

# **THE TRANSITION TO HEADSHIP**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Transition into first-time headship is a challenge, as the new leader lets go of their former role as a teacher/deputy and at the same time prepares to adopt a new professional persona. This research explores the nature of transition as experienced by six deputies moving to be heads of independent schools which are new to them. It identifies what is distinctive about the experience and what can be learnt which may be of benefit to future generations of new headteachers and the schools they join. It focusses on the challenges inherent in making this transition, and the strategies these fledgling heads adopt as they navigate the process.

Six research participants are tracked through the final months of their deputy headship and into the early months of their first headship. They simultaneously let go of their deputy role, paving the way for their successors in that role, while preparing to take on the professional responsibilities of the headteacher. Socialisation into this new role is reciprocal, as the new head affects, and is affected by, the school community they join. The new heads negotiate the tension, and attempt to find balance, between inheriting the role from their predecessor and inhabiting this role and making it their own.

The time in between being appointed to headship and formally assuming the position offers these heads-elect the opportunity to begin to divest themselves of their deputy role and take on the mantle of the school leader. During this lead-in period these incoming heads devise strategies, access support, explore and experiment as they continue the process of formulating and articulating their conception of the head they hope to be, and begin their tentative steps towards realising that vision.

In addition to data from semi-structured interviews, shadowing these deputies/new heads and discussion with those who worked most closely with them, and who knew them best, opened up a wider perspective on the two-way socialisation process and the nature of transition to headship.

## Declaration

I confirm that this thesis is my original work. It does not include material previously presented for the award of a degree in this, or any other, university.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Berry". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "J" and a trailing flourish.

Jill Berry

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## Acknowledgements

With thanks to my six research participants, who were prepared to give time to supporting this study at a very busy period in their professional lives.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION: THE RATIONALE FOR AND FOCUS OF THIS RESEARCH**

#### ***Why study the transition to headship?***

School improvement literature confirms the quality of teaching has the greatest impact on improved pupil outcomes, but the quality of leadership comes a close second (Leithwood et al, 2006; Barber et al, 2010). Research also suggests the role of the school leader has become more pressured and demanding over time (Hall and Southworth, 1997; Bristow et al, 2007; Kelly and Saunders, 2010). In the UK, this was exacerbated following the 1988 Education Reform Act, with the introduction of the National Curriculum, key stage testing and school league tables, the Ofsted and Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) inspection frameworks and a greater emphasis on accountability for schools and headteachers, including increasing numbers of Department for Education (DfE) regulations for independent schools. In the light of increased pressures, the potential shortfall of willing and capable school leaders has been charted across a number of countries (Cheung and Walker, 2006; Crow, 2006; Cranston, 2007). There is a danger future generations of potential leaders might be deterred from taking up the challenge of school leadership, rather than encouraged and inspired to do so. So on the one hand school leadership is seen as particularly important to school success and improved pupil performance. On the other hand it is seen as an increasingly pressured and potentially unpalatable career choice.

The role of the head is particularly significant as, unlike other senior leaders, the headteacher is often seen as the spokesperson for the school, the driver of the vision (Bush and Jackson, 2002; Earley and Weindling, 2004) and the person who, together with the governors, shoulders the full responsibility: as one of Weindling and Earley's (1987:125) participants put it, "carrying the banner and carrying the can." The National Standards of Excellence for Headteachers (DfE, 2015) describe the influence of school leaders, both within society and as shapers of the teaching profession. Heads, the Standards say, are lead professionals and significant role models, accountable for the education of generations of children, leading by

example and ensuring high standards are set and met: “guardians of the nation’s schools” (5). Despite the focus on distributed leadership, where successful leadership is shared across the school rather than residing primarily with the head (Harris et al, 2003; Connor, 2009), researchers such as Cranston (2007:110) assert, “it is the principal who remains in the ‘hot seat’...responsible and accountable for almost everything that happens in the school.” Bush (2015b:855) attests, “The role of the principal remains paramount.”

Thomson (2009:50) describes the head’s unique role,

She/he has narrative prowess. She/he is expected to develop a dream for the school and then get others to accept it. She/he has the power to get people out of their comfort zone and working hard. Because of this she/he must take responsibility for the actions of other people in the school community. She/he is not expected to operate democratically and be the convenor of the group dreaming, but is rather more like a CEO exhorting staff at a sales convention, or a general urging troops into battle.

Transition to new headship is particularly challenging as new leaders inevitably lack experience and therefore perhaps confidence as they embrace this demanding and responsible role (Thomson, 2009; Carman, 2013). The importance of appropriate support and training for those who step up to the significant responsibility of headship, both in advance of transition, and throughout their early and subsequent careers, has been stressed (Watkins, 2004). Customised, targeted preparation and guidance for aspiring and fledgling headteachers, and appropriate modelling of the role, could encourage deputies to see the appeal and satisfactions of headship, rather than simply its demands and pressures (Earley, 2014). A deeper understanding of the nature of the transition into first-time headship should help ensure preparation and support are appropriate, targeted and relevant to context and need, and this is the issue which my research addresses.

My examination of how six new heads manage the transition to first headship emphasises the importance of the school leader establishing themselves confidently so they are able to make a positive contribution to the continuing development of the school, the strength of the education it provides and the achievements of the students and staff within it. Despite the challenges of the role,

and increasing pressures over time, if new heads are able to manage the transition effectively, devising strategies and accessing the support they require in order to do so, modelling positively the experience of new headship, future generations of potential heads may be encouraged to step up to the leadership challenge. In addition, those who are in a position to support aspiring and new heads, such as governors, senior leader colleagues, headteacher associations and the wider educational community, including the DfE in the UK, could benefit from a consideration of the demands on, and the needs of, deputies moving to headship.

In terms of the warrant for this research, Weindling & Dimmock (2006:335) reflect on the longitudinal study of the transition to first headship, begun by Weindling and Earley in the 1980s and continuing over the next three decades, and attest, “More attention to the induction or taking-charge stage is needed, because it invariably is problematic and requires careful analysis and action in situ”. This echoes Gronn’s (1999:xiii) observation, “The time is well overdue for the field to take seriously the documented experiences of people as they go about acquiring a sense of themselves as leaders and to pass on the benefits of those insights to those coming up behind them.”

Normore (2004) reflects on how little research focusses on the beginning principal, and Loder and Spillane (2005:263) also call for more research on the transition to the principal role, claiming, “scholars have paid little attention to the interrelationship between the roles of teacher and administrator, particularly the constraints attendant in the transition from the former role to the latter one.” They assert understanding this transition is crucial with respect to the future healthy recruitment of school leaders. Ribbins and Gunter (2002:362) state,

In our view too much research in the field is about leadership and too little focusses on leading (detailed and contextualised accounts of what individual leaders do and why they do it in a variety of specific circumstances, how and why others respond as they do, and with what outcomes) and leaders (what leaders are, why and by whom they are shaped into what they are, and how they become leaders).

It is in relation to leading, how leaders are formed and how they behave that my research makes a contribution, focussing as it does on the development of leaders in context rather than on leadership in the abstract.

My research design enables me to chart the progress of six participants as they go through the experience of transition, tracking them through the last few months of deputy headship and into the early months of headship, so focussing on these heads-elect “as they go about acquiring a sense of themselves as leaders” (Gronn, 1999) rather than recalling the experience at some later point. It has an immediacy and a dynamism that comes from the exploration of an experience as it happens. The focus on ongoing experience ensures that the research is able to, in the words of Duke and Salmonowicz (2010:37), “avoid the problems encountered in retrospective studies in which principals are asked to reconstruct their thinking at some distant point in the past.”

Documenting these experiences enables me to draw conclusions about the challenge of making the transition from deputy headship to headship, and the support strategies my participants employ, which will be of use and interest to those, in Gronn’s words, “coming up behind”: aspiring and future new heads, and those in a position to support them. Learning of the challenges others have faced may be reassuring to future generations of new heads, who may recognise the issues which confront and test them are characteristic of the nature of transition to headship, rather than arising from their own shortcomings. Studying the six cases and reflecting on how my participants address their challenges, and the support they mobilise, allows for the dissemination of possible strategies to ensure future positive and successful transition to headship, a role which the research shows to be important, increasingly demanding, and potentially unpalatable unless appropriate support is in place.

Although a number of researchers consider the different stages of headship preparation and experience as a new and later established head, there is little research which focusses specifically on the lived experience (Hedges, 2010) of those making the move from deputy headship into their first headship, charted as it happens, and taking into account the views of those who know the individual well

and bring their own insights to bear on how the process of transition is being managed, a process Bush (2009:385) refers to as “role-set analysis”. This use of role-set analysis supports the exploration of the extent to which the socialisation process through which these beginning heads pass is reciprocal; it is also experienced by members of the community the new head joins, and the incoming head both affects, and is affected by, this community.

### ***Why focus on the independent sector?***

The vast majority of the literature into educational leadership, the challenges of new headship and the support mechanisms new heads employ, focusses on the experience of beginning heads in schools maintained by the state, although a number of Masters and doctoral students, current independent sector heads and senior leaders, are focussing their research studies on the sector in which they work, including Peterken (2008), Gladwin (2014) and Pytel (2014).

There is relatively little literature exploring specifically the experiences of those making the transition to first-time headship in the independent sector, a transition I made in my own career. The independent sector context relates to my own experience and area of expertise, reflecting my space in the research field, an area of leadership research which has been neglected in the past. McLay (2008:355) observes how little research on leadership has focussed on the independent school context. She cites Gronn (1999), and comments, “There is...a particular need with regards to the independent sector for initial information gathering to answer Gronn’s call to provide comparative points of reference and an understanding of the contexts of leadership.” Bristow et al (2007:16) similarly attest, “A greater appreciation of the specific challenges posed in a range of cultural situations may enable us to develop a deeper understanding of the roles of leaders and the nature of leadership.” Hall and Southworth (1997:158) also stress the importance of context in research into headship,

The differences which can exist because of variation in school size, type and location need to be emphasised and their implications more thoroughly examined, otherwise writing about headship may remain too general and become unconvincing to practitioners as it does not recognise or reflect the

individual contextual factors they face.

My choice of the independent sector therefore relates to Bristow et al's "cultural situations" and Hall and Southworth's reference to "school type" and "individual contextual factors". On the one hand, research suggests the particular challenges involved in making the transition to new headship are not context-specific, nor do they change significantly over time, nor according to the country, cultural context or educational system within which the new principal is operating (Garcia-Garduno et al, 2011; Robertson and Timperley, 2011; Earley and Bubb, 2013). However, tuning in to the context of the school you join as head, and taking this carefully into account as you decide on priorities, build relationships and gain the confidence of different groups within the school community, so decisions are informed and appropriately grounded in the reality of this specific school at this particular point in its journey, is seen to be key (Day and Leithwood, 2007; Davies, 2009; Glatter 2012). Hallinger (2003:346) suggests, "It is virtually meaningless to study principal leadership without reference to the school context." My research therefore focusses on new headship in a specific context, a context which has been neglected thus far.

My reflections on the experience of new heads in the independent sector may also have relevance for new heads in state schools. As McLay and Brown (2001:102) suggest,

There is a dearth of published research on any aspect of the UK independent sector.

This lack of research is significant because, although only a small percentage of children are at independent schools, their influence in British society is considerable...Furthermore, maintained schools have been forced into taking a more market-oriented approach, something already familiar to the independent sector. Research which investigates practice within the private sector can, therefore, be of relevance beyond its own immediate sphere.

Although this was written in 2001, my exploration of literatures on leadership, on new headship and the transition from deputy headship to headship, would suggest the "dearth" referred to above has not been redressed over the past 14 years.

Drawing on studies of school leadership commissioned by both the Department for

Education and Skills (as it was called at the time) and the independent sector headteacher associations in 2002, Earley and Evans, in a rare comparison of the role of independent and state school leaders (2003:28) concede: “There is a need for cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices between the sectors, whilst recognising there are important differences between the two.”

Exploring the experiences of new leaders of independent schools allowed me the opportunity to consider the extent to which moving to lead an independent school poses specific challenges, and whether the support networks available to new independent school heads differ from those accessed by new heads outside this sector. In the current educational climate, with the move in the UK towards increasing the number of Academies and Free Schools, the difference between leadership in the independent and maintained sectors is arguably reducing. School leaders in both sectors need to develop their entrepreneurial skills (Davies, 2009) and be aware of the importance of running a school as an effective business, recruiting healthily and marketing assertively within the wider community. Independent school heads have always faced the challenge of maintaining fee income through sustainable pupil numbers, dealing with demanding fee-paying parents and achieving a balance between promoting traditional values and being seen as forward-thinking and innovative. Exploring the specific challenges new heads in this sector face should therefore enable me to make my contribution to professional knowledge which is relevant to school leaders within both sectors.

Wellington (2010:134) identifies the researcher’s task as “to create coherence, articulation and linkage”, and I attempt to identify both connections and differences between the experience of my research participants and the findings of researchers who focus on transition to new headship in schools maintained by the state.

My focus on transition to independent sector first headship, especially in the light of the paucity of research exploring this specific context, supports the development of a fuller understanding of the nature of the sector. It contributes to our knowledge about the experience of independent sector new heads, an under-researched group in the leadership field (Bagi, 2015).

### ***Research questions***

When considering my specific research questions, I took into account Brown's recommendations (2010:180), " 'what's worth asking' is not just a function of the field of research, but also relates to who you, the researcher, are, and how your circumstances and aspirations position you in relation to the processes and outcomes of doing research" and Thomson and Walker's advice (2010:145), "what is worth asking needs to resonate personally with the researcher."

I am interested in identifying what is demanding about making the transition from deputy to head and how new heads can be supported as they negotiate this transition. This is a transition I navigated 15 years ago, and my research has enabled me to reflect on my own experience, how the experience of others may be similar, or may differ, and how the challenge of transition to new independent sector headship may have changed over time.

Encouraging and supporting colleagues was something to which I devoted a significant amount of time during my professional life. In the latter part of my headship, through my role within the independent Girls' Schools Association, working across schools to support fellow heads was a rewarding experience. Since leaving headship, through my consultancy work and in work with the National College for Teaching and Leadership, I have been engaged in preparing and appointing new independent school heads and supporting new and more experienced heads through professional review and coaching. The findings from my research have supported and been reinforced by this consultancy work, and the symbiotic relationship between the two has added to the richness of the research experience and outcomes. My research questions therefore reflect who I am, my circumstances and aspirations and what resonates with me.

What is the nature of the transition experienced by deputies moving to their first school headship? Specifically:

- What are the key challenges of making the transition to first-time headship in the independent sector?



- What strategies do these new heads generate or access as they face these challenges?

### ***Outline of the thesis***

Following this introduction, in 'Mapping the field' I examine the key literatures within which my research is situated. I focus on leadership literatures which are relevant to transition to first headship, and also literature relating to role theory which informs my exploration of the nature of this transition, including the tension between role-taking (assuming the role carved out by one's predecessor) and role-making (moulding the role to fit the temperament, priorities, vision and values of the new incumbent). The discussion of literatures firmly establishes the need for this research to be conducted, and further supports and situates the warrant for the study.

In 'Methodology and methods' I discuss my choice of case study, and, within this, the methods of semi-structured interview, shadowing/observation and discussion with those who work most closely with my research participants, and those who know them best, as I analyse these new heads' experience of, and thoughts about, the process of transition to first headship in the context of the views of those whose professional and personal lives are affected by this transition. I explain the data analysis process which followed the generation of data and production of transcripts and fieldnotes. I include discussion of my positioning with respect to this research: how I could be considered both an insider and an outsider, and how this affects my potential relationship with my participants and the dynamic between us. Focussing on reflexivity is one way in which I attempt to ensure the insider/outsider tension is thoroughly examined and effectively navigated. I explore my thoughts and actions with respect to ensuring the ethical underpinning of the research. I include a table of biographical information relating to my research participants and the timeline of my research.

In 'Six cases of transition' I outline the journey of each research participant as they reflect on the stages of applying for and ultimately securing their first headship; as

they move through the lead-in period between being successfully appointed and officially assuming the role; and in their early months in post.

The 'Discussion' chapter identifies what can be learnt about the nature of transition from the experiences of my participants, and how my research contributes to the field. In this section, through the focus on the challenges of making the transition and the strategies new heads adopt as they navigate these challenges, I address the research questions directly.

The 'Conclusion' draws together all that has gone before, building to the identification of my contribution to knowledge within the field of transition to school leadership: the overarching message from the study, beneath which sit three key findings. I discuss how I shall disseminate these findings, and the ways in which the professional community within which I have worked for 35 years may benefit from these research outcomes. I consider the inevitable limitations of this small-scale research project, and ways in which the project could be built on and further developed. I also discuss how the process of conducting research has impacted on my personal and professional development.

### ***Concluding comments***

As Southworth observes (1995:21), "Becoming a new head is a process which involves taking hold of what it means to be a headteacher. It also involves letting go of one's previous professional identity." This process happens simultaneously; these heads-elect negotiate their exit from their current school, handing over their deputy responsibilities while preparing to take on the role of head.

In the "positioning space" of the lead-in period, which Gronn and Lacey (2004:405) define as "a supportive holding environment which facilitates the exploration of potential and possible selves", my participants work to develop relationships across the new school community, winning the confidence of those they will lead and building their own confidence in their sense of themselves as the school leader, the one with whom the buck stops. They navigate a process by which they find a balance between inheriting a legacy from their predecessor, to some extent stepping into a role created by the head they succeed, and at the same time

beginning to carve out for themselves a new way of inhabiting this space, and making the role their own.

These incoming heads reflect on the appeal and demands of this role, as they move from the deputy position where they always have a figure to defer to, to being that figure to whom others defer. My research charts the experience of six participants as they negotiate the process of letting go and taking hold, releasing one professional persona while, at the same time, assuming another. I refer to role theory in my exploration of what is involved as these heads elect/new heads navigate the “positioning space” offered by the months prior to their official assumption of the headship role, and as they experience the early months in post.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### ***MAPPING THE FIELD: A LITERATURE REVIEW OF TRANSITION TO HEADSHIP***

This chapter examines what is already known about the transition to headship, and the elements of role theory most relevant to this transition. I look at what the literatures have to say about the broad field of school leadership, the link between school leadership and school effectiveness, and how researchers have defined a range of leadership styles and the phases through which emerging school leaders pass.

I discuss the focus in such research on the increasing demands of the role of headteacher, a pressure particularly acutely felt by those new to the role. There is a recognition in the literatures of the danger that, in the light of this pressure, a serious shortfall in headteachers is already being experienced in the UK. Research focussing on transition to first headship has concluded that preparation and support of aspiring and new headteachers is an important strategy in addressing such a shortfall. Socialisation into the new professional persona of the headteacher is shown in the literatures to be complex, phased and reciprocal, as both incoming head and the community they join impact on and change the other. The literatures explore how, throughout this socialisation process, a range of support strategies can be accessed to mitigate the pressure of making the transition to headship. I consider the elements of role theory most relevant to the study of transition to new headship. I note, however, the minimal focus on the move to new headship in the independent sector, on examining the perceptions of those with whom they work closely in an attempt to understand the experiences of deputies moving to headship, and on how an appreciation of role theory can help to illuminate an exploration of the nature of this transition. It is this gap to which I aim to contribute.

Brown (2010:176) describes literature review as:

a form of active engagement with writing and other academic and professional artefacts in order to gain a sense of the landscape in which we are working, figure out where we stand in this landscape, and, importantly, a clear sense of the other individuals and groups standing alongside us.

Wellington et al (2005) and Kamler and Thomson (2006) concur that engagement with and evaluation of literature in their field gives researchers the opportunity to show how their study builds on what has gone before, identifying any gaps which suggest the possibility for further contribution or a new perspective on what has already been explored, thus creating a space for their own work.

I examine first the different aspects of leadership on which the literature focusses before considering literature specifically on the move to headship. I explore what the literature has to say about what we already know of the transition to first headship, including on the challenges of making this transition and strategies which can be adopted by those going through this process. I explore how an understanding of role theory can strengthen the analysis of the nature of this transition, before considering how my research builds on what is already known and makes a contribution to the field.

### ***Educational leadership***

The subject of educational leadership has attracted considerable attention in recent decades. Holligan et al (2006) cite the annual review of research produced by the National College for School Leadership in 2003, which calculated there were at that time around 350 definitions of leadership, and the National College expressed surprise there were so few. Referring to the questions 'What is leadership?' and 'What is the relationship between leadership and management?' Adair (2006:5) suggests, "There are literally thousands of books, articles and research studies – more than 150,000 of them since 1934 – which purport to answer those questions."

Researchers have propounded theories concerning different types of leadership, with the emphasis on a range of leadership styles, including transactional (Adair, 2006), transformational (Burns, 1978), distributed (Harris, 2004), adaptive (Heifetz, 1994), translational (Fusarelli et al, 2013), instructional (Southworth, 2002) and moral (Fullan, 2003): a trend Leithwood et al (1999) dubbed “adjectival leadership”. Others have focussed on charting the stages of leadership through which aspiring/new/established heads progress during their career (Reeves et al, 1998; Cheung and Walker, 2006; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). Some contributors focus on the relationship between successful leadership and school effectiveness (O’Shaughnessy, 2007; Munby, 2011; Schleicher, 2012).

Much of this extensive research into and analysis of school leadership is pragmatic in focus (‘how to...’) rather than theoretical. In the consideration of what makes school leaders (and schools) effective, different models of leadership, or stages of leadership, have been explored. This enables us perhaps to simplify (through categorisation) and develop our understanding of the components of successful leadership strategy, the temperament and skills of the best school leaders and how such leaders may be prepared and supported.

A number of writers have emphasised the changing and increasingly demanding role of headship in contemporary society, (Biott et al, 2001; James and Vince, 2001; Kelly and Saunders, 2010). These researchers focus on changes which have taken place within the UK education system following the Education Reform Act 1988. This simultaneously heralded greater autonomy for schools and their leaders (reflected, for example, in the introduction of Local Management of Schools which transferred funding decisions from Local Authorities to heads and governors) while increasing accountability and prescription through the introduction of the National Curriculum and key stage testing, league tables and the establishment of the inspection systems, Ofsted and ISI. Such research suggests the pressures on school leaders increased significantly from the late 1980s. Gronn (2003:147) comments on the “greedy work” of leadership in the current educational climate, and how some leaders appear to thrive on and relish the all-consuming nature of their leadership task. It is, he suggests, almost addictive. Similarly, Thomson (2009:71)

discusses what she labels the “satisfaction paradox”, whereby the stresses and rewards of school leadership co-exist and are, in fact, closely related to each other. The very things which challenge and test us also bring us a sense of achievement.

There is recognition in the literatures that pressure is particularly intense for the principal/head who leads the institution, and this role has become increasingly demanding over time. In the face of these challenges and demands, encouraging capable senior leaders to aspire to headship, supporting new heads and continuing to inspire established heads, is seen as a way of counteracting a potential shortfall in school leaders in the UK and beyond (Cranston, 2007). This shortfall is the result of changing demographics (as large numbers of heads reach retirement age or opt to leave early) combined with a reluctance on the part of some senior leaders to take on the role (Young and McLeod, 2001; Bottery, 2004). As they watch their heads at work, increasing numbers of senior leaders may feel wary about the responsibility and stress of headship and decide this is a career path to which they are hesitant to commit.

In the light of the increasing demands of headship and the potential shortfall in the supply of future school leaders, a number of studies have looked closely at the perspective of those new to the role, the challenges they face, and support structures they access (including Bisschoff and Mackenzie-Batterbury, 2013; Pytel, 2014; Bagi, 2015). Using and evaluating what has been written about school leadership generally helped me reach the conclusion that the element of school leadership on which I wished to focus was the transition to headship in the light of the building demands and pressures on the role. A study which focuses on what motivates deputies to aspire to headship, and how they navigate the transition from one professional role to another, might be of interest and use to those considering this step in the future. We can learn from the lessons of those who went before and benefit from their experiences. My focus is on independent sector headteachers whose progress I chart as they prepare for and then take up the role. I explore their perceptions about the experience in the context of the views of those who work closely with them, complementing the work of other researchers who focus on headteachers in schools maintained by the state, and

who use self-reporting as the main (and in many cases the only) source of information about the new heads' experience.

### ***The transition to new headship: challenges***

A number of writers exploring how school leadership has become an increasingly demanding and pressured responsibility in the last few decades observe this pressure is particularly keenly felt by those new to the role who initially lack experience and, perhaps, confidence (Sackney and Walker, 2006; Stevenson, 2006; Bristow et al, 2007). Experienced heads build trust and "a bank of leadership credits" (Quong, 2006:386) which help them in their relationships and, in particular, resolving conflict, but this takes time and new leaders do not have these credits to draw on in their early days.

Several researchers have attempted to capture the voices of new and aspiring principals, for example Browne-Ferrigno (2003) who examined the nature of the transition in terms of the participants' role conception, initial socialisation, role-identity transformation and purposeful engagement. Such studies range in scale, from a focus on one principal in the first 100 days in post (Sarros and Sarros, 2007) to a longitudinal study which featured a sample of 250 headteachers over a 20 year period (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006), and they cover all parts of the UK, other European countries including Portugal, Sweden and Denmark, in addition to USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Hong Kong. Through recent initiatives such as the International Study of School Principals (ISSP), researchers including Cowie and Crawford (2009:8) examine the "lived reality and experience" of beginning principals across a range of countries to identify ways in which school leaders can be prepared and supported to make a success of the role. The similarities of the challenges described and analysed across different countries and several decades suggest there is significant consistency in the nature of the experience of transition which is not context or time-dependent. Only new principals operating in countries with very specific social issues, such as the leaders in sub-Saharan Africa which are the focus of the study by Bush and Oduru (2006), are seen to be significantly distinctive in terms of their experiences and challenges, as a result of the economic, social, health and educational problems these developing countries face.



The sense that new leaders go through a socialisation process and the assumption of a new professional identity, with the challenges which inevitably attach to this, is considered by a large number of researchers, including Coldron and Smith, (1999), Walker and Qian, (2006) and Bengtson et al (2013). In such studies, this socialisation process is charted from initial anticipatory socialisation (experienced in advance of taking up the appointment), through a period of professional socialisation (learning the skills and behaviours required of the role) and organisational socialisation (learning what is required in this particular context/school) to the position where a new occupational persona is adopted. Cowie and Crawford (2008) suggest professional socialisation takes place before a principal assumes their post, and organisational socialisation occurs from the time when they officially step into the role. In addition, as a new head assumes the role, this socialisation process is seen to be reciprocal, as both the individual and the organisation they join are active participants in their own learning, and each changes the other (Matthews and Crow, 2003).

Draper and McMichael (1998) describe the establishment of a new professional identity as evolving and dynamic, changing over time. Transition to new headship may therefore be an on-going and career-long process. As one of the subjects in Earley et al's research study (2011:105) claims, "Headship is who you are, not what you do." New headship is therefore seen to be identity work, in addition to requiring the development of the professional skills the role will draw upon. Bush and Glover (2005) discuss how new heads develop both personal and professional competence over time.

Those who focus on transition to headship explore the particular challenges involved in taking on this new professional persona. The main issues to emerge include the "divestiture from the deputy head professional identity and assumption of a new identity" and "a new way of behaving, interacting and knowing" (Bengtson et al, 2013:157). Harris et al (2003:34) consider the "gulf" between the two roles. Cowie and Crawford (2009) talk of new heads needing to develop confidence and self-belief, and Browne-Ferrigno (2003:479) of the required "role identity

transformation” being “a critical step in the professional growth process”. Davies and Davies (2011) discuss the challenge of establishing credibility and believing in yourself as a leader as you become confident that others are beginning to believe in you.

Many research subjects experience the early days of headship as a shock, with repercussions for their well-being and management of stress as they try to find an appropriate balance in their lives (Sackney and Walker, 2006; Shoho et al, 2010; Earley et al, 2011). Daresh and Male (2000:89) describe deputies in Britain and USA experiencing the “culture shock” involved in “crossing the border into leadership.” The idea of coping with the unexpected is explored by Draper and McMichael (1998). They talk about the surprises facing new heads as they deal with the Gains, Losses, Attachment and Detachment (which they call the ‘GLAD’ model) involved in taking up headship, and consider the relationship between what their research participants anticipate and the reality of headship once they are in post, as they leave behind the “cocoon of the familiar” (204). The experience does not always match the anticipation. Matthews and Crow (2003) observe that however well prepared an incoming principal may believe themselves to be, moving into the role involves surprises and frustrations.

Conflict may be experienced as new heads attempt to balance personal values with external pressures and demands (Hall and Southworth, 1997; Gronn, 1999 and 2003; Crow, 2007). This is a challenge which Cheung and Walker (2006:390) refer to as potential tension between “inner worlds and outer limits.” New heads strive to be true to their sense of moral purpose, while dealing with the reality of what is expected of them. This is described as a challenge of constant accommodation and occasional compromise. Lucas and Claxton (2010:184-185) suggest it is crucial that, in the face of the variety and fragmentation of the headteacher’s task, he/she still keeps a focus on the Big Picture, and has the capacity “to balance and resolve what is sometimes a bewildering portfolio of competing and conflicting desires and threats.”

There is much discussion in the literatures of the punishing pace of work facing new heads, and the demanding and draining nature of the calls upon them (Walker and Qian, 2006; Sarros and Sarros, 2007). Quong (2006) and Watkins (2004) talk of the importance of new leaders deciding what *not* to do, in their attempt realistically to prioritise time and energies.

The loneliness of the head's role, felt particularly keenly by new, inexperienced leaders, is considered in many studies, for example by Southworth, (1995), Draper and McMichael, (2000), and Earley et al, (2011), and the emotional demands in the face of possible feelings of isolation are seen to be considerable (Leithwood et al, 2006; Kelly and Saunders, 2010). This can be challenging in its impact on the health and well-being of research subjects in the studies.

Many challenges faced by new heads are seen as involving dealings with people – staff, pupils, parents, governors and the wider community (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). Incoming heads need to establish their relationship with, and leadership of, their new senior leadership teams, which might contain disappointed headship candidates (Draper & McMichael, 2000; Briggs et al, 2006). Building trust and distributing leadership can be a challenge when initially staff are unknown (Earley et al, 2011). New leaders adapt to the school and the school to the leader in a two-way process (Briggs et al, 2006). Gronn (2003) and Hargreaves and Fink (2006) concede that transitions can be difficult for everyone, not merely for the leader who adopts a new role.

One particularly important and potentially demanding relationship is with the new head's predecessor who, whether a strong leader or a weak one, can exert considerable retrospective influence (Stevenson, 2006; Walker and Qian, 2006; Forrester & Gunter, 2010). Hargreaves & Fink (2006:92) talk of the "Rebecca myth (from Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca*, that the predecessor was an irreplaceable paragon of virtue)", set against the "Messiah myth (that the coming successor will save everyone)". Either situation exerts considerable pressure on the incoming head. In addition, if certain responsibilities were neglected by the outgoing head, this creates problems which their successor inherits. As Crow (2007:61) summarises: "These new headteachers' socialization was influenced by

the problems created by previous headteachers, the leadership style of these headteachers and the school tone established by these headteachers”.

In summary, the main challenges experienced by deputies moving to headship, as reported in the literatures, include developing a new professional persona and building confidence and competence in this role; dealing with shocks and surprises and navigating the unexpected; managing potential conflict between personal values and external demands; coping with the pace of the work; dealing with possible feelings of isolation, and building positive relationships, including with the outgoing head.

Other staff observe the work of the headteacher, and there is a danger, if the most visible elements of the role are the challenging and stressful aspects, this will exacerbate the shortage of potential leaders who are keen, or even willing, to step up to headship in future (Draper and McMichael, 2000). It is therefore acknowledged in the literatures that new heads should be prepared for these challenges and supported through them, not only in order for their leadership to be effective, but also so others see this as a rewarding and fulfilling role, not just a demanding, challenging one (Gladwin, 2014). Focussing on the experience of new heads making the transition to first-time headship has helped me to understand the process more fully, draw conclusions about how this transition could best be managed, and generate some practical and reassuring guidance and advice for senior leaders considering headship as their next step.

### ***The transition to new headship: support strategies***

The literature focussing on transition to headship suggests support for beginning heads may come from a variety of sources. Formal preparation programmes have been analysed for their effectiveness by a number of different researchers, for example those involved in the ISSP such as Cowie and Crawford (2007, 2009).

There is a recognised need for such programmes to be improved and more successfully adapted to the needs of the individual new head (Kelly and Saunders, 2010; Crawford and Cowie, 2012). Support needs also to be ongoing, flexible and

responsive to *changing* needs over time (Hobson et al, 2003; Woods et al, 2009; Bush, 2013b).

Some researchers express concern formal preparation programmes can be constraining and can fail to prepare new leaders for the future, if such programmes focus on investiture and maintaining the status quo rather than on divestiture and innovative models of leadership (Crow, 2006 and 2007; Cowie and Crawford, 2009). Bolden (2005:3) suggests, “the issue of leadership development and its impact remains highly contentious”, although most researchers in the field appear to concur with Earley and Jones (2009) that it is possible to develop and train people to take on leadership roles but it is necessary to identify those who have leadership potential and will therefore benefit.

