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Introduction

In the international quest for improvement, development and acceptance, formal education plays a central and pivotal role. Schools are called to adjust, adapt and transform into learning organisations. Schools in Cyprus also try to follow current trends but studies report that Cypriot schools lack a vision to take them forward (Kazamias et al., 2004; Georgiou et al., 2001). This is characteristic of a highly centralised and conservative educational system.1 Head teachers hold positions of influence in their educational communities and their role is generally considered to be associated with raising standards, school improvement and development. As Harris et al. (2003: 67) argue, ‘schools that are effective and have the capacity to improve are led by head teachers who make a significant and measurable contribution to the effectiveness of their staff’. As a result, head teacher preparation initiatives are the focus of discussion and study in many nations. Although the preparation of school leaders has had a long and rich history in the western world (e.g. the UK and USA) in other countries, as Bush and Jackson (2002) argue, the recognition of the need for appropriate and adequate preparation for school leaders has been slower to emerge. In many countries training is not a requirement for an appointment to the post of head teacher and there is an assumption that a good teacher can become an effective head teacher. Cyprus is among this latter group.

In Cyprus, the introduction of management and leadership training programmes in education is still at an embryonic stage and is far from addressing the actual needs of Cypriot head teachers. Those responsible for organising in-service training programmes at the Pedagogical Institute conceded that the Cyprus educational system (CES) had failed due to the fact that it had neither trained nor created good school leaders (Charalampous, 2004). This was combined with a weakness in the procedures for leadership selection. This article is an attempt to illuminate this area of the CES and present primary school head teachers’ views on their preparation for headship in Cyprus.

The Cyprus educational system

The new state of Cyprus (formed in 1960) acted to keep control of the National Curriculum and educational policy and concentrated all the power in the hands of the Ministry of Education. The CES has not made any significant changes since 1960. As a centralised system therefore, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) is responsible for the enforcement of the educational laws and sets guidelines and rules. Schools are obliged to operate within this framework and are called to follow the syllabi, curricula and textbooks prescribed, regulated and supervised by MoEC. Head teachers are not involved in any influential decision-making process nor are they expected to develop initiatives which deviate from the
norm. Conservatism keeps the system rigid and allows for only small and less threatening changes. For example, the last reform in the teachers’ evaluation system was established in 1976 and textbooks for Greek language introduced in 1986 remained unchanged until 2006. Teachers within the system are appointed, designated to schools and promoted by the Educational Service Committee, an autonomous five-member body directly appointed by the President of Cyprus. Mobility between schools or regions is based on a transfer credits system (e.g. teachers are awarded transfer credits for every year that they work plus for the type of school that they serve – large or small). The more transfer credits one has the closer he/she will be appointed to their home base.

The process of conducting teacher evaluation is prescribed in the 1976 law relating to the duties and responsibilities of primary and secondary teachers (House of Parliament, 1976). Although the evaluation process is clearly specified, in practice it is highly problematic. According to the former president of the Educational Service Committee (Theofilides, 2004), promotions are grounded only on the number of years of teaching experience and therefore become the ultimate purpose of evaluation. As a result Cypriot senior management teams are characterised by gerontocracy (Educational Service Committee, 2003) and have very short service (Ribbins, 1998). The Educational Service Committee (ESC) (2003) in its annual report also stressed that there have been times when they had to promote staff to senior positions merely because they had been working long enough in the system and not because they had the qualifications and personal traits for their new role. Such an anachronistic policy has led to dysfunction. Therefore, currently, there is no precise selection process and criteria at all for teachers or head teachers. The in-service training and further professional development of teachers is the responsibility of the Pedagogical Institute. The majority of the courses offered are not school-based, although the latter can be organised, on a one-off basis, on the request of interested school units. Currently the only compulsory training offered is the introduction to management courses for newly appointed primary education head teachers, and secondary education deputies and head teachers.

**Head teachers in Cyprus**

Head teachers are mainly responsible for administration rather than management. The assumption that good teachers can become effective managers without any preparation is still prevalent in Cyprus. Head teachers work according to personal experience, copying other head teachers they have met who – in their turn – have worked in a fashion purely based on their own personal experience as teachers.

During the first few years following a promotion and appointment to the post, head teachers receive compulsory in-service training provided by the Pedagogical Institute. It is a 16 week course delivered once a week, over seven months. The course is related to general management and administration issues, educational issues and the duties of the post. However, as Georgiou et al. (2001) argue, even this kind of training is primarily bureaucratic in nature and inadequate to prepare future administrators/managers. According to internal evaluations of these programmes by the Pedagogical Institute (PIC, 2007), the participants argued that the training offered is not sufficient to meet the challenges arising for newly-appointed head teachers (see also Nicolaidou & Petridou, 2009). They also stressed the lack of links between theory and practice with the use of multiple teaching and learning techniques led by experienced professionals and academics. The head teachers argued for the necessity of receiving this training prior to promotion to the post. Nonetheless, relevant improvements to these courses have not yet been made.

