development emerges. This potentially is the crucial stage if how a head teacher deals with critical, or legitimisation, incidents then shapes the outcome of their headship. Fidler and Atton (2004) refer to these as trigger points which:

> …test the ability of the head teacher to see beyond the presenting problem to potentially deeper issues and to respond appropriately. This response will shape future decisions and will have an important effect on other stakeholder's attitudes to the head (Fidler and Atton 2004: 168).

Weindling & Dimmock (2006: 335) believe that in response to such incidents professional identity is formed, as the individual shapes her sense of herself as head teacher. This is thus a crucial stage in early headship. There is no doubt that head teacher socialisation is a complex process, but there is a further question as to whether the success of headship depends on how the new head teacher's professional identity is formed and the extent to which it is influenced by the organisational socialisation which takes place. To explore this question, it is helpful to consider what Weindling & Dimmock (2006) outline as a key element of organisational socialisation. This involves the head teacher attempting to take charge and bring about school improvement whilst at 'the same time the school is changing the school leader' Weindling & Dimmock (2006: 334). Indeed, the point where the head teacher influences the socialisation processes is crucial and it is possibly in this iterative process of the head being influenced by the organisation and vice versa that the key to successful headship lies. As new head teachers take up post and begin with an idea of what they want their school to be like, they then need to make sense of this when the school does not match their blue print and they must adjust their expectations accordingly, or affect change on the organisation to address the mismatch. Crow (2007) states that new head teachers socialise 'personnel to new values and approaches while simultaneously being socialised to the new values of headship' (Crow 2007: 56). This process may produce an early crisis situation if the individual head teacher is perceived to breach an aspect of the organisation's value system.

Weindling and Dimmock (2006: 338) further indicate that a key transition comes when the head teacher has to produce a tailor-made response to a particular situation and it is in this

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response that their professional identity as head teacher begins to be shaped. Fidler and Atton (2008) refer to such transitions as 'opinion-forming occasions… when the new head has to respond to a first major challenge. How it is dealt with will set the scene for success or failure in the future' (Fidler and Atton 2008: 171). Such is the importance of these early days that Weindling and Dimmock (2006) state that, in terms of head teacher training: 'More attention to the induction or taking-charge stage is needed, because it invariably is problematic and requires careful analysis and action in situ' (Weindling and Dimmock 2006: 335). This is further evidenced in the Scottish study where MacBeath et al. (2009: 20) concluded that new head teachers 'found their enthusiasm tempered by the complexity of responsibilities with which they were faced'. Thus it is evident that the early days of headship are possibly the most turbulent.

REFLECTION POINT 2: Can you recall any situation where you experienced (or observed) an 'opinion-forming' occasion in a new leader? What impact did this have and are there any lessons you would draw from this situation for the future?

Managing the 'Greedy Work' of Headship

Gronn (2003) refers to educational leadership as 'greedy work' (p246) requiring a great deal of time and personal commitment. Considerable emotional intensity is attached to such a high stakes occupation, where the success or failure of a school equates to the success or failure of the individual head teacher; thus the individual head teacher becomes identified with 'her' school. Further challenges in emotional leadership for head teachers leading schools in the 21st century, are outlined by Day and Gu (2010: 25), who refer to the 'new teaching environments' within which staff are now working. They state that, internationally, reforms in schools have six features in common, which include being driven by governmental desire to raise standards and address the fragmentation of social values. They also indicate that these reforms inevitably increase teacher workload and are driven by deficit views of teachers and that, unsurprisingly, they take little account of any emotional impact on staff. It is left to head teachers to manage the emotional impact of this general trend within each school, whilst also managing the emotional demands of each unique local situation.

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Onlookers may observe head teachers undertaking a variety of complex tasks and engaging in numerous interchanges involving countless individuals or groups, from the early hours of the morning until late into the evening. The tasks associated with headship can be delineated in job descriptions; the competences and standards required outlined in professional standards. What cannot be delineated, however, are the emotional demands made on head teachers on a day-to-day and cumulative basis. Such demands relate to the emotions spent in dealing with challenging situations within the school and its community, as well as handling emotions in themselves and others. These emotional demands contribute to the 'emotional labour' (Gronn 2003) of headship. This emotional labour may include, for example, the head teacher presenting an outward appearance that does not necessarily reflect what she is feeling on the inside, absorbing the emotions of others (quite often negative) and dealing with crisis management in stressful and often highly visible situations, often with media involvement. During such times, the head teacher is the figurehead and focus of attention as she embodies the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the school, as well as providing emotional leadership in crisis situations. How the head behaves or reacts will be mirrored in the cascading relationships within the school. When times are hard or traumatic, all eyes turn to the head for support, encouragement and guidance, at a time when she too is challenged as an individual. This may be particularly significant if such situations arise in the early stages of headship, when the individual is becoming established as a head teacher and dealing with several situations which they may have inherited from their predecessor.

