

# Talking heads

What is it that causes so many educators these days to avoid the top few rungs of the career ladder? **Richard Parker**, himself a former head teacher, has been investigating...

**I**t's a job like no other. There are times when things get so difficult you want to scream but you know that if you do, it has to be in a closed room where no one, apart from possibly your PA, can hear you. Some staff (albeit a minority) can be so difficult: they mistrust because you are seen as 'management' and therefore devious and out to get them. However, you can be having a tough day and then you walk in to an assembly and see some of your students doing a terrific sales pitch for a charity they are supporting and you feel so proud you could burst! It can be an emotional roller coaster but the opportunities you have to make a difference, a real difference to the life chances of young people make it a job like no other. Now that I've been a head for five years I couldn't imagine doing anything else."

Gill, a relatively young head of a medium-sized mixed comprehensive

When I began teaching it was widely assumed that it would be a job for life, and the ultimate ambition for some was to become a headteacher, but nowadays new entrants to the profession are much more guarded and uncertain even about how long they will teach for, let alone what their 'ultimate ambition' might be.

At present, for example, the average time a qualified teacher in the UK stays in teaching is eight years. Most therefore will be setting their sights on learning their craft, accessing some relevant professional development and perhaps taking on a middle leadership role sometime within the first five to eight years. Very few will be seriously considering headship and even those teachers who have been in the job for over 15 years will rarely, if ever, give you a straight answer to the question 'Do you want to be a head?' This shift in emphasis might go some way to explaining why fewer people are considering whether

headship is right for them. It would also explain why the majority of teachers do not even consider applying for headships until they are seasoned professionals with a wealth of middle/senior leadership experience behind them.

Of course there have always been hundreds of perfectly justified reasons why people do not want to be a head: the hours, the stress, the thought of missing the teaching and the contact with the students, the overt and covert criticism from all sides, being under the public microscope, the accountability, the isolation, the at times ridiculous expectations – the list is almost endless. Many, if not most, of the people putting forward all the negative aspects of headship will, in all probability, never apply for the position. That level of responsibility and accountability is just not for them whatever the appeal or the apparent rewards.

## Taking the plunge

The majority of those who *do* aspire to being a head will still in all probability be made up of those teachers who began their career determined to stay in teaching, made a success of each opportunity as it arose, avoided the complacency and potential stagnation which can come from staying in one post for too long and rose through the ranks to a senior leadership position from where the move to headship becomes an automatic, near inevitable final step. Taking that final step will trigger the sorts of questions, fears and apprehensions that should go through any sensible person's mind when thinking about headship:

- Do I need the additional hassle?
- Is it worth the extra money?
- Why I am entertaining the idea of moving out of my comfort zone?
- How will my family cope with the inevitable physical and mental upheaval?
- Will I be able to take a career break and still find the time and the energy to apply for a headship?
- Can I do the job as well as my current boss?
- Will I turn out to be as bad as my current boss?
- Is the stress as bad as they claim?
- If it is, will I be able to deal with it?
- Why are so many of my friends telling me I must be mad even to think of doing such a thing?
- What if I discover, too late, that I am completely out of my depth?



Two observations: first, this list could be considerably longer and secondly, just about everybody who has any sense or emotional intelligence will go through the same level of angst – not only when they are applying for headship but also when they are being interviewed, when they have been appointed and most probably in the first couple of years of actually doing the job. As a newly-appointed head talking to other headteachers who appear to you to be so comfortable in the role and so knowledgeable about virtually everything, the realisation that in amidst the pleasure and occasional euphoria they still experience moments of self doubt, depression and occasional despair can be rather reassuring.

The more you interview headteachers about how and why they considered taking on headship, the more diverse the reasons and the motives become. For example, if you ask any number of heads what they believe to be the toughest job (certainly physically) in a school they are likely to say being a deputy head. The role is exceptionally challenging because it requires so many different skills, operating as it does between whole-school decision making and working at the chalk face. Although it carries considerable clout, being a deputy head does not give you ultimate authority and that can be hard. For example, disagreeing fundamentally with your boss behind closed doors about a policy decision that you think will create many more problems than it will solve and then having to defend it doggedly in the staffroom (because that is your job) is very difficult. Most headteachers I have met said that deputy headship is a job most of us can only do well for a finite period of time and that sooner rather than later, applying for a headship becomes increasingly attractive for very many of them.

The vast majority of the heads I have interviewed say that their careers were in no way carefully mapped out from day

one; in fact, the major reason they went for promotion was less the attraction of the additional responsibility but more the desire to avoid getting stuck in their current role. This can be a tough position to be in, especially if even though you are currently happy in a leadership role in a school where you are settled and where your family is content and secure, you still have the nagging conviction that you will miserable if you are in the same job five years down the line.

I am in no doubt that headship is the most exciting, challenging and inspiring job in education with its enormous responsibilities and tremendous opportunities to change things for the better. Although the pace, variety and complexities of the role are daunting, the rewards are huge if you get it right and I would encourage anyone seriously considering taking on a headship to do all in their power to make the aspiration a reality.

### Action points

- Be pragmatic and businesslike about how you prepare for headship and do

not fall into the deceptively easy trap of believing that it is all down to luck. Most successful headteachers secured their positions by working hard and creating the right profile.

- Make sure that decisions about where you might apply for a headship are shared and agreed by any and all relevant members of your family. You are not the only one who is going to be uprooted and apprehensive about the future if you do find yourself moving to a new school in a different part of the country!

- Don't be afraid of taking on the responsibilities of headship if you are convinced that you want to run your own school. Remember that the vast majority of heads say that they have never regretted taking on the role and believe it to be the best job in education – a view I would heartily endorse.

- Don't spend all your time waiting for the perfect job. It rarely, if ever, exists. Accept any and all interviews: they will help you develop your technique and provide you with invaluable on the job training.

- If you manage to get an interview, do absolutely everything you can to make sure that you do your best. Don't be intimidated by the opposition. Remember that a lot of headship is putting on a performance and this is just as true at interviews as it is in any other aspect of the role.

- Many governing bodies assume that they are going to appoint the finished article to their particular school. They won't, so make sure you gain their confidence and support by creating a positive and constructive working relationship with them and with the Chair of Governors in particular.

- Find a mentor – someone whose character, confidentiality and guidance you can trust and someone who will tell you the truth – even when it is not what you necessarily want to hear.

- Access the best professional development opportunities available and tap in to as many useful and informed sources of help and advice as you can. Remember that a great deal of headship is learnt on the job so learn quickly and efficiently. Accept that you will make mistakes, particularly in the first six months to a year, but do everything possible to avoid

repeating them. Keep a log/diary for future reference.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RICHARD PARKER SPENT OVER 40 YEARS IN TEACHING, NEARLY HALF OF THOSE AS A HEAD TEACHER. HE WAS AN ASSOCIATE TUTOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER TEACHING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP, A RESEARCH ASSOCIATE WITH NCSL AND A MEMBER OF THE TEAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK COMMISSIONED TO REVIEW HEADTEACHER SUCCESSION PLANNING. THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN EXTRACTED FROM **THE REALITY OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP** (BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION, £24.99), WHICH HE CO-AUTHORED WITH DAVID MIDDLEWOOD. TS READERS CAN ORDER THE BOOK WITH A **20% DISCOUNT** BY ORDERING ONLINE AT [BLOOMSBURY.COM/EDUCATION](http://BLOOMSBURY.COM/EDUCATION) AND USING THE CODE **LEADER**.

