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## **Headteachers' views of how they are supported and challenged: questionnaire responses**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a national survey that was the second stage of an on-going research project investigating school leaders' perspectives on the support and challenge they seek and are offered. Data were gathered from a nationally representative sample of English primary and secondary headteachers by means of a questionnaire. Headteachers expressed their desire for support with their professional learning and practice, but provision varied. There is considerable scope for enhancing both support and challenge for school leaders, and the data point to factors to be taken into consideration with such provision.

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**Headteachers' views of how they are supported and challenged:  
questionnaire responses**  
*Sue Swaffield*

Headteachers, internationally more commonly known as school principals, matter. The nature and extent of their influence on school effectiveness and improvement, student learning, organisational development, and educational transformation are the subjects of extensive research, and remain contested (see for example Bell et al., 2003; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006; Mulford, 2008; Robinson, 2008; Swaffield and MacBeath, 2008; Witziers et al., 2003). It is not the purpose of this paper to continue those debates, but the research reported here rests on the premise that headteachers are important. Other foundations for the study are that the pressures on school principals continue to increase, and that headship can be a lonely as well as a demanding position (Fidler and Atton, 2004; Gronn, 2003; Mercer, 1996). These factors indicate the need for professional support for headteachers, while challenge of the right sort can be energising, motivating, and a spur to further improvement. The availability of appropriate support and challenge throughout a career may be critical in sustaining school leaders, something which all school systems seeking to recruit and retain innovative, effective and optimistic principals should consider. Moreover, it seems likely that a judicious combination of support and challenge can enhance school leaders' learning, and aid their leadership of others' learning.

I have discussed the concepts of support and challenge previously (Swaffield, 2008, p2), arguing that the dualism has become a strong theme in relation to school improvement. The pair has been seen as providing the assistance to change, as well as the motivation, incentive and imperative to do so. Policy makers frequently refer to models combining two dichotomous factors neatly resulting in four possible outcomes. For example, Barber (2000) advocates support and challenge as levers for school improvement but says that low support together with low challenge leads to under-performance; low support and high challenge leads to demoralisation; high levels of support but low challenge results in complacency; while a combination of high support with high challenge leads to high performance. It is not much of a leap to apply this depiction of support and challenge to

headteachers, and the apparently clear-cut model may provide some common sense resonances. However, the polarisation of the concepts and their simplistic static combination probably conceal as much as they reveal about the relationship between support and challenge. An alternative more dynamic model is suggested by Goddard's yin and yang representation of the relationship between leadership and followership. He could equally well be talking about support and challenge when he says:

The cyclical nature of these opposing phenomena means that each will turn into its opposite in a cycle of reversal, that each has within it the seed of its opposite state, and that even if the opposite is not currently visible it is always there, for 'no phenomenon is completely devoid of its opposite state ... This is called "presence in absence"' (Hooker. n.d., p2) (Goddard, 2003, p22-23).

As stated in the paper that was the precursor to this one (Swaffield, 2008, p2) "Support' is perceived as the more benign of the support and challenge dyad, and implies giving approval, encouragement, assistance or practical help. It is made tangible in many different forms but is generally viewed as constructive. 'Challenge' on the other hand is more ambiguous, prone to interpretation, and is certainly not always seen in a positive light. In reflecting on their work with local authority advisers, Ainscow and colleagues (2000) express concern that the term 'challenge' too often implies putting people under pressure to work harder. My own informal discussions with school colleagues suggest that some are averse to the term, possibly reflecting this kind of experience. Mulford (2002) identifies the need for leadership development programmes 'to challenge participants but without provoking trauma, entrenchment or flight' (p1028). While 'challenge' can denote dispute or confrontation, it also has a variety of less adversarial meanings including stimulation to reflect or act, and a questioning that prompts reasoning and explanation or the consideration of different viewpoints.

I regard both support and challenge as having constructive interpretations, but recognise that this is not necessarily the way everyone views them. How something is felt, understood and consequently reacted to depends on the recipient, not on the intentions of the instigator.' Therefore it is important to seek the views of the anticipated beneficiaries, in this case headteachers. Exploring their experiences and preferences for support and challenge opens a window on school leaders' professional learning and practices and

could prompt imaginative and innovative approaches to meeting their needs, perhaps suggesting new directions for fostering school leaders' vital work.

This paper builds on the work I presented at last year's ICSEI conference (Swaffield, 2008), and is part of a larger study with two related aims. Firstly, to investigate the nature of support and challenge that English primary and secondary headteachers find most helpful for their professional development, practice and well-being, with reference to external professionals. Secondly, to examine the concept of critical friendship in relation to headteacher support and challenge. Here I address the first aim using data gathered through a national survey of English primary and secondary headteachers.

