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## **“More Challenging than I Expected but More Satisfying”: Exploring the Experiences of New Heads of Independent Schools and the Leadership Skills They Employ**

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“More Challenging than I Expected but More Satisfying”: Exploring the Experiences of New  
Heads of Independent Schools and the Leadership Skills They Employ

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Educational Leadership

by

Andrew M. O’Brien

B.A. Rhodes College, 2005  
M. Ed. University of New Orleans, 2012

December, 2017

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Alec, this journey has taught me so much about leadership and how it takes many different forms. I believe leadership is something you do, not a title you hold. Calling yourself a leader is like calling yourself a hero; it shouldn't be self-applied. It should be a quality others see in you based on the way you carry yourself and the decisions you make. So Alec, I hope you will find ways to lead yourself and your world the best way you can. More than that though, all I want is for you to be your best self. I love you.

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## Abstract

This study examines leader behavior in an independent school setting. Specifically, this qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of new heads of schools in independent schools located in Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma and their conceptualization of the skills required for the headship. The study explores the knowledge and skills new heads say they use as leaders, how the knowledge and skills they developed in their careers prepared them for leadership, and the ways in which they feel they might have been better prepared for leadership. The study uses the skills-based model of leadership as its theoretical framework, and its methodological approach and discussion of findings are influenced by the framework's three main areas: knowledge, social judgment skills, and problem-solving skills.

The study revealed three main types of knowledge relevant to independent school leader preparation: knowledge acquired through terminal degree or other formalized programs, practical knowledge acquired through professional experience, and institutional knowledge, i.e. knowledge unique to a head's work in a specific school. The study also discusses three distinct ways in which new heads utilize social judgment skills: how they communicate, how they work with school constituents, and how they delegate work. The study suggests patience, deliberation, and listening are key factors in how new heads of school execute their problem-solving skills. The study also discusses other findings of note that are also relevant to the experiences of new heads of school. These include the feelings of loneliness and stress the participants felt as new heads as well as the personal and professional sources of support they sought because of those challenges. The study may be used to inform leader preparation programs oriented towards independent school leaders.

*Keywords:* independent schools, head of school, leader behavior, leadership skills

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Inquiries into educational leader behavior are abundant and cover a wide range of topics. Studies have described how educational leaders are evaluated (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios, 2013; Clifford, Hansen, & Wraight, 2012), how their behavior as leaders is perceived by stakeholders like parents and teachers (Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Smith, 2007), and their effect on student learning and achievement (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). There is, however, a marked deficiency in scholarship on leader behavior specific to independent schools<sup>1</sup> (Ring, 2015). Professional organizations like the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and Independent School Management (ISM) produce publications and reports; NAIS publishes four issues of *Independent School* a year, with topics related to independent schools, their students, teachers, and leaders. Similarly, ISM publishes editions of *Ideas & Perspectives* throughout the year, also covering a range of issues unique to independent schools. However, such publications are not peer-reviewed, and there is little research unique to independent schools or their leaders.

This lack of research makes identifying the skills<sup>2</sup> independent school principals (or heads of school as they are often called) all the more problematic. At many independent schools, the head of school is actively involved in a wide range of areas – some distinctly educational and pedagogical, and some not. A sample job description (see Appendix A) provided by NAIS for the use of schools undergoing head searches summarizes the broad range of duties assigned to a head of school, with emphases on personnel decisions, maintaining and supporting the school’s

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<sup>1</sup> The “independent” schools under review here refer to schools accredited by the National Association of Independent Schools [NAIS]. See Definition of Terms section for elaboration.

<sup>2</sup> This study regards skills as “the ability to use one’s knowledge and competencies to accomplish a set of goals or objectives” (Northouse, 2013, p. 44).

culture and a vision for the school, the head of school's relationship to the board of trustees, and the head's oversight of curriculum, school finances, and development. Naturally, each independent school has its own specific needs and constituencies. Depending on the school, the head may also teach a class, play a role in determining curriculum, and may meet and work in a given day with any number of varying constituents, like parents, students, teachers, trustees, business managers, development personnel, admissions officers, and community partners. Some basic leadership skills like oral and written communication are obvious and fundamental (Gillen & Carroll, 1985). While these skills surely apply to the position, there are also some skills unique to independent schools. Many heads are former independent school teachers, and they consider prior classroom teaching and experience in independent schools essential factors in their headship (NAIS, 2010). However, Cole (2010) notes that having spent one's teaching career in an independent school does not necessarily prepare a new head to deal with financial management, legal issues, business administration and governance, which are just a few of the key aspects of their role as leader of an independent school. This contrasts with public school districts where there are often specialized staff positions in these areas (Honig, 2003). Given the complexities of the head of school position, research aiming to identify the skills unique to independent school leadership is warranted and may help remedy a slowdown in the independent school developing leadership pipeline (NAIS, 2002; NAIS, 2010).

Indeed, independent school leaders are leaving their positions at a rate faster than which they are being replaced (NAIS, 2002; NAIS, 2010). One report cites perceptions regarding the demands of the head of school position as a major deterrent for midlevel administrators who are uninterested in pursuing a headship, and more information on how prospective leaders might better prepare themselves for those demands may alleviate those concerns and spur more

teachers and middle level administrators to pursue leadership roles (NAIS, 2010). Therefore, research better defining the skills needed for the head of school position could be used to improve independent school leader preparation programs and ongoing professional development and in-service training programs. It could also prepare potential educators currently dissuaded from pursuing upper management leadership positions in independent schools and help current independent schools identify, select, or recruit prospective leaders.

### **Problem Statement**

Not only is it unclear what leadership skills are used most by independent school leaders, but another mounting problem is the fact that, as previously stated, independent school leaders are leaving their positions at a rate faster than which they are being replaced (NAIS, 2002; NAIS, 2010). Multiple factors have affected this leadership gap, including the retirement of current leaders or a diminishing pool of interested candidates who are daunted by the head of school's many job responsibilities. Seventy-two percent of current heads are between the ages of 50 and 69 (NAIS, 2013), and nearly 68% of current heads of school plan to change jobs or retire in the near future, and only a small number of administrators have expressed interest in filling these positions (NAIS, 2002; NAIS, 2010; Orem, 2015). In the same study (NAIS, 2010; Orem, 2015), only 22% of responding middle level administrators reported any interest in pursuing a headship, the implication being that 78% of people already in the independent school leadership pipeline are not seeking or do not intend to seek a headship. This shortage of leaders is manifest in independent schools and in the public sector as well (Grove, Fontenot, & Montgomery, 2008; Litchka, 2007). Not only are schools experiencing growth in the retirement or resignation of administrators (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; Bingham & Gottfried, 2003; Cole, 2010), but they also have had difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified candidates to fill those positions

(Gates, Ross, & Brewer, 2001; Gordon & Crabtree, 2006; Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), 2000).

### **Deterrents**

This lack of candidates may be attributed to factors such as the location and size of schools, politics, social and generational changes (Barty, Thomson, Blackmore, & Sachs, 2005; Cole, 2010; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006), daily stress and the difficulty of the role, lack of adequate training, and individuals choosing not to advance their career (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; d'Arbon, Duignan & Duncan, 2002; Hammond, Muffs, & Sciascia, 2001; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006; Scott, 2004), and inadequate pay and the struggle to balance personal and professional responsibilities (d'Arbon et al., 2002; Hammond et al., 2001; Orr, 2006; Scott, 2004). Bass (2006) describes the various factors that both motivate and discourage aspiring school leaders, with the top three motivating factors being the desire to make a difference, the positive impact on people and students, and the personal challenge of being a leader. The top three inhibiting factors include increased stress, increased time commitment to work, and pressure from standardized test scores. These factors variously affect public and independent education institutions differently. Although there is a significant pay difference between public and independent school leaders – the median annual salary for a head of school is \$205,842 (NAIS, 2017a), and the median annual salary for public elementary, middle, and high school principals is \$92,510 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) – independent school leaders cite many of the same deterring factors as public school leaders. Cole (2010) and Scott (2004) pinpoint the daily stress, feelings of unpreparedness for the headship and lack of training, and the challenge of managing the multitude of job responsibilities facing a head as felt especially acutely by heads of school.

Even current heads decry the challenges of the job; in a survey asking heads to describe the experience of performing their job, Scott (2004) found:

When describing what it's like to be a head of school, almost everyone mentioned the "impossibility of the job," which was defined in the following ways: a job that is all-consuming, depleting, one with so many demands and pressures that you can't do a good job, a job which has no down time, no time for reflection, is exhausting, one where you're constantly spread too thin, face too many demands at once, where there's too much responsibility for one person, too many emotional and psychological demands, and you constantly battle sheer physical exhaustion (Introduction section; para. 5).

This selection is particularly telling, given that Scott (2004)'s research found that "almost everyone" (i.e. all heads surveyed) felt overwhelmed by the position. These feelings of stress or feeling overtaxed correlate with data from similar studies of public school leaders (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; d'Arbon, Duignan & Duncan, 2002; Hammond, Muffs, & Sciascia, 2001; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006; Scott, 2004). Scott's (2004) survey does not distinguish between established heads and new heads, and one can infer that, regardless of experience, even veteran heads find the position challenging. That being the case, it becomes clear why this is a position to which not many middle level administrators aspire.

To address the complexity of the headship, NAIS conducted studies in 2002 and 2009 to better understand the state of independent school leadership. The studies focused on career path, job satisfaction, demands of the head, background and preparation for leadership, mentoring, and problems in the leadership pipeline (NAIS, 2002; NAIS, 2010). According to the 2002 study, heads of school identified the most demanding parts of their job as providing vision and leadership, relations with their board of trustees, personnel management, and fundraising. In the



2009 study, the demands changed to include being more involved in managing the school's overall financial health, strategic planning, and fundraising/development. These concerns are largely unique to how independent schools are operated. Within the public sector, it is only in charter schools that school leaders must address financial management, human resources, and management of the school's physical campus, among other things (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011; Campbell & Gross, 2008; Dressler, 2001; Miron & Urschel, 2009; Ryu, & Johnson, in press). Otherwise, principals in public schools may have direction or assistance from a district's central office with regards to these matters (Honig, 2003), but these are responsibilities that fall to the head in an independent school.

### **The Need for More Training**

It is possible that heads struggle with these issues because few leader preparation programs are specifically configured for independent school leaders. Currently, there is no systematic approach to the development of aspiring independent school leaders (Ring, 2015), and Cole (2015) identifies only seven programs throughout the country that either provide terminal degrees or ongoing professional development for independent school leaders. Other programs include the NAIS Fellowship for New Heads (NAIS, 2015), the NAIS Institute for New Heads (NAIS, 2016), and the ISM workshop for new Heads (ISM, 2016). Moreover, Kane and Barbaro (2015) write that, given that many head transitions are related to a school's need to address its financial standing, independent schools with the greatest needs may be saddled with heads with the least experience or training. Kane and Barbaro (2015) argue that schools should support new heads in the transition period, encourage opportunities for financial education, and provide time and assistance for exploration of entrepreneurial approaches that would help strengthen the school. Even current heads of school express a desire for more developmental resources,

including more training opportunities for existing heads (NAIS, 2007). To that end, this study explores what knowledge, training, and skills new heads of school say are most relevant to their jobs and ways in which aspiring heads of schools might be better prepared to assume the headship.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Prior research has explored some key knowledge areas for K-12 administrators. For example, Grissom and Loeb (2009) cite instructional management, internal relations, organization management, administration, and external relations as key dimensions of principal task effectiveness, with each of these knowledge areas accompanied by its own set of leadership skills specific to the area. Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010) examined principals' use of time and correlate organization management with positive school outcomes, with attendance to day-to-day instructional activities as less effective (or even detrimental) to school effectiveness. NAIS (2002) explicitly recognizes the lack of skills-training as a major problem in future leader development, citing the need to develop the skills of talented administrators, middle managers, and teachers as a major task. Given that NAIS has itself cited the lack of skills-training as a major problem facing independent schools, their leaders, and their students, research to accomplish that very goal – helping to identify skills specific to independent schools that prospective leaders might work to develop – is a worthy and necessary scholarly pursuit. Many of the studies analyzing the factors that deter aspiring school leaders from pursuing more advanced roles cite stress and difficulty or complexity of the role as key factors in the lack of individuals aspiring to advance to a principalship or headship (Bass, 2006; Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; d'Arbon, Duignan & Duncan, 2002; Hammond, Muffs, & Sciascia, 2001; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006). Therefore, if independent schools are to fill this leadership gap, it is imperative that

they be able to articulate the knowledge and skills that the next generation of school leaders must possess. In doing so, current schools leaders would be able to demystify the position, removing some of the stress (both anticipated and unanticipated) associated with the role and its perceived complexity, as well as better identify qualified new leaders. To this end, this inquiry was a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of new heads of school to determine their perceptions of what knowledge, problem-solving skills, and social skills are necessary for the role.

### **Significance**

This research study can be used to help independent schools to better identify and train potential school leaders. As noted, there is a growing leadership gap not only in independent schools but across K-12 education in general (Growe, Fontenot, & Montgomery, 2008; Litchka, 2007; NAIS, 2002, NAIS, 2010). Independent schools are responsible for the instruction of over 700,000 students (NAIS, 2017a), and such a sizable population of students needs school leaders equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to educate them successfully. The research gathered from this study can be used to better inform leader preparation programs, especially ones targeting independent school leaders of which there are relatively few. It might also benefit professional development and in-service training programs for established heads of school and help them identify prospective leaders within their own organizations. As noted previously, Cole (2015) identifies only seven programs throughout the country that either provide terminal degrees or ongoing professional development for independent school leaders. Other programs include the NAIS Fellowship for New Heads (NAIS, 2015), the NAIS Institute for New Heads (NAIS, 2016), and the ISM workshop for new Heads (ISM, 2016). These programs focus on topics like marketing, advancement, and school culture stewardship and less on leadership topics

like curriculum development, teacher supervision, conflict mediation, professional development for faculty and staff. None of these programs specifically advertise skills-training or sharing head-specific knowledge as part of their leadership development curricula, which may be beneficial to aspiring leaders. This study might also provide a bank of knowledge for potential new heads and illuminate how one makes the transition from teacher or middle management to headship and what skills, knowledge, or training can facilitate that transition. As noted previously (NAIS, 2010), middle level administrators report that perceptions regarding the demands of the head of school position serve as a deterrent, and more information about what skills are necessary for success in the job may ameliorate those concerns.

### **Conceptual Framework - The Skills-based Model of Leadership**

The research study operates under the assumption that skills that can be learned and acquired are the primary factors influencing leadership efficacy. Whereas leadership traits may be considered largely fixed and inanimate, the leadership skills conceptual framework, as developed primarily by Mumford and colleagues (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007; Zaccaro, Mumford, Connelly, Marks, & Gilbert, 2000) posits that leadership is most influenced by skills and abilities that can be learned and developed, more so than the leader's personality or experiences (Northouse, 2013). The notion that leadership is affected by skills has been a topic of research for some time (Bass, 1990). However, Robert Katz's seminal article "Skills of an Effective Administrator" prompted a major push for more research into the topic. Katz (1955) emphasized leadership as a set of developable skills, rather than inborn traits. These skills include a range of abilities like competencies in specialized, technical areas, the ability to manage, work with, and inspire subordinates, or the ability to set goals for an organization.

More recent research has explored the notion that a leader's efficacy can be measured by his or her ability to address and rectify organizational problems, resulting in a comprehensive skills-based model of leadership (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Yammarino, 2000).

### **Katz (1955) and the Three-Skill Approach**

In developing what would become the skills-based leadership model, Katz (1955) emphasizes the notion that effective leadership skills may be divided into three major areas: technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills. Technical skill is “knowledge about and proficiency in a specific type of work or activity” (Northouse, 2013, p. 44). Examples of technical skills might include knowledge of computer software or some other activity involving a hands-on approach with a product or process. Human skills represent the colloquial “people skills.” Human skills refer to the leader's ability to relate to and manage subordinates, peers, and superiors. Katz (1955) emphasizes that an effective leader's human skills are greatly influenced by the leader's awareness of his or her own perspective while also being aware of the perspective of others. Human skills also help the leader foster an organizational climate of trust and respect. Conceptual skills are less tangential than technical and even human skills. They refer to the ability to work with ideas and concepts. A leader with developed conceptual skills can envision and articulate an organization's long-term goals and other such hypothetical notions. Conceptual skills might manifest themselves in the leader's ability to create a vision or a strategic plan for an organization. It is important to note that Katz's initial framework does not readily account for knowledge, which would be incorporated as others enhanced and refined the skills-based model of leadership.

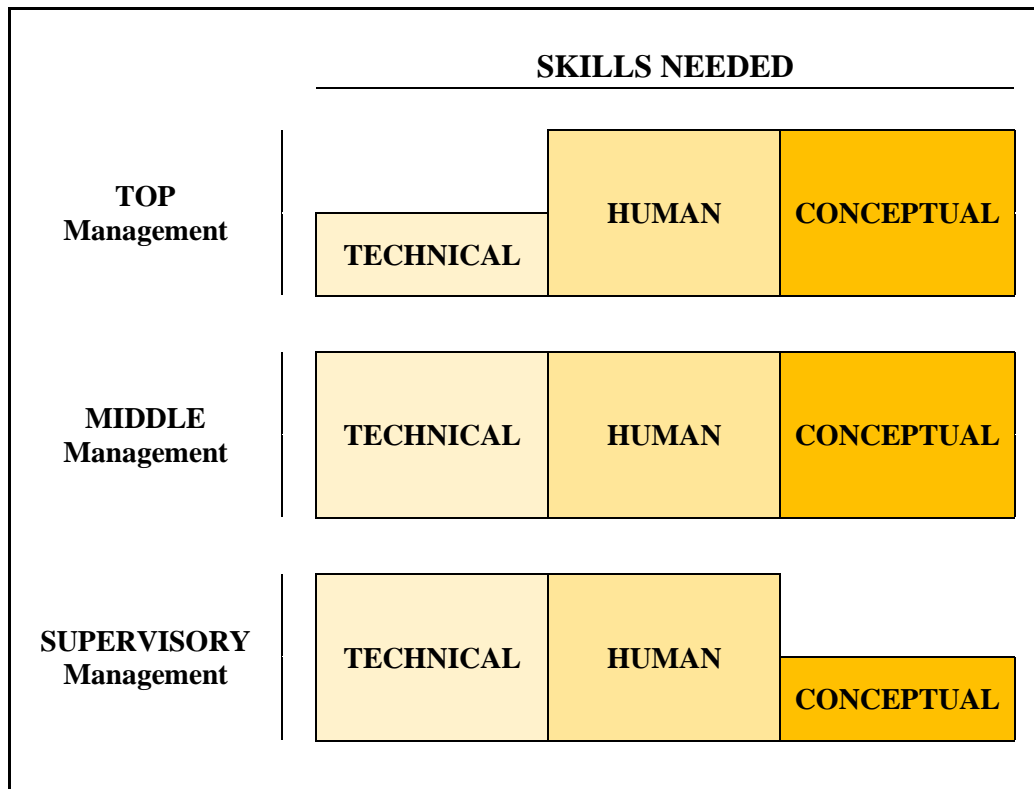


Figure 1.1. Management Skills Necessary at Various Levels of an Organization

Adapted from “Skills of an Effective Administrator,” by R. L. Katz, 1955, *Harvard Business Review*, 33(1), 33-42.

Katz’s (1955) Three-Skill Approach also includes a matrix of what skills are most necessary depending on where a person falls in an organization’s hierarchy. As Figure 1.1 shows, technical skills are most important among supervisory and middle management figures and less so among those in top management. In an inverse relationship to technical skills, conceptual skills are most important among top and middle management, and less so with supervisory managers. In that an organization by definition is comprised of more than one person, human skills are crucial at all three levels of an organization’s hierarchy. In an independent school setting as related in this research study, classroom teachers might be placed in the lowest level of the organizational hierarchy. They may be imbued with technical skills (e.g. how to use the school’s online grade management system or submit a facility request) and

also employ human skills in working with their colleagues, students, and parents. Conversely, heads of school occupy the highest level in the hierarchy. Less dependent on technical skills, heads of school instead need abundant human and conceptual skills in order to tackle issues like institutional advancement, school-community relations, and teacher evaluation.

### **Development and Refinement of Katz's (1955) Model**

Katz's (1955) research spurred on a new interest in a skills-based model of leadership (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al., 2000). The model, developed by Mumford and colleagues, emphasized the relationship between a leader's knowledge and skills and his or her performance. Simply put, the model endorses the idea that "leadership capabilities can be developed over time through education and experience" (Northouse, 2013, p. 47) and that many people have the potential for leadership. This belief contrasts with other models, like the trait-based approach, wherein only certain talented individuals are capable of employing effective leadership.

**Key competencies in Mumford's skills-based model.** Mumford's skill-based model has as key components competencies, individual attributes, and career experiences. Each of these components has more specific facets of its own. Key competencies include problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge. Problem solving skills include the ability to define a problem, gather information about it, formulate new understandings about it, and generate a possible solution (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000). Expanding upon the work of Katz (1955), Mumford and colleagues emphasize that leaders with the properly developed skills can not only identify and solve problems but also set short- and long-term goals, both for themselves and for their organizations (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al., 2000). This correlates with educational research on skills of K-12 leaders; Grissom and Loeb (2009) cite instructional management, internal relations, organization management, administration, and

external relations as key dimensions of principal task effectiveness, and many of these factors can be related to organizational goal-setting or strategic planning. Similarly, Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010) correlate organization management with positive school outcomes and associate day-to-day task management with less productive educational organizations. In other words, the more time leaders spent dealing with conceptual, strategic, or long term issues and less on the logistical particulars of the day's activities, the more positive the school outcome. In an independent school setting, problem-solving skills might relate to any number of strategic or conceptual issues that crop up for a head of school according to his or her job duties. Issues involving financial management, teacher supervision, curriculum design, parent and community relations, and any other part of the head of school's job all require problem-solving skills on both the small scale and large scale.

Social judgment skills relate most directly to the human skills in Katz's (1955) model. They refer primarily to the ability of leaders to understand people and social systems and allow leaders to work with others to solve problems. However, Mumford and colleagues conceptualize human skills more thoroughly than Katz (1955), identifying perspective taking, social perceptiveness, behavioral flexibility, and social performance as key social judgment skills (Zaccaro, Gilbert, Thor, and Mumford, 1992). For independent school leaders, the ability to work with people is a major part of the job. Heads of school may interact on a daily basis with students, parents, teachers, alumni, community partners, consultants, and others as they manage the operations of the school, and a head must understand how to integrate himself into the social dynamics at play in a given situation. The third part of competencies is knowledge, which can be defined as "the accumulation of information and the mental structure used to organize that information" (Northouse, 2013, p. 51). For heads of school, knowledge is also an integral part of



the position. This can take many forms, whether it is knowledge of accreditation standards and state requirements for licensure or about current best pedagogical practices. Figure 1.2 shows how these competencies are affected by other influences and how they which in turn affect leadership outcomes.

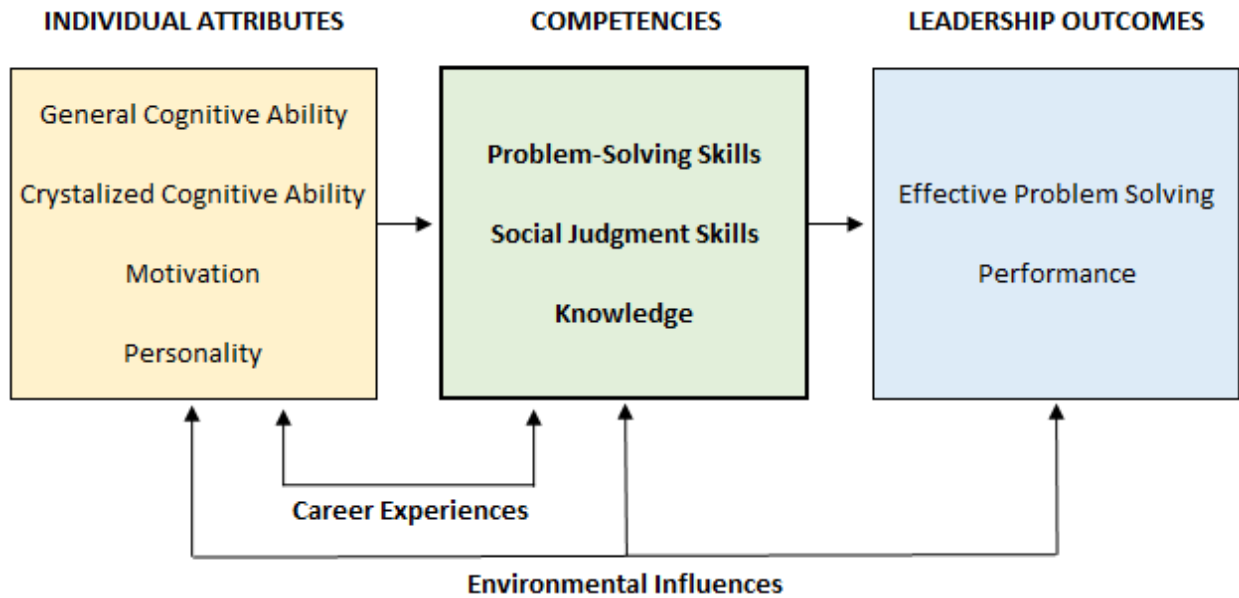


Figure 1.2. The Skills Model of Leadership

Adapted from “Leadership Skills for a Changing World: Solving Complex Social Problems,” by M. D. Mumford, S. J. Zaccaro, F. D. Harding, T. O. Jacobs, and E. A. Fleishman, 2000, *Leadership Quarterly*, 11(1), 23.

Competencies make up the primary component of the skills-based model of leadership although individual attributes, career experiences, and environmental influences remain relevant as well. Individual attributes include the leader’s cognitive abilities, motivation, and personality, and an individual’s career experiences also can influence his or her knowledge and skills. As leaders progress through their careers, they acquire higher levels of conceptual capacity as they encounter correspondingly more complex or challenging organizational problems. Just as Katz (1955) theorized that upper-level management figures should have a preponderance of conceptual skill instead of technical skill, the skills-based model emphasizes that upper-level

leaders have developed new competencies to address problems that are unique, ill-defined, or require an individualized approach. Many heads of school got their start in independent schools as teachers and consider prior classroom teaching and experience in independent schools essential factors in their headship (NAIS, 2010). As individuals progress from teacher to middle level administrator or division principal to eventual head of school, they acquire a range of knowledge and skills in all areas of the skills-model, whether it is technical skills about student learning and achievement or social judgment skills in dealing with parents, students, or colleagues. These accumulated skills, however, may not necessarily provide aspiring heads of school with all that they needs in order to be successful in the position. Therefore, this study aims to identify the skills and knowledge new heads of schools say are necessary to the position and that would have aided their transition into the headship.

### **Influence of the Skills-Based Model on Independent Schools Research**

The skills-based model of leadership has significantly influenced the scope and direction of this research study. Many of the issues related to the gap in independent school leadership are inherently related to leaders' skills or the lack or underdevelopment thereof. Middle level administrators and teachers cite politics, social and generational changes (Barty, Thomson, Blackmore, & Sachs, 2005; Cole, 2010; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006), the daily stress and difficulty of the head position, and the struggle to balance personal and professional responsibilities (Bass, 2006; d'Arbon et al., 2002; Hammond et al., 2001; Orr, 2006) as major deterrents in pursuing a headship. Many of these challenges correspond to areas wherein specific knowledge or skills would be beneficial. For instance, navigating political issues in education or addressing social change relate to social judgment skills, and an aspiring leader's unease with the perceived

complexity of the head of school position (including working with boards of trustees, developing strategic plans, and fundraising) may be ameliorated by developed problem-solving skills.

