

MAKING SENSE OF PROBLEMS IN PRIMARY HEADSHIP

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MAKING SENSE OF PROBLEMS IN PRIMARY HEADSHIP

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated with affection to the memory of our friend and colleague, Professor Ray Bolam, who exemplified all the very best qualities of leadership and management.

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Contents

About the Authors	<i>ix</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	<i>1</i>
Part I What's the Problem?	
Chapter 1 Mapping the Minefield: Explaining the Research Studies	<i>9</i>
Chapter 2 Landmarks in the Minefield: Generic Problem Issues	<i>21</i>
Chapter 3 New Heads on Their Blocks: The Problems of Assuming Headship	<i>35</i>
Chapter 4 Hard Labour: Managing a Problematic Workload	<i>47</i>
Chapter 5 Close Encounters: Problematic Colleagues	<i>63</i>
Chapter 6 Clients and Consumers: Problematic Parents and Pupils	<i>81</i>
Chapter 7 More Checks Than Balances: Problematic Partners in School Governance	<i>97</i>
Chapter 8 Counting the Cost: The Personal Impact of Headship	<i>113</i>
Part II What Every Head Should Know	
Chapter 9 Making Sense of Headship: Knowing What	<i>129</i>
Chapter 10 Making Sense of Headship: Knowing How	<i>139</i>
Chapter 11 Back to the Future: Revisiting Classic Knowledge Bases for Problem Analysis and Framing	<i>151</i>
Chapter 12 Learning the Ropes? On the Ropes? Making Sense of Headteacher Succession and Socialisation	<i>167</i>

Chapter 13 Putting Problems in Perspective: Strategy and Reflection in Problem Management	<i>181</i>
Chapter 14 Hands on Hearts and Fingers on Pulses	<i>195</i>
 References	 <i>205</i>
Index	<i>217</i>

About the Authors

In writing this book, the authors draw not only on empirical research but also on personal experience. Both are former primary headteachers who, in subsequent university careers, led post-graduate and in-service school leadership development programmes in the UK and overseas. Gerald Dunning taught at Swansea University and, subsequently, the University of Glamorgan (now South Wales) where he was Head of the Department of Education and Deputy Head of the School of Psychology. Tony Elliott taught at Bangor University where he was Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Dean of the Faculty of Education. Both were members of the consortium that delivered the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) for the Welsh Government for more than a decade (Tony Elliott as a former Chair) and worked on secondment to Ofsted (Gerald Dunning) and Estyn (Tony Elliott) as Lead Inspectors of primary schools. Gerald Dunning is a previous Chair of ENIRDELM.¹ These diverse roles have made the problems of headship part of their professional DNA and enable them to apply almost 60 years of combined experience and knowledge to the study presented in this book.

¹ENIRDELM (European Network for Improvement, Research and Development in Educational Leadership and Management) was originally formed as ENIRDEM in 1991 to draw together researchers, trainers, developers and practitioners in school leadership from western Europe and countries in the former communist bloc. It continues to thrive as a collaborative network bringing together a range of professional interests related to educational leadership and management, initiating collaborative research projects and organising an annual conference [<http://www.enirdelm.org>].

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You suddenly realise you don't have enough knowledge, you don't have the skills, but you often have to act very carefully and very quickly. You can make a lot of mistakes as a head by accidentally wandering into a minefield.

Val: primary head

Leading this school has been like walking through a minefield at times. You tread carefully but all the time, at the back of your mind, you wonder whether the next step is going to set off the big bang.

Lou: primary head

The legal framework that affects headship is all a real minefield at the moment.

Lloyd: primary head

I think a large part of the head's role is being the chief problem solver in the school.

Judith: primary head

Introduction

This Book is Different ...

Like many other books about primary headship this book has been written to enhance knowledge about school leadership and management in that phase. It is different because it approaches that task from an unusual angle by focussing on problematic aspects of the role. Our aim in writing about these is not to be negative or defeatist. Rather, we are concerned to present an honest account of the more challenging realities of the job as they affect the day-to-day work of contemporary primary headteachers.

Primary headship is a hugely rewarding role and the work of headteachers has a highly positive influence on children's lives long after their school days are over. It is not surprising, therefore, that heads are passionately committed to their job and take real pride in the achievements of their schools. Yet many also recognise that their role is increasingly beset by problems, so much so that several of those interviewed for this book described the current landscape of primary headship as a metaphorical 'minefield'. This book has been written because relatively little of the literature on primary headship addresses the problems of headship explicitly or helps practitioners, and those who contribute to their support and development, address them knowledgeably.

What This Book is About

Problem management can be defined as an ability to recognise a necessary or desirable change in a prevailing state of affairs and decide how to implement that change to best effect (Schon, 1987). The following chapters highlight the more common and enduring problems primary heads encounter as they negotiate their 'minefields'. They also offer a set of conceptual tools to support analysis of those problems and help identify how they might be ameliorated. Of course, not all problems can be solved outright. Some defy attempts to identify their cause clearly or frustrate remediation, and there will be occasions when it proves impossible to extinguish them completely. In these cases, the aim should be to reduce their dysfunctional impact as fully as possible and minimise further occurrences. Nevertheless, if we are serious about enhancing the effectiveness of our schools, we need to be honest in acknowledging the nature and impact of the problems which compromise attempts to achieve that goal.