The study refers to 'external professionals' as a way of focusing on those people beyond the school who in their professional capacity provide headteachers with support and challenge. Undoubtedly spouses, partners, family and friends provide invaluable support, and probably also a measure of challenge, to school leaders; excluding them from the study is a way of maintaining focus and in no way denies their importance. Similarly, I recognise that colleagues within the school both support and challenge headteachers, but are not included in this research. The position of Chair of Governors is more ambiguous, as someone who could be considered in some ways to be both internal and external to the school. Moreover, it is a voluntary role, but one undertaken by people from a wide variety of backgrounds, a number of whom have related professional expertise. I decided to include Chairs of Governors in the study as every school has a governing body, they are considered part of the educational system in England, their remit is specified in legislation, and they are seen as important sources of both support and challenge. The Chair of Governors is the leader of the governing body, and as such would be expected to be the governor in the closest and most regular contact with the headteacher.

### **Sources of support and challenge for English headteachers**

A review of literature reveals a number of sources of support and challenge for English headteachers, the most common six probably being Governors, the Local Authority,

School Improvement Partners, consultants, professional associations, and colleague headteachers. I discussed these in some detail in the earlier paper (Swaffield, 2008), and so now present only a brief summary as background for the empirical work reported here.

### *Governors*

Governors' have a duty to help schools provide pupils with the best possible education (DfEE, 2000), and doing so entails them supporting and challenging the headteacher. Governing bodies have been described as having three main roles: to provide a strategic view, ensure accountability and to act as a critical friend (DfE/OfSTED/BIS, 1995). A study published in 1999 listed seven benefits of an effective governing body, the first three of which were 'a critical and informed sounding board for the headteacher, offering support for the school, [and] helping to break down the isolation of the head' (Scanlon et al., 1999, p27).

### *The Local Authority*

A long established and continuing source of support and challenge for headteachers is the Local Authority (LA) (formerly the Local Education Authority (LEA)), whose officers work with schools and headteachers in response to, and in the context of, legislation and guidance. Thus over time the nature of LA engagement with their schools in general, and with the support and challenge of headteachers in particular, has changed. The 1988 Education Reform Act emphasised the monitoring and inspectorial roles of LEAs, placing 'the LEA adviser in the position of policing central government initiatives' (Hiscock, 1992, p141). The establishment of the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) in 1992 heightened both the support and challenge functions of LEA officers as they worked with schools, firstly to prepare them for inspection and then, in the case of schools that were judged to have weaknesses or as being in difficulties, to assist them to improve. Intervention by the LEA was to be 'in inverse proportion to success' (DfEE, 1999). Working within the constraints and demands of changing legislation, LA officers have to adapt their practices, but developing and maintaining good relationships with headteachers in pursuit of school improvement is still quite possible (Swaffield, 2005), and headteachers have been found to welcome the support of LA staff who bring an

outside perspective and a critical edge to the school's strategic thinking (Ainscow et al., 2000).

Local authorities have developed and provided different programmes and forms of support for newly appointed headteachers, although the provision and quality of such support have been found to be inconsistent and varied (OfSTED, 2002; Hobson et al., 2003). In the report by Her Majesty's Inspectors (OfSTED, 2002) it was noted that 'in a large majority of cases, LEA link advisers provide good induction support to individual headteachers, irrespective of the overall quality of the induction programme' (p5), which points to the importance of the working relationships between individuals.

In recent years the introduction of the 'New Relationship with Schools' (DfES, 2004) has altered the role and mode of operation of Local Authorities in general, and their provision of support and challenge in particular. This is now channelled through School Improvement Partners.

#### *School Improvement Partners*

School Improvement Partners (SIPs) were introduced as part of the 'New Relationship with Schools' (DfES, 2004), and have been phased in, beginning with secondary schools. Every maintained school in England should have had one by April 2008. SIPs have a variety of current positions, backgrounds and experiences. Some are full-time Local Authority employees, who may or may not have had previous headteacher experience. Others are external consultants employed by the Local Authority, whom again may or may not have previously been headteachers themselves. Sometimes these consultants are officials in other Local Authorities, or retired headteachers. Finally there are currently serving headteachers, either from within or outside the LA, who carry out the SIP role alongside their own headship.

