

International Schools as Emotional Arenas:  
facing the leadership challenges in a German context

By

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## Abstract

This study offers an understanding of the emotional challenges encountered by AGIS (Association of German International Schools) head teachers in the course of their role; the consequences and impacts these challenges have on their personal and professional lives and the strategies they use to cope. This mixed methods study employs a questionnaire survey of 34 AGIS leaders, plus semi-structured interviews with eight of them, to explore their lived experiences in relation to the emotional demands they face. The findings show that, in addition to the challenges experienced by heads in wider contexts, AGIS leaders face demands specific to the multi-cultural context and transitional nature of international schools. . They also highlight how school leaders may contribute to the challenges they encounter through their poor understanding of the cultural contexts that they operate in. The demands that heads face, may lead to a range of negative consequences and impacts for many. The coping strategies upon which they draw, reflect the context in which heads operate and their individual resilience capabilities. The study suggests a range of strategies by which leadership-training providers, school boards and regional and local networks may better support international school leaders. It is also suggested that international school leaders take greater initiative for both their own cultural literacy and the development of personal resilience capabilities. Such steps should reduce the demands placed on heads and enable them to better withstand the challenges they face.

## Dedication

To my husband Dave

we saw things clearer

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF TABLES, CHARTS AND FIGURES .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>TABLE OF APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>13</b>
1.1 OPENING.....	13
1.1 RATIONALE FOR STUDY.....	13
1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.....	15
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	16
1.5 CONTEXT OF RESEARCH AND POSITIONALITY .....	17
1.6 STRUCTURE AND OVERVIEW OF THESIS .....	17
1.7 CLOSING.....	21
<b>CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 OPENING.....	23
2.2 DEVELOPMENT OF LITERATURE REVIEW .....	24
2.3 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS.....	25
Stress .....	25
Emotional Labour.....	25
Emotional Exhaustion .....	25
Burnout.....	25
Emotional Arenas.....	26
Transition .....	26
Cultural Dissonance .....	26
International School.....	26
Association of German International Schools.....	29
International School Leader/Head/Head Teacher .....	30

2.4 HEAD TEACHER STRESS.....	30
2.5 THEORY OF EMOTION.....	33
2.6 THEORY OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR.....	35
2.7 ORGANISATIONAL THEORY AND EMOTIONS.....	37
2.8 SCHOOLS AS “EMOTIONAL ARENAS” .....	37
2.9 SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AS EMOTIONAL PRACTICE.....	38
2.10 WHAT SCHOOL LEADERS FIND EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGING.....	41
<i>2.10.1 Relationships .....</i>	<i>42</i>
Relationships with staff.....	42
Relationships with the Board and External Administrators .....	43
Relationships with Parents .....	43
Other Relationship Factors .....	43
<i>2.10.2 The Nature of the Work.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>2.10.3 Leadership Performance .....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>2.10.4 Isolation.....</i>	<i>45</i>
2.11 EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS.....	45
<i>2.11.1 The Role of Transition .....</i>	<i>46</i>
Transition Theory .....	46
The Impact of Transition on Internationally Mobile Families and Third Culture Kids .....	51
The Impact of Transition on Host Country Families.....	54
The Impact of Transition on Staff.....	54
The Impact of Transition on the Head teacher.....	55
<i>2.11.2 The Role of Cultural Dissonance .....</i>	<i>56</i>
Theory of Culture .....	57
Cultural Dissonance in International Schools.....	64
2.12 THE CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACTS OF EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES ON SCHOOL LEADERS .....	68
2.13 COPING WITH THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES.....	70

2.14 CLOSING .....	72
<b>CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, METHOD AND DESIGN .....</b>	<b>77</b>
3.1 OPENING.....	77
3.2 ONTOLOGICAL/EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY .....	78
3.2.1. <i>Autoethnography</i> .....	79
3.3 METHOD AND DESIGN .....	83
3.3.1 <i>Mixed Methods Approach</i> .....	83
3.3.2 <i>Questionnaire Design</i> .....	84
3.3.3. <i>Interview Design</i> .....	87
The Semi-Structured Interview Approach .....	87
Interviewing Peers.....	88
Interview Technique.....	90
Sampling.....	92
Practicalities of Interview .....	94
3.4 <i>Ethical Considerations</i> .....	95
3.4.1 Invitation to Participate .....	96
3.4.2 Potential risks to the participant.....	96
3.4.3 Rights of the participant.....	98
3.4.4 Possible benefits of the research.....	98
3.4.5 Confidentiality .....	98
3.4.6 Dissemination of the research data.....	99
3.4.7 Contact information .....	100
3.5 <i>Analysis of Data</i> .....	100
3.5.1 Questionnaire Data.....	100
3.5.2 Interview Data.....	101
3.6 <i>Issues Arising from the Research</i> .....	105
3.7 <i>Validity of the Study</i> .....	107



3.8 Closing.....	109
<b>CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>111</b>
4.1 OPENING.....	111
4.2 QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS.....	111
4.3 INTERVIEW FINDINGS.....	118
4.3.1 <i>Vignettes</i> .....	120
Vignette 1.....	120
Subject- Participant 3-David .....	120
Vignette 2.....	122
Participant 6-Jenny.....	122
Vignette 3.....	125
Participant 7-Cameron.....	125
Vignette 4.....	127
Participant 8- Peter .....	127
4.3.2 <i>Thematic Analysis</i> .....	130
What International School Leaders Find Emotionally Challenging .....	130
<b>Relationships with Staff</b> .....	130
<b>Relationships with Senior Colleagues</b> .....	133
<b>Relationships with the Board and External Administrators</b> .....	134
<b>Relationships with Parents</b> .....	135
<b>The Nature of the Work</b> .....	137
<b>Leadership Performance</b> .....	138
<b>Isolation</b> .....	139
<b>The Role of Transition</b> .....	140
<b>The Role of Cultural Dissonance</b> .....	143
The Consequences and Impacts of Emotional Challenges on School Leaders.....	145
Coping with the Emotional Challenges .....	148
4.4.1 <i>What International School Leaders Find Emotionally Challenging</i> .....	153
4.4.2 <i>The Consequences and Impacts of Emotional Challenges on School Leaders</i> .....	154

4.4.3 <i>Coping with the Emotional Challenges</i> .....	154
4.5 CLOSING.....	155
<b>CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>156</b>
5.1 OPENING.....	156
5.2 WHAT INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS FIND EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGING? .....	156
5.2.1 <i>Relationships</i> .....	156
Relationships with Staff.....	156
Relationships with Senior Colleagues .....	158
Relationships with the Board and External Administrators .....	158
Relationships with Parents.....	159
Other Relationship Factors .....	160
5.2.2 <i>The Nature of the Work</i> .....	160
5.2.3 <i>Leadership Performance</i> .....	162
5.2.4 <i>Isolation</i> .....	163
5.2.5 <i>The Role of Transition</i> .....	164
The Impact of Transition on Internationally Mobile Families and Third Culture Kids .....	164
The Impact of Transition on Staff.....	166
The Impact of Transition on the Head .....	167
5.2.6 <i>The Role of Cultural Dissonance</i> .....	169
5.3 THE CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACTS OF EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES ON SCHOOL LEADERS .....	174
5.4 COPING WITH THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES .....	176
5.5 CLOSING.....	179
<b>CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>180</b>
6.1 OPENING.....	180

6.2. WHAT ARE THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS AS PART OF THEIR ROLE?.....	181
6.3 WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF AND IMPACTS OF EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES ON SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES? .....	184
6.4 WHAT STRATEGIES DO INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS EMPLOY TO ENABLE THEM TO COPE WITH THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES OF THEIR WORK? .....	184
6.5 DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS .....	185
6.6 INFORMING FUTURE PRACTICE.....	188
6.7 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	192
6.8 CLOSING.....	193
6.9 A FINAL WORD.....	194
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>196</b>
APPENDIX 1.....	208
SURVEY QUESTIONS .....	208
APPENDIX 2.....	212
QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT INITIAL EMAIL CONTACT .....	212
APPENDIX 3.....	214
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET .....	214
APPENDIX 4.....	217
THEMATIC TABLES.....	217

## LIST OF TABLES, CHARTS AND FIGURES

<b>Tables</b>		
	<b><i>Title</i></b>	<b><i>Page</i></b>
Table 1.	Hofstede's 5 Dimensions of Culture	50
Table 2.	What School Leaders Find Emotionally Challenging	65
Table 3.	Interview Participant Sample	85
Table 4.	General thoughts about the emotionally challenging nature of international school leadership	104
Table 5.	Working with specific groups is emotionally challenging	105
Table 6.	Impact of emotionally challenging nature of international school leadership	106
Table 7.	Coping Strategies	107
Table 8.	Desirability of further professional development	108
Table 9.	Resilience in the face of emotional challenges	109
<b>Charts</b>		
Chart 1.	The School Leaders Sample: time served as an international school	105
Chart 2.	The School Leaders Sample: time in served in current post	105
Chart 3.	The School Leaders Sample: leader's current role	106
Chart 4.	Most emotionally challenging group	112
Chart 5.	Frequency of emotionally challenging events	113
<b>Figures</b>		
Figure 1.	The Consequences and Impacts of Emotional Challenges on School Leaders	66

## TABLE OF APPENDICES

<b><i>Appendix</i></b>	<b><i>Title</i></b>	<b><i>Page</i></b>
Appendix 1.	Survey Questions	191
Appendix 2.	Questionnaire Respondent Initial Email Contact	192
Appendix 3.	Interview Participant Information Sheet	194
Appendix 4.	Thematic Tables	197

# CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 OPENING

In this study I examine, within the context of Association of German International Schools (AGIS) member schools, the emotional challenges that international school leaders face in the course of their role, the impact this has on their professional and personal lives and the strategies they use to cope. Using a mixed methods approach, I demonstrate how international schools are emotional arenas (Fineman, 2002) overflowing with emotional demands, which place considerable strain upon those who lead them.

In this first chapter, I begin by establishing a rationale for my research and outlining my main research questions, as well as discussing my positionality. I then outline the structure of my thesis, chapter by chapter, and summarise both the review of prior literature and my research methodology and method.

## 1.1 RATIONALE FOR STUDY

It is clear that leadership is stressful (Campbell et al, 2007; Smith and Cooper, 1994). In the 2007 study of Campbell et al, involving business leaders, 75% of participants acknowledged that having a leadership role increased their stress. For leaders of organisations, stress comes from several sources. Campbell et al (2007) categorise stressors as either *leadership demands*, including time and financial pressures, or *interpersonal demands*, acknowledging the emotional aspects of the leader's role in managing relationships in the workplace. School leaders find their work stressful (Cooper and Kelly, 1993; Tucker, 2010; MacBeath et al,

2009) with workload being identified as the single greatest source of work-related stress (Williamson and Campbell, 1987; MacBeath et al, 2011). Although several studies have noted the impact of the interpersonal demands of the job (Williamson and Campbell, 1987; Gmelch, 1983; McBeath et al, 2012), research has focused mainly upon the leadership demands. In more recent years researchers like Harris (2007), Crawford (2007, 2009), Beatty (2000), Beatty and Brew (2004), Kelchtermans et al (2011) and others have increasingly focused upon the emotional demands of the role, seeing schools as “*powerhouses of emotion*” (Harris, 2007:3), with heads at the centre, facing daily, emotional demands and challenges. There still remains, however, little research on international schools in this field. The influence of high stress levels on school leaders may have implications for both the length and effectiveness of their leadership. Work-related stress has been linked to turnover of staff in a number of occupations (Bridger et al, 2013; Mosadeghrad, 2013; Chiang and Chang, 2012; Hwang et al, 2013). In state systems worldwide, we are witnessing a crisis of recruitment and retention of school leaders. In the USA, Fuller and Young (2009) found that only half of newly recruited principals remain in post for as long as three years, with less than 30% remaining for at least five years. In England, research links the crisis in recruitment and retention of head teachers to excessive workloads and high levels of stress (Hargreaves and Fink, 2005; Pont, Nusche, and Moorman, 2008). International schools are also exposed to challenges retaining leaders (Hawley, 1994; Benson, 2003; Littleford, 1999), with the average tenure of an international school head teacher being only 3.7 years (Benson, 2003). This is all of considerable concern as stable school leadership matters to school performance (Leithwood et al, 2004 and 2010; Seashore-Louis et al, 2010); impacts student outcomes (Baker, Punswick, & Belt, 2010; Fullan, 1999; Béteille et al, 2012); influences teacher

turnover (Béteille et al, 2011; Fuller et al, 2007) and effects teachers' attitudes to change (Hargreaves, 2004; Fullan, 1999).

