

INCUMBENCY PHASE IN HEADSHIP A STUDY OF FOUR HEADTEACHERS IN WEST MIDLANDS, ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

A growing number of international researchers suggest that teachers are deterred to apply for headship (Thomson and Blackbore, 2006). In light of this leadership 'crisis', this study attempts to gather some insights into the important influences headteachers perceive in the incumbency phase of their career and aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on understanding headteachers' lives and careers. In this study, the experiences of headteachers are sought to draw on the existing theoretical framework by Ribbins (2003). The underlying research paradigm in this study is of the qualitative/interpretive nature; using survey methodology to gather data through the interview method. The findings suggest that the influences as perceived by the headteachers in their incumbency phase concurred substantially with the literature and Ribbins's (2003) model. The finding, however, unfurled some alternative views and to what seems like a gap in the referred model. The conclusion, apart from highlighting the alternative views and suggestion for future studies, put forth some practical issues from the experience of conducting this study.

INTRODUCTION

A headteacher is an important element of a school. More and more emphasis is being given to the professional lives of headteachers as the demands of the post increase. Even though the headteacher's position it is the most senior position in the school, the enthusiasm with which applicants would want to assume this post seems to be on the decline. It is reported that a growing number of international researchers suggest that teachers are deterred to pursue a headship career, and that headteachers are leaving their positions because they see the job as too onerous, intrusive of family life and geared inappropriately to managerial, rather than educative tasks (Thomson and Blackbore, 2006). In light of this leadership 'crisis', it is imperative to carry out this study to investigate the headteachers' career so as to gather some insights into the important influences they perceive in their career. The findings, therefore, are aimed at contributing to the existing knowledge on understanding headteachers' lives and careers which will help chart the way forward for better planning of their future development and efforts to retain more headteachers in their posts.

The headteachers' lives and careers are described as one following a developmental pattern (Day and Bakioglu, 1996; Gronn, 1993; Gronn and Ribbins, 1996). Gronn (1993) proposed a framework in describing and understanding the phases through which educational leaders commonly pass during their career. A study on the careers of secondary school headteachers by Day and Bakioglu (1996) saw a model which

suggests a career pattern once the headteacher is in post. Ribbins (2003), working on these two models, suggested a third alternative framework which combines these two models but added on another dimension to it.

This study aims to investigate the incumbency stage of four headteachers using data drawn from semi-structured interviews. Ribbins's (2003) model will be used to look at the incumbency phase of the headteachers' lives. This study will address the following research question:

What influences do headteachers perceive to be most important during their incumbency?

Introduction to this paper will be the study background and the research question. It will be followed by section two with the review of literature which encompasses the work done by Ribbins (2003) and other researchers such as Gronn (1993), Day and Bakioglu (1996), Southworth (1995) and Woods (2002). Section three is on the research design of this study. This is followed by section four on the presentation of the findings and discussion. The last section presents the conclusion of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gronn (1993) conducted a biographical study of Sir James Darling, the distinguished headmaster of Geelong Grammar in Melbourne. Through the study, Gronn identified four main phases in the lives of leaders – formation, accession, incumbency, and divestiture. Day and Bakioglu (1996) researched on headteachers in England and their study comprised of 196 questionnaires and 34 interviews. They identified a model of four phases in the career of headteachers – initiation, development, autonomy, and disenchantment. Their framework was seen as a useful way to view development within one phase (incumbency) of Gronn's (1993) more encompassing framework (Pascal & Ribbins, 1998).

Ribbins (2003), from his initial work on career lives of primary headteachers (Pascal and Ribbins, 1998), utilised both Gronn's (1993) model and Day and Bakioglu's (1996) framework to put forth another framework on the lives and careers of headteachers.

The framework by Ribbins (2003) may be viewed as follows:

- Formation – the early socialisation influences from agencies such as the family, school and other reference groups which shape the personality of a future head.

