

Back to School: Why headship is no longer an option

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Next week, pupils and teachers will enter the new academic year. It is an expected view that all deputy and assistant headteachers will continue their journey into headship within schools in England, with the notions of role progressions, aspiration and performance development at the heart of the process. But in reality, this may not be the case. Applications for headteacher posts are at an all-time low and many vacancies are re-advertised a number of times before being filled. Headship is no longer the preferred choice of many deputy and assistant headteachers, meaning there is now a national shortage of headteachers.



Questions must therefore be asked about why so many deputy and assistant headteachers no longer aspire to leadership.

The reality of the education system in England is that the Government, together with the school inspection body, OFSTED, disseminates a constant flow of directives and White Papers to headteachers about what 'real' education should look like.

Politically, education has long been considered to be at the heart of the country's economic success. Key to this is strong headship and outstanding school leadership to shape schools for the 21st century and produce skilled young people for the future.

But in this era of accountability, we are experiencing something of a blame culture. The drop in applications for headship roles over the past five years signals a weakness in the succession planning strategy on a regional and national level.

Many deputy and assistant headteachers are making the choice not to follow the 'expected route' to headship, resulting in a 'bottleneck' situation.

The layers of this headship shortage in England need to be seriously considered, combined with the following questions:

- Why are so many deputy and assistant headteachers resisting 'the opportunity' for headship?
- Why does the school leadership workforce not represent an equal representation of Black Minority Ethnic male and female workers?

Research into the career paths of deputy and assistant headteachers has identified stabilising and destabilising factors, recruitment and retention issues, and perceived emotional and physical barriers relating to the headship role.

In January 2013 the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services introduced their new leadership and management programmes, which aim to acknowledge leadership development from three core experience levels within the education structure; Middle Leadership (NPQML), Senior Leadership (NPQSL) and Headship (NPQH). It is hoped that the revised programmes will provide a concrete and practical career plan for teachers and aspiring leaders as well as promote a climate of learning for leadership in order to build a diverse teaching workforce for the future.

Continued studies into the personal experiences and aspirations of classroom teachers and deputy and assistant headteachers in regional education authorities, together with a serious approach to professional development and to supporting all staff without prejudice, could serve to address the national headship shortage as well as promote realistic proposals for building progressive and practical transition routes into the 21st century headship role.

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