

A comparative study of current practice to appoint head teachers in England and the USA

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Abstract. This paper is based on a review of relevant literature, which draws comparisons between the current practice in the appointment of head teachers in advanced countries (England - which refers to England and Wales in this paper - and the United States). The recruitment and selection systems of school head teachers in both countries, with a focus on the similarities and differences between these systems. It also outlines the challenges that schools face in the USA and England to meet their demand for qualified head teachers. Recommendations are given to improve the selection system.

Keywords: recruitment, selection systems, selection criteria, school headteacher.

1 Introduction

The current focus on school leader preparation around the world is based upon the belief that school leaders make a difference in both the effectiveness and efficiency of schooling (Hallinger & Snidvongs, 2008). There has been international agreement about the call for school leaders who have the necessary power to improve teaching, learning and pupils' improvement and achievement (OECD, 2010). The final report for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009) represents a unique empirical and context-informed account, over time, of the leadership values, qualities and actions by which heads, in particular, exercise direct, intentional influence on pupil behaviour, staff commitment and quality, teaching and learning conditions and, through this, pupil outcomes (DCSF, 2009).

The research emphasises that head teachers in the more effective schools are successful in improving pupil outcomes through their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competencies, and through the specific recipe and appropriate implementation and management of these strategies in unique situations (DCSF, 2009). For these reasons, the recruitment, retention and development of school principals are matters of great significance for all school systems (Chapman, 2005). It is essential to select (and develop) suitable individuals for school leadership positions. This importance has led to the improvement of the present system of selection procedures (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

This paper is based on a review of relevant literature, which draws comparisons between the current practice in the appointment of head teachers in advanced countries (England - which refers to England and Wales in this paper - and the United States). It is divided into two parts; the first section compares the recruitment and selection systems of school head teachers in both countries, with a focus on the similarities and differences between them. The second outlines the challenges that schools face in the USA and England to meet their demand for qualified head teachers. Finally, recommendations are made to improve the selection system in the Ministry of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and comments are made on what can be generally learned from these examples.

Definitions of terms

Recruitment is the process of identifying and attracting a group of potential candidates from within and outside the organisation to evaluate for employment. According to Bratton and Gold,

Recruitment is the process of generating a pool of capable people to apply for employment to an organisation. Selection is the process by which managers and others use specific instruments to choose from a pool of applicants a person or persons more likely to succeed in the job(s), given management goals and legal requirements (2007, p 239).

Head teachers' recruitment and selection system in England and Wales

In England and Wales, the selection of school leadership employees is the responsibility of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), which has set standards for their education and development programmes (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). This Department is initially offering free online recruitment training to head teachers all around the county. The online training courses focus on good practices that should be implemented by adults working with children in schools when recruiting and selecting. Moreover, the local government provides short courses for the English principal of about ten days for the English principal in their first year after appointment. These courses include budgeting, curriculum, personnel and IT (Thody, 1989).

Responsibility for the selection of head teachers lies with the school governing body. Members of this committee (governors) include the head teacher, elected representatives of the parents, representatives of the teaching and the non-teaching staff and of the Local Authority (LA). The committee is also in part made up of so-called co-opted members (powerful representatives of politics and the economy). This board is also responsible for the selection and appointment of new head teachers; this process is overseen by a specific panel of five to seven governors (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

Altogether, the selection and appointment procedure of school leaders can be divided into the following seven phases (NCSL, 2006): (1) Continuous Preparation, (2) Defining of Need, (3) Attraction, (4) Selection, (5) Appointment, (6) Induction, and (7) Evaluation (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

The criteria relevant for the decision-making process are provided by the NCSL survey (2007). The governors interviewed considered the following criteria as extremely relevant. Governors' ranking of these criteria in the decision-making process differs for primary and secondary schools. In primary schools the governors' ranking of criteria respectively are expertise in teaching and learning - 94%, leadership and management skills - 87%, NPQH qualification completed - 49%, proficiency in budgeting and finances - 32%, experience in collaboration with the community - 34%, and former school leadership experience - 13%. On the other hand, in secondary schools, the most important criteria in ranked order are leadership and management skills - 94%, expertise in teaching and learning - 88%, NPQH qualification completed - 57%, proficiency in budgeting and finances - 37%, experience in collaboration with the community - 35% and former school leadership experience - 23% (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) is a key gateway qualification into headship in England. Initially centrally controlled (Brundrett, 2001), it started in 1997 as part of a training and development programme for teachers aspiring to become head teachers (Higham et al., 2007).

