

## A view from outside looking in.....

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Seven weeks ago, after 11 years as a headteacher and six-and-a-half in my last post, I took the decision to step down from headship. This as you can probably imagine, was a big decision and one that did not come overnight.

The last seven weeks have been spent recovering (a lot of sleep catch-up and some precious 'me' time at the gym), reflecting on next steps and positioning myself mentally and practically for the next stage of my career. I am too young and have too much enthusiasm and energy to retire, and despite being presented with options, I do not want to place myself back into a school full time at the moment.....never say never, but the idea of working for myself and assisting a number of schools and organisations feels like the right option right now.

Like most headteachers, I came into the profession not to get rich, but to make a difference. It is a tough job but is one that I truly loved and whilst it is still early, I already miss large aspects of it.

In my 11 years as a head, the job has changed and it was imperative to keep on top of the constant stream of initiatives and changes coming from outside. I also strongly believe that it was more important than ever to stick to the moral objectives that drove me to want to do the job in the first place, it was the difficulty in doing this within the context of my last school, that drove me to leave. So, what are these moral prerogatives that I hold so dear?

- I had a relatively unhappy and spectacularly unsuccessful time at school myself. I was pretty invisible to most teachers and whilst I arrived keen and enthusiastic, I lost confidence and drive as I progressed through the years. I strongly believe that things happen in life for a reason; I was determined that no student was ever going to feel inadequate or invisible in a school that I led
- I came from a working-class family; my parent's education was basic with both leaving school at the first available opportunity in order to secure a job and bring money into their respective families. My parents found it hard to support my academic development but taught me that the world does not owe me a living, you get what you work for. They taught me right from wrong, and by their own example without realising it, were the most fantastic role models
- My most important job as a head was to employ the right people. I was careful not to only say 'teachers' there, as so many people contribute to the ethos and offer that a school presents to its students, parents and community. I have been fortunate to carry out hundreds of interviews in a number of countries across the world, I looked for subject knowledge, enthusiasm, a reason why they did what they did (there are after all, easier and often better paid options), a spark or 'quirkiness' that would provide a tenacity in post and often an interest completely unrelated to teaching that made the candidates eyes light up as they discussed this at interview (this ranged from reading, writing, yoga, sport) the topic was unimportant, just something away from the job that provided joy and deep routed fulfilment

- Students had to perform to ability and we had a collective responsibility to create the environment and correct level of challenge and support that would allow this to happen. It is over simplifying the task to state that background is not important, of course the student's upbringing and support structures do influence their approach, mental state and self-belief; but our job was to create an environment where success was expected from all students, irrespective of race, gender, socio-economic background or parental support
  
- I strongly believe that this is a hard time to be young. I despair when I watch the news and that's with over 50 years of life experience behind me, it is no wonder that I came across so many students struggling to find their place in an increasingly complex world. In my opinion schools have a moral objective to assist students in making sense of their world, this ranging from friendship group issues to making sense of world politics. Hopelessness stems from a lack of understanding, I was determined to lead a school where students felt comfortable asking questions and where teachers and students shared the type of relationships where this became the norm (another aspect to look out for at interview "how would you approach the task of being a form tutor?")
  
- The curriculum offer is key to student engagement and success. I see so many schools doing what they need to do to gain positive progress 8 scores (I am not judging, it is completely understandable given the external pressures on school leaders), but the curriculum is there for students, not for progress 8. In my opinion we need to provide breadth and choice allowing each student to select aspects of their own development. Of course, students should study a core curriculum and if ability allows this should have an Ebacc foundation for as many as possible, but in the schools where I have been head, there has been a significant cohort of students that for whatever reason will never thrive on an 'academic' diet only. Here school leaders and governing bodies must be brave enough to offer what is right for their students, even if this has an adverse effect on the school's progress 8 score
  
- One of my hardest challenges in recent years has been learning to play the saxophone. With no musical background whatsoever, just learning to read music was difficult enough; before picking up a beautiful but complex instrument and trying to get a recognisable tune from it. There is an irony in the progress that I have made over the last 7 weeks... having stood up in assembly a few years ago and promised the school that I would take on this challenge, it appears I had to stop being a head to find the time to practice! The joy that I got from playing 'Chanson de Nuit' last week is enough to convince me that my decision to give emphasis to the arts in my school where they were being marginalised nationally, was the correct one

- I cannot end any curriculum conversation without stating the need for every student to have a basic sports and fitness education, with many selecting to continue this into level 2 and 3 qualifications. It is interesting that sport tends to be an area of strength in many schools even if the rest of the school is underperforming. It is perhaps no coincidence that three out of five Year Heads in my last school came from a very strong PE department?
- Finally, a school needs to develop a strong vision of where it wants to place itself within its local community and then develop a plan of how it will make this happen. Good schools are not inward looking but instead reach out to include their community within their vision for improvement. This often takes disproportionate time and energy, but in my opinion is essential if one is to win over the support of the community at large and include key aspects of this community within the curriculum offer
- The final challenge is, with all this in place, invest in your teachers and allow them the time and space to plan and deliver exciting, challenging and awe inspiring lessons

As I move to the next stage of my career I hope to be able to work closely with school leaders and local authorities across the country (and perhaps overseas) to create a vision that works for that community and then assist school leaders in delivering this vision and measuring success. I cannot wait to start!

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