The skills-based model of leadership is well-suited to a study of the head of school position because aspiring leaders' misgivings about pursuing the position may be related to their discomfort with how to do the job. One report (NAIS, 2010) cites perceptions regarding the demands of the head of school position as a major deterrent for administrators who are uninterested in pursuing a headship. Specialized training in skills specific to independent school leadership might boost the confidence of aspiring leaders and make the demands of the position less daunting. Therefore, a study exploring the skills necessary to prepare school leaders for the successful execution of the head of school position could do much to develop their efficacy in and preparedness for the position.

There are multiple theories on leader behavior that could yield interesting academic scholarship but were outside the scope of or ill-suited for this inquiry. For example, studies researching how heads of school employ servant leadership or team leadership might produce compelling results that are unique to independent schools; other studies have been conducted on the use of servant leadership (Fridell, Belcher, & Messner, 2009; Mehrad & Fallahi, 2014) and team leadership (Chrispeels, Castillo, & Brown, 2000; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010) in public education. However, such inquiries do not directly address the problems in the independent school leadership pipeline; they serve to explore leader behavior as leaders execute the duties of their position but do not help identify skills prospective leaders might develop. Therefore, the skills-based model of leadership is an effective theoretical framework to employ because it is studying the behaviors and lived experiences of people as related to the knowledge and skills they have, not the leadership styles they use in their positions.

Among the various leader behavior theories, it could be argued that the trait leadership approach stands in most contrast to the skills-based model of leadership stands. Whereas the skills-based model of leadership suggests that skills and abilities that can be developed (and not a leader's character or personal and career experiences) affect leader efficacy, the trait approach suggests "organizations will work better if the people in managerial positions have designated leadership profiles" (Northouse, 2013, p. 29). In other words, the innate qualities and characteristics of individuals have more effect on their leadership than on knowledge and skills they may have acquired and developed. Northouse (2013) identifies intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability as major leadership traits, and it is difficult to conceive of an effective leader who is appreciably deficient in any of these areas. Despite this, Northouse (2013) points out that the trait approach yields highly subjective determinations of the most important leadership traits and fails to account for contextual leadership. As this was a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of new heads of school, the personal traits of the school leaders were not of significant interest. Although study participants at times discussed how their personalities and personal traits affected their leadership behaviors, the focus of the inquiry was on the skills the new heads used as independent schools leaders and how their career backgrounds and the knowledge and skills they had acquired therein affected their leadership.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this inquiry were:

1. What knowledge, training, and skills do new heads of school say are most relevant to the execution of their job responsibilities?
2. What knowledge or training do new heads of school say would have made their transition to the headship smoother or easier?

## **Definition of Terms**

**Independent School.** The independent schools under review here refer to schools accredited by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). NAIS is comprised of over 1,600 independent schools servicing over 700,000 students (NAIS, 2017a). A school is eligible for membership in NAIS if it has 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, is governed by an independent board of trustees, has been fully accredited by an approved organization, has a demonstrated commitment to diversity in compliance with state and federal law, as evident in all nondiscrimination policies for admission and hiring, and agrees in spirit with the NAIS Principles of Good Practice. Many NAIS schools are parochial (e.g. Catholic or Episcopalian), but some independent schools are not affiliated with a church or faith system.

**New Head of School.** The head of school is the chief operating officer at an independent school. The head of school is appointed by and is the sole employee of an independent school's board of trustees and is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school. The NAIS Trustee Handbook defines the head of school as "the professional, institutional, and educational leader of the school [and] is authorized to oversee all administration [of the school]" (DeKuyper, 2007, p. 116). For the purposes of this paper, a head who has been in his or her position for three years or fewer is considered "new."

## **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation provides insight into the experiences of new heads of school, analyzing the knowledge, training, and skills new heads say are most relevant to the execution of their job responsibilities and the knowledge and training they say would have made their transition to the headship easier. Chapter 2 is a literature review and focuses specifically on independent school leadership, with sections on (a) previously established standards for educational leadership; (b)

leadership skills research in public schools; (c) existing development efforts for independent school leaders, including certain workshops and training programs; (d) personality traits found in heads of school; (e) duties of heads of school; (f) the transition process for new heads of school. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the research inquiry, which was designed as a qualitative phenomenological study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, and the researcher concludes the dissertation in Chapter 5, where he discusses the findings of the research project, implications for theory and practice, limitations of the study, and areas for further academic inquiry.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

This literature review focuses specifically on independent school leadership, with sections on (a) previously established standards for educational leadership; (b) leadership skills research in public schools; (c) existing training programs for independent school leaders; (d) personality traits found in heads of school; (e) duties of heads of school; (f) the transition process for new heads of school. The chief purpose of this literature review is to establish a context for what this study examines. As this research inquiry examines the skills needed by successful independent school leaders as conceptualized by new heads of school, it is important to frame this inquiry within the context of previous studies about educational leadership and about the position of head of school specifically.

### Existing Standards

Various standards have been developed over the years by different professional organizations to better prepare future school leaders. For instance, in *Qualities of Effective Principals*, Stronge, Richards, and Catano (2008) identify eight key leader responsibilities: instructional leadership, school climate, human resource administration, teacher evaluation, organizational management, communication and community relations, professionalism, and the principal's role in student achievement. Similarly, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), a non-partisan and non-profit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in states across the country, recognized that school leaders were increasingly unprepared for or unclear on the responsibilities of their positions. To address this problem, CCSSO (2008) established the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). In order to better prepare aspiring school leaders and augment school leader

preparation programs, CCSSO drafted school leader standards in 1996, which have since been updated and revised in 2008. These standards are designed to address important qualities in school leadership, such as the ability to improve instruction or student achievement, that heretofore had been undefined or varied depending on the school or the district. The ISLCC standards cover a variety of educational areas for the school leader, including developing an educational vision, nurturing school culture, organizational management, school-community relations, professional ethics, and anticipating and responding to the various outside forces that affect the educational process, e.g. political, social, or economic changes.

As have other states, the Louisiana Educational Leaders Network [LELN] created and adopted standards (LELN, 1998) aligned with those enacted by ISLLC (2008). The Louisiana standards, in sync with the ISLLC standards, cover the following areas: vision, teaching and learning, school management, school improvement, professional development, school-community relations, and professional ethics. Taken together, the ISLLC and Louisiana standards are able to efficiently and effectively measure school leaders' performance and abilities. However, these standards do not appear to have been incorporated by or informed the National Association of Independent Schools' (NAIS) principles of good practice (discussed below); a search of the NAIS website of "Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium" and "ISLLC" returned no results. Moreover, there is surprisingly little scholarly attention paid to leader behavior in an independent school setting (Augustine, Gonzalex, Schuyler, Ikemoto, Russell, Zellman, Constant, et al., 2009; Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; The Wallace Foundation, 2010), and it is unclear what similarities and differences exist between public school leaders and their independent school counterparts. In fact, NAIS heads and administrators cited serving as a principal or vice principal in a public school as among the least helpful experiences for a head of



school (NAIS, 2010), with only 1% of respondents in the study viewing such experience as helpful. Although some standards have been developed and leader behavior in K-12 schools has received substantial academic review (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios, 2013; Clifford, Hansen, & Wraight, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010), the bulk of this scholarship focuses on the public arena, not independent schools or the heads who lead them. In other words, these standards may form a helpful or ancillary framework for non-public school leaders but are not the standard by which independent school leaders' efficacy is judged.

### **Leadership Skills Research in Public Schools**

Research in skills used by public school principals is substantial, and a review of selections from that research may provide some context with which to compare skills used by independent school leaders. The National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) knowledge base (NCPEA, 2007) and The School Leadership Study are two representative samples of research in this area (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007).

The National Council of Professors of Educational Administration proposes a knowledge base that includes key knowledge and skill domains for public school principals (NCPEA, 2007). The eighteen domains reflect a wide range of knowledge areas for school leaders, including historical, social, cultural, and philosophical foundations of education, research methods, learning theory, curriculum, student services, administration of special programs, personnel, educational management theories, educational leadership, human relations, organizational change, site-based leadership, school law, school business and finance, school public relations, school facilities, district leadership, and technology leadership (NCPEA, 2007). These are fields

that are of particular use in independent schools. Whereas some of these areas like human relations, school law, and school business and finance may be typically handled by public school system central offices (Honig, 2003), these are areas that typically fall solely on independent school leaders, who must address on their own or delegate these tasks to others. Therefore, it is possible that the NCPEA knowledge base may be of some utility to independent school leaders. However, like the ISLLC standards, this knowledge base does not appear to directly influence or inform independent school leadership practices; a search of the NAIS website for either NCPEA or its knowledge base returns no results. Still, the overlap between some of the knowledge base domains and the responsibilities of heads of schools presents an interesting comparison of public and independent school leaders

The Wallace Foundation, the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, and The Finance Project conducted a study in 2007 called the School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007). The study surveyed public school principals and analyzed preparation programs at universities, with a focus on operations (program documents, courses, workshops, etc.), funding for programs, and impact on and attitudes of the graduates during and after the program. The study yielded information on the elements of good leadership –namely through the support and development of effective teachers and the implementation of effective organizational processes— and on pre- and in-service programs for leaders, the best examples of which are research-based, have curricular coherence, provide experience in authentic contexts, use cohort groupings and mentors, and are structured to enable collaborative activity between the program and area schools. The study also describes variances in leader preparation program design and the multiple pathways to high quality leadership development, with some programs emphasizing leadership and management skills

over academic proficiency. However, this study analyzed only preparation programs for public school leaders, not those in independent schools, although, as with the NCPEA knowledge base, some interesting points seem to overlap between the public and independent school worlds, especially in the area of leadership skills.

### **Charter Schools**

Of the varying types of public school systems, charter schools represent the most useful point of comparison with independent schools. Like independent schools, charter schools also are said to offer a smaller and more personalized environment for their students (DeMartino, in press). Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools are “publically funded schools [that] are granted autonomy and flexibility with respect to human resource allocation, funding, and general operational procedures” (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011, p. 44). Moreover, like independent schools, charter schools are “market-driven entities and, thus, must attract an adequate number of students to be financially viable” (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011, p. 46), and students’ families may take on the role of consumer, customer, or client instead of constituent.

Like independent school leaders, charter school principals (or directors as they are sometime called) often report to a school board that governs a single or small network of schools, and they have significant latitude in how they manage the school’s operations (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011; Gawlik & Bickmore, in press; Hausman & Goldring, 2001; Walls, Ryu, & Johnson, in press; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). This autonomy is intended to free up charter schools from the stifling bureaucracy associated with traditional public schools (DeMartino, in press). This freedom, however, has its drawbacks and can lead to tensions between the desire for flexibility and autonomy and the need for stability (Bickmore, in press); whereas traditional public school systems typically have a central office that can manage certain

areas of the school like human resources, accounting, or transportation, charter school leaders must often take on such management responsibilities themselves (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011; Campbell & Gross, 2008; Dressler, 2001; Miron & Urschel, 2009; Ryu, & Johnson, in press). This is similar to independent school leaders who must typically address such non-educational endeavors on their own. Also, Berman (2008) says that charter school principals must “find facilities, develop and monitor budget and strategic plans, recruit board members, hire and train staff, recruit and orient families and work with governing boards, local communities and the authorizing boards” (p. 5). These are all responsibilities similar to those of independent school heads.

Gawlik and Bickmore (in press) argue that this wide range of responsibilities requires charter school leaders to possess skills related to both instructional leadership and management, and Dressler (2001) says this also means charter school principals must manage both day-to-day operations but also help the school remain close to its original mission and vision. Charter school principals, especially those founding new schools, face particularly unique issues, including establishing and enacting a school mission, leadership and governance challenges, and attending to the business functions of school management (Cannata, Thombre, & Thomas, in press; Walls, Ryu, & Johnson, in press). Charter school principals also often struggle with fundraising, managing facilities, and negotiating with other public school districts (Campbell & Gross, 2008). These competing demands, often non-pedagogical in nature face charter school and independent school leaders alike. However, like their counterparts in traditional public schools, charter school leaders’ focus and time are most often spent on state testing challenges (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011; Bickmore & Dowell, 2014) and not issues like providing vision and moral leadership and managing the school culture and climate that independent school heads

consider their biggest priorities (NAIS, 2009). While certainly charter school principals would likely say they have similar goals, they often must conceptualize student achievement as synonymous with students' performance on state testing (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011). Other charter school principals' concerns are personnel issues, student-related issues like behavior, promoting the school, and management issues like funding, facilities, and other logistics (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011). It is difficult to make generalizations about charter schools and the principals that lead them given the significant variations in mission, vision, operations, and state laws related to the charter schools throughout the country. However, it would appear that charter school leaders do not spend as much time doing strategic planning and working with their school boards (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011; Campbell & Gross, 2008; Dressler, 2001; Gross & Pochop, 2007). This stands in contrast with independent school leaders who work in close concert with their boards of trustees and especially their board chairs (NAIS, 2009; NAIS, 2013).

Overall, given the similarities between the organizations they lead and the job responsibilities they have, a comparison between charter school principals and heads of school is beneficial and offers an effective qualitative link between independent schools and public education. The skill sets required by independent school leaders and charter school leaders may likely be similar, but, like leader behavior in independent schools, charter school leadership is a field of study that has not been significantly developed (Bickmore & Dowell, 2014). However, some similarities are obvious; charter school leaders and heads of school must both report to boards of directors, must develop and maintain a mission and vision for their schools, and handle a host of responsibilities like human resources and budgeting that are covered by central offices in traditional public schools, all while also being instructional leaders and promoting student

achievement. Therefore, research in independent school leader behavior may likely help inform similar inquiries into charter school principals although more scholarship in both areas is needed.

### **Independent School Leader Development Efforts**

There is not an abundance of leader preparation programs that provide either provide terminal degrees or ongoing professional development for independent school leaders (Ring, 2015); Cole (2015) identifies only seven programs throughout the country that focus specifically on this topic. Aside from degree programs, other programs, workshops, and institutes exist to help train and develop independent school leaders, including the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads, the NAIS Institute for New Heads, and the Independent School Management workshop for new heads. This section reviews the curricula of those programs, offers commentary on ways in which they develop leadership skills, and identifies leadership skill set areas that they do not appear to be adequately addressing.

#### **NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads**

To better facilitate the development of future heads of school, NAIS instituted in 2004 the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring School Heads, designed to provide practical knowledge on being a head. The fellowship involves participation in a weeklong summer institute taught by veteran and new heads. According to the program description on the NAIS website (NAIS, 2015), fellows receive career counseling, learn about the head search process, and take part in a group action research project. In doing so, fellows are guided in developing a leadership style of their own and develop a network of peers. The program also pairs the fellow with an established head who serves as the fellow's mentor and counsels the fellow on key issues that heads face. The program description states that, "As a result of this [mentoring] relationship, the role of head

will be demystified through candid conversations, real-life problem solving, and regular meetings and reading assignments” (NAIS, 2015).

This fellowship marks a significant step taken by NAIS in developing future school leaders, addressing the problems in the leadership pipeline that the organization has recognized. It signifies a deliberate effort by NAIS to anticipate developing leaders’ knowledge gaps and instruct them in areas of educational leadership with which they have no knowledge or experience. The opportunities for mentorship, counseling, and networking provide aspiring leaders with tangible resources they can utilize to better themselves as independent school leaders. However, some aspects of the fellowship program are problematic and do not appear to be effectively filling the independent school leadership gap. For instance, it is telling that the program seems to focus heavily on the job search, networking, and mentoring and not as much on technical or practical skills heads employ in their positions. No details are offered on curriculum development, teacher supervision, mediating conflicts with parents or a board of trustees, acquiring professional development for faculty and staff, or any responsibilities in the constellation of head duties. It would seem the fellowship is designed more towards helping individuals find and acquire jobs rather than for preparing them for the responsibilities and dilemmas they might face as heads.

Moreover, it is revealing that since 2004, only 580 individuals out of an independent school community that includes more than 1600 schools have participated; it is possible that the \$4500 program cost may be discouraging to some teachers and administrators. Orem (2015) also notes that a recent study of previous participants in the fellowship program reported feelings of discrimination in searches for new heads, with respondents citing race, gender, and a perceived “old boy network” as limiting factors for aspiring heads. These same respondents also reported

perceived biased on the part of head search committees, with woman and people of color labeled “nontraditional” candidates, making them less likely to be appointed. This is especially troublesome given that, in its State of Independent School Leadership report (NAIS, 2010), only 22% of current administrators expressed interest in pursuing a headship but 27% of administrators who identify as people of color reported interest in being a head of school. These perceptions do not appear to be addressed or rectified by the Aspiring Heads fellowship program. This same report notes that, among participants in the Aspiring Heads program, personal and family commitments were the most common reasons given for deciding to not pursue a headship. While this fellowship marks a good faith effort on the part of NAIS towards developing future leaders, it is a resource that is either underutilized or ineffective in training a sufficient number of new school leaders.

### **NAIS Institute for New Heads**

Similar to its Fellowship for Aspiring Heads, NAIS also offers the Institute for New Heads. According to the NAIS website, the five-day summer institute has prepared over a thousand heads of school for successful leadership transitions and is specifically designed for heads entering their first or second years (NAIS, 2016). Participants will also “acquire an understanding of [their] leadership style[s], gain practical knowledge, demystify the head experience, and build a strong peer network” (NAIS, 2016). Led by a faculty of current heads of school, the program covers topics including crisis management, practical leadership, working with constituents, building school culture, governance, marketing, and advancement. The program also provides exposure to the fundamentals of school governance, finance, legal issues, diversity initiatives, and development.



As with the Fellowship for Aspiring Heads, this institute represents meaningful progress on the part of NAIS in preparing its current and future leaders for the challenges of headship. It is telling that both the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads and the NAIS Institute for New Heads have as stated goals to “demystify” the headship. This reveals that NAIS has identified the vagaries and complexities of the head of school position as a problem for its current and future leadership. It appears that NAIS recognizes that even individuals with knowledge, experience, and expertise who are appointed as heads of school still may have considerable knowledge gaps. The opportunities for learning on a variety of topics from established heads of school who might serve as mentors to these new heads are significant. However, as also with the Fellowship for Aspiring Heads, the NAIS Institute for New Heads does not appear to wholly remedy the problem of providing skills a new head might need. Major leadership topics like curriculum development, teacher supervision, conflict mediation, professional development for faculty and staff do not seem to be addressed in the institute. Like the Fellowship for Aspiring Heads, this program has a substantial cost (\$4452 for NAIS members or \$5789 for nonmembers), and a board of trustees might not be willing to spend such capital on an individual the board presumes to be trained and ready for leadership. Therefore, while both these programs offered by NAIS may be of some benefit in helping train aspiring and new heads of school and provide them with the skills they will need to successfully execute their responsibilities, it is clear that more skills training specific to these responsibilities is warranted.

### **Independent School Management – The New Head of School Workshop**

Independent School Management (ISM), a group that provides strategic advice, research, management techniques, and other consulting services to independent schools, offers a similar workshop called the New Head of School. According to the program description on the ISM

website (ISM, 2016), new heads who attend the workshop will learn about constituent relationships, strategic planning, managing an administrative team, and how to set an appropriate school tuition. Attendees will also be able to network with peers who are also facing similar issues. The workshop also covers the head as chief operating officer of the school, providing vision and direction, leadership and the way forward, assuring financial stability, and maintaining one's own personal health and vitality. Based on this description, the workshop covers ground similar to the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads. The program does seem more substantive and deliberate in its programming; for example, teaching heads specific skills like how to set an appropriate tuition level is the kind of practical skill that other independent leader programs seem to omit. However, this workshop, as with the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads and the Institute for New Heads, seems to suffer from a lack of specific skills training that might benefit new heads. Moreover, the workshop is four days with a considerable registration fee (\$2450) that may be daunting to middle level administrators.

Overall, the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads, the NAIS Institute for New Heads, and the New Head of School workshop organized by ISM all represent meaningful efforts to train and develop both potential and novice independent school leaders. The programs' curricula cover a broad spectrum of topics important to independent school leadership, including working with constituencies, developing a leadership philosophy, and strategic planning. However, these programs do not seem to offer content specific to leadership skills that might benefit aspiring leaders or new heads of school. Helping develop skills related to working with a board of trustees, conflict resolution, teacher supervision, and financial management might benefit novice and veteran independent school leaders alike. NAIS does not provide any summary statistics on how its current leadership force has been trained, i.e. whether strictly through collegiate terminal

degrees, through workshops or fellowships, or some combination thereof. As it stands, while both the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads, the Institute for New Heads, and the ISM Workshop for New Heads both exist as formalized training grounds for potential school leaders, their programs may not be addressing all the areas in which new leaders need training.

### **Mentoring**

Recognizing the value of mentoring, NAIS has incorporated into several of its programs, including the Fellowship for Aspiring heads and its Institute for New Heads. Indeed, heads of school consider mentoring among the most effective strategies in preparing middle level administrators for leadership positions in independent schools (NAIS, 2010). Fifty-seven percent of heads say they had a mentor while working in independent schools whose mentorship was beneficial. Fifteen percent of heads say they had a mentor as part of a formal arrangement, and 29% say they had no mentor at all. Indicating a cyclical process, 85% of heads also report to have served as a mentor, either formally or informally, with promising results; seventy percent of heads report their protégés went on to become either a head of school or another key administrative figure (NAIS, 2010). Despite these promising results, the State of Independent School Leadership report does not analyze mentoring in great detail, and aspiring administrators would benefit from knowing what knowledge or skills a mentor-mentee relationship can foster in developing educational leaders. It is possible that mentoring may serve as an even more effective training than a formalized program like the Fellowship for Aspiring Heads, but this is an avenue that seems under-researched.

### **Heads' Perception of Their Own Preparedness**

It is important to put into context what tasks heads of school have said they felt prepared and unprepared to do as heads; in doing so, research examining the skills needed to better do

those jobs can be more focused. According to NAIS's State of Independent School Leadership report (NAIS, 2010), heads of school in their current positions report they feel well-prepared in most aspects of the job, including working with parents and families, managing a school's climate and values, providing vision and moral leadership, hiring and firing, admissions and recruiting students, and working with their boards of trustees. They also feel well-equipped to manage student discipline, conflicts, policies, their school's overall financial health, strategic planning, and community and public relations. However, they also report that when they first became heads of school, they were not well-prepared in such key areas as working with a board of trustees, strategic planning, fundraising, and managing a school's overall financial health; ironically, these are areas heads report demand the heaviest amount of their time. Heads also say they feel less prepared in the areas of business administration, legal issues, and addressing and managing diversity issues. In a similar vein, Kane and Barbaro (2015) examined the transition period for new school leaders, and the three challenges cited by new heads were financial issues, transferability of job skills (i.e. effective skills in a previous job not contributing to success as a new head), and prioritizing competing demands. Although this prior research sheds light on what areas new or aspiring heads need training in, it does not necessarily correspond to what skills are needed for the position. In other words, heads might cite the ability to work with a board of trustees as an area with which they felt discomfort or a lack of familiarity upon their appointment to the head of school position, but this still does not answer the question what social judgment skills a head might need to develop in order to work effectively with a board of trustees. Similarly, heads who are challenged by addressing financial issues or prioritizing competing demands might be well-served by acquired knowledge and honed problem-solving skills.

## **Personality Traits of the Head of School**

Beyond examining how heads are trained and what tasks they express confidence or difficulty in facing, it is beneficial to also examine who become heads of school and what personality qualities they may have. Barbara Gilvar (2004), whose firm conducts head searches, writes to those schools considering potential heads:

A very good indicator of leadership qualities is what people can tell you about their actual working relationship with someone and how they feel about the person they are describing. Are they loyal? Can they talk about the candidate as a mentor? Can they describe challenges faced and successful outcomes? Can they describe mistakes and what was learned? Can they talk about the person's ability to listen, to both offer and take advice? A school needs a head who is confident enough to check how he or she is doing and flexible enough to respond. A leader has to want to listen carefully to the pulse of the community to know what people need, or think they need. [ . . . ] A school needs a head who listens carefully to know what people are hearing, what they are not hearing, and where their concerns are. (Finding Leadership Qualities section).

At the heart of Gilvar's (2004) is the importance of interpersonal skills. Attributes like loyalty to others, the willingness to reflect on one's own practices and decisions, and the ability to take advice from mentors, colleagues, and other community members relate innately to the ability to connect with others. In fact, a study conducted by NAIS found that emotional intelligence was the most important attribute linked to outstanding leadership and performance in heads of school (Booth, 2004). The study described emotional intelligence as mood labeling (a person's ability to accurately label his or her feelings or emotions), empathy (an individual's ability to understand the feelings and emotions of others), and social judgment (a person's ability to make appropriate

decisions in social situations based on the emotional states of others). Successful leader behavior in this study also showed a high level of comfort with conflict, itself a form of interpersonal behavior. The study (Booth, 2004) concludes:

Our study found that these very effective heads are highly self-confident and self-directed, committed, goal-oriented, and adaptive. Their well-developed self-awareness, empathy, and social judgment are apparent in the ways they relate to other people. Friendly and enthusiastic, they develop new relationships very easily, excel at networking, and build positive relationships with their staff and colleagues. Their self-understanding and ability to motivate and guide people enable them to resolve conflicts at their schools and to pursue commitments from staff, donors, and colleagues. These school leaders skillfully manage the multiple stresses of their demanding careers and personal lives. They are motivated by challenge and a desire to provide a valuable service to others. Their strong emotional intelligence competencies, leadership styles, and motivations are great assets as they fulfill the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of a school head (Management Profile of School Leaders section).

As in Gilvar (2004)'s study, Booth (2004) here emphasizes interpersonal relationships as key to successful leadership practices, finding that leaders who are reflective, can relate to others, and are able to balance their responsibilities in order to do the most good for the most people can be counted as among the best leaders. The study serves to underscore the apparent relationship between interpersonal skills and effective leadership.

In the State of Independent School Leadership report (NAIS, 2010), heads and administrators themselves commented on what qualities and experiences makes one well-suited to be a head, citing classroom teaching as the most valuable experience in becoming a successful

head. Other helpful experiences are described in Table 1, as are experiences Heads described as least helpful.

<b>Table 1</b>	
<i>Helpful and least helpful experiences for heads of school (NAIS, 2010)</i>	
<i>Helpful Experiences</i>	<i>Least Helpful Experiences</i>
having a strong mentor	coaching an athletic team or extracurricular activity
holding other administrative positions in independent schools	being a trustee at a school
financial management experience	experience working in the business world
holding a division head position in an independent school	working or teaching in higher education
fundraising experience	serving as a principal or vice principal in a public school
being a parent	
holding an assistant/associate independent school head position	
admissions/enrollment management experience	

These experiences may be related to certain leadership skills. Having a positive relationship with a mentor may speak to an individual’s ability to work with others and to accept feedback, both positive and negative. Experiences in financial management, fundraising, and enrollment management involve technical skills that rely in large part on knowledge learned. Prior experience as an administrator, assistant or associate head, or a division head may also contribute to heads’ development of their overall leadership philosophies and management styles. With these experiences combined together, heads argue they are well-equipped to perform their job responsibilities. However, it is important to set a proper context for what all heads of schools do in their institutions.

