

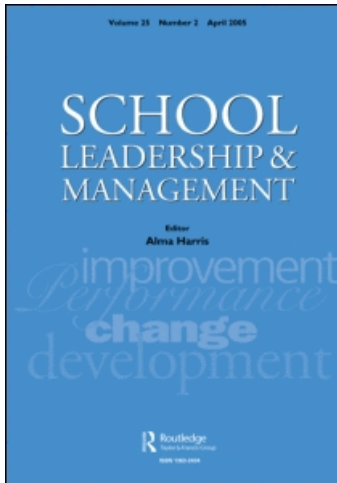
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### New heads on the block: three case studies of transition to primary school headship

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## **New heads on the block: three case studies of transition to primary school headship**

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The importance of headship to the success of schools is widely acknowledged. This paper focuses on two related aspects, *transition to* and *development during* the first year in post, and identifies and compares research findings with some of the key literature on transition theory and the development of occupational identity. The paper is based on three case studies of new heads before and during their first year in post. The part-grounded/part-developmental analysis identifies how particular themes emerge during transition, how post-transition development is influenced by the transition experience and how theoretical developments and previous research in the field of school improvement and school effectiveness are borne out in practice.

**Keywords:** transition to headship; socialisation; professional identity

### **Introduction**

Interest in school leadership – in particular, issues relating to the preparation, recruitment, development and retention of headteachers – continues unabated (Ward 2004; NCSL 2006; Rhodes and Brundrett 2008). Evidence of the impact of ‘good’ leadership in the context of school improvement, and the particular contribution of headship to effective educational provision (MacBeath 1998; Harris and Bennett 2001; Gronn 2003; DfES 2005) is largely uncontested. According to Leithwood et al. (2006), it is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning, so it seems only reasonable that heads should undertake specific preparation for the role (Bush 2008, 307). In the UK, the generic literature on headship (see Day et al. 2000; Harris and Bennett 2001; Hallinger and Heck 2003; Hoyle and Wallace 2005; Male 2006) emphasises the significance of the current National Standards for Headteachers (DfES 2004), which have increased the importance of pupil attainment data in monitoring headteacher performance as part of school inspection procedures. However, a related theme is emerging alongside this public accountability function; namely, the development of ‘practice centralisation’ (Bottery 2007, 87). Combined with an ‘acceptance of quasi-market mechanisms and an increased emphasis on performance management’ (Thrupp and Willmot 2003, 13) to enhance competitiveness, headteachers now operate in what Bottery (2007, 90) has described as ‘a more centralised system and a more directed profession’. The delegation of responsibilities by central government exists alongside greater surveillance, as a consequence of which headteachers merely *translate* central policy to a local context.

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This has resulted, in part, in a growing literature about early retirement and the reluctance of individuals to put themselves forward for headship (Gronn 2003; Fullan 2004), and heads already in post find themselves struggling to maintain their 'vision' from a basis of secure personal ethics while simultaneously having to respond to the daily demands of headship and the interplay of context and personality (Bottery 2007).

The *personal* accountability of heads for the effectiveness of their schools is not unrelated to these changing concepts of leadership and how it can be undertaken successfully, particularly in relation to the move away from heroic leadership towards distributive models that emphasise participation, sustainability, collaboration and networking. However, as power is shared, new and additional demands are placed on headteachers; for one thing, they need the skills to bargain and negotiate with a larger number of interest groups, even when those groups comprise stakeholders unwilling to subvert their self-interest and coordinate their actions for the collective good.

Formal systematic preparation for headship was established in the UK with the introduction in 1997 of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). It reflected the government's aspiration to improve the quality of headship training, which up to that time had been insubstantial (Male 1996, 6), patchy (Bolam 1997, 227) and haphazard (Bush 1999, 244). Although there had been earlier headship preparation initiatives, the establishment of the NPQH represented a significant shift to centralising pre-appointment training and assessment. The qualification, which since April 2009 has been mandatory for all new appointees, was developed on a competency-driven, management-orientated basis. At the time, it had a significant number of critics who considered that the provision under-represented the complexity of school leadership (Tomlinson, Gunter, and Smith 1999; Male 2006), and although National Standards today provide the assessment criteria, there remains a widely held belief that preparation for headship should be recognised as a more complicated developmental process, reflecting an inter-play of formal training opportunities and informal work-based learning prior to appointment. Duke (1987, 261) and others have also identified the importance of long-term and informal *socialisation* processes that reflect the developmental nature of school leadership and the limitation of short-term training programmes (like the NPQH):

School leaders do not emerge from training programmes fully prepared and effective. Their development is a more . . . incremental process, beginning as early as their own schooling and extending through their first years in the job. Becoming a school leader is an ongoing process of socialisation.

