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Reservoirs of Hope:

Spiritual and moral leadership in
headteachers

How headteachers sustain their schools and themselves through
spiritual and moral leadership based on hope.

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The concept

“The starting point is not policy, it’s hope. Because from hope comes change.” (Tony Blair)

This research study seeks to test this statement against the leadership stories of 25 serving headteachers drawn from a cross-section of school contexts, phases and geographical locations within England. It is based on the premise that a school cannot move forward without a clear vision of where its leaders want it to reach. Without such a vision, clearly articulated, it remains static at best or, at worst, regresses. ‘Hope’ is what drives the institution forward towards achieving its vision, whilst allowing it to remain true to its values whatever the external pressures. The successful headteacher, through acting as the wellspring of values and vision for the school, acts as the external ‘reservoir of hope’ for the institution. In the face of burgeoning demands for change, colleagues look to the headteacher to provide spiritual and moral leadership, the necessary coherence and unity of vision and to maintain its underpinning integrity of values.

It is important to stress that the concept of spiritual and moral leadership used in the context of this study does not have exclusively religious connotations or linkage to a specific set of beliefs, but rather is based on a wider concept of secular spirituality: whatever it is that gives individuals their foundations of ethical behaviour and bases of belief. Equally, the distinction needs to be drawn between the spiritual and moral management of the school, concerned with curriculum issues such as assemblies, religious education, citizenship etc, and spiritual and moral leadership. The latter is concerned with the often intangible aspects of interpersonal engagement and the quality of relationships, preserved by a clearly articulated structure of moral and ethical values. The distinction between leadership and management is neatly encapsulated as the difference between ‘being’ and ‘doing’.

Spiritual and moral leadership was defined by one secondary head participant in the study as ‘the extra bit that makes the difference’. To display that type of leadership requires the individual leader to act as the external reservoir of hope for the institution, preserving its collective self-belief and directional focus against the pressures of events. It also requires the leader to maintain and sustain an internal ‘personal reservoir of hope’ (the phrase is from John West-Burnham and is used by kind permission), from which their values and vision flow and which enables effective interpersonal engagement and personal self-belief.

This personal reservoir of hope for the individual has to be periodically refilled by a variety of replenishment and sustainability strategies, without which the leader will either ‘burn out’ by being unable to sustain hope and energy levels in the face of relentless pressures for change, or ‘drop out’ and withdraw from the change arena and, in the memorable words of one primary head participant, ‘die a lingering death through managing from the stock cupboard’.

The method

A cross-sectional sample of 25 serving headteachers was constructed, drawn from all phases of compulsory-age education, from a variety of contexts, a range of school sizes and from a wide geographical area.

A semi-structured interview schedule was drawn up to allow colleagues an open-ended one-to-one opportunity lasting approximately one hour to reflect on their leadership story within the context outlined above.

Key to the research approach was the use of critical incident technique, a well-established method for evaluating systems in functioning work environments which uses recollections of critical incidents (which may not necessarily be high level), captured through interviews with participants, as exemplars of the behaviour of a system under stress, even though that recollection may be personalised, distorted and non-triangulated.

The findings

- Although drawing from a variety of faith perspectives and belief systems, all headteachers in the study were able to articulate an individual personal value system that underpinned their approach to school leadership. They defined spiritual and moral leadership not as a concern for the management of issues such as the citizenship curriculum or religious education, but in terms of the headteacher acting as the guardian of the vision of the school and as the consistent exponent of its value system not only on a day to day basis but when faced with critical situations. All recognised the importance of spiritual and moral leadership in their headship role.
- An internal reservoir of hope is the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader from which their values and vision flow and which makes effective interpersonal engagement possible no matter what the external

pressures. The external reservoir of hope is where the head acts as the wellspring of self-belief and directional focus for the school. Twenty-three of the 25 heads interviewed found the metaphor of ‘reservoirs of hope’ unarguably of value in thinking about their role in spiritual and moral leadership.

- To replenish and refill their personal reservoir of hope, all heads were able to describe a range of sustainability strategies without which their effective functioning would be impaired. Such strategies included belief networks, sustained by high levels of self-belief in the rightness of their underlying value system; support networks, sustained by families, friends and colleagues; and external networks of engagement with interests and experiences beyond the world of education.
- Asked to reflect on situations from their leadership stories, all were able to offer micro-narratives of critical incidents encompassing community tragedies, personnel problems and organisational crises where their capacity for spiritual and moral leadership was tested. Headteachers found the opportunity to reflect and engage in discussion in this area energising and liberating.
- Heads were able to identify a development of capacity to act in a spiritual and moral leadership role as headship progresses, through a growth in confidence, self-awareness and willingness to use more creative and adventurous solutions whilst remaining true to their value system. There was a perceived development of a more reflective approach based on ‘being a head’ rather than ‘doing headship’. This growth can be linked with identified stages of development of personal authenticity as a leader.
- Clear messages were articulated concerning the professional development needs of senior staff at various stages of leadership development. These range from in-house modelling of spiritual and moral approaches to leadership to the provision of greater reflection opportunities on National Professional Qualification for Headship courses, with a focus not simply on the mechanics of school management, but on the more intangible aspects of vision and personal values.

For the more experienced headteacher, the reflection opportunities within the Leadership Programme for Serving Heads, triangulated by the views of other members of the school community, are important in consolidating and enhancing self-awareness. Irrespective of length of experience, there is a strongly expressed need for legitimisation and facilitation by LEAs, Diocesan

officers, professional associations or small clusters of like-minded heads. Networked support for experienced headteachers, through the availability of ‘professional listening partners’ and ‘collaborative development supporters’, can provide support and reflection opportunities either on a one-to-one, small group or networked learning community basis.

Very experienced heads have expressed the desire to put something back into the profession as consultant leaders to support such networking, but themselves need opportunities to reflect on what they have achieved and how it might be shared, in a collaborative model of ‘developing headteachers together’.

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