## **Duties of the Head School**

Providing a job description for a head of school is difficult, and an attempt to enumerate all their roles and responsibilities is a challenge. According to Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, and Meyerson (2005), educational leaders generally are “educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives” (Getting the Facts on School Leadership Preparation section, para. 1). Kennedy (2001) writes not facetiously:

“The head of a private school in the new millennium has to have the executive ability of a Fortune 1000 executive, the diplomatic skills of Ban Ki-moon and the vision of Bill Gates. S/he has to deal with substance abuse. S/he has to be politically correct. The graduates have to get into the right colleges. S/he has to raise millions for this project and that. S/he has to sort through legal issues which would numb the mind of a Philadelphia lawyer. The head needs the diplomatic skills of an ambassador to deal with parents and the technology infrastructure costs a fortune and doesn't seem to have improved teaching at all. On top of all this, the head's admissions department now has to compete for students with several other schools which years ago could hardly be considered the competition if they existed at all” (The Way It Is Now section, para. 2).

Kennedy's (2001) description here, though glib, speaks to the challenge at the very heart of leadership – the ability to manage responsibilities whose number and complexity can at times seem overwhelming and challenges both intractable and seemingly insurmountable. Indeed, educational leaders oversee student achievement and accountability, must satisfy both parents and teachers, and are held accountable by government regulations (Bush, Briggs, &



Middlewood, 2006; Cole, 2010; Frankel, Schechtman, & Koenings, 2006). Modern school leaders must account for school finances, teacher assessments, accountability and demands for new programs (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; IEL, 2000; Orr, 2006).

It is beneficial to review how NAIS and its constituents describe the major job responsibilities of heads of school, especially given that new heads' perception of their preparedness for the job is the main focus of the study. In order to better articulate what duties may be assigned to the head of an independent school, NAIS provides a sample job description for the use of schools undergoing head searches (see Appendix A). In summary, it covers the broad range of duties assigned to a head of school, with emphases on personnel decisions, maintaining and supporting the school's culture and a vision for the school, the Head of School's relationship to the board of trustees, and the head's oversight of curriculum, school finances, and development. It is important to note that this sample job description is boilerplate, and that each independent school has its own specific needs and constituencies.

This job description, while thorough, does not give any indication of what skills an applicant might need to carry out these responsibilities. Personnel management, curriculum oversight, facilities management, and all the other tasks laid out above each requires its own set of skills (technical, conceptual, and other types), and it is reasonable to conclude that any applicant would be daunted by the number and complexity of the job responsibilities associated with headship. Moreover, the current avenues by which aspiring heads might prepare themselves for the headship are noticeably lacking in skills training specific to these very areas.

## **NAIS Principles of Good Practice and Independent School Management Leadership Points of Excellence**

In order to better define excellence in educational leadership in an independent school setting, NAIS offers the Principles of Good Practice (see Appendix B) as guideposts for all heads (NAIS, 2017c). These principles of good practice cover the range of job responsibilities facing a head of school, from goal setting and strategic planning to personnel management and instructional oversight. These guidelines reflect the complexity and wide range of duties facing a head of school. It is telling, however, that these leadership practices suggested by NAIS do not include specific implementation strategies or suggestions on how a head of school might cultivate, develop, and refine his or her abilities within each of these areas. Heads of schools, it would seem, are on their own to discover how best to nurture and employ the skills needed to execute these practices.

In a similar vein, ISM (2004) conducted a study surveying independent school teachers who described their perceived leadership points of excellence for heads of school. Those leadership points of excellence are presented in Appendix C. These leadership points of excellence again speak to the wide-ranging duties of a head of school. Even more so than the NAIS Principles of Good Practice, however, these points are somewhat couched by a lack of specificity. Certainly all school leaders would be well-served pursuing such lofty goals as maintaining an inspirational commitment to the school and setting high expectations for its constituents. However, as with the NAIS Principles of Good Practice, there is little about specific practices in pursuit of these leadership outcomes available to a head of school or prospective leader. Without such specifics, it is challenging to connect either the Principles of Good Practice or the ISM leadership points of excellence to specific skill sets that heads can

employ or cultivate. It would appear that aspiring heads or new heads are at an even greater disadvantage, given that there is no ready way for them to identify the skills they need to be prepared for a headship, much less develop whatever skills that might be beneficial upon become a head of school.

**“Big Picture” Aspects of Headship**

Both the NAIS Principles of Good Practice and the ISM leadership points of excellence may provide heads of school some guideposts for executing their leadership responsibilities, but it is useful to see how heads themselves perceive their job responsibilities. In one NAIS survey, the 548 heads (40%) that participated identified the “big picture” aspects of their jobs as depicted in Table 2 (NAIS, 2009).

Table 2
<i>“Big Picture” Aspects of the Head of School Position (NAIS, 2009)</i>
1. Providing vision/moral leadership
2. Managing school climate and values
3. Working with board of trustees
4. Managing school’s overall financial health
5. Strategic planning
6. Fundraising
7. Community and public relations
8. Working with parents/families
9. Managing conflicts
10. Hiring and firing

Heads have also identified the ability to manage multiple constituencies, time management, fund raising, and keeping up with the sheer volume and pace of work as especially challenging in the position (Scott, 2004). In the face of these challenges, heads report fear of failure and a lack of sufficient knowledge as major concerns they have for their positions (Scott, 2007). In a different survey, heads of school cited finding time for themselves and their families, fundraising, schedule and time commitments/time management, hiring and firing staff, and managing the

school's financial health as the top five (out of 22 possible answers) most challenging aspects of the head of school position (NAIS, 2007). It is worth noting, however, that many respondents commented that while no single job out of the 22 items is itself extremely challenging, balancing these responsibilities and juggling two or more at the same time is a major challenge.

Neither survey includes as a descriptive measure participants' prior leadership experiences or the number years the participants have been established in their current positions, and so it is difficult to determine if these concerns can be alleviated by more or better preservice training for heads, continued professional development, or other resources. However, it is telling that the top three "big picture" aspects do not readily connect to tangible skills that can be easily acquired. Concerns further down the list like sustaining relationships with the school community, public, or families, handling conflict, or managing the institution's human resources might lend themselves to some form of training or professional development. Developing and implementing a vision and fostering a climate conducive to learning and rich in values are more elusive tasks for a school leader to realize. The current array of training resources available to heads and aspiring heads does not appear account for these challenges in a deliberate or significant way. With this need unmet, it is advantageous to explore ways in which aspiring heads could be better trained for the position and ways in which current heads, both veteran and novice, might further develop their leadership skills.

### **Relationship to Board of Trustees**

To execute a school's stated mission, the school's governing body, the board of trustees, appoints a head of school and sets goals for him or her. In other words, the head of school is appointed by and is the sole employee of an independent school's board of trustees. Therefore, while other constituencies (parents, faculty, etc.) may have a voice in the process, it is the board

of trustees that sets goals for the head’s performance and ultimately chooses to retain or dismiss a head of school. However, discrepancies often emerge between the head and the board as to what key issues face the school. Table 3 demonstrates the results of a survey (NAIS, 2013) wherein board chairs and heads of school were asked to rate the five most important issues facing the school.

<b><i>Issue</i></b>	<b><i>Heads of School</i></b>	<b><i>Board Chairs</i></b>
Managing enrollment/keeping the school affordable	68%	68%
Marketing/branding the school (showing the value-added of an independent school)	55%	48%
Recruiting, retaining, and compensating quality faculty	52%	41%
Developing a sound 5-year financial plan for the school	47%	42%
Creating a 21 <sup>st</sup> century program and curriculum	43%	34%
Expanding parent and alumni giving/support	40%	53%
Communicating with internal and external audiences	35%	25%
Renovating/enhancing school facilities	30%	35%
Increasing availability of financial aid	29%	27%
Identifying effective sources of non-tuition revenue	25%	25%
Dealing with increased competition from other types of schools	23%	24%
Creating a diverse and inclusive school community	20%	16%
Managing and expanding effective use of technology	17%	20%
Improving parent/school relationships	7%	10%
Handling legal issues/compliance	5%	4%

A review of the table shows that board chairs and heads largely agree on the issues facing schools, with emphases on managing enrollment, marketing, retaining qualified faculty, and financial management as key areas of agreement. However, some discrepancies (e.g. communication, fundraising, curriculum development, and faculty retention) exist. In relating to the boards of trustees that appoint them, Heads also cite finding time for trustee relations and trustee activities, building genuine, positive relationships with trustees, board training and education, identifying, cultivating, and mentoring new trustees, and keeping the board focused on appropriate big picture issues instead of on micromanaging day-to-day activities as the challenging aspects of their trustee relationships (NAIS, 2007). This data gathered in this study reflects this discrepancy, with new heads commenting on their relationship with the boards that appointed them and the mandates they received from their school boards.

Given such a discrepancy, it can be difficult for heads and boards to agree on an evaluation process that is fair and meaningful to both parties. The NAIS Trustee Handbook (DeKuyper, 2007) recommends that evaluations be based on goals set in advance of the school year agreed upon by both the board of trustees and the head. The Independent Schools Association of the Southwest (ISAS), a division of NAIS, provides a sample evaluation form for independent schools (Appendix D) for the assessment of the head's performance by parents, teachers, and/or board members that reveals some insight into the nature of the headship. Many assessment items relate to aspects of the skills-based model of leadership. For instance, items relating to the Head's ability to identify issues, anticipate problems, and manage and use time effectively may be construed as problem-solving skills. Likewise, questions about the head's ability to communicate with others, his or her working relationship with subordinates and with

the board of trustees, how he or she inspires parents, colleagues, and faculty relate to social judgment skills.

### **The Transition Process for New Heads of School**

As this research project focuses on the experiences of new heads, it is important to set the context for the environments new heads enter and how they are prepared (or not prepared) to acclimate to them. Many challenges face first year novice principals (Hertting, 2008; Ring, 2015). Friedman and Bassett (2004) argue new heads' jobs are especially difficult because their transition is often met with impossibly high expectations accompanied by equally unrealistic mandates like fixing intractable organizational problems without disturbing any one constituency. As schools make the transition from one head to the next, there is no formalized transition process for new heads of school, owing largely to the fact that the uniqueness of each school and its reason for appointing a new head of school makes any kind of standardization difficult (Saburn, 2004). However, Saburn (2004) argues there should be clear "rules of engagement" for the outgoing head, the new head, and the board chair regarding personnel, finances, accessibility, and personal appearances (e.g. at traditional events or on behalf of the school). Friedman and Bassett (2004) argue that this process is often made all the more complicated by the presence of the "first family," i.e. the new head's spouse and/or children who have their own set of unwritten but important rules for appropriate behavior and appearances. Friedman and Bassett (2004) describe a transition process wholly unique to "the first family" with their own professional, academic, and social needs accounted for. This murky transition process makes it unclear how new heads are to enter a new school environment, understand the issues, both great and small, facing the school, and establish priorities. Coupled with the challenges discussed earlier facing heads who are well-established in their current work

situations, the lack of an intentional transition process for a new head of school makes the new head's job all the more challenging.

Kane and Barbaro (2015) identify four phases of the transition process (see Table 3) for new heads: pre-entry, arrival, first 90 days, and second 90 days.

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Incoming Head of School Activities</i>	<i>Transition Assistance</i>
Pre-entry phase	Up to 12 months	- communication with key constituents - information gathering - building a leadership team	- allowing incoming Head to balance current work responsibilities with looking to future position
Arrival phase	1 – 2 months	- personal adjustment (housing, medical care, etc.	- helping Head make personal transition, especially as related to family needs
Third phase	1 <sup>st</sup> 90 days of academic year	- learning school realities (e.g. personnel or financial issues) - address immediate problems	- help in facilitating relationships with key constituents
Fourth phase	2 <sup>nd</sup> 90 days of academic year	- work to achieve first-year goals established with board of trustees	- receive formative feedback and deal with perceptions

These transition phases may be accompanied by varying levels of transition assistance from the board of trustees, the school community, a transition team, the search firm, or others. The pre-entry phase extends from the signing of a contract until arrival on campus. This phase, lasting up to 12 months involves the newly hired head in communication with key administrators, board members, and stakeholders while still retaining responsibilities at the school of current



employment. These interactions provide opportunities for the incoming head to gather information concerning the school's recent history, identify key issues, and learn about traditions. Often, the incoming head has been involved in filling one or two administrative positions during this time, given his or her stake in building a leadership team. The arrival phase spans the time between relocation to the new community and the opening day of school, often lasting between one and two months. During the arrival phase, the transitioning head and any accompanying family members adjust to the community, locating essentials such as housing, appropriate medical care, and schools for any children the head's family may have. As this research project explores the experiences of new heads of school and their sense of their preparedness for their positions, the nature of new heads' movement through these two phases (and how deliberate the boards of trustees who appointed them were in establishing a transition process of some sort) may yield compelling data on the experiences of new heads of school.

The third phase in Kane and Barbaro's (2015) model encompasses the first 90 days on the job, roughly equivalent to the first school semester. While the board usually provides directives for the year, the head must first get to know administrators and faculty, establish a relationship with the board chair and key board members, and learn how the school functions. In the process, heads discover realities about the school, some that had not been previously disclosed like personnel problems or financial challenges that were more serious than described. The intent of most heads during the first 90 days is to build credibility and achieve small wins, but some of these larger challenges required their immediate attention. The final phase of transition, the second 90 days, lasts approximately the length of the second semester, during which the head of school works to achieve first-year goals established with the board. In most

cases, the completion of this phase corresponds with the end of the school year and the board's first formal evaluation of the head's work.

This research project explore heads' experiences in all these transition phases, with particular emphasis on what leadership and management skills new heads employed in execution of their job responsibilities. Heads' experiences in Kane and Barbaro's (2015) third and fourth phases yielded the most compelling data, for it is in these phases that heads' work truly begins in earnest. With the school year in full swing, it is at this time that heads must begin balancing the many demands that compete for their attention. How new heads navigate this terrain and the skills they use (or find they lack) illuminates the experiences of new heads of school and how aspiring heads can be better trained for leadership.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review examined previously established standards for educational leadership, leadership skills research in public schools, existing training efforts for independent school leaders, personality traits found in heads of school, duties of heads of school, and the transition process for new heads of school. However, the extant literature is incomplete in addressing the needs of leadership in independent schools, does not adequately inform or prepare aspiring heads of independent schools, and does not help those future leaders identify, understand, and develop the leadership skills they will need. Existing professional standards like the ISLLC standards and their Louisiana counterparts, while useful guide points, are oriented towards a public school model, have not been utilized by NAIS, and do not appear to inform existing training programs for independent school leaders. Moreover, independent school leaders say that prior experience as a public school principal or administrator and the concomitant leadership skills employed in such a setting are not helpful in their current roles

(NAIS, 2010), and so the utility of these standards for independent school leaders is questionable. Given their unique configuration as a hybrid between public and private forms of education, charter schools provide an intriguing qualitative link between independent schools and public education. As stated, the skill sets required by independent school leaders and charter school leaders may likely be similar, but, like leader behavior in independent schools, charter school leadership is a field of study that has not been significantly developed (Bickmore & Dowell, 2014). Therefore, research in independent school leader behavior may likely help inform similar inquiries into charter school principals although more scholarship in both areas is needed.

Fortunately, some training programs exist that target independent school leaders. Both the NAIS Fellowship for Aspiring Heads and the ISM workshop for new heads (among other programs) are designed for independent school leaders. However, both programs do not wholly satisfy the needs of future leaders of independent schools. The NAIS Fellowship focuses on the job search process, networking, and mentoring and does not detail the technical or practical skills heads employ in their positions. Curriculum development, teacher supervision, mediating conflicts with parents or a board of trustees, acquiring professional development for faculty and staff, or other leadership responsibilities are not addressed in the NAIS fellowship or in the ISM workshop for new heads. While these offerings represent some meaningful professional development for new and aspiring heads of school, several gaps in their curricula exist that might better instruct school leaders on the skills they might need as heads of school.

Some research has established personality traits and characteristics that seem to be common to effective educational leaders and especially to heads of school. Interpersonal skills, loyalty to others, the ability to reflect on one's practices and to accept both positive and

feedback, and emotional intelligence are all skills and personality traits that have been found to be effective in independent school leaders (Booth, 2004; Gilvar, 2004). Heads of schools themselves say experiences with a mentor, holding administrative or leadership positions in other independent schools, and familiarity with financial management are among their most helpful leadership experiences (NAIS, 2010). These experiences may be related to certain leadership skills. Having a positive relationship with a mentor reflect an individual's ability to work with others and willingness to receive both encouragement and criticism from others. Experiences in financial management, fundraising, and admissions/enrollment involve technical skills that rely in large part on knowledge accrued over the course of a career. Prior experience as an administrator, assistant or associate head, or a division head may also contribute to heads' development of their overall leadership philosophies and management styles. With these experiences combined together, heads argue they are well-equipped to perform their job responsibilities. However, as stated, many of these experiences are not reflected in established professional standards or built into the curricula of the current array of independent leadership development programs. Without any kind of standardized leader preparation program in place for independent schools, it is a challenge for aspiring leaders to prepare themselves or receive training in the skills they might need as heads of school.

In reviewing the duties assigned to the typical head of school, it is clear that heads face a multitude of issues and challenges in their roles. Heads must possess the ability to manage responsibilities whose number and complexity can be overwhelming, but, even among independent schools, there is no clear consensus on what all it is that heads do and what constitutes the successful execution of those responsibilities. NAIS provides a sample job description for its constituent schools undergoing head searches (see Appendix A) and also

provides Principles of Good Practice (see Appendix B) for its member schools to use as a resource for heads of school (NAIS, 2017c). Similarly, ISM offers its leadership points of excellence (Appendix C) with which heads of school might align their practices (ISM, 2004). However, there is little in either resource about specific practices a head of school or prospective leader might engage in. Without such specifics, it is challenging to connect either the Principles of Good Practice or the ISM leadership points of excellence to specific skill sets that heads can use or learn. For new or aspiring heads of school, this is especially challenging as they cannot readily or easily prepare themselves for leadership. Furthermore, existing heads of school identify the ability to manage multiple constituencies, time management, fund raising, and keeping up with the sheer volume and pace of work as especially challenging in their positions (NAIS, 2007; Scott, 2004). These responsibilities do not readily lend themselves to tangible skills that can be taught and learned, and the current training resources available to heads and aspiring heads do not appear account for these needs. Therefore, it may be useful to explore ways in which aspiring heads could be better trained for the position and ways in which current heads, both veteran and novice, might further develop their leadership skills.

Finally, in reviewing the transition process many new heads undergo in entering their positions, there does not appear to be a ready way for new heads to acclimate themselves to their environments in a deliberate or clear fashion. This is of particular interest in this research study as it explores the experiences of new heads of school. The transition process does not seem to account for any particular skills training for heads of school, and it is only when heads have already entered their positions or when the school year has begun that heads can truly begin to conceptualize the skills they might need to execute their job responsibilities. It is clear then that more research must be conducted into identifying what skills established and aspiring heads must

develop either prior to or upon their appointment in order to effectively manage the demands of the job.

To that end, this study explores what skills new heads of school testify are needed to do the many tasks assigned to them. The next chapter will discuss the methodology of this qualitative phenomenological study, with sections on the research design, the study population, data collection, data analysis, verification procedures, and the role of the researcher.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

This study posed the following research questions:

1. What knowledge, training, and skills do new heads of school say are most relevant to the execution of their job responsibilities?
2. What knowledge or training do new heads of school say would have made their transition to the headship smoother or easier?

To address these questions, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology is the study of how individuals perceive and understand the world they live in (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2012) defines phenomenology as an approach that describes the common meaning of lived experiences, reduces those experiences to a phenomenon, and describes what and how people experienced that phenomenon. As this research inquiry was an investigation of the phenomenon of independent school leadership and the lived experiences of new heads of school, the researcher sought to describe the common meaning of the experience shared by new heads of school. Moreover, only individuals who have experienced a phenomenon can communicate its essence (Todres & Holloway, 2004). In this instance, the behavior, beliefs, values, and attitudes of independent school leaders represented a lived experience, and it was fitting that the leaders themselves describe those experiences. Given that the “how and why” of independent school leadership was the focus of study, a phenomenological approach, which is geared specifically for that purpose (Creswell, 2012), was well-suited. Specifically, this research study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, in which the researcher attempts to interpret the meaning that individuals receive from their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007).

### **Assumptions Underlying the Study**

This research study approached the problem from a social constructivist viewpoint. Creswell (2012) defines the social constructivist approach as one in which the researcher attempts to understand the world in which participants live and work, develop multiple meanings, and examine the complexity of viewpoints. In practice, the researcher asks broad questions, focuses on the process of interaction and on the historical and cultural settings of participants, acknowledges that his background shapes his interpretation of data, and interprets (with disclosed biases) the meanings other have about the world (Creswell, 2012). As the researcher explored the lived experiences of new heads of school, this approach helped him see the ways in which the participants formed their own meanings with regards to independent school leadership. The study examined the world of independent school leadership and how new heads of school conceptualize and form meanings about their experiences in it and employed broad, semi-structured questions about the skills new heads of school say they believe are needed for the position.

The research study also explored these leadership experiences through the lens of the skills-based model of leadership. Whereas leadership traits may be considered largely fixed and inanimate (Northouse, 2013), the leadership skills conceptual framework, as developed primarily by Mumford and colleagues (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Zaccaro, Mumford, Connelly, Marks, & Gilbert, 2000) posits that leadership is most influenced by skills and abilities that can be learned and developed, more so than the leader's personality or experiences. Hence, the experiences of participants, new leaders of independent schools, can be useful in providing guidance for describing the skills that aspiring leaders and leadership development programs ought to be focusing on.



## **Participants**

The study employed purposeful, homogenous sampling in order to identify participants for the study. This type of sampling helps focus the study and permits its results to be transferable (Creswell, 2012). Eligible participants were “new” heads of school, with “new” defined as being in his or her current position as head of school for three years or fewer in accordance with other studies on new school leaders (Petzko, 2008; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). All eligible participants in the study were heads of schools that are accredited by the Independent Schools Association of the Southwest (ISAS), which is an affiliate of NAIS. ISAS includes schools in Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. ISAS schools were targeted because they meet the “independent school” definition of this study. Also, the researcher is himself an administrator in an ISAS school, and the researcher believed that potential participants might be more amenable to participating in a project conceived by a colleague. Convenience and logistical considerations were also a factor; to ensure as many in-person interviews as possible, the researcher selected new heads in locations that he might be able to reasonably travel to during the course of the research project.

In order to find themes from shared experiences, Creswell (2012) suggests between five and twenty-five participants in a qualitative phenomenological research study; based on this, the researcher aimed to have sample size within this range. To recruit participants, the researcher contacted Rhonda Durham, the executive director of ISAS, who as a gatekeeper provided the researcher with a list of twelve heads appointed in 2014, 2015, and 2016. Upon approval of the research project by the university’s institutional review board, the researcher contacted the twelve heads via email and solicited participation in the research project from eight respondents, a response rate of 66%.

## **Data Collection**

All data were gathered during the spring and summer of 2017. Participants were not offered any compensation for their participation in the study. Prior to being interviewed, all participants were briefed on the nature and scope of the research project, and their written consent was secured (see Appendix E for the letter of informed consent). The participants were assured that they would be granted pseudonyms in the project and that any identifying details with respect to the heads, their schools, or specific personnel within them would be removed. Participants were also asked for permission to audiotape the interviews.

The researcher met personally with six of the eight participants and interviewed them face-to-face, audiotaping each interview session. These interview sessions were all held in the offices of the heads at their respective schools. The researcher also used the video chat application Skype to interview one participant and interviewed another participant over the telephone. Each interview lasted about an hour although the length of each interview varied depending on the dynamic of the conversation. Throughout the data collection process, all recordings, transcripts, memos, and other research materials were kept on a password-protected laptop that was itself stored in a desk in a locked office.

## **Interview Protocol**

Interview data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews containing largely open-ended questions (see Appendix F for the interview protocol). This study defines “semi-structured interview” as one in which the researcher provides some structure to the interview with the use of a prewritten interview protocol but allows the respondent’s descriptions and narratives to inform and shape the course of the interview (Brinkmann, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). To ensure that the participants did not deliver “prepared” responses, the

researcher did not give interview questions in advance at a matter of course. However, one participant did request to see the questions in advance, which the researcher permitted.

The tenets of the skills-based model of leadership theory informed the interview protocol used with interviewees, with questions focusing on leaders' problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge, with knowledge defined as "the accumulation of information and the mental structures used to organize that information" (Northouse, 2013, p. 51). For example, leaders were asked about problems they have faced as leaders that required unique, critical thinking skills or how they prioritize and consider both short- and long-term goals for themselves as leaders and for their schools. Participants were also queried on their use of social judgment skills, especially in dealing with their constituents, and on what skills they use to better understand and grapple with the social systems in their schools. Although the focus of the study and thereby the interviews was on leadership skills, the researcher allowed the interview process to grow organically, and intriguing points that arose during the interview were pursued.

### **Document Review**

Given that the researcher discussed in the interviews with participants their respective experiences in applying for the head of school position and working with the search committee assembled by the school's board, the researcher sought documentation of this process from the participants. Such a document review can provide clues to the phenomenon under investigation, and multiple data sources can help triangulate data (Merriam, 2009). Within a day of each interview, the researcher contacted participants to thank them for their participation in the study. The researcher also used this opportunity to solicit from the participants documents relevant to the job application process, e.g. the job advertisements they responded to, the resumes they submitted, and any other materials they submitted to the search committee as part of their

application like statements of educational/leadership philosophy. In this way, the researcher obtained from several participants data that might corroborate or better inform topics discussed in the meeting, allowing the researcher to explore the phenomenon using a variety of sources (i.e. not exclusively interview data) and also providing the study with some degree of validity through triangulation (further discussed below).

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher transcribed all interviews according to the recorded audio of the interview and coded the data in two phases: open coding and axial coding. Using word processing software, the researcher created for each participant a Microsoft Word document to house data relevant to that participant, i.e. interview transcripts and other documents relevant to that participant like his or her resume or statement of educational philosophy he or she provided to the researcher. The researcher created two columns in each Word document, one for research data (i.e. the transcript for each interview) and another column in which to write descriptive and *in vivo* codes (Richards, 2014; Saldana, 2009).

In the first phase of open coding, the researcher read all transcripts for accuracy and to re-live in his own mind the experience of each interview. As the researcher read the transcripts, he typed in descriptive or *in vivo* codes in the data analysis column alongside the column that contained the interview transcripts. These preliminary codes allowed the researcher to hone in on the parts of the interviews that were most relevant to the phenomenon under review. In the same way, the researcher also reviewed whatever job application materials the participants shared and noted in the margins the parts that were most relevant to the research study.

In the second phase of coding, the researcher employed axial coding. All code words and phrases from the open coding phase were assembled into a single Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to

facilitate the researcher's ability to see similarities among the participants. Expanding beyond simple descriptive codes, the researcher began the search for broader meaning, e.g. connecting stories or context-based statements to broader concepts or units of meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Richards, 2014; Saldana, 2009). Given that the focus of the interviews was on new heads' skills and knowledge, the researcher had established *problem-solving skills*, *social judgment skills*, and *knowledge as a priori* coding categories. The researcher also identified other categories and assigned code words or phrases to describe the meaning of selections from the interview data. The researcher color coded different categories, which allowed him to see in a visual sense the similarities and themes that were emerging from the data.