School Improvement Partners are 'to provide school leaders with challenge and support' (DfES, 2006, p3), and a central feature of the SIP's role is making judgements and reporting these judgements to the local authority and governors. SIPs are officially

described as critical friends (DfES, 2006), but the extent to which their brief enables them to fulfil this role is questionable (Swaffield, 2007). Both theory and practice have yet to be fully tested, but the recently published evaluation of the New Relationship with Schools (Cowen, 2008) paints a generally positive yet somewhat mixed picture of SIP effectiveness. The majority of SIPs are seen as providing effective challenge, particularly in the secondary sector, but support is experienced more variedly. There are questions about the SIPs' capacity to fulfil all that is expected of them within the five days annually allocated for each school.

### *Consultants*

'Consultants' in various guises and nomenclature are another source of headteacher support and challenge. Consultants are sometimes associated with specific programmes, or engaged to address a particular need. Many private organisations and individuals who consultancy to heads, while business and universities can be additional sources. The National College for School Leadership's 'Head for the Future' programme for established headteachers requires heads to 'nominate a sponsor [who] may be one of your governors, a trusted adviser or a colleague ... to challenge, offer advice and to hold you accountable for the outcomes you set yourself' (NCSL, 2007, p1). The NCSL provision for early headship recommends using an external professional to support the process of learning in the first years of being a headteacher (NCSL, 2006).

### *Professional Associations*

Headteachers' professional associations provide support for their members in a number of different ways. They issue regular bulletins helping headteachers to keep up to date with policy developments and legal requirements, and offer advice on the full range of topics relevant to a head. Their help-lines and support on legal matters are particularly valued. Weindling and Earley's study of secondary headteachers (1987) found that both newly appointed and experienced heads considered professional associations an important source of support. A more recent study likewise reported that 'professional associations are a very important source of support to headteachers' (Smithers and Robinson, 2007, p67).

### *Headteacher colleagues*

One of the main findings of an extensive enquiry into the state of school leadership in England (Earley et al., 2002) was that ‘school leaders look chiefly to their peers, both within and outside school, for ideas and inspiration’ (p9). Some interaction among headteachers occurs at local events such as meetings arranged by the Local Authority, where even though the agenda may be dominated by information there may be spaces for informal discussion among colleagues. Face-to-face interactions are also possible at meetings of local heads focused on common issues such as transfer arrangements, specialist school status, or church affiliation. There are also more and more opportunities for networking electronically, for example the online communities that are part of the NCSL’s Leadership Network. Perhaps most valued, though, are the personal contacts with those well known and deeply trusted individuals whom a headteacher can phone for practical advice, to share a concern, or simply to ‘let off steam’. This is illustrated by a head who described:

The desperate need for the safety of just being able to splurge a bit and to have people who know you well enough to say, ‘I think you’ve got this out of perspective, this is not a big issue, it’s not important’ without it sending ripples all over the place and being recorded. (Swaffield, 2008, p18)

### **Methodology**

The questionnaire that is the focus of this paper is part of a larger study, being preceded by exploratory interviews with a small number of purposively selected headteachers, and followed by in-depth interviews with headteachers who completed the questionnaire.

The questionnaire items were informed by literature and the exploratory interviews, previously reported (Swaffield, 2008). There was a variety of question types, including fixed choice, Likert scales, prioritisation, and short answer open questions. The questionnaire was refined through extensive consultation, and trialled with 40 headteachers in two contrasting Local Authorities.

The New Relationship with Schools (DfES, 2004) shapes current provision of support and challenge for headteachers in England and applies to maintained schools, including special and nursery schools. However, due to distinct differences in relation to SIPs (LfL, 2006) and the relatively small numbers of special and nursery schools, they were not included in the survey. To represent the approximately 17,350 maintained primary and 3,350 maintained secondary schools in England a sample of 400, stratified by geographical region and type of school (primary/secondary, and school performance) was drawn by the Research Data Services arm of the National Foundation for Educational Research.

The questionnaire was distributed in June 2008, and a reminder sent in July. Headteachers were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. 138 completed questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 34.5%. The returns received were largely proportional in terms of headteacher sex and school sector (see table below), and also region.

	<b>Whole sample</b>	<b>Returned</b>
Female	228 / 400 = 57%	85 / 138 = 62%
Male	172 / 400 = 43%	53 / 138 = 38%
Primary	335 / 400 = 84%	117 / 138 = 85%
Secondary	65 / 400 = 16%	21 / 138 = 15%

Returned questionnaires were checked, cleaned, and quantitative data entered into a statistical software programme (SPSS). The accuracy of data entry was checked firstly by eye, then using frequency distributions, followed by systematic data entry checks. Qualitative data (responses to open questions) were typed up and collated.