One of the advantages of preparation programmes is they can lead to the formation of supportive networks of fellow professionals at a similar stage of their leadership journey. Holligan et al (2006) report many graduates of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) cite the network to which it introduced them as one of the programme’s most positive benefits. The power of networks is explored by a number of researchers, including Biott et al, (2001), and Bristow et al, (2007). Networks of fellow new heads with whom there can be “lateral learning” (Barber et al, 2010:17) was cited as particularly useful (Bush, 2015c). As Bridges (2001:373) says: “People who share certain kinds of experience in common stand in a special position in terms of understanding those shared aspects of experience.” Rhodes et al (2009:464) stress the importance of “opportunities for aspirant heads to meet and talk with heads and other senior leaders...to enable their role conceptualisation and socialization to develop and for role identity transformation to proceed”. Crawford and Cowie (2012:181) discuss the value of communities of practice which go beyond simple support networks to provide “a conduit through which new learning was developed and knowledge shared.” Davies and Davies (2006) explain how networks can be both supportive and reassuring to group members (helping perhaps to combat the feelings of isolation referred to above) while they also encourage reflection and ideas for strategic development. Earley et al (2011) suggest many new heads benefit from a

range of different networks, using various supportive groups for different purposes. Draper and McMichael (2000) observe, however, that increasingly schools may be in competition with each other with respect to pupil places (arguably a particularly acute pressure in the independent sector) which can diminish the support new heads gain from their peers.

Research shows prior experience (as a senior leader, middle leader, teacher and even as a pupil) helps new heads hone their skills and formulate their vision and values for headship and the schools they lead (Peterken, 2012). The learning involved in being a deputy working alongside an experienced head is seen as especially useful (Cranston, 2007), particularly if deputies have the opportunity to take on the role of head when their current head is out of school (Earley and Weindling, 2007; Thomson, 2009). Aspiring heads benefit from exposure to different role models and mentors over the years, including former heads with whom the new leaders have worked who have encouraged and inspired them (Bush, 2008; Earley et al, 2011; Shoho et al, 2010). They will have learnt from negative role models, too, as they develop their views about how *not* to lead.

The period of time between when the appointment is made and when it is taken up is seen as providing an important opportunity for early familiarisation with the new school community. New heads can make an early impression and take the temperature of the institution they are to lead (Weindling and Earley, 1987; Earley et al, 2011). Throughout this period, and beyond it, the new head will be required to be adaptable, to learn quickly (and learning will be ongoing) as they tune into the school, their role and the challenges ahead (Southworth, 1995; Fullan, 2003; Crawford and Cowie, 2012). Being receptive to feedback that emanates from a range of sources has been demonstrated by these researchers to assist the process of adaptation and support the new leader's development. The support of others in their new schools, particularly fellow senior leaders, was frequently cited (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Bristow et al, 2007; Harris, 2007). Draper and McMichael, (1998:209) comment on how the support of the new school staff could enable "a new identity as head to be confidently acquired".

One particular source of support discussed in a number of studies was a new head's reliance on their own resources, core values and sense of moral purpose, what Crow (2006:319) refers to as "the values and dispositions a beginning principal carries into the job and develops on the job [which] are critical for the way the role is enacted". This emphasis on inner strength and resilience was also commented on by Harris (2007), Bischoff and Mackenzie-Batterbury (2013) and Steward (2013).

There is considerable focus in the literatures on the fact that, however well-prepared new heads feel they are, ultimately their preparation for the challenge can only be completed by actually *doing* the job (Daresh and Male, 2000; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006), a process which Quinn (2004) refers to as building the bridge as we walk on it. This may be partly as a result of the judgement calls which headship requires which it is impossible fully to appreciate beforehand (Evans, 1999). This is both the appeal (as you step up to the challenge, prove yourself and make a difference on a wider scale than you have had the opportunity to do before) and the challenge of headship. The literatures recognise heads need ongoing support and advice if they are successfully to handle the responsibility of making such decisions on a daily basis.

In summary, according to the literatures which focus on the support available to deputies moving to headship, and the strategies new heads adopt prior to formally taking up the role and in the early days, a number of different channels of support can be generated or accessed. These include preparation programmes and continuing professional development; the importance of networks, role models and mentors; prior experience, particularly as deputy; what can be gained from and learnt from others during the lead-in period before officially assuming the role, and one's own personal resources. However, although it is possible to prepare, to some extent the learning has to continue (and may never be completed) once a new head takes up the position, building their skills and capability during their time in post.

## ***Role theory***

The incoming head is not the only one who is changing and learning during this process of transition, and an examination of role theory has supported my developing understanding of the nature of the process of socialisation deputies moving to headship, and the schools they join, undergo. It has underlined how, irrespective of the individual who arrives to take up the new role, or of how skilfully they navigate the process, the change of leader has far-ranging effects on the organisation as a whole. Transition is not simply about the incoming head's journey. It is a far more complex and nuanced process which has wider repercussions. Role theory has helped me to appreciate the significance of this.

During the lead-in period between being appointed, and formally taking up the position, incoming heads are, in effect, occupying two roles simultaneously: that of deputy and that of head-elect beginning to establish themselves as the new school leader. In exploring this process, elements of role theory (Merton, 1957) and the concept of role discontinuity (Loder and Spillane, 2005) were found to be useful. Cognitive role-theory (Biddle, 1986; Hindin, 2007), for example, focusses on the relationship between the individual, role expectations and behaviours. It examines the dynamic between leaders and followers and the potential tensions between an individual's beliefs about how they should behave, and the beliefs held by others. In addition, literature specifically on organisational role theory, which Hindin (2007:3952/3953) describes as "concerned with the role of formal organizations and how individuals interact with these organizations" helped me reflect on the experiences of my participants as they move to their new role in their new schools.

As Koh et al (2011:612) suggest, organisational role theory "explains how people define and expect people to act in their roles within the organization." Each actor is subject to the influence of their "role-set" (Kahn et al, 1964): all those within the organisation who are in some way related to the actor, and, in the case of headteachers, this role-set is extremely broad, encompassing pupils, staff at all levels and of all types, current and prospective parents, governors, feeder schools and members of the wider community. Bush (2009:385) refers to "role-set analysis", where school leaders' self-reporting of their experiences (in Bush's



particular study about the effectiveness of principal preparation programmes) was complemented by the views of their colleagues. Interviewing representatives of this role-set, and analysing their perceptions, may enable the researcher to reach a fuller understanding of the experience of the new heads themselves.

Also of relevance here is Matthews and Crow's (2003:2) work on role conceptions of school principals:

When you begin your career as a principal... several factors influence how you practice the role. You bring with you experiences, knowledge and basic assumptions that factor into your practicing the role. Other people in the school will also affect your work. Teachers will influence how you will perform the role... Role conception is defined as the values and underlying assumptions that influence the way leadership is practiced in a school.

Considering the different elements of role theory helped me reflect on and better understand my participants' experience of transition, for example with respect to role expectations, role conflict, role transition, role discontinuity, role-taking and role-making. I also found Gronn and Lacey's (2004) concept of "positioning space", where new roles are rehearsed in advance of taking up a new position, illuminating in my consideration of how these deputies/new heads release one role while simultaneously preparing to assume another.

#### *Role expectations and role conflict*

One of the concepts which features in organisational role theory, as developed by Gross et al, (1958) and Katz and Kahn (1978), which is pertinent to my research into the transition to headship, is role expectations, and I have drawn on this idea to support my analysis. 'Expectations' are defined by Gross et al (1958:58), who explored the role of school superintendents, as "an evaluative standard applied to an incumbent of a position". Different members of the role-set have different expectations about what the role of the headteacher involves and how it should be carried out, and this affects the process of transition through which new heads pass. As Matthews and Crow (2003:3) recognise, new principals may hear the phrase: " 'This is not the way we have done things before' ...Such statements help shape and influence the role and expectations of the principal." The concept of expectations is helpful as I formulate my understanding of the experience of my

participants, and the reciprocal socialisation they and the schools they join undergo.

My research considers the expectations others have of the incoming head, often based on norms established by the predecessor. This helps me to explore the difference between what Crow and Glascock (1995:22) call “societal and individual” role-conceptions: the image of a role which is held by the school community, set against the conception the individual has of the role. As Kahn et al (1964:14) attest, “All members of a person’s role-set develop belief and attitudes about what he should and should not do as part of his role,” a view which is reinforced by Leithwood et al (1997). However, as Akkary (2014:721), in her work on the role and role context of Lebanese principals, observes, there also exist “reflexive role expectations that school principals send to themselves, since these will shape their perceptions of their role and ultimately have the strongest impact on their actions.” This relates to what Kahn et al (1964:16) call “self-senders”. As Shivers-Blackwell (2004:42) says: “The self-sender has a conception of their job and a set of attitudes and beliefs about how he/she should behave in his/her role.” When there are differences between the belief and attitudes of the role-set and the reflexive role expectations of the heads themselves, role ambiguity and role conflict (Kahn et al, 1964) occur. As Matthews and Crow (2003:3) suggest, “role conflict exists if co-existing expectations conflict or if simultaneous demands cannot be met.” Loder and Spillane (2005:266) refer to the situation where “individuals who transition from teaching to administration may find the commitments associated with administration...incongruent with their attachment to teaching.” Role conflict occurs when “commitment and attachment to roles do not match up”.

When deputies move to headship, they have expectations of what the role will involve (informed by the process of anticipatory, professional and organisational socialisation through which they are passing) and how they will carry it out. However, the community they join has expectations of its own, and the process of adapting to the new role is made more complex and potentially problematic, as the new head adapts to their context, and the new school community simultaneously adapts to its new leader. Role conflict can occur when there is a mismatch

between how the new leader determines to lead and what the school community expects, or when there is tension between the new leader's core values and what they recognise are the demands of the role into which they have stepped.

#### *Role transition and role discontinuity*

In his study of role transitions within a family context, Burr (1972:408) considers the power of anticipatory socialisation, defined as the process of learning the norms of a role before formally being in that role, and examines the proposition that "the amount of anticipatory socialisation positively influences the ease of transition into roles", a proposition which is relevant to the way in which incoming heads utilise the lead-in period between being appointed and formally assuming the role. Burr discusses moving out of roles, in addition to moving into roles, and this is relevant to heads-elect who are both moving out of their deputy role (and paving the way for their successor in that role) while preparing to assume the role of headteacher. Southworth (1995) talks of the process of simultaneously taking hold of the headship while letting go of one's previous role, and Loder and Spillane (2005:268) compare this to "the biblical allegory of shedding old wineskins to make room for new wine" which can lead to the uncomfortable experience of role discontinuity. Bennet et al (2011) use the metaphor of passing the baton, and Bagi (2015:119) claims the beginning principal "needs to start running before the pass is made". Browne-Ferrigno (2003:470) similarly discusses the transformative nature of the step up to the principal's role, which "requires an individual to relinquish the comfort and confidence of a known role...and experience the discomfort and uncertainty of a new, unknown role."

The situation is made more complex as the predecessor heads are also negotiating this process, preparing for a move to a new headship themselves, to a fresh professional challenge or, perhaps, retirement. The ease, or difficulty, of the outgoing head's role transition may impact on the experience of the incoming head and therefore have a significant effect on their lead-in period. Rhodes et al (2009:463) describe how outgoing heads transmit their "role conceptualisation" to incoming heads, and this may be characterised by their own "enchantment or disenchantment" with the role they have latterly occupied.

### *Role-taking and role-making*

Another aspect of role theory which is pertinent to my research is the difference between “role-taking” and “role-making” (Hart, 1993). This relates to the balance between inheriting the role, and inhabiting the role, discussed in the Introduction. As new heads assume their responsibilities, they are in some respects taking a role carved out by their predecessor. However, even when they take over the leadership of a stable school from a successful outgoing head, new heads may be determined to make the job their own, and to make their mark. In this respect they are role-making, rather than simply stepping into the space left by the previous head.

Matthews and Crow (2003:3) describe role-taking as “the process in which a principal accepts the role...that has been established within that context”, and role-making as “when as a new principal...you apply knowledge, skills and behaviour to the school and act in ways not previously expected of that role”. They suggest new heads taking over in difficult circumstances are likely to focus on role-making, whereas those assuming leadership of a well-established, previously well-led school are more likely to concentrate on role-taking. Governors appointing a head may emphasise that what they expect of the incoming head in the former situation is a focus on change and improvement, while the latter situation might involve simply an emphasis on consolidation. However, as Matthews and Crow (2003:262) argue, no incoming principal is a “blank tablet”, or “a pawn in the organisation’s hands”, but all are to some degree “a partner in the learning process.” Yukl (1989) discusses how initial demands and constraints may limit leaders’ choices in the short term, but eventually the leader finds opportunities to modify the demands and to eliminate constraints, giving them choices and the capacity to shape their leadership and what they are able to achieve in that role.

### *Positioning space*

Literature relating to role theory was also helpful in supporting my analysis of how new heads can positively prepare for role transition. Gronn and Lacey (2004:405) use the term “positioning space”,

A supportive holding environment which facilitates the exploration of potential and possible selves...An occupational safety zone. The purpose of a positioning space, as part of anticipatory socialization, is to provide a temporary haven during possible role transition for the self-rehearsal of likely future roles.

As they navigate this positioning space, aspirant heads go through what Normore (2004:109) describes as “an intricate process of reflection and learning that requires socialization into a new community of practice and role identity.” Loder and Spillane (2005:49:5) suggest: “Role-identity transference...is an essential component of successful principal making.” The lead-in period represents an important positioning space within which this process of role-identity transference can occur.

In summary, my analysis draws on elements of role theory as I explore the experience of new heads preparing to shed the skin of their deputy professional persona and assume the responsibilities of their first school leader role. They navigate role transition and experience role discontinuity, at the same time as the heads they are succeeding go through the same process; they face contrasting role expectations (their own and those of others) which can lead to role conflict which has to be in some way resolved. They work to find the balance between role-taking and role-making as they both inherit a legacy from their predecessor and begin to inhabit the role and make it their own. They move through the positioning space, rehearsing future roles as they prepare to transfer to a new professional identity.

### ***Concluding comments***

As I have demonstrated, a significant amount has been written about school leadership generally, and about the challenges of new school leadership specifically, in recent decades. There have been empirical studies ranging in scope and time-frame, academic reports which summarise key literatures on the subject, and professional articles and studies, and my reading in the field has embraced examples of all of the above.

Most of the literature focusses on new heads taking up their roles in schools maintained by the state. It often scrutinises the challenges of new headship, rather

than specifically exploring the transition from the deputy role to the role of head. In relatively few studies do researchers access the views of other members of the school community, or chart the process of transition as it happens, rather than recalling it at some point in the future. Many studies rely on the self-reporting of the research participants, usually accessed through interviews. In my study the wider perspective accessed through role-set analysis, and through shadowing/observation of these deputies/heads as they go about the two different roles, enables me to make a contribution to our knowledge of the experience of transition to headship, how it can be navigated, and the different factors, such as the expectations of members of the wider school community, including the outgoing head, which impact upon this experience. An appreciation of role theory has underpinned and strengthened my analysis.

Although a number of researchers consider the different stages of headship preparation and experience as a new and later established head, little research focusses specifically on the lived experience of those making the move from deputy headship to headship, charted as it happens, and taking into account the views of those who know the individual well and bring their own insights to bear on how the process of transition is being managed. This use of role-set analysis enabled me to explore the extent to which the socialisation process through which beginning heads pass is reciprocal.

In 'Methodology and methods' I explore the framework of my study, the choices I made as I designed and carried out my research and the reasons behind those choices.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

In this chapter I discuss the methodological framework and methods adopted in my study, demonstrating how these are appropriate to the focus of my research. I explain and justify my choice of an interpretive, qualitative approach which makes use of multiple case study, involving semi-structured interviews, shadowing/observation and discussion with colleagues. I discuss my positionality/reflexivity, ethical framework, and the generation and processing of data. I outline how the methodological choices I make relate to my research questions:

What is the nature of the transition experienced by deputies moving to their first school headship? Specifically:

- What are the key challenges of making the transition to first-time headship in the independent sector?
- What strategies do these new heads generate or access as they face these challenges?

#### ***The focus of my research, and the sample of participants***

I chose to focus on first-time heads in the independent sector for three reasons:

Firstly, I had, after having taught in four state schools, moved to the independent sector at deputy head level and, five years after that, secured a headship in an independent school, a role I fulfilled for ten years. New headship in the independent sector therefore connects with my personal experience.

Secondly, as a result of my fifteen years' senior leadership in the sector, I had made a number of contacts, including the Membership Secretaries of the five headteacher Associations within the Independent School Council (ISC), the organisation which represents over 1200 independent schools educating more than 500,000 pupils in the UK. I was able to use these contacts as gate-keepers to establish which deputies, already appointed to headship in a new independent school, were willing to be involved in this project.

Thirdly, I was aware from reading the literatures in the field of school headship that there was relatively little research focussing specifically on the transition to first headship (Normore, 2004; Loder and Spillane, 2005; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006), and even less focussing on new heads in independent schools (McLay and Brown, 2001; McLay, 2008). I was interested in investigating how far the challenges faced by new independent school heads making this transition, and the support strategies they accessed, mirrored those of their colleagues in maintained schools, as evidenced in the literatures.

Because the nature of the transition from deputy headship to headship may be significantly different for internal applicants who are already known within their school communities, I selected only participants moving to new schools as heads so they were, in this respect, in the same situation with regard to building relationships and establishing themselves as leaders within a new school community. For the same reason, I chose six participants who were currently deputies (rather than assistant heads, senior teachers, heads of section or housemasters in boarding schools) so all were likely to have common experience of deputising for the headteacher in their current role and, in that respect, had the opportunity to practise and develop headship skills. They had all made the decision to apply for a substantive headship post having had this chance to sample what headship might involve through their deputising responsibility.

Following communication with the six Membership Secretaries I was able to establish contact with a number of senior leaders who had already been appointed to their first headship with effect from the beginning of the Autumn Term 2013. The Membership Secretaries forwarded to all the heads-designate within their Associations an information sheet I had produced explaining the rationale behind the research, and how the research process would be organised. The heads-elect who were interested in being involved then contacted me directly.

I spoke to, perhaps, a dozen potential participants, several of whom were discounted because they were internally appointed, not currently in a deputy head role, or, in one case, facing difficult personal circumstances which I considered meant that he might find it challenging to take part in the study. When I had



identified six potential participants who fulfilled my criteria and expressed an interest in working with me, I informed the Membership Secretaries that my sample was complete and they did not send out the information to any further headteacher appointees from that time.

The schools to which my six participants were moving included co-educational and single sex; day and boarding; 3-18, 4-18, 11-18 and 13-18 schools. This was a fair representation of schools within the ISC. Three of my participants were men and three women. One was a primary specialist moving to lead a 3-11 section of a 3-18 school; the others were all secondary specialists, although some were moving to lead schools which included the primary phase. The sampling was therefore a combination of convenience sampling and purposive sampling (Cousin 2009; Wellington, 2000) as I both used my contacts in the sector to access those who were prepared to participate in the project, while deliberately selecting participants who were externally appointed, already in deputy headship, and I sought a balance of men and women and a range of school types.

I recognised that although the schools these participants were moving to lead were broadly representative of the sector, it could not be claimed my participants were necessarily representative of new independent sector heads. The very fact they had agreed to take part in the project might indicate they were more confident than fellow new heads who, being alerted to the study, opted not to be involved. Contributing to the project would take time and constitute an additional responsibility in a busy period in their professional lives, as they prepared to leave one role and embrace another. It might be these six participants were particularly resilient, disciplined and organised, as they felt positive about their capacity to fulfil what the research project might require of them, at the same time as preparing to leave one job and to begin another.

The table on the next page gives biographical information about the participants.

Table 1: Six participants - biographical information

Name	Gender	Age: Sept 2013	Years in teaching	Years as deputy	Number of schools taught in	Deputy school type	Head school type	Lead-in period: months
Robert	M	43	18	6	3	11-18 Day All boys to 16 Co-ed 6F	3-18 Co-ed	10
Olivia	F	42	20	6	8	4-18 Day All girls	3-18 Day All girls	5
Sally	F	46	19	5	5	11-18 Day & boarding All girls	4-18 Day & boarding All girls	5
Dawn	F	47	24	3	7	3-11 Day Co-ed	3-11 Day All girls (within a 3-18 school)	8
Peter	M	40	16	4	5	7-18 Day & boarding Co-ed	11-18 Day & boarding Co-ed	11
William	M	46	19	6	4	11-18 Day & boarding Co-ed	13-18 Day & boarding Co-ed	14

### ***Conceptual and theoretical frameworks and their link to possible methodological approaches***

The ontological assumptions which best reflect my world view are succinctly expressed by Wellington et al (2005:100), who suggest that if one sees the world as

socially constructed, subjectively experienced and the result of human thought as expressed through language....it will be necessary to collect subjective accounts and perceptions that explain how the world is experienced and constructed by the people who live in it

and, in terms of a related epistemological stance,

if knowledge is believed to be experiential, personal and subjective and socially constructed, [researchers] will have to use methods that engage with, talk to and question and explore the experiences of the people involved.

(Wellington et al, 2005:102)

This is an approach which connects with my interest in exploring the lived experience of my research participants as they embark on a new, exciting and energising phase of their personal and professional lives.

The selection of a qualitative research methodology offers me the opportunity to research my participants within a naturalistic setting (their own schools – initially the schools where they are deputies and later the schools in which they have taken up headship), exploring the significance of day-to-day and critical incidents in their professional lives. I analyse their response to such incidents as they strive to make sense of them; they are reflecting on and processing the experience as they discuss with me what is happening to them and their perceptions about it. Qualitative analysis enables me to access complex layers of meaning and interpret the behaviour and experiences of these heads-elect/new heads beyond their surface appearances (Cousin, 2009), as I probe their responses, and consider them in the context of others' views, to uncover underlying motivations and sometimes tensions. I adopt an interpretivist stance as I explore the participants' perspectives and shared meanings in order to develop insights about their situations (Wellington, 2000). My participants themselves, and I as the researcher, share and develop insights during the study.

Using an interpretive approach and a qualitative research framework enables me to examine the different perceptions of my research participants and explore the way in which these deputy heads/new heads interpret reality from their multiple perspectives (Oplatka and Tamir, 2009). All six are called upon to interpret the significance of what happens to them, and I am in a position to compare and contrast their perspectives. I consider how the different participants (within a relatively homogeneous group: they are all teachers and senior leaders with aspirations to take full responsibility for leading a school at a similar stage of their career journey) respond to the experience of transition to the role of new independent school head. I am interested in understanding their diverse perspectives and shared meanings rather than exploring cause and effect relationships (Emira, 2010); I seek to observe and understand rather than to identify root causes for the differences between them. My intention is to develop insights and interpret human behaviour (Wellington, 2000) as I focus on the participants' individual stories and access detailed information about their thoughts, feelings and experiences at this time of transition.

Through this approach and framework I generate insights which should be of use to those who follow on – future aspiring and new heads who may benefit from my analysis. Adopting a case study methodology was an appropriate choice as I strove to access and draw conclusions from my participants' stories.

### ***Case study***

In a case study, the focus is on the individual unit (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Cohen and Manion, 1989; Simons, 1996) within a real-life, natural context (Bassegy, 1999; Yin, 2009). This unit is explored using a variety of methods (Bassegy, 1999; Wellington, 2000; Yin, 2009) in a thorough, systematic way which captures its complexity and takes into account the holistic, bounded nature of each case (Cousin, 2009; Stake, 1995; Sturman, 1994). The reader of case study research has the opportunity to relate the detail to their own experiences and develop their interpretations alongside those of the researcher (Stake, 1995; Wellington, 2000).

Bassey (1999) recognises that reliability (in the sense of how far the results might be replicable were the study to be conducted by a different researcher) and validity (whether the research accurately describes what it is intended to describe) can be problematic in case study (particularly with respect to semi-structured or unstructured interviews and observation, which are inevitably influenced by researcher subjectivity). He claims the concept of trustworthiness might be more appropriate where case study is concerned, a view supported by Cousin (2009) and Bush (2012). Ensuring research is conducted in a thorough and methodical way, including triangulation and prioritising researcher reflexivity, are ways of attempting to increase trustworthiness.

My choice of case study relates to the capacity of this particular methodological approach to access the stories of the participants, develop understanding and insight into their experiences and perceptions and communicate this in a compelling way. The variety of methods – in my case semi-structured interviews, shadowing/observation, and discussion with a range of others who know my participants well - allows me to focus closely on each case and then to synthesise thorough and robust findings from all six cases, reporting these in a readable, convincing and interesting way to which readers can relate.

I use a multiple (Yin, 2009)/collective (Stake, 1995) case study approach to generate information about my participants' experience, focussing on several cases, each of which helps me learn about the issue under consideration. This strategy is appropriate to my study which involves analysing the experiences of a number of individuals at the same point in their professional lives. Initially I saw these as six cases of individual professionals. As the study progressed I recognised what I was focussing on was six cases of transition – six different sets of experiences, choices and strategies. Each case of transition reflects on and illuminates the others, through the similarities which emerge, and through the telling differences. The juxtaposition of all six enabled me to draw conclusions about the nature of transition to headship, and the varying ways in which individuals experience and interpret this transition, deriving findings that should be of use and interest to others undergoing a similar process in the future and to those who support them.

In Cousin's words (2009:49), my intention is to "draw in the readers, give them a vicarious experience of being 'there' in the setting with you, talking and listening to the participants as you did." Cousin (2009:148) describes the powerful features of case study, which "has the potential to generate rich understandings, ...offers flexible and creative ways of researching live settings and licenses evocative write-ups that aim to describe, interpret and persuade the reader." My intention is to draw in the reader who I hope will find my participants' stories as compelling and fascinating as I do. Enabling future school leaders to tune into the voices of those going through the experience and, through my analysis, drawing conclusions about the nature of transition, its key challenges and the support strategies these new heads use, allows me to make a contribution to the professional knowledge of the community of educational leaders. Wellington (2000) describes research as educational, in the sense that we should learn from it. My thesis should be interesting, accessible and useful to members of this professional community.

Wellington (2000:44) observes case study, like ethnography, allows us to address the question of 'what is going on here?' in "the extended study of human societies, institutions and social relationships by getting 'inside them'." I ask 'what is going on?' when deputies move to headship and have to manage the process simultaneously of letting go of one role and taking on another. I use role theory (Matthews and Crow, 2003; Hindin, 2007, Koh et al, 2011) to help me better understand and draw conclusions from the experiences of my participants and the schools they join. Through semi-structured interviews, shadowing/observation and discussion with different members of the wider school community I access rich information about the process of transition through which my participants pass. The wealth of detail involved in case study research ensures the complexity, depth and uniqueness of each case are fully explored, and the resulting analysis leads to a deeper understanding (Cousin, 2009).

In an educational context, Stake (1995:1) identifies the cases most likely to be of interest as 'people and programs', claiming, "We are interested in them for both their uniqueness and commonality. We seek to understand them. We would like to hear their stories." I have compiled an account of six individual examples of

transition which, collectively, provide insights into the process of moving from one specific professional role to another within an educational context.

The variety of methods employed allows multiple voices to be heard, increasing the likelihood of the reader's intellectual and emotional engagement. Case studies encourage empathy and enhance our understanding of human experience (von Wright, 1971). The dynamic relationship between reader and research is one of its key features. Wellington (2000) claims the reader is not simply the passive recipient of the research; he/she also has an important part to play in the interpretation of the data, and is able to make "naturalistic generalizations" (Stake, 1995:86) as a result.

The relationship between my research (both in the generation and analysis of data and in the presentation of my findings) and the professional community I wish to engage, inform and support, means case study is a particularly appropriate methodological choice. I should like aspirant and new school heads in the future (within the independent and state sectors) to derive unique meanings from the experiences of my case study participants (Stake, 1995), and therefore be involved in the co-construction of knowledge. Stake (1995) sees reader subjectivity not as a problem, but as an important element of the reader's understanding. As future readers compare these participants' career paths, motivations and aspirations with their own, this may lead to fuller insight into those readers' own perceptions of whether headship is an appropriate route for them, and, if so, whether independent sector headship might give them the opportunity to fulfil their professional and personal ambitions. As my participants grapple with the idea of the kind of head they hope to be, and what they can do, for example during the lead-in period between appointment and formally taking up the role, best to prepare themselves, readers of the research may also reflect on their own motivation to progress to headship, their suitability for this role and their state of preparedness.

Another advantage of case study research is that triangulation is built into the research design because of the range of methods involved and the variety of evidence generated (Yin, 2009). Triangulation is one way of cross-checking data to

establish its validity (Bush, 2012). In the case of my research, this is achieved by adding to the semi-structured interviews shadowing/observation of participants and wide-ranging discussion with a number of colleagues, governors, students, parents and in several cases the participants' partners. This use of role-set analysis enables me to contextualise the participants' own perceptions of how they are managing the transition, as communicated in the semi-structured interviews. As Bush claims (2009:385),

The perceptions of programme participants can be triangulated (Bush, 2007) by seeking views from close colleagues at the school or workplace. This enables candidates' claims to be corroborated or challenged by the perceptions of those who should be aware of changes in practice.

Through role-set analysis I am able fully to examine the two-way nature of the socialisation process taking place on the appointment of a new school leader by exploring the response of the school community to the arrival of a new head, in addition to tracking the new head's perceptions. In this way I present a "contextualised perspective in action" as I "explore what heads say... in the context of what they do" (Ribbins, 1995:257), examining any tensions or mismatch between what the deputies/heads-elect claim and the testimony of those who work closely with them. I am therefore able to consider the relationship between perception and reality by consulting both my deputy/new head participants and those alongside whom they work, as Pashiardis et al (2005) do in their Portugal-based study of the relationship between the perception of the principal and the perception of those whom the principal leads. I look for coherence (where the views of different members of the school community, including my participants, are aligned) and also for conflict (where there are significant disparities between different individuals or groups across the school community) in these perceptions of how my participants are negotiating the process of transition.

Case study research requires the development of a number of skills, as Yin (2009:66) succinctly summarises: "The ability to ask good questions, 'listen', be adaptive and flexible, have a firm grasp of the issues being studied, and know how to avoid bias" – skills which are, of course, relevant to other methodological



approaches too. I was mindful of the need to refine my skills in these areas, with the support of my supervisors, as I planned and carried out my research.

In summary, case study offers the opportunity for rich description and analysis of individual cases in naturalistic settings. Case study research should be thorough and compelling, drawing in the reader and encouraging him/her to formulate their own interpretations in addition to considering those of the researcher. A variety of different methods is used to generate data which fully reflect the complexity of the case under consideration. In the context of my research questions, I focus on a collective case study of six deputies moving to headship in independent schools which are new to them.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

Semi-structured interviews enable me to access participants' thoughts and feelings about their experiences. Rather than tightly structured interview schedules, in order to be receptive to the opinions and concerns of the participants, I designed the interview sessions along the lines of themed conversations. This enabled me to follow discussion threads which the participants considered most pertinent to the process of transition. I was mindful of Bush's (2012:78) view that an over-reliance on reliability can compromise validity, which is better served by a "friendly, human approach that allows respondents to answer in their own way". As Gronn (2003) claims, semi-structured interviews should be broadly consistent across all participants with respect to question order and wording, but sufficiently flexible to focus on key points, or to explore other avenues if appropriate. Follow-up questions were used if further information or clarification were required, and a degree of flexibility in the structure of the interviews allowed for this and helped to ensure the voice of each participant was accurately represented.

An interview guide/checklist of topics to be broached (Wellington, 2000), was shared with participants in advance of each visit to give them time to reflect on these issues and mentally prepare themselves for the discussion. (See Appendix 1). I concluded each semi-structured interview with an open invitation to raise anything we had not covered which the participant wished to talk about, eliciting

views without leading or prompting (Wellington (2000)). This was an attempt to ensure I did not fail to capture something which my participants felt particularly pertinent to the consideration of how they were experiencing and managing the process of transition. I was mindful, however, of the fact that the researcher has to be vigilant and adopt a degree of healthy scepticism with respect to what participants say, particularly when they have been alerted to the areas of questioning in advance and had the opportunity to prepare answers. In this respect, my discussions with their colleagues was a helpful way of providing something of a sense check, as it gave me access to a range of perspectives, and I was not reliant on my participants' self-reporting alone.

Such a loosely-defined interview framework suited my purpose as I encouraged participants to explore their experiences and perceptions about transition. Kearney (2003) talks of the balance a researcher needs to strike between encouraging free-flowing dialogue which is not too rigidly directed, while still being alert to opportunities to probe and follow up responses to access a full picture. Smith (2011:9) advocates the use of open questions, which "offer scope for involving participants in an empowering research process, in which they are enabled to take the lead in defining what is significant, rather than responding to a narrowly researcher-led agenda".

In my three visits to my participants I aimed for the kind of "dialogue between equals" which Herman (2010) advocates, where meanings are negotiated and hypotheses tested together. I strove for mutual respect and the development of trust, attempting to be flexible and responsive throughout. My status as a former independent school head lent credibility to my capacity to understand the experiences recounted. However, I also recognised the dynamic between researcher and researched is not one of equal power and there is always the possibility that participants will defer to the researcher and offer responses which show them in a positive light. A degree of circumspection is necessary on the part of the researcher, who cannot simply take comments at face value. It was also important I be sufficiently reflexive about my own stance, my relationship with my participants and potential tensions arising from this. The fact I was a former

headteacher might give me credibility in the eyes of the participants. It could also lead to false assumptions, misleading preconceptions and bias.

### ***Additional data collection***

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, I also shadowed my six participants as they went about their deputy/head duties, which helped me to contextualise the data generated from their self-reporting. I saw them interacting with colleagues, pupils and parents, which served to deepen my understanding of the dynamic between these deputies/new heads and the members of the school communities they were both leaving and joining. This also enriched my research into the process of reciprocal socialisation involved in transition to new headship.