According to Jamal (1985), a number of studies in the field of work-related stress show a negative relationship between job stress and job performance (Beehr et al, 1976; Breaugh, 1980; House and Rizzo, 1972 all in Jamal, 1985). Yuri Hanin, working in the field of sports performance since the early 1980s, theorises that each individual has a *zone of optimal functioning*, with a preferred level of stress for optimal performance beyond which functioning is impaired. High stress levels may therefore impact on the performance levels of school leaders.

## 1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As an international school leader over the last ten years, I have become increasingly aware of the high levels of stress encountered by international school heads and the professional and personal toll this takes on them. I have experienced this stress first hand and also know of many other leaders who are highly stressed; some who have become seriously ill and others who have returned to classroom teaching or have left the profession, in order to avoid the challenges of leadership. While I acknowledge that leadership demands contribute to these high stress levels, I consider that the interpersonal demands of the international school leader's role also play a significant part. In recent years, I have developed an interest in the emotional aspects of the work of international school head teachers and have considered whether factors distinct in the nature of international schools are placing emotional demands on leaders. It is the purpose of this study to demonstrate that



international schools are emotional arenas (Fineman, 2002) where, in addition to the emotional challenges extant in all schools, there may be special factors at play, producing a distinctive emotional climate and presenting a particular set of interpersonal demands. The goal of the study is to gain understanding about the extent to which international school leaders find their roles emotionally challenging; the aspects of the role that place emotional demands upon them; the personal and professional consequences and impacts of these demands and the strategies head teachers employ to enable them to cope. As the emotional strain under which heads are placed may influence both the longevity of their tenure and the effectiveness of their performance, my study should be of interest not only to international school heads but also to school boards and those responsible for leadership training and development programmes.

## 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The key research questions in my study are as follows:

- What are the emotional challenges faced by international school leaders as part of their role?
- What are the consequences and impacts of these challenges on their personal and professional lives?
- What strategies do international school leaders employ to enable them to cope with the emotional challenges of their work?

## 1.5 CONTEXT OF RESEARCH AND POSITIONALITY

This study takes as its context AGIS member international schools in Germany. During part of the time the research took place, I was a primary principal in an AGIS member school in Berlin. According to Cresswell (2013), as qualitative researchers, we bring a certain worldview to our research and cannot bracket out our personal experience and bias. It is therefore necessary that we acknowledge our positionality and consider what this may bring to our research and what it may take away. As a principal/former principal of an AGIS member school, I am an insider researcher. Although there are potential pitfalls in doing insider research, which are discussed in Chapter 3, drawing upon the work of Bonner and Tolhurst (2002), it is my belief that my position offers three key advantages: I have a greater understanding of the culture I am researching; I am able to ensure a natural flow of social interactions and I can establish an intimacy with participants that promotes the telling and judging of the truth.

## 1.6 STRUCTURE AND OVERVIEW OF THESIS

My thesis is presented in six chapters with this introduction making up Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature in order to establish the theoretical framework of my study. The literature review begins by examining the emotional challenges faced by head teachers, before briefly reviewing theoretical approaches to emotion. With a focus on the social constructionist perspective, I consider Hochschild's (1979, 2012) theory of *emotional labour* and the role that it plays in workplace stress for those involved in people work. Utilising the work of Fineman (2002) on emotions in organisations, and supported by the

school-based research of Hargreaves (1998, 2001), Nias (1996), Crawford (2007, 2009) and many others, I establish the idea of schools as emotional arenas. I also examine school leadership as an inherently emotional practice and consider the emotional demands placed on heads as conduits of emotions within the organisation.

With regard to my first research question, through careful examination of the literature, I develop four categories to discuss what school leaders find emotionally challenging: *relationships, the nature of the work, leadership performance* and *isolation*. Following this, I move on to consider two additional categories, which are, I argue, specific to international schools. These are *transition* and *cultural dissonance*.

Most international schools are organisations in constant transition made up, at least in part, of an internationally mobile population of leaders, staff, students and their families, whose stay may range from only a few months to a few years. The transitional nature of these schools, I argue, may provide a range of interpersonal challenges for school leaders. By way of background, I briefly consider transition theory, particularly the work of Schlossberg (1981), and the impact that major life changes have on individuals. I then examine the concept of *culture shock* and early models (Oberg, 1963; Lysgaard, 1955; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963) developed to aid understanding of individuals' experiences of travelling to new cultures, as well as more recent work from Hasleberger and colleagues (Hasleberger, 2005, 2008; Hasleberger and Brewster, 2008; Hasleberger et al, 2013, 2014) on expatriate adjustment. I discuss the concept of the *third culture kid* (Useem et al et al, 1963; Pollock and Van Reken, 2010) and the impact of transition on third culture kids and their

internationally mobile (IM) families, as well as the impact the transitional nature of the community has on host families (Bates, 2013). Finally, in this section, I review research into the transition of international schoolteachers and heads (Roskell, 2013; Joslin, 2002; Odland and Ruzicka, 2009; Stirzaker, 2004).

In addition to being organisations in constant transition, international schools are most commonly multi-cultural communities, where intercultural encounters may result in *cultural dissonance* (Hofstede, 2003) that pose challenges for school leadership (Shaw, 2001, Dimmock and Walker, 2010). Setting a context for this, I consider theories of culture, drawing upon the work of Hofstede (2003), Schein (1990) and Spencer Oatey (2012), before examining more closely Hofstede's (2003) 1980 study of 117,000 IBM employees and his model for categorising cultural values. I discuss his five dimensions of culture as a tool to compare cultures within organisations and also consider later dimensional models of culture (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997; Dimmock and Walker, 2010). I go on to examine the role of culture shock and ethnocentrism in cultural dissonance between groups and individuals and consider how these may develop in mixed culture educational settings (Hofstede, 2003; Shaw, 2001; Dimmock, 2002).

In considering my second research question, I examine literature on the impact that emotion work has on the personal and professional lives of school leaders. This focuses upon describing heads' emotions when they encounter critical incidents or situations; the anxiety, loneliness and vulnerability they experience (Beatty, 2000; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011); the emotion management that takes place (Crawford, 2007;

Beatty, 2000; Gill and Arnold, 2015) and the potential for emotional exhaustion and burnout for some heads (Friedman, 2002; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009).

For my final research question, I examine literature that highlights the coping strategies that school leaders employ (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011; Kelchtermans et al, 2011; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009). I utilise the model of *resilience capabilities* developed by Lucy et al (2014), to examine the presence or absence of resilience capabilities which Lucy et al posit are key to resilience in a leadership context - *perspective; emotional intelligence; purpose, values and strengths; connections and managing physical energy*.

In Chapter 3, I set out the research methodology, method and design of my study. I describe the ontological and epistemological underpinning of my research as *phenomenologically-inspired* (Finlay 2009:12) interpretivism, with elements of *autoethnography*. In the first section of Chapter 3, I set out what I mean by this and explain how I have sought to combine a phenomenologically-inspired methodology, drawing on the lived experiences of a number of international school leaders, with an approach that draws significantly upon my own position as an insider researcher. I also discuss autoethnography and explain how I have employed certain aspects of this approach to enhance my research.

My study utilises a mixed methods approach, beginning with an online questionnaire survey of 34 AGIS school leaders, aimed at gaining a wider understanding of the issues and identifying suitable candidates for follow up in-depth interviews. In Chapter 3, I set out the research design for this part of my study; outline how the data was collected and analysed;

consider ethics and discuss problems that I encountered. The questionnaire survey was followed by semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with eight participants known to me. I used open-ended questions based upon the interviewees' accounts of three to four critical incidents, or situations, that they have found emotionally challenging in the course of their current role. In Chapter 3, I outline in detail the research design; explain how qualitative data was collected, analysed, interpreted and presented; discuss ethical considerations; consider at length the pros and cons of insider research and share the difficulties I encountered along the way.

Chapter 4 of my thesis sets out the findings of both the questionnaire survey and the interview stage of the study in separate sections. In the first section, I offer a full analysis of the descriptive data provided by the 34 questionnaire respondents. In the second section, using the themes I have identified from the literature, I provide both a series of short vignettes of the stories told by four of the interview participants and a thematic analysis of data emerging from all eight interviews.

## 1.7 CLOSING

In this chapter, I have sought to establish a rationale for my research and the purpose of my study. I have set out the research questions that guide my study and have established the context and my positionality as an insider. I have also outlined the basic structure of the thesis and provided a summary of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the research methodology and method, discussed in Chapter 3. In the next chapter, I examine the literature in the field.

In Chapter 5, I present a discussion of these findings, linking my research findings from both phases of the study to the literature and identifying areas where the study findings are both consistent and inconsistent with previous research in the field.

In Chapter 6, I present my conclusions. Here I consider the trustworthiness of my research; discuss the implications of my findings for practice; examine the contribution my research makes to current knowledge and identify potential areas for future study.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 OPENING

In this chapter, I begin by defining key terms and then present a full review of relevant literature. Following a brief overview of head teacher stress, I move on to consider emotion theory, aligning this research with the social constructionist perspective. I draw upon Hochschild's theory of emotional labour to provide an understanding of the consequences of people work. Within the context of organisational theory, I consider how schools are emotional arenas (Fineman, 2002) and discuss the key literature that establishes school leadership as an emotional practice (Harris, 2009; Crawford, 2007). I examine the role that emotional labour plays in the professional lives of head teachers and the potential for resulting burnout.

I move on to examine the key factors that heads find emotionally challenging in the course of their role, presenting these in four categories: relationships-including relationships with staff, the board and external administrators and parents; the nature of the work; leadership performance and isolation.

Following this, I focus upon two factors that I argue are more specific to international school leadership -transition and cultural dissonance. I discuss transition theory culture shock (Oberg, 1963) and the impact of transition on expatriate workers and their families (Haslberger, 2005, 2008; Hasleberger et al 2013, 2014; Hasleberger and Brewster, 2008). I then examine the influence of transition on particular groups of international school



stakeholders, including third culture kids and internationally mobile families (Useem et al, 1983; Pollock and Van Reken, 199), host families, staff (Stirzaker, 2004; Joslin, 2013) and head teachers. In considering the influence of cultural dissonance on the work of international school leaders, I discuss cultural theory with a specific focus upon the work of Hofstede (2003), consider how dimensions of culture may provide a framework for understanding cross-cultural differences, within organisations, and how this may apply to international schools. Following this, I present literature regarding the impact of the emotional challenges they face on school leaders' personal and professional lives. Finally, I examine key literature relating to coping strategies utilised by heads, beginning with a brief consideration of the concept of resilience, including the work of Lucy et al (2014) on the capabilities demonstrated by resilient leaders.

## 2.2 DEVELOPMENT OF LITERATURE REVIEW

In developing this literature review, I began with a few key texts relating to teacher emotions and change management in schools, provided in Year 1 of the Ed.D course. From these, I discovered the work of Harris (2009) and Crawford (2007) and developed a core bibliography, relating to the emotion work of school leaders. I then pursued the trail of emotion theory through a key word search of the online university library and was introduced to the concepts of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979, 2012) and emotional arenas (Fineman, 2002). For the areas of transition and cultural dissonance, I again carried out a key words search of the online university library and established key subject areas and authors, whose work and references were reviewed in order to provide further sources. I also interrogated Google Scholar and reviewed a number of websites such as the National

College for School Leadership. In relation to the context of international schools, I was aware of a number of key books on the subject of international schools, their leadership and management. As quality literature on international schools is so scarce, I obtained each of these books and reviewed them in full, drawing upon their reference sections to develop a comprehensive bibliography. I also scanned the online contents pages of the journal International Schools Review from the previous ten years in order to identify further relevant literature.

## 2.3 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

### **Stress**

Stress is *“a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilise”* (Lazarus, 1966: 24)

### **Emotional Labour**

Emotional Labour is *“the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display”* (Hochschild, 2012: 8).

