



National Teacher Research Panel

engaging teacher expertise

This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2004, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research. All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

Reservoirs of Hope' as a metaphor for spiritual and moral leadership in headship, and why some headteachers leave headship early 'when reservoirs run dry'.

Aims of the project

The study aimed to:

- describe the perceived spiritual and moral bases of headship in a range of heads;
- explore the use of the metaphor of 'reservoirs of hope' in describing the preservation of individual values and institutional self-belief against external pressures;
- promote practitioner reflection on critical incidents when spiritual and moral leadership was tested;
- codify heads' individual strategies for sustainability, replenishment and development;
- analyse why some headteachers leave headship early due to the possible failure of their sustainability strategies 'when reservoirs of hope run dry'.

Context

The study involved a cross-section of 25 serving headteachers drawn from all phases of compulsory education, from a variety of social contexts and across a wide geographical area of England. This was followed by studying a similar sample of 15 headteachers who had left headship in advance of the normal retirement age or planned shortly to do so. Both studies offered headteachers the opportunity, through individual interviews, to reflect on critical incidents in their leadership stories and to consider the value of the metaphor of 'reservoirs of hope' and its sustainability in describing their approach to headship.

Summary of main findings

Heads interviewed could all articulate **an individual personal value system** that underpinned their approach to spiritual and moral leadership:

- a vast majority found **the 'reservoirs of hope' metaphor was useful** in considering their headship role;
- all could describe **a range of sustainability strategies** without which their effective functioning would have been impaired;
- all were able to offer **micro-narratives of critical incidents** in which their sustainability strategies had been tested; and
- all identified a **development of capacity** to act in a spiritual and moral leadership role as headship progressed, and identified with a transition from 'doing headship' to 'being the head' around the 4-5 year mark and the possible emergence of a plateau effect after 7-10 years.

Heads leaving early could be seen as **'striding', 'strolling' or 'stumbling' from headship**: 'strider' heads had a proactive exit strategy and moved on after successful experience; 'stroller' heads walked away from headship with concerns over work-life balance or pressures; and 'stumbler' heads suffered burn out through failure of their sustainability strategies to cope 'when the reservoir of hope ran dry'.

Such heads had similar value systems to their serving colleagues and had faced similar issues. They showed **a difference in the adequacy of sustainability strategies** in coping with critical incidents and the day to day pressures of headship.

All heads had key messages regarding **the value of professional development** when reinforced by **strategic reflection opportunities** and **an infrastructure of peer support** in sustaining both themselves and future generations of headteachers.

Background

Arising out of interest sparked by NCSL leading edge seminars on interpersonal leadership and leadership and spirituality, which drew together headteachers from a wide range of faith perspectives and moral value systems, this NCSL Research Associate study sought to test the concept of 'reservoirs of hope' (the phrase is from John West-Burnham and is used by kind permission) as an appropriate metaphor for school headship. The study allowed cross-sectional samples of serving heads and early-departing former heads the opportunity to reflect on critical incidents in their leadership stories and the spiritual and moral values that had underpinned their responses to them.

Exploring the Research Questions

The research explored the concept that headteachers have an internal 'reservoir of hope', the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader from which their values and vision flows and without which they cannot act as the external 'reservoir of hope' for the school by providing the wellspring of collective self-belief and directional focus when it is tested by critical incidents. As part of the research process heads were asked about:

- their value system and where it came from;
- the metaphor of 'reservoirs of hope' and whether it resonated with them;
- what the personal sustainability strategies were that they had used;
- examples of critical incidents they had faced and how those strategies had held up;
- whether they recognised a development of capacity as their headship progressed;
- how they felt their experience could be transferred to new generations of heads.

Findings

The following conclusions were drawn after analysis of tape recorded interviews:

1. All heads could articulate an individual personal value system that underpinned their approach to spiritual and moral leadership.

This value system could be categorised as:

Generational, rooted in upbringing:

"I was the first from my (working class) family to reach higher education. That's given me a sense of duty to give something back, to make a difference, like it made a difference to me."
(male secondary head, socially challenging area)

Christian, rooted in a Christian faith, even within a secular context, with over half of the heads citing an underpinning if not practising Christian value system:

"Living out the message of the gospel to love one another"
(female primary head, secular school)

Egalitarian, rooted in a drive to offer deprived children a better deal:

"Deprived children are going to have difficult lives when they grow up. Our job is to make their childhood as enjoyable as possible...so they can experience success now."
(male secondary head, socially disadvantaged area)

2. The majority (36/40) found the reservoir metaphor of value in thinking about their role in spiritual and moral leadership.