2 *Making Sense of Problems in Primary Headship*

This book has two main purposes. The first is to present empirical evidence of problems affecting primary headteachers during 20 years of continuous and substantial educational reform. In doing so it seeks to make sense of the first-hand experiences of serving school leaders (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002) and contributes to the canon of personal accounts of headteachers' work (Cohen et al., 2007). Ganz (2009a) suggests that leaders need to be able to articulate three stories about their leadership. The first is a story of 'self': how they themselves have been formed and the effects of that formation on their work as leaders. The second is a story of 'us': the character of their organisational group and its implications for their leadership. The third is the story of 'now': the climate and circumstances of the time and place in which the group functions and the responses these require from the leader. The accounts presented in the chapters of Part I articulate these stories and help map the 'minefield'. We hope they will encourage more open and honest recognition of the problematic experiences of primary headship.

The second main purpose of the book is to support analysis and understanding of the more demanding problems primary heads encounter. In doing so it aims to foster cultures of evidence-informed practice (Brown and Zhang, 2017; Sheard and Sharples, 2016) and contribute to the four purposes of educational leadership and management research defined by Bolam (1999):

- developing knowledge from description and analysis which explains prevailing states of affairs;
- developing knowledge for action useful to practitioners and policymakers from investigation of real-life leadership and management activity;
- developing instrumental knowledge supportive of headteacher preparation and development; and
- enhancing practitioners' capacity to engage in reflective analysis and action research to aid school effectiveness and improvement.

Having established its focus and purposes, it will also be helpful to clarify what the book does not set out to do. It is not intended as an armoury of magic bullets or a tips-for-headteachers problem-solving manual. Although most of the problems discussed affect primary schools generally, they need to be understood and addressed in terms of the interplay of a diverse mix of context-specific variables. There are consequently few, if any, quick fixes to the more pressing and endemic problems of headship (Waite, 2016) and they are seldom managed successfully by applying formulaic codes of practice. 'Capable' headship (Duignan, 2006) requires intelligent reading of the complex chemistry of human and organisational factors which constitute 'context specificity' (Hallinger, 2018) to determine appropriate problem-response strategies. This book supports that task but does not provide a stock of 'off-the-peg' solutions and makes no attempt to address all the possible problems affecting primary schools, though it does highlight those which appear to be most consistently problematic. It neither offers clever schemes for stretching budgets, or eliminating the ubiquitous problems of time management, nor does it consider strategies for dealing with one of the most pressing challenges for contemporary headteachers: generating and maintaining the positive performance

data that increasingly outrank all other indicators of success. The book also has little to say about the leadership and management of change *per se* even though that is widely recognised as a problematic issue.

There are two reasons for all of this. The first is that there is already a relatively wide literature which deals with these discrete topics. The second, and more important, is that all these issues are usually rendered problematic by deficiencies or overloads, deviations from plans or targets, competing goals and values, misinterpreted intentions, difficulty acquiring resources or converting people to new ways of thinking or behaving, and the uncertainty associated with the need to make and take decisions. These are the specific problem facets we identify in Chapter 1 and explain theoretically in the chapters of Part II.

The book also features very few highly dramatic or sensational problems because our subjects reported very few. What it does record is the long, low, persistent grumble of difficulties that many primary heads experience on a more-or-less daily basis. Their most challenging problems derive from intense workload pressures and the conflicting values, interests and assumptions which underlie dysfunctional relationships with others in the school community. People are usually at the heart of headteachers' workloads. It is people, with their needs for support and guidance, their crises and failures, their demands and complaints and their inability to understand or adopt required behaviours, who usually pose the most troublesome of heads' problems and frustrate attempts to improve educational outcomes. Consequently, this book focusses most substantially on problems centred on heads' relationships with other people in the school community.

In writing this book we refute any suggestion that problems are an excuse for ineffective practice. Rather, we believe that many of the problems confronting primary heads need to be recognised as essentially pervasive, persistent and even inevitable characteristics of modern schooling. The ability to mitigate them will be a crucial requirement of headteachers who are able to meet the challenges of current and future headship successfully. The fact that thousands of heads do so on a daily basis is testimony to the high degree of professionalism which characterises most school leadership in modern Britain. With this fact in mind, we also stress that this book is *not* a study of 'problem heads'. None of our subjects could legitimately have been deemed 'failing' heads and there was no deliberate attempt to include those leading schools known to be in difficulty or special measures. On the contrary, there was considerable evidence that our interviewees were highly capable practitioners and it would have been easy to develop a complementary study which celebrated their many successes. Their candour in discussing the problems they faced is a reflection of their honesty, their readiness to contribute to the support and enlightenment of colleagues and their wisdom in acknowledging the inherently challenging nature of their roles.