### **Emotional Exhaustion**

Emotional exhaustion is defined as *“feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources”* (Maslach, 1978:113).

### **Burnout**

Burnout refers to *“a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job”* (Maslach, 1978: 113).

## **Emotional Arenas**

Emotional arenas are “*where emotions are performed in a particular context for a particular audience*” (Fineman, 2002: 4).

## **Transition**

A transition “is any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Schlossberg, 1981: 3).

## **Cultural Dissonance**

Cultural dissonance is “*disharmony in cultural interactions, in the dimensions of communication, behaviour, expectations and experience*” (Allan, 2002: 49).

## **International School**

The term *international school* is difficult to define. No one organisation internationally can grant the right to use the term. There are thousands of schools around the world calling themselves *international schools*, which form a “*conglomeration of individual institutions which may or may not share an underlying philosophy.*” (Hayden and Thompson 1995:332)

School describe themselves as international schools for a variety of reasons, which may include the following.

- The nature of the student population.
- The type of the curriculum it offers.
- Marketing and competition with other schools in the area.
- The school’s ethos or mission.

(Hayden, 2006)

Although these factors may move us towards a better understanding of what an international school may be or not be, they may also serve to confuse matters more. The population of an international school may be made up 100% of children from the local community or it may service solely expatriate families, with a full range of possibilities in between. In terms of phase, size and gender, international schools again defy definition. They may include children from age 3-18 or focus on one phase only, be co-educational or single sex and range from 20-4,500 students (Blandford and Shaw, 2001).

The type of curriculum that international schools offer also varies considerably. Many schools seek to offer a specific national curriculum such as British or American international schools. Here the intended goal may be to offer a learning experience and standards adopted from the national curriculum of the home setting of an expatriate population, enabling children to fit back into local schools when the family returns home. These schools may also attract students from families who wish to send their children to universities in the UK or USA. Others are attracted to a less tangible notion of what these schools may offer. A large number of other schools offer an *international curriculum*, such as those offered by the International Baccalaureate, the International Primary Curriculum and International Middle School Curriculum. These emphasise principles that might underpin a more internationally oriented curriculum, such as the development of openness towards all cultures, appreciation of diversity and the appreciation of global issues (Catling, 2001).

Governance or management of international schools might be determined by the school itself, the owner, the board, the senior leadership team, the head of school or a managing agency (Blandford and Shaw, 2001).

Murphy (1991 in Hayden, 2006) offers a set of simple criteria that may take us forward, outlining the following common characteristics that may be shared by international schools.

- They are private and fee paying.
- They service children of the employees of international organisations and multi-national companies who move around with their jobs or children of the diplomatic corps.
- They service host country families who want an English language education for their children or prefer what an international school has to offer to the national system.

It is important to examine, on a school- by-school basis, what the school means when it decides to call itself *international* as there is no easy way to determine what a school intends when it calls itself such (Wilkinson, 2002). Many schools describing themselves as International schools are aware of the problems in defining what they offer and of distinguishing themselves from other schools with who they may be in competition. In seeking to demonstrate that they operate within a set of internationally recognised standards and offer a quality education, an increasing number of schools apply for membership of accrediting agencies such as Council of International Schools (CIS), AdvancED, or CfBT Trust. These agencies provide formal recognition of schools as international schools and attest to the quality of what the school has to offer, through an

accreditation process based on comprehensive sets of standards. Schools may also apply to join a regional organisation of international schools such as Federation of British Schools in Asia (FOBISIA) or European Council of International Schools (ECIS). While these organisations do not offer accreditation services, schools must meet specific criteria in order to secure membership.

### **Association of German International Schools**

In seeking to overcome the confusion surrounding defining international schools, my research is focused upon those schools that are members of the Association of German International Schools (AGIS). AGIS is an umbrella organisation of 25 full member schools, which represents and provides services to like-minded international schools in Germany. Member schools must meet a number of specific criteria.

- Be recognised by the German government as a private school or Ersatzschule (a partly state-funded enterprise).
- Have been founded to serve the needs of an international, mobile population.
- Provide an education in the English language.
- Be members of an accrediting body for international schools such as CIS.
- Be committed to continuous improvement through evaluation, accreditation and professional development.
- Be committed to ethical practice and cultural inclusiveness to foster internationalism and international mindedness.
- Participate in a free open sharing of ideas, curriculum and benchmark data between member schools.

The 25 member schools of AGIS are located across Germany. The population of these schools varies, from those serving over 90% German nationals, to those where the majority of the population are mobile expatriate families and whose student body may consist of over 50 nationalities. Curricula vary, with schools offering programmes of the International Baccalaureate, International Primary and Middle School Curriculum, English National Curriculum and internally developed curricula. Staff and leadership teams are drawn from both the host nation and the international teaching community.

### **International School Leader/Head/Head Teacher**

As outlined above, international schools vary considerably in their structure and the age range that they serve. To accommodate these differences, the senior leadership structure also varies considerably. Many schools are 3-18 through schools with early years, primary, middle/and or secondary school sections, each with its own head or principal and also a head of whole school termed Head of School, Director or, sometimes confusingly Principal. Other schools may service only one phase, or some combination with a single Head of School, Director or Principal. The terminology school leader, head or head teacher is used in this thesis to refer to senior leadership team members who have overall responsibility for the academic and pastoral care of a whole school or one section of a school and may include heads/principals of early years, heads/principals of primary, heads/principals of middle/secondary school and heads/principals of school or directors.

## **2.4 HEAD TEACHER STRESS**

There is considerable evidence that head teachers find their work stressful and that, for

many, this is impacting on their individual wellbeing (Washington, 1982; Cooper and Kelly, 1993; Shields, 2007; Tucker, 2010; MacBeath et al, 2009, 2011, 2012). In 1982, 77% of US principals surveyed felt the job imposed stress and pressure beyond that experienced by an ordinary person (Washington, 1982). 30 years later, 78% of Scottish head teachers surveyed (Macbeath et al, 2012) were concerned about the demanding nature of their job, while a US study of school principals in 2007 (Shields, 2007) found that 83% of respondents reported moderate to high levels of stress. In an earlier 2009 study, into the recruitment and retention of Scottish head teachers (MacBeath et al, 2009), only 9% of respondents felt their personal health and wellbeing was not a concern. A study from England, during the same period, found that the prevalence of work-related stress of head teachers was double that of the general population and that head teachers suffered significantly worse mental health than other managers and professionals (Phillips et al, 2008). Tucker (2010) found mental and physical breakdown of selves or colleagues to be recurrent themes in the interviews carried out with heads.

Some would point to the wide-ranging nature of the head teacher's role as being responsible for the high levels of stress (MacBeath, 2012) while others would argue that much of this is attributable to recent changes in the nature of the head teacher's role.

*"Head teachers...have been placed under considerable stress by changes in structure and culture in which they are embedded...these changes have provided creative opportunities for some but they have also created risks for many others," (Tucker, 2010:29).*

There has been a huge focus in the literature upon workload as the major cause of stress in head teachers. Early studies found workload and time management to be the main causes of occupational stress in those surveyed (Cooper and Kelly, 1993; Williamson and Campbell,



1987) and the main predictor of job dissatisfaction and poor mental health (Cooper and Kelly, 1993). This was borne out in later studies in both the US and UK (Shields, 2007; MacBeath, 2012). The England Workload Survey, 2013 (National Union of Teachers) found that heads work an average of 63.3 hours per week, with over 20% of work taking place outside of school hours.

Although the emotional aspects of the role and the emotional demands placed on head teachers have been less prominent in discussions on head teacher stress, the research points to these demands as having a significant impact. 70% of head teachers surveyed in Scotland (MacBeath et al, 2012), were concerned about the emotionally demanding nature of the job, while on both sides of the Atlantic, relationships within school have been identified as major stressors, for heads and principals, including staff discipline and appraisal (Gmelch, 1983; Cooper and Kelly, 1993; Washington, 1982; Williamson and Campbell, 1987); resolving school conflicts (Williamson and Campbell, 1987; Shields, 2007; Gmelch, 1983); relationships with parents (Washington, 1982; Tucker, 2010) and dealing with interpersonal staff problems (Cooper and Kelly, 1993; Williamson and Campbell, 1987). Both Tucker (2010) and MacBeath et al (2011) point to the nature and vividness of the descriptions given by head teacher respondents as evidence of the emotional intensity of the work. Heads describe their work as *“firefighting”* or *“battles”* (MacBeath et al, 2011) and describe themselves as problem solvers, politicians, diplomats, social workers and therapists (MacBeath et al, 2009). According to Allison, *“confrontation, conflicts and compromise are constants which principals face on a daily basis”* (Allison, 1997: 248), while others agree that head teachers need increased support to enable them to cope *“effectively with the balance of professional*

*priorities and personal lifestyle choices (which) plays a key role in retention and attrition”*

(Macbeath et al, 2012). In order to achieve this, there needs to be a better understanding of the emotional challenges that school leaders face.

## 2.5 THEORY OF EMOTION

In order to place the emotional nature of head teachers’ work within a wider theoretical context, it is necessary to consider emotion theory. Over the past 125 years, several major approaches have developed in the study of emotion. Hochschild (1979), categorises these into two accounts of emotions and feeling- *organismic* and *interactive*. In the organismic account, emotions are instincts or impulses, which are biologically given. These automatic responses to events in an organism’s environment are universal in all humans. Emotions are therefore inherent, genetically inscribed and inherited, rather than learned. In organismic accounts, social factors are not seen as influencing emotions and humans have no capacity to manage emotions as they are characterised by *“the fixity and universality of a knee-jerk reaction or a sneeze”* (Hochschild, 1979: 554).

Interactive accounts posit how social factors affect the way in which emotions are elicited, expressed, labelled, interpreted and managed and acknowledge how human adults have considerable capacity to control emotion. Included here are cognitive appraisal theories of emotion, which argue that while some emotions are based in physiology, people’s judgments of a situation, event or object determine the emotional response. Emotions remain, however, fixed and universal to all humans, it is only the evaluations of context that change.

Of more significance to my study are social constructionist theories, which see emotions as products of norms that operate within specific sociocultural settings. This approach began to coalesce in the 1980s, through the work of Rom Harré, James Averill and Catherine Lutz. It sees emotions as cultural products, which are learned rather than inherent. Lupton (1998) identifies *weak* and *strong* perspectives within the social constructionist tradition. Weak theorists accept that, while some emotions are inherent and universal, others are learned through socialisation and dependent upon the sociocultural context. The strong thesis contends that all emotions are entirely socially constructed and wholly learnt with no universality across cultures.

Within the social constructionist perspective, structuralists see individual's emotions as constructed within cultural contexts, in order to serve particular social purposes. According to Lupton, emotions are, "*...shaped by social institutions, social systems and power relations...(and) directly associated with (people's) position in the social system or their membership of social groups, such as their gender or social class,*" (Lupton, 1998:18). For some writers, such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, emotions are a tool used to oppress some groups in society. For others, like Emile Durkheim, they are utilised as a means to maintain the social order. This social control is achieved through culturally specific rules that prescribe how, when and by whom particular emotions are to be experienced and expressed.

## 2.6 THEORY OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

The work of Arlie Russell Hochschild (1979, 2012) applies the structuralist idea, that emotions perform a social function, to the workplace. Hochschild developed the theory of emotional labour, demonstrating that much work that goes on within organisations, involves having to express socially desired emotions as part of the job role. Hochschild's theory was developed with a focus on service workers in the airline industry and has been supported by other studies of front line employees (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Ashkanasy and Daus, 2002). Hochschild (1979, 2012) argues that organisations develop *feelings rules* that specify the emotions employees should feel. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) call these organisational rules *display rules* as they emphasise observable behaviours, rather than feeling. In order to display appropriate emotions, employees may need to regulate emotions. For Hochschild (2012), emotional labour represents the commodification of emotions, which can be bought and sold as an aspect of labour power.

Hochschild (2012) identifies two ways in which workers perform emotional labour -*surface acting* and *deep acting*. In surface acting, the employee uses the body through gestures, voice and facial expressions, to express emotion not felt, in order to elicit the required response from the customer or client. With deep acting, which Hochschild likens to the method acting of professional actors, the worker induces the required emotions inside of themselves in order to produce the appropriate surface response. Hochschild's main concern for workers performing emotional labour is that "*maintaining a difference of feeling and feigning, over the long run, leads to strain*" (Hochschild 2012:36). This strain is caused by

*emotive dissonance*, as workers become estranged from their true feelings, and is a major cause of work stress, having potentially harmful psychological effects.