In the first stage of analysis, frequencies for all the quantitative data were calculated in terms of raw scores and percentages, and means calculated where appropriate. For each question the highest scored items were identified. These figures were transcribed onto copies of the questionnaire and became the focus of a discussion with a reference group

of headteachers. The reference group was purposively selected to include headteachers with a range of experiences and contexts. They were the subjects of the exploratory interviews, and subsequently commented on a draft of the questionnaire. Four headteachers from the group participated in the hour-and-a-half meeting, three of whom were heads of primary schools, one of a secondary school; there were two men and two women; two were in their early years of headship, and two were very experienced. The discussion was taped.

The questionnaire data reported here provides some insight into the research aims, and is largely descriptive in nature, although interpretation was enriched through dialogue with the reference group of headteachers. Their views help shape the subsequent interviews that will provide greater explanation and understanding.

### **Sources of support and challenge for headteachers**

#### *Most valued sources*

The first item on the questionnaire was an open question asking headteachers to give the role or position of the professional, external to the school, whom they most value as a source of support and challenge. Some headteachers gave more than one person, giving a total of 147 listings. The largest proportions of these were School Improvement Partners and Local Authority officers (together mentioned by 62%) and other headteachers (mentioned by 30% of heads). There is considerable overlap between SIPs and LA officers as in many cases the person who had previously been the school's Local Authority adviser has become the SIP. There are also interrelationships between the categories of 'SIPs' and 'headteachers' because a number of SIPs are themselves serving headteachers. Only nine headteachers gave their Chair of Governors as their most valued source of support and challenge, but this low figure may be partly a consequence of the ambiguity in terms of whether Chairs of Governors are perceived as being 'external professionals' or not. Seven headteachers left this question blank or indicated that there was no one. Three of them referred to someone from the Local Authority whom they had

valued in the past, but was no longer available. It may be that these heads were in a transition period as SIPs were being phased in, but the fact remains that according to these data 1 in 20 heads feel they do not have any external professional to whom they can turn for support and challenge. Before the changes brought about by the introduction of the New Relationship with Schools it is almost certain that someone from the Local Authority would have filled this role. Most poignant was a male primary headteacher with 14 years experience who wrote: 'I have no-one really, I am very much alone. Fellow heads and a LA friend. It's very lonely.'

The headteacher reference group commented on the absence of 'mentor' from the responses, particularly as induction programmes for headteachers should include the provision of mentors. Of the 13 headteachers who returned the questionnaire and had two or fewer years experience as head, four of them said their most valued source of support and challenge was another headteacher, four mentioned their SIP, and three a LA adviser. One wrote 'consultant I met at an earlier interview' while the other did not put anybody. One of the newly appointed headteachers (a secondary head in his first year) wrote the following:

I was linked to a mentor in my first term by the LA – although this person proved totally ill-suited to the role, no-one from the LA ever checked on the relationship. Far more thought needs to be given to supporting HTs in their first year. I have had to find sources of support on my own.

(He gave a headteacher colleague as his most valued source of support and challenge).

This study did not focus particularly on support and challenge for recently appointed headteachers, but it does suggest that this is an area that should be explored more fully. Certainly, the headteacher reference group engaged in heated debate about what was needed for heads new in post, and were clear that current provision was inconsistent, inadequate and inappropriate.

#### *Balance of support and challenge from different sources*

The questionnaire presented headteachers with seven possible sources of support and challenge and asked about the relative proportions that each provided. The three groups

that were most frequently identified as providing both support and challenge were: the school improvement partner, the chair of governors, and a (non SIP) local authority officer. However, practically equal numbers of headteachers viewed chairs of governors as providing more support than challenge, as though they provided a balance. Groups perceived as providing more support than challenge were trusted and well known headteachers, less well known headteachers, and professional association officers. Relatively few headteachers identified any group as being more challenging than supportive, although for 18% of heads this was their experience of SIPs.

The SIP brief is to provide support and challenge, so the fact that 64% of headteachers thought that they did provide a balance is not surprising. What might be worth further exploration is that 18% found their SIP more challenging than supportive, 7% found him/her more supportive than challenging, and 5% reported receiving little support or challenge from their SIP. (A further 6% of headteachers who responded to the survey did not have a SIP at the time.)

