External influences impacting on beginning headteachers in England: Findings from the IBPS project

Trevor Male, University of Lincoln, ENGLAND.

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. Six 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 linguistic, cultural and structural differences between school systems. The research questions are:

1. What are the similarities and differences in the work of school headteachers/principals in different countries?
2. What encourages and discourages people from aspiring to the headship/principalship?
3. How do new headteachers/principals perceive and deal with external influences?
4. What learning experiences help new headteachers/principals adjust to their role?
5. How do new headteachers/principals become socialised into their role?
6. How does the culture of the school evolve with the arrival of a new headteacher/principal?

This paper investigates the data that can be applied to how the beginning headteacher deals with external influences. The paper also reviews the sources of support perceived by respondents as being helpful to them when dealing with these external influences.

Questionnaire design

Each of the six 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, cultural and structural differences between school systems. In England the primary difference of title of the post holder was the first consideration. Care was also 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*)* and that seen in 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 makers 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.

Requests were made to the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the central government department, 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 high profile annual induction conference for beginning headteachers (*Leading for Excellence*) held in London and attended by the Prime Minister for the last three years. Each LEA representative was contacted within the region where the English research team had determined to locate its investigation[1] with limited success in most instances, although four LEAs were extremely supportive.

[1] The research team intend to conduct follow up work with respondents, including face to face interviews and focus group meetings. The potential survey population was restricted geographically as a consequence.

Another possible source of support was the Headteacher Leadership and Management Programme (Headlamp) which is available to all first time appointees to headship. This is 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 and requires voluntary registration by the post holder. Attempts were made to elicit the necessary details from the Headlamp administration unit, again without success, nor would they agree to act as a mailing service for the project. Until 1999 the 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.

Outside of government agencies the principal weekly educational newspaper had extensive records of headteacher vacancies but no central systematic database. An extensive list of advertised vacancies was purchased from a private organisation and was used to cross check and confirm data from other sources. This data revealed which posts had not been re-advertised from which the team were able to assume that the post had been filled. However, the data did not give the name and personal contact details of the new post holder nor did it indicate whether the 'new' post holder was in fact a headteacher in their second or subsequent headship, an acting headteacher or a seconded headteacher .

The most profitable source of information turned out to be the delegate list for *Leading for Excellence* conference held in November, 2000, for which the team was eventually able to gain a copy. Even so, information on the delegate list was incomplete. The list did not include school addresses, LEA name or location. As a result the research team spent over 30 hours cross referencing school names with an Internet map database (LYCOS) and the published education directories in order to match delegate and school names with specific contact information. The possible survey population from this list was 250. 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), this total was finally reduced to 69 through identification of post holders in the geographical location chosen by the research team. A further 18 potential respondents were also identified courtesy of the four LEAs who co-operated with the team's search, leaving the team with a potential survey population of 87.

Each potential respondent was 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. Subsequently each was telephoned to establish both their eligibility to be part of the survey population and their willingness to participate. A number were found to be ineligible because they were internal appointments who actually had been up graded to the substantive post in May or June 2000. In the main, however, the response from the schools was excellent, with only four outright refusals to contribute. The remainder of non-respondents mainly cited pressures of work as their reason for not being able to take part. 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 50 questionnaires were mailed in mid-February, with each participant having been briefed by telephone conversation as to tbe 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, 2001 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 rate of return reported here compares favourably with the vacancy rate in the LEAs within the geographical area selected for this study from which the respondents came. Within those LEAs there were 144 vacancies. The 27 respondents for this survey thus represent a 21 per cent sample of the total population. The sample of respondents includes seven from the secondary sector ('n' = 7/23; a ratio of 20 per cent) and 20 from the primary sector ('n' = 20/121; a ratio of 17 per cent).

The respondents

All respondents worked in maintained schools, eight of which were of religious denomination. One secondary school was single sex, with one more being selective. Primary schools ranged in size from 28 to 407 pupils; secondary schools ranged in size from 257 to 1400 pupils.

16 of the respondents had gained the National Professional Qualification for Headship[2] (NPQH), the pre-service certification process based on national standards for headteachers (Teacher Training Agency, 1998) which is due to become mandatory in 2002.

There were 18 female and nine male respondents. Within the secondary phase there were five male headteachers as opposed to two females; within the primary sector there were four male headteachers as opposed to 16 females. These ratios are in line with national statistics (DfEE, 1998) that show the vast majority of secondary headships are held by men (75 per cent in 1997), whilst more primary headships are held by women (55 per cent in 1997).

In terms of initial qualifications 22 of the sample were graduates, with only nine apparently going through the one year postgraduate certification route for their teaching qualification. The remaining 13 graduates were likely, therefore, to have completed their first degree studies in Education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) being awarded alongside their degree. The five non-graduates will almost certainly have achieved QTS through the 3 year teacher certification route. Nine of the respondents had gained a higher degree (one doctorate), with only one achieving that award without an initial degree.

Findings – external pressures

Respondents were asked to grade the daily pressures they experienced from outside the school and indicate the degree (from 1 to 4) of influence or pressure. A score of 1 indicated no, or little pressure, 2 = some pressure, 3 = strong pressure and 4 = very strong pressure. The results are depicted in Table 1, below. The total in the fifth column is achieved by multiplying the number of respondents for each category by the score of 1 – 4.