The shadowing/observation I undertook involved watching my participants teach; address groups of pupils, staff and parents; chair meetings of different types; take assembly; meet individual members of staff and students for a variety of reasons; formally on duty and in informal contact with pupils, staff, parents and other visitors as they moved around the school, at breaks and lunchtimes. I watched one participant manage an unanticipated fire evacuation of the whole school. The range of activities I observed was helpful in giving me insight into the varied and at times disjointed responsibilities of my participants, as both deputy and head. All had to move quickly from one interaction and one focus to another, and how they managed this generated important data about their priorities, about the nature of their role and how they carried it out, which complemented what I had learnt from interviews with participants and discussion with colleagues. I was able to set their statements about their vision and values with respect to the school they hoped to lead, and the head they hoped to be, against the core behaviours they exhibited in both their deputy and headship roles.

The third source of data generated on my visits involved informal discussion with those who knew my participants best, had greatest contact with them and were in a position to offer insights on how the process of transition was being experienced and managed. The role-set I accessed encompassed the following: all members of the senior leadership teams within both schools, including the head whom they had

served as deputy; their PAs and other key members of the support staff; a variety of teaching staff with different levels of experience; groups of pupils; parents; governors, including the Chair of Governors in the school where they had been appointed head, and in several cases their partners. From these wide-ranging conversations I accessed multiple perspectives on the process of transition, as witnessed by those who worked closely, or lived, with them. These discussions were key to my developing understanding of the process of reciprocal socialisation heralded by the arrival of a new headteacher into an established school community. The fact that I had access to data from shadowing/observation and discussion with members of the role-set, in addition to semi-structured interviews with my participants, ensured a degree of triangulation which contributed to the trustworthiness of the data. It underpinned and strengthened my analysis.

Table 2 on the next page summarises the data collected with respect to all six participants over the three stages of the project.

Table 1: Six participants – data collected

<b>Name</b>	<b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	<b>Shadowing/ observation</b> <i>School where a deputy</i> <i>School where a head</i>	<b>Role-set Informal Discussions</b> <i>School where a deputy</i> <i>School where a head</i>
Robert	3 of approximately one and a half hours each	<i>On duty; addressing a meeting of 6<sup>th</sup> form prefects; interacting with staff at break</i> Informally interacting with staff and pupils around the school	<i>Head, PA, Director of Studies, Head of Sixth Form, Bursar, Economics NQT, Estates Manager</i> Chair of Govs, all members of SLT, PA, wife
Olivia	3 of approximately one and a half hours each	<i>Chairing report design meeting; mentoring meeting with a pupil; on duty</i> Informally interacting with staff and pupils on a tour of the school	<i>Head, Head of Maths, Director of Assessment, Trust Personnel Manager, Pastoral Deputy, Head of 6<sup>th</sup> form, Marketing Manager</i> All SLT, PA, Chair of Govs
Sally	3 of approximately one and a half hours each	<i>Managing a whole-school fire evacuation; meeting 3 NQTs; giving lesson observation feedback in appraisal meeting</i> Addressing staff, meeting parent, on duty	<i>Head, HoD in which Sally teaches, Housemistress, Head of KS3, Chaplain, Director of Finance and Administration</i> All SLT, PA, Chair of Govs, pupils, husband
Dawn	3 of approximately one and a half hours each	<i>Teaching several lessons with her Y4 class; on duty; in assembly</i> Meeting parents at the school gate; in assembly, in a meeting with her PA	<i>Head, Teaching Assistant, a range of other teachers, Director of Studies, Head of Key Stage 1, Head of EYFS</i> All SLT, overall head of the school, governor, parent
Peter	3 of approximately one and a half hours each	<i>Teaching Y13 Biology; in assembly; on a tour of the school</i> Chairing a senior team meeting; addressing a staff briefing	<i>Finance Director, Director of Admissions, Principal, Academic Secretary, a range of teaching and support staff</i> All SLT, Chair of Govs, a range of teaching and support staff
William	3 of approximately one and a half hours each	<i>Teaching Y10 History; in assembly; on duty; in a tutorial with Y8 pupils; in a staff meeting</i> At lunch with staff; informally interacting with staff and pupils around the school; addressing a gathering of 6 <sup>th</sup> form parents	<i>Head, Second deputy, Bursar &amp; Assistant Bursar, Director of Music, Head of Drama, Director of Sport, Catering Manager, Houseparents, PA, pupils</i> All SLT, PA, Chair of Govs, range of teaching and support staff; wife

### ***Data analysis***

During each visit I recorded the semi-structured interviews with my participants and, soon afterwards, while the memory of our conversation was still fresh, personally transcribed each interview. I chose to edit out repetitions and hesitation in order to render the transcript more fluent and clear, while ensuring I remained true to the spirit of what was said (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009); I recognised a verbatim transcription might be less useful than a more literary one in terms of highlighting nuances and communicating clearly with the reader.

Although typing up the transcriptions was time-consuming, it offered an excellent opportunity to examine closely, and to think carefully about, the content of the interview – both what the participants chose to focus on and the language they used to describe what had happened and their response (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). In addition, transcribing each set of interviews immediately after each stage helped me reflect and plan for the interviews scheduled for subsequent stages. I examined non-verbal cues, notes I had made about body language and interjections such as laughter. This helped me consider more deeply the significance of what was said and how it was expressed.

I had taken notes during each visit, both in response to the shadowing/observation of these deputies/new heads, and in my discussions with colleagues, governors and partners. These were intentionally brief, as during these discussions I was keen to focus on active listening (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). In my experience, it can be daunting for interviewees if the interviewer appears to be writing down everything they say. I fleshed these out into fuller fieldwork notes as soon after the visit as possible. This meant I could include more detailed information, using what I recalled of the visit in addition to notes I had made at the time. Reflecting on this data after each set of visits allowed me to consider what I had learnt (from the process, in addition to what I had learnt from the content of the notes and transcripts) which informed my planning for the next stage.

I generated a considerable amount of data, evidenced by the length of my transcriptions and extended fieldnotes. In order to give this data sufficient careful

thought, I processed it using an analytical framework I had designed which was structured according to three levels (see Appendix 3): the lead up to successful headship appointment (participants recalling the journey to headship, informed by their conception of headship) which was the focus of the first visit; the lead-in period, which was the focus of the second visit; and the early months of headship, (which included reflection on challenges and support strategies employed), the focus of the third visit.

I then moved into the coding stage, attaching labels to the data, from which recurrent themes and significant differences could be identified (Gough and Scott, 2000; Sarantakos, 2005). This enabled me to organise the data into categories, which I subsequently examined closely, moving from what Erickson (1986) calls the inductive to the deductive phase, initially categorising and then moving to an identification of relationships and significant patterns. Through this process I moved from a descriptive response to the data towards an analytical response by focussing on the patterning of the data and interrogating, contextualising, developing tentative explanations and then subjecting these to further interrogation and refinement (Barbour, 2007).

I opted to do this manually, using coloured post-it notes to identify which of five overall areas, within the three broad phases, particular incidents and comments related to:

#### THE LEAD UP TO SUCCESSFUL APPOINTMENT

1. Journey to headship;
2. Conception of headship

#### THE LEAD-IN PERIOD BETWEEN APPOINTMENT AND FORMALLY ASSUMING THE ROLE

3. Preparation between appointment and taking up the post

#### THE EARLY MONTHS OF HEADSHIP

4. Anticipated challenges/early challenges;

## 5. Anticipated sources of support/early sources of support.

I developed a range of codes to connect what was emerging from the transcripts and fieldnotes to two further levels/sub-categories in order to identify recurrent themes, similarities and differences. I attempted to identify what, in Cousin's (2009) words, seemed to be critical to the experience of transition, rather than incidental to it, and, as Bathmaker observes (2010) to go beyond analysis (bringing order to data and looking for patterns and themes) and move on to interpretation (attaching meaning and significance to these patterns, themes and connections). I annotated and adjusted the framework in the light of what my data generation, subsequent analysis and interpretation suggested. This process helped me identify key issues and begin to clarify emerging findings from which I was able to build my contribution to knowledge.

### ***My position as both an 'insider' and an 'outsider', and the importance of reflexivity***

As the former head of an independent school who, since leaving headship, has worked extensively across the sector as a leadership consultant, I recognise I am, to some extent, an insider in my participants' world. Crotty (1998) warns that at every point of their research, a researcher may inject a whole host of assumptions, and the closer their experience is to the experience of their participants, the more likely it may be that the researcher conflates their perceptions with the views the participants express. Being objective and open-minded can become more difficult as the insider perspective obstructs the researcher's sense of detachment and appropriate professional distance.

It is also important to recognise the stories research participants tell are shaped by their relationship with the researcher (Biott et al, 2001), and researcher and participant affect each other mutually and continually in the course of the research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), something Wellington (2000:41) labels the "Educational Uncertainty Principle". This is likely to be exacerbated if the researcher is an insider within the research participants' community.



In my case, the fact I was a successful head for ten years and a former President of the Girls' Schools Association, so quite a high profile and well-respected member of the independent sector, might give me additional credibility with the participants and help to build trust and empathy (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). However, in some respects my position within the sector could present an obstacle rather than constitute an advantage, leading to an unhelpful imbalance in the power relations between us (Kearney, 2003). It could be problematic if participants sought to impress and win my favour rather than to relate to me simply as a detached and objective researcher and observer who needed them to be open and completely honest, even if their responses meant they sometimes did not show to their best advantage. I might unwittingly "influence, disturb and affect" what is being researched as a result of this (Wellington, 2000:41).

My insider perspective could be beneficial as participants appreciated I understood their situation; in Hall's words (1996:21) I was perhaps a "familiar stranger" in the participants' world. I had managed the process of transition from deputy to headship (in a school which was new to me) several years before. I had negotiated the relationship with the outgoing head and used the lead-in period to prepare to leave one job well, investing time and energy in helping ensure the handover to my successor was smooth, while at the same time planning to begin the next job well by preparing as fully as possible. I had experienced and mastered the challenges my participants were now experiencing, and utilised some of the same support strategies.

However, I recognised I had to be wary of letting my memory of my own experience blind me to alternative points of view and the experiences and opinions of others which might not coincide with my own (Herman, 2010). The fact I am no longer in headship, and several years have passed since I was, means that to some degree I was moving from insider to outsider. Although I have extensive contacts within the independent sector, I did not have close links with any of the schools where my participants were deputies, or the schools to which they were moving as heads. Of the twelve schools involved, I had only visited two of them in the past. Of the six participants, I had met one briefly before the research began, and had

engaged with another through an online course I facilitate. My prior connections with participants and schools were therefore tenuous, and in this respect I could perhaps be considered to have a degree of detachment.

I recognised another possible threat to the integrity of the research might come from my contacts and relationships across the sector. Inevitably, even though I selected participants with whom I did not already have an established relationship, I knew some of their predecessors, some of the heads in the schools where they were deputies, and a number of colleagues in their schools. I was mindful that I have carried out coaching, mentoring, heads' and senior leaders' appraisals, staff training and inspection across a significant number of schools in the independent sector and my contacts are extensive. Although this had led to certain openings and opportunities, such as my contacts within the ISC headteacher associations whom I used as gate-keepers to identify potential participants, I recognised it also had the capacity to act as a barrier, with issues around preconceptions, assumptions and the possible compromising of confidentiality. It also meant I had to be clear about my role as researcher, which is very different from that of a coach, mentor, appraiser or inspector.

The issue presented by my insider/outsider perspective, with the potential for an unbalanced relationship between researcher and researched, and possible bias on the part of the researcher, could only be addressed by a carefully considered focus on reflexivity. Reflexivity, used, according to Lee (2009:42) "to conceptualize, analyse and make transparent to others the researchers' relationship with the research", was vital if I were to address possible bias and strengthen the research (Herman, 2010; Pillow, 2010). I needed to acknowledge how the researcher actively contributes to the data they generate (Barbour, 2007), and appreciate that data *is* being generated, rather than simply collected (Lee, 2009). The researcher is an integral part of the creation of data, not a passive recipient of it.

Every researcher has to examine their own preconceptions. Addressing bias is crucial with respect to ensuring the trustworthiness of the research (Bush, 2012). In order to counter possible false assumptions and unconscious bias, it is crucial that at each stage of the process the researcher pays attention to their positionality

and how it might influence the conduct and reporting of the research (Cousin, 2009). Pillow (2010) emphasises the importance of ongoing self-awareness, where the researcher makes visible the practice and construction of knowledge in order to secure more accurate analysis. I recognised the need to examine and discuss my particular perspective and to scrutinise my relationship with my research participants to take into account the way in which this relationship might affect the generation and subsequent analysis of the data. Identifying my space within the field and my position within that space was a crucial part of my research journey.

I sought therefore to ensure my awareness of these issues was acute throughout the process of building the most positive and constructive relationship with my participants and all those with whom I came into contact during the period of data generation. I was determined to structure the interviews and the conversations in such a way as to ensure I listened actively and openly, and spoke relatively little. When I spoke, I asked questions rather than made statements, and if the person to whom I was speaking asked for my view, I tried to avoid giving it and to respond to their question with another question which encouraged them to examine their own perceptions rather than seeking mine. I was reluctant ever to talk about my own experiences of moving to headship, whether those experiences coincided with, or differed from, the experiences of my participants, even when those experiences were actively sought. I was mindful of where the key differences were, and this was helpful in terms of ensuring I was being open-minded and receptive, rather than seeking evidence to confirm my own assumptions and pre-conceptions.

As an example, it became clear that my participants' relationship with their predecessor exerted a significant influence on their experience of the lead-in period and, consequently, on how they established themselves in the early months of headship. I had been personally fortunate that the head I had succeeded in 2000 had been extremely positive and helpful. My transition in this respect was smooth; my predecessor was happy in her decision to take early retirement, and was invested in helping me make a success of my own headship. She saw this as part of leaving a positive legacy within the school to which she had dedicated the last ten years of her professional life, and did everything in her power to make the lead-in

period a constructive experience for me. Similarly, I had a mutually respectful relationship with the incoming head who succeeded me in 2010, and felt committed to helping her make a positive transition to headship. As this had been my experience, I suspect I took for granted that this was the norm, with respect to the dynamic between outgoing and incoming heads.

Most of my participants were less fortunate than I. The tension which could arise in the relationship between outgoing and incoming head, and how this affected my participants' experience of the lead-in period, emerged strongly as one of the key factors influencing their transition to headship. The fact that I had not gone into the research expecting to find this was not a barrier to the learning which resulted from listening carefully to, and thinking deeply about, the experiences participants shared with me.

Brown (2010) argues that the field itself will be in a state of flux. In my situation, for example, it was important I recognised my own transition to headship took place 15 years earlier, and, even allowing for the fact that my memory of the process would not be totally accurate (layered, as it is, with the emotional repercussions of the experience), moving to a headship today might be different in a number of ways. This was something of which I ensured I was constantly mindful.

In terms of my relationship with participants and their colleagues, I sought to address the possible imbalance of power by putting my participants at their ease (always dedicating a specific amount of time to this before we began discussing the questions I had supplied in advance). I strove to be warm, friendly and approachable, though professional. I worked to build trust. I also reassured my participants' colleagues that I relied on their honesty but that their comments would be anonymised and nothing they said would be directly reported back to my participants. I was keen to make clear there were no acceptable nor unacceptable answers, that I was as openly receptive to alternative viewpoints as I could possibly be, and that my response would, as far as I could control it, never be disapproving or judgemental. At the same time I appreciate that anyone sharing their experiences with an interviewer will wish to emerge positively and be thought

well of; there is always the likelihood of evaluation and judgement in human interaction and I needed to take this into account in my response to all that was shared with me.

I sought to reassure participants that confidentiality would be fully respected. I did not call attention to prior knowledge of any individuals, as this was not relevant and might inhibit the openness and honesty of those who shared their opinions and insights with me. Being alert to the problems and entanglements which could arise from my multiple roles in independent schools was crucial. I acknowledged that, and spoke frankly about the fact that, within the scope of this project I was a researcher gathering information and generating data, not a mentor, critical friend, confidante or adviser. I reminded myself of this, periodically, in addition to reassuring others. I recognised the need to be clear about my role, and communicate this unambiguously to those with whom I came into contact. I strove to be true to this role and to carry it out in as unbiased, fair and objective a way as I could, while still recognising my human fallibility. A constant focus on ethical considerations was key.

### ***Ethics***

Drawing up ethical procedures to guide decision making and actions throughout the research process should ensure the ethical repercussions of the specific project are carefully thought through (Piper and Simons, 2011). As Wellington (2000:56) warns, “educational research might be unethical in its design, its methods, its data analysis, its presentation or its conclusion.” Carefully considered ethical guidelines, specific to the individual research project, help to guard against this.

Gaining informed consent from participants involves ongoing dialogue rather than a one-off event; it should be revisited during the course of the research to ensure all are still content with what they initially agreed to (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). In addition to seeking and securing informed consent at the outset of the project (see Appendix 2), at the time of each visit I checked with participants their willingness to continue. Ensuring all knew they had the right of refusal to take part,

to withdraw at any stage or not to be quoted, without penalty, was crucial to the ethical integrity of the research (Piper and Simons, 2011).

In addition to negotiating informed consent from my participants, I also sought approval from the headteachers of the schools where they were deputies, and checked the Chairs of Governors of the schools to which they were moving to take up headship consented to their involvement in the project. It seemed to me an appropriate courtesy to do so before I arrived in a school. This approval was forthcoming in all cases. During the course of my three sets of visits, I met all these heads, and Chairs of Governors, and was able personally to check all were content to support the participants' on-going involvement.

Ground rules for confidentiality were discussed at the outset and participants assured that identities (of individuals and schools) would be anonymised in the thesis. However, as my analysis proceeded I became aware of the sensitivity of much of the data, particularly relating to the outgoing heads (of whom I was in several cases critical), and also with regard to information I was accessing through the role-set analysis. Chairs of Governors and members of senior teams were sharing with me details of which my participants were not themselves aware. Initially I tried to discuss such information without revealing which of the participants it related to, but this became unclear and unwieldy.

Following discussion with my supervisors, I subsequently took the decision to apply to restrict publication of the thesis, in order more securely to protect the identities of my participants, the schools where they were deputies and where they became heads, the heads they served as deputies and the outgoing heads replaced. I recognised the world of independent education is a small world, and given the date my research was completed, even after anonymising my participants there was still a chance that future readers of the thesis might be able to identify individuals referred to within it. This issue was perhaps exacerbated by the fact that, in case study research, the amount of detail involved can render the issue of anonymity problematic, as Hollway and Jefferson (2000) concede. Once this decision was taken, I felt freer to report my findings openly and frankly, and the structure of the thesis was adapted accordingly, leading to the production of the six cases of

transition. I recognised there were alternative ways to communicate the research findings to my professional community so future aspiring heads and head-elect could benefit from my analysis of the experiences of my participants. I consider this in the Conclusion.

I strove to ensure everyone was treated with respect, and equitably, at all stages of the research, with divergent views respected. Consideration for participants should ensure that, as far as possible, they are not harmed by the research process, including emotionally. As Howe and Moses attest (1999), trust and mutual respect should characterise the relationship between researchers and participants.

In this particular study, participants were asked to confront personal issues including their fears and anxieties about the task ahead, and their personal competence and confidence to cope with the challenges involved. It was therefore vital I be aware of and sensitive to the possible emotional repercussions of participants beginning to feel they were not adequate to the task, which was certainly a possibility in the months before appointment, and in the early stages of headship. Self-doubt is not uncommon (Quong, 2006; Sackney and Walker, 2006). Mackay (2012) reminds us of the need to take into account possible participant anxiety caused purely by the interview process itself. I was committed to putting participants at their ease, while recognising I might be experiencing a degree of anxiety myself, particularly in the initial interviews: a new experience for me, too.

It was necessary to reassure other staff that they themselves were not under scrutiny, and each participant and I discussed how my shadowing would be explained and justified to the school community at large, some of whom inevitably interacted with the participant during my visits. Hall (1996) observed in her own study that while heads accepted they would be under close scrutiny, they were concerned to protect their colleagues. This was relevant to my research design, too, and the participants and I discussed beforehand how their involvement in the project, and the rationale behind and conduct of my visits to the schools, would be presented to the school communities in advance of my arrival. I then reinforced this in my individual discussions with different members of the school community when I met them face to face.

There were potential advantages to participants having the opportunity for structured, guided reflection on the transition they were going through and, in fact, this may have been one of the reasons why these newly appointed heads were prepared to be involved in the project. Engagement in research can provide participants with what Bridges (2001:377) calls “a richly educative opportunity”. As Cowie and Crawford (2008) report, new heads can find the process of reflection involvement in a research study requires positively beneficial, a view echoed by Earley and Bubb (2013). The researcher is not a critical friend in the way a mentor or coach would be, but, nevertheless, as Hollway and Jefferson (2000) suggest, it can be reassuring to talk through challenging experiences in a safe context.

The role of the researcher can be a positive one here, as Plowright acknowledges (2011:157/158), “Your interview may be the first opportunity they have had to talk through their difficulties....participants may derive some benefit from the experience of reflecting on and talking about their lives to a sympathetic listener.” Although my participants all had access to governors, senior staff, peers, colleagues and partners, there is inevitably a different dynamic with an objective researcher. They recognised I have the understanding which comes from having made the transition and led my own school in the past, but also a degree of detachment as I did not have a close link with them or their schools. My insider/outsider perspective could be a positive advantage, here. They could also share feelings of insecurity with me in confidence and know there would be no negative repercussions. They would not be continuing to work with me afterwards (as they were with their colleagues) or work for me (as was the case with their Governing Body).

However, it was important to recognise this was not a counselling relationship, and this situation could be emotionally demanding for both researcher and participant. One way of guarding against this, as Hollway and Jefferson (2000:89), quoting the British Psychological Society, suggest, involves “discussing their experience of the research in order to monitor any unforeseen negative effects or misconceptions.” This was something I built in to the programme at each of the three stages, discussing informally with the six participants how they were finding the process of



sharing their experiences with me, and being alert to potential negative effects. In the event, all six spoke positively of the benefits of being encouraged to reflect in a relatively systematic way, with the support of the interview guide, on their preconceptions about, preparation for and achievements upon assuming their new professional role. Perhaps partly for this reason, all six saw the project through to its conclusion. I had chosen six participants at the outset, recognising I might not end with six. I was delighted to do so, particularly as, across the six, there was a fascinating range of experience.

Miller and Glasner (1997:111) discuss the danger of representing research participants as “subjects” rather than as individuals in a way that “dismembers” them and transforms them into “mere theoretical patterns”. Kearney (2003:12) explains how he avoided this in his own research: “To remain true to the spirit of the narratives I present them as the complex individuals they are. So there is a great deal of direct quotation, since I want them to represent themselves as much as possible.” In my cases of transition, I, too, use a significant amount of direct quotation to create an accurate and vivid sense of participants’ voices. The very structure of that chapter is an attempt to present each participant as a fully rounded, complex individual on a distinctive personal and professional trajectory and not, to borrow Miller and Glasner’s word, to “dismember” them.

Piper and Simons (2011:25) suggest rather than simply “doing no harm”, researchers “should also aspire to ‘do good’ ” and it was certainly my intention this project benefit those involved, and those who subsequently read the findings, in its attempt to inform and reassure, developing our understanding of the nature of transition and exploring the importance of support for incoming heads during the lead-in period and during their time in post.

At the time of my initial contact with each head-elect I explained that, in addition to semi-structured interviews with my participant, I hoped also to spend time observing the deputy/new head as he/she carried out day-to-day responsibilities. I also wished to set up conversations with colleagues during the course of each visit. The timetable for the day was negotiated with each participant prior to the visit; I considered it essential they, and those I met, were comfortable with the schedule

proposed, as frank and open discussion depended on a degree of trust being established so no one felt threatened or anxious about meeting me and sharing their views. I accepted the shadowing programme might need to be adjusted depending on the sensitivity and confidentiality of the issues participants were called upon to deal with on the day of the visit; this was not something which was always possible to anticipate, so there would be a degree of flexibility in the planning of each visit.

I needed also to consider the issue of confidentiality with respect to anything other colleagues shared with me (even more pertinent at stage 3, when the participants were in their new headship posts, as Pashiardis et al, 2005, recognise). I reassured all those I met that nothing shared with me would be fed back to my participants, and, if I referred to their comments in my thesis, respondents would be anonymised and information gleaned from multiple sources appropriately synthesised in my subsequent analysis. Restricting publication of the thesis also meant confidentiality with respect to these respondents could be safeguarded.

I worked throughout the period of data generation to build positive and mutually respectful relationships with all I met (Tschannen-Moran 2004; Herman 2010). The narrative approach adopted in 'Six cases of transition' enabled me to explore participants' perceptions of their experiences within a context of trust and safety (Wellington et al 2005; Colley, 2010; Crawford and Cowie, 2012) as the participants spoke freely about their experiences, thoughts and feelings at the three different stages.

### ***Concluding comments***

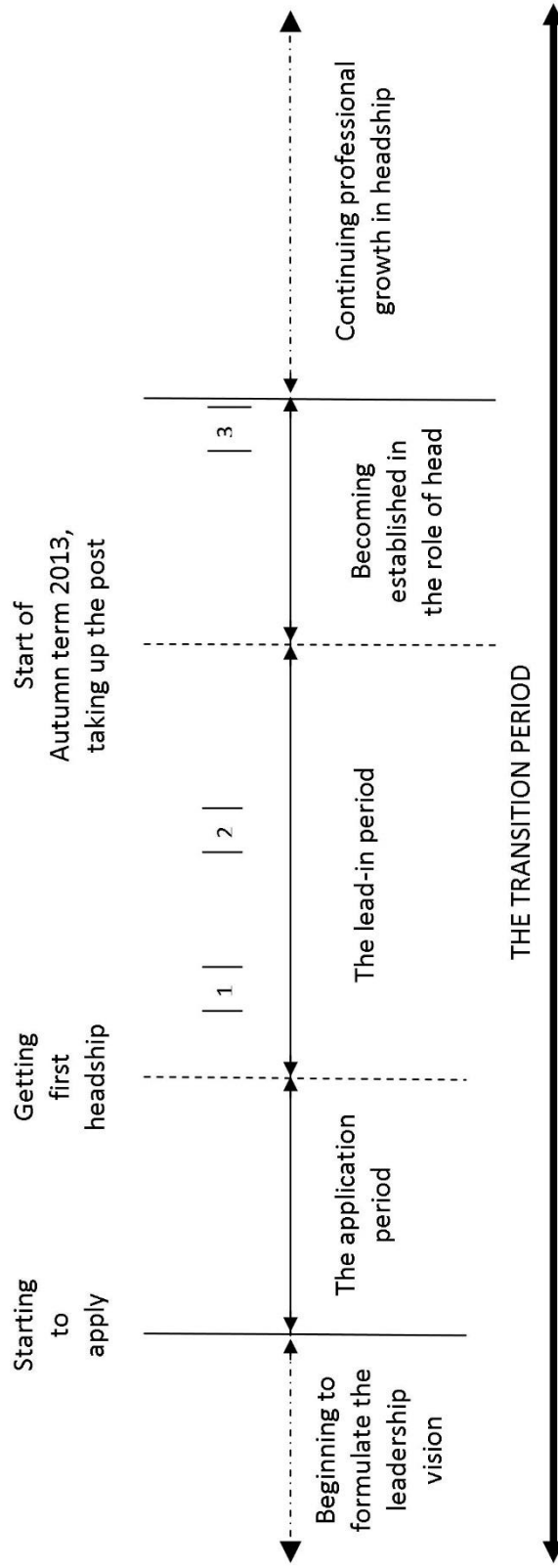
The methodological framework for my study therefore consisted of an interpretive, qualitative approach which used multiple case studies. The methods I adopted were semi-structured interviews, shadowing/observation and discussion with those who worked closely with the participants and knew them best. I coded the data generated using an analytical framework I had devised, and subsequently adapted, in order to identify, analyse and interpret key issues emerging which were relevant to my research question.

Throughout the study I examined my own reflexivity and adopted a critical perspective with regard to my stance as both insider and outsider. I thought carefully about ethical considerations before and during the project to ensure the process was sensitively and ethically conducted and relationships established with my participants, and others with whom I came into contact, were appropriately professional, considerate, mutually trusting and respectful. I was delighted all six participants were willing to see the project through to completion, and all at different times made positive comments about their experience of being involved in the study and what they felt they had gained from the process.

‘The timeline of transition to headship and parameters of the research study’ can be found on the next page.

Adopting this approach and using these methods led to the construction of the six cases of transition which is the focus of the next chapter.

Figure 1: TIMELINE OF TRANSITION TO HEADSHIP AND PARAMETERS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY



- 1: Data generation period #1, early Spring term 2013
- 2: Data generation period #2, late Summer term 2013
- 3: Data generation period #3, early Spring term 2014

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **SIX CASES OF TRANSITION**

In this chapter I present the six cases of transition of my research participants.

Each is structured according to the three stages of my data generation:

The lead-up to the headship appointment (the focus of my first visit)

The lead-in period between being appointed and formally assuming the role  
(the focus of my second visit)

The early months of headship (the focus of my third visit).

In each case I explore what I and my participants consider to be the salient features of that particular stage of the process of transition and what they believe is significant about their experience of it. I discuss what I learnt from my shadowing/observation, and from interviews with the range of people I met about how they perceived my participant was managing this transition.

#### ***Brief pen portraits of my six participants***

##### *Robert*

Robert worked as a semi-professional rugby player and spent time in the army before moving into teaching. He worked for two heads in his first independent school, a highly academic boys' day school, before achieving success in his first deputy headship application at the school where we met, another day school, educating boys only from 11-16 but with a co-educational sixth form. He had recently completed a Masters in Educational Leadership. He had applied for a number of headships and, having now achieved success, was moving to be head of a co-educational day and boarding (predominantly day) school for pupils aged 3-18.

##### *Olivia*

Olivia had experience of seven different state and independent schools over a 20 year career. For the previous six years she had been the deputy head in a girls' day school for pupils aged 4-18, where she had fulfilled the role of both pastoral and then academic deputy. Both this school, and the school to which she was moving

as head, were within the same overarching Trust. Following a number of headship applications in the last few years, she was moving to be the head of a girls' day school for pupils aged 3-18.

### *Sally*

Sally had taught in four independent schools, following five years in business after she graduated. She had had experience of running a Year 7 boarding house in a girls' independent school before moving to be the deputy head in a girls' day and boarding school for pupils aged 11-18, where she had stayed for five years. She had applied for three headships, including in the school where she was the deputy, and had been successful at her third attempt, moving to be the head of a girls' day and boarding school for pupils aged 4-18.

### *Peter*

Peter had worked in two state schools (one grammar and one comprehensive) and two independent schools. In his fourth school he had assumed the roles of housemaster, then Director of Curriculum and finally deputy head. This was a co-educational day and boarding school for pupils aged 7-18. He moved to be the head of a co-educational day and boarding school for pupils aged 11-18, successful in his first headship application.

### *Dawn*

Dawn had taught in six different schools, state and independent, over 24 years. She was the deputy head in a co-educational day school for pupils aged 2-11, looking for a second deputy headship to develop her experience further when she saw, applied for and was appointed as the Head of Junior School, overseeing the progress and welfare of the 3-11 year olds, within a girls' day school for pupils aged 3-18. This had been her first headship application.

### *William*

After five years in the City, William moved into teaching, assuming boarding and pastoral roles, heading a department and later a faculty in three independent schools over the next 19 years. He also completed an MBA in Educational

Management. His deputy headship was in a co-educational day and boarding school (predominantly boarding) for pupils aged 11-18. He had applied for several headships in recent years and was now moving to be head of a co-educational day and boarding (again, predominantly boarding) school for pupils aged 13-18.

### ***THE FIRST CASE OF TRANSITION : ROBERT***

#### *The lead up to the headship appointment*

Robert was initially unsure about his commitment to teaching, and, in his early years, whether it was a profession he would stick with, but as time passed he decided he would stay in the job and began to look to the future. He admitted he is ambitious and competitive, and it was important to him, professionally, “to get as high as you can”.

He claimed to be keen to prove himself, “I want to see if I can cut the mustard...I want to get to the top”. He talked of salary and status as being motivating factors, and the importance of being a good provider for his family. He was the only one of the six participants who spoke openly about the fact he felt this would be his first headship; he saw himself, in time, moving on to another, perhaps more academically high-flying and prestigious school, which he saw as being better suited to his temperament. Robert referred to “cutting my teeth” on this school. His wife, who had grown up within an army family, also saw this as, she said, a “temporary posting”.

Robert talked of wishing to escape the hard work and long hours involved in his deputy role, which perhaps suggested a degree of naivety about what the demands of headship might be. Once he decided to try for headship, and after a number of unsuccessful applications, he began to feel frustrated and lacking in motivation in his deputy role, and this was echoed by his colleagues. The bursar told me he was aware of Robert’s growing “boredom” in the year preceding his successful headship application. He said Robert was much more “relaxed”, having demonstrated his capacity to secure a headship.

Robert was relatively glib about the process of being successful in the appointment process: "It is image at the end of the day. [*Clapping his hands*] It's all smoke and mirrors, a lot of this game". In his view, "I can dress the part, I can look the part, I can talk the part...I do think it's style over substance". Later in our initial interview he revised this to, "What you want is style **and** substance" (*his emphasis*) though he still professed to a belief in "the army term of Bullshit Baffles Brains", reflecting his view that image and superficial features dominate the response of the selection panel to the candidate, rather than something more considered.

