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## **Heads' Tales**

Robert Kerr

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the substantial amount of writing during the past ten or twenty years dealing with education and educational management in Ireland one can notice a consideration of the role of the secondary school principal occurring with increasing – though still low – frequency. A new acknowledgement has emerged that the role of the principal in schools has changed almost out of recognition. That role continues to evolve, though many would claim that the rate of change is such as to merit the description revolution rather than evolution. Factors involved in producing this transformation include the continuing rapid decline in the number of religious available for principalships; the increasing demands of society (and, hence, the Department of Education) that schools – particularly secondary schools – accept responsibility for a wide variety of issues, none of which was considered either real or relevant twenty years ago; and an increasingly educated and literate body of parents, who are no longer prepared to be fobbed off with generalities or to abdicate their responsibilities in favour of the school.

In many cases in Ireland in the middle years of this century, principals held their posts for very long periods of time – up to several decades in some instances – and this produced a strong link in the minds of the parents, pupils and teachers (and, indeed, of the head him/herself) between the school and its principal. The school in a sense 'belonged' to its head, and the head personified the school. This in turn had the effect on parents of reducing the likelihood of a direct challenge to the system - any unpleasant question to the school was interpreted (perhaps more so by the parents than by those in the school) as an attack on the authority of the principal. Furthermore, the vast chasm that was perceived by pupils as existing between them and their teachers was reflected in the yawning gulf that was evident between the teachers and their principal.

Lest the metaphors carry us away in an unwanted direction, let us simply describe the situation of that time by noting that it was strictly pyramidal. The principal, at the apex, issued edicts to the teaching staff, who implemented them in similar fashion for the pupils. Occasionally the head might address the parents (at a speech day, for example, but very seldom, if ever, through circulars) who absorbed this received wisdom without overt question, even if occasionally they were somewhat puzzled as to why a certain course of action had been taken by the school. If a pupil had the temerity when at home to question the school (i.e. the principal), or a teacher, the parental authority generally quashed any further attempts at insurrection. Responses offered might include such non-explanatory statements as "that's just the way it is" or "Mr. Murphy knows best – he's the headmaster after all; when you're the head man you can ask why" or even "I don't know, dear; now just eat up your breakfast or you'll be late for school." All this clearly placed the principal on power level 1, with teachers below on level 2, followed by parents on level 3 and the long-suffering pupils on level 4. The trustees or management

boards, or even the Department of Education, to say nothing of those others employed in the school like secretaries, really did not feature at all. The principal was virtually king in his (or, occasionally, her) little kingdom and all his vassals paid him homage daily.

By contrast, today's scenario must see, like total anarchy to those leaders of nearly 50 years ago or even, perhaps, those of just 25 years ago. Today, the head is not only expected to inform many groups of his or her intended action, but he or she is answerable to the Department of Education, to the school's board of management, to the teaching staff and to their union(s), to the parents' association and possibly even, though less formally, to a students' council. A revised power diagram, if one was possible at all, might well have the parents on 'top', since all other bodies (with the exception of the unions) are expected to report either directly or indirectly to them. It is both astonishing and intriguing, therefore, and not a little frightening, to realise that the situation continues whereby principals in this country are appointed to schools with many hundreds of pupils, perhaps sixty or more teaching and ancillary staff, and one or more buildings worth greatly in excess of one million pounds and yet without any formal training at all for the vast responsibilities that are thrust upon their unsuspecting shoulders. Current research is seeking to examine possible modes of preparation and assistance for such heads, and the recent government white paper on education is supportive of such initiatives, so perhaps the future contains hope. But I digress.