Emotional Leadership

The revised 'Standard for Leadership and Management' (GTCS: 2012), emphasies emotional intelligence:

> Leaders continually develop self-awareness; they regularly question their practice through processes of reflection and critical enquiry. They manage self and others effectively, with a commitment to collegiate practice…They display confidence and courage in the way they deal with criticism and conflict (GTCs 2012: 9).

Whilst these examples may be statements about leadership behaviour, what is not readily discussed is the more complex area of handling the emotional leadership of the school. Emotional leadership (Gronn 2003: 134) of the school is the extent to which an individual head teacher shapes the emotional context of the school by the way she treats others and the extent to which her behaviour is congruent with her values and vision. Included in this is the sensitivity required in leading challenging schools, which may be handling 'repetitive change injury' (Harris 2007: 25), reflecting the volume of change and developments with which schools are currently dealing. Thus, headship is 'a complex synergy of emotion and leadership' (Crawford 2009: 2) where the head is dealing with her own emotions, particularly in the early days in post, whilst managing the emotions of others as well as the wider ethos of the school.

Dealing with legacy issues left by predecessors is a significant issue for head teachers in these early days in post. Some of the problematic legacy issues identified include: difficulties caused by the style and practice of the previous head, the school buildings, communication and consultation with staff, creating a better public image of the school, coping with a weak member of the senior team, dealing with incompetent staff and low staff morale (Weindling & Dimmock 2006: 329). Lack of central support, a sense of isolation and the realisation that the buck stops with them, were also identified as concerns for head teachers (Walker & Qian 2006: 301). These authors also indicate that surviving these early experiences necessitates a range of strategies including seeking feedback from stakeholders, clarifying and articulating values, building alliances and personal capacity, as well as picking appropriate battles to fight. Relating to emotional labour or leadership more specifically, Harris (2007: 90) indicates the danger of new head teachers being 'caught up in the web of historical power relations' when competitors vie for supremacy in gaining the trust of the new head teacher. In the context of early organisational and professional socialisation, it is crucial that these potential conflicts are handled sensitively, both in terms of the individual head teacher's own feelings about herself as head teacher whilst also recognising the feelings of the staff in the new school; there is only one opportunity to make a first impression and the new head teacher has to ensure that this is a positive one. Fidler and Atton (2004) stress how important this is:

In headship the first staff meeting and the first assembly are when staff and

> pupils form their initial opinions about the new head teacher. Having formed
> a first impression, they will then test this out, looking for evidence that it was
> right (2004: 164).

It is important, therefore, to create a positive first impression particularly in dealing with any conflicts that arise. In doing this, self-protection is important.

A number of characteristics relating to the affective domain have been identified as being important in successful school leadership (Day et al. 2010). The findings of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) suggest that 'schools that are person-centred, and where the functional is for the sake of and expressive of the personal are both morally and instrumentally successful' (Day and Leithwood 2007 cited by Day and Gu 2010: 146). This follows Fielding's (2006) thesis cited by Day and Gu (2010: 146) that the functional (organisational productivity) should support the personal (enriching the human experience). It is therefore important that both the functional and the personal work together; a focus on the personal without an emphasis on the functional could lead to organisational dysfunction. ISSPP concluded that successful head teachers could apply combinations of the personal and the functional[2], with different emphasis, according to the situation, for example, 'building person-centred communities which are functionally successful' (Day and Leithwood 2007: 17 cited by Day and Gu 2010: 148). Day et al. (2010: 8) build on this earlier research, asserting that the sensitivity with which leadership practices are applied to the context is crucial to success. Perhaps the key to successful emotional leadership lies in the ability of the head teacher to read the situation and to know which combination and emphasis to apply.