*The lead-in period between being appointed and formally assuming the role*

Robert was appointed ten months in advance of taking up the post. He felt strongly, however, that the school to which he was moving had not made constructive use of this period, which had caused him frustration. He talked of spending time each day checking the website of the school, looking at other local schools' websites to compare them and tuning in to the regional context and strength of the local competition. Robert said, "I'm building up a picture" and that he was "beginning to think more like a head", reflecting his role conception of headship with respect to having a whole-school, even inter-school, perspective.

However, in terms of actual contact with the new school, Robert had felt out of touch with what was happening, and recognised, compared with other Heads-elect, he had been kept at arm's length. There had been some key staffing appointments about which he had not been consulted. Robert felt the school was in something of a backwater, rather parochial and insular, which had contributed to making them "sluggish" in response to contact from him and requests for information. The school where he was currently a deputy was at a significant geographical distance from his new school, and Robert felt the outgoing head there had perhaps used this as an excuse. Robert's perception was that this head liked to keep tight control, and the involvement of the incoming head was therefore not welcome.

This meant Robert had not had the opportunity to learn more about the new context, to establish relationships, to start to know and to be known which some of his fellow heads-elect had had, and he was dissatisfied about this. There was an



event for incoming pupils and their parents and Robert had been told he did not need to be there, but had been insistent on this occasion and went up for several days, packing in as much as he could during that time. When we met for the second time Robert was reflecting on whether he should have been more assertive at an earlier stage, to begin to be more of a presence in the school to which he was moving.

By the end of the summer term, Robert was feeling anxious about certain elements of his new role. The school he was joining was a boarding and day school, and Robert had limited experience of boarding, "Boarding is a bit of a worry to me because I don't know enough about it yet. I really don't". This was exacerbated by the fact the outgoing head had also latterly taken over responsibility for being the main Boarding Housemaster, so there would be a new, inexperienced incumbent in that role, too.

The second area where Robert felt he lacked experience and confidence was working with the primary section of this 3-18 school, as he had never worked in an all-age school. He had reportedly said to the Head of Juniors, " 'What I know about primary education you can write on the back of a fag packet' ", a choice of words which could be seen as rather flippant and dismissive.

Ideally, Robert could have used some of this lead-in time to build his knowledge of, and confidence with respect to, both areas of his new responsibility, but having been kept at some distance from the school, and being currently in a school with no boarding and no pupils under 11, he considered he had not had the opportunity. He had not proactively sought out other sources of expertise. Robert admitted to beginning to feel anxious about gaps in his knowledge and experience. At the new heads' induction course organised by his ISC professional association he met his fellow heads-elect and realised how little productive use had been made of his lead-in time compared with others. For this he blamed the school to which he was moving.

However, in some ways Robert was beginning to prepare himself for this change of role during this lead-in period, perhaps even unconsciously. The bursar told me he

was aware of Robert, since the time of his appointment, immediately moving from using “we” to using “you” when he talked of activity at his current school. He felt Robert had moved on, mentally, quite quickly. He could also see Robert “trying out being a head”, adopting different styles, including what the bursar referred to as an aggressive, domineering “thumping the table in meetings” approach, as Robert tried out a new persona in what he perceived to be a safe environment. Robert was making use of the positioning space to experiment and practise.

The Head of Sixth Form had been promoted internally to the deputy post, so Robert had the opportunity for a gradual handover of responsibilities as he, in his own words, began to “stage manage my own exit out of here”, an interesting choice of image with respect to role theory, reflecting Robert’s determination to take control of this role transition. He had taken advantage of the chance to offload responsibilities he was less keen on, such as preparing the school calendar: “I’ve managed to palm it off to [*my successor*] for next year, because it’s a nightmare...Things like that, I think – result! Don’t have to do that again”.

However, at the same time, when I met Robert towards the end of the summer term he was finding the fact that the head and staff were looking to his successor rather than to him disconcerting:

You’re in limbo...I’m very rapidly finding myself no longer – and part of it is deliberate, because I’m deliberately pushing things away...But it’s quite a strange time because I’m not – I really shouldn’t be involved too much. But you still want to keep a hold on it...it’s a very strange time. It’s not at all comfortable.

While Robert was happy to hand over to his successor as early as possible responsibility for tasks he found unappealing, he also felt the loss of the authority this had accorded him in the past. He was now feeling like “yesterday’s man. It’s a very strange transitional phase.”

Robert’s experience of transition through the lead-in period had therefore not been a totally positive one, both in terms of becoming involved in his new school, and detaching himself from responsibilities and his status in his current school. On the

one hand he was keen to avoid work he found unpalatable, but position and power were important to Robert, and he felt uncomfortable as they started to slip away.

### *The early months of headship*

When I visited Robert in his new school, just over a term into his headship, he told me there were elements of the position he was relishing, and his wife claimed he was more relaxed, and definitely working less hard, than he had as a deputy.

However, in some areas there were tensions, and Robert was feeling his way in terms of what he considered he should or should not be doing as head.

Robert thought his predecessor had held the reins tightly, and told me he himself had a very different view of how a head should operate. Robert recounted a conversation he had had with his senior team:

‘Right, my philosophy is that you run this, and I’m not going to tell you how to do it,’ which was new. The last head – and this isn’t a criticism of him – held everything tight...Everything came through him, which is entirely contrary to how I think you should manage...I fundamentally disagree with that. I don’t think that’s the role of a headmaster.

Robert’s expectations of the role of head were very different from how his predecessor had viewed, and enacted, the role. Robert felt in his predecessor’s leadership there was a fundamental lack of trust in others. He believed since his arrival “the dust sheets have been removed and we’re opening the windows”, implying there was now a refreshing openness and sense of freedom which he thought the school community was relishing. Not all members of the school community I spoke to agreed, however.

Robert felt he did not have the senior team in place, and the clarification of roles and responsibilities, he would like to have. However, he did not have the resources to appoint an additional member of the team, and believed he had limited flexibility to alter the roles and responsibilities of those he had, “It’s like one of those puzzles where you need a hole in the middle before you can move the bricks around”. He felt he could only be reactive with respect to restructuring this team.

Robert was aware some staff were less competent than he felt they needed to be, but he appeared to lack confidence with respect to addressing this directly, unsure

whether the Governing Body would support him if he tackled under-performance head-on. Robert felt acutely his lack of experience with respect to managing redundancy or capability and disciplinary processes. The new Director of Boarding was struggling in the role, and the school had recently had a Boarding Inspection which it had failed on a minor security issue, which frustrated Robert. Having claimed he wanted senior staff to get on with the job without his involvement, when things did not go well he was unnerved and quick to blame.

Robert was finding it difficult to work in a constructive and harmonious way with his bursar, "Between you and me, quietly? I need a new bursar. Let's be honest. That's my feeling". He was, however, concerned there was what he called "a cabal" in this "parochial" community, including the bursar and Chair of Governors, and an underlying worry was that if he tackled the bursar, or certain members of the Governing Body, he might put his own position at risk. There was, perhaps, a touch of paranoia in Robert's description of this "cabal".

One shock experienced in the previous term was opening his iPad in August to discover there was very little wireless connectivity across the school, something he had taken for granted in his last two schools ("it was an assumption...it never occurred to me they wouldn't be doing this"). Robert spoke about IT provision to senior staff and governors and communicated his sense of urgency that this be addressed as an early priority, despite the expense and his fear that the Governing Body and the bursar didn't "get it", "The bursar is scared of it, because the bursary is...living in the Dark Ages...When I bounced in there and asked for [*a substantial amount of money to improve IT*] I was looking at some people who don't even have a bloody email address".

Robert was also deeply concerned about the high proportion of part-time staff and the constraints this placed on timetabling and extra-curricular provision. This was one of the features of the school which had come as an unpalatable surprise. In Robert's words, "I didn't see it coming because nobody told me it was going to be like that, which is a massive skeleton, a real shock". As Robert had not been proactive about finding out about the school during the lead-in period, he had been

relying on others supplying information voluntarily, and there was perhaps a degree of petulance in his “nobody told me...”

Robert’s summarising comment about his experience of the preceding term was, “I know what I need to do, but it’s such a long way down the road, being able to put the school where I want it” – a combination of staffing which he saw as not fit for purpose and inadequate financial resources to address this.

So although Robert’s wife described him as more “relaxed” in his headship role, and Robert himself said, “Am I enjoying my role? Yeah, I love it. I like challenges”, there were a number of elements of Robert’s new role which were causing him considerable unease.

Those I spoke to about Robert in my visit to his new school were divided in their response to how he was managing the transition to headship, and the division fell on gender lines. Robert’s pastoral deputy, PA, bursar, Head of Juniors and Chair of Governors (all women) expressed reservations about how he was adapting to his new role. His academic deputy, Head of Sixth Form and Senior Master (all male) were considerably more positive. Robert’s wife described him as “a man’s man”. His Chair of Governors shared with me that, at interview, the appointment panel had two reservations about Robert: firstly, that he might not listen, and secondly, that he might not work well with women, and she felt both areas of concern had turned out to be problematic since he arrived.

The men I spoke to felt Robert had tuned into the new context successfully, was clear about what he wanted for the school and was keen to trust others, which they felt had been well-received. They appreciated Robert’s “straight-talking”. However, the women I met said they felt Robert was not listening, was too quick to make snap decisions (the phrase “knee-jerk” was used by the pastoral deputy), was not fully aware of the different context of the school compared with his previous school, and was causing anxiety for some staff and governors as a result. Robert was described by the women as occasionally “crass”, “insensitive” and “naïve”. Interestingly, one criticism levelled at him by the Chair of Governors was that Robert’s tendency to “shoot from the hip” had caused consternation. The Senior

Master used the same phrase, “shooting from the hip” to describe what he saw as one of Robert’s qualities. The head’s PA, about whom Robert had spoken warmly, could see a number of positives in Robert’s “presentable, authoritative” stance, but she also described him as “impetuous, impatient, impulsive” and “inconsistent”. She questioned his judgment and was particularly concerned about his relationship with the bursar, whom she considered a huge asset to the school. The PA could see this relationship was not working successfully. Her summarising comment was that she saw Robert as an enthusiastic puppy: sometimes she wanted to roll him over and tickle his tummy. At other times she wanted to give him a slap.

Robert’s transition from deputy to head could therefore be seen as challenging in a number of ways, both with respect to the period in between being appointed and officially taking up the role, and as far as settling into his new role and taking over from his predecessor was concerned. Although there was a degree of bluster about Robert, and occasional touches of arrogance, underlying this there appeared to be a fundamental lack of confidence. Robert is status-driven, and enjoys having authority, but at the same time he is keen to avoid hard work and difficult decisions. There was tension between Robert’s desire to surround himself with highly capable staff who would get on with their job and leave him to be the figurehead, and the fact he considered he did not currently have the structure and strength of senior leadership to do so. Ironically, where senior leaders were strong, such as the bursar, this threatened Robert’s authority and caused conflict. It seemed the match between Robert’s temperament and skill set and what his new school required from its leader was deficient in a number of respects, and this was leading to tension and disharmony.

## **OLIVIA**

### *The lead up to the headship appointment*

During her six years of deputy headship Olivia had had extensive experience of a significant range of responsibilities and challenges and felt this fitted her well for stepping up to headship. She had been appointed to the role of pastoral deputy, but four years later had been transferred to the role of academic deputy, and

believed this dual experience provided an excellent foundation for headship. She had shown she was resilient, capable of working hard and balancing different demands, when she had at one stage taken responsibility for the pastoral and academic deputy roles and Head of Sixth Form simultaneously, during the maternity leaves of two senior colleagues. Those I spoke to attested to how skilfully and professionally she had fulfilled all these duties.

At the time of our first meeting, Olivia was feeling well prepared for headship. “There’s nothing big I can think of on the horizon I’ve never had any experience of”, and this increased her confidence and her sense that she was now ready. This contrasted dramatically with Robert, who was acutely aware of significant gaps in his experience and expertise, for example with respect to the primary phase and boarding.

In terms of motivation for making the move, Olivia spoke of the appeal of “being able to take a school in a direction I really want to go, to fulfil my vision of where I think the school I’m leading should be going”, and felt headship would give her the opportunity to do this in a way she would find satisfying and rewarding. Olivia’s focus was therefore on vision and moving a school forward, in comparison to Robert’s emphasis on getting to the top of the organisation and enjoying the kudos, the salary, and potentially (in his perception) an easier life once there.

Olivia had applied for a number of headships in the previous two years, but felt that, in retrospect, she had not been ready at the time of her first attempts. She believed her most recent experience in her current role had contributed to her self-assurance. She had been selective in the headships she had applied for and felt strongly the one she had secured, at a school within the same overarching Trust as the school in which she was a deputy (an organisation within which she was well-known and respected, confirmed by her current head), was the right one for her. She was confident this would be a good fit. The Trust had used a professional search firm for the appointment, and Olivia was familiar with the personnel and processes this firm used. She had felt positive and confident throughout the selection process.

Those I spoke to on my first visit to Olivia told me she was highly thought of and well-respected. It was claimed the school was definitely in a stronger place after six years of her deputy headship. The staff were sad to see her leave, but proud of her achievement, and several told me they thought she would make an exceptional head: clear-thinking, good at operational challenges but also strategic, strong at supporting others to resolve problems rather than taking problems from them, with the capacity to generate goodwill and inspire loyalty. The pastoral deputy told me she felt Olivia “now sees herself as a head”. However, even those staff who rated Olivia highly said she could occasionally be impatient and sharp, especially if thwarted. One male Middle Leader told me he felt Olivia got on better with men, and, in his view, women sometimes gave her “only grudging respect”. He wondered if this might be the case in her new school. All of the key personnel in Olivia’s next school, every member of the senior team and the Chair of Governors, were women.

#### *The lead-in period*

Since being successfully appointed to headship, Olivia said she felt more energised and excited. She felt increasingly motivated in her deputy role, determined to do a good job in her final months, to hand over positively to her successor and to take advantage of any opportunity to learn and consolidate her knowledge and skills before taking up her new post. This contrasted strongly with Robert, who appeared to lack motivation and who felt increasingly uncomfortable in his final months as deputy.

Olivia showed she was self-aware, of both her strengths and of areas in which she was still developing, and she was determined to make the most of further opportunities to learn during this lead-in period. She had arranged to spend time with her school’s Finance Director to discuss the management of the budget in her new school, and was talking to the Marketing Director of her current school about future marketing opportunities in her new role. She was involved in presenting the business case for a capital development project in her current school and was looking forward to working with the architects and continuing her learning in this area. She was to complete a new heads’ induction programme through her ISC



heads' professional association and was clear what she wanted to gain from that. Additional training was being offered by the Trust, who also engaged the services of a professional coach for new heads. Olivia had an initial meeting with her coach, and made contact with a mentor, a relatively recently appointed head in a similar school within the Trust. Olivia felt she was putting a support structure in place.

Olivia was organising a series of visits to her new school and doing what she could to build relationships, including with current and prospective parents and pupils. She felt comfortable with how she was managing her lead-in period. Her current head was supportive, and Olivia also found the head she was succeeding positive and helpful; she, too, was moving to a new headship and so was managing the process of transition herself. Olivia's plans for the summer were clear; she was committed to being in her current school for A level results, but would move to the new school to manage the GCSE results process later in August.

In terms of building relationships within the school to which she was moving, Olivia felt she was lucky to already have an established relationship with the single deputy in her new school; coincidentally, Olivia had been selected as a Trust mentor for this deputy, appointed in January. She felt this was an advantage rather than presenting any conflict of interest. We also talked about her relationship with her PA, which Olivia felt was a "key relationship" and which she thought had begun positively. It was interesting then to see how these relationships developed, and what the repercussions were, once Olivia had taken up headship.

Olivia was aware from the outset of challenges at the school to which she was moving, particularly recruitment and retention, and as the time between my first and second visits passed she developed a clearer sense of the nature and scope of these challenges. Her later visits to the school were more focussed and directed by her as a result: "I took control...So basically I asked to see certain people...because I knew more, really, what I wanted to hone in on". She felt some growing tension between her and her predecessor at this stage, as the balance of power subtly shifted.

I think [my predecessor] is very good, and is happy with her move...But it is still a bit tricky...She'll phone me sometimes and - I don't know whether it's just me but it seems a bit of an awkward conversation – she'll say, 'Shall I arrange for you to...?' So it was 'meet the Head Girls', for example, and I'd actually already said I wanted to do that, so it was already in a plan probably she hadn't seen. So that was all a little bit awkward.

A similar tension arose over summer works which Olivia wanted to be completed before she arrived so there was a physical manifestation of difference in the school, including the redecoration of the head's office. She recognised her successor was still the head, and it was important she continued to be seen as such, but Olivia had ideas of her own which required action over the summer, and this added to the sense of awkwardness in the dynamic between them.

Olivia was committed to ensuring she did a conscientious job in her current school, despite the focus of her attention already starting to move to her new school and role, "I would never ever want anybody to say I didn't do my best right up to the end." As with Robert, an internal appointment to the deputy role had been made which made the situation easier in terms of Olivia's handover of responsibilities. Olivia's approach to this handover contrasted starkly with Robert's, however. She was supporting her successor and working with her as far as possible to ensure a smooth transition, but she was determined not to off-load work too soon. At our second interview Olivia said, "I don't think it's fair to already start shifting things on to her, but I've been copying her in" which suggests that, although she wanted to ensure the change of deputy was seamless, Olivia did not want to take advantage of the fact her successor was already in the school. This was very different from Robert, who was eager to hand over responsibility to his internally appointed successor, especially for tasks he did not relish. Olivia was determined to leave well, ensuring she did all in her power to secure an effective transition for the sake of her successor, the head, pupils and staff of the school she was moving on from. Olivia's integrity and sense of responsibility were strong.

Olivia did have concerns there was anxiety in some quarters about how her current school would fare without her, "I'm a bit of a crutch, I think". Olivia explained she was determined to do all she could to mitigate any negative effects of her leaving. On my second visit, I observed Olivia mentoring a Year 10 student, who, touchingly,

when she left the meeting said how much she felt Olivia would be missed, and exclaimed, “You’re one of the pillars!” Olivia quickly replied, “But it won’t fall down! And [*my successor*] is brilliant!” The rapidity with which she sought to reassure and build the bridge between the present and future reflected her focus on leaving a positive legacy rather than encouraging a culture of dependence. Status did not appear to be important to her, again in contrast to Robert.

Olivia described herself as “a planner”, keen to prepare as fully as possible for the new role. However, she also felt much of what can be done and how it is done is context-dependent, and she would need actually to be in the role before she could take some decisions. She expressed her commitment to making the most positive first impression on the staff, while remaining authentic. “I have to be as much myself as I possibly can, but a ‘prepared self’.” She was keen to listen, to take people with her, and not to rush into making changes. She explained if anyone tried to push her into articulating her plans for the school too early she would say: “ ‘I need to learn from everybody who’s here, make sure I’ve got everybody on board, and make sure we all move in the same direction’ ”.

Olivia’s choice of language reflected her consistent concern with moving the school forward positively, and creating a sense of a unified school community. Olivia knew she had the tendency to be impatient, and would need to pace herself so she, and the school, could cope with the scale and speed of changes she might introduce. By the time of our second visit, when her ideas about what needed to be addressed were being consolidated, she recognised there were a number of changes she wanted to make, and deciding on priorities would be crucial, “to make sure I don’t get carried away with myself and try to do too many things”. However, she could see the advantage of moving to a school where there were issues to be tackled: she explained that taking responsibility for building numbers on roll, for example, offered her the chance to prove herself.

Olivia was also aware of the challenge of “just being a head. Being that final person” which, despite her extensive experience in her deputy role, was something she could not experience until she made the move to headship. She also stated how important it was to her that she remained true to her core values, “I think I

know the sort of head I want to be – do you see? – but I don't know whether I can be it! [laughs]". When pushed on what this meant, she listed,

Visible, wherever possible; open door policy; liked, I hope, but respected; and approachable...making sure I don't end up just panicking and withdrawing...you don't want to be that person that nobody really knows, or sees, or hasn't really any contact with unless you've got a problem. I don't want to be that person.

So in addition to having formulated her views about the head she hoped to be, Olivia showed a clarity of thinking about the kind of head she was determined not to be, and considerable self-awareness.

### *The early months of headship*

When I visited Olivia after her first term of headship, I discovered her early months had been challenging in a number of respects. The most difficult situation she had had to manage was the sudden death of a girl in Year 11 in August; following a fall from her horse, the girl had been in a coma and eventually her life-support machine had been switched off. This girl and her peers were due to collect GCSE results in August on what was, in effect, Olivia's first day in her new role. The girl's year group constituted the new Year 12. This was, inevitably, a sensitive, tragic situation for Olivia and her senior colleagues to negotiate.

Olivia had, during the lead-in period, spoken of how she was a planner who wanted to begin her time as head as her "most prepared self", but she recognised not everything can be prepared for. This unexpected death and the repercussions of it constituted an early, dramatic example of this. Interestingly, Olivia observed that, despite the difficulty of this situation, it had brought the staff together, particularly the senior team. Inevitably the aftermath of the death made results day, the start of term and Olivia's initial whole-school assembly more sombre and muted than would otherwise have been the case. However, Olivia was quick to recognise opportunity in addition to challenge.

Another early challenge was that the school had received the worst set of GCSE results it had ever experienced, which appeared to be unexpected. Olivia felt perhaps her predecessor, preparing for her move to second headship, had "taken

her eye off the ball” in her final year. Olivia’s first staff meeting needed to address this, she felt, and so was less upbeat than it might otherwise have been. Again, however, Olivia considered this offered her an early chance to make clear her high expectations and give some indication of how she intended to realise them.

Olivia had arranged visits with each individual Head of Department to discuss results, and was direct where she felt there were issues, which had caused some anxiety among the staff, and she had had a number of meetings with the main staff union representative in relation to this. Olivia felt that, although tackling disappointing results was not necessarily desirable as a focus for her first term, it was important to confront the issue. She believed changes needed to be made sooner rather than later, “I can’t afford to sit around for a year and wait and see”. Olivia had made some significant changes to external communications and the timing and format of Prize Giving which had made some staff and former staff unhappy. Olivia admitted the change to Prize Giving might have been better handled, as it was changing traditions former staff and supporters of the school cherished. This demonstrated her capacity to be reflective and constructively self-critical.

As a result of these changes and challenges, relationships with colleagues had not been consistently positive. Several of those I spoke to emphasised that Olivia’s predecessor was a “people-person”, “softer” than Olivia, and “keen to be liked”. Three different people referred to this predecessor as “fluffy”/“pink and fluffy”. It was also observed that this predecessor’s predecessor had been in the same mould. Olivia was very different in temperament, and one colleague summed up the situation as Olivia “reaping the whirlwind of her predecessor’s time at the school”; in her view, her predecessor’s “softness” was both a strength and a weakness, and Olivia was having to deal with the legacy of this and not necessarily benefiting from the contrast. I was told by several of those I met that, in their view, Olivia had not so far shown skill in her dealings with people.

A number of criticisms were levelled at Olivia. I was told she was not tuning into the context of the school sufficiently, that the pace of change was too rapid and uncomfortable for staff and Olivia was not listening enough and taking this into

account. She was described as “too direct”, “terse” and “abrasive”. I was told she needed to be “a diplomat rather than a Rottweiler”, that she at times adopted a “sledgehammer” approach. Olivia’s PA was one of her strongest critics. Although Olivia had spoken positively about her initial relationship with her PA, in the autumn term Olivia had felt the need to criticise her and the PA has not taken this well; she talked of the lack of mutual trust and respect in her relationship with Olivia and said she hoped the situation was not “irrecoverable”. Olivia’s closeness to her deputy, which Olivia saw as a strength, was also seen as problematic by some of the senior team, who felt they, and other staff, could not use the deputy as a sounding-board as she and Olivia were so firmly aligned.

Olivia told me she was aware of the need to build positive relationships, and she had drawn up what she referred to as a “praise list” to remind her to speak to specific staff whom she wanted to ensure felt valued. Olivia spoke of this as a positive strategy; her Assistant Head Academic talked to me about the same strategy but suggested this was rather contrived, artificial and manipulative.

The Chair of Governors was concerned about the “rumblings” among the staff and said Olivia had made some decisions which had alienated staff and the former student and staff community. She worried about Olivia’s tendency to demonstrate “tunnel vision” and an inability to “take people with her”. Olivia told me she did not have the most positive relationship with her Chair of Governors.

On the other hand, those staff who knew Olivia best and worked most closely with her, including the deputy, Assistant Head Pastoral, Head of Junior School and School Business Manager, were considerably more positive. They believed they could see through the brusque, no-nonsense exterior to what the Assistant Head Pastoral called the “warmth, wit and wisdom” beneath. They appreciated Olivia’s straightforwardness, her determination to “grasp nettles” and to deal with some unpalatable realities of the school’s current situation. In their view, the school would go further under Olivia’s leadership. It was observed by these staff that Olivia’s predecessor was perhaps overly protective of the staff, and the school rather cosy and comfortable as a result. Several expressed the view that the school would develop positively and strengthen considerably under Olivia’s leadership.

Olivia herself felt “a number of things were perhaps glossed over at the end of last year which would have been tackled if you’d had a head that was remaining in the school”. The school’s development plan, for example, was overdue for review, which Olivia saw as an opportunity rather than a problem.

Olivia was aware there was some resistance to change and, among her senior team, a tendency to worry too much about how staff might feel if more were required of them, and she was very much feeling her way through that. She was experiencing difficulty with one particular member of senior staff who had applied for the headship herself and been unsuccessful, and who was, Olivia felt, underperforming and unwilling or unable to face up to that. Olivia could see formal capability proceedings looming, and was prepared to tackle this head-on, while appreciating how difficult it might be – for the member of staff concerned but also for the staff looking on. In this respect Olivia was very different from Robert, who felt dissatisfied with his senior team but who lacked confidence in his capacity to tackle disciplinary or capability processes. He felt he had not had sufficient experience of this as a deputy. Olivia felt that, although such procedures were stressful for all involved, she had the experience and the courage to confront the challenge.

Change was perhaps happening more quickly than she might have liked, but Olivia’s view was, “when you come in there’s suddenly glaring holes, aren’t there, and you think, ‘Well, I’ve got to do that.’...You’ve got to act, you can’t just sit around observing”. While recognising some staff were finding the pace of change uncomfortable, Olivia believed prompt action was required for the sake of the on-going good health of the school.

Reflecting on what she had learnt about, and during, the process of transition to headship, Olivia observed, “I think I probably didn’t quite realise how sensitive staff are to change. I probably didn’t quite envisage how nerve-racking the change of head is just for a normal member of staff. And I think that’s quite hard to know until you’re in it”. Olivia could see the role tensions and role conflict between what the school community were used to, based on the norms established by the two previous heads, and her own different leadership style. She was aware some staff might find her rather too direct and even intimidating, and was making a conscious

effort to build relationships and show her warmer side: “I’m not quite there yet. I think I’m getting there. I know my personality, and the way that I am sometimes needs time to warm up on people. I think it takes a while for me to establish those relationships. I recognise that.” She was, however, determined to inhabit the role, rather than simply to inherit it: to lead in her own way and to focus on role-making rather than just role-taking.

Olivia’s transition, like Robert’s, had had its challenges, but she had used her lead-in time productively, and following one term of headship was feeling positive about the process, aware of where she was making progress, and stimulated and energised by what she had to do. She also exhibited the fundamental confidence that she was capable of doing it. The fact that Olivia was reflective, self-aware, constructively self-critical and prepared to act on what she was learning (seen, for example, in her introduction of the praise list) meant she was taking positive steps to tune in to the context of her new school and build alliances with different groups within the community. She was different from her predecessor but sufficiently sure of herself to recognise that, although it might take time, she was capable of being the leader she considered the school needed her to be, while still remaining true to her core values. She would work to win hearts and minds, but would not be deflected from the path she felt was right for a school with challenges ahead. If Robert’s experience of transition was characterised by tension and disharmony, Olivia’s was characterised by courage and confidence.

## **SALLY**

### *The lead up to the headship appointment*

Sally told me she started thinking about the move to headship three years before her successful appointment; she attended a course on Preparing for Headship and began to look at opportunities arising within the independent sector. She would not describe herself as ambitious, exactly, “My career pathway has never been, ‘I want to achieve this in this amount of time’. It’s been much more about finding a job which really interests me, and then doing it until the natural stage – next stage”, contrasting with Robert’s insistence on the importance, for him, of getting



as high as you can. Sally recognised she had reached that stage in her current role and felt excited and energised by the opportunities she believed headship would offer, “I think what I’m looking forward to most is being able to effect change and development about something I’m passionate about, which is education. My particular passion is the development both of children and adults”.

Sally’s focus was on encouraging and supporting the personal and professional development of others. She believed headship would allow her to do so on a scale unlike any other she had experienced. Like Olivia, Sally showed a clear vision of where she wanted to take a school which, in her view, needed to be a learning community. She showed commitment and a strong sense of responsibility.

Over her five years as deputy Sally had gradually developed “a sense of wanting to be the person who’s actually making decisions”. This feeling was particularly acute when her current head made a decision Sally did not fully agree with. Her relationship with this head was positive and professional, and Sally showed herself to be loyal and supportive. However, her developing sense of the kind of head she herself would choose to be motivated her to apply for school leader roles. She could see headship would enable her to “actually begin to carve the vision myself”, a prospect she found increasingly appealing.

Sally’s current head was, herself, moving on at the same time as Sally – in her case to a third headship. This head had not been totally happy and settled in the school and there were tensions relating to her departure. Sally was supporting her head through this transition in addition to negotiating her own.

Sally described the school to which she was moving in very positive terms, “There was a sense of [*pause*]...gentle but professional creativity and order about the place I liked very much.” She felt comfortable throughout the selection process (including the involvement of a professional search firm), which she thought had been well-handled. There were similarities between her current and new school (both had boarding and a diverse, international community) which she liked, and also new opportunities. The school to which she was moving was an all-age school with pupils from the age of four, which Sally was very much looking forward to.

During the appointment process, Sally had begun to build a positive relationship with the school's Chair of Governors, whom she liked, and the Chair told her the decision to appoint her was unanimous, and she had the full support of a strong governing body. This contributed to Sally's confidence and her sense that this school and role were a good match for her.

#### *The lead-in period*

Sally's predecessor was moving to a second headship after four years. When this predecessor had initially arrived as head, the school had been in serious difficulties, and this new head had needed to be something of, in Sally's words, "a hero head" who had taken on the challenging task of dramatically building numbers across the school, and significantly improving the image of the school through proactive marketing and PR. In Sally's view, what the Governing Body was now looking for from a new head was "consolidation and growth rather than slash and burn". They hoped for a period of stability and wished to appoint a head who would commit to the school and remain in post for longer than four years.

Sally saw the differences between herself and her predecessor in terms of their temperament and preferred leadership style, "She has had to be a hero head and has had to pretty much single-handedly pull it all together. That's not the sort of head I will be". Like Robert and Olivia, Sally had clear ideas of the kind of head she would not wish to be, in addition to continuing to formulate her vision of the head she hoped to be. Sally believed in a consultative leadership approach and talked on several occasions of her team and of listening to, involving and engaging those around her. Her predecessor had been strongly autocratic. In terms of the school community's expectations of how the head would lead, there was the capacity for contrasting role expectations and potential conflict.

None of Sally's senior colleagues had applied for the headship, and she had some concern that, because her predecessor had been controlling, the two Assistant Heads (there was no deputy) were lacking in confidence and initiative. She saw as an early challenge the need to give them "a bit more sense of power, responsibility...and strategy". In this, Sally's approach echoed Robert's. However,

while Sally's particular focus was developing others, in Robert's case there was the sense he wanted his senior leaders to be autonomous in order to make his own life easier.

Like Olivia, Sally saw recruitment and retention, and ensuring the school was on a secure financial footing, as ongoing challenges; her predecessor had made significant progress but there was still hard work to be done if the school were to be stable and confident in terms of numbers. Sally suggested reassuring both parents and governors would be important in her early months.

Sally also had initial concerns about professional development and review of staff, including lesson observations, appraisal and a general focus on teaching and learning, all of which she saw as good practice and which she did not think were well-developed in her new school. She wanted to create a whole-school learning community. This reflected her passion for developing others, building their confidence and professional capacity, for their own sake and for the sake of the school.

Sally recognised at the time of our first meeting that pacing herself, managing change sensitively and prioritisation were likely to be key in her early months, "working out what's the most important thing to put my energies into". Like Olivia, she understood the importance of deciding on priorities and trying not to do too much too quickly. Sally was keen to have a day with governors during the summer looking at strategy (something the Chair of Governors said her predecessor had actively resisted), to ensure her early efforts were appropriately targeted.

To prepare for the challenges ahead, Sally was spending time tapping into the expertise of staff in her current school, including the bursar with regard to financial management, and the Head of Marketing. As time passed she refined and clarified her thinking about early priorities in her new role, and how best to tackle them. With respect to the challenges ahead, by the time of our second meeting Sally felt, "I'm understanding them a bit better – I've seen the depth of them a bit more", as she confirmed and consolidated her learning about the new context. In this, her experience recalled Olivia's.