Duke's process of socialisation has three aspects: *professional socialisation*, which is concerned with the process of learning what it is to be a headteacher from both experience and formal training; *organisational socialisation*, which involves learning the values and behaviour required to perform the specific role post-appointment; and the establishment of *occupational identity*, which reflects a personal assessment by headteachers of the point where they feel confident and competent to gain control of the future (Tomlinson 2004, 93) and which is complete when the incumbent feels able to claim a place within the membership of the organisation. Southworth (1995, 177), on the other hand, sees the emergence of identity as the outcome of professional and occupational socialisation and contends that a head's identity is 'inflated on

becoming a head' and is 'altered in terms of isolation, self-belief and the projection of beliefs'. Most commentators agree that the whole process of socialisation is (and should be) closely associated with transition (Weindling and Earley 1987; Draper and McMichael 1998), which can be presented in a synthesised fashion as coming in three stages, each with its own particular characteristics (see Table 1). And all are agreed that contemporary headship is a complex, demanding and multifaceted job with wide-ranging accountabilities, in which authority and influence remain closely connected as the process of socialisation leads to the establishment of occupational identity. It is a job that must reflect long-term development as well as formal pre-appointment training, emerging from the complex interplay of prior and ongoing professional experience and reflection.

### A 3-phase transition model: findings as they emerged from the case studies

The transition to headship of three newly appointed primary school heads, in their first ever headship, and their development during their first year in post, were studied through a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews over the course of two years. Transcripts were systematically analysed to identify categories of emerging meaning, which were then shared with participants to check for accuracy and reliability. From this, it was possible to code, identify and categorise the themes of the inquiry based on 'phases

Table 1. Phases of transition, their characteristics and their emerging themes (after Weindling 2000).

Phase	Characteristics	Themes that emerged
(1) Preparation for headship	A pre-appointment stage that includes formal and informal learning through courses, training and experience. A period of <i>anticipatory socialisation</i>	(i) Personal motivation (ii) The nature of primary schooling and headship (iii) The development of aspiring heads
(2) Entry, orientation and immersion	A stage when previous learning about the job is applied, often in an unfamiliar context, and when formal induction and networking with other heads builds professional alliances and supports organisational socialisation. A stage when <i>organisational socialisation begins</i>	(i) Professional and organisational socialisation (ii) School effectiveness and school improvement
(3) Control and action	This stage is characterised by processes to reconfigure and reshape the school, and work with (and through) others becomes central to the change process. Experience is built during this stage as <i>organisational socialisation intensifies</i>	(i) Professional and organisational socialisation (ii) School effectiveness and school improvement (iii) The emotional dimension of headship

of transition'. The analysis identified how particular themes developed in each of three phases: for 'Maggie' at 'Brookfield Junior School', 'Ann' at 'Brackden Infant School' and 'Ben' at 'Sunningdale Primary School'. (Individual headteacher and school characteristics are set out on Table 2.) Subsequently, each headteacher was interviewed to see how professional development in the first two years in post was influenced by the transition experience, and this was then incorporated into the analysis.

Table 2. Summary of school and headteacher characteristics.

Headteacher	School characteristics
<p><b>Maggie:</b> 20 years' experience in education including four years' experience as a deputy in a successful junior school in the same local authority</p> <p>NPQH graduate at the time of appointment</p>	<p><b>Brookfield Junior School</b> An average size 7–11 junior school of 300 pupils Serves a socially mixed catchment area but with high levels of socio-economic deprivation High percentage (30%) of pupils from nearby army quarters Few pupils from owner-occupied housing 92% of pupils from white British backgrounds A low performing school on all comparative indicators SEN proportion (35%) above national average High pupil mobility due to army personnel movements</p> <p>Maggie's appointment followed a period of unsettled and broken headship</p>
<p><b>Ann:</b> Nine years' experience in education, all within the infant age range, including five years' experience as an infant deputy in a neighbouring local authority</p> <p>NPQH graduate at the time of appointment</p>	<p><b>Brackden Infant School</b> A small 4–7 infant school of 170 pupils Serves a large and relatively prosperous commuter village 93% of pupils from white British backgrounds SEN proportion (17%) in line with national average, but increasing over recent years</p> <p>Ann was the third headteacher in four years, prior to which the school's leadership had been very stable for 15 years and had established a strong local reputation</p>
<p><b>Ben:</b> 15 years' experience in education, including five years as a non class-based deputy in a large junior school in the same local authority</p> <p>NPQH graduate at the time of appointment</p>	<p><b>Sunningdale CE (Aided) Primary School</b> Large 4–11 primary school of 400 pupils serving a socially advantaged large rural area Almost all pupils from owner-occupied housing Strong local school reputation SEN proportion (13%) and free school meals proportion (4%) below the national average</p> <p>Ben's appointment followed that of a long established and well-regarded headteacher who was perceived to be leading a high attaining school</p>