The reference group drew attention to the figure of 6% of respondent headteachers experiencing little support or challenge from their chair of governors, describing this as ‘deeply worrying’: ‘Many chairs of governors are excellent but even 6% who are not is cause for huge concern.’ Whilst expressing alarm, the reference group was not surprised by the figure, citing the demands of the role, the difficulty of finding someone (a lay volunteer) to fill it, and therefore a possible feeling that ‘If you have got one you don’t want to push them too hard.’ Two headteachers returned quite lengthy comments with their questionnaires about their governors, expressing different difficulties. One, a female with 11 years’ experience of primary headship wrote ‘... I am about to leave my post because the new governing body, including the chair, is no longer supportive and is only critical...’ Her school, she said, ‘...is a good school with good leadership/ management (OfSTED), with no problems outside of the new governors’. Another female primary head, with five years’ experience, wrote:

The role of governors continues to be a challenge either in a supportive or challenging role. I have carried out training, set monitoring timetables, created link roles, encouraged questioning, developed governors' action plans to become involved in school life etc. *But* this is always me leading them, they nod nicely and drink their tea but are not able or do not wish to provide support or challenge, particularly the parent governors (the parents obviously reflect the social circumstances of the school ...)

The reference group also noted that 32% of heads had no contact with or received little support or challenge from anyone in the local authority other than the SIP. This leads to questions about the role of the local authority now that SIPs have been established.

#### *Frequency of support and challenge*

The most frequent source of support and/or challenge reported was the chair of governors, with 72% of heads reporting weekly contact. Almost all (97%) had contact with their chair of governors at least half-termly. 89% of heads said they received support and challenge from a well known and trusted headteacher at least half termly, with 42% of them reporting weekly contact. Such frequent contact with other groups was rare. Colleague headteachers, particularly those who were less well know, were typically contacted half-termly, whereas for SIPs and other local authority officials the pattern was more of termly communication. 60% of heads reported being in contact with a professional association officer less than once a year or never.

Once again the reference group drew attention to low figures that they thought were noteworthy, in this case the numbers of heads who were not engaging with colleagues at all. Even though the proportion was very small (2%) it was described as 'scary' that some heads appeared to have no contact with other headteachers. It was noted that some heads tend towards isolationism, perhaps influenced by a context of competition for pupils, or reflecting their own personalities.

#### *Initiation of contact*

In relation to initiating contact with the chair of governors and other headteachers (those known both well and less well), the dominant pattern was for both parties to play an equal part. This was particularly the case with colleague headteachers, with 86% of heads

reporting equal initiation with a close trusted headteacher and 71% reporting equal initiation of contact with a wider group of colleague heads. For the chair of governors, although the majority (61%) reported equal initiation of contact, 33% of heads said that it was mostly them that instigated the communication, while 7% said it was more often the chair of governors.

SIPs were the group that headteachers reported as generally initiating the contact (65%), and only 3% of heads said that they were usually the ones to activate the interaction. The reference group thought that part of the reason for this was that SIPs are particularly constrained by their diaries. Initiation of contact with another local authority official was more evenly balanced.

This item of the questionnaire generated discussion among the reference group participants of the great value that headteachers place on their colleagues. The group talked about other heads being the people, perhaps along with their personal assistants (not considered in this study since they are internal to the school), with whom they are most open, both in terms of expressing feelings and seeking advice.

## **The nature of support and challenge**

### *Valued attributes*

An open question posed early in the questionnaire tried to find out why heads would value a particular person for support and challenge. Unsurprisingly both 'support' and 'challenge' featured highly in the responses, but the accompanying adjectives and phrases provided greater insight – both support and challenge need to be 'appropriate', and challenge is valued when it is constructive, realistic, and not judgemental. Also featuring very highly was 'knowledge' in a variety of forms: headteachers appreciate people who are professionally knowledgeable and bring a depth of understanding and experience; and they want someone who understands the wider educational agenda, the local context, and particularly the specifics of their own school. They value someone who understands the

demands on headteachers, probably through having similar experiences. Headteachers look for someone they respect and trust, and who may well share the same values. Confidentiality is important, as is the notion of being independent and proffering an objective view. A number of headteachers appreciate direct advice, but equally they value someone who helps them think, asks challenging questions, and acts as a sounding board. A range of interpersonal skills, providing feedback, and simply being available or at least accessible, were also mentioned.

A later question sought to find out how headteachers value different competencies and attributes displayed by people who provide support and challenge. Respondents were presented with a list of 17 characteristics that they were asked to rate as ‘very valuable’, ‘valuable’, ‘somewhat valuable’ or ‘not at all valuable’. This question was analysed by ranking the items in three ways, using: a mean score for each item; the percentage of ‘very valuable’; and the percentage of ‘very valuable’ and ‘valuable’ combined. The first two methods produced the same three items in a distinct group at the top of the rankings:

<i>Rank by ‘very valuable’</i>	<i>% rating ‘very valuable’</i>	<i>mean</i>
Someone who...		
1. I can speak to in confidence	80%	3.66
2. Helps extend my thinking	75%	3.65
3. Shares good practice from elsewhere	72%	3.68

When the percentages for ‘valuable’ were also taken into account, these items were joined by another two to form a group of five attributes clearly valued much more than other characteristics.