It is worthwhile mentioning here that there were head teacher preparation programmes organised in conjunction with Florida University (1999–2000), which have been abandoned because of budget cuts. Furthermore, a number of teachers have attended postgraduate programmes in universities in Cyprus and abroad at their own expense. Nevertheless, the percentage of head teachers qualified with postgraduate degrees in Educational Management and Leadership is low.

Cyprus is facing numerous challenges since it has become a member of the European Union (2004). A debate has begun around the need for educational reform (Kazamias et al., 2004). All the stakeholders were invited by the government to participate in the effort. Among the themes under discussion is the highly centralised educational system, staff assessment and development and the promotion system. The extent to which the head teachers themselves also believe in the need for change in the current evaluation, promotion and training systems remains unknown and the topic of this article.
The study
This article reports on the results of a pilot study on the national primary school head teachers' in-service training programmes and further professional development in Cyprus. Data collection took place between May 2005 and August 2005. The aim of the pilot project was to investigate primary school head teachers' own views on the national training programmes for headship programme with a view to influence current attempts for reform and development in these areas, and also to pilot-test the instruments used in order to formalise them. Three main data collection instruments were designed and used. In May 2005, a group of head teachers (every other head teacher following registration during a national head teachers conference was asked to take part) were asked to complete an open-ended question on the current state of head teacher preparation and in service training and any changes deemed necessary in order to establish whether there is a need for this research (Cohen & Manion, 2006). It also identified issues that needed further exploration (Robson, 1998). Issues highlighted through this process formed the basis for constructing a structured questionnaire that was later distributed to 125 primary school head teachers. The third data collection tool used was group interviews with head teachers contacted through personal connections (convenience sample). The group interviews picked up issues raised by the head teachers through the questionnaires. In total 125 (60 per cent male, 40 per cent female) primary school head teachers took part in the study. Of the respondents 59.5 per cent were new to the post with two or fewer years experience. Only 1.3 per cent had any experience between seven and eight years as a head teacher, while none of the participants had more than eight years experience. In terms of teaching experience 84.8 per cent had a total between 26 and 35 years. Only one participant (1.3 per cent) had 20 or fewer years of teaching experience. Fifty-five participants (69.6 per cent) were 51–56 years old, 67 responders (85 per cent) were older than 50 and no one was younger than 40. In terms of qualifications prior to promotion all participants were graduates of Pedagogical Academies, while 47.4 per cent also held a BA or equivalent degree. Only one respondent held a PhD and nine (11.4 per cent) held a Masters degree, though not necessarily in Educational Management and Leadership.

Working with the data
Participants clearly stated that preparation for headship is necessary for their effectiveness with only 14 per cent disagreeing (see Figure 1).

While acknowledging the significance of preparation for headship, primary school head teachers argued that the current in service training programme needs further development and to become more professionally-oriented, as it is characterised as far too theoretical, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Participants also stated that their experience as deputy head teachers was not enough to equip them with the necessary qualifications and experience to cover for the head teacher, and strongly argued for relevant head teachers’ preparation. As noted during the interviews:

You cannot solve the problems of today and you cannot shape the future with practices from the past . . . especially since as a deputy you are not actively involved with management issues as most of our head teachers are over-controlling . . . and we often find ourselves copying behaviours observed as the safest way to act . . . through the continued use of the apprentice model we reproduce the past and we adhere to amateur and empirical models . . . (Head teacher 5)
Participants were asked to evaluate the training subject-content of the preparation programme, categorising the subjects on a scale of 1 to 7 to show how essential and useful they considered each subject to be (see Table 1). Participants were also asked to add any other subject that they considered important that was not already covered. Participants included subjects such as health and safety in schools, prevention of the use of narcotics, conflict-solving and relations with inspectors.

The interview data highlighted the fact that the delivery of the modules was not strongly based on principles of adult learning, nor did it provide participants with opportunities to actively practise leadership. Group interviews also indicated that real training needs were not addressed.

Our preparation is partial as we move from subject to subject every day. For example, one day we had environmental education, the next day multicultural education and the following ICT. This journey from one topic to another leads to superficial learning and certainly it does not provide us with the necessary knowledge and skills. Besides that, the subjects did not reflect our needs or the needs of our school context and finally our experience and previous knowledge was totally ignored. Needless to say there was no attempt to link what we were supposed to be learning with our everyday practice . . .