In addition to conducting two rounds of coding on the interview data, the researcher also conducted a document review. After soliciting from the participants any documentation from their job application processes, the researcher received documents from three participants. One head shared his resume, his cover letter, and his personal statement/educational philosophy. Another head provided his resume and the job advertisement he responded to. The third head gave the researcher the job advertisement he responded to, his resume, his statement of leadership philosophy, his statement of educational philosophy, and the cover letter he sent to the search firm that was overseeing the hiring process. A review of these documents aided the study in several ways. During the interviews with participants, the researcher had asked the heads how they had represented themselves to the search committee, specifically in terms of what skills, knowledge, or experiences they highlighted that they felt made them well-suited for the advertised head of school position. By obtaining resumes, cover letters, and/or statements of philosophy, the researcher was able to corroborate and expand upon the participants' responses by comparing the interview data to the documentation they provided to the search committee.

Similarly, the job placement advertisements the heads provided gave the researcher insight into what skills, knowledge, or experiences the search committees and search firms representing independent schools say they seek in prospective heads.

Following the data analysis phase, the researcher determined if and how the research questions were answered. Based on this review of the implications of the study and the extent to which its research questions have been answered, the researcher made recommendations on changes in practice and on areas in need of further academic review (see Chapter 5).

### **Verification Procedures**

The researcher employed several methods in order to verify the data that emerged from the research study. As discussed in the delimitations section below, the researcher disclosed his biases and any personal experiences he has with participants and institutions involved in the study. The researcher also bracketed himself throughout the course of the inquiry, a process which allows researchers to address their subjectivities and biases by putting aside preconceived notions about a topic so that they can examine the subject from a more objective perspective (Creswell, 2012). In order to facilitate the bracketing process, the researcher journaled as the research inquiry progressed in order to reflect on the experience, identify any biases that arose in the interpretation of data, and clarify his positioning on certain topics. This journaling primarily took the form of memoing. After each interview session, the researcher wrote a reflective journal entry in which he described his immediate reaction to and thoughts on the interview session that just transpired, how he felt the interview might fit into the study, and how the data gathered in the interview seemed to compare to data gathered from other interviews. This process of journaling allowed the researcher to keep a record of his thoughts and rationale throughout the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

## **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe four aspects of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To this end, the researcher undertook a number of steps in order to make the study trustworthy (i.e. internally consistent).

**Credibility.** The researcher strove to triangulate data wherever possible. While the data contained in this study comes primarily from the interviews conducted with new heads of school, the researcher sought other sources of data as well to corroborate those data and to aid their validity. As discussed, after each interview, the researcher asked each participant to share documentation of topics discussed in the interview. In this way, the researcher obtained resumes, cover letters, and statements of philosophy several heads submitted when applying for their positions. These other forms of data helped clarify, explicate, and confirm what the participants described in the interview sessions (Merriam, 2009).

Additionally, the researcher employed member checking and peer debriefing to help verify the results of the study by asking participants their views on the accuracy of interview transcripts and interpretations thereof. Participants were offered the opportunity to clarify their statements or any other aspect of the transcript. They were also given the chance to read the findings produced by the researcher in the data analysis phase. This process of member checking allows conclusions to be “tested with members of those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). The researcher also conducted peer debriefing sessions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define peer debriefing as “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). This process primarily took the form of informal chats with the head

of school at the school where the researcher works. This head, who was not a participant in the study, checked in with the researcher throughout the research study to inquire about the progress he was making. These conversations allowed both the researcher and the head to discuss leadership and the challenges of headship in a relaxed, nonjudgmental way. This process of peer debriefing gave someone with a fresh perspective on the work the opportunity help the researcher identify any subjectivities or sources of bias influencing the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as well as “test” emerging interpretations of the data on a knowledgeable nonparticipant.

**Transferability.** Given the relatively small sample size in this study, enabling the transferability of the results is a challenge. To that end, the researcher has provided participant profiles of each participant in the study in an effort to provide a thick description, i.e. one that provides detailed information of the participants and the setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because the study laid out fairly specific parameters for the participants (heads of independent schools within the first three years of their appointment) and because the background and working conditions of the participants is laid out in detail, the researcher believes the results may be considered transferable and might be similar to the product of similarly conducted studies.

**Dependability.** To ensure dependability, the researcher conducted external audits throughout the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe external audits as a process in which a researcher not involved in the research process examines both the process and product of the research study. The purpose is to evaluate the accuracy and evaluate whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data. To that end, the researcher solicited input from peers throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher asked a head of school colleague who was not involved in the study to review the interview protocol and offer input. The peer suggested expanding the



questions related to the head's relationship with the board chair as well as further exploring the head's relationship with mentors. Moreover, the researcher shared his work with other educational leadership graduate students who offered suggestions on how to refine or improve the study.

**Confirmability.** As with transferability, establishing confirmability in a qualitative research study with a relatively small sample size is a challenge. However, several of the measures undertaken as described above, including external auditing and triangulation, help to ensure that the results gathered in the study have been shaped by the participants in the study and not by the researcher or any biases or agendas he may hold. Moreover, the researcher's methodological techniques, including the interview protocol and the coding procedures, have been constant throughout the process and are thus documented so that others might replicate the study.

### **Researcher Identity**

In order to make clear my perspective on what I have researched in this inquiry, it is appropriate for me to establish my own identity as a researcher and inhabitant of the independent school world. I am myself the product of an independent school education, having attended a local independent school in New Orleans starting in the first grade and culminating in my graduation. After my undergraduate studies, I returned in 2005 to my native New Orleans and began my educational career as a teacher at an independent school. Since 2005, I have taught Latin at my school to students in grades five through eight and, after a few years at this school, I joined the school's administrative team while continuing to teach. My experiences on the school's administrative team gave me insight into how school leaders and administrators must

keep multiple perspectives in mind when making decisions and how nuanced those decisions sometimes must be.

With encouragement and support from my school's head of school, I enrolled in the educational leadership program at the University of New Orleans and received a Master of Education degree in 2012. My coursework in the educational leadership program gave me further insight into the challenges and dynamics of leadership. The program was populated mostly by aspiring public school leaders, making my perspective as an independent school leader different from that of my classmates. Ironically, despite the fact that the program was oriented toward the public sector, I found that many of the topics covered were more relevant and practical to me than to my classmates. Feeling the weight of the public school bureaucracy and the emphasis on high stakes testing in their world, many of my public school counterparts did not seem to feel they would be able to utilize in a practical way the knowledge and skills we were acquiring in the same way I might be. In this way, my experience in this graduate program gave me a better understanding how leadership practices differ in the public and independent school arenas.

In 2015, I was appointed the school's middle school principal all while continuing to fulfill my duties as the middle school Latin teacher. I have enjoyed my work both as a teacher and as an administrator and truly feel I have found my calling in life. The heartaches and hardships one associates with teaching are real, but the work is fulfilling and never dull. It is my experience that independent schools, especially those in a city such as New Orleans that faces substantial racial and socioeconomic divides, are often viewed skeptically as elite and exclusive schools whose students and teachers are immune to the academic and social problems facing their counterparts in the public arena. The environments are certainly different, but the problems

experienced by independent schools are uniquely acute and need experienced, invigorated leaders to face them.

To that end, I have a particular interest in leadership preparation for aspiring heads of school because I am myself an aspiring head. In my career, I have worked with several different heads of school, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, and I have learned much about what good leadership looks like and what challenges heads of school face. I have heard anecdotally from colleagues and other heads of school that the leap from teacher or division principal to head of school is a challenging one. One goes from the familiar confines of the classroom to the less familiar arena of the boardroom, and the skills one uses as a teacher are not necessarily what the head of school needs in order to be successful. As someone who himself wishes to be a head of school, I have a personally vested interest in this research topic and wish to learn what knowledge and skills I will need in order to be a successful head of school if ever I am granted the opportunity.

### **Limitations**

Several factors limit this study. The researcher assumes that participants were honest in their responses during interview sessions but recognizes the possibility that participants may not always have been completely forthcoming. To elicit truthful responses, the researcher assured participants that their role in the study was on a strictly voluntary basis. The researcher also offered confidentiality to the participants and redacted any identifying information unique to them or their schools. The researcher also assigned pseudonyms to participants. As a further assurance of their trust, interview transcripts were made available to the participants so that they might identify any errors in collecting or reporting data. This process of member checking serves as a scan for factual errors in the data and allowed the participants to offer their views on

the credibility and accuracy of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To the extent that interviews focused on leadership skills, the researcher feels there was little incentive for school leaders to be disingenuous in their responses as the focus is not on individual schools or on the leaders' personal style of leadership, character, or efficacy in running their schools. However, it is possible that some leaders may have attempted to "save face" by presenting how they should have employed leadership skills in a given situation as reality. The researcher cannot verify all of the school leaders' claims, nor was that the intention of the study, but the researcher hopes that using pseudonyms in place of the participants' names encouraged them to speak openly and honestly.

The effect of time was another limitation on the study. The researcher defines a "new head of school" as an individual who has been in his or her position for three years or fewer. The researcher has based this parameter for the sample population on other studies of new leaders (Petzko, 2008; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). The researcher assumed that leaders with three or fewer years of experience in their current headship were still new enough in their tenures that they were still learning how best to employ leadership skills in their current work environments. However, the researcher hoped that, as opposed to a head in the first few months or in the first year his tenure, heads with three or fewer years also had the capacity to reflect on what knowledge and skills made their transition to their new position easy and what knowledge gaps or deficits have presented challenges.

### **Delimitations**

Although investigating the lived experiences of any new school leader, regardless of whether in a public school or an independent school, is a worthy scholarly pursuit, this research study focused exclusively on heads of independent schools. The researcher concedes that

focusing on independent school leaders eliminates a large population of potential participants, i.e. public school principals. However, research concerning public school leaders is abundant (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios, 2013; Clifford, Hansen, & Wraight, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010), and this research study was intentionally designed to study the smaller population of independent school leaders.

Also, the study did not directly address the religious affiliation of the schools at which the new heads of school work although many independent schools are outreach efforts of various faith-based organizations. Although the religious affiliation of an institution certainly influences a school's identity and culture (and thereby who is appointed head of school), this study was not consciously attempting to explore that specific dynamic except inasmuch as the school's religious identity plays a role along with other factors in the new head of school's lived experience. However, the researcher recognizes that the faith system with which a school is identified is important to the school's identity and that governance issues sometimes arise between the leaders of a school and the leaders of the church of which the school is an outreach. Navigating those governance issues and establishing clear boundaries between church and school are at times for important jobs for the head of school, and surely there are skills necessary for working with this unique constituency. The researcher felt that this topic was covered in discussions of social judgment skills and problem-solving skills. The researcher also made a good faith effort to establish participation from heads leading a various types of schools. To that end, the researcher secured the participation from at least three nonsectarian institutions. Two other schools were Episcopalian, two were Catholic schools, and one school was Jewish. The researcher feels this range lends the study a large degree of trustworthiness and transferability.

However, the researcher acknowledges that the faith system associated with the school a head leads may present intriguing themes not reviewed in the study.

### **Conclusion**

The skills-based model of leadership greatly influenced the scope, direction, and focus of this research inquiry and presented a useful lens through which to examine the research topic. Certainly, other theories of leader behavior could yield interesting scholarship with relationship to new heads of school; how a head of school motivates his new subordinates using leader-member exchange theory or the ways in which transformational leadership affects a new head of school attempting to rescue a school in crisis might form the bases for compelling research studies. However, given that this inquiry studied what knowledge or training new heads of school said would have made their transition to headship smoother or easier and explored the knowledge gap that might exist between being an aspiring school leader and being an actual head of school, the skills-based model of leadership was best suited for the study. The framework provided a focal point around which to center the study, with social judgment skills, problem-solving skills, and knowledge being specific key components of the framework that aligned well with the focus of the study.

Moreover, these aspects of the conceptual framework directly guided the data collection and analysis phases of the research project and informed the interview protocol that was the primary measurement instrument utilized in the study. The researcher believes that this inquiry provides not only useful and relevant information that can be used to improve leader preparation programs and workshops oriented towards independent school leaders but that the research study also demonstrates the practical application of the skills-based model of leadership on a contemporary leader behavior study. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings

This study of the experiences of new heads of school produced several compelling themes both in terms of leader behavior theory and in practical applicability of the data. As the research project progressed, the researcher wrote memos that described his thought processes in the data collection and analysis phase that helped him consider, identify, and explore codes to be used in the data analysis phase (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Richards, 2014; Saldana, 2009). In this way, the researcher identified the primary themes to emerge from the study.

Those findings are organized according to and coupled with the three major areas of the skills-based model of leadership: knowledge, social judgment skills, and problem-solving skills (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000). In the first section of findings, The study revealed three main types of knowledge relevant to leader preparation in independent schools: knowledge acquired through formalized programs like terminal degree programs, practical knowledge acquired through professional experience and mentors, and institutional knowledge, i.e. knowledge unique to or helpful to a head's work in a specific school. The second section discusses three distinct ways in which new heads utilize social judgment skills: how they communicate, how they work with school constituents, and how they delegate work. In the third section of findings, the study suggests patience, deliberation, and listening are key factors in how new heads of school execute their problem-solving skills. A fourth section discusses other findings of note to emerge from the study that are not specifically related to the skills-based model of leadership but are still relevant to the experiences of new heads of school. These include the feelings of loneliness and stress the participants felt as new heads as well as the personal and professional sources of support they sought because of those feelings. This chapter

opens with a profile of the study participants followed by discussion of the themes that emerged from the study.

### **Participant Profiles**

In the spring and summer of 2017, the researcher solicited the participation of eight new heads of school (Table 5). All participants are heads of schools that are accredited by the Independent Schools Association of the Southwest (ISAS), which is an affiliate of NAIS. Of the schools whose heads participated in the study, four schools are Louisiana, three are in Texas, and one is in Oklahoma. As all data were collected in June or July (i.e. following the conclusion of the 2016-2017 academic schoolyear), all heads had recently finished either their first, second, or third year as a head of school. All participants were also serving their first headship. The schools in the study represent a wide range in terms of grade levels, types of students served, coed or single sex, and faith affiliation. Three schools are nonsectarian, two are Catholic, two are Episcopalian, and one is Jewish. One school also specifically serves students who are learning disabled. Moreover, the heads themselves are a relatively diverse group in terms of sex, professional experiences, and paths to the headship. Moreover, one head is a priest, and another is a Catholic sister. A description of each participant follows. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 5.			
<i>Profile of Study Participants</i>			
<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Number of Years as a Head of School</i>
Diana	Female	African-American	3
Kenny	Male	White	2
Louis	Male	White	3
Mark	Male	White	3
Mary	Female	White	3
Paul	Male	White	3
Rachel	Female	White	1
Robert	Male	White	3



**Diana**

Diana has been head of school for three years at the same school where she has been working in one capacity or another for over thirty years. She spent sixteen years as a classroom teacher. In that time, she taught students between first 1<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. She has taught language arts, math, reading, and government. She has also served as a division head for lower, middle, and upper school as well as assistant head of school. She has a bachelor's degree in social work and a master's degree in generic special education.

**Kenny**

Kenny has served as a head of school in his current school for two years. He was an external candidate for the headship position. Kenny has worked as a history teacher, Spanish teacher, athletic coach, college counselor, admissions officer, middle school dean, and middle school head. Kenny has advanced degrees in education, including work as a Klingenstein fellow at Columbia University's Teachers College, where he studied under a program focusing specifically on independent schools.

**Louis**

Louis has been a head of school for three years but has been at the same school for over 23 years working in various administrative roles. Unlike the other participants in the study, Louis has never been a classroom teacher but has instead has spent his career in administrative positions. He has worked primarily as a development officer for independent schools but also in other capacities as well. In his 23 years at his current school, he has done work related to development, communications, alumni relations, admissions, financial aid, facilities, and government. He served at the school's assistant head for seven years prior to assuming the headship at the school three years ago.

**Mark**

Mark has been a head of school for three years. An external candidate for the position, Mark has nearly twenty years of experience in education. He briefly taught in public schools as a resource teacher and kindergarten teacher before spending the bulk of his career in independent schools, where he taught music and music history and theory. He eventually became a department head, a lower school division head, and an assistant head of school. He holds a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in music and has a Doctorate of Education in educational leadership, policy, and administration.

**Mary**

Mary has been head of school at her school for three years. Although she was an external candidate for the position, she is an alumna of the school. Mary has an extensive educational background, with a master's degree in administration and schools, a master's degree in applied spirituality, and a master's degree and PhD in human and organizational systems. She has held a number of educational roles in her career, including teaching in lower, middle, and upper schools as well as at the university level and administrative work in special programs like service learning. A Catholic sister, Mary has also been the director of campus ministry and the campus minister at several schools. She has also worked for nearly twenty years as an educational consultant to state agencies including the state department of education in wide number of educational projects and initiatives.

**Paul**

Paul has served as head of school in his current school for three years. He was an external candidate for the headship position at his school. When asked what educational positions he's held prior to becoming a head of school, Paul replied, "pretty much all of them."

Those various roles include work as a boarding school teacher and dorm master, sports coach, theater director, English teacher, math teacher, chair of the math department, dean of students, head of the upper school, and the assistant head of the school. Paul has an advanced degree in education.

### **Rachel**

Rachel has been head of school at her current school for one year. She was an external candidate for the position although she was on the board of trustees and even board chair at the school at one point. Rachel was as a special education teacher before becoming the special education supervisor in a public school district, where she worked for over 30 years. She also worked as the district's due process hearing officer, which meant she presided over the expulsion of 750 students during her career, giving her a wealth of experience in dealing with challenging educational situations. She next became the upper school division head at an all-girls independent Catholic high school, where she worked for eight years before becoming a head of school. Her undergraduate degree is in speech therapy, and she has a master's degree and a PhD in special education as well as a master's degree in administration. Rachel is also an associate of her Catholic religious order (a "nun wannabe," she jokes).

### **Robert**

Robert has been at his current school for over 14 years and has served as its head the last three years. Like Louis, Robert took a nontraditional path to the headship. Initially working as an accountant for a Fortune 500 company while supervising a staff of over 250 other individuals, Robert was asked by a board member at the school to consider joining the school's administration to help improve its financial situation. Looking for a change from his stressful business lifestyle, Robert agreed and found a passion for education that he did not know he had.

He worked primarily as the school's chief financial officer but also coached sports and taught a section of math for a year "because we were so broke." He went on to become the school's associate head of school for operations and eventually became the school's head after the previous head of school left abruptly. His degrees are in general business education and accounting.

### **Summary of Participants**

Overall, the participants in this study represent a useful look into the experiences of new heads of school, and the schools in the study represent a wide range in terms of grade levels and types of students served, coed or single sex, and faith affiliation. Moreover, the heads themselves are a relatively diverse group in terms of sex, professional experiences, and paths to the headship although the sample remains relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity, given that all but one of the participants are White. Despite this limitation, the sample of participants helped produce results that offer insight into the experiences of new heads from a variety of perspectives. Those results, garnered from analysis of interviews with the participants as well as a review of documents provided by the participants (e.g. resumes and statements of leadership philosophy) are presented in the next section.

### **Findings**

In that the interview protocol and the overall study were both highly influenced by the skills-based model of leadership, the following discussion of findings is accordingly organized by the three main concentration of the conceptual framework: knowledge, social judgment skills, and problem-solving skills (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000). A fourth section discusses other findings of note to emerge from the study.

## **Knowledge**

Knowledge is “the accumulation of information and the mental structure used to organize that information” (Northouse, 2013, p. 51). The study revealed three main types of knowledge relevant to leader preparation in independent schools: knowledge acquired through formalized programs like terminal degree programs or the NAIS Institute for New Heads, practical knowledge acquired through professional experience and mentors, and institutional knowledge, i.e. knowledge unique to or helpful to a head’s work in a specific school.

**Knowledge acquired through university programs.** The heads in the study have the breadth of degrees and accolades one would expect from a sampling of educational leaders. All have advanced degrees, including PhDs for Mary and Rachel and an EdD for Mark. Some advanced degrees are unique either to the head’s career path or his or her background. For instance, Diana, who has spent her entire career working in and now heading a school for learning disabled children, has a master’s degree in generic special education. Robert, who spent much of his life prior to working in schools in the business world, has a master’s degree in taxation. Otherwise, the remaining heads have advanced degrees in the liberal arts and/or in educational leadership.

The majority of heads did not explicitly attribute their advancement in their careers or their successful work as new heads to knowledge acquired through formalized programs. Mark says,

My doctoral program was in educational leadership, but that’s kind of the 30,000 feet viewpoint. A lot about leadership concepts and learning cultures of schools. All that stuff was good background information and helpful and certainly stuff that I could use on

a daily basis, but the practicality which you have to get your arms around to be successful [as a head], that stuff came from the mentoring [I've had in my career].

Mark draws an interesting distinction between “practical knowledge” and conceptual, “30,000 feet viewpoint” knowledge and seems to suggest that the former is more relevant to his work as a head of school. Mark also made a point of mentoring “the support and positive role model of mentor teachers and good administrators” in the personal statement he submitted when applying for his position. Similarly, Paul was dismissive of the effects of his graduate work in educational leadership on his ability to work as a head, saying “I think my graduate degree was largely worthless except that it gave me a broader perspective on teaching and education than I had had before that.” Ironically, Paul says instead his master of divinity has a much greater effect on his leadership. He related a story about a mentor of his who said a master of divinity was the best training for being a head of school “because it gave you a perspective on people and on counseling and on faith and on perspective that was indispensable. [This job is] so much about balancing and managing people.” Like Mark, Paul suggests his graduate work gave him more a “broader perspective” on education but did not give him practical leadership tools he might utilize as a head of school. As with Mark and Paul, Louis and Robert did not make any connection to their work as heads with their educational backgrounds. Rachel’s graduate work was primarily in special education, which was especially useful in knowing how to navigate the challenging legalities of how to service students with special needs. Her graduate work also gave her a greater appreciation for professional literature, of which she is a “voracious reader.” She did not, however, make specific connections to her advanced degrees and her abilities as a leader.

However, Mary has perhaps the most extensive educational background and offered a perspective that was different from the other participants'. She has a master's degree in administration and schools, specializing in secondary education, a master's degree in applied spirituality, a master's degree in human and organizational systems accompanied by a PhD in human and organizational systems. Mary says,

I'm a strong proponent of education and educational background and preparation. You can see from my own. I have a strong track record of ongoing, continual professional development. And I feel that every single one of those degrees has prepared me and trained me well for the position I'm in right now. And I have actually in the position I'm in have drawn on all of them and feel the skills and the competencies that I've actually prepared for and studied about, became a scientist in, have effectively been at work in the position.

With such a pedigree, it is no surprise then that it is Mary who spoke most stridently about the utility of a strong academic background in preparing an aspiring head for leadership. Unlike the other participants, Mary does make an explicit connection between knowledge she gained as a graduate student and through other formalized programs and her daily work as a head of school

Besides Mary, Kenny is the only other head who spoke with much conviction about how his graduate work affected his headship. That connection exists primarily because Kenny was a Klingenstein fellow at Columbia University's Teachers College, where he studied under a program focusing specifically on independent schools. He says the Klingenstein program "is very well designed about running a school like this [i.e. an independent school] and not just any school. You don't spend time on dealing with a city council or taxes. It's about independent schools." Indeed, the Klingenstein is one of only seven programs in the country that provides

either a terminal degrees or ongoing professional development designed specifically for independent school leaders (Cole, 2015). The Klingenstein program offers a master's degree program, a summer institute for new independent school teachers, and a fellowship for established heads of school seeking professional development (Klingenstein Center, 2017). The Klingenstein's master's degree program, which is what Kenny undertook, includes a curriculum not dissimilar from other independent school leadership programs like the NAIS Institute for New Heads; its program overview lists school leadership, curriculum and cognitive development, school choice, philosophy and ethics, education law, school finance, negotiation, and marketing as core courses (Klingenstein Center, 2017). Therefore, given that his graduate work was specifically tailored to educational leaders in independent schools, it is not surprising then that Kenny was one of the heads who felt the knowledge he acquired in a formalized degree program was of particular use or meaningful in his leadership.

Overall, Diana's voice was representative of how the majority of heads in the study seemed to feel about knowledge acquired through formalized programs, saying,

Degrees are important. The application is more important. I will say to you having been at the school for 35 years and having been under the leadership of both those who had the degrees and training in the area of administration and those who did not – I can't tell you that the degree made a difference.

Diana here hits on the distinction between practical knowledge (i.e. what she calls "the application" of concepts learned through degree programs) and the knowledge one might acquire through degree programs that other participants describe as generally broad, conceptual, or philosophical and therefore not readily applicable to a head's day-to-day work. To that end, the data gathered in the study suggest knowledge acquired through university-based programs is



limited in its effect on training independent school leaders. None of the participants made explicit connections between their work in their graduate programs and their work as new heads. The exception to this was Kenny, whose graduate work was in a program that was specifically oriented towards independent school leadership. His work as a Klingenstein fellow suggests that aspiring heads might benefit from preparation that is similarly programmed. Otherwise, the utility of university-based programs on the preparation of new heads of schools seems limited.

*NAIS Institute for New Heads.* As discussed in Chapter 2, NAIS has established the Institute for New Heads to help prepare newly appointed heads for their first headship. According to the NAIS website, the five-day summer institute is specifically designed for heads entering their first or second years (NAIS, 2016). Participants also “acquire an understanding of [their] leadership style[s], gain practical knowledge, demystify the head experience, and build a strong peer network” (NAIS, 2016). The curriculum covers a range of topics, including crisis management, constituent relationships, school financing, legal issues, governance, marketing, and advancement.

Six of the eight participants attended the NAIS Institute for New Heads; Mary and Rachel did not attend the institute. All heads who attended the program spoke positively of it. Some heads were quite enthusiastic about their experience in the program, but others were more measured in their praise for the program. Diana expressed great praise for the program, saying,

It was incredible. That probably prepared me more for my transition than any degree could have done for me. I’m just going to say because it was very practical. It was very much chock full of information I could bring back to my community and apply immediately, which is what I did.

It is important to note that Diana previously expressed the belief that “the application” of knowledge from degree programs was more important than the degree itself, and therefore it is no surprise that she feels the greatest benefit she received from the institute was the “practical” knowledge she could apply “immediately.” This type of practical knowledge in the Institute for New Heads curriculum includes information on institutional advancement, marketing, enrollment management, data management strategies, school finance, and legal issues. The Institute for New Heads experience was meaningful for Kenny as well, who said,

It was great. Very highly recommend it for getting to know other people in your same stage and for getting some really good hands on knowledge right when it mattered most. I was a huge fan of that and also for being able to call on real life heads who you normally wouldn't be able to call on.

Like Diana, Kenny feels the “hands on” knowledge was of great utility for him as a new head, again in contrast to theoretical or less practical types of knowledge, and he also valued the ability to network not only with peers who are also new heads but also with experienced veteran heads to whom he might turn for counsel.

Louis's perspective on the Institute for New Heads was unique. As a head of school who had in a nontraditional way spent his career not in the classroom or as a division principal but instead solely in administrative work, he brought a unique set of skills and experiences to the institute. A specialist in development, Louis had in fact attended the institute previously not as a new head but as a presenter at the institute on fundraising. Although he generally spoke positively about the experience, Louis was dismayed by the lack of focus on development and fundraising, saying,

And the thing I was stunned by then and still am now, out of five days, five full days, you spend two to three hours on fundraising. And if you ask board members, trustees, how important fundraising is, they'd say it's one of the two or three most significant responsibilities you're going to have, is to be able to lead a program that is effective in garnering resources for the school.