<i>Rank by ‘very valuable’ and ‘valuable’ combined</i>	<i>v val</i>	<i>val</i>	<i>v+val</i>
Someone who...			
1. Shares good practice from elsewhere	72%	26%	98%
2. Helps extend my thinking	75%	21%	96%
3. Acts as a sounding board	66%	30%	96%
4. Gives me feedback on how I am doing	63%	33%	96%
5. I can speak to in confidence	80%	15%	95%

These results are consistent with headteachers' responses to the earlier open question along similar lines, with the qualification that the open question elicited the importance of knowledge of a variety of educational issues and contexts as a key factor in headteachers' evaluation of people who provide them with support and challenge. The pre-specified items concentrated more on behaviours than knowledge or understanding.

*The focus and balance of support and challenge*

Headteachers were asked about the overall balance of support and challenge that they experience in relation to different aspects of their work. Out of the 15 aspects or areas suggested, headteachers identified eight where they felt the dominant pattern was one of balanced support and challenge. These, in order, were:

- Analysing student attainment data (57%)
- Conducting school self-evaluation (51%)
- Leading school improvement (50%)
- Developing the curriculum (39%)
- Enhancing your professional effectiveness (37%)
- Enhancing Every Child Matters outcomes (35%)
- Dealing with staffing issues (34%)
- Managing finances (33%)

It was no surprise to the reference group that 'analysing student attainment data' came top of the list as they felt this was the focus of their work, and they were always trying to raise attainment. It is also an area where the headteacher is aware of factors affecting the attainment of individuals and groups of children, and the heads recognised that they were often challenged about attainment figures.

The majority of headteachers reported that they received little support or challenge in relation to the other seven aspects of work offered in the list. The highest figure afforded to any one category was in respect of the item 'managing your workload' where 59% of heads felt they received little support or challenge. Other areas where support or challenge were noticeable by their absence were:

- Handling personal relationships (48%)
- Delegating responsibility (46%)
- Managing student behaviour (36%)
- Influencing pedagogy (36%)

Working collaboratively with other agencies (32%)  
Improving student attendance (26%)

Reflecting on these figures the reference group noted that the three aspects of their work where almost half or more of the headteachers reported experiencing little support or challenge (managing workload, handling personal relationships, delegating responsibility) were about how heads actually go about their jobs, and relate directly to their wellbeing. There was a difference in interpretation of these figures among members of the reference group, most strikingly between the two that had most recently taken up headship. One felt it was worrying that so many heads were in effect saying that no one helped them with these issues, while the other interpreted the figures in a more positive way, as being trusted to get on with the job, and happy to be so. The question that followed this one on the questionnaire provided more data to assist with interpretation of this point, and is discussed in the next section below.

A view was expressed by an experienced head in the reference group that the other areas where headteachers report receiving little support or challenge – particularly managing student behaviour, influencing pedagogy, and improving student attendance – were aspects to which heads would like to give more attention but were unable to due to more administrative and bureaucratic demands.

The areas that stood out in terms of being challenged more than supported were:

Analysing student data (34%)  
Improving student attendance (25%)  
Conducting school self-evaluation (20%)

The three aspects that scored highest in terms of more support than challenge were:

Dealing with staffing issues (33%)  
Managing student behaviour (29%)  
Working collaboratively with other agencies (27%)

#### *Desired changes in the balance of support and challenge for different areas*

The next question was an open one that asked headteachers about aspects of their work with which they would like more or less support or challenge than they currently

experience. The number of mentions for each aspect was expressed as a percentage of the total number of respondents.

The aspect of their work that stood out from all the others in terms of heads wanting more support was that of ‘managing your workload’ (mentioned by 28% of heads). Looking at this figure in combination with the response to the previous question where 59% of headteachers said they experienced little support or challenge with managing their workload indicates credence for both interpretations put forward by members of the reference group: approximately half of those heads who experience little support or challenge with managing their workload would like more support, although only 5% wanted more challenge. The other two aspects of work that featured in responses to the previous question as being the focus of little support or challenge – delegating responsibility and handling personal relationships – were rarely mentioned at all in terms of altering the balance (by 10% and 6% of heads respectively).

Out of the 15 aspects of work suggested as areas in which they might like a change in the balance of support and challenge, respondents said they would like more support in relation to 12 of them. This seems to indicate a perceived deficiency of support overall. However, the figures for each are not particularly high: after an expressed desire for more support in relation to managing workload by 28% of heads, 15% wanted more support in dealing with staffing issues, 14% wanted more support with enhancing personal effectiveness, and the same figure for analysing student attainment data. Interestingly, exactly the same proportion of heads as wanted more support with analysing student attainment data said they wanted less challenge in that respect, although only one headteacher wanted both.