Until Hochschild, work on job stress focused on features of the physical work environment or physical and cognitive demands of the job, rather than on emotional demands. Although there was recognition of the role that emotional exhaustion plays in work stress and burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1986), emotional work demands were not considered as predictors of burnout, previous work instead associated frequency or quantity of interactions with customers/clients with role overload and burnout (Maslach 1978, Cordees and Dougherty 1993). Hochschild (2012) theorises that the consequences of emotional labour, relating to work stress, fall into three categories. The worker who identifies, too wholeheartedly, with the job and risks burnout; a second type of employee, who is able to separate themselves from the job and is less likely to suffer burnout but may denigrate themselves for acting and finally, a third category who is able to estrange themselves from the role and does not feel blame for this but rather sees it as part of the job. For Hochschild, all three are vulnerable to burnout but the first two categories are the most at risk.

In recent times, it has become recognised that emotional labour is not the preserve of front-line, service employees. In her 2012 edition of *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild estimates that one third of American workers, and at least half of women in the workplace today, have jobs that demand emotional labour. Other studies (Glomb and Tews, 2004; Grandey, 2003; Johnson and Spector, 2007) confirm that emotional labour, across a broad spectrum of occupations, contributes to emotional exhaustion of employees.

## 2.7 ORGANISATIONAL THEORY AND EMOTIONS

The focus on the role of emotional labour fits well with developments in organisational theory since the 1990s. Prior to this time, organisational theory was approached from a cognitive standpoint. Organisations were presented as rational undertakings, where priorities are set and problems solved, to effect the efficient and economical production of goods and services. Emotions were viewed as the antithesis of organisations, interfering with the rationality that characterises them. From the mid-1990s, however, alternative understandings of emotions in organisations began to emerge, from assumptions that emotion and reason are inextricably intertwined. Fineman (2002) characterises organisations as *emotional arenas* in which people are at the very core, constituting the organisation itself, what it is and is able to achieve.

*“As emotional arenas, organisations bond and divide their members. Workaday frustrations and passions...are deeply woven into the way that roles are enacted and learned, power is exercised, trust is held, commitment formed and decisions made.” (Fineman 2002:1)*

## 2.8 SCHOOLS AS “EMOTIONAL ARENAS”

As organisations, schools are emotional arenas where emotional labour takes place (James and Vince, 2001; Hargreaves, 1998; Harris, 2007; Crawford, 2009). Teaching has been described as *“essentially emotional in nature”* (Nias, 1996:39) and *“inextricably emotional”* (Hargreaves 2004:1057). This is linked to the emotional bonds that teachers establish with their students (Woods and Jeffrey, 1996; Hargreaves, 1998), the intimacy of student-teacher interactions (Nias, 1996) and the responsibility teachers take for safeguarding students’

wellbeing (Hebson et al, 2007 in Kinman et al, 2011). It is also a product of the way that teachers invest their *selves* in their work, closely merging their sense of personal and professional identity (Nias, 1996), coupled with the vulnerability they feel about their lack of control in the workplace (Kelchtermans et al, 2011). Since the mid-1990s, there has been an increased focus upon the emotional impact on teachers of educational change. During this period, schools have experienced increasingly negative emotional climates and a rise in stress among teachers (Hargreaves, 1998; Nias, 1996; Carlyle and Woods, 2002; Blackmore 2004). This stems from a sense of grief (Nias, 1996; Blackmore, 2004) caused by perceived threats to teachers' sense of identity (Van Veen and Slegers, 2006) and their inherent beliefs and values (Schmidt and Datnow, 2005), leaving teachers feeling undervalued (Richardson, 1995 in Carlyle and Woods 2002).

Emotional labour is a fundamental aspect of teaching (Hargreaves, 1998, 2004; Kinman et al, 2011) and continuous emotional labour is a stressor for teachers (Keller et al, 2014) that causes psychological strain (Cheung et al, 2011). A body of research indicates that teachers are more vulnerable to work-related stress and burnout than many occupational groups (Carlyle and Woods 2002; Kyriacou, 2000; Kinman et al, 2011).

## 2.9 SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AS EMOTIONAL PRACTICE

With the exception of emotional intelligence theories, emotion has run counter to educational leadership discourse, focused on technical/rational/managerial approaches to

leadership, borrowed heavily from business. Recent research (Beatty 2000, 2002; Carlyle and Woods, 2002; Blackmore, 2004; Crawford, 2007; Brennan and MacRuairc, 2011) has raised the profile of emotion in school leadership. There is now recognition that leading schools is an inherently emotional practice (Crawford, 2007; Kelchtermans et al, 2011; Harris, 2007), primarily due to the people-centred nature of schools, placing relationships at the heart of the head teacher's role (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009; Crawford, 2007; Brennan and MacRuairc, 2011).

*"School leadership is about emotions-desire, fear, despair, caring, disillusionment, pain, anger, stress, anxiety and loneliness" (O'Connor, 2006: 44).*

Researchers have focused upon the *"pivotal position"* (Richardson in Harris, 2007:15) of the head teacher, around whom all relationships in school oscillate, in order to understand the emotional aspects of the role. The head teacher can be viewed as a *tribal leader* or *carrier of culture* (Sergiovanni, 1995) and his or her role seen as that of a moral or social agent (Crawford, 2009). Leadership is practised at an intersection of the personal and professional (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004), where principals find themselves at a crossroads of different interests, acting as gatekeepers (Kelchtermans et al, 2011). The head teacher is also an emotional conduit (Crawford, 2009) or buffer for the emotions of others, whose role it is to soak up the difficult or unwanted emotional states of the school community (James and Vince, 2001), becoming *"psychological containers for others' emotions"* (Gronn, 2003:131).

*"Head teachers may therefore become the focus of everything that is wrong with the school, or seen as the school's saviour," (James and Vince, 2001:312).*



As leader of the school community, the head teacher sets the emotional standard and manages meaning for the group, acting as an emotional guide (O'Connor, 2006).

The nature of the leadership role, particularly in the high accountability climate of recent years, places high expectations on the leader, which can lead to fear and anxiety, rendering leaders vulnerable and insecure (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; MacBeath, 2009; Crawford, 2007; Beatty, 2000). This is compounded by the lonely nature of the school leader's role, with the necessary boundaries of leadership meaning that a degree of isolation is inevitable (Crawford, 2007).

The complexity and intensity of these experiences means that school leaders are confronted on a daily basis with a range of emotions, both their own and others, which need to be managed (Jonas, 2011; Blackmore, 2004), requiring leaders to have emotional skills (Beatty and Brew, 2004). A key part of the school leadership role therefore concerns managing the emotions of others and ones self (James and Vince, 2001; Blackmore, 2004; Crawford, 2007). This involves emotional labour, as head teachers manage their emotional display in order to "*act the head teacher*" (Crawford, 2007), suppressing their feelings in order to emotionally support others (Harris, 2007) or faking emotions to raise the spirits of the community (Crawford, 2007).

Suppression of emotion, to detach from one's true feelings, may also be a crucial tool to enable school leaders to protect themselves from the emotional demands of the role (Jonas, 2011; Brennan and McRuiarc, 2011). Developing these social defence systems, by disengaging from the emotion they feel, may make significant inroads over time into their

sense of self (Blackmore, 1996), with head teachers losing the capacity to regulate their feelings and causing emotive dissonance (Crawford, 2007). Burying emotions can be very draining (Brennan and MacRuairc, 2011), leaving school leaders vulnerable to emotional exhaustion and burnout, as emotional resources become depleted (Crawford, 2007; Harris, 2007).

According to Ackerman and Ostrowski (2004), school leaders are also vulnerable to sustaining *wounds*, which may be caused by emotional and physical exhaustion or by the emotional fall-out of day-to-day decision-making. This is compounded by an overdeveloped sense of personal responsibility (Crawford, 2007), with the head teacher unable to balance their own personal needs with that of the role (Crawford, 2007; Harris, 2007; Brennan and MacRuairc, 2011; Blackmore, 2004) and attempting to live up to the myth of the heroic leader (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004) while placing their health at risk.

*“Leaders find it challenging to offer themselves the same undivided attention, to be loving to themselves, to observe changes in their moods and physiology, to listen to themselves” (Harris, 2007: 236).*

## 2.10 WHAT SCHOOL LEADERS FIND EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGING

There is therefore strong evidence that emotional leadership in schools is profoundly demanding, exacting a high emotional price on school leaders (O’Connor, 2006). From the literature, four key themes emerge that place emotional demands upon school leaders.

- Relationships with adults

- The nature of the work
- Leadership performance
- Isolation

### 2.10.1 RELATIONSHIPS

*“People and relationships and the social interactions this invokes, are woven into the fabric of the everyday life of a head teacher... the core of a school lies in relationships... These relationships may be many and different but they are quite literally at the heart of education” (Crawford 2007:88).*

Relationships within a school are a key to its success but can also be a major source of challenge for school leaders. Relationships with other adults including subordinates, superiors and the wider school community are all identified as sources of potential conflict that place demands on school heads. These relationships, if not managed well, can have a negative emotional impact on individuals and the school as a whole.

#### **Relationships with staff**

Relationships with staff are complex with many aspects that may lead heads to feeling emotionally challenged. Lack of support or cooperation from subordinates may lead to emotional exhaustion (Friedman, 2002; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004), especially where there are value-based differences (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011) or the leader’s *passion of purpose* exceeds that of those around them (Beatty, 2000). Appraising and supporting underperforming teachers and dealing with staff discipline are also major sources of stress (Cooper et al, 1993). While managing staff responses during times of change can be increasingly challenging in the current climate of relentless systemic change and school improvement (Blackmore, 2004; Hargreaves, 1998).

### **Relationships with the Board and External Administrators**

Relationships with the Board of Governors/Directors and local education authorities may lead to emotional exhaustion, particularly where there is pressure to succeed with insufficient support from above, with lack of autonomy, (Beatty, 2000; Schermuly et al, 2011; Gill and Arnold, 2015). Such disempowerment may lead to feelings of resentment, fear, frustration and anxiety Beatty (2000). Relationships with the board are the single most significant reason for international school heads leaving their post (Benson, 2003), with an overlap between the responsibilities of the head teacher and the board leading to difficulties in role definition and creating an atmosphere of suspicion, mistrust and ill-feeling (Hayden, 2006). Demands placed on school leaders by Local Education Authorities were found to be a significant stressor for heads in England (Cooper et al, 1993).

### **Relationships with Parents**

Heads play a key role in the regulation of parental emotion in their schools (Crawford, 2007; Tucker, 2010) and dealing with demanding or unreasonable parents (Freidman, 2000; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009) and their vocal challenges (Gill and Arnold, 2015) is seen as an overwhelming stress factor by many, as is the need to react appropriately to parental anger and anxiety during times of change (Blackmore, 2004). Disagreements about what is best for the child or where the balance of parental and school authority lies in disciplining pupils are also of concern (Tucker, 2010).

### **Other Relationship Factors**

Supporting others in the school community may also be a cause of emotional strain for heads (Beatty, 2000) as they experience *fellow feeling* towards those experiencing

difficulties, such as a colleague caught *juggling the books* (Beatty, 2000). Balancing the demands and needs of multiple stakeholders within the community is also identified as a source of strain, causing feelings of being torn and leading to ethical dilemmas and conflicting loyalties for heads (Kelchtermans et al, 2011). Knowing how to behave with the community and being unsure about what is expected may also cause emotional stress (Gill and Arnold, 2015).

### *2.10.2 THE NATURE OF THE WORK*

Beatty (2000) describes as “*dirty work*” some of the tasks and situations that the school leader is expected to perform, including selecting staff members to be dismissed as part of a restructuring (Beatty, 2000). Decision-making is also found to be emotionally challenging for heads (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011). The level of responsibility that the role involves (Kelchtermans et al, 2011; Gill and Arnold, 2015), particularly having to take responsibility for the work of others, over which the head teacher may have little or limited control, can be a source of stress. Additionally, leaders may harbour an overdeveloped sense of responsibility for everything that occurs in school, even when it is beyond their control (James and Vince, 2001). Being of service in the school community, can also threaten the barriers between professional and personal, as the school leader becomes a “*magnet and object of public sentiments about schooling and a host of other issues*” (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004) leading to an imbalance between home and school life.