Louis here suggests that one type of practical knowledge that heads do need but the institute does not sufficiently share is about fundraising. Therefore, while many heads expressed the idea that the practical knowledge they acquired at the institute was beneficial, Louis, especially considering his background in development, feels the institute is omitting a significant knowledge area for new heads.

Otherwise, the other participants who attended the institute were generally appreciative of what they learned but did not seem to find it particularly meaningful in their preparation as leaders. Mark's perspective on the institute seems representative of how the other heads viewed the New Heads Institute and other formalized leader preparation programs, saying, "There are classes, they're okay. [ . . . ] To be honest, that stuff wasn't all that memorable. [ . . . ] If I had to rely on the Institute for New Heads and I didn't have those aspects, I wouldn't have been prepared to be a head of school." Mark here suggests that the Institute for New Heads is best considered as one of several preparatory tools for aspiring and new heads of school. To that end, data gathered in this study suggest that new heads feel that leader preparation through degree programs and workshops is helpful in some regard; Mary, with her array of degrees, was particularly emphatic on this point. However, the participants all argued much more forcefully that practical experience in schools and institutional knowledge serve as much more effective means of preparation than formalized degree programs or workshops.

**Practical knowledge acquired through professional experience.** All heads in the study had spent some or all of their working lives in independent school education. Moreover, most of the heads had also worked as classroom teachers, division heads, and/or assistant heads, and it is knowledge acquired through those experiences that the heads say had a greater effect on their leadership abilities as heads of school, as did the knowledge they acquired through mentors they had in their work lives.

Some heads acquired this working knowledge and experience through direct work with their superiors. For example, when he became an assistant head of school, Mark had a conversation with his head of school about his career goals and his aspiration to be a head himself one day. The head then allowed him to participate in decisions involving the head of school and “see what the job looked like before I actually got into it,” which he states was “crucial.” He describes the experience:

I came up through the education side of the school so I was very comfortable with teachers and curriculum and those types of things. But finance, operations, fundraising were not areas that I was familiar with. And frankly, nobody’s familiar with working with the board and the board president until they get to the headship. So [the head] would give me projects in those areas where I didn’t have any experience so I could practice.

By explicitly communicating his interest in areas in which he had little experience, Mark was able to acquire knowledge he might not otherwise be exposed to. Other participants also benefitted from this type of training facilitated by a superior. For example, Louis says the head of school he worked alongside with and eventually succeeded was “a huge mentor [. . .] because I could sit back and watch him lead.” This mentor delegated whole areas of responsibility to

Louis like the operational side of the school, including development, fundraising, and facilities and also taught Louis certain practical lessons about leadership and the headship like taking emotions out of decision making.

Rachel, Kenny, Mark and Paul had worked as division heads or assistant heads before becoming heads of school, and they all say those experiences were crucial in their leadership development. Paul says,

Certainly what's helped me the most is my experience in schools. I think that being a division head, being an assistant head...there's no way I could have done this job otherwise. I think somebody from business or just teaching to become a head is an impossible leap. There's so much politics. There's so many working pieces.

Paul argues here that the key part of his training to be an independent school leader was the "experience" itself of being in independent schools and that knowledge acquired in other arenas would not adequately prepare an aspiring head. Similarly, Rachel says "the best training of all" for being a head of school is being a division head. Echoing the sentiments of other participants, Kenny says, "It would be really hard to have not been a division head. Division heads do...I think it's a harder job than this one in many ways." As a division head at a large school, Kenny's work experience allowed him to acquire knowledge in key areas; he was responsible for a \$3 million budget and had virtual autonomy in personnel decisions in his division. Kenny's work as division head also gave him working knowledge in constituent relations ("the carpool presence" and "the lunchroom presence"), curriculum, and other areas, all of which, on a smaller scale, mimics his work now as the head of school with hundreds of students and teachers and a \$24 million budget. Kenny's work experience also brought him into contact with a number of mentors who he said all made great impressions on his leadership style, including nurturing

young talent and training new leaders, the ability to delegate, and dealing with personnel issues. Similarly, Diana's experience with heads who served as mentors gave her insight in interpersonal skills, effective communication, and how to work with the board of trustees.

The experiences voiced by the participants suggest that graduate work and other types of leader preparation programs alone cannot train independent school leaders. One might also argue that practical experience on its own may not be sufficient in preparing educational leaders. However, it is clear from interviewing these heads of school that the knowledge they acquired through their work either as midlevel administrators or with their mentors in independent schools was much more relevant to their work as heads of school than knowledge they may have acquired in graduate school or through other formalized arrangements. Indeed, Paul says, "So much of this is by practice," and it is clear that the knowledge gained through sheer experience is hard to replicate. This sentiment is echoed by new charter school principals, who, like independent school leaders, face unique organizational, educational, and management challenges but also often feel like no amount of preparation can truly replicate the actual experience of leading a school (Cannata, Thombre, & Thomas, in press). However, if knowledge gained through work in independent schools is uniquely relevant, several heads say institutional knowledge about the specific schools they lead is even more important.

**Institutional knowledge and external candidates.** Four heads of school in the study rose internally through the ranks to become heads, and four were external candidates for the headships they now occupy. Those varying paths to the headship give a glimpse into how institutional knowledge (i.e. knowledge about the school's climate, culture, and key players) affect the head's leadership. Rachel, Kenny, Mark, and Paul all came to their schools as newcomers, and all said their "outsider" status may have had some impact on their headships;

Paul even says that the fact that he grew up in and spent his career in another part of the country may have some implications for his leadership at a school in the American South or his ability to understand some of the cultural nuances and dynamics at play in his school. Rachel also had to address the perception of being an outsider, saying “the trust factor was a significant issue.” She was able to ameliorate those effects to some extent because, although her prior job had taken her elsewhere, she is originally from the region, and she benefits from her family name, which is positively and deeply embedded in the community; indeed, Rachel deliberately and astutely includes her maiden name as part of her signature so as to benefit from that local connection.

Beyond any sense of regionalism, Paul says that his acclimation to his new school and his interactions with those under his leadership have been affected by being an external candidate for the position. Had he known some of the key players better, Paul believes he would have been in a position to make decisions that were better received, saying,

It’s like they were bothered by [a decision] but they never told me, and so I didn’t know them well enough to see it in their face or they didn’t trust me well enough to let me know. And therefore I am kind of bumping against things I don’t need to bump against if people would just be more candid.

Paul contrasts this experience with work at his previous school, where he had been for many years, saying “By the time I was assistant head, I knew everything. I knew everybody. I knew every strand of the web of who’s connected to whom. You tug on one, I can predict 17 effects that’s going to have.” When asked if there were some knowledge area like school finances or board governance he would like to develop further, Paul even said “There’s so much for me to learn about how this place operates even after three years, so if I was going to study something, it would be studying this system rather than some particular skills.” This sentiment serves to

underscore how important institutional knowledge is for new heads, especially external candidates. Moreover, the transition process for any head of school is already formidable (Kane & Barbaro, 2015), and the increased burden of learning the culture and key players unique to a school only adds to the challenge.

***Integration strategies for external candidates.*** Given their lack of institutional knowledge, several of the new heads who were external candidates for their positions undertook deliberate measures that allowed them cultivate institutional knowledge. For instance, faced with leading a large school with players he did not know, Kenny took it upon himself to meet individually with all 220 faculty and staff members at the school to properly introduce and establish himself with his new colleagues. Similarly, Mark made a point to personally telephone each family in his school upon arriving to the headship so he could introduce himself. Both Mark and Kenny say that this work, while immense, was invaluable, but it also represents a challenge an internal candidate for a headship would not face. Like the other external candidates, Rachel also spent an inordinate amount of time (“up to 14 meetings a day, which is ridiculous”) gathering institutional knowledge, which allowed her to quickly identify and prioritize the school’s problems and determine which constituents were helping or hurting the school’s progress. Rachel also dialogued constantly with the outgoing head during her transition so she might be better apprised of issues facing the school. Overall, these deliberate efforts the external candidates undertook in accumulating institutional knowledge bore fruit for the new heads, and that work, while considerable, was vital in their success as new heads.

***Institutional knowledge held by internal candidates.*** As opposed to external candidates, the heads who were internal candidates came to their positions with a wealth of



institutional knowledge that benefited their transition. Indeed, Robert emphasized the benefit of hiring an internal candidate when he applied for his position, writing in his cover letter,

I am known [here at the school]; my strengths and weaknesses are already evident. I believe this minimizes the risk of hiring a candidate who appears during the interview process to possess all the qualities the School is looking for, only to find that out once hired, he or she also has weaknesses.

It is clear that Robert felt his status as an internal candidate was beneficial both to him and to the school, and he felt it important to highlight that distinction for the search committee. Diana says her transition from assistant head to head of school was made all the easier because she knew the constituencies she would be working with like the administrators, teachers, students, and parents in the school. Diana says, “I think having a relationship or a level of comfort with your major stakeholders is key to the transition of a new head of school. You need to feel comfortable with the people with whom you’re going to be working.” She stresses that any head of school (especially ones coming in as external candidates) need to know the culture, the climate, and the history of the school, and she was in a unique position to already have that institutional knowledge. However, the benefit of being an institutional candidate also came with some liabilities for some heads. Robert had been at his school for 11 years and knew the school well. When the previous head left abruptly, Robert served a brief term as interim head before being appointed the permanent head of school in the middle of the school year. Robert says this meant

It was difficult because I wasn’t given the opportunity to listen, to learn, to figure out the heartbeat of the school. I was expected to go straight into strategic planning, straight into making changes immediately. So I had no grace period to think and to digest what we’d be doing. We went right into action mode.

Whereas other external heads benefited from some sense of goodwill bestowed upon a newcomer or were granted support by means of transition committees, Robert was faced with enacting change immediately, with the assumption that his institutional knowledge would enable him to do so. Robert was also faced with the challenge of transitioning from being a colleague to a supervisor, making difficult conversations with underperforming faculty and staff all the more challenging. Similarly, Louis says since he had worked as a development officer at his school for so long, it was a challenge for him to shift people's perceptions about him as to being involved in and attuned to all the needs of the school.

Mary and Rachel both share the experience of being outside candidates for their headships while also retaining institutional knowledge of the schools they came to lead. Although she was an external candidate for the position, Mary is an alumna of the school she leads, saying "I know these corridors. [ . . . ] I know it, I get the school, and I get the students. I understand the constituency." She also says that being a Catholic sister leading a Catholic school grants her a sense of institutional knowledge that helps her understand the culture, mission, and vision of the school. Similarly, Rachel, who is an associate of her religious order, also holds a great deal of knowledge both of the religious affiliation of the school as well as the school itself given that she was a trustee and the board chair at the school at one point.

Whether they were new to the school or internal candidates, all the heads in the study strongly endorsed the concept of institutional knowledge as a key source of information. Those heads who came in as outsiders had to expend considerable resources in acclimating to their new schools and getting to know its key constituents. This work occupied time in a transition period that is already fraught with challenges and responsibilities. The "external candidate" status also had some negative implications on the heads' ability to lead. However, Paul and other external

candidates also recognize that they may have been brought in specifically because they were outsiders. Paul's "outsider" status gave him the authority to disturb the status quo, and one might argue that an internal candidate might have struggled to change a school's culture in such a manner. Meanwhile, internal candidates had no learning curve and were able to navigate more successfully because of their institutional knowledge of their schools and their constituents. That insider status did present its own set of drawbacks, particularly the challenge of transitioning from the position of colleague to the position of head of school from the perspective of teachers and staff and from having to "rebrand" oneself accordingly.

**Strategies for addressing knowledge deficits.** Heads in the study identified a range of knowledge areas in which they feel they are deficient. Not surprisingly, several heads, especially those who had taken the more traditional career path to the headship through teaching experience, acknowledged their knowledge of school finances as a weak area. Others, like Louis and Robert, who had little or no experience as classroom teachers, owned up to their lack of knowledge about curriculum and instruction. Louis admits that his lack of teaching experience gave some members of the search committee pause. To address those concerns, Louis says,

Part of what I said [to the search committee was] you're right, I'm not a curriculum expert, but I understand how it works and I understand the importance of people and culture and moving organizations forward, which is what's critical to facilitate that work. My point was the head of school, whether it's going to be me or somebody else, shouldn't be the one doing that work anyway. They ought to be setting in place the right kind of environment and the right kind of culture that facilitates people taking ownership for those sorts of things and then giving them the resources they need to be successful.

Louis here suggests that a knowledge deficit is not necessarily a hindrance or weakness in a head of school as long as the head recognizes it and accounts for it in some fashion. Similarly, Robert says, “I don’t have an educational pedagogy, but I surround myself with people who do. So I think you can surround yourself with people you’re deficient in skill sets but learning how to lead is something you really want to develop training for and train in leadership skills.” Louis and Robert both suggest that their knowledge deficits can be addressed by delegating authority or using others to assist in those areas, and this theme of delegation will be explored in the next section.

Overall, no head urged aspiring leaders to do specific work to address perceived deficient knowledge areas. Indeed, Mark, who acknowledges his discomfort with the financial management portion of his job responsibilities, says, “I can spend a lot of time to try to get moderately better at being the CFO of the school and understanding the finances [. . .] but I wouldn’t. I don’t think that’s a productive use of my time.” He continues:

I would say typically, if you can, you want to work towards your strengths and get support in the areas you need support in. [. . .] I think I need to work on my strengths and put people around me who have different strengths and can do those things. I’m not sure I’m encouraging people to become experts in things they’re not experts in.

Expressing thoughts similar to other participants, Mark here suggests that a head need not attempt to disguise a knowledge deficit or even work deliberately to acquire knowledge in those areas. Instead, by getting assistance from others, Mark feels he is able to adequately account for his knowledge deficit. Robert echoes that sentiment, saying “I think you can surround yourself with people you’re deficient in skill sets [and be successful].” It may seem counterintuitive that the heads seemed to dismiss the notion of professional development in knowledge areas they felt

deficient in, especially in the crucial matter of finance, but they seemed to feel their time was better spent in handling matters they were more naturally able to address and that other, more capable delegates might better work on those issues. The one exception in this area, however, was knowledge how to work with the school's board of trustees and specifically the board chair. Several heads expressed the sentiment that better understanding of how to work with the board of trustees would have made their transition to the headship and their first few years as head more successful. Board relations are a crucial part of the head's job (DeKuyper, 2007; NAIS, 2017b), and the dynamic of board relations and the social judgment skills heads use to navigate that relationship and other constituent relationships are discussed in the next section.

### **Social Judgment Skills**

The participants in the study indicate that social judgment skills are a crucial component of their work. Social judgment skills relate primarily to a leader's ability to understand people and social systems and allow him or her to work with others to solve problems (Zaccaro, Gilbert, Thor, and Mumford, 1992). The skills-based model of leadership conceptualizes key social judgment skills as perspective taking, social perceptiveness, and behavioral flexibility (Zaccaro, Gilbert, Thor, and Mumford, 1992). The participants in the study say they use social judgment skills in several ways: how they communicate, especially with regards to their listening skills and how they work to be responsive to their concerns in their communities, how they work with constituents (the board of trustees and the board chair in particular), and how they delegate work to subordinates.

**Effective communication: listening and responsiveness.** The participants in the study repeatedly returned to the theme of effective communication with constituents as a key social judgment skill. A central tenet laid out in the handbook of Rachel's Catholic religious order is

“clear, direct, and open communication,” and she says that she uses that concept as guide for how she treats her constituents. She also utilizes that concept in resolving conflict between members of the school community. Diana says, “[A head needs] great interpersonal skills. Absolutely the ability to communicate the mission and vision of school and lead the community forward. That’s your parents, your student body, your faculty, your staff, that’s everyone who’s a part of your community.” Diana explicitly connects the school’s mission and vision with how she views communication with constituents and recognizes interpersonal skills as key to that. Similarly, Mark repeatedly came back to the notion of emotional intelligence (“working on your listening skills, asking questions”), which he says has been crucial in his work as a new head (Goleman, 2006). In the personal statement he submitted when applying for his position, Mark specifically mentioned an administrative mentor in his career who excelled in this area; he writes, “[This mentor] was particularly effective at showing an interest in each student, parent, and teacher. I knew that she cared about the school and my part in it. She taught me the importance of listening and making everyone feel valued.” Inspired by this mentor, it is clear that Mark felt it was important to emulate that leadership behavior and be deliberate in adopting a personal touch with his constituents. Similarly, Paul says, “Probably the most important skill is handling people. [That is to say] interacting with people in a way that helps them to feel valued and heard.” This notion of fostering positive relations with constituents by listening, not necessarily acting or reacting, came through in many heads’ responses. Robert says,

You really do have an awful lot of time you spend with faculty, listening and understanding and hearing their concerns and caring about them as individuals. I think faculty need to know that their work matters, what they do matters and that they matter to the mission and vision of the school.

Robert emphasizes the essential point of why heads must utilize listening skills; their constituents want to feel they are listened to. In his personal statement, Mark writes, “Parents and students need to feel they have the freedom to be able to discuss their needs, goals, and hopes in an atmosphere of respect and kindness,” and he worked throughout his tenure as a new head to foster that type of climate in his school. Similarly, Kenny writes in the resume he submitted in his job application that he “maintain[s] accessibility [with parents] with an open door policy and prompt email responses,” which underscores his understanding of the need to listen and be responsive to others. By engaging in active listening with constituents, the head communicates his or her attentiveness to constituents and empowers them by making them feel like the head values their input.

Louis, who was concerned about a perception problem from the faculty at his school who were accustomed to seeing him as only interested in the development work that had previously occupied so much of his attention, made a point to be especially attuned to his relationship with the faculty. He says, “In my first year, I went out and rather than going out and listening to alumni and parents, I was sitting down with faculty in small groups and individually. Listening, trying to get a sense of where the issues were.” So crucial does she consider effective communication, Rachel has even decided to bring in a psychologist specializing in conflict resolution to work with her faculty and staff, who have become divided and contentious as a result of years of leadership turnovers and general institutional strife. Mary and Mark both made a point of assembling focus groups of constituents to help tackle issues facing their schools. Part of that is to delegate work, but more importantly, Mark says it gives others the feeling of being legitimately involved in the decision-making process. Mary adds:

I do think that the qualities of effective listening, the expertise and the competency to engage in dialogue, to not position yourself as a person who solves problems but facilitates conversations towards solutions, all of those things, the competencies that mediators require through their training and to their practice, I think that's a very important quality that I think heads of school really need today.

It is important to note the role the heads adopt here in exercising this area of their social judgment skills. Although not adopting a wholly passive stance, by engaging in active listening, the heads recognize the notion that constituents often simply want to be heard, and the heads adroitly handle this component of their constituent relationships simply by deliberately presenting themselves as available, open, and willing to listen.

**Working with constituents.** Obviously, heads of school communicate most regularly and most consistently with their constituents, and indeed, heads deal with a number of constituents, including students, faculty and staff, parents, alumni, donors, and other community partners. In his statement of educational leadership philosophy, Robert writes,

Successful leaders must be accessible and participate in the life of the school. Students need to know that we are interested in them in all aspect of their lives. By modeling such behavior, leaders establish expectations for the faculty and staff.

Robert here stresses the importance of being personally involved in the lives of a school's most important constituents – its students. Therefore, the heads in the study said the majority of their work and any success their work produces are implicitly tied into how they navigate these relationships. In his personal statement, Mark writes, “[Success in independent schools] is directly proportional to the school's ability to serve the unique needs of its community,” and he and other participants went to great lengths to identify ways to work with the members of their



school communities. In the resume he submitted in his job application, Kenny proudly shared that he “know[s] every student and virtually all their parents,” which is indicative of the emphasis he puts on constituent relationships. As the new heads in the study assumed their positions, they all recognized establishing positive relationships with their constituents as a key first step. Even those heads who were internal candidates for their positions and already had a thorough understanding of the schools they were now leading were attuned to this dynamic and took active steps to establish rapport with their constituents.

Most heads did some sort of listening tour as their transition into their new role and throughout their tenure as new heads. Despite being at his school for many years, Louis recognized that he had to make a deliberate effort to establish his identity. Concerned that the school community, especially the faculty, might put undue emphasis on his development expertise and lack of pedagogical knowledge, Louis says in his first year, “I invested almost all my time in deepening relationships with the faculty and spending time on campus and working with the students and working with the faculty. “ Robert, who was also an internal candidate for the headship and had a deep understanding of the school and its constituents, still made a point to visit key donors, parents, and other key players. Other heads similarly made deliberate efforts to establish or nurture their relationships with their constituents. Where feasible, heads of small schools made contact with literally every constituent they could as part of their transition. Despite being at a school with over 200 faculty and staff members, Kenny also met with each of those constituents as part of his transition to the role. Mark personally called each of the over 200 families in the school to introduce himself. As discussed earlier, Mark and Kenny had made these outreach efforts to garner institutional knowledge, but an additional benefit was the positive social capital those phone calls and meetings produced. Similarly, Diana met with every

member of the board of trustees and every family, and she also moved the head's office from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the building to the first to provide a sense of openness to her constituents.

Robert, who admits that his background in business tends to make him blunt in his dealings with teachers and that this directness can have a detrimental effect, made a deliberate effort to establish "a more thoughtful tone" when working with teachers. He also has attempted to be intentional about positive reinforcement by sending a personal note to each teacher in his school, saying "That kind of a note would send a signal to the faculty member that hey, my head of school knows who I am and cares about me." In Rachel's school, the parents had become accustomed to turning to the head of school if they had an issue rather than approaching the teacher or division head who was more directly involved. Despite feeling this behavior was "dysfunctional" and reluctant to enable it, Rachel nevertheless met in her first year with parents in order to establish positive rapport and reputation in the parent community. She did, however, make a point to have these parent meetings alongside the teacher or division head so as to establish better communication habits among the parents. Moreover, she also makes a point to eat lunch with students or teachers every day and to attend as many parent gatherings and functions as possible so as to be visible and approachable among her constituents.

The extensive efforts undertaken by new heads to be attentive to constituent relationships signify their understanding of how critical those relationships are. While some of the heads in the study had immediate problems to attend to like personnel matters or other crises, it is important to note that the heads seemed to view establishing and maintaining those relationships as chief among their first duties as heads. The heads' work in this area falls in line with Kane and Barbaro's (2015) phases of transition model for new heads. The third stage of the model encompasses the head's first 90 days on the job, roughly equivalent to the first school semester.

According to the model, while the board usually provides directives for the year, the head must first get to know administrators and faculty, establish a relationship with the board chair and key board members, and learn how the school functions. However, the heads recognized that their relationship with the board and especially with the board chair was the most critical relationship to develop, maintain, and nurture as new heads. Indeed, when asked who he felt it was most important to communicate with as he transitioned into his position, Mark said not facetiously, “There’s always one person, and it’s the board president.”

*Working with the board of trustees.* To execute a school’s stated mission, the school’s governing body, the board of trustees, appoints a head of school and sets goals for him or her. The head of school is the sole employee of the board, and clear lines of governance are established. The board of trustees oversees the long term strategic planning and financial management of the school, while the head manages the day-to-day operations of the school, including student and faculty matters (DeKuyper, 2007; Orem, 2015). This makes heads’ work similar to how charter school directors relate to their schools’ governing boards (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011; Campbell & Gross, 2008; Dressler, 2001; Gross & Pochop, 2007). Therefore, although the head of school must attend to all the various constituents discussed in the previous section, the head must also pay particular attention to the board of trustees given the unique relationship the head and the board share. Paul best summarizes the head’s relationship with the board of trustees:

The board is the source of everything. It’s the source of your priorities. It’s the source of your power. It’s the source of your ability to get anything done. When you lose the board, the game is over. Pack up and go somewhere else.

Some heads said that board overstepping those governance boundaries and interfering with the head's job responsibilities is something all independent school leaders must guard against, and several heads, including Diana, Mark, Rachel, and Mary, say their relationships with their boards were successful specifically because the board understands its role with regards to governance. Others attributed their success specifically to their relationship with and the support they received from the board chair as part of the transition process.

All the heads in the study recognized the board relationship as key to their success, but some navigated that relationship better than others as new heads. Most had some experience working with boards before. Some heads had mentors who provided opportunities to learn about the board-head relationship, while others had previously serve on boards or worked with boards as part of their administrative jobs. Unsurprisingly, those heads with more experience working with boards saw the most success in maintaining that relationship as new heads. Louis, with his many years of experience in development requiring an extensive working knowledge of how to successfully work with a board, faced little difficulty in this area. Indeed, he was so comfortable in that relationship that he says,

There have been times in the past here where I've gotten crosswise with trustees because I said if you want to get involved and do my job, then get someone else to do my job. They're accustomed to just telling people what to do. The person in this seat [i.e. the headship] has to be prepared to have a backbone with the board and work successfully with the board and provide the leadership and direction with the board and not be intimidated by board members

Rachel makes a similar point about being assertive with the board, saying “[A head must be] courageous and assertive without being disrespectful to the board if they cross the line into the

world of curriculum and instruction and administration. That's my [the head's] territory." As they were among the participants with more experience working with boards than others, Louis and Rachel both express not only a degree of confidence but the ability (or even duty) to push back on board members when they felt they were either overstepping governance boundaries or acting against the best interests of the school. This helps to establish that the head's relationship with the board, although in one sense akin to an employee-employer relationship, also must be viewed as the head advising the board on educational matters outside their own knowledge area.

The varying dynamics of this relationship were revealed in other participants' experiences working with their boards. Paul says his relationship with his board is so "exceptionally good" that he "can't quite figure out why it's as good as it is." After some reflection, he pinpoints his intentionality of having a personal relationship with each board member. After being appointed the head of school and per the advice of a mentor, Paul made a point to meet personally with each member of the board, granting him enormous personal and political capital with the trustees. Between that and being "an over-communicator" with the board, Paul says he has firmly established "a real level of trust and transparency there." Mary also testified to the need to "over-communicate" and connects her positive relationship with the board as being of that level of communication and transparency. Rachel says she and her board have "almost a perfect relationship." She attributes this to her previously being on that very same board herself as a trustee. Therefore, she says, "I know how they think. I know how they act. [ . . . ] It is fabulous because I trust them, they trust me, and we can move with laser speed because I don't have to prove it."

While no head in the study said he or she had a poor relationship with the board, some heads expressed that it was challenge for them to learn how to navigate the relationship. Board

relations were largely productive for Diana because she was an internal candidate although it was a challenge for her getting a handle on how best to work with them. She says,

Biggest challenge for me in that first year really was figuring out what the board of trustees needed from me as the head of school. How could I best serve them and help them feel like they had their fingers on the pulse of the day to day even though they're not involved, even though they're not responsible for the day-to-day. It was important to me that they felt like they had their finger on the pulse of the day-to-day and that the relationship between myself and them was completely transparent. That was the hardest thing for me because the prior relationship was not that way at all.

Diana here suggests that she understands her role in the relationship is to advise and inform the board on important school matters while at the same time respecting governance boundaries.

While she understands the need to provide the board with working knowledge of the school, she also understands that the "day-to-day" operations of the school fall squarely into her purview, and striking this balance challenged her at first. Finding this balance was also a challenge for Kenny, who says,

I'm a little surprised by how much of a challenge that has been. [. . .] It's a little awkward. It's not strained, but it's a little awkward that I'm not completely comfortable that every conversation I'm having is as candid and direct as I would want it to be. There's a little bit of my kind of watching for who do I say what to. [. . .] It was a big challenge navigating how to communicate with that group. What to communicate with that group. What not to communicate.