Table 1 – Dealing with external pressures

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**Total**
Central (national) educational legislation	0	6	15	6	*81*
Central administration (LEA)	0	15	10	2	*68*
Impact of central legislation	0	4	14	8	*82*
National improvement projects	1	8	9	9	*80*
New curricula	0	8	9	10	*83*

[2] NPQH is the first formalised preparation programme for aspirant in headteachers in England. Available since early 1997, the programme is currently undertaken voluntarily although enabling legalisation will allow the Secretary of State for Education make the qualification compulsory from 2002.

Board of governors	3	19	4	0	*53*
Daily contact with parents	4	12	7	4	*65*
Inspectors and advisers	6	12	9	0	*57*
Other external organisations	12	13	2	0	*44*
Consultants/trainers	13	12	2	0	*43*
Other (please specify)	2	1	2	2	*18*

The 'other' pressures cited included two from the church community, both of whom were from denominational primary schools; two citing personal imperatives; and one citing a forthcoming inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)[3].

Discussion - external influences

Table 1 demonstrates that most external pressure felt by this sample of beginning headteachers emanated from the actions of central government, with legislation, new curricula and national improvement projects dominant. This is in keeping with recent experience where there has been a relentless series of government actions which have systematically increased central control over the system of schooling whilst simultaneously relocating responsibility for the processes of schooling to the local level. This recent level of activity builds upon a raft of legislation through the previous two decades and has culminated in a pattern of bureaucracy that had schools in receipt of some 3000 documents from central government agencies during the first 1000 days of the current Labour government, with nearly 300 of these documents requiring a response. Such has been the pressure that headteacher associations have threatened industrial action in response and were, in one case, unable to publicly support the collection of data for this study as it required yet more work from its members.

The Labour government was elected on their manifesto mantra of "Education, Education and Education" which were to be the three main priorities of their new administration. The core of this programme was to be "Standards, not Structures", for which there was to be an unrelenting drive for improvement. 'Standards', it transpires, are to be recognised as increases on national averages for performance on standard tests. In primary schools this has largely been recognised by student performance in literacy and numeracy, particularly at the end of Key Stage 2 (11 years of age) which is the most common age of transfer to secondary education. In secondary schools improved performance has been largely recognised as student grades in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), taken at the end of Key Stage 4 (16 years

[3] All schools are subject to Ofsted inspections at least once every six years. After the introduction of a national system of inspections in 1994 all schools have by now been inspected at least once and are nowin the second cycle of inspections.

of age). In both cases student data is aggregated and set against national targets for the school population.

As schools have become familiar with the requirements (and technique) of improved student performance on graded national tests scores have risen, but at a cost. In many cases there has been a narrowing of curricular provision (particularly in primary schools) and there have been an increasing number of students excluded from mainstream provision, particularly on behavioural grounds where disruption and disaffection have damaged scores. One consequence has been a stream of further initiatives designed to limit the effect of the initial pressures. Underlying principles for these actions include the need to bring school provision more in line with legislative requirements of the national curriculum (which has to be broad, balanced and differentiated), to improve the learning outcomes of the curriculum and to enhance principles of equal opportunity. In addition further legislation on teachers' pay and conditions of service, along with other legislation planned for the next term of office, have tended to diverted headteacher attention away from being proactive on local and internal processes toward reacting to central government.

The findings show that at the school level the highest level of pressure comes from the parental body, another finding in keeping with recent trends. During the 1980s there was a significant shift in the control of schools, with legislation championing the parent as the primary customer and controller of schools in the market led environment encouraged by successive Conservative governments of that era (Male, 1995). The 1992 Education Act required schools to furnish a range of information to parents as a matter of course and to provide an annual report for which there was to be an open meeting to discuss the school performance. Good relations with parents are central, therefore, to successful school leadership and this is reflected by the respondents to this study. There are other possible explanations for these feelings, including heightened perceptions of individual rights now becoming increasingly evident in parental (and student) behaviour. Investigation of the causal factors in this instance will form part of the second and subsequent phases of this study.

Table 1 shows the next most demanding influence to be the LEA central administration. LEAs provide a range of services for schools, but are bound by central legislation to deliver a quality of education locally that is commensurate with national targets. LEAs are now required to publish their annual educational development plans (EDPs) which are required to identify targets for student attainment on national tests. With LEAs now subject to inspection by Ofsted, the pressure is on for them to encourage improvements in aggregated scores on national tests. There has been a consequent knock on effect for schools who have been required by LEAs to

provide data and information to them which, in turn, is used by the LEA as evidence of how their responsibilities are being met. Inspectors and advisers fare a little better than their employers, although sufficient pressure is perceived by the respondents for them to be rated as the next most significant source of pressure. One possible explanation here is that in many cases the role of local education adviser has been transposed to that of inspector, with the role holder now demanding rather than encouraging performance. This process, hastened by the need to match targets, has often resulted in the relationship between headteachers and LEAs turning sour in some instances.