### *2.10.3 LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE*

Being public performers, where every aspect of their work is constantly judged may cause emotional stress for school leaders (Gill and Arnold, 2015). Fear of failure and not measuring

up to the job is overwhelming for some heads (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004), due to the intertwining of the school leader's personal identity with the leadership role.

#### 2.10.4 ISOLATION

The loneliness of headship is probably the most commonly recurring theme in the literature. Isolation leads to considerable emotional strain on heads (Crawford, 2007; MacBeath, 2009; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Beatty and Brew, 2004). This "*structural loneliness*" (MacBeath, 2009), results from both the lack of external support and a trustworthy peer group to confide in.

*"We can say that it is still, unfortunately, lonely at the top for school leaders...a kind of isolation that is not born of solitude... (and is) shared by school leaders everywhere"* (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004: 240).

### 2.11 EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

This wealth of research, establishing schools as emotional arenas and school leadership as inherently emotional, focuses mainly upon the national school systems in Anglophone, western countries, while the emotional landscape of international schools remains an under-researched field. The general characteristics of schools and school leadership, discussed above, are likely to apply also to international schools but, in addition, I argue, there may be other factors pertinent to international schools that impact upon their emotional climate and place demands upon their communities and, in turn, their leaders. These factors will be examined under the two inter-related themes of *transition* and *cultural dissonance*.

### 2.11.1 THE ROLE OF TRANSITION

Growth in the number of international schools has come about due to an increase in globalisation of trade, to meet the needs of IM (internationally mobile) families and the increasing demand for schooling in English, among local populations. Many international schools consist, at least in part, of highly mobile student populations and their families, with an increasing number of native English speaking teachers and administrators employed to service them. This means that most international schools find themselves in a perpetual state of transition as community members move in and out. This transition may have a significant impact on the individuals involved, as they adjust to the new status quo.

#### **Transition Theory**

Transitions have been characterised as turning points in our lives, which involve both a sense of chaos and a new adventure, accompanied by a letting go of aspects of the old self and former roles to make way for a new self and roles (Anderson et al, 2012). Theories of transition have grown out of *crisis theory*, first developed by Erich Lindemann in 1965, in the context of grief. Crisis theory asserts that individuals operate in equilibrium with their environment, able to solve problems through the use of habitual mechanisms and reactions. A crisis occurs when this equilibrium is disturbed and individuals are unable to rely on their tried and tested problem solving approaches, leading to feelings of helplessness, anxiety, fear, guilt and shame, before new ways to solve problems are developed. In the 1970s, authorities such as Parkes, Levinson and Speirer replaced the term *crisis*, and its negative associations, with the term *transition*. Transitions, according to Spierer,

*“may be due to biological, sociological, environmental, historical or other phenomena. They may have consequences that are evident now...or are manifested at some future date. They*

*may be evident to friends and to society...or remain unnoticed...they may be sudden or, more likely, cumulative” (Spierer, 1977 in Schlossberg, 1981: 6).*

Schlossberg, first working in the field of young adult development in the 1980s, presented a model of transition, which uses a common set of variables to understand an individual's transition experience. According to the model, transitions may be *anticipated*, *unanticipated* or *non-events* (where expected changes do not occur). The impact of a transition on the individual is determined by the degree to which the change alters their daily life. Schlossberg identifies four major sets of factors that influence the subject's ability to cope with a transition.

- *Situation*- including what precipitated the change; the level of the subject's control over the change; whether there is a role change; the duration of the transition; previous experience of a similar transition and whether there is other concurrent stress.
- *Self*-these factors relate to personal and demographic characteristics as well as psychological resources such as ego development, outlook and values.
- *Social support*-here the subject's ability to cope will be impacted by intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends and membership of institutions and communities.
- *Strategies*- actions taken by individuals in response to the transition.

(Anderson et al, 2012)

Schlossberg draws upon a wealth of literature to illustrate that transition is a process involving adaptation to a new equilibrium over time, passing through stages or phases,



which may take six months, one year or two years to move through (Anderson et al, 2012). As far back as the 1950s, models have been developed to discuss the adaptation of expatriates adjusting to a new country. These models grew out of theory on *culture shock*, which was first developed by Kalervo Oberg in 1954, to describe the experiences of people who travel abroad into new cultures. He coined the term *culture shock* to define, what he viewed as the harmful effects of transition into a new environment, describing it as “*an occupational disease of people who have been transplanted abroad,*” (Oberg, 1963:177). Oberg postulated a four-stage model of transition, consisting of *honeymoon-crisis- recovery-adjustment* and described symptoms of homesickness, loss, sadness and disorientation experienced during the *crisis* stage.

Alongside Oberg’s work, many later models have been developed to describe the transitional experiences of travellers and their likely adjustment patterns. These include Lysgaard’s (1955) *U-curve model*; the *W-curve model* of Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) and Brown’s 4 stage *Acculturation Model*, (Brown and Holloway, 2008). Whilst these models differ, they all acknowledge the significant impact that culture shock may have on an individual. More recent work by Haslberger and colleagues (Haslberger, 2005, 2008; Hasleberger et al 2013, 2014; Hasleberger and Brewster, 2008) demonstrates the complexity of individual expatriate adjustment and develop a more complex model to explain it. They postulate that people adjust to expatriate transition in three dimensions- *Cognitive*-involving knowledge and understanding of their new environment; *Affective*-relating to their feelings about their new situation and *Behavioural*-pertaining to their ability to behave in ways that seem to be effective in their attempt to *fit in*. Each dimension has both internal

and external aspects, where both the individual expatriate and the external environment judge whether the expatriate has adjusted.

Haslbereger and colleagues draw upon and adapt the work of Navas et al (2005 in Haslberger et al, 2014) and Hippler et al (2014 in Haslberger et al, 2014) to demonstrate how all expatriates must adjust to a number of different domains, including *public order and political systems, work, economic and ecological domains, together with social relations, family relationships and language and ideology*. Adjustment in each of these domains depends upon the starting point of each individual, which is affected by their antecedents. Do they, for example, have prior expatriate experience, or experience of the host country as a visitor or through language or family ties? Each domain will have its own unique starting point for each individual expat and it is these starting points that cause the process of expatriate adjustment to be so complex and unpredictable and render earlier models of limited value. This is further complicated by *spillover* of adjustment between domains, and *crossover* of adjustment between family or group members. In addition to this, the role of emotions introduces randomness to the process of adjustment via the affective dimension. Haslbereger and Brewster (2008) draw upon the work on Patterson (1988 in Haslberger and Brewster, 2008) to identify additional and new demands which may be encountered by expatriates and their families during their transition, in the form of *stressors, strains and daily hassles*. The main stressor of the new job assignment is likely to coincide with a series of further stressors, including the spouse giving up work, children moving to a new school, the move to a new home, changing family routines, financial uncertainties and cultural differences. Strains may manifest more slowly than stressors and can result from the

tensions created when adjustments and adaptations to the new life are not entirely successful. These can lead to anxiety and depression and may be compounded by increased daily hassles relating to amount of family time; health and well being of family members; the nature of work and workload; relationships with colleagues and employers; the weather; the environment or recreation outside of the home. All this occurs at a time when expatriates and their families are likely to have less social and community resources to draw upon for support and are forced to rely upon resources from within the family unit.

The spouse also experiences an adjustment process of his or her own (Takeuchi et al, 2002; Black and Stephens, 1989; McNulty, 2012). Often referred to as the *trailing spouse*, because of their inability to work legally in the host country, the partner of the expat employee experiences his or her own stressors, such as giving up of work/career, change in family routines and financial status coupled with strains resulting from tensions arising from these stressors, in addition to the daily hassles of dealing with locals in a foreign language (McNulty, 2012).

The isolation from physical and psychosocial support systems that families experience during this time of transition, means expat workers and their spouses become more dependent upon each other and during this time, the level of adjustment they experience will crossover to each other as a result of negative or positive synergy between them (Takeuchi et al, 2002). An increase in stress in the general environment, including home life, may spillover for the expatriate employee into the work domain. However, when the spouse adjusts well to the general environment, more emotional and psychological resources are available to support the working partner and this may lead to a better work life adjustment for the

employee (Takeuchi et al 2002; Black and Stephens, 1989).

*“While offering potential for personal growth and development, periods of transition may also be unsettling and trigger a great deal of psychological and physiological pain.” (Dixon and Hayden, 2008:486)*

It is a postulation of this research that the perpetual transition of the international school population may affect any or all members of that community, whether internationally mobile families, host country families or school staff, and that issues relating to a population in transition may provide a range of emotional challenges for the school leader.

### **The Impact of Transition on Internationally Mobile Families and Third Culture Kids**

Useem et al et al (1963) coined the term *third culture kids (TCKs)* to describe children of IM families. They found that children of expatriate American families posted to India, developed a third culture, combining elements from their home culture with that of the host country.

This concept was developed further by Pollock and Van Reken (1999), who describe the way that *TCKs* build relationships to all cultures they experience, without having full ownership in any. Often used interchangeably with the term *TCK*, *global nomads* is also used to describe

*“a person of any age or nationality who has lived a significant part of his or her developmental years in one or more countries outside his or her passport country because of a parent’s occupation”*(Schaetti, 1998:13).

According to Langford (1998) the preponderance of global nomads or *TCKs* creates a unique environment in international schools where the needs of IM families, as they adjust to international moves and experience varying degrees of transience, are paramount. While many students and their parents adjust well, others can experience crisis (MacLachlan,

2008). For children, moving results in a change of school, loss of friends and extended families and adjustment to a new lifestyle. How well and quickly they adapt will depend upon a range of factors including age, gender, personality, nature and frequency of moves and level of support from parents, schools and others (MacLachlan, 2008). Many children experience a sense of loss for what has been left behind (MacLachlan, 2008; Pollock and Van Reken, 2010).

*“Most TCKs go through more grief experiences by the time they are twenty than mono-cultural individuals do in a lifetime,”* (Pollock and Van Reken, 2010:169).

An international move or moves may impact on a child’s sense of belonging, denying them a sense of home, rendering them rootless and lacking a stable network of relationships (Fail et al, 2004). For those who move frequently, there may be an unwillingness to form anything other than superficial friendships (MacLachlan, 2007), leading to a sense of loneliness, as well as having a negative impact on the child’s sense of identity. As children come into contact with a range of new cultures, including the host country, international expat community and home country expats, all presenting new sets of norms and assumptions, they may feel culturally adrift (Gillies, 2003). Furthermore, those people who act as validators in the development of a child’s sense of self, such as parents, teachers and peers may be conflicting and dissonant in a cross-cultural situation, communicating different values (Fail et al, 2004).

*“Children have to adjust and adjust again and learn a certain cultural relativity and chameleon-like quality which may affect their identity well into adulthood”* (Fail et al 2004:324).

During transition, the role of the family takes on exaggerated importance as often the only support network for children (MacLachlan, 2007 and 2008; Gillies, 2003). An increase in

family cohesiveness, while essential, can pose challenges, especially for adolescents who are unable to develop independence away from the immediate family (MacLachlan, 2008). This may be compounded if children experience separation from parents due to work and work related travel (MacLachlan, 2007 and 2008).

Pollock developed a five-stage model of transition (Pollock and Van Reken, 2010) for children experiencing multiple moves. This traces the transitional journey of an IM child from their current location at Stage 1, through Stage 2 (*leaving*), characterised by anticipation and distancing from friends, to Stage 3 (*transition*), where children may experience excitement but also chaos and anxiety. At Stage 4 (*entering*) Pollock describes how children may suffer vulnerability due to uncertainty about their position in the new community and isolation, especially if there are language problems. Although most children eventually move on to Stage 5 (*re-involvement*), some children may not be able to move on from the entering stage, as the transition may trigger psychological or physiological pain (Dixon and Hayden, 2008), causing children to develop longer term problems (MacLachlan, 2008; Downie, 1976 in MacLachlan, 2007) such as depression, anxiety and stress (Davis et al, 2010 in Bates, 2013).

