

The Professional Induction of Headteachers in England: Findings from the IBPS projectⁱ

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Introduction

This paper reports on the data gathered through a self-completion questionnaire administered to a sample of headteachers in England who took up post in September, 2000. The survey is part of a larger, international study (The International Beginning Principals Study – IBPS) which aims to investigate and report on the experiences of beginning headteachers and principals during their first two years in post. Research teams are undertaking parallel studies in other countries, including Belgium, Canada, Netherlands and USA. Four research questions underpin the design of questionnaires used in all countries, thus allowing for data to be compared across the countries whilst allowing each questionnaire to reflect cultural, structural and linguistic differences between school systems. The four basic research questions are:

1. How does the process of professional development evolve, what are the main determinants and can we distinguish different patterns?
2. To what extent is it possible for a headteacher – given some external constraints – to develop autonomously a local policy?
3. How (and to what degree) can a beginning headteacher influence the existing school (daily organisation; structures; culture) and the development of individual teachers?
4. What encourages and discourages people from aspiring to headship?

Questionnaire design

Each of the four research questions was included in draft questionnaires which were generic to all teams in the early stages of the project. Later adaptation was undertaken to reflect linguistic and structural differences between school systems. In England the primary difference of title of the post holder was the first consideration, although care needed to be taken to reflect the considerable gap between the autonomy and control of resources enjoyed by headteachers in a school system now firmly based on the principle of devolved decision-making than that to be seen with

principals from other countries involved in this project. At the time of this survey 85 per cent of total potential resource had to be devolved to schools by statute, with this figure due to extend to 90 per cent during the next two years. This effectively makes headteachers the key decision maker in terms of hiring and firing of staff as well as for purchase of goods and services used by the school. By law every school in England has a governing body that is representative of local stakeholders and has responsibility for the allocation of those resources. Headteachers are responsible for the day to day management of the school under the direction of the governing body, yet in reality school governors have neither the time nor the ability to provide more than local accountability for headteachers as all members are part-time, unpaid volunteers. The English version of the questionnaire reflects these differences and realities.

The draft version of the questionnaire to be used in England was initially adapted and extended by the head of the research team, who has considerable experience of conducting research into headship and leading programmes of professional development for headteachers. Advice was taken from the four co-researchers on the team, all of whom have personal experience as headteachers with three of them still in post. Subsequently the questionnaire was piloted with a small number of serving headteachers. Appropriate revisions were made at each stage of this process. The final, agreed version was professionally typeset and printed. The appearance is thus of high quality.

Identification of potential respondents

No central record of beginning headteachers was available to the English research team, with both central and local government officials seemingly unable or unwilling to provide the information which would allow the identification of those new to post.

Under the terms of the government Headteacher Leadership and Management Programme (Headlamp) all first time appointees to headship are entitled to a grant worth £2500 (US\$4000) to be spent on their own professional development through the first two years of their post. This grant is administered on behalf of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) by an externally contracted service which requires voluntary registration by the post holder. In addition each

newly appointed headteacher is invited to attend a high profile induction conference held annually in London which, for the last three years has been hosted by the Prime Minister. Despite the existence of these two central databases it proved impossible to gain a clear picture of who had been appointed to the post.

Requests were made to the DfEE on several occasions throughout the later stages of 2000 for details of names and school addresses of newly appointed headteachers. After what seemed to be initial agreement to release the names, prevarication was followed (in January, 2001) by refusal to release the details to the research team. The frustration caused by this was intense, especially as the team had been asked at one stage to provide guarantees that the release of the personal information to the research team would not compromise the DfEE registration under the Data Protection Act. Instead the team was supplied with the details of the contact person within each local education authority (LEA) who supplied the DfEE with details of newly appointed headteachers to the annual conference in London.

Attempts were also made to elicit the necessary details from the Headlamp administration unit, again without success. Until 1999 the Headlamp administration unit used to provide up to date lists of all newly appointed headteachers to approved providers (with whom 80 per cent of the Headlamp funds must be spent). With the sponsors of this research recognised as one of the 400 authorised providers the details sought for this project would have automatically been available to the research team. With the change of control of Headlamp moving between central government agencies during 1999, following the quinquennial review of the Teacher Training Agency (DfEE, 1999), this procedure was terminated. Enquiries directed to the Headlamp administration unit in January, 2001 confirmed that this information was no longer available to approved providers, even on request.

Each LEA representative was contacted within the region where the English research team had determined to locate its investigation, although with limited success in most instances. Eventually the team was able to gain a copy of the attendance list for the annual London conference held in October, 2000 which proved to be the most productive source of relevant information. Even so, information on the delegate list was often incomplete in terms of school location

which resulted in the research team conducting a form of detective work through analysis of a published directory of school names and addresses.

Each potential respondent on the delegate list was telephoned to establish both their eligibility to be part of the survey population and their willingness to participate. After eliminating those on the delegate list who had been in service for a substantial period (and who had attended the conference as expert practitioners) and those who had been appointed before September, 2000 (all headteachers appointed in 2000 were invited as were some from 1999 who had missed the previous conference), the team was left with a potential population of 90. Each potential respondent was then mailed a pack which explained the purpose of the project, identified the research team and detailed the extent of their commitment if they were to join the project as a respondent. This led to further withdrawals from the potential survey population, although there was only one point blank refusal to contribute with the remainder of non-respondents mainly citing pressures of work as their reason for not being willing to contribute. It is worth recording that the vast majority of those who were either ineligible or who felt unable to contribute asked to be kept informed of the project outcomes in the future.

A total of 59 questionnaires were mailed in mid-February, with each participant having been briefed by telephone conversation as to the demands of the questionnaire – particularly the time needed to answer the questions which was estimated at between 60 and 90 minutes as a result of piloting of the instrument. The mailing was timed to precede the mid-term break as it was anticipated that a number of respondents would prefer the opportunity of filling in the questionnaire during a period when the school was not in session. By mid-March a total of 27 completed questionnaires had been received. This paper is informed by these returns for although further returns are anticipated, the time before the AERA convention is limited thus precluding some further data which may appear subsequently.

The number of responses reported here (27) does compare favourably with the vacancy rate in the geographical region selected for this study. Analysis of headteacher vacancies within the region was commissioned from a commercial data

survey organisation who reported on those positions that were advertised once. The absence of re-advertisement is considered here as evidence that the post was filled. In all there were 144 such vacancies. The 27 respondents for this survey thus represent a 21 per cent sample of the total population. This ratio is to be considered a minimum sample as some of those vacancies have almost certainly be filled by people for whom this would not have been their first headship. The sample of 27 respondents includes five from the secondary sector ('n' = 5/23; a ratio of 22 per cent) and 22 from the primary sector ('n' = 22/121; a ratio of 18 per cent).

References

Department for Education and Employment (1999). *Quinquennial Review of the Teacher Training Agency*. Annesley: DfEE Publications.

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