(Head teacher 4)

Responses to questionnaires also indicated that the participants were not able to make the link between theory, practice and research, nor could they relate with confidence to international perspectives of the head’s role. At interview one noted that:

. . . we are now living in the twenty-first century and we must not adhere to the belief that a good teacher can become a good manager and leader without any preparation, or to the idea that the leader is born. The head teacher has to earn the necessary knowledge and skills so as to be able to implement different models of management, according to the situation. This is not the case in our system so far. (Head teacher 3)

Analyses were also performed checking for differences between groups (sex, age, level of studies, years in headship) with regard to the venue of the training (i.e. school-based or university-based) and the qualification gained following successful completion of the training (MA or other professional qualification). Male primary school head teachers scored higher means in these items indicating a preference for a preparation that leads to an MA degree, lasts at least for one year and is assessed by flexible evaluation methods. Female primary school head teachers preferred school-based preparation and less preparation on university campuses. When checking for age, the findings of the study failed to achieve statistical significance. Participants holding an MA showed a preference for preparation leading to a certificate equal to an MA; they also indicated that the preparation programme needs to have a duration of an academic year. As for the years of experience in the post, findings achieved statistical significance in personnel management and guidance and in ICT in education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training subject/subject's usefulness</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 Fiscal management</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>1.305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Evidence-based approaches</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>1.170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Leading teaching and learning</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>1.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Student management</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>1.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Educational law</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>1.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Curriculum development</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>1.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 ICT in education</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>1.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Accountability and responsibility</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>1.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 ICT in educational management</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>0.959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Staff development</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>0.923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Decision-making</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>0.974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Relations with parents and the community</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>0.940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Shared leadership</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>0.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Introduction of innovation</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>0.808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Communication strategies and skills</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>0.891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 School climate</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>0.840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Problem-solving</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>0.805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Personnel evaluation</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>0.766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Strategic direction for school improvement</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>0.749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Management and leadership</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>0.712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Personnel management and guidance</td>
<td>6.59</td>
<td>0.651</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 = less useful, 7 = very useful.
Making sense of the data I

The sample demographics in terms of age confirm Educational Committee reports where it is noted that there is a gerontocracy in possession of leadership and management posts in our schools (the average age for newly-promoted head teachers in primary schools is 40 whereas in secondary schools it is 50 years of age). Ribbins’ (1998) remark that Cypriot primary head teachers are old and have a very short career in the post is still valid, while Georgiou et al.’s (2001: 76) argument that ‘appointments to headship occur not long before retirement age’ has not changed considerably. Questions arise such as: Is it worth educating head teachers who retire after six months in post? Do they have the energy and willingness for the post? Would they be more efficient and effective if training were offered prior to promotion? In terms of qualification, results are in line with the 2006 Educational Committee report indicating that only 2 out of 133 newly promoted primary head teachers had a PhD in Education (1.55 per cent) and 27 had a Master’s degree (20.30 per cent). As regards the gender of the population, analysis showed that 40 per cent were female and 60 per cent male. A comparison with the 2006 Educational Service Committee data shows that this ratio is overturned (57.6 per cent female and 42.4 per cent male). Taking the gender ratio of the population into consideration there is a 1:7 possibility for males to be promoted to headship, whereas for females this ratio is 1:9 (Education Service Committee report, 2006).

Making sense of the data II

Feelings of abandonment

Cypriot primary school head teachers emphatically point out that CES does not adequately prepare them to meet the demands of their new role, nor does it provide adequate in service training and further professional development. Although they recognise the necessity for such preparation and training. It was stressed that the compulsory preparation and in service training for headship provided by the Pedagogical Institute following promotion is poor in both content and delivery, while ‘much more interesting and useful’ (Head teacher 2) preparation offered by other external providers to practising head teachers and deputy head teachers was abandoned because of cuts in budgets. In particular, the head teachers considered their in service training preparation as inadequate for a number of reasons. They stressed that lectures are far too theoretical turning them into passive listeners. Lectures include no practical input from the head teachers themselves and no reference is made to their daily practice and experiences. It is very important to note that the head teachers stressed that their lecturers were not well-experienced (professionals or academics) in the field of educational leadership and at times an inconsistency was observed (Group interview 1). Another barrier that the head teachers highlighted was the fact that the training usually started after being promoted to the post: ‘it feels like being abandoned at sea,’ one head teacher stressed. The head teachers identified that preparation and further professional development programmes should be designed drawing on leadership and management theories and build on practice as the main component. Areas such as strategic direction for effectiveness, school improvement, action planning, personnel management and coaching, monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning, quality and accountability should be included, examined in depth and practised in schools. Head teachers are willing to develop knowledge and skills so as to be able to plan and share a vision on improvement and to raise pupil standards, to keep everyone committed to the schools’ mission and to perform beyond the call of duty, to turn their school into a learning organisation and to open their schools to the community.

What is emerging from the head teachers’ list of training needs is the fact that head teachers identified similar subjects to the six key areas identified in the National Standards for Headteachers (DfES, 2004) and to the content of what Bush and Jackson (2002) described as the international curriculum for leadership.