Head teacher vacancies must be nationally advertised. The publication used commonly is the *Times Educational Supplement*; or governors may advertise vacancies in other publications, e.g. *Golwg*, *Education Guardian*, *Western Mail*, and *Y Cymro* (Governors pack, 2008). It is essential that the advertisement catches the attention of as many appropriate persons as possible, so they may consider including local publications and the Internet for advertising (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

After viewing incoming applications, a range of methods are employed to screen the candidates: panel interviews by the working group, presentations by the applicants, and finalising interviews. Psychological tests and talks with representatives of the parents are applied more rarely. External assessment centres are seen to be useful, although not widely used, such as the National College of School Leadership (NCSL, 2006). The last step of the process is feedback and information to the candidates (if judged not suitable,

the candidates are entitled to be given reasons for rejection and another chance to apply again in the following year (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). Governing bodies offer candidates the chance to present their full capacities and character. This may involve a two-day selection process on visits, interviews, presentations and/or a measurement of the specific skills required in the job description (Higham, Hopkins, & Ahtaidou, 2007).

Selection Process for Head Teachers in the United States

The latter years of the twentieth century and the arrival of the new millennium saw new challenges in educational management and administration in the USA that were met with a admirable unity of purpose to address changes in learning paradigms due to the special role played by the universities which were places for the training courses and programmes to develop methods for selecting educational leaders. It is noted that the training and development programme includes all states, which leads to differentiation in the school administrations. So, the decision in America very often lies directly with the selection board of the school. Human resource leaders and administrators employ different criteria for selection, the former preferring professional experience – typically defined as years of teaching experiences – while the focus and the centre of attention for the latter is on leadership capabilities (Roza et al., 2003). Thus, the responsibility for the design of the selection procedure is ultimately to schools in most cases where the committees of school selection procedures and in many cases may be assigned other agents and private companies offering outsourcing and consulting services for the selection of school principals (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

In general, the requirement for the application for a leadership position as a ‘principal’ is a Master’s degree in Education, Educational Leadership, Educational Administration, or similar. Additionally, applicants for principalship have to own a certificate (valid in the relevant state or district). To get that, they must have taken the particular courses, have professional experience, and often have passed a special test or an assessment centre interview (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

Advertisements for head teacher positions can be found on the career boards of the various professional associations or on the board of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 1998, 2002, 2004), which can be accessed by members only. Emails and many leaflets circulate around schools, or advertisements are published in newspapers (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

Then, there are series of personal interviews with members of the selection committee, preceded by an analysis of the curriculum vitae of the candidate. The following documents such as suitable qualifications and a copy of the certificate of his/her leader in current work are requested as well as a written vision for the future of the school (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

In contrast, the assessment centre method plays a different and important role in measuring the expecting performance for school principals. The NASSP (1998, 2002, 2004) proposed 12 leadership indicators to provide a good benchmark for future performance levels for newly hired administrators in education. This assessment centre has several descriptions: (1) The use of several arranged situations to examine behaviour, (2) the existence of a number of trained evaluators to assess a range of specified aspects (e.g. the assessee’s leadership, risk-taking, and managerial abilities), (3) the assessment of several candidates at one time, and (4) extensive written or spoken feedback (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). Table 1 presents a brief comparison between both countries.

| | England and Wales | United States |
|------------------|---|---|
| Overall Approach | Distinctive decentralisation (responsibility lies with the schools) | Distinctive decentralisation (responsibility lies with the schools) |
| Selection Body | School Governing Body | Hiring or selection committees, established by |

| | | |
|-------------------|--|---|
| | | the school |
| Prerequisites | Participation in The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) | Teaching licences, adequate university Master’s degree, principal’s licence |
| Selection Methods | Presentations by the applicants, finalising interviews, interviews by the committee, psychological tests, talks with representatives of the parents, sometimes reference checks (percentages refer to secondary schools) | Great variation among tests (for licensing); analysis of the curriculum vitae, answers to written questions, reference checks |

Table 1: Adapted from Huber and Hiltmann (2010)

Challenges and difficulties relating to the correct choice of the school head teachers

From reviewing the related literature, errors may occur in any stage of the selection procedure. Some obstacles are mentioned regarding to the governing body experience. For example, some members of the governing body may have inadequate experience in the recruitment and selection of teaching staff; others may have experience in other areas that may or may not be relevant to a school situation and its demands. This might affect the chances that many governors will be selecting a headteacher for the first time (NCLS, 2010).