As with Diana, Kenny recognizes the need to maintain ongoing communication with the board, but there appear to be trust issues preventing Kenny feeling he can speak openly about school issues with certain board members.

As noted, the relationship between the head and the board of trustees is a crucial one. The board of trustees is often staffed by many non-educators, and it is incumbent upon the head to be the educational expert who can be an effective steward of the school as the board's sole employee (Orem, 2015). Numerous heads in the study spoke to the importance of engaging in constant, open communication with the board ("No surprises," advises Rachel). The heads in the study with prior experience working with boards or as trustees themselves unsurprisingly had the greatest success in navigating this relationship. However, even Kenny, who had been mentored in this area and had worked with a board before, faced some challenges in this area. Given the importance of this role and the lack of experience some heads in the study had in dealing with a board of trustees, it is apparent that aspiring and even current heads need a thorough understanding of this relationship and its importance.

**Delegation strategies and benefits.** Given their wide range of duties, most heads in the study freely admit to delegating as much as they possibly can. This is due in part to the nature of heads' work, whose quantity and complexity can be overwhelming (NAIS, 2002; NAIS, 2010; Scott, 2004). Heads simply cannot execute all their job responsibilities without assistance, so heads, including the participants in this study, actively delegate a variety of tasks to other administrators, teachers, or staff members. Indeed, when asked about how he chooses what to delegate, Mark says,

The short answer is I try to delegate as much as I can. There are things that only I can deal with and that has to do mostly with the board. Everything else I want to give my input on, but I don't want to be the person managing that.

On a similar note, Mark also writes in his personal statement, "My goal is to use the strengths of the people I work with and support them as they use their talents in the service of the school."

Given that Mark, as with all independent school heads, is the sole employee of the board and the person in the school who interacts with the board the most, it is logical that he feels he cannot easily delegate work involving the board of trustees. Otherwise, Mark feels confident that actively supervising but not directly managing other types of work is an effective delegation strategy. As with other participants, Louis actively works to delegate, but he also recognizes that some issues need his immediate attention or his input. He says, "Of course there are times when you have to deal with issues directly and immediately and people need to come in this office and talk to me about issues. I really try to reserve that for the most significant problems and issues."

This illustrates that Louis's delegation strategy is nuanced and allows for some leeway depending on the issue at hand, its timeliness, and its significance. Mirroring Mark's thoughts, Mary delegates "to every extent possible." Many of the heads in the study have an assistant head to whom they delegate lots of their responsibilities; Louis even says his relationship with his associate head is "a symbiotic relationship."

Part of the head's ability to successfully delegate relies on his or her social judgment skills; heads must know to whom they can pass on tasks and how to delegate the responsibility in a way that communicates trust and responsibility. A head can also pass off work to someone who someone who wants to cultivate knowledge and experience in that area, resulting in the head successfully delegating work and fostering a mentor-mentee relationship with others



(Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Daresh, 2004; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012). Although the head still bears ultimate responsibility for the work that has been delegated and must also monitor the work if it is being performed by someone with limited experience in the area, the head nevertheless is still able to lessen the burden that falls on his or her shoulders through delegation. To that end, Mary says she tries to “play to people’s strengths” or delegate issues to a person with “areas of interest and growth and passion. If a person really wants to grow in the field then I try to give them an opportunity to do that.” In doing so, Mary not only addresses a job that needs to be done by delegating it to someone else, but she also provides training for a person interested in that area and thereby fosters a positive relationship with that person by taking a vested interest in his or her professional development. Conversely, Diana relates how she took on additional work for herself to allow a new employee time to understand the complexities of his job, saying:

The business officer’s job description entails that he will manage the maintenance team, take care of the physical plant and all of that. [ . . . ] My new business officer just has not been able to take care of all that. He needed to get some things worked out and some systems reestablished in the office before he could take on all that, so I took on working with the maintenance team and really helping them keep the physical plant in good standing and all that. But as soon as I see that he’s in a good place to take that back on, I will hand that back over.

In this instance, Diana astutely recognizes that, although she as head would not normally be involved to this degree in the work of the business officer, it is beneficial and prudent to wait to delegate certain types of work to him until he is fully prepared to take on those responsibilities.

Likewise, Mark says he works to delegate extensively but some areas require more of his attention than he would prefer. He says,

I'd like to be less involved in [development], but the reality is at this time in the school that's not feasible. I [also] have to spend a lot more time than I want to in admissions.

But again those are the two revenue streams and I have to be very, very involved in those things. But that's not my goal.

As with Diana, Mark here recognizes that, although some administrative areas like development or admissions ideally should not necessitate the head's direct involvement, the reality at his school means that these areas need deliberate and substantial attention from the head. Just as Diana intends to eventually lessen her involvement with some aspects of the business manager's work, Mark also hopes to be less involved in admissions and development at the appropriate time. These cases illustrate that heads often must recognize not simply what work to delegate but also when to delegate and that they may take on or set aside work as circumstances change.

Heads also delegate issues that fall either outside their personal area of expertise or their interest. Kenny says he delegates "where I'm less capable or less interested and know there's someone else more capable or more interested or places where I just simply know I can't do it and I need your expertise." Also, given that a head is generally viewed as the person who wields considerable power or authority, heads are often the first point of contact for members of the school community. To avoid being inundated, many of the heads in the study, including Diana, Mary, Rachel, and Robert, say they often defer to a subordinate's job description or realm of authority when delegating matters. For example, if a middle school parent brings a concern to the head of school, the head will direct that concern to the middle school head. Paul offers a different example illustrative of this point. He says,

I just hired this last spring a new division head for the early childhood program. [. . .] And I said to her, look it's really quite simple. I want the kids that are coming out of there to be eminently prepared for our Pre-K, and I want people to be falling over themselves to get in so we have a wait list from here to kingdom come. You achieve those two things. However you want to do it, you do it. And I don't know very much about early childhood. I don't know very much about the laws and all the rest of it. I'm assuming that you're going to need all these things. I'm going to hear about it if you don't, but I'm going to trust you to do that. [. . .] And I'll be checking in on a regular basis, and I think that's good leadership as long as I keep checking. And I meet with her each week, I'm there to help, hear, listen, advise to the degree she wants me to listen and advise.

Paul here delegates the enormous responsibility of running his school's early childhood program, a significant administrative area. He feels comfortable doing so because the person to whom he has delegated the work has knowledge and expertise in the area that exceeds his own.

Recognizing a knowledge deficit of his own while also acknowledging the acumen of someone else, Paul effectively identifies work that he is comfortable assigning to others. However, his trust is not blind, and he still maintains a level of responsibility and management over the work he has assigned. In striking this balance, Paul is able to delegate work to others while at the same time monitoring its progress, empowering others, and advancing the school's educational mission.

Based on data collected in the interviews, it is clear that the ability to delegate is a key skill that aspiring leaders need to develop. The heads in the study all felt fairly comfortable with their ability to delegate. Although they all acknowledge the enormous amount of work they are

required to do as heads, the heads in the study felt they were effectively delegating tasks as best they could. The participants' ability to successfully delegate appears to be based on their ability to maintain awareness of issues facing the school at a given time without necessarily inserting themselves into the decision-making process. Paul's voice is representative of many participants when he says

It is my basic administrative philosophy that leaders exist to empower the people they delegate to. And that good leadership is [to] find really good people, give them all the autonomy that you possibly can, all the support you can possibly offer, and just check in on them and make sure they're okay.

Paul here explicitly connects delegation to empowerment, not simply as a means for the head to lessen his or her own workload. Paul recognizes that, although delegation serves a practical use for the school, it is also benefits those in the school to whom the work is delegated. By providing them with autonomy and support, the head communicates trust and faith in others while at the same time advancing the school's mission. Similarly, Louis also summarizes how many heads in the study view their position in the school hierarchy and how they view their role in the decision-making process:

I really try not to intervene in people's decision-making unless I feel it's absolutely necessary for the school. I'd just as soon guide and support and lead people in a way that I don't have to make any decisions for them. Even when I have to be involved or I feel it's important for me to be involved, I try to do it in a way that helps them be empowered to make the decision themselves and assist them rather than do it for them just because I think it's important for them, healthier for the school.

Louis's last point, connecting delegated responsibilities with a healthy school climate, is intriguing. It suggests that delegation, while in a way a problem-solving skill (a dynamic explored in the next section), also exists as a means of promoting a sense of ownership in the school's mission and success among the head's subordinates. On the one hand, heads might delegate work simply so that they have fewer tasks for themselves to handle, but the empowerment factor in delegation also functions as an effective means to motivate others. This dynamic is a good representation of how social judgment skills like delegation are among a head's tools in effectively executing their job responsibilities. Like the other participants, Louis recognizes that a significant component of delegating is the "guide and support" aspect of assigning responsibility to others. No head said he or she has blindly handed off whole areas of the running of the school to others. Instead, the heads say that even in areas that are outside their knowledge or comfort zone (e.g. the financial management of the school), they nevertheless understood the need to maintain some degree of oversight. By establishing effective working relationships with those to whom they delegate, the heads are able to focus on the work that they must focus on while entrusting and empowering others to work on tasks that do not require the head's personal involvement.

Robert openly admits that delegating is a skill he struggles to execute at times; he even intends to hire an executive coach to help him develop the skill, saying,

I find to be a weakness of mine is micromanaging. So I tend to get into the details more than I need to as a leader and want to understand more of the details rather than empowering my team to bring the ideas and really fully implement the ideas. I want to work with a coach to help me develop the ability to think more strategically and let the team focus more on the details.

On a similar note, Rachel says that her predecessor was a micromanager and that the teachers, administrators, and staff had been trained to turn to the head for even minor decisions.

Exasperated by this behavior when she first became the head, Rachel immediately set about delegating decisions and responsibilities, saying, “one of the things I had to do [was to] have people feel empowered to make their own decisions. This notion of empowerment suggested in Robert and Rachel’s experiences a key indication of how delegating is a social judgment skill. Delegating is not simply passing off work so that the head has more time and energy; embedded in delegating is a sense of trust and responsibility. As some heads astutely recognize, they can distribute work they do not want to do or do not have the interest and expertise to do to those who want the work, especially those working to cultivate a greater knowledge or understanding of something. By doing so, the head empowers and nurtures those to whom he delegates while also in a practical sense solving a problem for himself. In this sense, delegation might also be considered a problem-solving skill. Given the range of issues they face in a given day, heads must identify, prioritize, and address problems as they appear. Delegating, while implicitly a social judgment skill, also might fall into the category of problem-solving skills, which are reviewed in the next section.

Overall, Louis says of the headship, “I think people mistake the job as a doing job as opposed to a managing job. As a result, they expect somebody in this role to be able to do everything.” In this instance, the “managing” aspect of the headship is implicitly related to social judgment skills; the task is managing or “handling” people, as Paul noted. The heads in the study described this phenomenon in a variety of ways, but Kenny is most on point in likening this facet of the headship to “pastoral” work. Diana describes the head as “the keeper of the souls” and “the one who’s making sure everybody’s needs are met.” Robert says that as head,

“You’re always on and you’re always giving to someone else whether it’s parents, whether it’s teachers, administrators. You’re always solving someone else’s issue.” Therefore, how the head attends to these “pastoral” duties is crucial to his or her success as a head.

In conclusion, the study revealed how participants utilized social judgment skills in their work. These skills manifested themselves in a number of ways, including how new heads communicate (especially with regards to their listening skills and how they endeavor to be responsive to concerns in their communities), how they work with school constituents (with particular emphasis on their relationships with the board of trustees), and how they delegate work to others. The primacy of social judgment skills in a head of school’s work is unsurprising, given that schools are fundamentally social enterprises filled with a huge array of varying constituents, each with its own unique set of needs, and other studies have shown the connection between emotional intelligence and outstanding independent school leadership (Booth, 2004). Therefore, it is incumbent upon a head of school to effectively navigate those relationships, and it is for this reason that social judgment skills figured so prominently in how new heads of school performed their duties.

### **Problem-Solving Skills**

The third category of leadership skills that are derived from the theoretical framework is problem-solving skills. Problem solving skills include the ability to define a problem, gather information about it, formulate new understandings about it, and generate a possible solution (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000). Mumford and colleagues emphasize that leaders with the properly developed skills can not only identify and solve problems but also set short- and long-term goals, both for themselves and for their organizations (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al., 2000). As new heads, the participants found themselves addressing issues that

ran a true gamut, both in the short term and the long term. Long term problems included declining enrollment, financial management, changing school culture, and other similarly complicated issues. Heads also had to address various short-term problems, including litigation, personnel issues, or other crises or tragedies. Despite this range of problems heads might need to attempt to solve, some critical themes about problem-solving skills emerged from the data, including the important of being patient and deliberate when making decisions and gathering data about the problem from a variety of sources.

**Patience, deliberation, and listening.** Several participants suggested that the ideal and often best solution to a problem required the head to be patient and thoughtful in making the decision, which often was aided by deliberation and by getting a full understanding of the problem from multiple sources. Mary says an effective head of school involves being able to “critically assess the problem” like a “diagnostician,” a description which suggests the calm, even clinical approach a head might take in addressing issues. Likewise, Robert says discernment is a key skill for heads of school, specifically “the ability to discern whether or not you really have as big a problem as it first presents itself.” By taking time to evaluate the problem before jumping to a solution, Robert says he immediately benefits from responding in a manner that is appropriate and commensurate to the problem that he is facing. Conversely, many participants indicated the decisions made rashly, without sufficient information, or with the intention of solving the problem quickly but not necessarily effectively often begat other, even more challenging problems. To prevent such an outcome, several heads counseled patience and deliberation as key components to effective problem-solving skills. To this point, Louis says the head must be “deliberate” and that making decisions without having a chance to talk to others can lead to trouble. Robert says the key quality is patience and “the ability to sit on something



long enough to let the answer bubble to the surface.” Robert pointed out that the interview was taking place during the summer, when school is not in session and the head presumably has less to do. Despite that, Robert says his desk “has tons of stuff on it” and he feels a sense of “I’ve got to get this off my desk.” He cautions against that impulse, however, saying “I don’t think that’s always the best answer. So from a problem-solving standpoint, I think we rush problem-solving and you don’t want to do that.” Given the scope of their jobs, many heads identify keeping up with the sheer volume and pace of work as especially challenging in the position (Scott, 2004). Therefore, it is natural that Robert says that a head’s first reaction might be to find the most expedient solution to the problem, but that reaction might be counterproductive. The slow, deliberative process also allows the head time to process the problem and address it in a calm and focused manner. When asked about problem-solving skills, Diana says, “[You need] a cool head. Nonjudgmental. You really, really have to remain objective as you are working with your faculty, your staff, your parents, your students. I would say the strongest one is the ability to just keep a calm approach.” Given the volume of issues facing a head of school and given that many such issues may be emotionally charged, Diana here underlines the importance of the head remaining calm, determined, and focused in solving the problem. Addressing problems in such a manner is benefitted by a deliberative pace, which allows the head to process the information and the problem and offer a solution that is pragmatic and reasoned and not hampered by a rash or emotional decision making process.

As noted with delegation, some overlap exists between problem-solving skills and social judgment skills. Paul describes that connection: “[Problem-solving] goes back to your people handling or your social awareness skills. It’s trying to get at all of the perspectives and all of the costs that are involved in something.” The biggest overlap between problem-solving skills and

social judgment skills falls under a head's listening abilities. Louis says being a "good listener" is important, and Robert says a key part of solving a problem is "helping listen and really get to the root, the heart of what [someone is] upset about or talking about." Mark describes the listening aspect of problem-solving skills as a key component of gathering information on how best to address it, saying,

The most important thing in solving problems is to listen and to ask questions. I say to my senior admin team all the time, not to force a decision but to ask questions, to listen, and almost always the right decision will kind of manifest itself.

Louis, Robert, and Mark all recognize the value of listening as a means of problem-solving. As discussed, not only does listening promote positive relations with constituents (indicative of its relevance in social judgment skills), but it also allows the head to gather information as part of the problem-solving process. Another reason listening is a key problem-solving skills for heads is that it also can allow the head more time to make a decision to address the problem. Indeed, conversations with the participants revealed the concept of deliberation (i.e. careful consideration) as key to problem-solving skills. On this point, Louis says,

My predecessor would come in this office and close the door by himself and come out with a decision. I'm the kind of person, I'll sit with two or three people in here and we'll talk through an issue. [. . .] We sit down, we talk through it, we may sleep on it overnight, we come back the next day. [. . .] You really try to emphasize that whole theme of collaboration.

This process described by Louis highlights several important parts of the problem-solving process. By gathering constituents who are either affected by the problem or will be affected by its resolution, Louis is able to gather information about the problem, build consensus for its

solution, and communicate trust in others helping him make the decision. Had he made the decision unilaterally, as he says his predecessor often did, Louis may be able to provide a solution to the problem that is sound and acceptable to those affected but he might also lose the opportunity to demonstrate his collaborative nature and faith in his colleagues. Therefore, the method he describes here not only helps solve a problem but also promotes a sense of ownership of the problem from multiple constituents. In taking even a few days to make the decision, Louis also promotes the notion of being slow but deliberative in making decisions. Indeed, an important reason for taking the time to listen is to “not force decision,” as stated by Mark, who expands on the concept further:

Generally speaking when there’s an issue at the school, if you have good information, you can make a good decision. And the thing that gets people into trouble is they make a snap decision or they don’t gather enough information, and whatever the issue was is usually minor compared to the issue they created when they came to a conclusion too quickly. [The key is to] listen and ask questions.

Listening, as part of the information-gathering process in problem-solving, allows the head more time to deliberate, consult with others, and avoid compounding the problem with rash or impulsive decisions.

Often, the heads used their listening skills as a means to solve a problem, especially when they sensed that the very problem was that someone felt he was *not being listened to*. In other instances, the heads used their listening skills to gather information that would better inform their solution to the problem but also allowed them more time to deliberate. David’s experiences as head provide a useful example of this concept. An alumnus of David’s school has risen to national prominence as a controversial figure who espouses inflammatory political rhetoric. In

reaction to the alumnus's growing fame (or infamy, as some would say), multiple constituents (especially from its active and influential alumni community) strove for David to take action. Suggestions included revoking the alumnus's diploma, banning the alumnus from the campus, publicly rejecting the alumnus's invective, and "everything you can imagine under the sun," according to David. Others argued that the controversy would eventually dissipate on its own and that the school need not engage the issue at all. The controversy escalated quickly, culminating in a short period in which David says he received (without exaggeration) "a thousand emails and phone calls in a period of seven days." David addressed the issue by listening to and communicating with all the relevant constituents, including the prominent alumni community (especially members of the alumnus's graduating class), the board of trustees, and outside public relations consultants. Under David's leadership, the school came to issue a series of public statements condemning the alumnus's rhetoric and stating that the alumnus's beliefs are not representative of the school's values. Moreover, the other members of the alumnus's started a fundraising effort to support a minority community that is one of the alumnus's frequent targets.

This episode illustrates many ways in which David, like other new heads, utilized problem-solving skills. David did not rush a decision but instead was patient and deliberate, and he addressed the issue not by making a unilateral decision but by gathering information and counsel from a variety of sources. Similarly, by assessing the situation through patient discernment, other heads were also able to identify the best course of action when facing a challenge, which often meant delegating the problem to others. Delegation, as discussed previously, is also a social judgment skill; the head must have a fundamental sense of trust and faith in the person to whom he or she is delegating the issue. This overlap between social

judgment skills and problem-solving skills presents a unique theme to emerge from the study and is discussed in Chapter 5 as the researcher reviews the theoretical implications of using the skills-based knowledge of leadership on future studies.

### **Additional Findings: Loneliness, Stress, and the Need for Support**

The research questions for this study asked what knowledge, training, and skills new heads of school say are relevant to their jobs and how new heads feel they might have been better prepared to assume the headship. In discussing their experiences as new heads, several heads focused on themes not directly related to knowledge and leadership skills but are nevertheless relevant to the experiences of new heads. These themes provide aspiring leaders meaningful insight into what the experience of being a new head is like and describes the reality of being an independent school leader. These themes related to the loneliness the heads felt as leaders and how they often felt overwhelmed by the demands and stress of the position. These experiences suggest coping skills developed through professional and personal means of support heads might cultivate in order to remain effective and to ensure their commitment to their work is sustainable.

**“I was the least prepared to be lonely.”** Several heads talked specifically about the “loneliness” of leadership. This theme was not something related to a question in the interview protocol but instead is a theme that emerged organically in several interviews, typically as part of the wrap-up portion of the interview when the head was asked to provide any other commentary he or she felt was relevant to new heads. To that end, Robert says,

For me, I was the least prepared to be lonely. And I think you need to be prepared to be lonely. And I was not ready for that. [. . .] I love what I do, but it is one of the most lonely positions I’ve ever done. And I can’t completely describe that, but there are times that it’s extremely lonely. Everyone wants you for their problem, and no one cares [that]

you might have a problem. I don't mean that [like you should] feel sorry for me. It's far more lonely than I thought it would be. There just isn't anyone that will relate to you about some of the things that you go through.

As discussed throughout this chapter, heads of school use knowledge, social judgment skills, and problem-solving skills to solve the issues and dilemmas that are brought to them, but Robert here expresses the frustration that there is no one readily apparent to whom he can appeal for support. Mark and Paul also use the word "lonely" to discuss the headship, and Paul expands on that same theme:

I always knew it was lonely at the top, but it's really lonely at the top. Much more than the cliché can convey. The stress and the pressure and the things that you kind of have to hold. It's as if this is a giant family with [hundreds of] people in it, and any issue, any problem, brokenness, whatever comes to you that you have to bear. And that's a lot of weight.

Paul's reflection indicates that he, as head, feels the responsibility to bear the "weight" of the school and its constituent problems. As when Robert expresses dismay that there are few others he can turn to for support, Paul also indicates that he feels that the school's problems are ultimately his alone to handle.

**Stressful work.** Other than these feelings of isolation, all heads testified to the challenges, seemingly overwhelming at times of the position. Mary even said she believed the headship had affected her health, saying

It's very challenging, no doubt about it. [. . .] This situation that I'm in has been the most challenging from the personal view of health. My blood pressure went up. It's always been calm, always been low. Could be age, but I think it's not unrelated.

Certainly, it follows that a Fortune 500 executive, city council president, police chief, or any other leader in a high-stakes working environment would attest to feeling similar pressures, and the feelings of loneliness that leaders (both inside and outside education) experience are well-documented (Cooper & Quick, 2003; McCooley, 2017; Rokach, 2014). Moreover, even in the educational world, a college president, school superintendent, or public school principal likely would express similar sentiments, and other studies have validated this loneliness experienced by educational leaders (Daresh & Male, 2010, Howard & Mallory, 2002; Sciarappa & Mason, 2014; Walsh, 2010). Moreover, stress in educational work is also well-established (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Kokkinos, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). However, that so many participants returned to this theme of feeling overwhelmed, stressed, isolated, or even lonely is telling. In responding to the grand tour question asking heads to summarize their experience as a new head, Paul said,

It's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. It is unceasingly demanding. It is personally draining and taxing. [ . . . ] The challenge is really, really worth it but really, really hard. [ . . . ] You can't please all the people all the time, and therefore you are pushed back on, attacked, vilified, [and] hated in ways that I've never been in my life.

Rachel is a bit more tempered on this point. Because much of her work in public schools involved disciplinary hearings for expelling students, she is no stranger to the challenges of leadership and dealing with volatile situations (“I had a gun pulled on me three times”). Therefore, although she is quick to point out that she finds the burden of leadership she bears as a head to be similar in magnitude to those she felt in her work in public education, she acknowledges that the heavy workload (“I work lots and lots of days for 15 hours”) means “I don't have balance in my life like I should.” Of all the participants, Rachel is the head who had

spent the most time in public school education, and therefore her testimony that the headship is as grueling as any position in public education significant. Moreover, it is telling that the heads in this study come from a variety of backgrounds and lead a wide range of schools, yet all seem to feel the burden of leadership equally.

The heads in the study all indicated an awareness of and understanding of the notion that the burdens of leadership are substantial and that they knowingly accepted the responsibility. However, even cognizant of the pressures they would be walking into, several heads nevertheless acknowledged being taken aback by the intensity of their jobs, its nonstop nature, and (what they feel most acutely) the loneliness and isolation they feel is intrinsic to the position. None of the participants expressed regret about becoming heads of school, and most struck an overall hopeful tone; Louis says the headship has been “more challenging than I expected but more satisfying.” However, Diana and Robert both say that they feel they are unlikely to pursue another headship position when their current tenures end. Given these feelings of loneliness, many of the heads said they are intentional in seeking out support from other sources, as discussed in the next section.

**Professional and personal support.** Given how taxing and debilitating their experiences as new heads were, nearly all the heads in the study spoke to the need to find support from others. This is a self-preservation skill that the participants suggested was crucial not only for their professional lives but for their personal well-being. For some heads, this meant establishing a network of colleagues (often other heads of school) with whom they could consult or find empathy. Robert says that one of his mentors helped him understand the importance of having a system of professional support who might offer input when facing a challenge. Likewise, Kenny says a head needs “a really deep bench of mentors and confidants. You’re not



going to have them in your own school, and that's hard. Division heads have each other to talk to, but it's really different to be at the tip of that." Unlike division heads or other midlevel administrators who can dialogue with one another at a school, the head has no administrative equal in a school, and Kenny points out how that isolation requires a head to look in other areas for professional support. Diana meets regularly with other female heads of school in her area for both professional and personal support, which she says has been "absolutely phenomenal." At these meetings, Diana says, "People are posing questions and issues that they're wrestling with, and as a team we strategize and throw out ideas and suggestions and so forth, and it's been really helpful to have that." Diana here finds not only professional camaraderie but also a practical way she and other heads can problem-solve with each other and offer one another guidance and support. This support system may be beneficial to any head of school, but that this group is comprised of all female heads is especially beneficial, given the loneliness that many female educational leaders feel (McCooley, 2017). As with other participants, Mark also says he feels the isolation and loneliness of leadership. However, he points out that that isolation, while challenging at times, can be used to help insulate himself. He says,

You have to have some emotional distance from everyone else at the school. I hate to be cynical about it, but it's true. [. . .] You can't be overdistant and aloof and not connected to the school or the individuals. But you can't be underdistant where you're kind of wrapped up in all of their stuff all the time or get tight, bogged down with whatever their particular hobby horse is. So you're somewhat isolated, and you have to be. But that creates a certain amount of issues as well. You do have to be somewhat isolated but you have to be sure the lines of communication are open so that you can find out about the things you need to find out about.

Mark here identifies the challenge balance he as a head must strike. On the one hand, he understands that he must strive to stay informed of the problems and issues his school is facing, but he also recognizes that he must maintain some sense of separation from those issues. Mark recognizes that if he is too isolated, he may be perceived as aloof or disconnected. However, if he were to be overly involved, he would be “bogged down” in issues.

Besides having colleagues with whom they could consult on professional matters, many heads spoke to the need to have some way for the head to find a way to take care of their own personal well-being. Paul says,

You got to be strong. And you can't be strong as an island. So what do you have that helps you not be overwhelmed? The people who make it have great marriages or they have great friendships, they have great faith, or all of the above, or great relationships with their kids. Because you need that perspective.