*IM* parents experience their own transitional journey, as outlined earlier but additional pressures are placed upon parents as they try to support their children through the unique challenges of international mobility while managing their own transition (Hayden, 2006). Mothers, in particular, may bear the burden here (MacLachlan, 2007; Harvey, 1985 and Simon, Cook and Fritz, 1990 both in Langford, 1999) as they are often forced to put careers

aside and revert to the traditional role of wife and mother.

IM parents may feel an enormous sense of fear and guilt in relation to the wellbeing of their children (MacLachlan, 2007; Langford, 1998). The school plays a key role in supporting both IM students and their parents during transition (Langford, 1998; Dixon and Hayden, 2008; Machlachlan, 2007), becoming community centres for the *trailing spouse* (MacLachlan, 2007) and taking on a central role in their lives (Hayden, 2006).

### **The Impact of Transition on Host Country Families**

Not only IM families feel the experience of transitional adjustment within an international school setting. Host country families may also experience the impact and sense of loss, resulting from a high turnover of IM families, meaning that new relationships have to be constantly forged (Bates, 2013; MacLachlan, 2008).

### **The Impact of Transition on Staff**

The high turnover of families in international schools is also mirrored by a high turnover of teachers and administrators (Roskell, 2013; Joslin, 2002; Stirzaker, 2004; Hawley, 1994; Benson, 2003). This may impact on the whole school community as the personal and professional dynamics within the school constantly change. Unlike the personnel of international companies who are posted overseas, teachers choose to apply to international schools and as a result are seldom provided with cross-cultural training or orientation prior to leaving (Joslin, 2002). The personal and professional challenges that international school teachers face can result in double the stress of relocating within a national context (Stirzaker, 2004), as teachers adjust to an unfamiliar organisational context and a new

national culture. In her study of twelve British teachers relocating to their first international school in South East Asia, Roskell (2004) describes the exasperation of the study's participants as they contend with the heat, humidity, mosquitos and high levels of sickness as well as their frustrations in working with local teaching assistants and students. She conveys the participants' negativity towards and mistrust of the school leadership team and the confusion felt about the teacher's role in the unfamiliar environment, leading to participants feeling, "*generally depressed, demoralised, demotivated and desperate to leave.*" (Roskell, 2004: 161).

Poor school leadership is the main reasons for teachers resigning from international schools while other challenges relate to the proprietary ownership of schools, such as profiteering, poor resourcing, dissatisfaction with the quality of colleagues, misrepresentation of the school during recruitment and contractual matters relating to the term and conditions of employment (Odland and Ruzicka, 2009). Challenges provided by the culturally diverse environs and the potential for cultural conflict in approaches to teaching are also highlighted (Joslin, 2002). Relationships with school leadership are identified as having a substantial influence on the teachers' overall quality of life, probably due to the isolation of international school communities and the extent to which members rely upon support from within (Joslin, 2002).

### **The Impact of Transition on the Head teacher**

Given the transitory nature of international schools, those in leadership positions "*may have to be adept at dealing with expatriate concerns among professional staff, the student body*



*and the community as a whole,”* (Hayden, 2006: 54). As such, many heads take on roles and responsibilities that would not be considered reasonable in other contexts (Hayden, 2006). The importance of the school community in the lives of those living away from home, positions head teachers as community leaders (Hayden, 2006), responsible for the care and support of not only students but also parents and staff. In addition to this, the head’s own transition also needs to be considered, with the rapid turnover of international school leaders (Hawley, 2004; Benson, 2003) meaning that heads often find themselves in transition between schools and countries.

*“Culture shock may well affect senior administrators in just the same way as it does other expatriate”*(Hayden, 2006: 105).

The transition experiences of heads are likely to be impacted by the lack of transferability of many of the skills they have developed in previous roles to their new context (Hayden, 2006) and the poor level of support they receive from within the new school (Hayden, 2006). According to Hayden (2006), there is little evidence of any support being provided to heads new in post and few if any individuals within school they may turn to for support who understand the complexities and pressures of the role (Hayden, 2006).

### *2.11.2 THE ROLE OF CULTURAL DISSONANCE*

One characteristic that international schools share is a cultural mix of stakeholders where *intercultural encounters* Hofstede (2003) are part of everyday life. These encounters may be between local student and migrant teacher, migrant teachers from different countries, expat parents and administrators, local and migrant students, mixed-culture boards and head teachers, or a range of other combinations. What is clear is that each member of the community brings different value patterns and expectations, which may be potential sources

of misunderstanding, misinterpretation and dissonance and may present considerable management challenges (Shaw, 2001).

This potential for cultural dissonance is compounded by the fact that the values and educational policy, theory and practice, upon which most international schools are based, are often transported from cultures very different to those where they are implemented (Dimmock and Walker, 2010). Although the international school community is, by its nature, multi-cultural, with its stakeholders embracing a wide range of pluralistic values, many international schools are constituted on western-centric cultural assumptions and values (Blandford and Shaw, 2001). This may be a deliberate marketing tool or may be influenced by the prevalence of school leaders and teachers from mainly Anglophone countries, whose ethical foundations are most likely derived from the western Judeo-Christian tradition (Begley, 1999). In addition to a dominance of western values, international schools are also subject to the pervasiveness of Anglo-American theory, policy and practice.

*“Policymakers are increasingly adopting policy blueprints, management structures, leadership practices and professional development programmes, fashioned in different cultural settings while giving little consideration to cultural fit” (Dimmock and Walker, 2010: 17).*

### **Theory of Culture**

In order to understand the cultural dissonance that occurs in international schools, it is necessary to examine the theory of culture. According to cultural theory, everyone carries patterns of thinking; feeling and potential acting learned over a lifetime but mostly acquired in early childhood from the social environments we grew up in (Hofstede, 2003).

*“Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies,*

*procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior" (Spencer-Oatey, 2012:3).*

Both Schein (1990) and Hofstede (2003) describe culture as manifested at different levels of depth. Hofstede (2003) describes culture as *The Onion* with *symbols, heroes and rituals* on the outer layers, making up *cultural practices*, which are more visible and may change over time. On the inner layer lie *values*, which are based on inherent, cultural assumptions, rarely articulated or overtly acknowledged and less likely to change. In a similar way, Schein (1990) refers to *Artifacts and Creations* as the first level of a culture, visible but often undecipherable; *Espoused Values* at the second level, which are hard to observe directly and *Basic Assumptions and Values* at the third level, which are invisible and taken for granted. Culture is associated with social groups and humans have a persistent need to classify others according to group and spend much of their social activity maintaining symbolic group ties (Hofstede, 2003). Humans will be members of many groups, which may include national groups; regional, ethnic or religious; gender; generational and social class among others (Hofstede, 2003).

While the norms of a culture apply to all of the people within that culture, they will vary in their degrees of relevance to individuals so that no two group members are likely to share identical sets of values, attitudes and assumptions (Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

In 1954, Inkeles and Levinson, building upon the work of anthropologists Ruth Bennett and Margaret Mead, published a survey of literature on national culture, in which they identified what may be five common problems shared by societies worldwide- *Relation to Authority; Concept of Self; Relationship between the Individual and Society; Individual's Concept of*

*Masculinity and Femininity and Ways of Dealing with Conflict* (Inkeles and Levinson, 1954 in Hofstede, 2010).

In 1980, Geert Hofstede, in a major study of 117,000 IBM employees, worldwide, set out to examine how national cultures affect the way organisations work. He found distinct differences in basic cultural assumptions, which had an effect on the way people worked and related to each other in the workplace. From this, drawing upon the work of Inkeles and Levinson, Hofstede derived a way of categorising cultural values into five dimensions (Table 1), or aspects of a culture, that can be measured relative to other cultures and provide a tool for comparing cultures with each other.

Since Hofstede, other models have also been developed that use dimensions of culture for analysing cultural differences in an organisational context.

*“Dimensions provide common benchmarks against which cultural characteristics at the societal/subcultural level can be described, gauged and compared.”* (Dimmock and Walker, 2010)

**Table 1.**  
**Hofstede's Five Dimensions of Culture**

Individualistic/Collectivist	How personal needs and goals are prioritised vs the needs and goals of the group.
Masculine/Feminine	The distribution of emotional roles between the genders". Masculine cultures' values are competitiveness, assertiveness, materialism, ambition and power, whereas feminine cultures place more value on relationships and quality of life
High/Low Uncertainty Avoidance	A groups' tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty and change.
High/Low Power Distance	The extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.
Confucian Dynamism (Long vs Short Term Orientation)	Whether the values and goals of a group are oriented to the long term or short term.

*Based on Hofstede (2003)*

The most well known of these alternative models is the seven dimensional model developed by Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997), while Dimmock and Walker (2010), working in the field of cross-cultural educational leadership, have developed a six dimensional model, specifically for the comparable study of international educational leadership and management, drawing heavily on the work of both Hofstede and Trompenaars and

Hampden Turner.

The research of Hofstede (2003), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) and Dimmock and Walker (2010) among others, demonstrates that work related values and norms are, at least in part, culturally determined and that it is important to be aware of the impact that culture has on behaviour in organisations.

Hofstede (2003) draws on work relating to culture shock and transition theory to explain the difficulties that workers may experience when encountering those from other cultures in the workplace. For the newcomer, there will be a period of adjustment as *“a visitor to a foreign culture returns to the mental state of an infant in which the simplest things must be learned over again,”* (Hofstede, 2010: 215), but those from the host country may also experience psychological and social reactions to outsiders coming into their environment. The process is likely to begin with curiosity but may develop, after a short time, into ethnocentrism, where hosts judge the newcomer, usually unfavourably, by the standards of the host culture. With more frequent exposure to foreigners, hosts may move towards a more polycentrist approach, recognising that different kinds of people should be measured by different standards or eventually towards bi or multi-culturality, where they are able to measure outsiders by the standards of the outsider’s own culture.

Culture shock and ethnocentrism may lead to cultural misunderstandings, anxiety and hostility, which may improve as individual adjustment takes place. However, Hofstede (2010) guards against a presumption that intercultural contact among groups automatically

breeds mutual understanding. To the contrary, he finds this usually confirms each group in its own identity, with intercultural encounters among groups provoking group feelings and becoming a potential source of cultural misunderstanding. This can be compounded when there are language barriers, as language differences contribute to cultural misperceptions and prevent one fully understanding a culture.

For Hofstede (2010), successful intercultural communication is dependent upon three factors.

- *Awareness*- a recognition that we each carry a *mental software* which is different to that carried by others.
- *Knowledge*- learning about the symbols, heroes, rituals and values of other cultures.
- *Skills*- recognising and applying the symbols, recognition of heroes and practising rituals by getting along and fitting in.

These can be taught through intercultural training but some individuals are better suited to this than others.

It is an assumption of this research that, due to the perpetual transition of their internationally mobile populations, cultural dissonance may commonly occur in international schools, where people experience discord, disharmony or confusion, as a result of cultural misunderstandings. This can be emotionally challenging for school leaders, as the pivots around which all school relationships revolve. Several studies (Fail et al, 2004; Shaw, 2001; Dimmock and Walker, 2010; Hofstede, 2010, McLean, 1995) have sought to apply

dimensional models of culture to examine how intercultural misunderstandings may occur in culturally mixed schools.

Before embarking on cross-cultural comparisons of this kind, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and pitfalls of using dimensional models of culture. Hofstede's model has its share of detractors and has been highly criticised over the years since its introduction. Critics raising questions as to whether a simple survey, carried out only in the workplace, across one company, with an inherently unrepresentative sample, using a western-centric, culturally biased questionnaire can successfully define dimensions of national culture (McSweeney, 2002; Hanna, 2005). Furthermore, dimensional models of culture work on the assumption that each culture exhibits certain preferences over others and as a consequence will favour particular modes of conduct and behaviour. It is important to acknowledge that the values contained within these dimensional models are expressions of preference and not absolute indicators of behaviour, they simply highlight opposing orientations that people may share.

*"It is important to note that the culture-behaviour link is by no means simple. For instance membership in a sub-culture on the basis of regionality, ethnicity, age, gender or socio-economic class, can significantly influence values and behaviour; organisational culture determined by such factors as industry size, history, location and integration of technology can shape how country cultural values are acted out; and individual personality can influence thoughts, feelings and actions to a greater extent than cultural values" (Wilson et al, 1996: 4.)*

In order to avoid cultural stereotyping or over simplification of the concepts involved in cross cultural comparison it is worth bearing in mind Hofstede's warning that neither culture, values nor dimensions exist in reality. They are merely constructs used as a tool to advance our understanding and when they cease to do so, they will be of no further use (Hofstede,



2003).