The same could be said for the case in the USA, although here selection board bodies are a mixed composition, but the members of those committees usually suffer a lack of training in the selection of individuals (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

In term of requirement qualifications, Roza and his colleagues in 2003 in the USA stated that no one can say with any certainty what qualifications or background will yield better school leaders. In reality, there is almost no empirical evidence to give good reasons for most of the certification requirements for today’s administrators (Roza et al., 2003). In a similar way, in England and Wales, the NPQH programme was revised in 2001 and it was further reviewed due to a request from the Secretary of State (Kelly, 2004). The features and impact of the NPQH course in England have been evaluated in a few studies (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). However, literature on the NPQH in England reveals that many NPQH graduates do not seek a transition to leadership (Rhodes et al., 2009 cited in Higham et al., 2007). Therefore, it seems sensible that keeping an open mind about applicants’ experience and backgrounds may open the door to a wider range of gifted candidates (NCLS, 2010).

The Governors have to be able to accurately ‘translate’ the demands and needs of their school into selection criteria to guarantee that the best possible candidate secures a position at their school. Apparently, however, sometimes in England and Wales, the Governors prefer the ‘safe route’. In these cases they seek an individual as similar as possible to the previous school leader instead of focusing on the future needs of the school (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). In addition, overlooking the selection criteria and standards in the USA shows that hiring committee members often do not make expectations and criteria for principal selection explicit, or tie selection criteria to current school or district goals. Frequently, national standards and assessment are not considered (Schlueter & Walker, 2008 cited in Clifford, 2010).

The research was done to evaluate the assessment centre procedures, and it findings confirmed sufficient analytical validity of the assessment centre for the future achievement of principals. However, the effect of further selection methods on the actual processes of filling positions (e.g. interviews, potential analyses, self-assessment through psychological tests) still needs to be established (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

In addition, some of these challenges are related to lack of applicant numbers. It is obvious that the head teacher is a key to the school in terms of being accountable for, and having an impact on, a school’s overall performance and achievements. Therefore, according to the National College for School Leadership, there has been a declining trend

in the number of applicants to primary and secondary headship. For instance, in 2006-07, 37% of primary schools seeking a new head teacher failed to make an appointment after a first advert, compared with 25% of secondary schools that failed to appoint. In 2006-2007 just over 12% of primary schools in England started a recruitment operation for a head teacher with an advert in the *Times Education Supplement*. That was around 2,100 schools in total, of which 63% were successful in making an appointment at the first attempt (NCSL, 2008).

The 1998 study by James and Whiting in England and Wales identified six significant influences on the career decisions of deputies *not* to seek principalship: role overload, contentment with their current job, negative impact on the individual's family, self-doubt, concerns over public accountability, and external factors such as inadequate funding for schools and the scale and pace of bureaucratic initiatives (Mulford, 2003).

Ofsted rates 62% of all secondary and 48% of all primary head teachers as very good or excellent not enough of these leaders are in these schools (Higham et al., 2007). The schools with problems are often the least likely to catch the attention of best leaders. Consequently the young people and children who most need their learning and life chances transformed tend to miss out (ibid).

Conclusion

The literature confirms that choosing a head teacher is not an easy task, and perhaps the most significant and important decision governors will make is the selection of a headteacher to lead the school. The complexities of the school's role makes identifying and selection of principals more difficult. This selection requires quite an investment of time and commitment to ensure a quality process, from advertisement of the position to confirmation of the successful candidate. This investment is well worth the outcome if the right person is chosen to lead and develop the school. The USA experience of school leadership preparation extends over a century, while the England and Wales experience is elided into the period of a generation in the latter years of the twentieth century (Brundrett, 2001)

Although selection decisions in England and Wales, and the USA very often lie directly with the selection board and committees established by the school, who defined different criteria for selection, literature however illustrates that challenges and errors may occur in any stage of the selection procedure. Obstacles can be lack of training in the selection of individual; or that the governing body's experience may be inadequate in the recruitment and selection of leaders, or may not be relevant to a school situation and its demands. These demands, which focus on the future needs of the school, should be accurately translated into selection criteria to guarantee that the best possible candidate gets the headship position.

More research and empirical evidence is needed in terms of requirement qualification and background which will yield better school leaders. It is sensible to review these qualifications and applicants; experience and backgrounds, and open the door to a wider range of gifted candidates. In addition, research and empirical studies are required to assess methods and tools which are utilised in the selection process and its impact on actual processes of recruitment.

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