Running a school is not so often seen as a power play these days. Rather, the education of our young people is an interactive partnership where everyone takes the credit but only the principal takes the blame. As part of recent research on the new role of the head, 26 principals in Ireland in a variety of second level school were asked to describe their working life, to suggest how the level of satisfaction in their jobs could be improved and also to offer some advice to incoming principals. Such comments are given here anonymously for obvious reasons. In each case the principals knew that no attributable quote would be given and hence they were able to speak completely freely. The schools represented in the sample include voluntary secondary schools, community schools, comprehensive schools, and vocational schools/community colleges. The size of the schools ranged from less than 200 pupils to over 1000, with a corresponding spread of staff size. Some of the schools were located in urban areas, others had mainly rural populations; some were single sex, others were coeducational; some had only day pupils, while others also offered boarding facilities. The schools in this sample were in nine counties in three provinces in Ireland and all the heads had been principals for at least five years, thus ensuring an appropriate mixture of experience in the responses.

## **JOB SATISFACTION**

In response to the question which asked the principals if they found their present job satisfying (see Table 1), a substantial majority replied "mostly". Clearly, this is a very favourable situation where relatively few principals are in the positions of not achieving job satisfaction. Nevertheless, unless the level of response to 'always' was 100%, it behoves us to try to establish what circumstances act on the principal's time and tend to reduce this rating. Hence, the heads were then asked to try to identify these factors. One half of the group identified people as the major cause of their disappointments. In many ways this is hardly surprising since heads spend the vast majority of their days in direct or indirect contact with other people

– Rosemary Stewart (1998, 114) has measured the fraction of time spent by managers talking as 67%, with most of this figure representing face to face conversations. However, we need to examine further precisely what it is that these people do to depress the satisfaction rating of the principal.

Satisfaction Rating	Number Responding	% Response
Always	3	11
Mostly	20	77
Often	1	4
Sometimes	2	8
Never	0	0
Total	26	100

Table 1: Responses of principals to the question “Do you find your present job satisfying?”

Comments from principals include the following:

- You break your neck for people, but then people let you down; but I like people!
- I find it very disappointing when children steal from one another, and even more so when they then lie about it to cover it up.
- My biggest bugbear is unreasonable people – the inability of people to see that you have other jobs to do, other people to see and that their point of view is not the only one.
- I would like to run self-development courses for all staff. Some teachers are too stuck in their own little groove.
- What do I not enjoy? Teacher! People! They cause problems. For me, maintenance men and blood pressure are synonymous.
- There are some frustrations caused by people but not that many really.
- The relationship between myself and the Vice-Principal leaves a lot to be desired and causes a great deal of unnecessary frustrations.
- Poor teaching is the biggest problem – there is little I can do when a parent complains.
- I find hassle caused by interpersonal rifts as the greatest source of negative feeling for me. It is difficult to get the balance right, especially when dealing with recalcitrant pupils.
- The constant conflict between a couple of members of staff is very wearing.
- I think my biggest frustration is other people wasting my time, especially when they just create work for me through lying or stealing or vandalism or just through inefficiency.
- I get very upset by the impatience of teachers with their students – they seem to want to constantly change the pupils rather than adapt to them.

This litany of woes sounds depressing and it is clear that many heads are finding the everyday, relentless ritual of being understanding to all people in the face of aggression, obstinacy and perhaps even stupidity more demanding than they can easily tolerate. Again, this raises the question as to how well they are prepared for their jobs in the first place. Furthermore, we should consider what safeguards there are in place, if any, for principals to let off steam

(probably away from their schools) and prevent the build-up of pressure to such an extent that they become unwell.

A further section of the sample identified their own shortcomings as being the most significant factor in their not feeling satisfied by their job. Some comments made by this group include:

- I would love to be able to do it all as it should be done. Six years into this job I'm still not in a position to do that. People would prefer a different style from me – more autocratic, I think.
- Time management and interpersonal skills – I'm useless at those!
- My own lack of perception of the depths of the job; I'm just not a realist.
- The stress caused by my not being completely happy with my own performance.

Of all the divisions within the sample, this set of quotations most eloquently demands the training of principals, both pre-service and in-service. The aim of most training can be seen as equipping the trainees with the necessary skills and information by which they can perform their jobs to the satisfaction of both themselves and their employers, as well as those whom they serve.