Mary acquires both professional and personal support from others in her religious community, and she recommends all heads have a similar “circle of support” or “a center point or a place to go to reframe, get perspective, [and] renew.” As a Catholic sister, she naturally recommends faith as the source for that support but also says meditation or journal writing might be beneficial. Regardless of the source of support, she says heads “need that [support] because there's so many pulls and pressures and forces at work that a person in this position either needs to find on their knees or in the Lotus Position or a journal.” Mary here illustrates the importance of support of any type, even mentioning not entirely facetiously yoga positions as a method of helping heads cope with the challenges they face. On this point, Diana says,

Find ways to breathe. Find ways to just step out for a moment and breathe. Even if you just take a walk around campus. Find your sweet spot. Whatever that may be, and for

most of us, it really is the students. [ . . . ] But find your sweet spot and make sure that you tap into that sweet spot at least once a day. You need to remind yourself why you're here. Why you're doing what you're doing because it does get to be overwhelming.

Whereas other heads noted support systems outside the head's work life (e.g. faith, family, or friends), Diana here connects that support method ("the sweet spot") explicitly *with* the head's work life. However, the distinction is that Diana finds comfort in the children at her school, not the budget she drafts, the funds she raises for the school's development and advancement, or the facilities she manages. Given that all those nonacademic areas occupy so much of a head's thoughts and attention, Diana here emphasizes that heads must remember and recognize why they do what they do in the first place – the betterment of their students. As stated, this study did not explicitly seek to investigate the personal and professional trials experienced by new heads, but the feelings of loneliness and stress represent a phenomenon experienced by all the participants that appeared continuously throughout the study. Given the debilitating nature of their work, the participants found solace through a variety of means that helped them both personally and professionally, and they all emphasized the importance of those support structures.

This research study focused primarily on the knowledge and skills new heads use in their positions, their feelings of preparation for leadership, and what knowledge and skills new heads feel might have made their transition to leadership easier. However, it is significant that most of the participants identified loneliness, isolation, or feeling overwhelmed as a fundamental part of their leadership experiences. The heads coped with these challenges as they did with others by using social judgment or problem-solving skills. Heads exercised social judgment skills by being intentional in seeking out both personal and professional support for themselves. As many

participants said, the headship is in many ways a “pastoral” role. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the head to address and tend to the feelings and problems of other, but often it is the heads themselves need support. This theme, while not surprising, is an important one and may be used to better inform and support aspiring leaders as they prepare for the challenges of leadership.

### **Conclusion**

As a result of interviewing eight new heads of school and reviewing documentation of how those aspiring leaders came to be heads (including resumes, cover letters, statements of personal and educational philosophy, and job advertisements that participants responded to when applying for the positions), the researcher identified several key themes related to the experiences of new heads and how new heads employed aspects of the skills-based model of leadership in their work (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000).

The researcher identified three primary types of knowledge new heads employ: knowledge acquired from formalized programs like graduate schools or other programs like the NAIS Institute for New Heads, practical knowledge acquired through their career experiences and through mentors with whom they have worked, and localized institutional knowledge specific to the climate and culture at the schools the heads now lead. Of these three types of knowledge, the heads utilize their practical, career knowledge and institutional knowledge far more they do the knowledge they acquired from their graduate work or leader preparation programs. The new heads acknowledged some gaps in their educational knowledge, including understanding best pedagogical practices, relationships with the board of trustees, and school finance and fundraising. The heads, however, did not indicate that this lack of knowledge had a substantial negative impact on their leadership or conversely that any attempts to shore up any knowledge area deficits would have made their transition to the headship any easier.

The researcher also identified the main social judgment skills and problem-solving skills the new heads use as leaders. In terms of social judgment skills, the heads make concentrated efforts at fostering and maintaining positive relationships with key constituents in their communities with special emphasis on their relationship with the school's board of trustees. They do so by engaging in deliberate communicative behaviors, including effective listening and working to be responsive to constituent needs. The heads also delegate tasks to others in their community, both as a means of promoting positive and effective working relationships with others but also as a means of problem-solving. The heads also employ problem-solving skills by carefully listening when being informed of a problem and practicing both patience and deliberation before addressing the problem. The study also produced some compelling commentary from heads on the feelings of loneliness and stress they experienced as new headers and how they seek out both professional and personal support to ameliorate those detrimental effects.

Chapter 5 provides a further discussion of these findings, including the study's implications on theory and practice. It discusses the utility of the skills-based model of leadership on future studies as well as ways in which the study's findings can be incorporated into practice, especially in leader preparation programs oriented towards aspiring independent school leaders. Chapter 5 concludes with an overall summary of this phenomenological study and makes recommendations on potential avenues for new research based on the findings of this study.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

At its outset, this inquiry was directed by two primary research questions:

1. What knowledge, training, and skills do new heads of school say are most relevant to the execution of their job responsibilities?
2. What knowledge or training do new heads of school say would have made their transition to the headship smoother or easier?

The first question has largely been answered by this study. It is clear from the interviews conducted with participants in the study that they feel institutional knowledge and knowledge about educational practices gained from mentors and their career experiences working in schools have the most effect on how they do their jobs. Although all the heads in the study had advanced graduate degrees and most had attended formalized leader education programs or workshops (especially the NAIS Institute for New Heads), the applicability and relevance of knowledge gained from those sources do not appear particularly significant or immediately relevant to their work as heads. Instead, the heads in the study said their working experience in independent schools provided them with a much better understanding of an independent school's constituents and their needs. Nearly all the heads in the study had worked in independent schools for the majority of their careers, and they feel that their successful stewardship of their schools, even as novice heads, can be attributed to that experience. The majority of the heads had previously worked as classroom teachers, division heads, and/or assistant heads of school, and those experiences provided substantial assistance for the participants as they transitioned into their new roles. This sentiment falls in line with other evidence that heads with prior classroom teaching and experience in independent schools view these as essential factors in their headship (NAIS,

2010). Moreover, in terms of skill sets relevant to the skills-based model of leadership, the participants pinpointed social judgment and problem solving skills as skills that they regularly utilize, especially their listening skills, their efforts to be responsive, and their ability to delegate (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007; Zaccaro, Mumford, Connelly, Marks, & Gilbert, 2000).

The answer to the second research question is a bit more elusive; indeed, when asked that very question during their interviews, the participants struggled to identify any specific skill or knowledge area that aspiring leaders might cultivate in order to be better prepared to be an independent school leader, and no true consensus emerged from participants' responses to the question. Most heads (especially those who had served as division heads or as assistant heads of school) seemed to indicate that the summative experience of their careers was the best preparation they might have had. These statements by the participants echo the experiences of other independent school heads, who say holding other administrative positions in independent schools like a division head or assistant head are among the experiences most helpful to a head of school (NAIS, 2010). Even heads who conceded a lack of knowledge in a particular area (e.g. pedagogy or school finance) did not indicate that their lack of expertise in those areas presented any particular challenges or had any detrimental effects to their leadership. Instead, the heads mostly spoke in general terms of how to prepare aspiring school leaders. Robert says, "The best training you can give anyone is not to teach them how to do specifics but how to lead and how to organize leadership." Similarly, Louis says a head of school's work is primarily a "managing job" not a "doing job," and that efficacy in all relevant skill sets (i.e. the "doing" aspect, as Louis says) is not necessarily of use for heads of school. This presents a challenge for training new

independent school leaders. While the participants were able to articulate the knowledge and skills they feel are useful, their career experiences do not necessarily translate easily into a program or curriculum for a workshop or degree program. Save for intense and lengthy working internships in independent school leadership roles, the participants' experiences do not suggest something readily apparent to integrate into graduate programs and other leader preparation workshops. However, the participants' experiences as new heads and analysis of the data culled from the study do present some avenues that are worthy of exploration.

### **Practical Implications and Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this inquiry, the researcher makes several recommendations in practice, especially with regards to the core subject matter of the study: how to better prepare aspiring independent school leaders for the headship.

#### **NAIS Institute for New Heads – Better Training in Board-Head Relations**

Six of the eight participants attended the NAIS Institute for New Heads. Although all participants who attended generally spoke positively about their experiences, only Diana expressed the feeling that it was a truly meaningful part of her preparation to be a head. Diana specifically mentioned the institute provided her with practical information which “I could bring back to my community and apply immediately.” Diana focused intensely on the “practical” benefits of the institute, but other participants focused more on the camaraderie they experienced with other new heads as a benefit. Otherwise, the other participants did not endorse the Institute for New Heads as a particularly meaningful part of the preparation to be a head of school.

Many participants identified board relations as a challenge for them as a new head, yet the institute does not seem to address in a meaningful way how the head of school is to interact with the board of trustees that appoints him or her. As part of the document review for this



study, the researcher acquired the daily program schedule for the 2016 NAIS Institute for New Heads. Over the five day period, two segments seem devoted to head-board relations: one two hour session titled “Governance” and a portion (“Balance of Power: The Head-Board Relationship”) of another two hour session. All heads in the study say they understand the significance of their relationship with the board, especially considering that the head’s performance and ultimate employment is evaluated by the board. However, several of the heads in the study expressed that navigating board relations was a challenge despite perhaps gaining some insight into the relationship through the Institute for New Heads or through other experiences in their careers. Even those heads who had worked with the board in other capacities prior to their appointment as head said understanding the proper way to work with the board was a challenge at times. Kenny says, “I knew there would be challenges in learning to work with a board. I’m a little surprised by how much of a challenge that has been.” To that end, when asked about how to better prepare aspiring school leaders, he says:

Training in how to work with a board is huge. And demystifying that process is a huge need for heads of school to do with their trainees and for ISAS to do with its trainees and NAIS to do with its trainees

This is especially significant given that Kenny was a head who had been given practical experience working with the board by his head of school but still felt unsure in how best to work with the board of trustees. Similarly Mark, who with his prior experience as a teacher, division principal, and assistant head represents a career path many take to the headship, also feels that better training in board relations would be beneficial for aspiring independent school leaders. He says:

Some aspect of the headship that would be beneficial for everyone is how to work with the board. [That] is pretty crucial and almost nobody knows how to do that when they take on their headship. That's a piece of information that would be really helpful for anybody who wants to be successful as a head of school. Specifically, the relationship with the board president but also how to work with the board. You have this unique position where you're their one employee, but you're also expected to partner with them and lead them in fulfilling the mission of the school.

Mark's description of the paradoxical relationship between head and board is meaningful. He identifies the relationship as, in one sense, employer-employee, yet he is also correct in describing the relationship as a partnership, given that the head and board are both working to advance the school's mission and vision. Although the head is employed and empowered by the board to help the school fulfill its mission, the head must also focus on his own job performance and how he is evaluated by the board. This relationship is well-integrated into and in a sense codified by NAIS's Principles of Good Practice for the Board of Trustees (NAIS, 2017b). One of the twelve principles states, "The board selects, supports, nurtures, evaluates, and sets appropriate compensation for the head of school," while another principle says the board "engages proactively with the head of school in cultivating and maintaining good relations with school constituents as well as the broader community and exhibits best practices relevant to equity and justice" (NAIS, 2017b). In other words, the first principle alludes to the employer-employee nature of the relationship between the board and the head, but the second speaks to the collaborative nature of the partnership. Likewise, as discussed in Chapter 2, charter school directors, who are akin to heads of schools given the independence they have in comparison to traditional public school principals, also share a unique relationship with their schools' board of

directors. Charter school principals have significant latitude in how they manage the school's operations but are also held accountable by the school's board of directors and must work collaboratively with the board in order to fulfill the school's mission (Bickmore & Dowell, 2011; Hausman & Goldring, 2001; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). Otherwise, best practices in head-board relationships do not appear to be a well-researched area. Although inquiries have been conducted in how effective nonprofit boards operate (Brown, 2005; Miller-Millesen, 2003; Stone & Ostrower, 2007), these tend to not focus on educational enterprises. Although both NAIS (2017b) and Orem (2015) offer some insight into how independent school boards operate and might work in concert with a head of school, this is an area in need of further research.

The heads in the study who say they have either excellent relations with their board or who feel a great deal of confidence in their ability to work with the board were largely those heads who had had substantial experience working with boards in the past. Both Rachel and Mary had served on school boards before, and Rachel had even served as the board chair of the school where she later went on to be the head. Also, Louis, whose work in development and institutional advancement at his school involved a great deal of interaction with the board of trustees, felt at ease in his relationship with the board. Along with Rachel, he says he feels quite confident and secure in his ability to not only maintain a harmonious and productive relationship with the board but to also aggressively assert his position or push back when he feels that board members are working against the interests of the school or crossing governance boundary lines. It is difficult for training programs like the Institute for New Heads to replicate the career and life experiences of new heads like Rachel, Mary, and Louis, but it is clear that working with this key constituency is a significant part of the headship and that all new heads need to be effectively prepared to manage that relationship. Therefore, NAIS may be well-served by being

more deliberate in integrating board relations training into the Institute for New Heads curriculum. Teams of heads and board chairs who enjoy a productive working relationship might present to institute attendees how best to navigate this crucial but challenging relationship and give participants some working knowledge on ways an effective head of school engages with the school’s board of trustees. In addition to being assigned an experienced head as a mentor, new heads at the institute might also benefit from being given a veteran board chair to serve as a mentor and with whom to dialogue. That relationship might also include the new head’s own board chair, who likewise might benefit. Such a dialogue could provide new heads with better insight into how effective board-head relationships operate and how information, counsel, and support are exchanged in this relationship. Given that the board of trustees and the board chair especially are often the new head’s first and most important relationship when first appointed as head, giving new heads tools that help them better understand this relationship would be useful.

### **Other Preparation Programs for Independent School Leaders**

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are few graduate programs oriented specifically towards independent school leaders (Ring, 2015); Cole (2010) identifies only seven such university-based programs, which are outlined in Table 6.

<b>Table 6.</b>	
<i>Independent School Preparation Programs</i>	
Adapted from “Leadership Development for Independent School Leaders: A Model,” by M.L. Cole, 2010.	
<b><i>Leadership Program</i></b>	<b><i>Program Description</i></b>
Independent Schools Institute Harvard University & NAIS	Institute details current education research from leading faculty as applied to the professional practice of independent schools.
Educational Leadership for Independent Schools Johns Hopkins University & Association of Maryland Independent Schools	A graduate certificate program for individuals interested in taking a leadership role in the management of non-public schools.
Private School Leadership Program	Master’s degree program for Independent

Klingenstein Center for Independent School Leadership Teachers College – Columbia University	School Leadership prepares students to develop further their ability to exercise leadership and to increase their capacity focused specifically on independent school educators.
School Leadership – Independent Schools University of Pennsylvania	Program designed to develop leadership skills in preparation for taking on increasingly challenging roles in the nation’s schools. The program has two tracks: Public and Charter Schools and Independent Schools.
Independent School Leadership Institute Vanderbilt University Peabody Professional Institutes	Program designed to equip participants with a set of tools to be effective independent school leaders. Challenges facing independent schools and leadership are addressed.
Emerging Leadership Institute for Independent Schools University of Richmond & Virginia Association of Independent Schools	Program designed specifically for aspiring leaders who wish to advance their careers in independent schools.
Private School Leadership University of Hawaii & Hawaii Association of Independent Schools	Master’s degree program that focuses on leadership in the unique setting of private schools.

Only one participant in the study attended one of these programs; Kenny attended the Klingenstein Center for Independent School Leadership at Columbia University’s Teachers College program. When asked about the program, he says it “is very well designed about running a school like this [i.e. an independent school] and not just any school.” Given that no other participant’s graduate work was specifically tailored to educational leaders in independent schools, it is not surprising then that Kenny is one of the heads who felt the knowledge he acquired in a formalized program was of particular use or meaningful in his leadership. With the scarcity of terminal programs designed specifically for independent school leaders, programs like Klingenstein are obvious resources for aspiring school independent leaders. However, it would appear that the Klingenstein program has not necessarily adapted to the changing identity of independent school leaders. For example, Louis applied to the Klingenstein program earlier in his career, and his application was rejected. He describes the experience:

They wouldn't let me in the program because I hadn't been a classroom teacher. Well, I'm now a head of the school in one of the schools that's one of the largest in this part of the country. And I would have had something meaningful to add to that program because I had a tremendous amount of experience by then. I know a ton of people who've gone through that program that had no administrative experience. To me, that's the kind of thinking that's going to have to change over time if you want to bring a comprehensive look and perspective to what it means to be a head.

Indeed, a review of the program shows that applicants to the Klingenstein Center are required to have three years of teaching experience to apply, and Louis is correct in arguing that the program would benefit from a broader applicant pool, especially considering that many heads, like Louis, arrive at the headship in nontraditional ways. The Klingenstein program appears unique in this regard. For instance, the Educational Leadership for Independent Schools at Johns Hopkins University only requires applicants to be "educational professionals employed in a K-12 independent school" (Johns Hopkins School of Education, 2017). The School Leadership – Independent Schools graduate program at the University of Pennsylvania states:

To be admitted into this track, students must have several years professional experience in a school setting. Most often our students' school experience comes from teaching in a classroom but special to the Independent School Track is the ability for those in admissions or development roles at private schools to participate in the program without having had prior classroom experience (University of Pennsylvania, 2017).

As the Johns Hopkins and University of Pennsylvania programs both recognize that those interested in leadership may not necessarily be exclusively teachers, they position themselves well not only to service a wider range of potential independent school leaders but they also

implicitly acknowledge that there are many paths to the headship. The other programs cited by Cole (2010) do not appear to impose any particular limitations on applicants, nor do they require applicants to have prior experience as teachers as the Klingenstein program does. Therefore, it would benefit the Klingenstein program and other independent school leader preparation programs to recognize the changing face of the head of school and to accept applicants from a variety of backgrounds to their programs. Given that one of this study's research questions specifically asked what knowledge or training would have made participants' transition into leadership easier and also given that participants' experiences in degree programs and other formalized programs did not have a significant effect on their leadership, it follows that change may be needed in these types of independent leader preparation programs to better serve the needs of independent schools.

### **Mentoring**

Several heads in the study say that the mentoring they received as aspiring leaders progressing in their careers was significant in how prepared they felt as heads of school. Indeed, mentoring is a vital part of the development process for school leaders (Playko & Daresh, 1989; Ring, 2015). Reyes (2003) says, "School leaders at all career stages – aspiring, intern, new, mid-career and late career – need other more experienced professionals to guide them in their journey through the challenges of turbulent times" (p. 45), and mentors can assist aspiring administrators in developing the tools they need to be effective leaders (Crow & Matthews, 1998; Ring; 2015; Reyes, 2003). According to Mitgang (2007), mentoring is valuable for all school leaders, but it is especially effective in supporting and developing novice principals. Several participants, including Louis, Mark, and Kenny, benefitted from their heads acting as mentors and providing them practical training in areas a head of school must be knowledgeable in. This often took the

form of working with the board of trustees or even attending board meetings so that aspiring leaders like Louis, Mark, and Kenny might be better prepared for taking on a headship.

Although all the participants acknowledged being shaped in one form or another by various mentors they have had in their careers, their mentors' deliberate efforts to train them as future heads appear to be inconsistent. For example, Mark says that he had to specifically discuss his career goals and aspirations with his head of school, who thereupon helped set before him avenues by which he might hone the leadership skills necessary to the headship.

There are obvious benefits to mentoring in educational leadership (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Daresh, 2004; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012), and to its credit, NAIS has established formalized mentorship for participants in its Fellowship for Aspiring Heads program and the Institute for New Heads. Mark, who is the only participant to have participated in both programs, says "by luck of the draw" he had a mentor in the Aspiring Heads program who was extremely helpful in his development. The relationship he had with the mentor with whom he was paired in the Institute for New Heads was not as beneficial, but overall, Mark strongly endorses the concept of mentoring for aspiring independent school leaders, saying,

Having someone who's been in this job for some time, and someone you can talk to and bounce ideas off of in a confidential way and get advice from who had seen a lot of this stuff - there's no substitute for that.

Mark specifically focuses on benefits of the back-and-forth interaction and the notion of tapping into a veteran head's years of experience as key benefits of the relationship, and such knowledge or experiences might best be shared through a mentor-mentee partnership. The value of this relationship is emphasized by Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2004), who say this type of partnership can provide an "incredible opportunity for leadership capacity building through



reciprocal sharing between practicing and aspiring principals” (p. 471). However, the other participants in the study who had been assigned mentors through NAIS did not find the relationship was particularly meaningful or impactful.

Indeed, Daresh (2004) finds many mentoring programs do not provide sufficient training for mentors and mentees, lack a clear set of goals and responsibilities, and use poorly conceived methods for mentor selection and mentor/protégé pairing (Daresh, 2004). Effective mentors are active, dynamic, visionary, knowledgeable, and skilled (Crow & Matthews, 1998), but it would appear that most of the participants in the study did not have assigned mentors who fit these criteria or that they were improperly paired with mentors who were unable to provide support that was meaningful or relevant to them. Instead, rather than utilizing mentor-mentee relationships that were intentionally or formally established, the participants all seemed to rely much more on an informal network of mentors and colleagues with whom they’ve cultivated deep and trusting relationships throughout their careers. This mirrors the experience of new charter school leaders, who also say that networking with school leaders from other charter schools is beneficial (Cannata, Thombre, & Thomas, in press). Therefore, while NAIS has made good faith efforts to develop mentoring relationships for aspiring and new heads, the participants in this study seem to have benefited more from relationships established with personal mentors they knew and trusted.

In order to continue to foster fruitful mentoring relationships among its school leaders, NAIS may consider encouraging current heads of school to work to identify aspiring school leaders within their school communities and to establish mentoring relationships with those potential future leaders. Weingartner (2009) describes such a relationship as one in which the mentee “could pursue questions, issues, concerns, and frustrations with an experienced peer

whose sole purpose is to provide support, advice, and direction” (p. 69). The participants in the study who had such mentor-mentee relationships benefitted especially from being given work and exposed to areas outside their current knowledge area, especially board relationships, and NAIS might consider encouraging current heads of schools to establish similar learning opportunities for aspiring leaders within their schools. Two of NAIS’s nine Principles of Good Practice for Heads relate to this concept. One principle states, “The head establishes an effective manner of leadership and appropriately involves members of the administration and faculty in decision making” (NAIS, 2017c) and another says, “The head is responsible for attracting, retaining, developing, and evaluating qualified faculty and staff” (NAIS, 2017c). These two principles might be better related or beneficial when utilized through a mentoring program, and current heads of school might thereby not only develop effective and beneficial working relationships with their administrators but they might also help develop potential new school leaders. This type of development might also take the form of creatively assigning non-instructional tasks to interested teachers, including aspiring leaders on strategic planning committees or board committees, and offering professional development to midlevel administrators who would like to develop knowledge outside their area. The National Mentoring Program was established in 2003 by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and has trained over 1500 school leaders since its inception. Its purpose is to provide new administrators with high-quality mentoring founded on a standards based pedagogy (Ring, 2015; Sciarappa & Mason, 2014). NAIS might partner with NAESP or use elements of the National Mentoring Program to improve its own mentoring efforts for its school leaders.

Overall, mentoring might be considered one of many different avenues of training future school leaders. Ring (2015) writes,

While on the job training is a valid and necessary source of learning and experience, scaffolding learning opportunities with mentoring, coaching, and peer learning communities would enable novice leaders to cultivate their leadership skills and potentially minimize the negative effects of the steep learning curve inherent in the role (p. 6).

Indeed, while participants noted that their career experiences and the type of “on the job training” referenced by Ring (2015) were especially important in their work as new leaders, other avenues, especially mentoring and other forms of coaching may be beneficial.

### **Improving the Transition Process for New Heads of School**

This study explores the experiences of new heads of school after the initial transition into their roles, and, as discussed in Chapter 2, this transition process is often challenging, especially given there is no standardized transition process for new heads of school (Saburn, 2004). Friedman and Bassett (2004) argue new heads’ jobs are especially difficult because their transition is often met with impossibly high expectations accompanied by equally unrealistic mandates like fixing intractable organizational problems. Saburn (2004) argues there should be clear rules of engagement for the outgoing head, the new head, and the board chair regarding personnel, finances, accessibility, and personal appearances (e.g. at traditional events or on behalf of the school). This murky transition process makes it unclear how new heads are to enter a new school environment, understand the issues, both great and small, facing the school, and establish priorities. The participants in this study largely navigated their respective transitions successfully. Although some heads encountered unexpected challenges like unresolved personnel issues, undisclosed budget or legal issues, or other problems, all the participants

effectively established themselves as heads, and no participant indicated any major disruptions in the transition process or that he or she had failed to transition into the headship effectively.

This study also supports the validity of Kane and Barbaro's (2015) model of the transition process for new heads. Kane and Barbaro (2015) identify four phases of the transition process (see Table 4 in Chapter 2) for new heads: pre-entry, arrival, first 90 days, and second 90 days. These transition phases may be accompanied by varying levels of transition assistance from the board of trustees, the school community, a transition team, the search firm, or others. The pre-entry phase involves the newly hired head in communication with key administrators, board members, and stakeholders. These interactions provide opportunities for the incoming head to gather information concerning the school's recent history, identify key issues, and learn about traditions. The heads in the study all followed these guidelines, with the heads emphasizing their communication with the board chair as of particular importance. Other participants made a point of contacting or meeting with other constituents, especially teachers and parents, as part of the pre-entry phase. The arrival phase spans the time between relocation to the new community and the opening day of school, often lasting between one and two months. During the arrival phase, the transitioning head and any accompanying family members adjust to the community, locating essentials such as housing, appropriate medical care, and schools for any children the head's family may have. This phase did not pose any particular challenges for the participants. Although some heads had some challenges in this area (e.g. Kenny and his wife lived in separate cities until she was able to leave her job and settle in their new city, and Paul's new headship required his entire family to move from a different part of the country), none of the participants expressed the notion that this phase of transition was especially onerous on them or their families.

Of particular interest in this study were the third and fourth phases of transition. The third phase in Kane and Barbaro's (2015) model encompasses the first 90 days on the job, roughly equivalent to the first school semester, and the final phase of transition is the second 90 days, lasts approximately the length of the second semester. During these phases, the head of school works to achieve first-year goals established with the board. While the board usually provides directives for the year, the head must first get to know administrators and faculty members, establish a relationship with the board chair and key board members, and learn how the school functions. In the process, heads discover realities about the school, some that had not been previously disclosed like personnel problems or financial challenges that were more serious than described. Participants' experiences in Kane and Barbaro's (2015) third and fourth phases yielded the most compelling data and help confirm the utility of this model. Indeed, the participants all had to address varying issues suggested by the model, including problems both previously identified by the board and others not fully disclosed or understood, and as suggested by the Kane and Barbaro (2015), many of these challenges were indeed set for the new heads as short- or long-term goals by the boards. For example, upon his arrival, Mark had to finish a capital campaign that had stalled as well as begin a new strategic plan while also addressing a lawsuit facing the school. Rachel had to immediately address a significant budget shortfall and personnel issues among the faculty. Robert's tenure as head of school began with a faculty whose morale was "at an all-time low." As a result of his efforts, he says, "We were very successful very quickly in improving faculty morale in a very short amount of time. Within two months, we were already seeing measurable changes in our faculty morale." Both Paul and Mary addressed instructional or pedagogical issues that they felt were impacting student achievement. These examples serve to demonstrate the gamut of problems new heads might

face, and the work the participants did to rectify them falls in line with the third and fourth states of Kane and Barbaro's (2015) transition model.