12% wanted more challenge in respect of leading school improvement – the highest figure in terms of heads expressing a desire for increased challenge. The reference group wondered where heads wanted this challenge to come from – for example whether from governors, from the Local Authority or from the School Improvement Partner. For the item ‘Improving student attendance’ equal numbers of headteachers wanted less support

as less challenge, while equal numbers of headteachers wanted more support as wanted more challenge in respect of 'Enhancing ECM outcomes' (but only 5%).

The highest figures recorded on this question were in the 'not applicable' categories, with 41% of heads indicating that there was no area of their work in which they wanted less support, and 28% and 31% of heads saying there were no areas where they wanted more or less challenge than they were currently experiencing.

### **Conditions that affect supportive and challenging relationships**

Headteachers were asked about the conditions that affect working with an external professional, and to specify up to three things that help and up to three that hinder supportive and challenging relationships. In response, they made a total of 343 separate statements about affordances, and 209 about hindrances. Many of the statements reinforced points that had been made in response to questions about what it is that headteachers value, particularly: trust and confidentiality; the other person's knowledge and experience; and interpersonal skills. The open nature of the question allowed heads to express themselves freely, and in so doing they added detail and nuance to the broad-brush headlines. For example, trust was highlighted not only in the sense of trusting the other person's integrity and that they will maintain confidentiality, but also trust based on respect for their professional experience, competence and expertise. Well-developed interpersonal skills, especially genuine listening and empathy, are perceived as facilitating supportive and challenging relationships. The heads also pointed to the importance of role clarity, continuity of personnel and time to develop a relationship and understanding, as well as having sufficient time for in-depth discussion.

In a related question respondents were asked to rank in order of importance six statements about support and challenge. These statements were taken directly from analysis of the interviews that preceded the questionnaire (Swaffield, 2008). Three

statements or conditions stood out as being of much greater perceived importance. These were:

- Each headteacher needs at least one external professional whose discretion s/he trusts completely (*ranked by 81% of headteachers*)
- Provision of support and challenge must take account of the practical realities of being a headteacher (*ranked by 78% of headteachers*)
- For in-depth professional dialogue an external professional needs to understand the school's context (*ranked by 72% of headteachers*)

In discussing these results the headteacher reference group noted the clear importance attached to having someone whom they trust absolutely – a recurrent theme across all the data. Members of the reference group agreed that it is vital that external professionals understand the school's context, but heads feel that this is often not the case. Too frequently it seems as though external people are pushing the government's priorities, which may not be those of the school. There was a feeling that a number of people come with their own set agendas that they stick to no matter their relevance to the school or the issues that the headteacher wants to raise.

Hindrances are often expressed as the obverse of affordances, as the discussion by the reference group illustrated, and was also seen in the lists of factors that hinder supportive and challenging relationships proffered by respondents. Headteachers frequently referred to: lack of trust and confidentiality; lack of knowledge, experience and understanding especially of the particularities of the school; hidden, narrow, imposed and competing agendas; and an overemphasis on attainment data. The lack of time came up repeatedly. There were also a number of comments about badly managed arrangements for meetings – hastily convened, poor timekeeping, delays in follow up - as well as the lack of availability of the external professional.

A fifth of the headteachers made one or more points that reflect badly on the individuals they probably encountered who were supposedly providing support and challenge. Comments included:

- Lack of respect
- Doesn't treat me like an equal
- Basic contempt for staff

- People out to ‘gain’ just for themselves
- Something to prove
- Them being condescending or patronising
- Destructive criticism
- Being dictatorial
- Judgemental attitudes

And perhaps not so serious but nevertheless unhelpful:

- Insincerity
- Talking of their experience not mine / Saying ‘I used to ...’
- All talk without understanding
- Making inappropriate suggestions / Giving unhelpful advice
- Platitudes
- Over familiarity
- Negativity / Whinging about the job / Pessimism

Whilst undoubtedly the people in question are having to cope with their own pressures and demands, these comments suggest inappropriate behaviours and lack of professionalism.