**Phase 1: motivation and preparation**

Motivation for headship appears to develop, typically, during the period of extensive (and almost subconscious) professional orientation prior to securing a post, and this orientation period seems to be part of a process of ‘anticipatory socialisation’, whereby post-holders prepare themselves, overtly or covertly, by gathering social and technical experiences to qualify them for the job (Taylor 1968; Greenfield 1985; Eraut 1994). Although personal motivation emerged in different ways with each of the three heads, a common feature was the lasting influence of previous mentors; the headteachers under whom their ‘values orientation’ – you might say their ‘professional ethic’ – had developed, and under whom the technical and personal skills were acquired that enabled a vision of headship to emerge with confidence later. In all three cases, this vision of headship was defined by moral–ethical (rather than by pragmatic–managerialist) considerations and personal constructs emerged in two related dimensions about the nature of headship: the nature of contemporary *education* and the nature of contemporary *school leadership*. For each of the three heads, the former seemed to provide the context (at school, local and system levels) within which the latter was undertaken.

In terms of their preparation, all three heads developed personal constructs of the contemporary systemic context within which they were going to operate, an ethical approach to political influence in education and its implications for school effectiveness and school improvement, and all were keen to ensure that national priorities were customised and focused to reflect *school-specific* development and their own vision for the school. Speaking early in his headship of the potential tension between central control and local initiative, Ben said: ‘You’ve got to stand your ground and get to know the initiatives as they come in; not just jump on every bandwagon. You’ve got to decide what’s right for your school’. Views like this have important implications for headship and in particular for headteachers’ influence over school improvement and development.

Preparation for headship in each of the cases involved a variety of pre-service formal training programmes; in particular, of course, the NPQH. Although perceptions were mixed, none of the heads saw NPQH as making a significant contribution. Ben was the most critical, describing it as ‘mostly a complete waste of time’. He felt that the only useful aspects of the programme were concerned with ‘acquiring factual information’ and he was particularly critical of the way the content lacked any attempt to personalise or reflect different needs. His views were echoed by Maggie, who reported that she ‘didn’t learn anything new from NPQH’ that she ‘could not have better learned through working with good role models’; and Ann saw NPQH only as a useful preparation *for the selection process*, not for headship itself. She recalled: ‘It prepared me more for the interviews than it did for headship... although it did provide some theoretical background to my practical experience’.

The influence of other preparatory activities had both explicit/short-term and implicit/medium-term dimensions; as Male (2006, 41) put it, ‘very few aspects of preparation equip new headteachers to make the transition to effectiveness immediately’. The three heads in this study had numerous opportunities to gain in-school experience prior to taking up their first headship. Ben, in particular, as a deputy headteacher *without* significant teaching responsibility, had benefited from opportunities that, combined with his experience as an acting head, provided a broad

and valuable base of pre-service know-how. Maggie and Ann, also deputy heads but *with* teaching responsibility, had engaged in a range of whole-school initiatives and were coached by their respective heads to play a significant part in school leadership through engagement in improvement planning, evaluation and work with governors. However, as useful as these ‘pre-experiences’ were, all three heads said that the degree of *personal* accountability associated with actual headship meant that it was impossible to simulate the reality of it in any meaningful way prior to appointment.

### ***Phase 2: entry, orientation and immersion***

Two main themes emerged during this phase: professional and organisational socialisation, and leadership of school effectiveness and school improvement. The phase begins after interview and intensifies once appointment is taken up. Previous learning continues through formal induction, networking and the building of professional alliances to reflect the start of the process of professional and organisational socialisation.

One challenge facing the three heads in this study was the urgent need for change and innovation in their respective schools. This led to marked differences in how each headteacher managed this phase of transition and, in particular, how fast they moved towards the next (‘control and action’) phase. Maggie inherited a school where the need for improvement was acute and widely accepted, but in spite of this clarity and shared understanding, she felt the need to be careful to pace her entry and to take time to understand the school from her own perspective. Her priorities included ‘being visible’, ‘being easily accessible’ and ‘being involved in the day-to-day life’ of the school. In so doing, she built professional relationships across the school community and after two weeks in post was able to reflect:

My primary job is to make everyone feel valued, children and staff, because there has been a head here who has been quite poor, often away, so they haven’t had the leadership they need; people haven’t felt valued. They’ve hung on, but the structure has been lost. We need to put some structures in place.