One issue which was emerging by the time of my first interview with Sally was that her predecessor was resistant to Sally visiting the school. She had not wanted Sally to be involved in the school's Open Day, or in events involving the new intake of pupils and their parents, which might be considered to be the norm when a new head is appointed. The outgoing head had been vague about exactly when she would move out of her office and the on-site head's house, which Sally found unsettling. Her predecessor's attitude to Sally as incoming head was making her preparation for taking up the role extremely difficult. Reluctance on the part of the outgoing head to involve the incoming head recalled Robert's experience, but in Sally's case there was active hostility and a degree of aggression which Robert had not met.

Sally and her family visited the school during the Easter break, shortly before we first met, and this had been an uncomfortable experience: “[*The outgoing head*] was behaving like she had been forced out, almost in a sense treating me like an upstart, who needs to be put back in her box, and she was, I'd say, really almost rude”. Sally suggested her predecessor seemed in some way threatened by her, and this was causing significant discord. Sally was in negotiation with the governors about finding temporary accommodation for her and her family so she could move into the area in August even if the outgoing head had not vacated the head's house, but she was troubled that lack of co-operation, or even active obstruction, from her predecessor was making her preparation for the role unhelpfully fraught.

In between our first and second visits, Sally visited the school again. The relationship between Sally and her predecessor continued to be strained. Sally believed her predecessor was struggling with leaving the school, and the relationship between her and the Chair of Governors had broken down. The outgoing head would not confirm exactly when she was leaving the school house, even after the Chair had formally written to her, so Sally and her family were unable to make firm plans for moving in the summer. Sally had asked for documentation which her predecessor had been reluctant to supply. This had caused her anxiety. She felt making the move was “a massive transition...a huge

job”, and for her own peace of mind she needed to “get all my dots in a row”. She had not been able to prepare as thoroughly as she wished to, including arranging the house move, familiarising herself with the school’s development plan and understanding the staffing, all of which would have helped her to “allay the concerns I have about how it’s going to be, making the transition.”

Like Olivia, Sally was a planner, and to give herself confidence about the new professional challenge she was facing, wanted to prepare as fully as she could. Resistance from the head she was succeeding was, in Sally’s case, making this considerably more problematic. Even Olivia, whose relationship with her predecessor had been generally positive, had been aware of some awkwardness in the dynamic between them. In Sally’s case she was dealing with overt hostility. Sally felt uneasy about, for example, negotiating with the head’s PA in her new school, or talking to the bursar.

In terms of her capacity to cope with the demands of the role, when we first met Sally expressed concern about ensuring she had the degree of confidence and the resilience required to recover quickly, should she meet difficulties. Sally saw her current deputy role as quite reactive; despite her positive relationship with the head she did not feel she had a huge amount of autonomy, and was mindful of how different headship would be, and the lack of the “safety net” which is always present, for deputies, in the head they work alongside. Sally expressed the hope that she was capable of doing a committed, professional job while still retaining a healthy balance in her life.

The other staff I met had faith in Sally’s capacity to meet such challenges. They spoke of Sally’s introvert temperament and natural reserve but also her warmth and authenticity, her intelligence (although I was told that “she wears her intellect lightly”), compassion and strong core values. Her colleagues expressed confidence Sally had the skills to find balance in her headship role, although it was also observed that having had so much day-to-day operational control as a deputy, and being highly organised, calm and extremely competent, Sally might find it difficult to let go of the minutiae and trust others successfully to manage the detail, particularly if some of them were patently less capable than she is.

One of the pastoral leaders in Sally's current school told me, at the time of my second visit, she had been aware of Sally starting to move away from her deputy persona and being prepared to challenge the head (albeit in a professional, polite and supportive way) with a greater degree of confidence, since her own successful headship appointment. Sally was increasingly, in her own words, giving consideration to "what it's going to be like to *be* a head, not just to *do* the job" (*her emphasis*), and how best she could prepare herself for that.

In addition to negotiating tensions in her relationship with her predecessor in her new school, Sally was also trying to mediate between the outgoing head and incoming head in her current school. The choice of her head's successor indicated, Sally felt, the different direction in which a new Chair of Governors was intent on taking the school. Her current head was being more or less excluded from this, and Sally was trying to support her. When Sally and I met a term into her headship, she looked back at her final days as a deputy and admitted that, because her head had found her own departure difficult, "there were certainly times where I felt there wasn't space for my process of leaving".

Sally's senior colleagues were also anxious about their own future. Sally was attempting to protect them, to a degree, and also to prepare them for change and challenge ahead. The situation with respect to her own successor as deputy was not straightforward, as the incoming head had decided to make an interim appointment (which at the time of my second visit to Sally had still not been confirmed) so handing over her current responsibilities to one named individual was not possible, and this complicated Sally's situation with respect to the school she was leaving.

In terms of the next step, at the end of the summer term Sally was experiencing a mixture of eager anticipation and trepidation: "I am very excited, definitely. I want to get on with it....I'm terrified!...And part of the reason I want to get on with it is – I'm going to lose my nerve!" She reflected on what makes the transition to headship difficult.

The tensions around living through this process...It's really tough. And it's to do with the personal level stuff as well. Not only relationships, but as you as a potential leader begin to become that person... In a sense one sells oneself as a potential head on a...a kind of Meccano, a dot-to-dot – this is what I will be when I'm a head. But you don't actually know you can do it until you're doing it.

### *The early months of headship*

Sally's early challenges in headship included the sudden death of her Head Girl's father, a sensitive and delicate situation to manage, in the middle of her first term. The school also underwent an ISI inspection the week before I visited in January. Although the inspection report provided for Sally an important benchmark of where the school was, a position from which she could now build, nevertheless readying the school for the inspection visit (and in terms of its DfE Regulatory Compliance, she was aware she had inherited a significant shortfall which had to be quickly addressed) was a frenetic and stressful experience.

However, those I spoke to were unanimously positive about how Sally had stepped up to the challenge. They appreciated her calmness, the clarity of her vision, honesty and careful consideration. The phrase "hero-head" was again used of Sally's predecessor by staff I met, and I was told that, although this head was not always easy to work with, she was well-respected, and some expressed retrospective gratitude that she had "saved" the school. All could see Sally was very different in temperament and skills (more reserved and private, more even-tempered and balanced) but the view was consistently expressed that now was the right time for the headship to transfer to someone with these qualities.

The Chair of Governors was thrilled with the start Sally had made, following her latterly difficult relationship with the previous head. She felt Sally offered the stability the school needed, as it moved from aggressive marketing to consolidating its reputation through well-established high standards, for example in teaching and learning.

Change had taken place quite rapidly, but those I met could see there was an urgency which meant the timing was appropriate, and all felt Sally had won the trust of staff and taken people with her. Sally herself was positive about how hard

staff worked and how committed they were; she had found them a much less contentious group than the academic staff in the school where she had been a deputy. Sally had dedicated significant time to building relationships with individuals and groups through face-to-face contact, trusting and supporting others, and this was appreciated.

Sally was aware there was a risk involved in trusting senior staff so quickly, but she had felt this was the right thing to do, and they had risen positively to the challenge. There is an interesting contrast with Robert here: Robert was also keen to trust others, particularly as he felt that would make his own job easier.

However, he felt he did not have sufficiently capable colleagues in the right senior roles and was quick to blame when things went wrong, for example in the boarding inspection. Sally's commitment to trusting and empowering staff is based on her conviction the school should be a learning community within which the personal and professional development of individuals is paramount. She felt senior colleagues were repaying her trust and beginning to feel valued, as they had not been under the previous head's tenure. Although there was further work to be done in strengthening her team, Sally was committed to doing this for their sake, and for the school as a whole, rather than because she herself might gain from it.

In terms of how she was being received by the school community, Sally appeared to be benefiting from the comparison with her predecessor. Senior staff felt the fact Sally and the Chair of Governors had a positive and mutually respectful relationship contributed to much calmer and more productive governors' meetings, for example, and this was a relief to all attendees. Similarly, the Heads of Prep and Pre-Prep observed that senior team meetings were shorter and more constructive, with far less "angst and drama". The Sixth Form girls I spoke to appreciated Sally's warmth, saying they found the previous head quite "cold".

The outgoing head was still causing Sally anxiety as the autumn term began. It was mid-September before she passed to Sally the head's school iPhone, and part way into the term she was still accessing and answering school emails. In Sally's view, all the indications were that she was very reluctant to leave the school, despite her new appointment in a prestigious school, and this was underpinning her hostility



towards, and consequent lack of co-operation with, both her successor and the Chair of Governors.

In addition, the legacy Sally had inherited from her predecessor was constituting serious challenge for her. The previous head had expended significant effort to boost numbers and get the school back on to a financial even keel, but some of the measures taken and strategies adopted were, in Sally's judgement, "not sustainable" and she was having to address a number of difficult issues quickly.

My very very worst moments – and these are my worst, darkest, most unpleasant moments, there was a feeling that the last head was actually setting things up for me to fail... There were really heart-stopping moments when I thought, 'Gosh – this house has been built on sand. And we've got a heck of a job shoring it up'.

However, so far it appeared Sally had tackled all the challenges her predecessor left behind and was beginning to make significant progress, albeit in difficult circumstances. She felt her previous experience had fitted her well for stepping up to headship, "There's nothing about the job I haven't had at least some insight into before", and her time as deputy had been very good preparation for the challenges she was now facing. Sally's experience and opinions were very much aligned with Olivia's, here, and starkly contrasted with Robert's. This increased her confidence in her capacity to deal with the most difficult issues, including three outstanding disciplinary/capability processes which she had inherited and dealt with in her first few weeks.

Sally's compassionate and empathetic nature appeared to be helping her form positive relationships, for example with her Chair of Governors, towards whom she felt almost protective, mindful of how the Chair's relationship with her predecessor had collapsed. Sally felt the need to be particularly sensitive, given the relationship tensions she had inherited.

Sally felt she was working towards being the head she wanted to be,

I made the decision to carry on being me....I respect the role very much and expect other people to respect the role, but I still – if the tea needs pouring I'll pour the tea! Because I used to do that. I don't see why I should stop just because I'm a head.

So I have a clear idea, I suppose, of the sort of head I want to be. When pushed to articulate this more fully, Sally considered carefully and then suggested: “Fair...inspiring. Enabling. Practical. Honest. Trustworthy. The caretaker of the vision, really, of the original ethos. Consistent – very much so, I think it’s important. Creative. Fun! [*Laughs*]”. When asked whether this vision of the head she wished to be had changed or been clarified during her first term of headship, Sally conceded, “I suppose it’s been tested”.

Sally had, herself, been tested, but it appeared from my conversation with her, from watching her at work and from talking to the Chair of Governors and her colleagues, the pupils and her husband, that she was rising to the challenge of making the transition extremely positively. Despite the difficulties she had experienced during the lead-in period as a result of the antagonism shown towards her by the outgoing head, Sally’s strong sense of moral purpose, and her commitment to trusting, inspiring and developing others were helping her to build the resilience she needed to step up to the role and to strengthen and stabilise the school. She was clear in her vision of the kind of learning community she wanted the school to be, and her calm temperament, her quiet intelligence and empathy were earning respect and loyalty. Few of those to whom I spoke expressed any reservations about Sally and how she was leading others, although there was still admiration and respect for her hero-head predecessor in some quarters.

## **PETER**

### *The lead up to the headship appointment*

At the time of our first meeting, Peter appeared to be a confident and charismatic individual who was looking forward to the challenges and opportunities headship would present, and this was confirmed by all those I spoke to who were, without exception, complimentary about his strengths and positive about his capacity to make a success of the role. It was observed by the Finance Director that, since Peter’s successful appointment, he had changed subtly in his current role: he now appeared more mature and confident in his words and bearing, looking and

sounding “more like a head”. The Finance Director suggested Peter’s self-esteem had been boosted by the sense that he had been “chosen”.

Peter told me headship was something he always had in his sights, and he had formulated ideas and beliefs about education throughout his career which he was looking forward to having greater opportunity to implement in the head’s role. “To move a school forward, I think, is a great privilege, and I’ve been lucky enough to be offered a headship to do that”. There was an interesting balance of confidence and humility in Peter’s reflections on the path to headship.

Peter felt he was approaching something of a plateau in his current role, reaching the limits of what he could do to make a whole-school difference, and keen to move on before he became stale, or bored. In terms of his motivation to move to headship, Peter’s words recalled Robert’s focus on moving upwards, although he appeared less interested in the status this would give him than in the capacity it would offer to develop the school. His commitment to moving the school forward and his comments on vision suggested his approach was closer to Olivia’s and Sally’s than to Robert’s.

Peter had only just begun actively looking at headship vacancies when the head who had recently retired from his current school contacted him. This former head was now on the governing body of a school whose head was retiring. He felt he knew what the school needed in its next head and, having worked with Peter, believed he had the temperament and skills to make a success of the role in this particular school, so he encouraged Peter to apply. Peter felt the process of applying for headship, and certainly achieving success, had happened earlier than he anticipated.

Peter could see his achievements as deputy, for example with respect to the development of teaching and learning, linked directly to those areas requiring attention in the school to which he was moving. Looking at the school’s last inspection report, Peter could identify recommendations for further development which connected with his own expertise and recent experience. He was, however, sensitive to context and talked of his realisation that he would need to tune in to

what the new school needed rather than to import ideas he had known to be successful elsewhere.

Peter felt it was important that throughout the application process he was honest and able to be himself, “I don’t want to be the sort of person that is trying to sell something that I’m not. Because I have to go in there and live that....I can’t pretend”. He had prepared for the interview by reading about the school, talking to others who knew it, “to get a feel for the school...if it was ready for change and we could do something with it” which he saw as having more appeal than going into a school which was already “firing on all cylinders” where a new head might need simply to assume “a caretaker role”. He came to the conclusion that, with this school and this particular headship, “everything seemed to fit”, and as the selection process continued he felt more committed and motivated to succeed. He was thrilled to have done so at his first attempt.

Looking back over his career and the range of experiences he had had, Peter felt well-prepared to take on this challenge, however. He believed he had learnt from positive and negative role models in a range of schools, and had, over the years, taken on a variety of responsibilities – academic, pastoral, boarding and extra-curricular – which he considered a good springboard for future success. He was aware of how far he had been encouraged by others, “I was lucky in my career...People tapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘Look, would you like to do this?’ – and... rather than having a clear view, ‘I’ll be a head by the time I’m 40’ – it’s sort of been a pathway”. Like Olivia and Sally, and unlike Robert, Peter felt he had the experience and skills which would enable him to tackle the challenges ahead.

#### *The lead-in period*

The head in the school where Peter was a deputy had been only recently appointed, so Peter had had the opportunity to see at close range a handover from one head to another. Peter felt both the new head and his predecessor had not handled this well; there had been obvious tensions between them, and Peter considered he had learnt from this negative example. His current head had also

not been supportive about allowing Peter time out from his deputy role to visit his new school, and this had been difficult to manage. He did not feel his head was initially pleased about his appointment. The relationship between the two of them did, in fact, become more positive as Peter's lead-in time progressed, perhaps as a result of a slight power shift as Peter grew in confidence and began to see this head as a peer rather than a superior. It might also be that Peter developed a better understanding of this new head's position as he anticipated becoming a head himself. At the time of our second interview, Peter reflected on how the relationship had improved.

Peter described his predecessor in his new school as co-operative and helpful. This outgoing head was retiring after 11 years, and Peter saw this was an emotional time for the head and his wife, who had been closely involved in the life of the school. However, Peter felt his predecessor was trying to help him make a success of taking up the role, passing on his thoughts about early priorities and what could be improved. Peter thought the outgoing head was ready to retire, and "not defensive or protective". The relationship between them appeared to be open and reasonably relaxed, and Peter had been forthright about their relative status in this preparation period, reassuring his predecessor in "an open and frank conversation at the start" that " 'This is your school until the moment you leave it' ". Peter told his predecessor he was happy to leave the decision about how far he himself was involved in the school in this lead-in period to the outgoing head.

Peter could see he needed to be involved in high-level decisions that might have far-reaching consequences, and he cited senior appointments and future building development as examples, but felt the more operational tasks should remain the preserve of the outgoing head, partly because Peter did not yet know the school well enough. In addition, Peter was fulfilling a time-consuming and demanding role in his current school some geographical distance away, with a current head who was rather grudging about his deputy's possibly divided priorities.

This became increasingly difficult, however, as the lead-in period passed and the time when he was to step into the role drew nearer. Peter was aware he was being copied in to a range of emails, sometimes when its sender was not receiving the

hoped-for response from others. He was starting to be asked to make decisions about the year ahead, many of which were operational rather than strategic. Peter tried to reroute those where possible, believing he was not in a position to make such decisions without knowing the full facts and possible repercussions; he was “not quite in post yet”.

Peter felt in some areas the outgoing head was passing on some operational decisions he could himself have taken, especially if there was any contention. He claimed to prefer this, however, to being kept out of the loop by a predecessor who continued to keep tight control. Peter’s experience here contrasted starkly with Robert’s. Robert had concerns that he was not sufficiently involved. In the latter months of the lead-in period, Peter considered he was perhaps being contacted and consulted too frequently.

However, having a generally positive outlook and, like Olivia, the disposition to see challenges as opportunities, Peter reflected on potential benefits of being drawn in to operational decisions at such an early stage. He felt he was learning more about his predecessor’s way of doing things: “I know he is not keen to rock the boat...but at the same time he could be guilty of not taking people on when he maybe should ... I sometimes think, why did you let that person get away with that? Because that’s going to store up problems for you later on”. In this case, of course, the problem was being stored up not for the head, but for the head’s successor.

There were also elements of strategy which had not been tackled by a head on the verge of retirement. Peter could see gaps in provision which he realised might be the result of an outgoing head letting things slide. The school’s strategic development plan, for example, expired three years before and had not been updated. Peter could see this lack of strategy was, for him, both an opportunity and a challenge. Peter’s position and approach here recalled Olivia’s.

Not all the members of the senior team Peter was to inherit were equally competent. The deputy was highly thought of; she had applied for the headship and was disappointed not to be successful. Peter told me how impressive he thought she was, but her expertise was primarily pastoral, and the governors had

decided what the school needed now was to focus on the academic: the curriculum and raising the standard of teaching and learning. This deputy had been professional and positive with Peter, however, for which he was grateful. As part of the appointment process all candidates produced a piece about their vision for the school, and the deputy had subsequently shared hers with Peter, in case he should find it useful, which Peter felt was an important gesture of trust. At the time of our first meeting, Peter recognised the deputy would continue to apply for headships and would eventually be successful. By the time of our second interview, this successful appointment had already happened, and the deputy would be moving on at the end of Peter's first year of headship.

Peter felt the Director of Studies, on the other hand, was not so capable. Peter had asked him for information which had not been supplied, and he had met with a degree of defensiveness. The outgoing head had shared with Peter his concerns about the Director of Studies' competence, "I was warned by the head, he said this guy's not able to do his job", and Peter could see this was an issue he would have to address early. Peter was inheriting a problem from an outgoing head of whom he said, "he knows he's retiring so he's not dealt with it, and that problem has festered". Peter could see, looking at the current senior roles across the school, a degree of restructuring and rationalising was required, which he recognised would be sensitive and potentially controversial. He felt he needed to establish a balanced leadership team with clear lines of communication and mutual trust, not the situation he was stepping into, "You inherit people you may or may not choose". Peter's situation here recalled Robert's, but Peter was determined to tackle it head on, while Robert, reactively, waited for the hole to appear in the middle of the puzzle enabling him to move the bricks around.

Discussing this lead-in period and how it felt to be living through it, Peter described how "you've a frame shift" as the departing deputy/head-elect begins to look to the future. With respect to handing over to his successor, the incoming deputy, Peter was keen to ensure he did what he could to make this a smooth and effective process. While hoping to ensure there was continuity for the school, Peter could see his deputy successor might choose to do things differently, as "You've had the

guardianship of this role for a set amount of time and then it's time for it to be handed on." Peter's humility and sense of being a servant leader contrasted dramatically with Robert's focus on status and authority.

A change in senior leadership can open up the possibility for readjustment of responsibilities, and at the time of our second interview, Peter talked of giving staff who aspired to senior leadership the opportunity to take on some new tasks. He felt this would support the incoming deputy but also contribute to their own personal and professional development. This focus on staff development was quite different from Robert's desire to offload unpalatable tasks. Peter's commitment to developing others for personal and professional fulfilment appeared to be closer to the principles of the whole-school learning community articulated by Sally.

At the same time as preparing to hand over one's current role and responsibilities to one's successor, a head elect is also beginning increasingly to think about the school and the role to which they are moving. Peter could see this becoming a growing preoccupation, "You're having to deal with something else that is occupying your mind and it's going to get bigger and bigger". He described this balance of priorities as a "tipping scale" which is recalibrated as time passes.

Peter accepted some elements of his deputy role were more appealing than others, and was keen to ensure he did a good job, especially with respect to those responsibilities he was less keen on. Peter was also relishing those aspects of his current role he enjoyed the most, aware that in some cases these kinds of activities would not feature in headship, for example teaching examination classes and accompanying expeditions: "I think it's given me a renewed joy for the role I do here". Like Olivia, the experience of being appointed to a headship had in some ways re-energised Peter in his current role.

Like Olivia and Sally, Peter was using expertise in his current school to help prepare for challenges ahead, for example in marketing and finance. He was also in communication with friends and former colleagues who had, themselves, recently moved into headship and was tapping into their experiences, for example with respect to managing change, dealing with governors and restructuring senior



teams. He was seeking advice and perspectives on the way in which others in similar roles had balanced the professional and the personal, “because you’re not just coming to it by yourself, you’re coming to it with your wife and children and it has an impact on them.” Peter was acutely aware of the responsibility of removing his family from their current friendship groups and transplanting them in a new area/new schools.

The opportunity to complete a new heads’ induction course offered by the heads’ professional association to which Peter would belong offered him the chance “to share and hear about, from experienced people, the problems you’ll face which you may not have thought about. And be able to work out strategies and be prepared for them”, which he felt was particularly valuable. Like Olivia, Peter wanted to go into his new role as well-prepared as possible. He was being proactive in order to achieve this, contrasting strongly with Robert.

Peter’s first visit to the school following his appointment focussed on getting to know people, and getting to be known. His priority, he said, was to listen, nod and smile. He anticipated his second visit would be different in tone “getting down a little deeper”. He was beginning to formulate more detailed questions to which he wanted to find out answers. This echoed Olivia’s experience of recognising a shift in her strategy in later visits to the school which she was more assertively directing.

Peter described a certain amount of frustration in being appointed 11 months in advance of taking up the appointment, “Part of you naturally is excited so you want to get going as soon as possible. You know it’s a bit like getting money for Christmas but not being able to spend it for the next three days until the shops open!” However, he also saw the advantage of not being rushed through the lead-in period when he was preparing, learning and tuning in to the new context.

In terms of anticipated challenges, Peter recognised managing change in a well-established and ostensibly successful school would require careful handling, “so people don’t feel they’re out of control... they can see where we’re going and why we’re going there”. He was acutely aware of how sensitive members of the school community might be to role transition at headship level. Peter expressed the

conviction that “selling a vision will be something that’s vital and that’ll set the tone of your headship...this is what you stand for”. He explained how keen he was to take people with him, “what you need is your whole staff moving together”, recalling Olivia’s use of images of forward movement and togetherness. Peter recognised the need to pace himself through this process, and admitted he had had a tendency in the past to move too quickly. He showed a degree of self-awareness here, another similarity between Peter and Olivia. He said he appreciated others might be less comfortable with change than he was. Peter’s capacity for empathy was a consistent thread in his comments about the importance of building relationships at all levels.

Peter could see his experience as a deputy had in many respects fitted him well for his future headship challenges, but he could also see the differences between the two roles, “Your job as a deputy is to have one foot in both camps. To be that link between the Common Room and the head. You as a head are completely different and separated...It is quite a lonely job because you’re going through a lot of things no one else would even understand”. He recognised as a deputy he had been fully involved in the day-to-day life of the school, and one challenge would be “moving out of that role and, I suppose, letting other people do it.”

Peter felt he was able to use his lead-in time constructively and positively, and was starting to prepare himself for the challenges ahead, even though “you never really know until you’re in a job what it’s going to be like”, echoing Sally’s words. He recognised, “I will make mistakes and I will struggle, but it’s learning from those mistakes and moving on...And if you can’t do that then you shouldn’t be in the job!” He appeared clear-sighted about the nature of the challenges ahead.

Certainly by the end of this lead-in period Peter was very eager to begin his headship, “I think because it’s been so long in the offing and you think so much about it, you’re itching to get started to a certain extent...It comes with trepidation as well...” Peter was reflecting on the fact that an incoming head may experience, simultaneously, excitement and nervousness, particularly in the latter stages of the lead-in period.

### *The early months of headship*

The difference between Peter and the previous head was remarked upon by several of those to whom I spoke when I visited after he had been in post for a term, and the contrast worked to Peter's advantage. I was told he was "more business-like and professional" than the previous head, and his focus on building warm and positive relationships with staff, parents and students was appreciated. One senior colleague, for example, explained how assemblies, which can be an effective channel for school leaders to communicate who they are and what they stand for, had been transformed under Peter's leadership; they were now far more interesting and engaging. I was told this "has greater impact than Peter probably realises". An incoming head cannot, of course, see so clearly the contrast between himself and his predecessor.

The Chair of Governors was particularly frank. He professed to being surprised by "the condition the school was left in" by the outgoing head, whom the governors had believed was doing a committed and conscientious job. Since Peter's arrival it was clear there were a number of serious unresolved issues, and the Chair admitted to feeling "embarrassed" about this. He felt the previous head, knowing he was leaving, had "taken his foot off the accelerator" too early. He claimed Peter, to his credit, was dealing "magnificently" with the tough initial challenges he had inherited, and the Chair of Governors felt relieved the governing body had made such a successful appointment.

Peter explained how exhilarated he felt when he actually moved in to occupy the head's office, "Because you've got this huge anticipation. And then you're actually sitting in the chair. You're doing it!" It was apparent throughout our conversation that he was flourishing in the role. Peter's use of the image of "sitting in the chair" was revealing; our conversation took place in a resplendent, newly decorated head's study, and the chair in question, while not actually a throne, was an ornate and substantial one. In a well-established school such as this one, founded in 1860 and steeped in tradition, the head's chair and study represented something of the solidity and status of the role. Upon appointment Peter had, perhaps, been awarded the badge. Now he was sitting in the chair.

During the lead-in period, despite being generally supportive and accommodating, the outgoing head had kept Peter very much at arm's length from parents, so Peter spent much of his first term meeting and building relationships with the parent body. Peter recognised the previous head had, himself, kept parents at a distance and seemed increasingly uncomfortable about dealing with, particularly, contentious parental issues. Peter realised the deputy had acted as "the buffer", seeing challenging parents and defusing problems. Peter's arrival, combined with this deputy's imminent departure, gave Peter the space to do this differently.

The planned departure of the deputy to a headship of her own constituted for Peter a significant opportunity to restructure the senior team along the lines he considered most appropriate, and he began planning for this from the time of her appointment and was able to put it into practice in his first few months. The restructure enabled him also to address the under-performance of the Director of Studies by redistributing areas of responsibility, and beginning to work towards the balanced leadership team he had spoken of six months earlier.

In terms of other areas he felt he needed to address in this first year, Peter considered by the end of the lead-in period he "knew where the big broad brush strokes are" and in his first year would need to focus on "defining those and finding progression and a way forward". The picture was becoming increasingly clear over time. He recognised he needed to pace and prioritise changes that would give him the best return on his, and the school's, time, effort and energy. The key, as he saw it, was "having the right people in the right place and being able to delegate to them to get on with it... I think my first year will be spent putting people in the right jobs". Peter's resolve to trust and empower others reflected Sally and Robert's comments about leadership. However, Sally and Peter both focussed on the importance of professional development to build confidence and capacity, whereas Robert's concern appeared to be making his own life easier.

The outgoing head had been clear in his conversations with Peter about what he felt were the priorities, including the importance of improving teaching and learning, and the management structure. "He knew what needed to be done. But in his last two or three years, retirement was looming". The implication was that

the head, on the verge of retirement, lacked the drive to tackle more difficult tasks. It appeared, too, that the outgoing head had become increasingly dependent on his highly capable deputy.

Peter was aware that, without currently having the structure he needed in place, he was doing more “micro-managing” than he ideally wanted to and this was currently preventing him from being “the sort of leader I want to be. I want to have the overview, just to delegate to people and go, ‘Just go do it’ ”. He recognised it would take time to get there, but he was clear about the direction of travel, for his own leadership and for the school. He observed, “This is maybe part of what leadership is, being able to adapt”. Peter reflected on the importance of aligning the head you hope to be with the head the school requires at this stage of its journey.

The first term, inevitably, involved unexpected challenges too. Like Olivia and Sally, Peter had to lead the school through a bereavement when, the day before term started, a former student (aged 19) was tragically killed. He was one of three brothers who had boarded at the school, from a military family who were based abroad, and the school was very much the focus of the funeral and memorial service, a sensitive situation to manage. It dominated the first week and meant the start of the academic year, and the arrival of the new head, were more muted than they might otherwise have been. However, like Olivia, Peter could see a positive element to this, as it had given him the opportunity to engage with a significant number of parents, current and former, at the beginning of his tenure.

In the very early days, Peter was conscious how he relied on those around him who had already built the relationships, and who knew the systems, much better than he. “I was very aware that I was the head in title only”, lacking experience and detailed knowledge of the school. He was reluctant to rush into change unless he felt it really could not wait. He was keen to listen and learn as much as possible. The staff (teaching and support) and governors, in consultation with parents and students, had spent some time discussing the school’s core purpose, and the five key elements of the education it offered. Peter felt this had been a positive and

productive exercise, a useful starting point for articulating the school's vision and revisiting, reviewing and updating the strategic plan.

Building relationships was a key focus of Peter's first term, "letting them know you cared, not just about what they were doing but about them as people". However, he had also tackled difficult staffing issues, including five disciplinary cases in that first term. He was keen not to shirk the more unpalatable responsibilities, including a sensitive child protection case. Despite the challenges of his new role he was thriving and very much enjoying it. He was keen to be visible, to call into lessons, look at pupils' work and tune into the learners' experiences. I learnt from those I spoke to that the staff recognised, however warm and friendly Peter might be, he would insist on high standards and hold people to account. The Chaplain observed that the staff were receptive, however. "They want to be led", which he said had not happened at the school latterly. Peter recognised that himself, "They're desperate to be led". His advice, "for any new head starting, going in, people will look to you to lead. Regardless of who you've taken over from, it's a new person, and they want to follow you instinctively". Peter's view was that this was the dominant role expectation from the school community upon the arrival of a new headteacher.

The evidence confirmed they were certainly following Peter. As with Sally, there was very little criticism of Peter and his early leadership decisions from any of the individuals to whom I spoke. Peter had used his lead-in period to learn and to prepare himself, psychologically and practically, despite his head's reluctance to allow him too much time out of school. This was now bearing fruit following his formal assumption of the head's role. Peter was earning loyalty and respect within his new school community very quickly, as a result of his warm, cheerful temperament, his sound judgement and his refusal to dodge difficult issues. His focus on vision and on working together to improve the educational provision for pupils and staff development had been well-received. He was showing energy and determination, and governors, staff, parents and pupils were responding positively to this. In Peter's case, what he brought to headship, and what the school appeared to need at this stage of its journey, were a strong match.

## **DAWN**

### *The lead up to the headship appointment*

Dawn had been in her current deputy role, in an independent primary school, for three years, but was finding the job increasingly frustrating. She and the head did not see eye to eye; he appeared to find her efficiency and thoroughness threatening rather than supportive, and in the early morning meeting between them which I attended on my first visit to the school, the tensions were palpable. Dawn had a heavy teaching commitment she felt left her little time for her deputy responsibilities, which then had to be fitted in during evenings, at the end of a long day, and weekends. She felt she was not involved in the strategic side of running the school and the decision-making, had little contact with governors, and would therefore have a steep learning curve as a head. She could, however, draw on senior team experience from her previous school which she felt, in many ways, constituted a better platform for headship.

As a result of her frustrations, Dawn had begun looking for other jobs early in her third year, had seen an advertisement for a role in a school which appealed, before realising that this was a headship rather than deputy headship. This was the headship of the 3-11 section of a 3-18 all girls' school. Dawn decided to apply anyway, and was exhilarated to have been successful – her first application for headship, like Peter's.

The opportunity to care for pupils was very much at the heart of Dawn's motivation to pursue headship. She spoke often of "my girls". She was looking forward to having greater autonomy; even within an all-through school with an overarching head she felt she would have a far greater say in the life of the junior section than she had experienced in her current post, "I cannot make a decision here which I won't run by the head first of all. So the main thing for me will actually be having the power to move things forward at the pace I would like things moved forward at." Like Olivia and Peter, the idea of forward movement featured several times in Dawn's reflections on leadership. She saw her future school as being on a journey which she felt privileged now to be part of.

Recounting her interview experience, Dawn talked of the importance of being true to herself and authentic, as Peter had done, “As my first interview experience, all I wanted to do was be me, and if they wanted to appoint me for me and not something I was pretending to be”. She felt comfortable and warmly welcome at the school, so the process had felt relatively relaxed. When she received the call to offer her the post she felt elated, “Wow! I can actually truly be the person who leads and supports, and it’s going to be truly my school.” In terms of developing her conception of the kind of head she hoped to be, Dawn recognised she had learnt a good deal from role models, positive and negative, throughout her career. She was determined to take the best of what she had learnt and apply it, while still being herself.