Interestingly respondents felt pressure from their governing bodies, although not to the same extent as the other influences. Whether governing bodies can be seen as external to the school is a moot point, for under legislation the governors are the responsible agents for school decision making with headteachers responsible for the day to day organisation and management. Each school in England has a governing body consisting of parental and other community representatives with between nine and 19 members depending on school size. All major strategic and operational issues are resolved at this level, leaving the headteacher to direct school business in an executive capacity. The reality of that scenario is that most members of governing bodies are reluctant volunteers who tend to be largely supportive of the headteacher, rather than challenging. There are governing bodies who are intrusive and political in their actions, just as there those which are virtually dormant. As a rule, however, governing bodies in England to be less than demanding on headteachers who usually determine the content and pace of debate within the board. The findings here give rise to the question as to how beginning headteachers in this study perceive the pressure they have identified in their responses. The best guess at this stage would be that headteachers see the governing body as the first, and possibly most relevant, level of accountability for them in their professional capacity – creating the kind of 'creative tension' referred to be Senge (1990). This is speculation based on the research (e.g. Thody, 1998) and anecdotal evidence of governing bodies in action, however, and this hypothesis needs to be clarified in the second and subsequent phases of this study.

There is too little clarity in the responses associated with the other issues identified by the questionnaire or the respondents for any preliminary or substantive conclusions to be drawn at this stage, although areas for further investigation have emerged. Too little opportunity was offered to respondents, for example, to specify how they classified external consultants and organisations, something which will be investigated in the next phases of the study. The individual responses which introduced new categories will also be investigated at that time.

Findings – levels of support

Respondents were then asked to grade the level of support (1-4) they received from various groups. A score of 1 = little or no support, 2 = some support, 3 = strong support and 4 = very strong support. The results are depicted in Table 2, below. The total in the fifth column is achieved by multiplying the number of respondents for each category by the score of 1 – 4.

Table 2 – Levels of support

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**Total**
Central administration (LEA)	1	8	13	5	*76*
Board of governors	0	3	8	16	*94*
Professional associations	4	15	6	2	*60*
Fellow headteachers	1	10	6	10	*79*
Informal/formal mentoring	7	5	8	7	*69*
Colleagues from local cluster group of schools	5	9	8	5	*67*
Other (please specify)	1	1	2	2	*17*

The other areas of support cited included the diocesan board (2 responses), the deputy headteachers (3 responses), family/husband (1 response), central government (1 response) and senior support staff (1 response), although in all instances ratings of the level of support were not provided.

Discussion – levels of support

Governing bodies were found to be the most highly rated support mechanism for this selection of beginning headteachers, a finding that further supports the tentative conclusion that governors are largely supportive, reported above.

Fellow headteachers just edged LEA personnel from second position, although both categories of responses need further deconstruction as there are disparate groups within them. It is not immediately clear how respondents differentiated between fellow headteachers who were adjacent geographically (and could have formed part of the cluster group support) or were professionally adjacent. The separation of these categories will form part of the subsequent work of this study, but what is clear that beginning headteachers value and draw on the experience of colleagues whether they are mentors, friends, peers or rivals.

Similar distinctions will need to be made between LEA support mechanisms and LEA pressures, together with the need to locate support mechanisms within the LEA structure. Many LEA officers operate in a grey area between direction and facilitation. Frequently they are the first line of advice, particularly for the interpretation of central government initiatives, whilst also bearing responsibility for successful school operation, albeit through the mediating influences of headteacher and governing body. In many ways LEAs resemble parents - sometimes strict and sometimes benevolent, with the measure of each dependent on circumstance. How the respondents to this study perceive the different roles of officers will form part of the subsequent phases of this study.

Professional associations did not feature so highly in terms of support, although most are heavily committed to providing extensive support mechanisms for their members. The best guess at this stage, again based on anecdotal evidence, is that professional associations provide a useful and necessary back stop for advice and guidance rather than a front line service. Most professional associations issue policy positions and advice in the light of national initiatives, for example, but do not frequently spend time in individual discussions with members unless local circumstance require intervention and support. There is also the prospect that local and regional support mechanisms for the members of professional associations are provided by other members, rather than central office, who would be likely to figure in one or other category of fellow headteachers.

Other categories of support specified by respondents did not provide any clues as to the importance of that support, so no conclusions can be made at this stage of the investigation.

Conclusion

Several important clues have emerged from this initial analysis of data as to the pressures facing newly appointed headteachers and their sources of support. Further analysis of the data is needed, however, followed by the second phase of the project before we can to make these findings more concrete. The next phase of data gathering will be through telephone interviews with individual respondents in order to clarify responses and through focus group meetings where initial findings will be tested for validity. Those interested in the study as it progresses are invited to keep in touch with the author; those requiring a copy of the questionnaire are similarly invited to write to the author.

References

Male , T. (1995). Market forces approaches to systemic school reform: A critique of reform processes in Chicago and England & Wales. *Planning & Changing*, 25(1/2), 117-128.

Senge, P.M., (1990). *The fifth discipline*. New York: Doubleday.

Thody, A. (1998). Training school principals, educating school governors. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 12 (50), 232-239.