There was an enthusiastic resonance with the metaphor:

"It is ringing true..."
(male primary head, large inner city school)

Indeed, some were anxious to refine and develop it further:

"Reservoirs always have movement, they're always filling up and emptying so it's a good metaphor because headship is dynamic. Reservoirs are open to the elements and gather rainwater, they are fed by a variety of springs, as heads need to be open to external influences and opportunities ... and reservoirs unfilled lead to drought."
(male secondary head, inner city area)

Of particular value was felt to be the concept of the 'internal reservoir of hope' in characterising the need to retain that calm centre against the external pressures of the world:

"If you feel OK inside, it gives you the courage so as not to compromise on your values when the going gets tough" (female secondary head, inner city area)

3. All could describe a range of sustainability strategies without which their effective functioning would be impaired.

These could be categorised as belief networks, support networks and external networks:

Belief networks, sustained by high levels of self-belief in the rightness of their value system -

"I'm not going to be at the mercy of tides of events"
(female secondary head)

- and affirmative feedback from what is felt to be the core of the job, the pupils:

"Children are 'a touchstone'; I walk round and draw strength from their reactions"
(female secondary head, inner city area)

Support networks of families (particularly partners), friends and colleagues. Some cited the support of colleagues within the school as sustaining mechanisms. Others used their partner as a 'sounding board', as a catharsis to verbalise the problems and offload the events of the day. Senior staff played a key role in offering support on a day to day basis, as did convivial contact with fellow heads, giving a sense of much needed perspective:

"so that trivia (that had been burdening you in your own school) becomes trivia again"
(male secondary head, 19 years headship experience)

Caring support for the head was not restricted to senior colleagues. One head quoted:

"the day to day support of the office staff providing tea, sympathy and laughter"
(female primary head, suburban area)

External networks of engagement with interests and experiences beyond the world of education. Many valued getting away from it all to 'a world elsewhere' to what was called 'open spaces, quiet places', or took refuge in sporting or recreation activities, or specific relaxation or meditation techniques. All were concerned to manage themselves to avoid burnout and accepted that such refreshment time also provided opportunities for reflection on professional vision and values, although it was recognised by one that:

"It is difficult to write down the emerging ideas in a notebook during your daily swim!"
(male secondary head, suburban area).

4. All were able to offer compelling micro-narratives of

- **critical incidents encompassing community tragedies** (pupil knocked down and killed on the way to junior school reported just as assembly was starting),
- **personnel problems** (having to suspend a member of staff for a child abuse allegation at 9.30 am on the first day of headship) or
- **organisational crises** (the arrival of OFSTED notification 2 weeks into a difficult headship)

Headteachers interviewed found the opportunity to reflect and engage in discussion in this area an energising and liberating one. Indeed, one head rather sadly commented:

"It's very rare in a lonely job to have the time and be encouraged to talk about yourself, and not to an inspector or advisor or deputy, but to a fellow head...and for the first time in over 16 years of headship to feel that it's legitimate to do so."
(male secondary head, socially challenging context)

5. All identified a development of capacity to act in a spiritual and moral leadership role as headship progressed -

- through a growth in confidence, self-awareness and willingness to use more creative and adventurous solutions. There was a perceived development of a more reflective approach based on 'being the head' rather than 'doing headship'.

Several experienced heads described this as a 'sea-change' in their headship after about 4-5 years, with a greater capacity to focus on principles and beliefs now that the mechanics had been mastered and it was felt that the logistics of headship could look after themselves:

"I have served my time with the nuts and bolts; I can now be more overt about the values underpinning my actions".
(male secondary head, 7 years experience, embarking on 3rd headship)

However, there was amongst early-leaving heads a recognition of the possible emergence of a '**plateau effect**' after 7-10 years in headship, which might have been overcome by the availability of re-energising professional development opportunities.

'I had a window round about the 7 year mark to bring about change. Thereafter I felt I was marking time. I should have cashed in my experience and moved on. I needed something different, even for a year, to re-energise me'
(male secondary early-departing head)

6. Heads leaving early could be categorised as striding, strolling or stumbling from headship

'**Strider**' heads had a pro-active exit strategy, and moved on after successful experience

"I knew that I had reached the 'reploughing the same furrow' point and that new blood was needed for the good of the school...I was ready for new stimulation and a new challenge to put my expertise and experience to use in a new context"
(male secondary school head age 51, now in LEA project work)

'**Stroller**' heads walked away from headship in a controlled manner as a result of concerns over work-life balance, change pressures or philosophical issues

'the tension between becoming a granddad and the demands of a 70 hour working week'.
(male secondary head age 54, now in part-time HT support work)

I found myself out of sync with the culture of the new age'.
(female primary head age 54, now in part-time LEA support work)

'**Stumbler**' heads suffered burn out through the failure of their sustainability strategies to cope, resulting in stress-related or ill-health retirement.

'The water was running out faster than it came in. School was overtaking me...I had no time to think about myself or look after myself'.
(female secondary head age 56, early retired on health grounds)

It should be noted however that the difference between these categories could be very slight, and heavily dependent on the pressure of prevailing circumstances. As one 'stroller' head put it:

'How great or small are the steps between striding, strolling and stumbling? Very few steps are needed I suspect, if the circumstances are such, to move you from one gait to another very quickly. I may have been a strider at one time, and I certainly recognise elements of the stumbler. Taking control (in respect of the decision to leave a second headship early), being pro-active and 'doing' rather than being done to, have helped me to retain my professional dignity and to leave physically and mentally intact.'