Dawn felt the school to which she was moving would suit her. It was an all-age girls’ independent day school, similar to the school Dawn had moved from to take up her current deputy role, and where she had been happy and fulfilled. She relished the opportunity to track girls’ progress all the way to the age of 18. Dawn very much liked, and felt a connection with, the overall head of school, and the governors and staff she met on interview. She also felt she was developing a positive relationship with her predecessor, who was moving to a second headship.

Dawn believed her current head was not happy she was leaving, and even perhaps a little resentful she had achieved headship success at the first attempt. She said he had been grudging about allowing her time out to visit her new school and she had found this difficult to manage. In this her experience recalled Peter’s. Dawn was not being replaced within the school, either as a teacher or a deputy, and her current responsibilities were being distributed among a number of other staff, which made the issue of the handover of her duties complex, a situation which reflected Sally’s.

#### *The lead-in period*

Dawn talked of how in her work as head she would have a team around her, and support and guidance from the overall head and governing body. Building



relationships with all those with whom she would work closely was a process which was beginning prior to taking up the role.

One tension with respect to building this relationship arose from the fact that the Director of Studies had applied for the headship. This Director of Studies had never applied for deputy or headship posts elsewhere, and Dawn had been told by the overall head and governors that her application had come as a surprise. It had subsequently become clear that the Director of Studies was bitterly disappointed, and had been avoiding Dawn on her visits to the school, "I'm told it's not personal, it's just her way of coping". By the time of my second visit to Dawn, when there had been further opportunities for her to meet the Director of Studies, the situation was no better, and Dawn felt there had been examples of overt rudeness. Dawn recognised she would need to develop a positive working relationship with her Director of Studies, and this was likely to be an early challenge.

The Director of Studies' hostility towards Dawn as incoming head (not personal, as she did not know Dawn, but related to the role of head – a role the Director of Studies felt she was better placed to fill) recalled the attitude of Sally's predecessor to her arrival as the new school leader. However, in Dawn's case, time would not necessarily resolve this situation, as she and the Director of Studies would need to find a way of working constructively together. In Sally's case, her hostile predecessor would, at least, be leaving the school.

Dawn was planning to be highly visible to parents, for example at the beginning and end of the school day, meeting them face-to-face and building relationships. She was acutely aware that at the start of the autumn term she was walking into a school where she knew few people, and said that building that knowledge quickly was a priority for her. In this respect her words echoed Peter's, in his awareness that a new head's knowledge base with respect to this particular school, and the people within it, was initially, inevitably, superficial, and the incoming head was therefore reliant on the expertise of others, such as their senior team.

Dawn talked about building relationships with pupils, when she would no longer have a class of her own. She saw assemblies as an important way of establishing

herself and getting to be known within the school community, “I’d like the girls to feel they know me just through the assemblies....It’s the challenge of all the girls being my girls”.

Although she was clear about her principles and core values, Dawn recognised the importance of tuning in to context and felt she had to build her knowledge of the school before making decisions about exactly what she might need to focus on and perhaps change, “To actually get in there, get to know the staff on a one-to-one basis, get to know my parents, get to know my girls, build the relationship with the overall head and most importantly find out how we’re going to move the school forward.” Dawn’s frequent use of the first person possessive pronoun, “my”, underlines her focus on care and responsibility, and, like Olivia, Sally and Peter, she often uses images of forward movement, suggesting her focus on developing the school whose headship she has assumed.

Dawn was aware she would be stepping into decisions already made by the previous head, so this was not a blank canvas. She was determined to be well-prepared, while recognising she would need to be sensitive, adaptable and flexible once in post. She was very much a planner, like Olivia and Sally, and anticipating what she might be faced with and preparing the ground were priorities for her.

Dawn was aware her experience of the Early Years Foundation Stage was relatively limited, and knowledge of this section of her new school would be important, so she was tapping into the expertise of the Head of Early Years in her current school to build her skills. She was also receptive to anything else she could learn, including from her current head, who had clear skills, such as taking assemblies. Although Dawn recognised he and she were very different in skills and temperament, and would be quite different kinds of heads, nevertheless she found herself asking what she could learn from him, while recognising, “I’m not going to be him, I’m going to be me.”

Dawn used some of her own time, including in holidays, to visit her new school and do further preparatory training, such as completing a child protection course. She was reading about education and documents specifically related to her new school,

including their weekly newsletter, so felt she was familiarising herself with the context and preparing herself as far as she could, given certain constraints. She recognised at that stage her priority was to the children she was teaching, their parents, and the staff at the school where she was deputy, and was determined “not to be seen not to be doing my job properly here” although, inevitably, her thoughts were increasingly preoccupied with her next role. In her conscientious approach to her current responsibilities, her words recalled Olivia’s.

Dawn was keen not to “step on the toes” of the outgoing head, who had had a positive nine years at the school and was trying to bring that to a satisfying conclusion before handing over responsibility to her successor and moving on to a second headship. Dawn could see this was a potentially delicate situation. She appreciated any opportunity to learn from this predecessor and had sat in on a special celebration assembly and had a tour of the school to see how such things were usually done, which Dawn had found extremely useful. She was appreciative of how supportive her predecessor had been, “The head leaving was fabulous, and she just wanted to make sure that the school carried on beautifully, despite her leaving and a new member of staff coming in”. Of all six participants, Dawn’s relationship with her predecessor was perhaps the most positive.

When encouraged to reflect on the differences between the roles of deputy and head, Dawn spoke of the challenge of being more of a figurehead:

I don’t know what it will be like to be the main person, to be the face of the school...you know, all the high profile events. As a deputy you’re behind the scenes organising everything, the person in the shadows, and maybe being there and then handing it over – but I’m actually going to be the person.

In terms of managing change, Dawn expressed her intention to be circumspect, to take her time and work hard to get staff on-side. She recognised they would be anxious about possible change, and was determined to consult and involve them so they felt part of anything newly introduced. She recognised she was joining a successful school, taking over from a capable and well-respected head and inheriting what she described as a “beautifully-run ship”. It seemed to Dawn, at

the end of the lead-in period, that maintaining this was the most important consideration.

Dawn was feeling reasonably calm and confident as she prepared to leave her current school and she reflected on this preparation period:

It takes a while to actually come to terms with it and believe it and I found that, over time, the more I've gone into the school and got to know the people – met the children, met the staff, met the parents – the more I feel comfortable and thinking, yes, I can actually do this, because I have the experience, I have skills. No, I don't know everything now, but I've got the support network there.

Dawn did not anticipate headship would require her to work any harder than deputy headship had done, however. She felt it was simply the nature of the work which would differ, as she was working to capacity in her deputy role.

#### *The early months of headship*

Interestingly, when I visited the school where Dawn had taken up headship, I asked about early shocks and surprises, and her first response was, “the quantity of work was quite a shock, even though I'd put in the hours as a deputy”. There were far more commitments, including in the evenings and at weekends, than Dawn had expected, although she seemed to be relishing them.

Dawn compared taking up headship with her memories of childbirth:

When you have your first child nobody tells you what it's like to take on that responsibility as a mother. You have to have gone through it yourself. That is what it's like to become a head. Suddenly, it's yours. You are responsible. You have to make the decisions. And it was actually humbling to have a chance to make those decisions.

Dawn's use of this maternal image was revealing, connecting as it did with her focus on “my girls” and her commitment to caring and nurturing, which seemed to be a strong element of her core values and motivation for moving to headship.

I was able to shadow Dawn in some of her day-to-day interactions with pupils, parents and staff and to talk to a range of staff, the Chair of Governors and the Chair of the Friends' and Parents' Committee (a current parent), about how they felt Dawn had managed the process of transition into her new role. The response

was mixed, but the majority of those I met were extremely positive about Dawn, who was spending far more time with the girls and with parents than her predecessor had. I was told by one member of staff there was a sense that Dawn had “brought the school back to the children”.

However, some staff were uneasy with the pace of change, which they felt was too rapid (despite Dawn’s intention, stated prior to taking up the appointment, to pace change carefully). Dawn was also prepared to hold staff to account, and it was observed that while the previous head had been quite happy for staff to leave at 4pm, Dawn’s expectations were different. She was also keen to engage classroom assistants in staff meetings and parents’ evenings, and this was causing consternation in some quarters, as it was not what the school staff were used to. Conflicting role expectations (of their own roles in addition to the head’s) were coming into play, here.

The Director of Studies was particularly critical of the pace and manner of change, and she appeared a strong character who was influencing others, including the deputy. She said she felt Dawn was making change “for change’s sake”, the pace of this change was too rapid and Dawn was not listening sufficiently and taking into account her new school’s context. She felt gestures towards consultation were only paying “lip service” and there was no real dialogue. She was not feeling valued by Dawn, and told me others felt similarly.

The Director of Studies used as an example Dawn’s changing a letter to parents that went out with end of term reports, even though the letter used by her predecessor had, in the Director of Studies’ view, “worked perfectly well for the last eight years”. She felt the change was a mistake, and was not successful; in her words “chaos” ensued, though this was not something mentioned by anyone else. She was also offended when Dawn approached other staff for information she herself should supply, which she said was “embarrassing” both for her and for colleagues. Dawn had explained to me that she had done this as the Director of Studies was slow to supply information she had asked for, and she had decided to circumvent her, although Dawn realised in retrospect this did not show good judgement on her part.

The deputy echoed some of these concerns about the pace of change, although she conceded that, on at least one occasion, Dawn had introduced a change about which she had reservations, but it had worked well, and she had admitted that to Dawn afterwards. The deputy felt she was “having to put on the brakes” to stop Dawn moving too quickly, and she felt uncomfortable about this. She thought Dawn was underestimating how difficult some staff could be, and some were feeling “neglected, sidelined and put upon”. She also thought that Dawn had very definite ideas about how a school should be led and was finding the transition from deputy headship difficult.

On the other hand, several staff, the Chair of Governors, the overall head of the school and the parent I spoke to were glowing in their praise of the beginning Dawn had made. I was told of her assured handling of potentially challenging parents, her quick grasp of marketing and PR and her confident public presence. The phrase “breath of fresh air” was used by more than one respondent. One early challenge had been a full ISI inspection in the autumn term, and I was told Dawn had led the Junior School extremely well through this, being unfailingly positive, calm and receptive. In this respect Dawn’s experience and approach echoed Sally’s at the time of her own school’s inspection.

Dawn could see the way in which she was working was different from her predecessor, and this had been positive in some ways but challenging for staff in others, as they had to readjust their expectations of how things would be done. On the positive side, Dawn felt she was more open and collaborative. However, Dawn recognised that if staff are accustomed to a more autocratic leader, sometimes they are uneasy when asked for their views, and need to develop confidence and build trust before they will readily share. There was a quiet determination in Dawn’s approach here, however. Like Olivia, she was committed to inhabiting the role and making it her own, rather than leading as her predecessor had done, and as some members of staff would prefer her to do. Openly recognising she was different from her predecessor was a specific strategy Dawn had adopted, saying in her very first staff meeting, “ ‘The last head was excellent, she did an excellent

transfer, but I'm not her. I'm never going to be her. I'm not going to try to be her. All I can say to you is that I am myself, and I will do my very best' ”.

The previous head had spent much of her time in her office, and if she wished to speak to staff, girls or parents, they were summoned to her. Dawn was out and about, visible and approachable, getting into classrooms and into the playground, where she chatted informally to parents at the beginning and end of the day. Parents found this reassuring. I was told that some staff, however, were feeling they were less important to the incoming head than parents were.

In terms of change, Dawn could see that, despite her intention to manage any change carefully and slowly, the very fact a new head has arrived was something of a culture shock to members of the school community, “Because you're new, you're going to be different. You don't come in with the intention of changing things. But just by your very nature you are going to be perceived as being different”. This echoes Olivia's words when she spoke of not fully realising how sensitive staff are to a change of head. Both Olivia and Dawn also recognised that, despite a new head's intention not to rush into change, and even if they have inherited a reasonably successful smooth-running operation, nevertheless things emerge which they need to review and perhaps adjust at an early stage of their tenure: in Dawn's words, “Straight away you're looking at things, you're reviewing...and you're saying, 'Well, shall we change that?' ”

Assumptions and pre-conceptions (on both sides) meant there had been awkward moments, and one had arisen with the deputy. Dawn had worked to build a constructive relationship with her deputy, informed by her own, more negative and frustrating experience of the head/deputy relationship. She was sharing information openly, determined they would work together. However, Dawn described one salutary experience:

There was one example of where people's perceptions are so important. While I was perceiving myself as being very open and wanting to be involved, my deputy perceived a situation as very threatening and intimidating. It was in preparation for the Harvest Festival. There was a practice scheduled on the timetable. I'd actually made sure I could go along. So I literally just sat at the back and was enjoying it and just being part of it. But afterwards it came

out when I next saw the deputy that she'd actually felt really really threatened and didn't see it as support, and hadn't felt she was still in charge and didn't know what to do, and didn't know what to say, and whether I was going to say everything. And again it was probably the way that it had been handled by the previous head who'd wanted to – if she was there, she was the person in charge whereas I was, deliberately, even in my body language, was stepping back.

Dawn realised from this experience that “my idea of valuing people, wanting to be open, some are actually perceiving as threatening”, and she recognised the need carefully to examine some of her own pre-conceptions about how others might respond to her leadership style. She had discussed this openly with the deputy after the event, “ ‘In future you'll always know it's not me judging you.’ ” Dawn was keen to communicate her expectations clearly, but she was also committed to doing the job the way she felt it should be done, rather than following her predecessor's line, definitely role-making rather than role-taking.

Dawn talked of the importance of building the confidence and competence of others, delegation and trust. She recognised she could not do everything herself. She believed the previous head had been quite controlling. Dawn felt she was trying to re-educate the staff that there were other, to her, better, ways of working. She was keen to delegate and use others' strengths. This dovetails with Sally, Peter and Robert's views of leadership empowering others; Dawn's motivation, like Sally's and Peter's, was to build the confidence of individuals and therefore the capacity of the staff as a whole, in order to benefit individuals and the school.

Dawn's relationship with the Director of Studies continued to be challenging, and she was meeting significant resistance. She felt she was having to be cautious as there were occasions when “it feels as though I'm being set up”; the Director of Studies' lack of co-operation and support could be actively damaging rather than simply inconvenient. This recalled Sally's fears that her predecessor was setting her up to fail. Dawn did not feel she had handled the situation as well as she could have done, and needed perhaps to be more assertive and manage the confrontation rather than trying to avoid it. Like Olivia, Dawn demonstrated she



was reflective, aware and constructively self-critical. If she made a mistake she was keen to learn from it and do better in future.

Reflecting on the difference between being a deputy and a head, Dawn looked back at her first term in the head's role and recognised she needed to leave operational detail to her deputy, stepping back from her own previous role where "I organised everything...It's been a case of realising – trust your deputy, she's able to do it, let her get on with it". Letting go can be a challenge, particular for the highly organised and efficient. Similarly, Dawn was getting used to working with a PA, a new situation for her, and the PA shared with me that there were occasions in the early weeks when Dawn would prompt her about a task when the PA did not need to be reminded, but she recognised this was simply initial nervousness about a perceived lack of control, combined with increased responsibility. Her PA felt Dawn had gradually become accustomed to this and the relationship between them had become easier as a result.

Dawn realised how much she had learnt since taking up the role. Although she felt her experience as a deputy, and, even more so, her experience as a senior teacher prior to this, had helped prepare her in a number of ways for her current responsibility, nevertheless, "As a deputy you think, 'Oh, I'm running the school while the head's away. That's fine – I can do this!' but it's only truly when you become a head that you realise that, actually, there is so much more to the role that nobody's ever told you about".

Dawn felt she had prepared as thoroughly as she could, in advance of taking up the post, making the most of her lead-in period despite her current head being reluctant to release her from her deputy responsibilities. However, Dawn felt that, ultimately, a new head has to experience the role in order to continue their learning, "There comes a point where you have read everything you could possibly read... You've done all the background you can, you've met the staff – there comes a point where you have to – day one, and you actually learn the job from the experience of doing it".

With the exception of the Director of Studies, who was dealing with her own disappointment at not being appointed and was therefore perhaps pre-disposed to be critical, and the deputy who seemed to be strongly influenced by the Director of Studies, the staff, parents and governors I met were positive and enthusiastic about the beginning Dawn had made. Her concern for the pupils (“my girls”) was paramount, and Dawn saw headship as offering her the opportunity to make a difference to the life of these pupils on a wider scale than she had been able to do at any other stage of her career. Her experience as a deputy had been particularly frustrating, and she was enjoying the autonomy of her new role, despite the challenges inherent in taking everyone with her, especially in the light of resistance from some on her senior team, and the increased workload. However, Dawn was wholly positive about her experience so far, relishing the early months of headship and looking forward to the future.

## ***WILLIAM***

### *The lead up to the headship appointment*

William’s sights were set on headship from the time he joined the teaching profession, “I suppose I always had at the back of my head that ultimately I would like to run a school in due course”. In this he recalls Robert and Peter – a clear early-career focus on proceeding to headship which my three female participants did not share. William thought he would be a more successful head having had a range of leadership experiences beforehand. He felt he had learnt a significant amount about leadership from each of his different roles, and even as a Middle Leader was keen to be involved in initiatives beyond his department, such as staff appraisal, which enabled him to develop a whole-school perspective.

From the time he had taken up his deputy role in his current school, there had been the sense William was actively preparing for headship, with the full support and encouragement of his head. Even at interview, this head said he expected William might move to headship after five years. William and the head had both been mindful of any opportunities his current role had offered him to develop his skills and ready himself for future challenges, and William was appreciative of the

grounding he had had as a deputy, a similar view to that expressed by Olivia, Sally and Peter. As deputy William had been confronted with some difficult governance, child protection and staffing issues, and working alongside his highly experienced head and other capable senior leaders had been a productive and positive opportunity to develop his leadership skills. He said he had been exposed to both operational and strategic challenges and had built his knowledge of, for example, financial management and marketing. William believed having the whole-school perspective a deputy has was a very good preparation for taking the next step.

William felt he was very much ready for headship, was looking forward to the challenge and had a carefully worked-out philosophy (which he articulated clearly) about how he wanted to use the lead-in period to give him the most positive start, and what he hoped to achieve once in post. He felt he had perhaps reached a plateau in his current position and was ready to step up to the next level, “Ultimately everything I do here, there is always a safety blanket, and in some ways I’m quite looking forward to having the buck stop with me, scary as that is on occasions.” Peter had expressed a similar concern that a deputy could reach a plateau after a number of years in post, with the attendant fear that, without a positive change, there might actually be a decline in performance and in job satisfaction.

The difference between the roles of deputy and head is, of course, part of the appeal to those preparing to move up to the position of school leader. William described this appeal, as far as he was concerned, “The fundamental thing is that you can really change things when a head....To actually be the initiator...and to allow those things to then flow is a very exciting prospect.” The sense of forward momentum and the importance of vision recalled comments made by Olivia, Sally, Peter and Dawn.

William’s readiness for the new challenge was confirmed by those with whom he worked most closely, including his current head and fellow deputy who commented that William, by the time of my first visit and several months following his successful headship interview, was already “seeing things from a head’s perspective”. Similar comments had been made by colleagues of Olivia, Sally and

Peter. Another senior colleague said William might well miss some elements of his current school experience, but was “sufficiently realistic to accept and embrace the sacrifices moving to headship will involve.”

In terms of his conception of headship, William articulated the importance of “identifying what you are, what you want to be, how you project that out there, and then get people on board and get people working to the same messages”. He felt the school to which he was going was the right school for him, despite other applications and disappointments. He knew the school, and what his predecessor had achieved there, and found the ambiance and ethos appealing. When probed to articulate this further William spoke of the “groundedness” of students and staff, the “vibrant feel” and enthusiasm for learning. This tied in with his own educational philosophy and priorities about the primacy of teaching and learning, and having high aspirations. William said it was important to him that he and the school were a good “match”, “It’s crucial that a school is right for you and you’re right for the school...because everything you do day in day out is projecting that”. William had, for example, been keen to move to a school that was predominantly boarding, as this was a particular passion of his. William’s comments about being an authentic leader recalled similar statements by Olivia, Sally, Peter and Dawn.

William was aware the school to which he was moving was strong in many respects, financially stable so there were resources he could draw on, and it offered him the opportunity to consolidate strengths but also to develop in new ways, “All those ingredients would enable me to build on what’s there but also you’ve got the raw materials to then branch out into other directions”. He felt he would be able to make his mark there. His situation and outlook in this respect recalled Peter’s, who was moving to a similar school.

William described the elation he experienced when he was initially offered the post in the school with which he felt a strong “affinity”, and then the process of moving from initial elation to a considered reflection of the nature of the task ahead. He described the process as passing through “euphoria, calm measured contemplation, consultation and then familiarisation” as he progressed from the

initial journey to headship into the period of preparation and anticipation before he formally took up the role.

### *The lead-in period*

William was systematic about how he managed this lead-in period, and talked of his strategy in terms of the “three Rs”, a framework he had developed for himself, which involved “reaffirming, reassuring and then reviewing”. He was aware of potential anxiety among students, parents, governors and staff who might feel the new head was going to “pull everything apart that people have bought into”, but, at the same time, he recognised, “there are things that need doing”.

William had used this “three Rs” mantra during the headship appointment process, and, having achieved success, was keen to build on this and formulate, articulate and implement a philosophy to guide him through the lead-in period and into his first months as head. He was supported by the outgoing head and the Governing Body drawing up what they called a Familiarisation Plan to provide a structure to the year before William took up the role. He was involved in making key appointments, including the bursar, pastoral deputy and chaplain. He spent time talking to staff and starting to build constructive relationships with those alongside whom he would be working. His predecessor was reluctant to allow him to meet students, and William accepted that, although building relationships with students was important to him. It therefore became a priority in his first term as head.

William was aware he was in a number of respects quite different from his predecessor, who was retiring after leading the school for 21 years. William had respect and admiration for this head who had, among other achievements, built the school’s academic profile and significantly developed the physical site. He described this predecessor as “not a complacent man...but the school does need some fresh eyes, I think”. William considered the outgoing head “an old style headmaster” who had never, for example, expressed interest in marketing, and whose involvement in strategy was minimal. William believed strategy was important as every school needed to have a sense of direction. However, like Olivia

and Peter, William felt the current lack of a clear strategy offered a valuable opportunity to an incoming head to help shape the vision and make their mark.

William felt the school was in some ways a little regional and parochial in its approach, and he wanted to promote “a greater sense of global connection”. He believed that, in preparing students to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this wider outlook was necessary, “Increasingly they’re not up against somebody from the school down the road or the other end of the country. They’re up against guys from Shanghai or Mumbai”. William had his eye on the future. His predecessor, in contrast, had never used a computer.

However, William felt his predecessor was welcoming and supportive, and their initial meetings post-appointment were positive and productive. There had been an agreement that William would not visit the school in the summer term, “to give the outgoing head his final term without me popping up”, although there were planned meetings with some staff and governors off-site at this time. William could see the outgoing head becoming “very emotional” as the time came for him to leave. In fact, William did visit the school mid-way through the summer term, as there had been staff he had not had the opportunity to meet on his previous visit whom he felt he needed to see, and this caused his predecessor to have what William called “a little wobble”. William felt he managed to clear the air when he subsequently explained why he thought his visit was necessary. This recalled the “awkwardness” expressed by Olivia and Sally: where is the power base during this lead-in period? It is notable that William was sufficiently assertive to do what he felt he needed to do in order to establish himself, and to justify it to his predecessor afterwards, trying to address the outgoing head’s concerns, rather than allowing the outgoing head to dictate exactly what William should do. He was already engaging in the process of role-making rather than contenting himself with role-taking.

William’s relationship with the governors, in particular the Chair of Governors and his deputy, was firmly established during this period, and initial meetings with governors to discuss school strategy were held during this time. William expressed his determination to keep his counsel in these meetings. He was eager to get to

know others and find out what they thought, but circumspect where his own views were concerned. He said he was fully aware some might expect him to have a clear sense of direction for the next five years, and to be able to articulate this forcefully and coherently in the months prior to taking up post. However, he was keen not to be bounced into passing judgement too early – whether that was in response to pressure from governors, from staff, from current or prospective parents or from feeder school heads. William claimed that, although he was learning a considerable amount during this lead-in period, his understanding of the character and needs of the school was only just beginning to be formed, and he felt precipitate judgements might be unhelpful.

Other key relationships William was keen to build were with his senior team, including a highly experienced deputy and Director of Studies, whose judgement and experience he trusted and on whom he felt he could rely for “wise counsel”. Neither had applied for the post. William felt confident there existed complementarity of skills and temperaments across the senior team. He described the deputy, for example, as “a good foil for me”. William used the words “pure gold” to describe these established senior leaders at the time of our first interview, and said he considered himself “blessed” in this. This was a view he expressed on each of the three occasions I met him.

As other participants described, one challenge in the lead-in period is balancing the growing preoccupation with the demands and opportunities of the new role against the pressures of current responsibilities. When, in the first interview, I asked whether being appointed to headship had made William feel differently in his current role, I was thinking perhaps of the increased confidence and self-assurance that might come from being successfully promoted. Interestingly, William’s response, “Am I a lame duck President?” reflected his concern he might be seen as less effective in his deputy role as a result of being drawn towards headship. This involved time out of school for visits to his new school, or simply being distracted and preoccupied with concerns relating to future challenges. He was anxious he should not be seen as less committed to his current responsibilities, “I hope I haven’t been perceived as being less engaged or energetic”. In this,

William showed a similar conviction to Olivia, Sally, Peter and Dawn – and a dramatic contrast to Robert.

This anxiety to be seen to be effective in his deputy role continued throughout this period, and was discussed fully in our second interview towards the end of the summer term. William explained the strategies he had adopted to ensure all went smoothly for his successor, and for his current school. He was determined his moving should cause minimum disruption to staff and students he cared deeply about. William recognised the importance of a smooth handover to his successor, and the building of a bridge between his time as deputy and what came after he had moved on, so staff and students did not suffer from the hiatus, a preoccupation he shared with Olivia. Putting measures in place to achieve this helped William feel confident he was doing a conscientious job to the end, and helped him manage potential feelings of guilt at leaving, mid-stream, students and staff who might be working through an issue. He described to me a conversation he had with his current head when he said, “I don’t want to appear to be ducking things...Please be honest if you think I’m dropping or missing things.”

William recognised his successor would make his mark, “I’m pleased the person we’ve appointed I think is going to be really good... I mean he’s obviously different but I think he is probably what the school needs now going forwards – a different set of eyes”, a similar view to that expressed by Peter when he reflected on how his successor might be different from him, and this could be a positive thing for the school.

William was, in many respects, attempting to control the process of transition carefully, but still conceded, “it probably gets increasingly hard to focus at one end or the other”. Occasionally he felt he was asked to make decisions when he did not have the experience, awareness of context or time to do so and he found that difficult. His experience mirrored Peter’s. However, William felt sufficiently confident to explain to the outgoing head, governors and senior team his reservations about making such early decisions during the lead-in period.



During the months prior to taking up the headship William felt that in his deputy role he was scrutinising challenges and considering how he would respond were he the head. He felt he had done this throughout his deputy headship, but, “Now it’s much more focussed, it’s sharper, because I know that six months down the line, whenever, I will be having to make those decisions”. His knowledge of the school to which he was moving also developed as time passed and William felt able to “confirm things [which] crystallized or informed what I’d already thought” which he found reassuring. This developing depth of understanding over time was something to which both Olivia and Sally referred.

William, like Peter, was aware he was also transplanting his family – his wife who was happy and settled in their current location and three children who would be leaving friends and starting new schools. He spoke of the “psychological transition” in addition to the practical tasks of finding schools and moving house. William was aware that sometimes, when he was feeling stressed, his wife would bear the brunt of his anxiety – offloading at home meant he was better able to present a calm and controlled professional front. The pressure of making the transition had exacerbated that.

William talked of simultaneous feelings of eager anticipation and trepidation as his move became imminent, “You’ve got that growing ball of anxiety...because suddenly it’s all becoming very real and the expectation to deliver is there. But at the same time...yeah! I’m buzzing!” Like Peter and Sally, the combination of nervousness and excitement characterised the final stage of William’s lead-in period.

#### *The early months of headship*

A change of head might be seen as an apposite time to re-examine the school’s vision and values. William observed in our second meeting, “It certainly struck me that the school is very much at a big question mark as to what next. I suppose in part that’s because there’s a change of head”. William and the governors were keen to begin their work together by ensuring there was a coherent understanding within and beyond the school community of what the school stood for and where it

was heading. In William's words, "We've got to nail down the four or five key things we're going to put on the flags above the castle turrets", recalling Peter's reflections on the five key elements of an education at his school. Much of the first term following William's arrival as head was dedicated to an extensive consultation about this, involving all groups within the school community. William was keen then to move from an articulation of the school's vision to an examination of "core behaviours" and how to ensure the vision is "lived" in the day-to-day practices of the school. Discussion with William's colleagues at the time of my visit to his new school suggested this process of guided reflection, encouraging introspection and inviting criticism, was found uncomfortable by some. It also involved a significant number of meetings and discussion. Managing this alongside all the other activities of a large and busy day and boarding school was proving to be testing for all concerned.

Although the Director of Studies was in many respects positive about William's first term as head, when referring to the process of consultation William had led the school through he used the term "navel gazing", which perhaps suggested his own enthusiasm for the process was muted. He observed there was a feeling in some camps that the school was already highly successful and "tampering with what works could be dangerous". He described William as having considerably greater social skills than the previous head, but the term he used to describe this was "schmoozing", a word which does not necessarily have positive connotations, and which could suggest something superficial and manipulative about William's desire to build positive relationships with all members of the school community. The incoming bursar, appointed by William, who had taken up his post the term before, had caused some consternation in his determination to make early significant changes, and it was clear that both the Director of Studies and deputy had concerns about the balance of power between new head and new bursar. Although William had consistently been glowing in his praise of his senior team, in my discussions with them there was a suggestion of some tension in the relationships between them and the new head, and between them and the incoming bursar.

William had opted to teach (Year 9, the 13 year olds who had just joined the school) and was also setting aside time to meet all teaching staff and key support staff, and weekly slots when he could walk the school and call in to lessons. He wanted staff to become used to him being a presence around the school, including in classrooms, and felt this would be a key way in which he built relationships and took the temperature of the school whose leadership he had assumed. William felt staff had generally coped well with this, and some had positively appreciated his interest. His commitment to seeing as much extra-curricular activity as possible had certainly been well-received.

William considered his first priority was to build relationships. He was committed to being visible and approachable, and staff appeared to have responded positively and candidly; on the day I visited William told me of a disgruntled member of staff who had been to see him to say she was “pissed off” with one of his decisions. William felt it was perhaps surprising a colleague would use such out-spoken language with a new head; he could not imagine that term being used to his predecessor. However, William explained to her that he was pleased she had been to see him and had been honest about her frustrations. This enabled him to discuss the issue with her, rectify some misunderstanding and address her concerns. He wanted staff to be open and frank with him and, despite being a little taken aback by her choice of language, cited this as a positive example of his developing relationship with staff.

Meeting parents at, for example, sporting events, was important to William both in terms of building relationships, winning their confidence and earning trust, but also in terms of reinforcing his knowledge base. When we met, William had just had a difficult conversation with disgruntled parents, but considered the fact he had had so much parental interaction since the start of the year had strengthened his position, as he had been able to refer to “other perspectives” gleaned from his contact with parents so far. William said he was keen not to seem dismissive of the disgruntled parents’ concerns or their child’s point of view, but he felt putting this into a wider context and presenting other parental views might help them move towards a resolution of the issue.

William's wife spoke of some tension between the personal and professional, and how she was having to be quite assertive in insisting William tried to switch off, once at home, including literally by disconnecting from the electronic devices linking him to school concerns and personnel. She felt her priority was the family. William was having to balance his professional and his personal relationships and responsibilities. She saw her role as to support him but to keep him grounded and, at times, to remind him of the world beyond headship, which can become, she realised, all-consuming.

The Chair of Governors spoke about the difference between William and his predecessor and, in his view, William emerged very positively from the contrast – approachable, straightforward, human and visible, with good commercial awareness and a forward-thinking approach to all elements of running a school. The Chair found dealing with William “a breath of fresh air” in comparison to his predecessor, a phrase also used by those I met when I visited Dawn. Latterly, in particular, the outgoing head had not been easy to work with. William had already told me that the head and the previous bursar had been in constant conflict, and this had inevitably caused tensions. Having a new head and a new bursar who saw eye to eye was transformative, from the governors' perspective.

The deputy also observed that the comparison between these two heads was key, and that it highlighted both William's strengths, and his areas for development. In terms of the latter, he felt William did not have the literary or public speaking skills of his predecessor, but he could see these might develop in time, and, following a recent meeting between William and parents which he had also attended, he had commented, “ ‘You really were starting to sound like a head, then!’ ”

He also commented on how difficult the outgoing head had found it to hand over the leadership of the school, to the extent that, following the first round of interviews, he had contacted the Chair of Governors to say he felt none of those longlisted were capable of doing the job, and they should abort the selection process and give the job to the deputy, who had not, in fact, applied for it. William was not aware of this.

Reflecting on his first term of headship, William's conclusion was that the experience had been "around 80%/85% frenetic fun! And 15% thereabouts severe headaches". Early unanticipated difficulties had included a sensitive and potentially damaging safeguarding issue and a flood of part of the site. As with other participants, however, dealing with the unexpected and challenging had offered the new head the chance to show his mettle, and this had the potential to transform a difficulty into an opportunity.