Head teachers stressed the need for developing strategic head teacher pre-post preparation programmes, with further development sessions while in post based on a dynamic model of leadership development. Preparation should be provided to deputy head teachers and other aspiring school leaders, leading to a recognised professional qualification. This certificate or other higher qualification in educational management should be mandatory for headship. Furthermore, head teachers emphatically maintained that continuing professional development programmes must be established through site-based training and meetings of practising educational leaders, heads and deputies. Mentoring and site-based coaching would be welcomed for head teacher development. In particular it is expected that head teacher preparation programmes be designed
based on contextual educational factors particular to Cyprus. In order to engage in these suggested reforms a certain level of decentralisation and delegation of powers and responsibilities to school units and head teachers is necessary.

Among some of the barriers to fully developing their role, the head teachers highlighted:

- the appointment and transfer system which does not allow for strategic planning to flourish;
- the recruitment system which does not allow them to choose their teaching staff or to dismiss any inefficient personnel;
- the fact that there are no national standards and school self-evaluation strategies, which gives Cypriot schools the impression they are ‘sailing towards an unknown destination’ (Head teacher 2);
- the fact that no non-contact time is allocated for school-based staff development activities;
- the fact that there are tremendous pressures from the curriculum;
- the fact that head teachers also perform the duties of administrative staff as there are no secretaries in schools.3

All of these mean that by the end of the day head teachers do not have time to lead teaching and learning as instructional leaders, nor to empower or transform others into leading learners.

Recommendations

The findings of this study showed that the need for appropriate and adequate preparation of head teachers in Cyprus is recognised. Only a small number of head teachers have received appropriate preparation in educational management and leadership in universities in Cyprus and abroad – and this at their own expense. The need for change in the preparation system is urgent as we enter the EU and are now participating in the new competitive environment and targeting the Lisbon goal to achieve a knowledge-based economy. In response to this need and based on the evidence of this study the following achievable recommendations can be made.

We propose academic-level leadership training for educational leaders as an important element in the professionalisation of their role. Such training must be addressed to deputys and other aspiring and practising leaders (i.e. classroom teachers, subject coordinators, subject advisers) and lead to a professional qualification.

This qualification should be required for application for headship. Successful graduates can earn credits against an MA degree in Educational Leadership and School Improvement should they wish to. A schools-based networked consultancy scheme on peer coaching and mentoring by experienced and qualified head teachers could also be set up. Networking and school-to-school cooperation must be developed in small focus groups having similar interests and needs and involving the sharing of good practices. The Pedagogical Institute has the experience and the means to foster such programmes. Further, the state must investigate the possibility for decentralised continuous professional development for practising head teachers having centrally assured the desired quality of such courses. We also recommend reforming head teachers’ ‘job descriptions’ and Schools Regulations as part of the educational reform. Steps should be made towards gradual decentralisation of the system by giving more authority and responsibilities to head teachers, allowing local decision-making and enabling them to become real educational leaders.

Final thoughts

This study roughly sketches out a picture of the situation in Cyprus in relation to head teachers’ views on their training. It explores not only their perceptions of their training needs but goes further to report their views on ways to revise existing policy and planning in head teacher training and preparation programmes. It highlights problems, makes achievable recommendations and gives the decision-makers involved in the ‘educational reform plan’ the chance to consider possible solutions, supported by the grass roots, for proper and adequate preparation of educational leaders. A recently released Strategic Planning for Education document (2008) announces that school head teachers will be selected by means of a three-day evaluation during which they will be assessed and judged against their management and risk-taking abilities. Following selection, the newly appointed head teachers will receive training organised by the Head Teachers’ School (an institution to be formed) and delivered in conjunction with local universities and other leadership schools abroad. Since there is no planning to train or develop aspiring or potential school leaders such as teachers or middle level leaders, only those who pass the assessment criteria for headship, the notion persists that inherited or internal capacities for leadership are enough to ‘earn’ a promotion to a leadership post. We argue that
the need to balance the interplay between exercising and possessing power at either end of the continuum would be achieved with relevant training and devolution of powers to school leaders. The professionalisation of education and practitioners of all levels is a lever in ensuring success.

Notes
1. The Cyprus Education System (CES) follows a top-down vertical way of communication and decision-making approaches. There is no autonomy at the lower levels of the hierarch (school head teachers/teachers) in terms of reaching important decisions for improvement and development, or even for minor issues such as staff leave (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2007). For a description of the CES please refer to the relevant section in this article as well as the UNESCO (1998) report.
2. According to the Government Personnel Department in March 2005 there were 312 primary head teachers in post.
3. As from the school year 2007/2008 primary schools were allocated secretaries. This is still on a pilot basis. Not all schools have secretaries yet, and those who do may not have them on a full time basis.

References


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