### **Cultural Dissonance in International Schools**

Within each international school community, stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds may have contrasting values based on differing understandings and beliefs about the purpose of education or sociological and economic differences (Cambridge, 2002). Most of the literature in this area focuses upon the clash of western and eastern cultures, which have come to the fore following attempts to implement a range of western leadership and management practices in inappropriate cultural contexts.

The role of the school leadership is a key area where cultural dissonance may occur. According to Dimmock and Walker (2010), in collectivist, group oriented societies, such as China and Singapore, the role of the school leader focuses upon developing and ensuring harmony among staff and enforcing common approaches to organisation, curriculum and instruction. There is avoidance of open confrontation or assertiveness, with instead an emphasis on retaining harmony. In these high power distance societies, where authority is greatly respected, the leader's viewpoint is invariably accepted and the head teacher is expected to set the direction and make the decisions in an authoritarian style. In these contexts, attempts to introduce distributed and collaborative leadership practices may run into severe difficulties (Shaw, 2001; Dimmock and Walker, 2010). In these feminine cultures, a teacher's loyalty is to the school, rather than to his or her own self-advancement and assertiveness and competition between staff is less tolerated (Dimmock and Walker, 2010). Where there is participation, it will be within hierarchical levels rather than between them

(Dimmock and Walker, 2010).

In western, individualist societies, there is more emphasis on the individual needs of staff and a focus upon task achievement rather than relationships. There is lower power distance, with decision-making more likely to be shared and leaders expected to earn respect.

Teachers are more willing to openly challenge leadership; standing up for what they believe in and their loyalty is placed with their students or directed towards their own self-advancement, rather than the school (Dimmock and Walker, 2010). These differences in cultural values may lead to problems, in a range of areas, where western models of educational leadership are imposed upon schools in eastern countries, causing cultural dissonance.

Another example cited in the literature focuses upon staff appraisal systems or coaching and mentoring, where close but objective interaction between the school leader and a team member is required (Shaw, 2001). For those from collectivist cultures, staff appraisal systems and individual goal setting are based upon untenable key assumptions (Dimmock and Walker, 2010), predicated upon assessing the performance of individuals. In collectivist cultures, the teacher is pushed to adapt to the group needs and norms, with individual performance being secondary to fitting in with the group (Dimmock and Walker, 2010; Shaw, 2001). A system based upon the judgment of individuals is, therefore, incongruent with a group oriented culture and may become a source of disharmony between leaders and their teams, as may the promotion of staff based upon individual merit (Dimmock and Walker, 2010). Due to conflict avoidance, two person face-to-face appraisal meetings are

likely to remain only at the surface level and have limited effectiveness (Dimmock and Walker, 2010). Low uncertainty avoidance means eastern cultures are likely to prefer informal, more subjective appraisal containing fewer explicit rules, policies and procedures (Dimmock and Walker, 2010).

From a teaching and learning perspective, high power distance, collectivist cultures tend towards a didactic, teacher-centred approach where open ended inquiry and independent learning is less valued or understood (Shaw, 2001; Fail et al, 2004); students only speak when specifically called upon (Deveney, 2005) most commonly within smaller groups ([www.geert.hofstede.com](http://www.geert.hofstede.com)); questioning by students may be considered rude or insolent (Shaw, 2001) and teachers may be expected to give preferential treatment to some students ([www.geert.hofstede.com](http://www.geert.hofstede.com)). This contrasts with low power distance, individualist cultures where classrooms are student centred, students are expected to initiate communication and find their own learning paths and teachers are expected to treat all students equally, providing them with equal opportunities (Shaw, 2001; [www.geert.hofstede.com](http://www.geert.hofstede.com)).

According to Hofstede ([www.geert.hofstede.com](http://www.geert.hofstede.com)), in feminine cultures, teachers use average students as the norm and promote systems that reward students' social adaptation. Students are encouraged to behave modestly and academic failure is considered to be of minor concern. In masculine societies, by contrast, the best student is used as the norm; academic performance is rewarded; students are encouraged to make themselves visible and failure is seen as a major blow ([www.geert.hofstede.com](http://www.geert.hofstede.com)). These cultural differences provide challenge for teachers, as their behaviour, attitudes and expectations of their students is rooted in the culture in which they were trained (Fail, 2011).

*“teachers need to be aware that the sort of behaviour that they want students to produce...may actually be at odds with the way they have been encouraged to learn in other classrooms” (Fail, 2011: 89).*

A coherent ethos between school and parents is a prime factor in school effectiveness and poses challenges for schools where parents come from a wide range of cultures (Allen, 2002). Cultural differences may generate significant issues in international schools (Allen, 2002), where school leaders are likely to come into conflict with demanding parents with differing cultural expectations about the purpose and role of the school and approaches to learning (Hayden, 2006).

*“I sometimes tell parents that they enroll their children at their peril. The children will be learning different things in different ways...the values they have may be different to their values” (Murphy, in Langford 1998: 39).*

Parents from collectivist cultures readily accept the demands of the school, while those from democratic, participatory systems within individualist cultures expect to be represented (McLean, 1995). Furthermore, parents from cultures with a low power distance might expect to side with the student in teacher/student conflicts, while those from high power distance cultures naturally support the teacher (Allen, 2002). Differing parental expectations of this kind may also impact strongly on the success of parent boards where members may have different understandings of both the board’s and the school’s role (Hayden, 2006).

This cultural dissonance, experienced by teachers, parents and children can be the cause of considerable stress (Deveney, 2007) and may form barriers to effective organisational management, leading to lower task alignment; less effective communication and increased conflict, resulting from mistrust, frustration and dissatisfaction (Schneider and Barsoux, 2003). This may have a significant impact on school leaders responsible for bringing communities and teams together and for finding ways to make a best fit between

contrasting cultural norms.

*“The successful leadership of such communities calls for very specific knowledge and skills attuned to ethnicity and multiculturalism” (Dimmock and Walker, 2010: 4).*

## 2.12 THE CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACTS OF EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES ON SCHOOL LEADERS

So far I have established that the emotional demands experienced by school leaders come from a wide range of sources. In this section, I will examine literature relating to the consequences and impacts that these emotional challenges have on the personal and professional lives of head teachers. While there is ample literature on the causes of emotional strain on heads, there is less literature that documents the consequences and impacts of these emotional challenges. Much of the available literature focuses on describing the range of emotions that heads feel, as a result of challenging critical incidents or situations in which they are involved.

Anxiety is an emotion referred to often in the literature (Beatty, 2000; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Brennan and MacRuairc, 2011) and is likely to occur when making difficult decisions or dealing with complex staff relationships. Anger is also frequently mentioned (Beatty, 2000; James and Vince, 2001; Crawford, 2007; Johnson et al, 2005) and can be precipitated by a range of events or situations, including working under pressure to succeed, without support or autonomy (Beatty, 2000) or dealing with underperforming teachers (Yariv, 2009). Frustration is also commonly experienced when supporting failing staff (Yariv, 2009; Crawford, 2007). Heads have reported feelings of vulnerability (Brennan and

MacRuiarc, 2011; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004) as their public persona exposes them to the projections of others expectations, hopes and fears and they are considered to be “*fair game*” for criticism (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004). Isolation is both a cause of emotional challenge and a symptom of the same (Gill and Arnold, 2015; James and Vince, 2001; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004) and a range of incidents and situations in which heads are involved can subject them to feelings of loneliness, including the exclusion they experience when they are criticised by staff (Kelchtermans et al, 2011). Other emotions regularly experienced are fear (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Beatty, 2000); self-doubt (Gill and Arnold, 2015), disillusionment (Johnson et al, 2005) and upset or sadness (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Johnson et al, 2005).

There is less literature on the impact these emotional experiences have on the professional and personal lives of school leaders. Heads feel tired (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009); suffer from sleeplessness (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Johnson et al, 2005) and feel stressed (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009; James and Vince, 2001). They are conscious of a blurring of the lines between their professional and personal lives and an invasion of personal time and space (Blackmore, 1996), which may contribute to ill health risks (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009). There is plentiful evidence of emotion management taking place, with heads as they engage in emotional labour (Crawford, 2007; Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011; Beatty, 2000) in order to maintain a professional face and comply with expected display rules (Beatty, 2000). Male principals may feel under additional pressure to mask their real feelings in order to maintain the respect of the community (Gill and Arnold,

2015). Ultimately this may lead to emotional exhaustion (Schermyly et al, 2011; Friedman, 2002) and burnout (Friedman, 2002; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009) for some leaders.

## 2.13 COPING WITH THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES

In this section, I examine the literature on how school leaders cope with the demands they encounter and the strategies they employ to support coping. In this context, it is necessary to consider the concept of resilience.

*Resilience is the process of negotiating, managing and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment, facilitate the capacity for adaptation in the face of adversity” (Windle, 2011: 158).*

For Windle, an individual’s capacity for resilience does not remain constant but can vary across their life. Dweck and colleagues (Dweck, 2012; Yeagar and Dweck, 2012), researching originally in the context of secondary school students, identified two *mindsets* that influence how individuals cope with the challenges they face-*growth mindset* and *fixed mindset*. Those with a *growth mindset* believe, or are taught, that one’s basic abilities and qualities may be cultivated and improved through effort, dedication and hard work. A growth mindset creates resilience in the face of personal and professional challenges and those with a growth mindset experience greater achievement, when exposed to challenging situations, than those with a fixed mindset. A growth mindset can be learned and developed over time, indicating that an individual’s resilience is not necessarily fixed or constant. Supporting this notion, Lucy et al (2014) have developed a model of personal resilience in a leadership context, based on five key capabilities which individuals may develop in order to enhance their resilience in any given situation. They postulate that these resilience behaviours are learnable and that capacity for resilience can be developed and maintained, with careful

management, based upon the five *resilience capabilities of perspective; emotional intelligence; purpose, values and strengths; connections and managing physical energy.*

Within this model, resilient leaders are able to take a step back from challenging situations and gain perspective, accepting rather than denying its negative aspects whilst focusing their efforts on the things they can change. They understand how the regulation and processing of emotions is essential to resilience and are compassionate to both themselves and others. Leaders with a strong sense of purpose, values and strengths related to their work, have greater resilience and draw upon their personal moral compass during times of challenge and uncertainty. A wide network of connections in the form of family, friends and colleagues is another capability marking out the resilient leader as an individual who is able to rely upon a full range of support from others, as well as give support to those around them. Finally, managing physical energy through keeping fit, eating well and taking time away from work to recuperate is an essential capability of resilient leaders.

This five-part model is a useful tool for examining the literature on coping strategies employed by school leaders. Most of the existing literature focuses upon the resilience capabilities of perspective and connections with head teachers gaining perspective through the process of reflection and growth (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Zembylas, 2007) and through taking time away from the immediate challenges of the school environment, either as a break to recharge batteries (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011) or while attending training (Kelchtermans et al, 2011) where they are able to *“be safe to stand still, look back and around (and) meet with others,”* (Kelchtermans et al, 2011: 95). Connections are developed through sharing emotions, either through a process of genuine openness with staff and the



community (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011) or through seeking support, from senior colleagues (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009; Zembylas, 2007), networks of head teachers outside of school (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009) or close friends and family (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009; Zembylas, 2007). Although emotional labour has been mentioned as an impact of the emotional challenges faced by heads, it may also be viewed as a coping strategy, with some actively seeking to disengage emotions in order to maintain control (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004), practising *detachment* (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011); *disengaging* themselves from the emotions they feel during difficult times (Blackmore, 1996) or emotionally shutting down during confrontations (Crawford, 2007) in order to protect the self. While regulation of emotions fits in well with the capability of emotional intelligence discussed by Lucy et al (2014), relentless emotion management by heads may “*make significant inroads over time into their sense of self and professionalism*” (Blackmore, 1996), leading to emotional exhaustion and burnout and may not be an effective long term coping strategy.