(male secondary head age 54, now in part-time headship support work)

They had similar value systems to their serving colleagues, and like them found the metaphor of 'reservoirs of hope' a useful one in reflecting on their experience of headship and the critical incidents they had faced within it.

7. The essential difference was the way in which they had been able to cope with such critical incidents:

'Strider' heads had robust replenishment mechanisms, and had been more able to compartmentalise their feelings and be pro-active in their response so that their sustaining reservoir did not run dry

'I cannot say that I believe I felt the sustaining mechanism to fail at any time. They (critical incidents) were just challenges that needed some form of response; each one provided a steep but very valuable and positive source of learning...the thrill of headship is from this learning.'

(female primary 'strider' head age 48, with 4 years headship experience)

'Stroller' heads recognised the continued draining of their emotional reservoir due to relentless, repeated pressure of continual waves of change, weakening the reservoir's retaining walls, and had left headship before this could occur:

'I could have coped until 60 but I had this sense of déjà vu, of a pendulum effect...and I found the change after change after change physically wearing, especially as I had led from the front.'

(female primary 'stroller' head age 58, with 18 years headship experience)

'Stumbler' heads had non-existent or inadequate sustainability strategies to replenish their reservoir particularly in the face of repeated waves of change. For them, the realisation of burn out came suddenly and unexpectedly, with stress-related or psychosomatic physical symptoms resulting in early retirement often on health grounds.

'If I'd had sustainability strategies I'd have seen a way forward. The only one I had was more of the same: I enjoyed innovating which gave me satisfaction but ironically caused me to work even longer hours. I had no one professionally to turn to. My self-belief was undermined. I felt a good head would have solved this, and I had no one to convince me otherwise.'

(male secondary 'stumbler' head age 48, with 2 years headship experience)

8. All gave clear messages about the professional needs of senior staff:

These focussed on

- greater reflection opportunities to be made available on headship training courses
- peer support for reflection through the availability of fellow heads as 'professional listening partners'
- networked support on a learning community basis in a collaborative model of 'developing headteachers together'. As an experienced secondary head put it:

"When you articulate practice with others, you reflect and learn together".

All this they felt should not be left to chance encounter or individual effort. Rather it should be legitimised, funded and actively managed at both local and national levels as part of an entitlement within a leadership package for all who wish to access it, in order that the 'reservoir of hope' of the individual school leader could continue to be sustained, built up, replenished and renewed in an on-going 'triumph of hope over experience'.

Research Methods

This National College for School Leadership Research Associate study used two samples of headteachers. In the first sample, 25 serving heads were selected to form a representative cross-section which was:

- cross-phase: from small infant school to large secondary schools;
- cross-area: from Devon to Durham, Lancashire to London;
- cross-context: with free school meal indicators from 2% to 45%;
- cross-faith: with 30% church, 20% high ethnic and 50% secular schools; and
- cross-experience: with headships ranging from 1 to 20 years (mean 16 years).

In the second phase of the research, 15 early-departing heads drawn from the East Midlands area were selected to form a cross-sectional sample similar in school type and context to the serving heads previously interviewed. This sample had the following distinguishing characteristics:

- length of headship experience: between 2 and 18 years, mean 10 years; and
- age on leaving headship: between 45 and 58, mean 52 years of age.

All the heads were given the opportunity using a 1+ hour semi-structured interview schedule to reflect on a critical incident in their leadership story and to describe what had sustained them through it. Interviews were tape-recorded with the agreement of participants to supplement contemporaneous notes. These were used to analyse emerging themes from the studies and to provide the source of the quotations cited, and the draft report was then subject to respondent validation by being sent out to interview participants for their feedback. It was recognised that whilst the reflections of participants captured through the totality of this process might be personalised, distorted and non-triangulated, they did nevertheless provide an insight into spiritual and moral leadership in headteachers through an authentic rendering of practitioner voice.

Conclusion

Headteachers interviewed had key messages for policymakers regarding the value of professional development when it was underpinned by the opportunity for strategic reflection within an infrastructure of peer support both on a 1:1 and networked basis. There was a strong plea for this to be legitimised by the setting up of LEA-sponsored networks of support and pastoral care for headteachers, with the provision of funding to facilitate them. The need for the provision of ring-fenced finance for on-going headteacher professional development, memorably termed 'Tail-lamp' money to rival the former 'Headlamp' funding for newly-appointed heads was strongly urged, with such funded and legitimised reflection opportunities as part of a leadership entitlement package available to all heads. With an ageing workforce and heads in general being prepared to spend on average fewer years in headship, the need for personal sustainability strategies and support mechanisms and the fostering of such reflection opportunities within professional development was felt to be even more pressing, if the quality of effective headship for future generations was to be maintained.

Further reading

Flintham, A.J. (2003) Reservoirs of Hope: spiritual and moral leadership in heads, NCSL

Flintham, A.J. (2003) When Reservoirs Run Dry: why some heads leave early, NCSL

West-Burnham, J. (2002) Leadership and Spirituality: leading edge seminar, NCSL

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