The Structure of the Book

This book has two main parts. In Part I, the first chapter outlines the background to our research studies, summarises their main findings and presents an original problem typology derived from accounts provided by our subjects. The second chapter reviews a set of generic issues which form a problematic backdrop to

contemporary headship. Chapters 3–8 record the most significant problem issues identified by subjects in two interview studies conducted between 1997–1998 and 2009–2017: assumption of headship, workloads, relationships with others involved in the life and work of the school and the impact of problems on heads’ personal and professional lives. A significant finding from comparison of the two studies is that most of those issues were regarded as consistently problematic throughout the course of two decades. The most marked difference between them was the identification of new problem issues associated with parents and pupils by subjects in 2009–2017.

Part II reviews a set of theories which aid understanding of the provenance and ramifications of the problems identified in Part I. When they reach that stage of the book, readers may question why we are presenting some theories which are 30 or more years old when headship in Britain has changed radically in the intervening period and continues to do so rapidly (Earley, 2013; Earley and Greany, 2017). It is not because we are unaware of anything more recent. The contributions of research, theory and practitioner literatures to the preparation and development of school leaders commonly reflect shifts in educational policy and practice. While this is essentially a healthy phenomenon, it also has a downside. As the circus continually moves on, classic acts from the past are forgotten and their relevance to present-day schooling overlooked. The choice of contents in Part II of this book reflects a conviction that theories which helped guide interpretation of data from the first interview study in 1997–1998 remained highly pertinent to reports from the 2009–2017 study and will continue to have much that is helpful to say about the problems of primary headship in the foreseeable future. Therefore, where we cite theory, research evidence or commentary from the past, we do so because it helps clarify understanding of current problems for new readers who are unlikely to be familiar with the original sources. The main theories we present, in particular those in Chapters 11 and 12, are commonly at the heart of problems even our most recent interviewees still found difficult to manage.

Part II begins with two chapters about headteachers’ role learning. Chapter 9 reviews types of knowledge headteachers need to be able to access while Chapter 10 considers how such knowledge is formed and might be applied to problem management. The next two chapters explore theory bases which should aid analysis and framing of specific types of problem. Chapter 11 addresses organisational micropolitics, symbolism and value theory, while Chapter 12 explains the processes and implications of headteacher succession and socialisation. Chapter 13 deals with strategic problem management and the role of reflection in that process. Finally, Chapter 14 summarises themes from earlier chapters and contributes additional perspectives on the problematic nature of primary headship.

Explaining Terminology

Sense-making

We did not write a book entitled ‘Solving Problems in Primary Headship’ for reasons explained earlier in this introduction. Our choice of ‘Making Sense of

Problems in Primary Headship' acknowledges the concept of 'sensemaking' [*sic.*] defined by the American organisational theorist Karl Weick to describe the meanings people attribute to their social and organisational lives and the problems associated with them. Weick (1995) recognises several key influences on sense-making summarised as follows:

- (i) *Self-identity*. People's ideas about who they are, how they matter, where they stand in relation to others and what is expected of them shape how they pay attention to their circumstances and interpret the meaning of events and relationships.
- (ii) *Temporality*. The attention people pay to events and behaviours, the significance they attach to them and their overall understanding of them are affected by whether their engagement with them is retrospective, immediate or prospective.
- (iii) *Narrative*. People respond to their circumstances by constructing stories and accounts to articulate their developing understanding and assumptions about what is happening and what it means. These accounts are shared with others so that individual understanding becomes a product of both first- and third-party interpretations.
- (iv) *Plausibility*. One of the most influential factors governing the sense people make of their circumstances is not what is actually true, but what they think is most likely to be true. The plausible, rather than the rational or most factually accurate, is often the explanation which fits most comfortably with prevailing understanding, assumptions or prejudices.
- (v) *Reciprocal interpretation*. Individuals' existing sensemaking determines the way they respond to situations and other people, in particular the cues and clues they look for to help them identify what is significant. What they come to regard as important and the responses they make are influenced by existing self-identity and narrative constructions, as well as temporality and plausibility. In turn, how they perceive the significance of events and relationships may well affect how situations develop and other people behave in a series of chain reactions. These further influence individual sensemaking both discretely and in combination in an on-going series of reciprocal iterations.

All these influences on sensemaking are affected by, and contribute to, the issues identified in the following chapters. Their potential and actual significance needs to be understood as a basis for managing a range of problems which frustrate school effectiveness and improvement (Ganon-Shilon and Schechter, 2017).

Problem Management

In the following chapters of this book we use the term 'problem management' since it embraces Mezirow's (1991) concepts of 'problem posing' and 'problem solving'. We understand management in the sense of Hodgkinson's definition explained in Chapter 2 which identifies it as a function supportive of leadership

6 *Making Sense of Problems in Primary Headship*

vision and mission. The term also highlights the fact that even where complete elimination of a problem proves impossible, heads, as managerial ‘experts-in-context’, should be able to devise appropriate mitigatory strategies. Additionally, it acknowledges that many of the problems encountered by headteachers arise from the constituent tasks of headship itself, or are presented to them by other people, so that they are charged *de facto* with management of those demands.