- Accession – advancement in their chosen career and preparation for headship.
- Incumbency – the total period of headship, from appointment to leaving headship.
 - Initiation
 - Development
 - Autonomy
 - Advancement
 - Disenchantment or Enchantment
- Moving On – leaving headship.
 - Divestiture or Reinvention

This study is on the incumbency phase. Ribbins (2003) describes the incumbency phase as “the period or periods of actual headship and runs from the time a head is first appointed to headship to the time he/she finally leaves headship” (p. 65). The Incumbency phase with its four sub-phases from Ribbins’s model is as following:

- Incumbency
 - Initiation
 - Development
 - Autonomy
 - Advancement
 - Disenchantment or Enchantment

Initiation

The initiation sub-phase is an immediate period of induction. During this time, the new headteachers become familiar with the organisational and workplace norms of their new schools and its community (Ribbins, 2003, p. 65). Ribbins also suggests that this first phase takes at least three years. He also indicated that whilst some headteachers enjoy a smooth transition into the post; others face great difficulties. The quality of the transition seems to be influenced by factors relating to previous experiences and the relevance of those experiences to the present post.

Development

The development sub-phase is characterised by enthusiasm and growth and normally takes some four to eight years (Ribbins, 2003). Ribbins explains further that headteachers at this stage have developed confidence in their ability to manage their schools (ibid: p. 65). He further suggests that this is the stage whereby the heads were most effective and made the most progress.

Autonomy

According to Ribbins (2003) the third sub-phase, autonomy, "comes into play after eight years or more in the job. The head at this sub-phase is generally very confident and competent" (Pascal & Ribbins, 1998, p. 34; Ribbins, 2003, p. 66). Ribbins (ibid) added that the experience they gained from their headship gives them a sense of control and the knowledge that they have largely mastered the demands of headship. According to Woods (2002), two issues emerge out of this stage; the first of which is related to management style and the second to job satisfaction. On the management style, there is a tendency for the heads to move towards a more autocratic style of management. On the other hand, he reported that headteachers at this stage perceived a lack of excitement, thus a decline in job satisfaction. This was because their careers which had seen them move 'upwards' and 'onwards', often quite rapidly and always meeting new challenges and achieving new goals, are now somewhat not what they were. This could lead to some moving to another work.

Advancement

The advancement sub-phase has two routes, one characterized by 'disenchantment' and the other by 'enchantment' (Ribbins, 2003). Day and Bakioglu (1996) depict this final sub-phase as an inevitable disenchantment. They describe it as a downward spiralling process finally leading to disillusion and divestiture. Gronn (1993) further distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary departure, but Ribbins (2003) argues that neither could be seen in a positive term. Day and Bakioglu (1996) describe headteachers in 'disenchantment' as increasingly autocratic in style and reluctant to respond to any kind of demand for change, especially where change is externally mediated.

The other direction in sub-phase advancement is enchantment. Ribbins (2003) describe headteachers in this direction as more enthusiastic about their jobs. He added that these headteachers expressed a feeling of having a lot left to do, new challenges to face and being able to commit more time and energy to doing so.

The literature mentioned thus far sets the direction for this study. There are various influences that shape the headteachers' careers in incumbency phase and its four sub-phases. The influence of past experiences in initiation, influence of growth and confidence in the development sub-phase, influence of 'being in control' of things in autonomy sub-phase, and the negativity in disenchantment and the positivity in enchantment make up some of the influences projected by the literature. The literature also suggests that the autonomy sub-phase influences the change in the headteachers' management style to being more autocratic and brings about a decline in their job satisfaction.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilises the humanistic knowledge domain as identified by Gunter and Ribbins (2003), which “seeks to gather and theorize from the experiences and biographies of those who are leaders and those who are led” (p. 375). In this study, the experiences of headteachers are sought to draw on the existing theoretical frameworks and to propose any new emerging theme or themes. The underlying research paradigm in this study is of a subjective or interpretive nature.

The strategy used in this study is survey. Many methods are available under the survey strategy; questionnaires, interviews, documents and observation but the interview method was chosen to be used in this study for it served the purpose of the study to be able to get in-depth information on the headteachers’ careers.

The interviews in this study were carried out by a four-member group. Each member conducted an interview of a chosen headteacher and the transcripts were then shared amongst the group members. Sampling technique used was ‘non-probability sampling’. The form of non-probability sampling used by the researcher in this study was purposive sampling. The headteachers were ‘handpicked’ for the suitability in matching the relevance of this study. This was to get the most of the sample, in tandem with Denscombe (2003) who explains; “The advantage of purposive sampling is that it allows the researchers to home in on people or events which there are good grounds for believing will be critical for the research” (p. 16).