Emotional Labour and Self-Protection

Smith (2011) indicates that head teachers develop emotional self-protection skills, including, for example, the ability to manage relationships for the benefit of the school, the ability to de-

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[2] The authors enumerate the following: Sustaining passionate commitment and personal accountability. Managing tensions and dilemmas and maintaining moral purposes. Being other-centred and learning focused. Making emotional and rational investments. Emphasizing the personal and the functional.

personalise negative experiences and the capacity to view unpopularity with detachment. These emotional self-protection skills are crucial for head teachers at any stage, but possibly more so during the intense period of organisational socialisation, where the new head teacher is coming to terms with their new context, their new role and their changing professional identity. A further emotional demand on head teachers is outlined by Crawford (2009), who elucidates Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour. In this construction 'head teachers may have to put on what they believe to be the appropriate emotion for a head teacher' (Crawford 2009: 21). There is considerable strain in attempting to portray emotions which may not be those actually experienced by the head teacher at the time. Head teachers require endurance and resilience to handle the emotional dissonance in these situations and present emotional coherence for the school (Crawford 2009: 84). This is not to suggest head teachers are being devious or deliberately misleading; rather it is recognising that as the formal leader of the school there are expected norms of behaviour which have to be adhered to, sometimes at some personal cost, when it may not be appropriate for the head teacher to display her own feelings. Gronn also refers to the emotional labour of headship, where feelings are commodified in the interests of the performance of a task or function (2003: 131). He cites a vivid image from James and Vince (2001) where head teachers 'carry invisible rucksacks on their backs into which various people around them deposit rocks' which are the burdens of others' emotions, behaviour or expectations. This unburdening usually takes little or no notice of the rocks the head teacher may already be carrying, whether of a personal or a professional nature. Harris (2007: 41), again citing Hochschild (1983), speaks of the 'hard emotional labour' of school leadership and stresses the importance of self-care. She argues:

> Developing emotional fitness and literacy is not a one-off task- it is about creating a climate in which people feel safe enough to learn and grow in their capacity to value themselves and others, to relate effectively and to lead…. The primary skill involved is to be aware of self in the moment-by-moment experience of relating with another and to take full responsibility for one's own experience (Harris 2007: 42).

A number of authors highlight various aspects of emotional intelligence for head teachers, whether this is in terms of inter-personal skills (Smith 2011; Barret-Baxendale & Burton 2009; Weindling & Dimmock 2006;) or, very importantly, in an understanding of self:

> Moulding a new professional identity as a head requires the formation of a new sense of status, image and self-worth in the role and in the career; it means establishing values, priorities and what one stands for – an "educational platform" (Weindling & Dimmock 2006: 338).

Constructing this new professional identity is crucial to a successful headship but it is possible that early experiences may undermine a new head teacher's sense of self-worth as she manages the many facets of organisational socialisation whilst simultaneously constructing her new professional identity. Thus, it is important that head teachers are resilient and have emotional self-protection skills. In analysing the journals of new head teachers, Cowie & Crawford (2008) indicate 'The emotion of headship can also be viewed as a process that requires continuous conscious and unconscious management' (Cowie & Crawford 2008: 682). They go on to state that maintaining a sense of perspective is critical in difficult situations. Harris (2007) contends that one way this can be achieved is by head teachers' awareness of their own personal and professional stories, and particularly an awareness of their vulnerabilities or emotional triggers. This is particularly true when handling negative emotions, where the ability of the head teacher 'to respond to the negative emotions of staff… kick starts the process of re-culturing and creating a climate of trust' (Harris 2007: 44). The head teacher, at this point, begins to set the emotional tone of the establishment and how she behaves at this time will inevitably be compared to their predecessor.

Flintham (2003a: 3), in a study of twenty-five existing head teachers, appositely summarises the key emotional aspects of the post:

> The successful head teacher, through acting as the wellspring of values and

vision for the school thus acts as the external 'reservoir of hope' for the institution. In the face of burgeoning demands for change, colleagues look to the head teacher for spiritual and moral leadership, to provide the necessary coherence and unity of vision and to maintain its underpinning integrity of values.

Spiritual and moral leadership are not necessarily about religion, but are instead concerned with 'whatever gives the individual their foundations of ethical behavior and bases of belief' (Flintham 2003a: 3); in other words, their fundamental values and motivation. It is perhaps the case that a strong inner motivation will relate to a strong ability to maintain perspective and to possessing resilience in general. Flintham (2003a; 2003b) touches on the latter when he states that head teachers also need to sustain an internal reservoir for themselves, which they have to refill. Ethical behavior and sustaining this internal reservoir will perhaps be supported by authenticity where the head teacher operates in an open and transparent way, sharing not only facts and figures but also her reasons, judgments and intentions for decisions (Harris 2007: 100).

REFLECTION POINT 3: *To what extent are you able to present an inscrutable demeanour, as required? Are you aware of your own emotional triggers and how to manage them? What helps you to maintain your 'internal reservoir'?*

Post Script

Whilst headship is demanding, head teachers invariably point to the motivational features of being able to make decisions which impact positively on outcomes for young people. This sustains them and makes the job worthwhile. The post appointment phase of the new headship qualifications is specifically designed to support new head teachers in developing their new professional identity and negotiating their way through whatever early challenges their new post may bring.

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