William said he could see what you do in the first year of headship, for example attending many extra-curricular events to build relationships, show interest and tune into the life of the school, can then become what you do throughout your time as head. With respect to being a presence around the school, William claimed, "I would like that to be the kind of thing I do, actually, because I think if you're making a decision on things you need to have your finger on the pulse". He had been told the pupils had warmed to him, and found that reassuring, because "I'm only being who I am". This idea of having integrity and being true to yourself was something Olivia, Sally, Peter and Dawn had also been keen to articulate. Authenticity as a leader was something each claimed to be important to them. This was not something that featured in Robert's reflections on headship.

William had clearly formulated views of the type of school leader he was determined to be: visible, accessible, responsive. He had used his lead-in time productively and this had given him confidence. He felt, at the start of his second term of headship, he was able to start to lead in the way he wanted to lead. "And when I leave the house each morning to walk to school I feel energised. I feel positive and I look forward to the challenge". Despite the demands of headship, and the "15% severe headaches", William was emphatic about how much he was relishing the experience.

### ***Concluding comments***

Each of these six cases of transition is different, reflecting the temperament of the incoming head and their different contexts: their relationship with the head in the school where they are a deputy; how well-prepared they feel as they step up to

headship; their relationship with their predecessor; and the situation and emerging needs of the school they join as school leader. However, there are a number of consistent threads across the six sets of experience.

Reflecting on the lead up to successful appointment to headship, all six participants consider their motivation and preparation for the new role. There are distinctions, here: reference to power and status and proving oneself; other references to power related specifically to having the capacity to make a positive difference to the lives of staff and pupils; references to vision, and to forward movement; references to personal and professional development, to care and responsibility. However, all these heads-elect are going through the process of considering what headship means to them, how their current and earlier roles have prepared them to make the role transition and to step up to the new challenge, and how, perhaps, there is a danger that, without future fresh challenge, their career might reach a plateau and become less successful and satisfying. There is also a focus on the sense of match, and how far the role and school they move to fits their skills and temperament.

During the lead-in period, all reflect on key differences between the roles of deputy and head, and how they can best prepare to make this transition, including strengthening areas they consider less well-developed, and tuning in to the new school context. They build relationships, invest time and energies in knowing and being known. They “build up a picture”, in Robert’s words.

Challenges include preparing to leave their current role well, handing over their deputy responsibilities to their successor, while simultaneously preparing to begin their new role well. They attempt to balance their pressured current role with the increasing demands made by the school to which they are moving, being sufficiently, but not overly, involved in the school where their predecessor remains head until the end of August, and negotiating an occasionally awkward, at times even hostile, relationship with this outgoing head. They are called upon to calibrate what Peter calls the “tipping scale”.

In their first months in post, these new heads negotiate possibly conflicting role expectations, their own and those of members of the school community they have joined, attempting to remain true to themselves and keeping a focus on the head they hope to be (in several cases distinctly different from the head they have succeeded). Now “sitting in the chair”, as Peter calls it, they find out what it means to “be the head, not just to do the job”, in Sally’s words. They are all called upon to deal with the unexpected; in some cases re-examining their own, or others’ prior assumptions; in other cases facing serious unanticipated challenges. In meeting such challenges, however, they are offered the opportunity to show their mettle and to begin to make the job their own. They both inherit the role from their predecessor (role-taking), and inhabit the role (role-making), and attempt to find a workable balance between the two. They face up to the legacy of this predecessor, in some cases addressing challenges created or left unresolved by outgoing heads who have themselves been negotiating role transition and dealing with role discontinuity. They begin to establish themselves as the leader of their new school community.

## CHAPTER 5

### *DISCUSSION*

In this chapter I relate the findings from ‘Six cases of transition’ to my original research questions:

What is the nature of the transition experienced by deputies moving to their first school headship? Specifically:

- What are the key challenges of making the transition to first-time headship in the independent sector?
- What strategies do these new heads generate or access as they face these challenges?

I firstly revisit the literatures discussed in ‘Mapping the field’ to establish the landscape within which my research is situated, before going on to explore the conceptual and contextual significance of what my study has to say about the transition to headship. I build towards the overarching key message emerging from my research, and the three sub-findings which sit beneath this, which encapsulate my contribution to the field.

The literatures on transition to headship, and on role theory related to the experience of transition, show how leadership is crucial to school effectiveness and positive pupil outcomes (Leithwood et al, 2006), and the headteacher is particularly important in setting the tone and driving the vision (Earley and Weindling, 2004).

The role of headteacher has become more demanding over time, as responsibilities, expectations and accountability have increased (Kelly and Saunders, 2010). New headship is especially challenging as incoming heads lack experience and, as a consequence, confidence (Thomson, 2009), and both have to be built over time.

Researchers chart how schools are experiencing a shortfall in the number of senior leaders stepping forward to be heads, set against the number of vacancies arising as heads reach retirement age, or opt to leave early (Cranston, 2007). The perceived intense demands of headship may deter senior leaders from moving into



the role, which can be seen as a high-pressure, high-risk position; when schools experience difficulties, often the headteacher is an early casualty. In both state and independent schools, heads are being replaced if academic standards, inspection outcomes, financial stability or numbers on roll significantly decline.

When the head changes, the school community they join also changes, as incoming head, and school, adjust to new roles and relationships (Matthews and Crow, 2003). Inevitably, a new head will differ in some respects from their predecessor(s), and the school community's expectations of how a head should and will behave are often based on the norms established by the previous incumbent(s) (Loder and Spillane, 2005). Socialisation is therefore a reciprocal and complex process, as new head and school begin to re-educate each other about how the role should be enacted. Role conflict may have to be addressed.

New heads do not inherit a blank canvas, and need to tune into the specific context of the schools whose leadership they have assumed, negotiating possibly conflicting role expectations as they manage both the role transition and the legacy of their predecessor(s) (Yukl, 1989). If they have latterly occupied a deputy role, they will have had opportunity to experience the role of the head, practising and honing their skills while deputising for their current head (Earley and Weindling, 2007). However, filling a substantive headship role may surprise and test them in unanticipated ways as they move from an often predominantly operational deputy role to an all-encompassing and potentially overwhelming headship role (Shoho et al, 2010).

The literatures outlining the main challenges of new headship include the identity work of adopting and adapting to a new professional persona (Earley et al, 2011). There may be tension between the values and principles of the new head and the reality of the job they are now called upon to carry out in this specific context (Cheung and Walker, 2006), and they may experience shocks and surprises along the way. They may also have to deal with feelings of isolation (Draper and McMichael, 2000) as they strive to establish new working relationships and build high performing teams. They have to manage workload – not simply in terms of time pressures but also with respect to the emotional demands placed on them

and the difficult decisions they are called upon to make (Walker and Qian, 2006). During the lead-in period before officially taking up the post, building the most constructive relationship with the outgoing head should help them to make a positive beginning, but, although they have to negotiate this relationship to the best of their ability, they may not be able fully to control it (Forrester and Gunter, 2010). The outgoing head is also navigating role discontinuity and may be experiencing role ambiguity and role conflict in the process (Rhodes et al, 2009).

In terms of support, the literatures detail how formal preparation programmes (Cowie and Crawford, 2009), followed by flexible, ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities (Bush, 2013b), can help fledgling heads build their skills, competence and confidence over time. New heads will have learnt from role models (negative and positive) and mentors throughout their career (Bush, 2008), and will have established networks which offer the chance to reflect, share and learn with and from others who have managed, or who are currently experiencing, a similar professional transition (Bush, 2015c). Their prior experience, including as a deputy who steps up in the absence of the head, will have given them insights and, perhaps, confidence in their capacity to learn and grow into the new role (Peterken, 2012). The lead-in period offers them the “positioning space” (Gronn and Lacey, 2004) within which to try out, rehearse and refine their skills. When they officially step into the role they continue to develop and consolidate these skills as they learn from the members of their new school community. Ultimately, they may learn how to be a head by being a head (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006).

The issues to be addressed include how to ensure we have sufficient understanding of the process of transition from deputy to head to enable us fully to prepare and support future aspiring heads. This might help us establish how we can better secure the retention and recruitment of heads by customising such preparation and support to meet their changing needs over time. My research focusses on what can be learnt from exploring and analysing the experience of transition (charted as it happens rather than recalled retrospectively), tapping into the perceptions of deputies making this transition, informed by shadowing and observation as they go through this process, and seen within the context of the views of those who know

them best. Such studies could lead to a greater understanding of “what leaders are, why and by whom they are shaped into what they are and how they become leaders” (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002:362).

The connections between the six cases in my study give some indication of what is distinctive about the process of moving from deputy headship to headship, features of the experience not necessarily dependent on the temperaments and skills of the individual making the move, or their specific context. In addition to such connections, distinct differences between the experiences of the six participants also emerge and merit careful consideration with respect to what they tell us about the nature of this transition.

Based on the experiences of my participants, three elements of the transition appear to be particularly significant, and I consider them in turn: firstly the importance of the lead-in period; secondly the relationship with the outgoing head, and thirdly managing unexpected challenges, including navigating reciprocal socialisation, as incoming heads learn to become a head by being a head.

### ***The lead-in period***

As Weindling and Earley (1987) observed, in terms of the opportunity it offers these leaders to learn, build relationships and establish their authority as the incoming head of the school, fully and productively utilising the lead-in period between being appointed and formally taking up the role was a key issue for all these heads-elect. Olivia, for example, talked of the opportunity this time gave her just to be seen by staff and girls so they felt more secure. This sense of increasing visibility and building confidence (the participant’s self-confidence and winning the trust of those across and beyond the school community) was commented on by all these incoming heads.

Involvement in the research heightened my participants’ sense of the importance of this period, as we talked at our first meeting about how they were planning to make use of this time, at our second meeting about how it was progressing and at our third and final meeting about how far, in retrospect, they felt it had been

helpful. One of the key learning points from the project was an awareness of how much ground can be covered by heads-elect if this period is well-planned and productively utilised. Robert talked of “building up a picture” as he spent time each day checking the website of the school to which he was moving, looking at other local schools’ websites to compare them and tuning into the regional context and the strength of the local competition. This kind of developing familiarity with the local context, as described by Wildy and Clark (2008), was particularly relevant to those making a significant move geographically.

The lead-in period presented these heads-elect with opportunities and challenges. Firstly, in terms of opportunities, participants were able to increase their learning: about the role of head, both in terms of specific areas of responsibility, and in terms of their capacity to step into this role; and about the school they were joining and the particular issues they might need to address at an early stage of their tenure. This preparation therefore constituted both professional socialisation (learning about the role of the head), and organisational socialisation (learning about the specific contextual needs of the school to which they were moving), (Walker and Qian, 2006; Bengtson et al, 2013).

In terms of professional socialisation, participants undertook specific training during the lead-in time, for example Dawn’s child protection training. Five of the six attended new heads’ induction programmes organised by ISC headteacher associations. One undoubted benefit of these programmes is the opportunity they afford to build links with fellow deputies/new heads, a useful support network for the future (Bridges, 2001). All five participants who had undertaken this training (only Dawn was unable to complete it prior to taking up headship), attested to its impact.

Some of these deputies made a conscious effort to tap into the expertise and advice of staff in their current school, for example in marketing, finance, putting together a business case for a capital development project, and fuller involvement in the Early Years Foundation Stage. This presented an opportunity to secure a

more confident understanding of different aspects of school leadership. Robert was alone in not using the time in this way.

There was in several cases a heightened awareness of the perspective of the head for these heads-elect as they fulfilled their deputy responsibilities, an element of leadership preparation commented on by Earley and Weindling,(2004). William described how he was more focussed on the head's point of view since being successfully appointed to headship and how, when discussing issues within the senior team, he found himself considering more carefully what he would do, were he already in the head's role.

As Cranston (2007) observed, and the bursar in Robert's school described, these fledgling heads were also trying out a new professional persona. Several of those I met in my first and second visits, including colleagues of Olivia, Sally, Peter and William, described how they had witnessed my participants starting to move away from their deputy persona and beginning to behave and sound more like these colleagues expected a headteacher would. The role conceptions of members of the school community were reflected in these comments about perceived differences in the attitude and approach of deputies, compared with heads. They referred to confidence, authority and initiative.

This recalls Gronn and Lacey's (2004:405) exploration of the "positioning space" as an "occupational safety zone" within which, as part of their anticipatory socialisation, actors rehearse likely future roles and undergo "the exploration of potential and possible selves". Learning about and rehearsing roles throughout this period was a key part of how my participants prepared to inhabit the new role, to make it their own and do all they could to ensure they were both accepted and respected by the new school community.

The learning these heads-elect were undergoing during the months leading up to officially assuming the role therefore covered factual, technical expertise but also their developing sense of the head's perspective and how to demonstrate the required confidence and assurance their new school community might expect from

its leader, reflecting the findings of Earley et al (2011). Robert encapsulated this when he talked of “beginning to think more like a head”.

Bengston et al’s (2013) reference to the importance of organisational socialisation was recalled during my participants’ lead-in period, as they learnt more about the schools they were joining, what was expected of them as incoming heads in that context and what the main issues and priorities were. There was the sense of consolidation and confirmation that Earley et al’s (2011) research participants also experienced. Olivia and Sally talked of clarifying their thinking about opportunities and challenges in later visits to the school during the months prior to formally assuming the role. In addition to increasing the participants’ confidence, however, in some cases building knowledge and a heightened sense of the challenges ahead also served to stimulate anxiety, recalling Cranston (2013), something to which Sally, Peter and William referred.

The lead-in period therefore also presented a number of challenges, as Kelly and Saunders (2010) outlined, and my participants had to devise strategies to help them to address these challenges. For example, participants were mindful of how they might be perceived in their deputy role once news they were to move on became public. William spoke of anxiety that he might be considered to be less effective in, or less committed to, his current role as a result of being drawn towards his new school and responsibilities. He was determined to do the best job he could until he left his deputy post, and spoke openly to his head about this. All participants except Robert expressed their dedication to their current job, despite their excitement about the future.

Robert felt increasingly uncomfortable about his diminishing authority and status, describing “the slow march to the door”, an experience he found disconcerting. Olivia and Peter, in contrast, described feeling energised and motivated in their deputy role, knowing they would soon be leaving it, and Peter explained how he was relishing those elements of his deputy role he knew were unlikely to feature in headship.

Perhaps ironically, despite bemoaning his diminishing status in his deputy role, Robert was keen to hand over as early as possible to his internally appointed successor as much work as he could, especially with respect to tasks he found onerous. The other participants who were handing over to a new deputy, whether internally appointed (Olivia) or externally (Peter and William) were keen to make this transition positive and smooth. Sally and Dawn were not being replaced as deputies at this time, which made the handover of their current responsibilities more problematic.

Without seeming not to be totally engaged, these outgoing deputies also had to prepare their school communities to do without them. There was recognition among my participants of the importance of building a bridge between their time as deputy and what came after they moved on, so staff and students did not suffer from the hiatus. William and Peter believed they had been caretakers of the deputy role for a finite period of time, and their successors might choose to do the job differently; each said they were comfortable with that. They recognised their school might be ready for a deputy with a different focus or skill set at the time of this handover. There is a parallel here with heads-elect succeeding a head who might, in a number of respects, be very different from them, as Crow observed (2007), and the school might be ready for that.

Putting in place measures which ensured continuity and a smooth handover to the new deputy helped participants feel confident they were doing a conscientious job, enabling them to manage potential feelings of guilt at leaving their current school. This was made a little easier for those whose successors had been internally appointed (Olivia and Robert), or where there had been some restructuring of responsibilities so that some of their duties were being assumed by senior colleagues (Peter). In this situation the process of handover could be an incremental process, rather than having to take place in specific blocks of time when an externally appointed deputy visited the school.

All participants recognised the potential for feelings of role conflict (Crow, 2007) as they balanced current and future responsibilities and straddled the deputy/head divide, and several found this increasingly difficult as the lead-in period progressed.

Ideally they wanted sufficient involvement in the school they were moving to, with the opportunity to establish themselves there, while respecting the fact that their predecessor was still leading that school. Peter described the experience in terms of a “tipping scale” with shifting focus and priorities as the lead-in period drew to an end and the time when you officially assumed the headteacher role approached.

In the case of William and, even more so, Peter, these heads-elect were being asked to make decisions they did not feel qualified to make before they had officially taken up the reins. In other cases, for example Robert’s and Sally’s, participants felt they were not being sufficiently involved in decisions being made, and this was found to be similarly frustrating and difficult to manage.

In terms of looking ahead to future challenges and opportunities once they formally took up their headship role, participants had to develop strategies during the lead-in period so they did not feel overwhelmed. They experienced considerable challenge in collating their views about what they were learning and future direction, about priorities and planning what they should initially spend time and energy on once formally in post. William built up a “grid of ideas” which he used to help him marshal and keep track of his thoughts about the future direction of travel. It helped him feel in control of the process. Participants also had to decide how much reading and research to do at this stage; what could wait until the summer holiday or later; what was pressing and what could be put on hold. Several talked of feeling overwhelmed and overloaded at times, which reflected the findings of Gladwin (2014), and having to make a conscious decision to leave certain things (for example reading, drafting copy for the marketing and admissions team) until they had finished for the summer. Compiling a to-do list for the summer (often to be tackled after they had had a proper break and a rest) helped clear their heads and made them feel more in control of the current and impending workload.

As these heads-elect both prepared for the future, while fulfilling a demanding and time-consuming deputy role and preparing to hand over this role to their successors, they were simultaneously “letting go” and “taking hold” (Southworth, 1995:21). Throughout this process, my participants’ relationships with the head in



the school where they were a deputy had a significant impact on them as they negotiated the delicate balancing act of fulfilling one demanding role while preparing for another, and as they increased their exposure in their new school. This connects with Cranston's (2007) research. Four participants had positive relationships with the heads of the schools where they were deputies, and this helped them manage the balance of competing priorities and occasional feelings of uncertainty about the process of doing so. William's, Olivia's, Robert's and Sally's current headteachers were positive about their deputy's promotion and a significant source of support as these deputies prepared to step up to headship. This was an example of what Peterken (2008:157) calls the "apprenticeship" model of headteacher preparation in the independent sector, which contrasts with the competency-based, externally certificated headship development characterised by the mandatory (at that time) completion of NPQH in the state sector.

Dawn's headteacher was not so supportive; he was grudging about her taking time out to visit her new school and felt her energies should be devoted to her deputy responsibilities. Peter, too, did not initially feel supported by his head. Their relationship had always been tense, and this seemed at first to be exacerbated by the fact that Peter was leaving to embark on a headship of his own. However, this relationship improved as the lead-in period progressed. It appeared the balance of power between head and deputy shifted following the deputy's appointment to his own headship, and this led to increased mutual respect.

The lead-in period ranged in length from 14 months to only five, but the length of time was less of an issue than how proactive and assertive these heads-elect were in making the best use of it, in conjunction with how welcoming and supportive their predecessors were, something to which Weindling and Earley (1987) also refer. Four of my research participants, Olivia, Peter, Dawn and William, felt they had been able to use this lead-in period constructively. In Robert's case, he had been reactive and recognised towards the end of the summer term that, compared with fellow heads-elect, including those he had met at the new heads' induction course, he had not taken full advantage of the lead-in time. In Sally's case,

although she was keen to prepare fully and be involved in the life of the school to which she was moving, her predecessor's hostility made this problematic.

So the lead-in period between being appointed to a headship and formally assuming the role is a challenging one to manage, as heads-elect perform a demanding job but, increasingly, feel pulled towards their new role, and role conflict may occur. They also experience role discontinuity (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003) as they move from a role in which they are secure and successful (even if some, for example Robert, are beginning to feel bored in this role – a role he feels he is outgrowing) and so leave “the cocoon of the familiar” (Draper and McMichael, 1998:204). With respect to Draper and McMichael's 'GLAD' model, these outgoing deputies need to be able to accept the losses that leaving this role behind necessitates, and detach themselves from the elements of deputy headship with which they may have been familiar and comfortable. The Registrar in the school where William took up headship said he was aware this new head was having to sacrifice the intimacy of relationships within school to have the greater distance required to be its leader, an example, perhaps, of role tension (Normore, 2004). At the same time, these heads-elect recognise the gains of the new role, and the attachment to new areas of responsibility, particularly having the opportunity to formulate and realise their vision, with the capacity to make a difference on a broader scale.

Pytel (2014:9), exploring the move to headship in the independent sector, talks of the transitional “void” in which he believes an incoming head can achieve very little. One of his three research participants says, of the move to first headship, “I wouldn't look to get into the school before your predecessor departs. I would keep communication with the senior management team at a minimum” (42). This echoes the view of one established independent school head interviewed by Carman (2013:32), who compares assuming headship to taking over the captancy of a ship: “You'll never step on board after you've gone, and you never step on board before you start. Don't ever try. It's only your ship on the basis of your office.”

Based on the experiences of my research participants, I would strongly disagree. The period in between being appointed and formally taking up the role offers crucial opportunities to begin to tune in to the new school context, to start to know and to be known. It is also a challenging time as the head-elect prepares to leave well (handing over their deputy head responsibilities and readying the school for their departure) while at the same time plans to begin well in their new role, preparing the school for their arrival (Southworth, 1995).

### ***The relationship with the outgoing head***

As my participants were managing role transition and dealing with role discontinuity, (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Loder and Spillane, 2005), their predecessors were going through the same process. In some cases they were managing heightened emotion as they retired at the end of a long and illustrious career, for example William's predecessor after 21 years of headship. There were elements of both "enchantment and disenchantment" (Rhodes et al, 2009:463) in these outgoing heads' perceptions of school leadership.

The dynamic between incoming and outgoing head can have a significant effect on the new head's management of the lead-in period and as they establish themselves in the early months of headship. It is significant with respect to how positive and supportive, or tense and challenging, their relationship is. In addition, the way the outgoing head enacted the role, and the legacy they left behind them, impinges on the way in which their successor enacts the role, recalling the findings of Forrester and Gunter (2010).

In this section I deal in turn with each of these aspects of the dynamic between my participants and their predecessors. The three stage research design enabled me to chart how participants managed tensions arising from this relationship and their predecessor's attitude to giving up the professional persona of the head of this school (in three cases, as they were moving to another headship), or, on retirement (in the other three cases), to releasing the persona of headteacher completely.

Across my six participants there was a range of experiences, and relationships between outgoing and incoming heads varied in terms of how positive or challenging they proved to be. Establishing yourself as head-elect without “stepping on the toes” (Dawn’s term) of the head who is leaving can be a delicate balancing act, an element of the transition to headship also explored by Stevenson (2006). Even when relationships between incoming and outgoing heads were relatively positive and harmonious, there could still be occasional tension and awkwardness, an issue raised by Olivia. Participants had to negotiate with the outgoing heads to address and resolve such tensions.

Sally had a particularly difficult relationship with her predecessor, who, dealing with her own anxieties about leaving, regarded the incoming head as something of an interloper and put up barriers rather than helping her build bridges. It appeared this outgoing head saw her successor as a threat, a possibility discussed by Walker and Qian (2006), which caused significant difficulties with respect to Sally using her lead-in time as positively and productively as she wished to, and the issues continued into Sally’s first term of headship, with the outgoing head’s use of the school head’s iPhone and email account.

Some participants were open with their predecessors about the issue of handover, for example Peter’s frank conversation where he made clear he would bow to the judgement of the outgoing head over how much or how little involvement he had in school life and decisions before the start of the autumn term. Peter was confronting the potential source of tension in an attempt to establish open negotiation about areas of responsibility and the degree of expected involvement of the incoming head. It was interesting that, if anything, this outgoing head began to share arguably too much as time passed; certainly in Peter’s view he was being consulted about operational decisions he felt were not sufficiently important. This contrasted dramatically with Robert, who believed his predecessor was keeping him at arm’s length and not involving him in significant decisions. Peter felt the school was involving him too readily; Robert felt his new school was keeping him at too great a distance and he felt uncomfortably detached. Incoming heads may be called upon to navigate either of these issues.

Of all six participants, Dawn was able to establish perhaps the most positive relationship with her predecessor. This was a relationship characterised by openness and warmth, a recognition the new head needed to build relationships with pupils, staff, governors and current parents and, crucially, prospective and new parents, including the parents of the autumn term intake of pupils, and the outgoing head could help with this. Dawn described how her predecessor believed the most important consideration was the school and safeguarding its smooth running and effective operation under her successor's tenure. Her own emotions and ego were definitely secondary to this. The handover process was therefore properly planned, carefully paced and responsive to the needs and wishes of the incoming head, the ideal scenario outlined by Draper and McMichael, 1998). Dawn felt she had been able to learn much from her predecessor.

So the relationship each incoming head was able to build with their predecessor had significant impact on my participants' experience of transition as they attempted to begin to establish themselves as the new school leader. Some of these relationships, such as Sally's, were particularly challenging. Others, such as Dawn's, were a source of support and encouragement. Most were somewhere on the spectrum in between.

In addition to the issue of the dynamic between the two, all participants were mindful of what they inherited from their predecessor (and earlier heads within the school to which they were moving) and how this impacted on their capacity to establish themselves and win the confidence of the different groups which make up the wider school community (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). Other staff were aware of this too, having experienced the before/after effect of my participants' arrival, in a way these new heads themselves could not fully appreciate.

Dawn addressed the issue of legacy directly when she told staff in the first staff meeting she thought her predecessor had done an excellent job, but she herself was different and she would not try to *be* the previous head. Her difficulty with the deputy head at the Harvest Festival rehearsal exemplified the fact that, even though she recognised she was different from her predecessor, there were still assumptions and expectations on both sides which could lead to tension.

Where these new heads were different from the heads they succeeded, they were offered a challenge: how could they establish themselves within a community where the norms of behaviour established by their predecessor exerted a strong influence on the community's role conceptions about headship (Loder and Spillane, 2005)? However, the difference between outgoing and incoming heads also offered these heads-elect an opportunity: how could they make the role their own, demonstrate their distinctive leadership style and begin to make their mark?

This illustrates the difference between "role-taking" and "role-making" (Hart, 1993; Matthews and Crow, 2003). To what extent do new heads simply step into the role vacated by their predecessor, taking on the role and inheriting that space? To what extent do they carve out a new space for themselves which reflects their own priorities and temperament, their skills and their values, making the role their own and inhabiting the space? Matthews and Crow (2003) suggest new heads taking over in difficult circumstances, such as Sally, are likely to focus on role-making, whereas those assuming leadership of a well-established, previously well-led school, such as William, are more likely to concentrate on role-taking. However, considering the experiences of my participants, it appears even in a successful, stable school any new head will be determined to have an impact, to lead in a way which is right for them (and which may be quite different from their predecessor). An element of role-making, allowing an incoming head to inhabit the role, rather than simply to inherit it, may always be present. Certainly this is borne out by my study. William, for example, asserts himself when the outgoing head does not wish him to visit the school in the summer term. William is respectful, but he does not allow his predecessor to dictate what he should do. When conflicting expectations with respect to roles, and to relationships, became clear, these incoming heads were faced with choices. How firmly should they cleave to their principles and do what they believed to be right, and how far should they be influenced by the uneasy response of some of the led to the new regime?

All my participants recognised that there were certain role expectations (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Matthews and Crow, 2003) held by different members of the school communities, but their own principles and values meant they had role expectations

of their own which influenced the way they assumed their leadership responsibilities, as discussed also by Akkary (2014). Where role tension and role conflict between the different sets of expectations had to be navigated, these incoming heads had to make decisions about the extent to which they were prepared to compromise and capitulate, and the degree to which they were prepared to be assertive and forceful.

All six confronted the issue of conflicting role expectations at some stage when members of their new school community expressed concern about how the new head was fulfilling the role. However, all determined to do the job in a way they felt was true to them, the importance of which is explored by Quong (2006), rather than being overly influenced by how their predecessors had enacted the role.

Robert considered he was more open and trusting (though he was also quick to blame when things did not go well). Olivia was more exacting and less inclined to protect and placate. Sally was calmer, more even-tempered and keen to build the capacity of her colleagues. Peter was more commercially adept and strategic in his thinking. Dawn was more consultative and eager to build relationships with pupils and parents. William was more visible and approachable. All could see, and discussed with me, how their predecessors were different from them, and how they determined to behave in a way they considered authentic or appropriate.

Crow (2007) observes that the contrast between incoming heads and predecessors could work either to the advantage or disadvantage of the new incumbent, depending on how their relative strengths were perceived by the school community they joined. This was certainly the case in my study, where, for example, one of William's senior team observed, "The fact he is so different from the previous head probably makes establishing himself easier", and a different senior leader independently commented, "The comparison with his predecessor is key – both in terms of his strengths and also his weaknesses". A new head's strengths may appear particularly impressive, and his/her failings particularly acute, when juxtaposed with the qualities and shortcomings of the head they succeed.

Shadowing William in both his deputy and head roles enabled me to observe at first hand the core behaviours underpinning his principles, such as his commitment to being visible and approachable, and showing how well he knew and cared about all members of the school community. William's informal interactions with pupils, staff and parents as he moved around both schools reflected his stated commitment to establishing the most positive relationships with all who make up the extended school community. In the school where he became head he was proud to tell me he knew that "Mary who does the pot wash" had recently won a spy weekend in a competition and, when we went for lunch, he enjoyed asking her about that. In this he was a very different type of head from his predecessor, who, I was told by those who had worked with him, was a far more remote figure, although he was a more confident public speaker and fluent writer than William had so far proved to be. The difference between William and the previous head was proving to be both an advantage to and a challenge for William.

As the lead-in period progressed, my participants became aware of some of their predecessors' limitations, and of how this may have left them with a job to be done, a challenge of headteacher succession discussed by Crow (2007). Peter saw his predecessor had avoided confrontation and failed to address some difficult issues, such as the underperformance of his Director of Studies. The outgoing head had shared with Peter what he felt needed to be done, such as addressing teaching and learning and the management structure, but this head had not had the energy or the impetus to do this himself prior to retirement. Peter's Chair of Governors confirmed this when he spoke of the outgoing head having "taken his foot off the accelerator" too soon. Olivia, too, could see her predecessor, knowing she was leaving and managing her own transition to second headship, had perhaps let standards slip, leading to a particularly disappointing set of GCSE results in her last year. There were several references to predecessors losing momentum and energy in the final phase of their headship, perhaps because they were losing focus as they were starting a new headship elsewhere, or because they were tiring at the end of their careers. Such deficiencies in the performance of outgoing heads offered



incoming school leaders issues to resolve, but, at the same time, the opportunity to make an early, visible impact.

Sally inherited a particularly challenging legacy, realising at an early stage of her tenure that some of the initiatives introduced by her predecessor were potentially unsustainable. This was testing, both in terms of the difficult tasks which had to be tackled, and the lack of confidence she felt when the gravity of the situation she had stepped into became clear. Not only did Sally and her predecessor enact their role differently, but the way in which the outgoing head enacted the role made it particularly difficult for Sally to assume the role successfully. However, the situation also offered her the opportunity to show her strength, as Harris (2007) observes.

When these new heads inherited problems, as all did, such problems presented them with an opportunity to prove their competence. They could resolve issues, improve a difficult situation, win the confidence of different members of the school community and start to make their mark in the role and in the school. Often the problems related to issues left unresolved by, or even caused by the limitations of, their predecessor. My participants all showed themselves to be learning, both during the lead-in period as they took the temperature of the school and gauged its relative health, and then, even more intensively, once they stepped into the role at the start of the autumn term. They were not presented with a blank page on which to write as they wished, an element of succession explored by Crow (2006).

Sensitivity to context, and action which was appropriately aligned to this context and respectful of the history which preceded these new heads' arrival, was proving critical (Glatter, 2012).

The relationship which develops between outgoing and incoming head has a significant impact on the process of transition and the new head's capacity to establish themselves, during the lead-in period and in the early months in post. Although incoming heads have to negotiate this relationship, they are not able fully to control it. In addition, the legacy the outgoing head leaves behind presents both challenges and opportunities to their successor.

***Managing unexpected challenges, including as a result of reciprocal socialisation, and learning to be a head from being a head***

Sackney and Walker (2000) describe the challenge of facing the unexpected, and this was borne out by the experiences of my participants. However well-prepared these incoming heads considered themselves to be by the end of the lead-in period, all faced unanticipated challenges in the early months of headship, which tested them but which also offered them the opportunity to show their mettle. Such challenges included dealing with bereavement in their first term, as Olivia, Sally and Peter did.

In addition, the experience of making the move to headship changed these incoming heads, and the school community they joined changed as a result of their arrival. The process of socialisation involved in the transition process can therefore be seen as reciprocal (Matthews and Crow, 2003); when a deputy moves to take up a headship this is not simply the journey of one individual. This constituted a challenge of its own, shown for example by the incident where Dawn became aware of how her actions at the Harvest Festival were misinterpreted by her deputy. Dawn believed she was showing her interest in and commitment to being involved in all aspects of the life of the school. The deputy, who saw the organisation of the Harvest Festival as her responsibility, and not something the head would want to be part of, felt anxious, rather than supported. This illustrates well the uncertainty that can arise from the change of leadership style at the top, the importance of incoming heads being alert to assumptions and preconceptions (their own and those of others) and the necessity of developing the most effective communication protocols and practices across the school in order to address such assumptions as Bristow et al (2007) explore). This was a significant, often unanticipated, challenge.

Through the process of role-set analysis (Bush, 2009), drawing upon the perspectives of different members of the school community enabled me to explore pertinent elements of clashing role conceptions which in some cases were leading to role tension and role conflict. The role expectations of others can contrast with the reflexive role expectations of the actors themselves (Crow and Glascock, 1995);

in the light of these different role expectations incoming heads have to decide on the extent to which they will remain true to the conception of headship and how it should be enacted which they believe is authentic, or whether they should modify their behaviours and conform to, or at least accommodate, expectations of others.