Ben took a similar approach, giving priority to establishing his personal presence in order to gain acceptance and ‘to understand the school’s culture at a deeper level’. However, in contrast to Maggie, who was largely welcomed by staff and seen as filling a leadership vacuum, Ben found himself entering a hostile environment because of the particular circumstances of his appointment, with important consequences for organisational socialisation. ‘Sally’, the long-established deputy at the school and herself an unsuccessful applicant for the headship, was a popular member of staff with considerable staffroom support. Ben reflected on the implications of this in terms of his own incumbency:

Some [staff were] a bit more ‘standoffish’ than others. It was a threatening time for them really. They had the same head for fourteen years, the same deputy for twelve. It was bound to be worrying. I think they wanted to keep the status quo. They weren’t opposed to me as a person, but they were opposed to the appointment not being internal.

Although sensitive to the situation, Ben felt it important to assert control. He deliberately established a close working relationship with Sally, publicly recognising and acknowledging her contribution to the school, and involving her in much of his initial thinking; for example, during the first term he established *with her* a

programme of classroom observation to confirm both his own ‘visibility’ and ‘their close working relationship’.

Ann also gave priority to establishing good professional relationships and like Ben, worked particularly hard at building a relationship with ‘Sue’, her long-established deputy. Although not an applicant for the headship, Sue was a popular and well-established member of staff. Ann recognised the need to secure Sue’s support for any innovation and from the earliest stages; she shared her emerging perceptions of the school with Sue and found agreement in the view that the school was ‘complacent’.

For Maggie the situation was different. The absence of a deputy in the school made her potentially more isolated as she sought to build alliances across a range of internal stakeholders, both to deepen her understanding of the school and to confirm her own position as leader. She worked with a number of staff, particularly the assessment co-ordinator, to initiate staff development activities focused on meeting the immediate priorities she had identified. Throughout, she deliberately extended the participation and engagement of staff, and in so doing signalled a change of approach in the school’s leadership.

Learning about their respective schools through the process of professional and organisational socialisation was a time-consuming initial priority for all three headteachers, and in all three cases, leading school effectiveness and school improvement was closely linked with leading cultural change by providing appropriate opportunities for staff learning. For Maggie, issues of school improvement and school effectiveness dominated much of her work in all phases of her transition. To tackle these issues, she took a number of early decisions, many of which were set within the bigger context of managing cultural change. She gave top priority during her first term to, ‘getting to know the children and staff, and looking at areas for development and the strengths of the school’. This ‘*looking at*’ the organisation enabled Maggie to build a range of interpersonal relationships in the context of the school’s micro-politics. She knew that a range of systemic changes was necessary to secure improvement and greater effectiveness and that for these attitudinal, behavioural and methodological changes to be successful she would need to establish a basis for, and a bias towards, action. Maggie’s approach suggests that if sustained *behavioural* and *methodological* change is to be achieved, and shallow short-lived change avoided, ensuring *attitudinal* change is crucial (Cuban 1988). She sought to secure this by ‘building and maintaining an organisational culture’ (reflecting theory from Schein 1985), ‘establishing a mission for the school’, ‘giving a sense of direction’ (reflecting theory from Louis and Miles 1992) and ‘simply doing the right thing’ (reflecting theory from Bennis and Naus 1985). She recalled: ‘I needed to demonstrate my personal vision: through assemblies, training days, sharing ideas and thinking in staff meetings; just the way I am around the school. And through formal meetings, such as in the senior management team’.

In her first weeks of headship, she saw her priority as, ‘getting to know people first and only then getting around to more formal data and reports’. A term into her first year, reflecting on her experience, she confirmed the importance of this approach:

This is the most amazing job, but you have to give yourself time to find out about the school, to get to know the staff, parents and children. These are your key people. Whatever happens in the school is dependent upon how these [groups] work together.



This view illustrates an important implication for Maggie's work over her first year. Her prime focus was 'looking into' rather than 'looking out of' the school, building *internal* alliances and re-shaping the school's culture. Halfway through her second year she recalled:

I didn't really look out. I was too busy looking in. My focus needed to be there; there were so many things that needed to be done. Having said that, next term I'm going to send some teachers out to see other schools.