### **Differences among headteachers**

Thus far the data reported have been all those returned taken as a whole, and representing English headteachers in general. However, it may be that there are significant differences in the way various groups of headteachers (primary or secondary, male or female) perceive support and challenge. To investigate this possibility cross-tabulations were produced for all applicable items, and in almost all cases only very small differences from the expected responses were found either in relation to phase of school or sex of headteacher. However, it appears that school phase may be a factor in relation to the initiation of contact with an officer of the headteacher’s professional association: fewer primary heads than expected initiate the contact while more secondary heads than expected do so. Sex of the headteacher appears to be a factor in relation to three other items, one of which is also about initiation of contact, while the other two are about the balance of support and challenge provided. Male headteachers seem more likely than female heads to initiate contact with other headteachers in wider networks, yet more male

headteachers than would be expected say they experience little support or challenge from these colleagues. Finally, fewer female headteachers report experiencing more support than challenge from their School Improvement Partner than would be the case if there was no difference in response between men and women. Further statistical tests will be carried out to investigate the significance of these differences. Analyses will also be carried out to see whether headteachers' responses to questionnaire items are related to the length of time they have been in post.

### **Additional comments**

At the end of the questionnaire there was an invitation to make any other comments about support and challenge for headteachers. 36 heads (over a quarter) took the time to write something here, and of these 22 (16%) were explicitly negative. The most common causes of this negativity were workload, bureaucracy and multiple initiatives. A selection of quotations provide the flavour:

I am extremely concerned that overload of challenge for headteachers is increasingly making a negative impact on enjoyment of the job, ability to function efficiently and lead the school. Too reactive, not enough opportunity to be proactive = negative experience.

*(Primary female headteacher with 6 years' experience)*

The most frustrating part of headship is the ridiculous amount of red tape around health and safety, finance, policies etc. I spend at least 50% of my time on stuff that is nothing to do with teaching and learning.

*(Primary female headteacher with 4 years' experience)*

I feel that there are many demands on a headteacher and these are frequently overwhelming. It seems impossible to recover from one 'crisis' before the next starts at times! Frequently the problems overlap and it is difficult to prioritise. *(Primary female headteacher with 19 years' experience)*

The job is fantastic and the opportunities to do well for children are many but the present obsession with statistics is killing any sense that this is a profession which cares about education. We are doing severe damage to many children's prospects by not focusing on education and obstacles to learning. The government does not listen ever and is getting it all wrong.

*(Secondary male headteacher with 8 years' experience)*

I feel that a key issue in maintaining headship is managing the workload so that the focus of the role is on teaching and learning. Challenge and support is needed for governing bodies and the local authority to make the role manageable. I am a leading professional in learning. Why am I expected to oversee asbestos surveys, do fire risk assessments, or financial management? (To name but a few!!)

*(Primary female headteacher with 14 years' experience)*

If you have any influence on the DCSF, *please* reduce the bureaucratic workload of headteachers and farm it out to 'civilians'. I recognise that we need to have a vision for our schools, but it's a strategic vision to improve the world for children, not to keep office dwellers happy.

*(Primary female headteacher with 10 years' experience)*

You cannot effectively manage challenge because there are too many challenges, too much ridiculous administration which hampers progress. The Government is ruining a noble profession with accountability, Human Rights legislation and change that is pointless.

I can't wait to go.

*(Primary male headteacher with 10 years' experience)*

Another two said they were about to leave headship since they felt no longer able to do the job.

These comments given an impression of dedicated professionals, wanting and struggling to do their best for their pupils, yet finding it hard if not impossible to focus on the things that matter. From them the plea is not for support, much less for any more challenge, but rather a drastic change in the context and culture in which they work. Systematic and cultural change generally takes time, and in any case there is no certainty that the changes these heads seek will come about, despite some stated intentions by politicians and policy makers to reduce bureaucracy (for example DfES, 2004). Meantime, it appears that a worrying number of headteachers in England are feeling very unhappy, a situation that could perhaps be ameliorated to some extent by the provision of appropriate support. Given the system's reliance on the effective functioning of headteachers and the significance attributed to their performance this is certainly something that should be given considerable attention. Whilst the level of challenge to headteachers from a whole range of pressures is likely to remain high increased support, according to the four-fold typology, would make the difference between demoralisation and high performance

(Barber, 2000). As previously stated I regard this as an over-simplification, but nevertheless on the basis of this national survey I recommend an increase in the provision of support for headteachers, and a reconsideration of the extent and nature of challenge to which they are subject. As the data presented here have indicated, the sources, focus, nature, and circumstances of both support and challenge vary considerable, and some are much more valued by headteachers than others. We should take note and act on what these valuable school leaders are telling us.

### **Further research**

The issues discussed in this paper will be further investigated in the spring of 2009 through in-depth interviews with 30 of the headteachers who responded to the survey. I am also looking in detail at headteachers' perceptions of the support and challenge offered by School Improvement Partners. Considerations of space preclude reporting on the questionnaire items that particularly focused on SIPs, but these data will inform future papers that will also consider the concept of critical friendship in relation to headteacher support and challenge.

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