Approximately one quarter of the group identified a lack of resources as being their biggest problem. Comments such as the following were fairly typical:

- I get very frustrated by not being able to achieve something achievable, all because of some outside reason, for example the lack of Department of Education finance or Board of Management intransigence, etc.
- The lack of both time and human resources is my biggest worry.
- I think the lack of services and the lack of finance are my greatest headaches.
- I really wish there was a better support structure for the principal. The current system of posts of responsibility is virtually useless as far as I am concerned.
- There's just not enough of anything to go round, is there? I mean, we don't have enough people to run things or enough money to pay for them.

This set of quotations clearly supports the many and frequent clarion calls for massive increases in the levels of the resources given to schools by which they educate the children and young adults of this country. Whether this happens remains to be seen.

The final set of responses referred to the extensive demands on the principal's time and the constant overload to which he or she is subjected. Typical comments were:

- The excessive workload! It nearly kills me.
- I get really exhausted just trying to keep up with all the work, and I can't.
- I would like to get away from the idea that principal is the dumping ground for each and every problem in the school.

A survey of the literature concerned with the work of school principals and other similar managers has been summarised elsewhere (Kerr, 1994). This has shown that all heads share

many characteristics of their working time in common with other managers. These include the “brevity, variety and fragmentation” as features in almost every description since Mintzberg’s seminal work (1973, 51). This refers to the relentless interruptions of the principal’s work where the urgent takes precedence over the important and which reduces the average time per event to minutes or even less. Such constant change pushes the head from the profound to the trivial and back again in rapid succession and it leaves many activities unfinished at the end of the day. As Marshall and Stewart said, “there’s no time to think, no need to decide what to do, things just come at you” (1981, 184). Such is the pressure that some writers, such as Rees, suggest that the only solution is for the manager to leave the office and work elsewhere (1990, 40)!

The high volume of work and the rapid pace at which it proceeds is also characteristic of the head’s day. Martin and Willower (1981, 79) list this as the most obvious symptom, as does Wolcott (1973, 88). In this country, Leader and Boldt (1994, 92), Hannaway (1991, 124 and 137) and Kerr (1994, 93-94) all refer to the formidable workload of the principal and the excessive amount of their time spent on low value tasks such as maintenance. Heads are seen to react to the greatest pressures rather than be in direct control of what they do. They receive very little feedback from any quarter, and most of what does come is negative. They also spend remarkably little time either in contact with their superiors or in supervision of teachers. Johnson, for example, describes (1990, 243) how school principals “occupy isolated, often thankless posts. They rarely receive acknowledgement for successes or sympathy when their efforts and plans fail.”

All of the above results and characteristics, so widely documented around the globe, imply that there is an urgent need for comprehensive training of school heads. Recently, the Department of Education has accepted such a position (1995, 152), but the nature of the training to be offered is not yet clear, although it does seem very likely that it will be geared purely towards training for management rather than the training for leadership which many educationalists would claim is essential for real progress.

## **ADVICE TO INCOMING PRINCIPALS**

At the end of the interview, which consisted of a structured series of both closed and open questions and which lasted about sixty minutes, the principals were asked to offer any form of advice they might have for incoming incumbents. As expected, these varied considerably, some thinking carefully and then producing some quite profound statement, with others settling for the more flippant utterance. One very experienced head simply said “I wouldn’t know what to say to any prospective principal!” Whether this was because he thought he still could not feel in charge of his job or the scale of the task was too great is unclear. Perhaps the smirk which flickered about his mouth suggests that he would merely prefer to let each new principal find out the full extent of the horrors for him/herself.