Ben and Ann also emphasised the importance of establishing good internal relationships. Like Maggie, their actions were closely related to signalling a change of direction for their schools, but for them the urgency was less acute as their schools were already judged to be reasonably effective and the external pressure for change was much less. Ben and Ann instead stimulated *internal* motivation for change, so that 'management of attitude' was the critical aspect of their work. Ann deliberately 'started gently to encourage staff to have an input into what they felt about change', establishing mechanisms to consult with staff, children, parents, governors and the wider community, and to build consensus about the way forward. This consultative process did not identify any great thirst for immediate or major change, perhaps reflecting the complacency Ann had already detected in the school, but it did highlight the necessity for her to build strong professional relationships if change was to be secured. She began this process by encouraging greater engagement and participation in school leadership. At the time, she said:

The priority here is to build a team. They don't know me. I need to be clear and communicate my vision for the school and ensure everyone is involved in that vision. There is a need to build distributive leadership. In the past there hasn't been that approach. People need to be more aware of their own capacity for leadership.

Ann focused in particular on extending staff engagement in shaping the school's strategic plans in order to build leadership capacity. One term into post, she remarked: 'You won't get distributed leadership unless people are involved. If it ends up with just you or the deputy, you'll never go anywhere really. You've got to get the whole culture right if you are [to] go forward'.

Ben's approach to the leadership of attitudinal change, although similar to that of Ann, was more strongly influenced by the school's context, and priority was given to establishing and developing a professional relationship with Sally, his deputy. Initially this went well, but mid-way through the first year, he was beginning to experience increasing personal frustration. Although most of the staff had gradually grown to accept his appointment, they acted collectively to restrict the introduction of relatively minor changes. One term into post – 'One hell of a term!' as Ben called it – he wondered whether the staff had 'moulded him to what *they* wanted, rather than the other way around'. In managing this complacency and its associated resistance, Ben identified Sally's continuing support as crucial, but the absence of a secure and effective middle-leadership structure through which to re-configure collective thinking was proving problematic:

It is very hard to get things moving . . . with the leadership team I've got at the moment. It is a nightmare. It doesn't work as a team. I haven't worked out why [name of teacher] is on the team. He just is. He's not effective at all.

Shortly afterwards, the mould began to break unexpectedly when one member of the leadership team resigned, providing a welcome recruitment opportunity. Ben recalled the resignation with glee, though he 'did not indicate that to anyone, not even to Sally'. As a new leadership team began to emerge, Ben anticipated and seized on new opportunities as they occurred to introduce the change he wanted.

### ***Phase 3: control and action***

During this final phase of transition, the themes that were established during the first two phases continued and deepened, and a third theme, the *emotional* dimension of headship, emerged. For all three headteachers, the pace of their learning accelerated as the year progressed, and as the demands of the job intensified and the complexity of the issues deepened. Professional and organisational socialisation continued during the second and third terms of their first year of incumbency and beyond, leading to the establishment of occupational/professional identity. For each head, it was an important part of their transition to *formal* leadership and (they said) reflected a personal assessment by them of the point where they felt confident and competent in the job. During this third phase, all three heads were found to be working increasingly in what West-Burnham (2001, 2) termed 'contexts of high complexity and high significance', which required a 'nexus' to be created between knowledge, experience, skills and qualities. Typically, for our three participants, this resulted in the establishment of a 'mental map' to help them make sense of their environment and decide on particular courses of action. The resulting high-order/profound learning, characterised according to West-Burnham by high personal engagement, a sense of autonomy and the capacity to act, was in evidence in all three cases. Responses were formulated, tested and applied, and problems and possible solutions defined and redefined, particularly in the area of school improvement/school effectiveness. Learning to lead school improvement/school effectiveness – and through it the establishment of occupational identity – provoked a range of strategies and each of the three heads was seen to develop a range of cognitive skills in the areas of analysis and interpretation of data. Schools' previous performance was analysed in each case by each head to identify future goals, reflecting different contexts. For Ben, the priority was to tackle issues of *differential* performance, particularly the under-achievement of high prior-attainment pupils. In raising expectations, he wanted staff *to focus on pupil outcomes*. His growing understanding and awareness, achieved in part by questioning established practice and procedures, accelerated during this 'control and action' phase, as initial impressions were checked and established ways of working challenged, and Ben began to firm-up his intentions: 'I know the staff [need] to be challenged. I certainly don't want to be the sort of head that dominates, but certainly I don't want to be a head that the staff thinks they can manipulate and be a pushover'.