The group which conducted this study formed questions to be used in the interviews, and went on to interview their respective sample using the questions which touched on all the four phases of the headteachers’ lives and careers. The nature of interview and the flexibility of questioning classify the type of research interview in this study as semi-structured. Each of the group members had to extract and report, using the data collected, on a certain phase of the headteachers’ lives and careers. This was determined at the outset of the study.

This paper is presented with the focus on the incumbency phase of the headteachers’ careers and it analyses the four sub-phases of incumbency. From the four headteachers chosen as the samples in this study, three are still serving in their headship while one is retired.

This study was done with greatest importance placed on ethical considerations. The guidelines from BERA (British Educational Research Association) Revised Ethical Guidelines for Researchers, which was revised in 2004 from its original form of 1992, was used as the compass to maintain the ethic of respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research, and academic freedom in this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion on the findings of this study will be done in the four sub-phases of the incumbency phase, besides addressing the research questions within. A brief description of the four headteachers in this study is as follows:

- i) Headteacher A (HTA) is in his third headship. He has served eight years in his first school as head and five in his second. He has been in his present school for three years;
- ii) Headteacher B (HTB) is in her first headship. She has been heading this school for eighteen months;
- iii) Headteacher C (HTC) is in his first headship. He has been in this headship for one month.
- iv) Headteacher D (HTD) was a head of school for nine years. She served as a headteacher in only one school and was medically retired in 1992.

Initiation

This study found that previous experiences of these headteachers in their deputy headship post are perceived to be an important influence in their initiation sub-phase. Headteacher A was a deputy for four years prior to his first headship and it helped him a great deal in his headship post. He accords much of that to his headteacher, as he said:

But most importantly, my headteacher was a great mentor to me. He was an excellent role model and gave me a lot of invaluable advice.

Headteacher C spent two years as a deputy head and he received a lot of support from his headteacher. Headteacher D, on the other hand, said that her deputy headship did not prepare her for the eventual headship in another school. She perceived her deputy role as not relevant because she received very little support from her head.

The findings in this study point towards the existence of the initiation period in every headteacher's headship career, as proposed by Ribbins's (2003) model. The findings concur with Ribbins (2003) that the quality of the transition seems to be influenced by factors relating to previous experiences and the relevance of those experiences to the present post.

However, even though Ribbins (2003) suggests that the initiation period being at least three years, the findings show that the initiation period could be even a shorter one. HTB is such a case. She was the deputy head in the school she is heading now and acted on the headteacher's post for a term. She was already feeling initiated just after being in the post for eighteen months. This could be a theme for further research to investigate whether being in a leadership role before in the same school helps the headteacher to be initiated early in the headship.

The findings in this study also suggest that a headteacher's perception of what initiation means could influence the length of time needed to be initiated in the post. This could very well differ in every headteacher. For instance, Headteacher A said he spent five years in his first headship before feeling initiated in the post, even though he had an enriching experience in deputy headship for four years and felt comfortable and happy during his early headship years. Amongst his criteria for feeling initiated in his first headship was after witnessing "almost a generation of students go through".

Development

In this study, this sub-phase is influenced by the headteachers' active and exciting roles. Headteacher A recalled being actively involved in getting the schools ahead during this sub-phase. Headteacher D spent her development years in building relationships with the staff, albeit having to face "hostility" at the same time. Headteacher C, having served only 18 months in her school, thinks she is "in the middle stage", and her key task now is to formalise the teams within the school. In this sub-phase, the headteachers built relationships, formalised and moved teams, and helped the school excel in their external inspection. It was time to create a new image for the schools. The findings concur with the description of this stage in Ribbins's (2003) model.

Autonomy

Only two of the headteachers in this study are perceived to have experienced this stage. Headteacher A experienced about eight years in his tenure at his first headship post while Headteacher D had hers for nine years.

Good communication with fellow staff, getting everyone motivated and enthused, and moving the school further ahead appeared to be important influences for the headteachers at this sub-phase. The findings agreed with Ribbins (2003) that the headteachers by this stage had mastered the demands of headship. The findings, however, did not support the proposition by Woods (2002) that headteachers at this stage change their management styles to being autocratic and show a decline in job satisfaction.