It is something of a slight surprise, and certainly rather a relief, to note just how many of the pieces of advice are given in positive, constructive terms rather than the bitter negatives one might associate with over-taxed managers. On the other hand, it will come as no surprise at all that the majority of the suggestions refer to people and to relations with them. Some of these

comments are very brief – such as “consider people first” or “spend more time on people than on paper” or “you really have to listen to people” – while others are a little more specific, as follows:

- The kernel is to combine a high priority of good relationships with assertiveness – getting a good balance between these two.
- The most important thing is communications with staff (especially the vice-principal), with pupils and with parents, with the secretary, the caretakers and cleaners.
- The most important thing is relationships: if these are right, people will give you as much help as you need. You must remove the areas of friction (in the Board, with teachers or parents, etc.); you need to know everyone’s personal problems.
- I think the most important aspect of being a principal is the personal touch – be as personal as you can. Answer a complaint immediately.

Many of the heads gave advice about the structures under which they operate, very many of these pointing out the importance of mastering any systems rather than allowing the system to dictate matters to the principal. Examples of such comments include:

- I wish I had been taught how to use a filing cabinet!
- Set up systems for people to accept their roles and which leave the principal with more freedom; have clearly defined roles for people and be willing to delegate.
- Any school should be self-managing, i.e. the principal should be able to get away and let the place run itself for a while. The principal should be a “post-heroic leader” [this term was not defined!]. We spend too much time on problems and too little on solutions, so we need the support of the staff – we have to set goals, support the teachers, and empower them to make their own decisions.
- Delegate effectively so as to avoid stressing yourself by taking on too much.
- Have a vision for the school. Have an educational philosophy and work towards this. Create structures to support these.
- Spend about three months in the school before you take office, learning as much as possible about the structures and the individuals in the school. You need to develop a clearly defined role for the vice-principal and you have to make sure that the staff understand the role of the Board of Management.

A further set, similar in many ways to the last, describes certain difficulties faced by heads arising from their own perceived deficiencies. In several of these comments it will be noted that the speaker is anxious for help in the form of training.

- I find I cannot do anything about manipulative parents or disloyal parents or pupils, i.e. people who exploit the school for their own advantage. I have never worked out what to do with bullying, stealing, lies and deceit.
- I was trained as a teacher, as we all were, and I regret not having the time to teach although it’s my own fault that I became a principal. I look forward to going back into the classroom but I worry that things have changed too much for me. On the other hand, it is interesting to observe change. I think my future challenge lies in trying to overcome the generation gap.

- I plan my whole day while still in bed, listing the essentials for the day, but I still want more managerial time and less administrative.
- You have to make sure that things work. You need a vision of where you want to go and you must share that vision with others and make sure it is one vision. You have to really plan meetings carefully. [However, during this interview with the principal (which had been arranged at least three weeks in advance), we were interrupted by several different people for discussions about fire extinguishers, timetable changes, mice in a classroom, a pupil's progress (with a teacher), arrangements for upcoming examinations, another pupil's progress (with a parent), financial charges made to a pupil (with a parent), imminent parent-teacher meetings, and career choices (with a pupil), plus time to compile pay slips for ancillary staff and, finally, time to go and teach! Clearly, not every head is able to practice what he/she preaches.]
- The problem may well be that everything is in the head of the head and it goes no further! The most easily improved thing is the lack of possibility of not being able to go to other schools and interact with other principals.
- There is a great difference between expectations and reality at the outset. It is difficult not to be disappointed by this. I found that I had to be mildly dictatorial, and maybe sometimes even a little more. I needed to draw lines for people. In the end I know I often may not be able to tell staff or parents or pupils all the facts.
- You have to carefully manage your time and have a definite idea as to how you want to spend your time, otherwise it will be taken over for you. You must have time for yourself.
- Get in-service training! Visit other schools. Get ideas and be open to them. Know that you are never 100% correct, so be willing to change your opinion. Listen!
- Identify what being a principal really involves, i.e. what the task is and not what you think it should be. You need to know how to communicate with, collaborate with and lead people.
- The only difference between the ideal job and the actual job for me is that I am not doing it well enough.