Ben's impression that his school, though successful, was underachieving in terms of outcomes for high prior-attainment pupils, became the focus for his school improvement and school effectiveness strategy as he sought to establish a long-term approach to the development of the conditions that support and enhance school development (reflecting theory by Hopkins 2001). His continuing observations of teaching and learning confirmed his view, but he found initiating change difficult with established teaching staff. He recalled: 'During my second term, the honeymoon

ended and trying to make changes, I met a lot of resistance. I expected it, but a few staff just dug their heels in and things were not moving at the speed I wanted’.

Ben perceived an inward-looking culture and a staff with limited or no teaching experience in other schools. His challenge, therefore, as he saw it, was to secure improvement from within, rather than relying on external momentum (Earl and Lee 2000). The mid-year resignation of a member of the leadership team was followed three months later by the unexpected resignation of his long-established deputy. Ben welcomed this as an opportunity to reduce resistance and enable attitudinal change. He reflected at the end of his first year:

Challenging [staff] complacency was the hardest part; it proved really difficult. I was still meeting a lot of resistance. It was a popular and successful school and this led to resistance to change. The loss of staff helped, without doubt. If they hadn’t left, I would still be struggling now.

In developing strategies for ‘learning to lead’, all three headteachers found themselves engaged in activities based on real-life problem-solving. Although the complexity and significance of these situations varied, each provided an opportunity for learning through the application of *familiar* skills in *unfamiliar* situations. One important dimension to this process was that the context for problem-solving had important school-specific boundaries: usually a problem originated within the school, typically, a pupil or staffing issue, but even when it appeared from outside the school, the heads found themselves having to *(re)interpret* the problem in the specific context of the school. The challenge of interpreting, contextualising and tackling critical problems in real-time was always intense for the heads in this study, and was best summarised by Ben as: ‘just hell really – you get the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. There is no doubt, [contextualising and] tackling critical problems [in real-time] is very hard work’.

All the strategies developed in relation to ‘learning to lead’ were developed in the context of establishing a sense of moral purpose and a ‘search for personal authenticity’ (West-Burnham 2001) through processes that had implicit implications for personal work patterns and collective review processes (including reflection, discussion, networking, coaching and mentoring).

Like Ben, Ann faced the challenge of raising aspects of her school’s performance against the inertia of an established deputy and a self-satisfied school community. She also built upon her initial assessment of the school and continued her focus on team building, through which she sought cultural change by encouraging participation in school leadership. Two events during Ann’s third term in post were significant in this process: Sue’s unexpected resignation (for personal reasons) as deputy headteacher; and an Ofsted inspection. Having built a successful working relationship with her, Ann initially regretted Sue’s decision to resign – ‘She’s the person closest to me. I am anxious about who we will get in’ – but she was keen to maximise the opportunity for development presented by the vacancy.

The Ofsted inspection of Ann’s school was encouraging and paid tribute to her work to date, both in establishing herself ‘as the school’s formal leader’ and in the way she had ‘secured a broad base of involvement to shape the school’s future direction’. By this time, Ann had implemented a number of school improvement measures with a strong focus on teaching and learning, reflecting the view that a major goal of school improvement must be to: ‘help teachers become professionally

flexible so that they can select, from a repertoire of possibilities, the teaching approach most suited to their particular content area, and the age, interests and aptitudes of their students' (Hopkins 2001, 8). However, in contrast to Ben's experience, Ann found the pace of change both faster and easier than she had anticipated.

School improvement and school effectiveness were also central to Maggie's work in this third phase of transition. The size and nature of the challenge she had initially identified continued into this phase and like Ben, most of her efforts continued to focus internally on re-shaping the school's culture, but unlike Ben, Maggie soon felt she was making rapid headway. She continued to give priority to sustaining professional relationships and improving staff morale. In encouraging cultural change, she was able to harness goodwill and enthusiasm. 'Taking control' occurred at an early point as she recognised the need for immediate action to address critical performance issues: 'Someone had really to take it by the scruff of the neck and say "this is where we are going"'.

In doing this, Maggie was careful to forge internal networks that could later support identified developments. She was keen to 'take people along', and build and develop a leadership team, although her personal drive and enthusiasm remained significant factors in securing the school's increased effectiveness.

During this third phase of transition, for all three headteachers, the *emotional* dimension of headship emerged as a key theme. Self-confidence and self-awareness became stronger, learning moved from 'theoretical preparation' to 'practical application', and acquired expertise was accelerated and enhanced as professional and organisational socialisation enabled the new incumbents to achieve occupational identity. All three heads identified the significance of their 'guiding values' in identifying 'the big picture' in complex situations. They saw leadership of change as inevitably involving a range of emotional responses, like fear and anxiety, which reflected Fullan's (2001, 342) view that leadership at the level of the individual school requires heads to be 'attuned to the big picture'. In all three cases, their learning was supported by a largely responsive (but unstructured) mentoring system through which timely interventions from colleagues, Ofsted, parents, governors and pupils supported everyone's growing self-awareness.