In this study, it seems to be unlikely that Headteacher A will use autocratic style of management in his incumbency, because he is a firm believer of "using gentle persuasion and praise". Headteacher B was also very much enthused with her headship in this sub-phase and no indication pointed towards her being an autocratic head.

Advancement

In this study, this sub-phase involves Headteacher A and Headteacher D. HTA's enthusiasm in the job influenced him to still feel enchanted about his work, and he indicated another good 8 to 10 years in the present headship. After that, he still wanted to be involved with education, albeit only in the teaching part of it.

Headteacher D, on the other hand, was medically retired after nine years in her post. Towards the end of her career, her S.L.D.(Severe Learning Difficulties) school had to be relocated to two different places – one; an empty infant school attached to a primary school, and two; a de-commissioned kitchen and canteen annex in an adjoining comprehensive. She had to deal with the change and external factors such as parents and new heads, and all this took a toll on her. She fell sick, which led to a hysterectomy and then viral encephalitis that landed her in hospital and eventually medically retired. Using the Ribbins (2003) model, she could be classified as 'disenchanted'. However, to classify her sub-phase as disenchantment and negative would appear somewhat inconclusive without first looking at the circumstances surrounding her and what her feelings were subsequently. She was "devastated" to lose her career and life style and it took her 10 following years to get over the loss of her headship. She did not really divest after her retirement but rather bounced back to set up three private homes for people with learning disabilities. This seems to point to a gap in Ribbins's model, whereby a case such as Headteacher D's is not addressed. She had to leave her job after falling ill, which would fit in the 'disenchantment' and 'divestiture' bit of the model but that was not the end of her story. She bounced back and got 'enchanted' again and went on to 'reinvent' herself with her new vocation.

Summary of findings

The findings in this study, as discussed on each of the sub-phases in this section, suggest that the influences perceived by headteachers in their incumbency phase concur substantially with the literature and Ribbins's (2003) model. The findings, however, do point to some alternative views from the literature in suggesting that the initiation sub-phase does not necessarily occur after three years in post and the heads do not change their management styles as they get into the autonomy sub-phase. The findings also point to what seems like a gap in Ribbins's (2003) model, pertaining to the advancement sub-phase, whereby the 'rebound' or 'rejuvenation' of headteachers who leave the post has not been addressed.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with only four headteachers. The headteachers were interviewed by four different members in the group. Even though the interviews were targeted at getting the experiences in the lives and careers of these headteachers, they varied in gathering adequate data for each section or phase being studied. This occurrence is probably inevitable as each of the group members strived to first get enough data for their respective phase, while acquiring data for the other phases, and that their choice of sample could have been based on this criterion. This made up the limitation of this study. Amidst this limitation, conclusions could still be drawn with regards to the framework used in the study and the research question.

This study concludes that there appears to be a gap in the Ribbins (2003) model on describing the advancement sub-phase; with regards to disenchantment. Disenchantment, which is followed by divestiture, probably falls short of conclusiveness in the framework of Ribbins (2003), with its reference on Day and Bakioglu (1996), without considering what happens afterwards to the headteachers who leave the post. The model could be extended to address this phenomenon and investigate the 'rejuvenation' of headteachers who seem temporarily fit into the disenchantment and divestiture frame, only to come out of it afterwards. Further work could be undertaken towards this.

Another concern for a study like this is the different knowledge base of the researcher and the researched with regards to the perception of career sub-phases. This dwells into the ontological question of the 'truth'; whether it is defined by the researcher or the researched. It could be assumed that the headteachers might have or might not have the knowledge of the framework by Ribbins (2003) resulting in different perceptions of 'stage' or sub-phase that they were in. In this study, for instance, Headteacher B perceived herself in 'the middle stage' and this could very well be the case but it could also be that she is still in the 'initiation' stage if so perceived by the researcher. For the sake of the analysis in this study, the former perception was adapted.

In conclusion, the experience of this study points towards the difficulty of adapting any one framework to explore the many themes of educational leaders' lives and careers. The frameworks, nevertheless, help to pave a basic path of seeking knowledge to further explain the details and intricacies of educational leadership.

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