There were some heads who gave advice based on their own practices, including things they did routinely and which they thought might be advantageous to others. Some of these are given here:

- The existing training had minimal relevance for me, so I had to learn for myself. I don't do anything myself that I can get someone else to do. Five minutes after opening the post it is off my desk – I find somewhere for it to go! I don't commit myself to anything; the school will run without me. I have my morning tea with the teaching staff and my afternoon tea with the caterers. When I am interviewing for a new member of staff I look carefully at their extra-curricular interests and try to fit these into the school. [However, this head admitted that he had no hobbies at all – “I spend my time here,” he said.]
- Be clear in what you want to do and do not be deviated from it.
- Interruptions can be a release valve. Of course, they can also be a great nuisance but you have to try to learn to look at them as helpful.

- If possible, delay making a decision for 24 hours. Allow time in your daily plan for interruptions and unscheduled meetings and for reacting to unexpected events. When you are teaching, don't allow anything other than a dire emergency to take you away from that. Beware of parents! Be aware of parents' agendas. Take the month of July off! Bend when it is less important and stand firm when it is important, and know the difference, i.e. don't say 'no' all the time.
- The ability to switch off and sleep is essential. I find I need to remain objective and generally calm if I am to get anywhere. Gardening is very therapeutic. Compared to this large school, my former school was a picnic!
- I have learned to always leave myself a bolt-hole, but this is not always easy. I also try to enjoy everybody, even the one who has put his knife in my back just five minutes earlier.
- I think there is less administration in a smaller school and this must surely be more enjoyable, so I try to reduce the amount of administration I am expected to do.
- I have tried to create a positive culture in this school, mainly through careful recruitment of staff since there has to be a good fit between staff and students. You cannot have inflexible subject-centred teachers with dependent students. Teachers need to teach pupils how to learn. If you get this culture right everything else comes right, more or less on its own but with a gentle push every so often. Secondly, I think it is much more important than the Department of Education realises to maintain the buildings at a high standard – pupils react positively to high standards.

It is clear that there is a very wide range of suggestions given above and, indeed, some of the pieces of advice contradict others. This reflects the individual differences of each principal as well as the particular problems and constraints facing each one at the time of the interview. There were three formal and several informal meetings with each principal during the course of this research and it was clear that some of them would give radically different pieces of advice at alternative stages in the year than those given and recorded above. Nevertheless, the fact that these statements have been made at all is quite important, since they help to show the type of thoughts going through the minds of those running our second level schools.

## **SUMMARY**

It is apparent that the task of the secondary school principal is dominated by interpersonal relationships, mainly with the teaching staff. Many heads have referred to this as the number one priority in the school; some have said they find great difficulty with this area and others have simply stated the need to "get it right", though few have even attempted any form of concrete advice as to how this might be achieved. Similar difficulties with parents and pupils (and others) face principals on a daily basis and it behoves us to ask, therefore, why they do not receive any form of training in this skill either before or after their appointment.

Most of the specific problems which are listed appear to arise from work being created unnecessarily by others, including extra administration, hassle with buildings and maintenance, and, again, other people within the school community (staff/students/etc.) involved in interpersonal friction. Sometimes the solution is obvious to the head but, even if it is, the main



task is to know how to get the other participants to agree. Again, the training required for dealing with such eventualities is sadly lacking for principals.

The Minister for Education has proposed recently that all heads will receive training both before and after their appointments (1995, 152), but the white paper seems to suggest that this training will be to produce efficient managers (i.e. people who can deal effectively with all forms of administration, buildings and organisation) whereas virtually all current educational research is concluding that training should rather be for leadership (i.e. to yield those who are adept at skills involving people and encouraging or enabling those people to produce work of a higher standard). This paper, and the comments expressed therein by a wide variety of secondary heads, clearly supports the view that training is urgently required for all principals and that this training should be for leadership rather than management, as is the well-established policy of other European countries (Kerr, 1995, 67-72).

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