In terms of 'guiding values', all three headteachers saw it as important to establish and display transparency, integrity and trustworthiness in their day-to-day work. This appeared to strengthen as the year progressed and as more complex situations developed. Establishing an 'open culture' and engaging staff more extensively in a variety of whole-school strategic issues and decision-making were illustrations of this approach. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002, 254) suggest that leaders who act transparently – defined as 'an authentic openness to others about one's feelings, beliefs and actions' – live their values. The importance of personal values therefore, already identified as an important aspect of emotional self-awareness, became a regular feature of the behaviour of our three heads as the terms went by and as unacceptable behaviour was challenged. Of course, achievement/success is supportive of transparency in the long-term and for all three headteachers, the drive to improve performance and to meet 'inner standards of excellence' (ibid., 39) was an important aspect of their work. For Maggie, this meant meeting the 'need to be a creative thinker'; for Ann and Ben, it meant tackling the

differential performance of particular sub-groups ‘by setting achievable but challenging targets’.

Initiative – the readiness to act and seize opportunities – was demonstrated by all three headteachers in this third phase, and their personal initiative was (they said) central to what was achieved later. It appeared to go beyond Maggie’s view of the need to be a creative thinker, to seizing and at times *generating* opportunities in order to shape the future. Central to this notion of initiative is the accountability dimension of headship and the demands it makes on heads, which Maggie regarded as ‘frightening’. All three reported an overpowering intensity to this aspect of the job and the consequent need to manage anxiety, identified by Gronn (2003) as a key dimension to the emotional aspect of leadership. Ben commented:

You have this lovely honeymoon period and then you are accountable for everything. I wake up at night and at weekends thinking about what I have to do, but there is a bit of me, because I love the job, that wants to talk about it as well.

Ann recalled a similar ‘intensifying’ view as she moved towards her second year of headship: ‘The personal workload now seems to be increasing. I think that’s because we’ve got so many things going on that need to be maintained’.

As part of the accountability imperative, all three heads in this study demonstrated significant *personal* (in addition to *professional*) influence in guiding the development of their schools and motivating others to engage in that process. As Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002, 255) noted, leaders who inspire ‘move people with a compelling vision and shared mission’. In different respects, each head represented the principal source of ideas for their schools, while working to develop more distributed approaches to leadership. They were responsible for setting both the pace and direction of travel for their schools, though interestingly, direct and active governor involvement was low in all three schools, though their support for development was always secured in advance by our headteachers.

Developing and sustaining a sense of *common* purpose and a *shared* understanding among staff was a process that intensified during the second half of the first year in post. Maggie reflected: ‘It is important to influence thinking through discussion and to lead through example; to demonstrate what you are thinking’.

And Ben suggested: ‘Headship is about . . . ensuring everyone understands where the school is heading and what you want to be achieved. I think it is “people first; work second”. To me that is the crux of headship’.

These comments hint at an additional aspect of relationship management for new heads: that of influence – ‘knowing how to build buy-in from key people and [build] a network of support’ for initiatives (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee 2002, 256). Ben deliberately established and developed a professional relationship with his deputy; Ann worked in a similar way with *her* deputy to ensure shared thinking; and although without a deputy, Maggie sought ‘buy-in’ from a range of key staff as the year progressed. In so doing, all three heads sought to develop a culture of teamwork and collaboration, to build commitment to *collective* effort and to build *collective* identity. The ‘everyone buys-in’ approach was thought by the heads to have other additional advantages, particularly in terms of resolving conflict, though it slowed the pace of change and resistance was never totally eliminated. As Ben put it: ‘Even the most insignificant changes were challenged. Looking back, I could have tried to move faster, but I think I would have left people behind’.

## Conclusion

This research confirms that transition to contemporary headship is a complex process: from anticipatory and organisational socialisation to the establishment of occupational identity. It suggests that headship *preparation* has both explicit and implicit dimensions, and that headship *itself* is best viewed as a career stage that builds upon previous personal and job experiences to represent a point of significant development in occupational identity. Headship may be, as Male (2006, 4) puts it, a ‘combination of leadership, managerial and administrative behaviours and actions that are appropriate to the given circumstance’, but it should also be a behaviour that emphasises the importance of context. This is not to deny that there are important similarities between heads working in different contexts, particularly for heads within the same phase of development, such as: the high *personal accountability*, particularly in relation to parents, the local authority and governors; and the *political setting*, in relation to central control and the range of national initiatives that focus upon improving standards. Effective headship requires the incumbent to achieve a balance of action over time and across *a range of* behaviours – a balance that will be different in different schools at different times – and a headteacher’s internal operational accountability for achieving the school’s agreed outcomes lies at the heart of that task.