The participants' experiences in these phases of transition suggest the importance of institutional knowledge as a key resource in identifying and solving problems facing the school. Half of the participants in the study were internal candidates for the headship and began their tenures familiar with their school's key players and acquainted with the challenges facing the school. The heads who came in as external candidates faced greater challenges in this area. As Saburn (2009) suggests, boards should establish policies with the incoming head on a number of key areas, including personnel, finances, and accessibility. Specifically, Saburn (2009) writes agreements should be made regarding the incoming head's involvement in personnel decisions, accessibility to facilities, personnel, board members, the head's residence (when applicable), the school's current financials and business officer, board meetings, and the annual calendar. These are areas in which many participants struggled. Some participants faced issues that the board had either mischaracterized or not disclosed at all. As noted above, Mark had been assured that the school's strategic plan and capital campaign were both completed when they had not been, nor was he informed of litigation facing the school. Rachel arrived at her school and was presented with a significant budgetary shortfall that had not been disclosed to her by the board of trustees. The heads' ability to gather information and acquire institutional knowledge helped them address these issues, but more disclosure and better information from the board of trustees in the areas described by Saburn (2009) would have helped the heads better position themselves for these issues as they began their headships.

Therefore, schools welcoming new heads would be well-served by providing their new leaders as much institutional knowledge as possible. Indeed, Fullan (2001) says both

relationships and knowledge are key parts of the change process and emphasizes the concept of knowledge sharing. He distinguishes between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge, with tacit knowledge being akin to institutional knowledge in that it is more challenging to identify, explicate, and share. However, Fullan (2001) says, “Successful organizations access tacit knowledge. Their success is found in the intricate interaction inside and outside the organization - interaction that converts tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge on an ongoing basis” (p. 80). This type of knowledge sharing would be especially beneficial to incoming new heads seeking a better understanding of the mission, vision, and culture of the schools they are about to lead. Rachel benefitted from this exact type of information exchange. During the first pre-arrival phase of Kane and Barbaro’s (2015) model, Rachel was able to talk with the outgoing head on a regular basis, and she says that experience was especially beneficial in helping her understand some of the issues she would be facing. She says,

My advice to new heads? Have that weekly conversation [with the outgoing head] and get the lay of the land before you come. Honestly, other than that [budget] deficit the day I walked in, I knew of everything. Every single thing. The other bit of advice would be to stay close to your board chair. Very close to your board chair.

Rachel identifies the board chair and outgoing head as the key sources for this type of institutional knowledge, and it follows that schools bringing in new heads should establish a formalized relationship between the incoming head and with the board chair to better facilitate the exchange of information. Where possible, a similar relationship between the outgoing head and the incoming head should also be fostered although this may not always be possible considering the nature of the previous head’s departure. In such an instance, some boards even discourage the outgoing head from interacting with the incoming head (Kane & Barbaro, 2015).

Regardless, providing ample support for new heads during all phases of their transition, especially in the form of institutional knowledge, seems significant to the success of a new head in his or her first year. Many new heads receive only minimal assistance as they transition into their new positions (Kane & Barbaro, 2015). What assistance is provided typically comes from the school's administrative team, the board chair, a board member, or the outgoing head, with search or headhunting firms providing little to no assistance in the transition phase. Many heads say that, even when a transition committee was established, they were not clear on what the committee was supposed to do to help them (Kane & Barbaro, 2015). Therefore, deliberate and formalized structures like transition committees need clear instructions on how to support new heads and provide them the tools, especially relevant institutional knowledge, they need for their transition to be successful.

### **Theoretical Implications – Utility of the Skills-based Model of Leadership**

This study was heavily influenced by the skills-based model of leadership (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007; Zaccaro, Mumford, Connelly, Marks, & Gilbert, 2000). This theory posits that leadership is most influenced by skills and abilities that can be learned and developed, more so than the leader's personality or personal traits (Northouse, 2013). It is important to note that the skills-based model of leadership originated from Katz's Three-Skill Approach, which may be divided into three major areas: technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills (Katz, 1955). Technical skill is "knowledge about and proficiency in a specific type of work or activity" (Northouse, 2013, p. 44). Examples of technical skills might include knowledge of computer software or some other activity involving a hands-on approach with a product or process. Human skills represent the colloquial "people skills." Human skills refer to



the leader's ability to relate to and manage subordinates, peers, and superiors. Katz (1955) emphasizes that an effective leader's human skills are greatly influenced by the leader's awareness of his or her own perspective while also being aware of the perspective of others. Human skills also help the leader foster an organizational climate of trust and respect. Conceptual skills are less tangible than technical and even human skills. They refer to the ability to work with ideas and concepts. A leader with developed conceptual skills can envision and articulate an organization's long-term goals and other such hypothetical notions. Conceptual skills might manifest themselves in the leader's ability to create a vision or a strategic plan for an organization. According to the model, top management figures (like heads of school) need an abundance of conceptual and human skills, with not as much emphasis on technical skills. The model was further refined by Mumford and colleagues, (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al., 2000) to include as key components competencies, individual attributes, and career experiences. Each of these components has more specific facets of its own. Key competencies include problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge. Problem solving skills include the ability to define a problem, gather information about it, formulate new understandings about it, and generate a possible solution (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000). Accordingly, the interview protocol was designed to address these three major skills areas, and the data analysis phase of the project was influenced by findings related to these areas.

This study suggests the skills-based model of leadership is in effect in how independent school leaders execute their job responsibilities. This is especially beneficial given that the skills-based model of leadership has not been thoroughly applied to studies of educational leadership (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007). The participants in the study say they regularly employ social judgment and problem-solving skills (respectively akin to human and

conceptual skills) and they do not necessarily need technical skills (i.e. content-specific knowledge about school finances or pedagogy), especially when they have subordinates to whom they can delegate tasks requiring those technical skills. This lack of emphasis on technical skills is in accordance with skills-based model of leadership, which suggests that top management figures (like heads of school) do not use technical skills. Moreover, the participants stridently attested to the relevance of their career experiences in independent schools as relevant to their work as heads of schools. Given that career experiences represent one of the main components of the skills-based model of leadership, this study suggests the validity of the model in educational leadership. Therefore, it is likely that the skills-based model of leadership can be applied to other studies of educational leadership. This project studied how leadership skills are used by new heads, but, given that even veteran heads struggle with the challenges of leadership (Scott, 2004), this model may be useful in studying how experienced heads of school employ leadership skills, and a comparison of the respective skills sets of new and veteran heads may be intriguing. Moreover, given that many of the participants suggested that their experiences as midlevel administrators were significant in their training to be heads of school, other inquiries might use this model to explore the leadership skills division principals and assistant heads use in their work. Some work has been done in this area, especially with assistant principals in public schools (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Weller & Weller, 2002). However, more scholarship, especially on midlevel independent school administrators and the skills they use in their jobs would be informative. Alternatively, future studies might isolate a single component of the model (i.e. knowledge, social judgment skills, or problem-solving skills) to explore in greater detail how independent school leaders use such skills exclusively.

The model also heavily influenced the overall perspective of the researcher's approach to the topic, and it served as the key framing device for the study's interview protocol. In that sense, it was an enormously beneficial means to shape the study, and the data that emerged from the responses participants gave during the interviews originated directly from questions related to aspects of the skills-based model of leadership. Other studies therefore may benefit from adopting a similar methodological approach. The study also suggests some overlap between the three main sections of the skills-based model of leadership. Leaders' knowledge often informed their use of problem-solving or social judgment skills, and their listening and delegation abilities were used alternatively as both problem-solving skills and social judgment skills. This overlap among leadership skills is generally accepted (Hoffman, Woehr, Maldagen-Youngjohn, & Lyons, 2011; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004), and the model does not impose boundaries on these skill set areas or consider skill sets to be static. Given the overlap suggested by this study, future research inquiries might explore specifically the interaction between problem-solving skills and social judgment skills, especially in areas like listening and delegation that seem to be of equal utility in problem-solving skills and social judgment skills.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited by several factors related to its sample population as well its research methodology. Those limitations are discussed in the next section.

### **Sampling**

Overall, the participants in this study provided a useful look into the experiences of new heads of school, and the schools in the study represent a wide range in terms of grade levels and types of students served, coed or single sex, and faith affiliation. Moreover, the heads themselves are a relatively diverse group in terms of sex, professional experiences, and paths to

the headship. Of the group, one head is an Episcopal priest, and another is a Catholic sister. However, the relatively small size of the sample population and overall methodology of the study are limiting factors of the study, and broadening the scope of the study both in terms of number of schools and types of schools would be beneficial. Such a study might also be able to include participants who are more racially diverse; in this study, all but one of the participants were White. Conducting another study with a larger sample size might yield data with which to compare the results of this study.

Moreover, six of the eight participants had prior experience as classroom teachers and/or as division or assistant heads of school, and these participants considered these career experiences essential to their ability to be a head of school. Some even doubted how a person without those experiences could possibly be an effective head at all. However, Louis had never been a classroom teacher, instead spending most of his career in independent schools working in development, and Robert worked primarily as the school's business officer, with little practical experience in the classroom. Their apparent success as new heads of school appears to rebut other participants' emphasis on their experience as a division or assistant head being crucial to their work as heads of school as well as that of other independent school heads (NAIS, 2010). Therefore, it would be beneficial to explore the experiences of other heads who, like Robert and Louis, did not arrive at the headship with prior experience as teachers or division heads but instead have prior career experiences, some even outside education entirely. On that point, Louis mentioned in his interview knowing heads from a variety of backgrounds, including one head who had spent her entire previous career in higher education and another head who had been a career Marine and had never held any educational positions at all. The researcher contacted NAIS to inquire about any data NAIS might keep on career experiences of heads of schools.

Learning how many heads have had traditional educational careers paths and how many come from non-educational career backgrounds might help this avenue of research, but NAIS does not currently gather such data from its schools. Therefore, NAIS might consider learning more about its own heads in order to better understand the experiences of non-educator heads.

Research studies about the experiences of those types of heads of school might yield compelling data not only on the current nature of independent school leadership but also reveal different and novel concepts that might better inform independent school leader preparation programs.

The study is also limited by the geographical location of the study participants; the heads interviewed in this study all lead schools either in Louisiana, Texas, or Oklahoma. Expanding the study to other parts of the country would help better inform the conclusions drawn here. Given that the schools whose heads participated in this study were all members of the NAIS regional affiliate ISAS (the Independent Schools Association of the Southwest), it may be useful to conduct similar studies with new heads of school in affiliates in other parts of the country. Such affiliates include the Association of Independent Schools of New England (AISNE), the Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS), the Northwest Association of Independent Schools (NWAIS), and the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS). A study similar to this one was conducted in the New York metropolitan area (Juhel, 2016), but clearly, research in independent school leader behavior would benefit from investigations in a variety of locations and schools.

### **Research Approach**

This study is also limited by its research approach. Creswell (2012) states that one challenge in phenomenological research inquiries is choosing study participants who have all experienced the phenomenon so that the researcher can come to broader understanding of that

phenomenon. The phenomenon under review in this study is the experience of being a new head. Although certain parameters were established to gather participants who have experienced that phenomenon (e.g. all heads were first-time heads and were in the first three years of their headship), one might argue that the sample presents a disparity that dilutes the clarity of the phenomenon. In other words, the study is aided by having participants from a range of backgrounds and other demographic differences and by having schools that are diverse in terms of size and students served. However, this diversity may in fact serve to inhibit the study's ability to generalize about the experience of new heads of school. Therefore, other, non-phenomenological approaches might be of use. Different data collection methods like surveying a larger population of new heads or assembling focus groups of new heads might produce useful data as might wholly different methodological approaches, e.g. narrative research studies or case studies of new heads of school.

### **Future Research**

The study raises fundamental questions about what training is most relevant to preparing independent school leaders. As noted, most of the participants in the study had been teachers and division heads or assistant heads prior to becoming a head of school, and those participants considered these career experiences essential to their ability to be a head of school. This corroborates what other heads of school have said about experience in independent schools being essential factors in their headship (NAIS, 2010). Therefore, this perspective raises the question about the fundamental benefit and relevance of formalized leader preparation programs. All participants in the study had advanced degrees, and most had also attended the NAIS Institute for New Heads, a program designed specifically for new independent school leaders. However, the participants in the study generally viewed knowledge and skills acquired either in their graduate

work or from other sources like Institute for New Heads to be insignificant factors in their ability to be a head of school. Essentially, they viewed such experiences as helpful in a general way but whose benefit was dwarfed by what they learned in their careers as independent school teachers and administrators. Therefore, further research might explore how the practical knowledge and skills independent school educators acquire in their careers might be transferred or replicated in leader preparation programs. When discussing this issue in his interview, Paul said, “Probably the very best training a head could have would be to shadow another head for a month at ten different schools.” Such an experience, akin to an in-depth internship program, might provide an aspiring head useful practical knowledge that current leader preparation programs do not seem to be adequately providing. As discussed in Chapter 2, The Wallace Foundation, the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, and The Finance Project conducted a study in 2007 called the School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007). Among other findings, the study yielded information on pre- and in-service programs for leaders, the best examples of which are research-based, have curricular coherence, provide experience in authentic contexts, use cohort groupings and mentors, and are structured to enable collaborative activity between the program and area schools. Given that independent school leaders would likely benefit from such preparatory measures, implementing these components into independent leader development programs would be advantageous.

Furthermore, at its outset, the study identified factors that deter potential leaders from pursuing a headship. Such factors include the daily stress and the difficulty of the role (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; d’Arbon, Duignan & Duncan, 2002; Hammond, Muffs, & Sciascia, 2001; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006; Scott, 2004) and the struggle to balance personal and professional responsibilities (d’Arbon et al., 2002; Hammond et al., 2001; Orr, 2006; Scott, 2004). Bass

(2006) identifies inhibiting factors include increased stress, increased time commitment to work, and pressure from standardized test scores. Cole (2010) and Scott (2004) pinpoint the daily stress, feelings of unpreparedness for the headship and lack of training, and the challenge of managing the multitude of job responsibilities facing a head as felt especially acutely by heads of school. This study suggests all these deterring factors are still in play. Several heads in the study spoke to the debilitating nature of their work and the personal and professional toll it has taken on their lives. Further research might explore ways in which these deterrents can be assuaged, including ways in which independent school leadership might be fundamentally changed from a traditional, top-down hierarchy. Such a change might ease the burden on the typical head of school who feels the ultimate responsibility of caretaking hundreds or even thousands of constituents falls squarely and solely on his or her shoulders. Some work has already been done in exploring this concept (Elmore, 2000; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Harris, 2014; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), and the ramifications of such a fundamental change would be great but are worthy of consideration.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to address the leadership gap in the independent school pipeline. Independent school leaders are currently leaving their positions at a rate faster than which they are being replaced (NAIS, 2002; NAIS, 2010). Moreover, only a small number of middle level administrators have expressed an interest in seeking a headship (NAIS, 2010; Orem, 2015). This lack of candidates may be attributed to factors such as the location and size of schools, politics, social and generational changes (Cole, 2010; Lamkin, 2006; Orr, 2006), daily stress and the difficulty of the role, lack of adequate training, and individuals choosing not to advance their career (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006; Orr, 2006; Scott, 2004), and inadequate pay and the struggle



to balance personal and professional responsibilities (2006; Scott, 2004). Bass (2006) describes the three main inhibiting factors as increased stress, increased time commitment to work, and pressure from standardized test scores. The results of this study fall in line with these previous research inquiries. Indeed, all the participants in the study attested to the rigors of the job, its debilitating effects on their personal and professional lives, and its thankless nature. The study also set out to determine what training or preparation might be of use to aspiring independent school leaders, seeking to better inform leader preparation programs. Most participants in the study had served the majority of their careers not only in independent schools but specifically as teachers and division or assistant heads, and those participants indicated that their experiences in these roles were essential in their preparation to become heads of school. The participants on the whole did not endorse any kind of formalized preparatory avenues for leader preparation, instead emphasizing the utility of practical professional experience as educators and the guidance of knowledgeable mentors. The challenge facing independent schools then is how to recruit the next generation of school leaders. The most obvious candidates are the precocious teachers, division heads, and assistant heads within independent schools. Effective and deliberate mentoring of those candidates might be able to not only give those potential leaders practical knowledge and experience in school leadership but might also demystify the head's position and alleviate the reservations potential school leaders might have about pursuing a headship.

The challenges of independent school leadership are both potent and real, and aspiring school leaders must understand that even veteran heads of school with an abundance of experience, knowledge, and skills struggle. Despite these challenges, while all of the participants in the study spoke to the personal and professional challenges, none of the participants expressed any regret about becoming a head of school, and they all ultimately struck

an optimistic tone about their lives as heads. Louis says the headship has been “more challenging than I expected but more satisfying,” and that description seems to speak to the experiences of the other new heads. By depicting the headship as indeed arduous but also fulfilling, independent schools may provide for aspiring school leaders a realistic portrait of a job that acknowledges its challenges but also assures its rewards.

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## Appendix A

### NAIS Sample Head of School Job Description (NAIS, 2004)

The head of school is the sole employee of the board of trustees. In situations with very large schools and multiple divisions and/or campuses, often there is a president and one or more school heads. In those instances, the following job description is "divided" between president and school head(s), as mutually agreed upon by the president and the board of trustees.

Responsibilities include the following:

- The head of school shall be a member ex officio of all standing committees of the board.
- He or she shall be the representative of the board in its relations with the faculty, staff, students and the patrons of the corporation.
- The head of school shall select and hire properly qualified persons to serve as members of the faculty and administration (including some members of the board in an advisory role for those key hires of other administrators who interface regularly with the board, such as admissions, finance, and development officers).
- The head of school shall have direct supervision of the faculty and staff and shall coordinate the activities of the entire organization. The head of school shall hold regular meetings of the faculty and staff and see that the general policies of the board are understood and followed.

General duties of the head/president include (but are not restricted to) the following:

- To embody, manifest, and advocate the mission of the school.
- To articulate the vision for the school and its future.
- To monitor and address all matters of school climate and culture.

- To manage the sometimes competing demands of the various constituencies of the school.
- To provide to the board of trustees various scenarios and possibilities for the board to consider as it does its work focusing on the strategic future of the school.
- To work with the board of trustees, its chair, and its committees in carrying out established school policies; to review those policies and make recommendations for changes; to attend meetings, prepare reports, maintain board records, and keep trustees informed on all aspects of the school's operation.
- To supervise all programs of the school (academic, athletic, ethical, and other extracurricular programs); to monitor curriculum, grading, testing, and reporting to parents; to prepare for and conduct periodic program evaluations; to submit reports to external agencies as required; to establish disciplinary policies and standards of conduct.
- To supervise the business manager in the preparation of preliminary and final budgets; to monitor income, expenditures, collections, and cash flow; to maintain appropriate financial records; to oversee the employee benefit program.
- To supervise the admissions director in determining programs for the recruitment of students, including marketing and outreach, information dissemination, applicant testing and interviews and acceptance and decisions.
- To represent the school to all of its constituents including neighborhood, parents, students, alumni, business community, faculty, and staff.
- To supervise the development director and development efforts to cultivate and effect generous support of the school.

- To handle all matters regarding employment, retention, and dismissal of personnel; salaries and contracts; job assignments and performance evaluation; and orientation and training. To prepare employee handbooks, and maintain appropriate personnel records.
- To represent the school in its relations with state and federal agencies and with local, state, regional, and national educational organizations and accrediting agencies.
- To supervise the college counselor in planning for an appropriate program for college guidance and college admissions.
- To act as liaison with the other organizations to ensure fulfillment of the school's contractual obligations; to coordinate schedules, arrange for rentals, and coordinate procedures where the interests of both organizations are involved.
- To supervise and/or assist with all other aspects of the school's operation, including (but not limited to) facilities maintenance and operation, food service, transportation, summer programs, development and fund raising, and alumni affairs.

## Appendix B

### NAIS Principles of Good Practice - Heads of School (NAIS, 2017c)

1. The head works in partnership with the board of trustees to establish and refine the school's mission; articulates the mission to all constituencies - students, faculty and staff, parents, alumni/ae, and the community; and supports the mission in working with all constituencies.
2. The head oversees the shaping of the school's program and the quality of life in the school community.
3. The head establishes an effective manner of leadership and appropriately involves members of the administration and faculty in decision making.
4. The head is responsible for attracting, retaining, developing, and evaluating qualified faculty and staff.
5. The head is accessible, within reason, and communicates effectively with all constituencies.
6. The head is responsible for financial management, maintenance of the physical plant, strategic planning, and fund raising.
7. The head ensures that every element of school life reflects the principles of equity, justice, and the dignity of each individual.
8. The head is alert to his or her role within the broader networks of schools, school leaders, and the community.
9. The head works to ensure that the principles of good practice of all school operations, especially those of admission, marketing, faculty recruitment, and fund raising, demonstrate integrity at all levels of the school.

## Appendix C

### Independent School Management Leadership Points of Excellence (ISM, 2004)

1. The School Head vigorously seeks a professional development-focused faculty culture.
2. The School Head gives public, positive reinforcement to deserving employees in all categories – especially in regard to laudable professional growth achievements – and, as well, to students at all levels.
3. The School Head actively promotes an ongoing faculty conversation regarding high expectations and support for students.
4. The School Head seeks to establish a faculty-wide conversation regarding professional development.
5. The School Head places great emphasis upon the faculty's specific-to-each-student high expectations.
6. The School Head demonstrates an inspired and inspirational commitment to the institutional mission.
7. The School Head sustains high levels both of self-awareness and of self-management.
8. The School Head exhibits determined pursuit of her/his own professional growth program.

Appendix D

ISAS Sample Head of School Evaluation Form

**HEAD OF SCHOOL EVALUATION FORM**

For each question, please indicate your rating with an **X**. If you do not have enough information to enter a rating on any item, you may leave it blank. Fill in the "comment" section when applicable.

**Following is the criteria to evaluate various qualities of the Head of School:**

- Excellent:** Performance is outstanding in almost every instance for a Head of School having similar responsibilities and experience.
- Good:** Good performance and meets standards for a Head of School having similar responsibilities and experience.
- Fair:** Meets standards, but there is room for improvement. Some additional effort needed to raise performance level.
- Needs Improvement:** Performance less than desired, in most instances, for a Head of School having similar education, experience, and responsibilities.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
1. Exhibits clear understanding of role of Head.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
2. Identifies and addresses key issues promptly and effectively.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
3. Anticipates future problems and opportunities.				

<u>Comment:</u>				
4. Confers and communicates well with all appropriate persons and groups.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
5. Makes sound decisions and implements them in timely manner.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
6. Maintains professional appearance, conduct, and decorum.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
7. Affords Trinity School positive recognition.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
8. Manages office and duties in organized fashion.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
Is considerate and mannerly in dealings with others.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
Has good working relationship with subordinates.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
Has good working relationship with Board.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
Exhibits creative approach in problem solving.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
Attends to problems promptly.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
Uses time effectively.				



<u>Comment:</u>				
Exhibits character and integrity consistent with School's Honor Code and Church heritage.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
Is good example to students.				
<u>Comment:</u>				
Inspires parents, colleagues and faculty.				
<u>Comment:</u>				

What are the Head's three greatest strengths or assets?
What does the Head seem to do exceptionally well?
What are the Head's major accomplishments over the course of the last year?
On what should the Head work especially hard next year?
What advice would you offer the Head at this time?

With what sort of task or tasks does the Head seem to have the most difficulty?
How would you describe the Head's management style?
In what ways has the School changed due to the Head's leadership?

Signature (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Please check the appropriate category: Parent \_\_\_\_\_ Board \_\_\_\_\_ Faculty/Staff \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E



LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

[Date]

Dear [Name],

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Brian Beabout in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations at the University of New Orleans (UNO). I am also the middle school principal and Latin teacher at St. Paul’s Episcopal School in New Orleans, an independent prekindergarten – 8<sup>th</sup> grade school accredited by the Independent School Association of the Southwest (ISAS).

I am conducting a research study on new heads of independent schools. My project strives to understand what skills heads of independent schools employ in their jobs and what knowledge or skills would have made new heads’ transition to their headships easier. Rhonda Durham, the executive director of ISAS, provided me with a list of recently appointed heads in ISAS schools, and I am hoping you will be able and willing to participate in my study. I am requesting your participation, which would involve me interviewing you one or more times during the spring or summer of 2017.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but neither your name nor your institution’s name will be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (504) 339-3885. You may also contact Dr. Brian Beabout at (504) 280-7388.

Sincerely,

Andrew O’Brien

By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the above study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Brian Beabout at the University of New Orleans, (504) 280-7388.

## Appendix F

### Interview Protocol

#### Demographics

- Describe your educational background.
- What educational positions have you held in your career?
- How long have you been in your current position?
- Have you served as a head of school before?

#### Grand Tour Question

- What has been your experience as a new head of school?

#### The Transition to Headship

- What training do you feel is important for a head of school?
- What training (formalized or not) had you received in educational leadership prior to being appointed head of school?
- As part of your training, have you ever worked with a mentor on either a formal or informal level?
- How have your mentors guided you? What skills or qualities did they have that you admire?
- Are there any previous experiences like being a trustee, a division principal, a teacher, a parent, or a student at an independent school that you feel was beneficial?
- Have you ever worked as a school leader in a public school setting? How was that experience different from your work in an independent school?
- Why did you want to become a head of school?

- How did you represent yourself to the board of trustees when you applied for the position?  
What special skills, knowledge, or experiences did you highlight that you felt made you well-suited for the headship? What skills do you believe the board saw in you?
- Describe your transition to being head at your current school. What made the transition easy? What made it difficult?
- Despite your prior experience as a head (if any), can you describe any factors or challenges that made your transition here difficult or different from a previous school?
- Who did you feel it was important to communicate with as you transitioned into becoming the head?
- What mandates or specific goals did the board assign to you upon being appointed head of school?
- What are your duties as head of school?
- What challenges did you find at the school that you were unaware of or had not anticipated?
- How has your personal/family life been affected by your becoming a head?

#### Social Judgment Skills

- Describe the culture at your school.
- Describe your relationship with the board of trustees.
- How often do you meet with the board chair?
- How is your performance evaluated by the board?
- Is your school affiliated with a church or faith system? If so, describe your relationship with the church leadership.
- Since you were someone new to the school, who or what was your greatest resource in finding out the conditions “on the ground?” How did you identify the school’s informal leaders?

- Does your school have an administrative/leadership team? Who is on the team? How did you determine who to appoint to the team? How do you delegate authority to its members?
- Describe your relationship with the student body. How do you maintain that relationship?
- Describe your relationship with the teachers. How do you maintain that relationship?
- Describe your relationship with the parents. How do you maintain that relationship?

### Problem-Solving Skills

- What problem-solving skills do you think a head needs in order to be successful as a head?
- Describe a problem that needed your immediate attention when you became head.
- Describe a short-term problem you had to solve or need to solve. What skills do you think you need to address the problem?
- Describe a long-term problem you had to solve or need to solve. What skills do you think you need to address the problem?
- How do you determine what problems to address yourself and which ones to delegate to others?

### Knowledge

- What knowledge do you think a head needs in order to be successful as a head?
- As a new head, what knowledge do you feel you lacked going into the headship?
- What leadership skills or knowledge that you need as a head do you feel are underdeveloped?

How do you intend to develop them?

## Vita

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He received his bachelor's degree in Greek and Roman Studies from Rhodes College in 2005. He obtained his Master of Education degree in Educational Leadership from the University of New Orleans in 2012, whereupon he began to pursue his PhD in Educational Leadership from the same university. He works full-time at an independent school in New Orleans as the Latin teacher for students in grades 5 – 8 and as the middle school division principal.