In the main my participants held to their resolve to be the kind of head they wished to be. Olivia was not deterred from the path she felt was right for the school, despite some resistance and negativity. Dawn was determined to continue to get out of her office, build relationships with parents, show an interest in the girls and build the confidence of her team. When I asked Sally whether her vision of the leader she wished to be had changed or been clarified by her experience of the first term of headship, her response was, "I suppose it's been tested". This might reflect the fact that, as they went through the process of making their mark, establishing themselves and inhabiting their new role, a constant process of experimentation, reflection and adaptation enabled these fledgling heads to create and follow their own path. However, being alert to the perceptions of others and occasionally adjusting or compromising, shown, perhaps, in Olivia's introduction of the praise list, showed how expectations of others had a bearing on their own developing conception of what headship required. This constituted a significant challenge during the process of transition, and it was not a challenge which could easily be anticipated and prepared for.

As a result of meeting, and addressing, unexpected challenges, including navigating the process of reciprocal socialisation which assuming a headship involves, my participants continued their learning about how to become a head from the actual experience of enacting the role, an element of transition discussed by Weindling and Dimmock (2006). They all recognised becoming the head would involve "being that final person", to use Olivia's words: something that, however much they felt they had gained from their years as a deputy, they could not experience or fully understand until they actually moved into the role. In the same way, although they had continued to develop their role conception of what being a head would involve, while learning about their new school context, throughout the lead-in period, when they considered their new school landscape they were observing it

from a distance. Once they assumed the headship position at the start of the autumn term, they themselves became a crucial part of that landscape.

From this point onwards, all participants continued their learning about how to be a head, and how to inhabit the role (role-making) in addition to inheriting it (role-taking). All became aware, in some cases initially during the lead-in period, but their knowledge was consolidated upon formal appointment, that there were a range of practices in their new schools – some minor, some major - which they felt needed to change. As Earley et al (2011) reported in their study of new heads in cities, my participants recognised that, inevitably, instituting change will always appear retrospectively critical of the departing head, and when new heads are working closely with staff who were loyal to, and emotionally invested in, the previous regime, this required careful handling. Change had to be introduced in a way that was, ideally, respectful of the achievements of one's predecessor(s) while still moving the school forward.

There was also the issue of knowing what to begin with and what could wait, as Sally and Olivia conceded. Olivia was keen to strike the right balance between showing her new school she was different and things would change, while not instituting change too quickly. She demonstrated self-awareness when she recognised she perhaps had a tendency to move too fast. Reflecting on the issue of change after her first term of headship, she felt she had greater insight borne of experience. She then tried to consolidate, and reassure staff, as a result of her learning. These new heads were beginning to recognise establishing the right pace of change was an early challenge. Much depended on the context, the priorities, the needs of the school, the temperament of the leader and of the led. Their developing awareness during the process of transition helped them.

Participants spoke of how they recognised the pace needed to be sufficiently challenging but not overwhelming, and consultation needed to be thorough but not ponderous, as Watkins suggests (2004). Some participants realised the only way they could gauge what was right, in terms of pace, was to start to make changes and then monitor and adapt in the light of experience; it was impossible to anticipate exactly how things would go. These new heads saw the advantage of

going in with a watching brief, learning and monitoring for the first year until a cycle of activities and events had been completed and then planning change from the following year. However, they then found they had to be reactive in some respects, as issues emerged which required addressing and which could not wait. Some believed there was greater urgency for change than others, and to spend a year watching and learning was too great a luxury in their particular context. Olivia felt this acutely, inheriting the worst set of GCSE results the school had known, and challenging pupil recruitment and retention. She felt she needed to act quickly in the light of this.

Several participants said when their predecessors were new heads, the school and the job they inherited was different from the challenge facing the incoming head in 2013, a situation considered by Stevenson (2006). Sally's predecessor, for example, inherited a school in difficulties, and needed to be a "hero-head" to turn things around. My participants realised an incoming head needs to be right for the individual school context and the priorities at that particular stage of the school's journey.

All were keen to reassure parents (current and prospective), staff and governors that this new head was capable, and school development would not lose momentum in the early days of their leadership. Building positive relationships, establishing trust and developing the staff's understanding of the kind of leader you want to be seen as, and how you may be different from your predecessor(s), takes time (Davies and Davies, 2011). When I visited the participants just over one term into their headship, all felt they were at an early stage of this process. Some were mindful they were taking over from heads who appeared to know everyone, including a significant number of individual pupils, and they felt acutely the pressure this potentially put them under to accelerate their own learning. This recalls the findings of Weindling and Dimmock (2006).

Participants reflected that deputy headship is in some respects the best springboard for headship, allowing them to experience the responsibility of headship when their head was out of school, giving them a taste of ultimate school leadership. However, it is a very different role, more operational and less strategic,

and as a result the professional identity of the deputy is quite different from that of the head (Thomson, 2009). Peter explained how deputies act as the bridge between head and staff, whereas the head has to exercise a degree of detachment and, as a result, can experience isolation.

The difference between the two roles is, of course, part of the appeal to deputies preparing to move to headship. William described this appeal as being able to initiate, moving the school forward. Having the capacity to drive the vision was described as a strong motivator for five of my participants, and key to their role conception of headship. This reflects the focus on the head as the leader of the vision in the literatures (Cranston, 2007; Thomson, 2009). Only Robert failed to talk of this, although he did discuss the importance to him of his own rise to the top.

All considered they were now ready to take the step to headship, and in several cases their sense of readiness had increased as their deputy headship had progressed. Sally talked of her developing sense of watching her head at work and recognising she would do things differently. Olivia saw the appeal of headship as fulfilling her personal vision of how a school should operate. Peter felt he was reaching a plateau in his deputy role and needed the challenge of headship to make a difference on a whole-school scale. Dawn talked of the elation she felt at being offered the post of head where “I can actually be the person who leads and supports”. That sense of responsibility but also of capacity – headship would enable these deputies to make an even greater difference to the lives of pupils and staff – came through in these declarations. Robert, on the other hand, saw the appeal of headship in terms of his desire to be tested, “I do want to make a mark. I do want to have my own school. I do want to see whether I can, you know, do things with it.” For Robert, the focus seemed to be on having the opportunity to prove himself. His conception of the head’s role was influenced by the status and power he believed it would accord him.

The experience of my participants suggested the extent to which deputy headship prepares you for the next step depends to some degree on whether you work for a head who involves you in strategy, allowing you to develop relationships with governors, build financial awareness and play a part in the resolution of the most

demanding issues. Of my six participants, four of them – Olivia, Sally, Peter and William – believed deputy headship had constituted an excellent grounding for headship. All talked of how fortunate they felt they had been in having a strong foundation of experience and skill development, and the whole-school perspective, which would enable them to step up to the next level. This relates to the findings of Cranston (2007) and Earley and Weindling (2007) about how the experiences of deputies can be of particular benefit to those moving on to headship, especially when they are given the opportunity to deputise properly for the head.

Robert and Dawn believed they had been less fortunate and, as a result, felt less well-prepared for some of the challenges the future might hold, such as dealing with (and perhaps moving on) less effective members of staff. Dawn, in particular, had had a frustrating experience as a deputy, with no involvement in strategy and little support from the head, reflected in his reluctance to allow her time to visit her new school. Robert, on the other hand, had had a relatively positive relationship with the head of the school where he was deputy, but when he moved to headship realised there were elements of school leadership, for example staff capability processes, of which he had little experience and about which he therefore lacked confidence.

How well prepared these new heads had been through their deputy headships and prior experiences was something they could only accurately assess once they had stepped into their headship roles. From the vantage point of her own headship, Dawn reflected on how, as a deputy, she had felt she understood what the role of head involved, but, once in post, she learnt much more about its demands and complexities. When I probed Dawn about specifically what she was alluding to, she talked about time pressures, conflicting priorities and the sheer number of commitments which were now among her responsibilities. She had felt she was extremely busy as a deputy, but when I met her after a term of headship she recognised she had worked even harder in her first term of headship. Similarly, Olivia, Sally, Peter and William all believed they were working harder as heads than they had as deputies. It was only Robert of whom this was not true.

One of the differences my participants perceived in moving from deputy to head was releasing the operational elements of the deputy role and trusting others to manage such tasks. As Dawn said, it was important to trust your deputy to manage the operational, recalling the research reported by Bengtson et al (2013). Peter observed, “Your deputies run the day to day....and I think the greatest challenge will be moving out of that role and letting other people do it”.

All spoke of the responsibility of headship as being of a different order from what they were accustomed to as deputies (Earley, 2014), for example Robert, “They look at you, no longer do they look past you to the next person. It’s you.” This sense of operating without the safety net of a head standing behind you came through in my interviews with all six participants, for example William, who talked of casting off the “safety blanket” of working with and for an experienced head. William claimed to be “looking forward to having the buck stop with me”, though his parenthetical “scary as that is on occasions” reflects the tension between eager anticipation and trepidation which was characteristic of the conflicting emotions of all six heads-elect.

As Woods et al (2009) discuss, the extent to which you *can* be prepared to make the move from deputy headship to headship was considered by all the participants, with Dawn concluding it was like new motherhood – difficult fully to appreciate the sense of responsibility until you experience it. When I asked my participants how well-prepared they felt they were going into headship at the end of their lead-in time, there was a sense in several cases that they now needed to get on with the job and learn from the experience of doing it. As the lead-in period came to an end, these deputies were relishing the chance, finally, to take on the role. At the same time, they were perhaps inevitably nervous about how they would measure up.

The particular organisational context within which my participants were working, and the legacy their predecessors left behind them, posed certain challenges and imposed a number of constraints. My participants needed to tune into the norms established before their arrival and the assumptions and pre-conceptions of the school community based on these norms. The new heads might well opt to make



significant changes, but nevertheless they needed to be aware of what they inherited, to show sensitivity and good judgement, if they were not to alienate or disenfranchise the members of this community.

Yet all my participants showed a commitment and a determination to making the job their own, to making their mark, and leading the school in a way which was true to their priorities, their core principles and values (Cowie and Crawford, 2009).

They were not content simply to inherit the role. They intended to inhabit it and establish themselves as the new incumbent in whom all members of the extended community could have faith.

In summary, there are a number of ways in which heads-elect can prepare to take up the role of school leader, but they ultimately learn how to be a head from being a head. Because of the reciprocal socialisation process the incoming head and the school community they join undergo, the school leader role and the dynamic between leader and led continue to evolve. The incoming heads may prepare as fully as they can, yet it is impossible for them fully to anticipate how it will be once they take up the role. Although they have observed how their new school operates from the vantage point of the lead-in period, the context changes when they are in post and become part of that landscape. They will meet early unexpected challenges which will test them, including those which arise from reciprocal socialisation, but such challenges also give them the opportunity to prove themselves and to make their mark.

### ***Concluding comments***

The literatures which focus on the transition to new headship in most cases consider those who take up the role of head in schools maintained by the state. In considering six new independent school heads in my study, I was interested to see how, in terms of both challenge and support, my participants' experiences compared. I found numerous similarities between the experiences of new heads in the two sectors, and very few differences. There may be differences in the role context once these new heads are fully established in post. From my own

experience I would anticipate independent heads might need to spend more time on marketing, recruitment and retention of pupils, and state school heads more time on supporting behaviour management and coping with government initiatives. However, these differences between the context of headship in the state and independent sectors do not appear directly to impact on the challenge of managing transition to new headship, the focus of my research.

In terms of the challenges of managing transition to headship in schools maintained by the state, as discussed in 'Mapping the field', the main issues to emerge include: the establishment of a new professional persona in the light of limited experience and possible lack of confidence (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002); dealing with the unexpected (Daresh and Male, 2000); managing conflict (Shoho et al, 2010) and building the most positive relationships with the different members of the school community (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003) and with the outgoing head (Crow, 2007); deciding on priorities and managing the pace of change (Quong, 2006); coping with the volume of work and its emotional demands (Gronn, 2003), which can lead to a sense of isolation and vulnerability (Gladwin, 2014).

According to the experiences of my participants, similar challenges characterised their transition to headship. William, for example, talked of the trepidation of moving into the headship role, despite his excitement. Olivia, Sally and Peter had to deal with the unexpected challenge of bereavement. Conflicting role expectations were managed by all participants, including Dawn, seen in the Harvest Festival rehearsal, and also in her attempt to build a positive working relationship with her Director of Studies, a disappointed candidate for the headship role. Sally had a particularly difficult relationship with her predecessor. Olivia was mindful of finding an appropriate pace of change and recalibrating when she made some early miscalculations. All the participants, except Robert, conceded they were working harder as heads than they had as deputies.

The only challenge mentioned frequently in the literatures which did not feature strongly in my research is that of isolation. As my final interview with participants took place only one term into the role, perhaps this had not yet emerged as a significant feature of transition. Only Robert gave the impression that in some

ways he was feeling vulnerable, at odds with the bursar and governors' "cabal", although even he did not explicitly refer to feeling 'isolated' or 'lonely'. It might perhaps be that a "man's man" (his wife's words) such as Robert would be reluctant to admit to such an emotion.

The challenges of transition to headship as experienced by my independent sector participants are broadly consistent with those experienced by new heads of state schools in the UK and abroad, both current and stretching back over the last five decades. This reflects the conclusions drawn by researchers such as Hobson et al (2003) and Earley et al (2011) that the challenges of new headship are not context-dependent and do not appear to change according to differences of culture, location, type of school or time.

Similarly, the main sources of support cited in the studies of transition to new state sector headship are broadly in line with those my research participants found to be helpful. As outlined in 'Mapping the field', these include: formal preparation and ongoing professional development programmes (Cowie and Crawford, 2009); networks, role models and mentors (Bush, 2008); prior experience, especially as a deputy who assumes the role of head when required (Peterken, 2012); learning from feedback and members of the new school community (Bisschoff and Mackenzie-Batterbury, 2013); depending on one's own resources (Bagi, 2015); making the most of opportunities to learn and to consolidate skills in the lead-in period (Fullan, 2003) and, after that, learning by doing, reflecting and, if necessary, revising in the light of that reflection (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006).

There was significant consistency between the support strategies outlined in the literatures and the experiences of my participants. Participants discussed how they benefited from new heads' induction programmes offered by ISC headteachers' associations. The network of fellow new heads to which this introduced them was also seen as an ongoing source of reassurance and support. All referred to significant role-models and mentors, for example the experienced and supportive head in the school where William was a deputy. Sally, William, Olivia and Peter talked with enthusiasm about how well they believed their years as deputies had prepared them for what lay ahead. Dawn was aware how she was benefiting from

the advice of her predecessor during the lead-in period, and William appreciated the “pure gold” of his well-established and capable senior team. All participants except Robert felt they used the lead-in period well to learn more about marketing, finance, child protection and early years’ education, for example. Once in post, these new heads learnt from experience and sometimes from mistakes, for example Olivia with the pace of change and Dawn in how she was dealing with resistance from her Director of Studies. All were building the bridge as they walked on it (Quinn, 2004). Drawing upon their personal resources was not necessarily something my participants explicitly discussed, although in our consideration of vision and values and their formulation of principles and priorities, a sense of the support and strength they were deriving from their own inner resources was evident. My participants were not simply passively accessing avenues of support, but were actively creating and mobilising support strategies of their own.

As with the challenges, there were therefore significant similarities and few differences between the experiences of my participants and the new state school heads discussed in the literature. The emphasis on the importance of support being customised, targeted and relevant to individual (and changing) needs, as observed by, for example, Weindling & Dimmock, (2006), and Woods et al, (2009), is equally applicable to new heads in independent schools.

The main challenges of transition to headship, and new heads’ support needs, can be seen to have remained consistent both over time, and in different cultures and systems and schools of different types. Although context is important in terms of how new heads manage their transition into a leadership role in a specific school which will be at a particular point in its development (Walker & Qian, 2006; Wildy & Clark, 2008), nevertheless the challenges, and channels of support, do not appear to be context-dependent. This aligns with the findings from Earley and Evans’ study (2002) that the similarities between the sectors are far greater than the differences.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### ***CONCLUSION***

In this thesis I began by setting out the rationale for and focus of my research project, charting the process of transition to first-time headship experienced by six deputies who were moving to become heads in independent schools which were new to them. I outlined the reasons for studying the transition to headship and the thinking behind my focus on the independent sector.

I discussed key literatures on the subject of transition to headship, and on the relevance of role theory to my research, positioning my own research interests and identifying the area of the field to which I plan to contribute. I charted the methodological decisions I took as I considered which research framework, and specific tools, were best suited to fulfil my research purpose.

I then explored the experiences of each of these deputies/new heads, with a focus on what draws these experiences together, what distinguishes them and what can be deduced from this, expanding on this in the subsequent discussion and considering how the experiences of my participants relate to and reflect on the experiences of those making the transition to headship as explored in the literatures, particularly with respect to the key challenges of making the transition, and the support strategies these deputies/new heads access or generate. I conclude that of particular significance is: firstly, how they make use of the lead-in period between being appointed and officially assuming the role; secondly, the relationship which develops between incoming and outgoing head and how this affects the experience of transition; and, thirdly, however well prepared these fledgling heads may be, ultimately they learn how to become a head from being a head, managing the process of reciprocal socialisation and meeting some unexpected challenges along the way. In conclusion I consider the contextual and conceptual significance of my research study, what has been learnt about the process of transition to new headship which constitutes a fresh contribution to the field.

The thesis builds to the statement of the overarching message which emerges from my research:

Making the transition to first-time headship is a process which involves negotiating the tensions, and finding balance, between inheriting the role from your predecessor and inhabiting the role and making it your own. Throughout this process both incoming head, and the members of the school community they join, undergo reciprocal socialisation into a new role and a new relationship, as both the new head and the new school influences, and is influenced by, the other.

Beneath this overarching message sit three sub-findings:

1. The period in between being appointed and formally taking up the role, the lead-in period, offers crucial opportunities to begin to tune in to the new school context, to start to know and to be known. It is a challenging time as the head-elect prepares to leave well (handing over their deputy head responsibilities and readying the school for their departure) while at the same time plans to begin well in their new role, preparing the school for their arrival.
2. The relationship which develops between outgoing and incoming head has a significant impact on the process of transition and the new head's capacity to establish themselves, during the lead-in period and in the early months in post. Although incoming heads have to negotiate this relationship, they are not able fully to control it. In addition, the legacy the outgoing head leaves behind presents both challenges and opportunities to their successor.
3. There are a number of ways in which heads-elect can prepare to take up the role of school leader, but they ultimately learn how to be a head from being a head. Because of the reciprocal socialisation process the incoming head and the school community they join undergo, the school leader role and the dynamic between leader and led continue to evolve. The incoming heads may prepare as fully as they can, yet it is impossible for them fully to anticipate how it will be once they take up the role. Although they have observed how their new school operates from the vantage point of the lead-

in period, the context changes when they are in post and become part of that landscape. They will meet early unexpected challenges which will test them, including those which arise from reciprocal socialisation, but such challenges also give them the opportunity to prove themselves and to make their mark.

This overarching message and three key findings address the research questions I established at the outset:

What is the nature of the transition experienced by deputies moving to their first school headship? Specifically:

- What are the key challenges of making the transition to first-time headship in the independent sector?
- What strategies do these new heads generate or access as they face these challenges?

I recognise the limited scope of my research study, focussing as it does on the experiences of only six participants. Further, broader research into a larger sample of deputies moving to new headship would enable my findings to be built upon, consolidated or challenged. Given the under-researched nature of the field with respect to the independent sector, additional work on the nature of independent headship, its challenges, and perhaps its rewards, in addition to an exploration of how leaders of independent schools could be supported to be their best, would enable the ISC and its member associations to ensure the heads of its schools were continuously and appropriately developed. Strengthening independent school headship should, as research suggests (Leithwood et al, 2006; Barber et al, 2010) serve to strengthen the schools and the standards pupils across the sector are able to achieve. Further research focussing on how best to inspire and enthuse current senior leaders considering a future in independent school headship would enable the five headteacher associations within ISC (HMC, GSA, IAPS, ISA and the Society of Heads) to support and secure a healthy, well-prepared and confident supply of aspiring headteachers who are motivated and driven to succeed in this role in the future.

My research study and findings have significant implications for research, practice and policy with respect to the preparation of, and ongoing support for, aspiring, transitioning and newly appointed heads.

Further research into the independent sector, in particular, would be of benefit, given that this is an under-researched field. A larger scale study of deputies moving to headship, including a consideration of the particular challenges of establishing your new professional identity in a school within which you are already known (and you see yourself) as a deputy, would be of use to new heads both internally and externally appointed. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the current headteacher supply challenge is leading to a greater number of internal appointments, so this is an aspect of transition which would merit further exploration.

In addition, with the standard retirement age now moving beyond 60, increasing numbers of school leaders are moving beyond their first headship in due course, and, indeed, to a third or even fourth headship in time. Research into the specific challenges, and opportunities, of making the transition to a subsequent headship, which might bring with it the potential for heightened tension, feelings of guilt and a demanding balancing act as you move between the two roles, would be timely.

Thirdly, detailed research into the perspectives and potential headship aspirations of Middle and Senior Leaders, to include consideration of what might deter prospective heads and how their concerns and perceived support needs might be addressed, could build on my findings and help to secure a stronger pipeline of school leaders, across both sectors, in the future.

With respect to implications for practice, my consultancy work with the five ISC headteacher associations as they plan, deliver, evaluate and develop their formal training for aspiring heads, new heads' induction and follow-up support, is enabling me already to disseminate my findings and influence practice.

I am also referring to the outcomes from my research as I facilitate a four-week online course on 'Leading an Independent School' (initially developed for the National College for Teaching and Leadership). We have strengthened the



references to the importance of the lead-in period and the dynamic with the predecessor head in the course's consideration of what comes directly after a successful appointment to headship.

Thirdly, through the professional educator networks on social media, I have the opportunity to connect with aspiring heads, new and established heads, other senior leaders and governors. I am already making use of my learning from the research project in my role as an educational commentator, adviser, mentor and coach. This is enabling me to influence practice across both the independent and maintained sectors as I work with leaders at all levels, addressing perceptions of headship and helping them to access targeted guidance and support on their leadership journey.

In terms of the policy implications of my research, addressing succession planning at headteacher level on a broad, national scale is necessary if we are to secure a healthy supply of well-prepared and confident senior leaders who are willing to step up to headship and energised by the opportunities it will offer. There is much discussion at present about this headteacher supply "crisis", for example in the recent TES article *DfE in talks about funding new institute planned to tackle shortage of 'great' heads* (22 April 2016). In the article Anthony Seldon, Michael Wilshaw and Toby Young discuss a proposal to bring in and fast-track bright young graduates, in addition to career-changers, who, they believe, could proceed to successful headship in their early twenties, trained at a new Leadership College based at the University of Buckingham.

On the basis of my research, I would suggest that fast-tracking those who do not have a teaching background, and who have not experienced the educational leadership training that progressing through Middle and Senior Leader levels within a school brings, is not necessarily the best policy. The headteacher recruitment challenge could better be addressed by fully utilising the talent and potential we already have within the teaching profession. If we investigate more thoroughly why current teachers, Middle and Senior Leaders who are capable of progressing to headship and leading well are not willing to make the move, this would be a first step in confronting concerns and helping prospective school leaders to recognise

that with the right support and targeted ongoing professional development, headship can be a very rewarding and even joyful career option. It is necessary for policy makers to consider how current and prospective heads can be better supported, including by governors and overarching trusts and federations. Those who select and support heads have to be sufficiently aware, well-informed and empathetic to make good appointments which they follow up with careful attention to the lead-in period, ensuring that if the dynamic between outgoing and incoming heads is problematic, it is robustly addressed. In the weeks, months and years which follow heads should continue to be supported and developed so that they achieve success within their schools and model the role positively to those who come after them. Headteacher succession planning policy needs to address what makes headship currently appear a high-stakes, high-risk position for those already in the profession.

As my six participants follow the “pathway” (to use Peter’s word) through their career towards successful headship appointment and then into the role, I have been following a route of my own from recently serving independent school head into the joint roles of educational consultant and researcher. As my heads-elect have consolidated their skills and prepared for this fresh professional challenge, I have faced my own challenge, learning how to move from practitioner to adviser and researcher, addressing my assumptions and preconceptions, my limitations and potential biases. I have had to be more reflective, more critical and analytical, to generate robust data and to interrogate it rigorously in such a way as to reveal and explore insights I had not necessarily anticipated. I have found the dynamic between my consultancy role (involved in heads’ and senior leaders’ appointments, appraisals, training and coaching) and my researcher role (reading and thinking, interviewing and transcribing, analysing and identifying what my distinctive contribution to the field might be) mutually enriching and supportive. I firmly believe my research has made me a better consultant and adviser. It has certainly given me a broader knowledge base and exposure to a wide range of experiences (of both researchers and of the researched) which have strengthened my appreciation and understanding of school leadership and of the ways in which

aspiring and serving educational leaders at all levels can be prepared and supported.

My role as a consultant offers me a range of opportunities to disseminate the findings of my research. Although I took the decision to apply to restrict publication of my thesis, to protect the confidentiality of my participants, their schools and colleagues and the heads they succeed, through my range of contacts in education I have secured a contract to write a book entitled *Making the leap: Moving from Deputy Headship to Headship* in which I intend to disseminate my key messages. It is my intention to inform and support aspiring heads, heads-elect and new heads, but also to communicate with the ISC headteacher associations, with governing bodies and other members of schools' senior teams who are in a position to support those making the transition to headship.

In my consultancy work for the ISC headteacher associations, where I act in a training capacity to those managing leadership transitions at all levels; in my work directly with schools, and in my professional writing for *TES* and a number of online educational publishers, I have the capacity further to disseminate what I have learnt, while still protecting the anonymity of those involved in the research. I hope in this way to make a full contribution to continuing professional development within the field of educational leadership.

Although the focus of my research study was not on how effective or successful I anticipated these new heads would be once established in post, perhaps inevitably during the course of the year in which I worked with them I reflected on the head each might develop into over time. I had confidence that five of them appeared to have a clear sense of what headship might involve, how prepared they were and what they still had to learn. Although all five met a range of challenges, during the lead-in period and in the early months in post, they all retained a degree of confidence that they were ready for and prepared to meet the demands of the role. The sixth participant, Robert, seemed to me, despite occasional bluster, far less self-assured and, in terms of his understanding of the role and his own state of preparedness to undertake it, sadly deficient in some respects.

When, at the start of the summer break 2015, I contacted all six again to ask for further biographical information to flesh out the table of participants in Chapter 3, I received prompt responses from all except Robert. I decided that, unlike his fellow new heads, Robert was perhaps not accessing school emails during the first weeks of the holiday. I therefore emailed him again around A level results day, as it seemed highly unlikely that a head would not be in school at that time.

I received a response on 8 September 2015, not from Robert, but from his PA, whom I had met in January 2014. She was the colleague who had described her new head as rather like an enthusiastic puppy: sometimes she wanted to roll him over and tickle his tummy. At other times she wanted to give him a slap.

The PA's email read as follows:

You will recall that we met a couple of years ago when you visited the school. I am just letting you know that Robert left the school with effect from the end of August. He has relocated down south "to pursue new ventures". I know he read your email during the holiday but I am not sure whether he forwarded it to his home email for a response. I am sorry I cannot help you further.

By the time I received this information, my thesis was almost finished, so the news that Robert had not succeeded in staying in headship did not dramatically affect the content of my analysis. I realised if I had known one of my participants, although staying with me throughout the three years of the research project, would not continue in post as the head of the school where they embarked on their headship in autumn 2013, Robert would have been the one of whom I considered this most likely to be true. Perhaps the "cabal" conspired to move him on. Perhaps the women in his role-set, governors and staff, were able to see that Robert was not a good match for the needs of the school and, in fact, his leadership of the school might weaken it.

Robert has subsequently been in touch with me, kindly supplying the biographical information I requested, and explaining his relationship with his governing body broke down (as a result, he asserted, of failings on their part) and he considered he had no choice other than to resign, pulling his daughter out of the school and relocating his family again, even though he had no alternative job to go to. The differences I charted between Robert's experience of transition to headship, and

the experience of his five fellow new heads, seemed particularly poignant and revealing in the light of this information.

A new headteacher's transition into the role is a long and complex process, which continues well beyond the scope of my study (Lochmiller and Silver, 2010). Cowie and Crawford (2008) suggest "professional socialisation" takes place before a principal assumes their post, and "organisational socialisation" occurs from the time they officially assume the role. Based on the experience of my research participants, however, I would suggest the socialisation process is more nuanced and complex, rather than proceeding in such logical stages. Professional and organisational socialisation may take place simultaneously and occur throughout the period pre-appointment, post-appointment but prior taking up the role, in the early months of first headship and, in fact, throughout a head's career. There is evidence of my participants' tuning into the specific context of their first headship during the months prior to taking up the role, for example Olivia talked of being able to take control of the schedule for her second visit to the new school, and William explained how his understanding of the new school context developed in between his earlier and later visits, when he felt able to confirm and consolidate his early perceptions. This suggests that organisational socialisation begins to take place at an early stage of the transition process, prior to formal assumption of the role.

Similarly, my participants were continuing the task of professional socialisation during the early months in post, for example Sally and Dawn preparing to lead their schools through inspection, learning about the head's role in such a process as distinct from the deputy's more operational, reactive role. Both recognised the head's part in lifting the spirits of the staff, modelling strong and confident leadership and receptivity to inspectors' judgements. This is one example of the role-identity transformation identified, for example, by Browne-Ferrigno (2003) and Rhodes et al (2009).

These beginning principals continue to build the bridge as they walk on it (Quinn, 2004) in the years to come, a view supported by Lochmiller and Silver (2010:103), "Induction becomes the first few steps on a principal's path toward professional

self-sufficiency which are then continued through other professional learning opportunities throughout the principal's career". Individuals may proceed at different rates along this path, depending on how well-developed their skills are, how confident and competent they are and how well their early career experiences have prepared them for the challenge of headship. Socialisation is a career-long process rather than a logical, staged event which proceeds in the same way for each new leader, as implied by Cowie and Crawford.

Headship is not easy. All my participants attested to the joys, rewards and satisfactions of the role, in addition to its demands, but Robert's story also shows that if the dynamic between an incoming head and the school community they join is not sufficiently positive and strong, the consequences may be serious. In the light of this, it appears to me that preparation for headship, prior to appointment and, crucially, during the lead-in period before the incoming head officially takes up the post, and then ongoing, targeted professional support once they take up the role, is necessary if deputies are to make a success of the transition.

Transition is an ongoing process and the role of headteacher will continue to evolve over time. As Matthews and Crow (2003:xiii) attest: "Reconceptualizing the role of principal is not something you do once, but in this changing society you will need to redefine your role constantly." Gronn and Lacey (2004:410/p421) concur:

Identities, both personal and occupational, are not static and may undergo significant modification through a range of experiences and encounters at different points in the life cycle...Negotiating role transitions is a journey within the much larger and longer journey of a working career. This is a journey well worth tracking through research.

My own research journey is definitely something I have found well worthwhile, and I hope my findings are of use and benefit to aspiring and new heads, in addition to those who train, recruit and support them, in the future.

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## **APPENDIX 1: Areas to be covered in each visit, shared with the participants beforehand**

Stage 1 (around Easter 2013):

1. Tell me about the headship application process and the experience of being successful. Why does headship appeal, and do you have a firm idea of the sort of head you would hope to be?
2. How are you preparing for your new role? What use are you planning to make of the time in between being appointed and when you take up the role in the autumn term?
3. Are there any particular challenges you are anticipating, with respect to moving from deputy headship to headship?
4. What sources of support are you accessing and what strategies are you developing as you prepare to face these challenges, or do you anticipate accessing/generating in the future?
5. Is there anything else you would like to discuss with me?

Stage 2 (before the end of the summer term 2013)

1. Tell me how the last few months have been, and whether you feel any differently now from how you felt when we last met.
2. Are you pleased with how you have been able to use the lead in period between being appointed and formally taking up the role? Would you do anything differently if you could live through this period again?
3. Do you have any additional insights into the challenges of making the transition, or the support strategies you can access or mobilise?
4. What are your plans for the summer and how else can you prepare for the start of the autumn term?
5. Is there anything else you would like to discuss with me?

Stage 3 (January 2014, after a term of headship and the Christmas break)

1. Reflect on the first term of headship. Was it as you anticipated? Describe any shocks or surprises and how you responded.
2. In retrospect, how useful was the lead-in period prior to taking up the role? Do you have any advice you would offer to others with respect to the time in between being appointed and stepping into the post?
3. To what extent do you believe you are beginning to develop into the head you hope to be?
4. What would you say are the main challenges you have experienced so far, and the main strategies which have been useful as you have addressed these challenges?
5. Is there anything else you would like to discuss with me?

## APPENDIX 2: Participant consent form

**Project title : The transition to headship**

**Researcher's name : Jill Berry**

**Supervisors' names : Professor Andrew Noyes Dr Andrew Townsend**

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.
- I understand that I will be audiotaped during interviews.
- I understand that data will be stored securely by the researcher in her home. The data will consist of written notes, electronic notes and audiotapes. No one other than the researcher and her supervisors will have access to this data.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisors if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research.

**Signed** ..... (research participant)

**Print name** ..... **Date** .....

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## APPENDIX 3: Analytical framework