The heads in this study were promoted to headship following successful careers as teachers and as deputies. As such, their transitions reflected a coherent development process; with both *continuity* in terms of occupational identity, and *change* in terms of the situational self. In all three cases, the process of anticipatory socialisation was critical and it was through a range of pre-service activities and experiences that the new heads first came to terms with the job. This study has identified a range of influences on that process; in particular, the opportunities to broaden and deepen management and administrative knowledge prior to taking up post.

The influence of other people on newly appointed heads, particularly former headteachers with whom they had worked during their teaching careers, was a significant factor in the preparation and transition of our three participants. In different ways, all three identified the significance of the mentoring and coaching opportunities provided by these former professional relationships and how they helped shape their thinking (reflecting previous theory and research by Tomlinson 2004; Male 2006; Rhodes and Brundrett 2008). The formal training provided by the NPQH appears to be less influential. None of the three headteachers in this study saw it as a significant dimension of their overall preparation, although some aspects of the programme were identified as being more useful than others. There was unanimity that the NPQH represented a particular perspective that identified headship as primarily underpinned by a nationally recognised competencies model and as such reflected a limited construct of headship which under-emphasised context. Transition to headship introduces a set of challenges that require previous learning experience to continue through early incumbency, ‘configured by personal attributes’ and ‘personal history’ (Male 2006, 16). This research finds transition to be a *slow but demanding* process of professional growth and personal development. Although the contextual factors specific to each of the headships in this study were significant, two main themes emerged: the continuing influence of professional and organisational socialisation, and the need to lead school effectiveness and school

improvement. Once in post, the new heads were found to apply their previous learning most urgently to these themes. As formal induction and networking becomes established, it seems that a period of ‘making sense of context’ and developing an understanding of the culture of the inherited organisation begins, which includes recognising the influence of the previous incumbent and encouraging the exploration of alternative structures. During this period, each of the heads was careful to secure initial personal acceptance and establish credibility prior to making important decisions and in advance of selling their personal values and vision.

In their different ways, all three heads reported a degree of initial shock about (what they perceived as) the relentless demand to address a range of pressing issues of unexpected complexity, which confirms findings from earlier studies (Draper and McMichael 1998; Male 2006). This appeared to have two main practical implications. Firstly, that initial attention was focused on *internal* school matters – *looking-in* rather than *looking-out* – which meant that immediate managerial issues took priority over longer-term strategic ones. Secondly, personal time-management issues became increasingly important, particularly for the headteachers in schools that lacked structures of devolved responsibility, which added to the pressure and intensity of early incumbency.

Although initially reluctant to accept the idea of ‘control’ in relation to their leadership, all three headteachers grew to accept the need for it during their first year, though all were keen to emphasise the need to ‘take people along’ and build alliances of internal support in order to encourage more distributed leadership and greater shared accountability. At the same time, the emotional dimension of headship emerged as a powerful theme. The study confirms the importance of the inter-play of the four domains of emotional intelligence: self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship management. All four domains were found to strengthen during transition, as theory moved to practice. In particular, self-management developed a strong *achievement* dimension that was found to be closely linked, *in an entrepreneurial way*, to school effectiveness and school improvement.

Moving to headship is clearly a formidable challenge, in terms of its scope, scale, complexity and the opportunities it offers to ‘make a difference’. Headship is a unique occupation in terms of the demands it makes of its incumbents and the potential personal exposure to legal, systemic, political and societal demands. In many ways, transition to it is a move from a position of relative obscurity to one of professional prominence and public accountability, which, though it requires little or no direct transfer of skills from the previous job of teaching (Draper and McMichael 1998), carries with it the implicit expectation that newcomers become instantly familiar with (and responsible for) the school community they have just inherited. The challenge for heads in their first year in moving towards establishing occupational identity requires coming to terms with how others perceive them, which in part reflects the potential isolation and loneliness of the job. In their search for identity, new heads appear to mimic behaviour *they have seen*, but modify it to align it more closely with their new situation and beliefs. ‘New heads on the block’ must either satisfy the expectations of others or be able to shape those expectations by commanding the criteria by which they are judged.

### Notes on contributors

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