## 2.14 CLOSING

In summary, in this review of the literature I have examined the stressful nature of the work of the school leader and identified the emotional aspects of the head teacher’s role as being a significant factor in causing this stress. I have provided an overview of theoretical approaches to emotion, considered the role of emotional labour in workplace stress and the role of emotions in organisations. Linking these concepts to head teacher stress, I have drawn upon the literature to establish schools as emotional arenas, where emotional labour takes place, and have considered the role that emotions, and emotional labour, play in the

professional lives of school leaders.

In addressing my first research question, I have discussed the emotional challenges that head teachers encounter in the course of their role and have identified four key factors, from the literature-relationships, the nature of the work, leadership performance and isolation that cause heads to feel emotionally challenged. I have also identified two additional factors that may present emotional challenges to the international school leader. These are transition and cultural dissonance. In seeking to explain the first, I have presented an account of the key literature relating to transition theory, culture shock, expatriate adjustment and third culture kids and examined how the whole range of *international school community* members –internationally mobile families; host families; staff and head teachers may be impacted by transition. In relation to cultural dissonance, I have established a basic foundation of cultural theory and the role that dimensional models of culture have played in allowing us to compare cultures within organisations and in the development of our understanding of cultural dissonance. I have also considered the potential shortcomings of the use of these models, before demonstrating how such models may be applied to the international school environment.

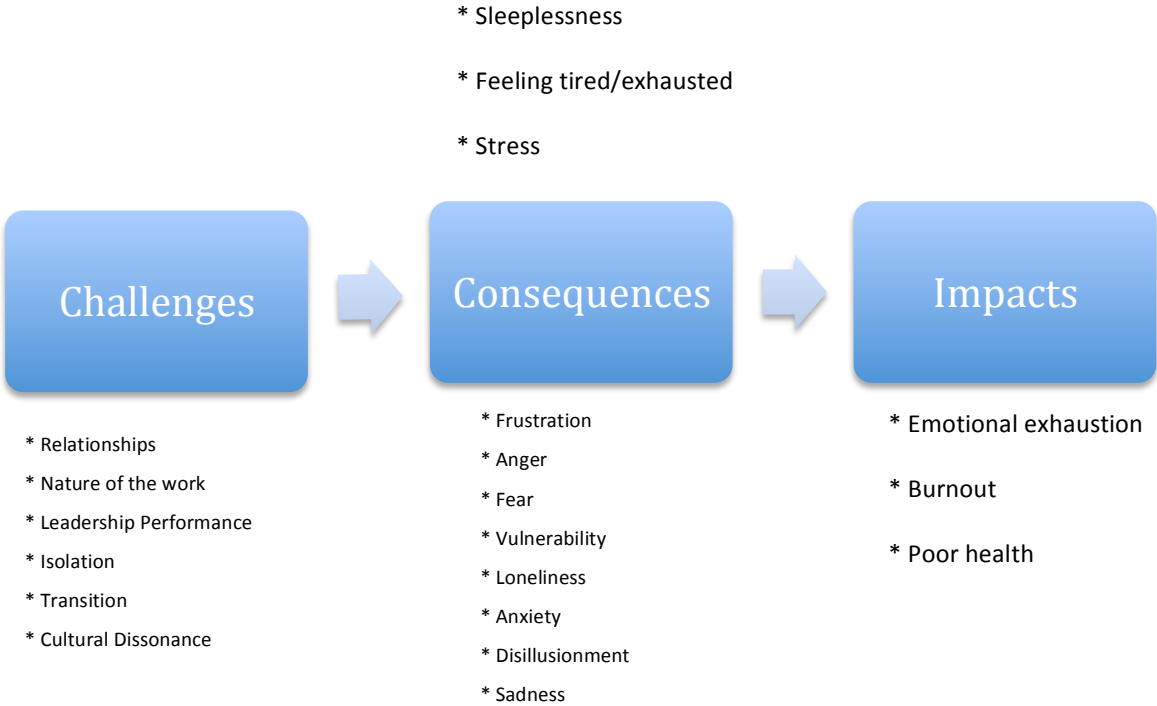
By way of a summary, Table 2 provides an overview of the factors that school leaders in general may find emotionally challenging and those that pertain specifically to international school leaders.

In addressing my second research question, I have examined how the emotional challenges that school leaders encounter may impact their personal and professional lives, the emotions they feel and the negative consequences they experience. Figure 1 provides a summary.

**Table 2. What School Leaders Find Emotionally Challenging**

<b>All Schools</b>	
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff</li> <li>• Board and external administrators</li> <li>• Parents</li> </ul>
Nature of the Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dirty work</li> <li>• Decision making</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> </ul>
Leadership Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public performance</li> <li>• Public scrutiny</li> </ul>
Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of peers</li> <li>• Lack of external support</li> </ul>
<b>International Schools Only</b>	
Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Third culture kids and IM families</li> <li>• Host families</li> <li>• Staff</li> </ul>
Cultural Dissonance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-cultural misunderstandings</li> <li>• Differing cultural expectations</li> </ul>

**Figure 1. The Consequences and Impacts of Emotional Challenges on School Leaders**



In addressing my third research question, I have briefly examined the concept of resilience and how the mindset of individuals may determine how well they cope with the challenges they face. I have adopted the five-part resilience capabilities model of Lucy et al (2014) to discuss the coping strategies employed by school leaders facing emotional challenges in the course of their work.

In Chapter 3, I will outline my research methodology, method and design and discuss each aspect in full.

## CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, METHOD AND DESIGN

### 3.1 OPENING

In this chapter I present the methodological framework, research method and design of my study. The primary goal of this research is to understand the lived experience of participant school leaders in relation to the emotional challenges they face in the course of their work. Working within the interpretivist paradigm, employing a "*phenomenologically inspired*" (Finlay 2009:12) methodology, with aspects of autoethnography, I utilise a mixed methods approach, combining a questionnaire survey of 34 respondents with semi-structured interviews of eight participants. Although I will be combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods, I consider the study to be primarily qualitative and define it as "*qualitative mixed*" on the mixed methods continuum developed by Johnson et al, (2007, in Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014: 72).

I begin this chapter with an examination of my ontological and epistemological perspective and research methodology. I then offer an in depth examination of autoethnography and its advantages and potential pitfalls. I move on to discuss and justify the mixed methods approach employed, before examining in more detail the questionnaire stage of the research; the goals and research design, including sampling and recruitment. This is followed by an in-depth examination of the interview stage of the study, my purpose in utilising a semi-structured interview and a full consideration of the pros and cons of interviewing peers. I then consider the qualitative research design, including interview technique, sampling and recruitment, before providing an overview of the ethical considerations of my

study. Following this, I discuss the techniques I have used in the analysis of both the questionnaire and interview data. I then consider my positionality, issues arising from the research and, using a set of criteria specific to qualitative research, the trustworthiness of my study.

### 3.2 ONTOLOGICAL/EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

From an interpretivist perspective, reality is constructed, by humans, intersubjectively, through meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially. Interpretive research draws upon detailed, personal accounts to make sense of aspects of the social world and prioritises the meaning of human experience over scientific measurement or prediction. Within the interpretivist paradigm, phenomenological research aims to produce knowledge about the subjective, lived experience of research participants through in-depth examinations. It is *“particularly interested in how social life is constructed by those who participate in it...and how people (make) sense of the world they live in through their actions and interpretations”* (Denscombe, 1998:102). This sits well with the goal of my research, which is to acquire rich descriptions of the experiences of international school leaders, from their own perspectives, about the emotional challenges they encounter, the impact these challenges have on their lives and how they cope.

I pull away from describing my methodological perspective as purely phenomenological as I will be using elements of autoethnography in my study. To follow is an examination of autoethnography and how it will be employed in this research.

### 3.2.1. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

*“ The term autoethnography invokes the self (auto), culture (ethno) and writing (graphy). When we do autoethnography, we study and write culture from the perspective of the self...we look inward-into our identities, thoughts, feelings and experiences-and outwards-into our relationships, communities and culture”(Adams et al, 2015: 27).*

Autoethnography grew out of reflections, which began in the 1970s, on the role of the social science researcher as a detached or neutral observer. It developed from a movement that sought to look for new ways to recognise how the researcher is part of what they study and shapes and affects the research.

*“ Even though some researchers still assume that research can be done from a neutral, impersonal and objective stance, most now recognize that such an assumption is not tenable” (Ellis et al, 2011: 274).*

During this period, ethnographic studies began to consider how the *self* and the *field* are inextricably linked and the term autoethnography began to be used to describe research in which the researcher gives accounts of their own culture and chooses a field tied to their own identity or group membership. By the 1980s, researchers in a range of fields were attempting to include the self in their research, through the use of subjectivity, reflexivity and through employing techniques such as personal narrative. Autoethnographic researchers draw upon their personal experience, as cultural members, in order to produce rich, evocative and aesthetic descriptions and personal experiences within the cultural context. This is achieved by either comparing their own experience to existing literature, interviewing others or examining cultural artifacts (Ellis et al, 2011). Autoethnographers are encouraged to take a *“hyper-reflexive stance”* (Kempster and Stewart, 2010: 206). This



approach gained momentum and increasing legitimacy during the 1990s, through the work of Stacy Holman Jones, Art Bochner, Carolyn Ellis and others.

Autoethnographic approaches seek to contribute to existing thinking and theory by developing an understanding of previously hidden experiences and sensitive topics, examining the emotions that these experiences generate, through embracing vulnerability, for the purpose of breaking silences and disrupting taboos and ultimately creating greater understanding (Adams et al, 2015). Autoethnographic research varies considerably, particularly in the emphasis placed upon the study of others, the self and interaction with others, but according to Adams et al (2015), autoethnographers share common concerns, approaches and priorities. These include the following, which I draw upon in my research.

- Foregrounding personal experience by making use of a researcher's subjectivity in designing research, often drawing upon the personal experiences that researcher's wish to understand more deeply.
- Utilising reflexivity by considering and acknowledging how the researcher's experiences, identities and relationships influence their work.
- Illustrating insider knowledge of a cultural phenomenon by offering complex insider accounts and demonstrating how and why particular experiences are challenging and important.
- Describing and critiquing cultural norms, and taken for granted experiences and practices by encouraging both insiders and outsiders to consider them carefully in new and enlightening ways.

Reflexive interviews are a commonly used approach in autoethnographic studies. These interviews focus upon the emotional dynamics of the interview and the relationship of the interviewer and interviewee. Whilst the participant is the main focus of the interview, the personal motivation of the interviewer in engaging with the research, the knowledge of the context they bring and the emotional response to the interview, are significant to the study (Ellis et al, 2011). These interviews are likely to be situated within the context of both emerging and well-established relationships between the interviewer and participant, with the researcher maintaining and valuing interpersonal ties with interviewees (Adams and Holman Jones, 2008).

Although autoethnography has been criticised as insufficiently rigorous, theoretical or analytical, as well as highly emotional (Ellis, 2009), autoethnographers believe their research can be *“rigorous, theoretical, analytical and emotional, therapeutic and inclusive of personal and social phenomena”* (Ellis et al, 2011: 109).

In this study, I am drawing upon my personal knowledge and understanding of the context of international school leadership, with a particular focus on Germany, where I worked in the three years leading up to and during part of my study. In my role as primary principal and member of the senior leadership team of a large international school, I experienced an epiphany (Ellis et al, 2011) about the emotional nature of international schools and the emotional demands placed upon school leaders. The emotional demands I experienced in this role were considerably more than I had experienced in a previous similar role in Asia and corresponded to the experiences I observed in both close colleagues and leaders of other

AGIS schools. This prompted my interest in the emotional nature of international schools and the consequent demands placed on school leaders and motivated me to find out more about the hidden experiences of my colleagues. In doing so I have been able to draw upon my own knowledge of the international school context as an insider and my personal experiences as a school leader in order to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of others. I have also been able to utilise my relationships with participants, not only to gain access at both the survey and interview stages of the research, but to carry out reflexive interviews with participants, building on prior trust and shared experiences to gain significant insight, through what are often painfully honest and emotional accounts of the interviewee's experiences.

I am aware of the need for care in combining approaches inspired by both phenomenology and autoethnography. The role of the Husserlian phenomenologist is not to edit or *“to interpret the experiences of those concerned...(but) to present experiences in a way that is faithful to the original”* (Denscombe, 1998: 94). It can be argued that for a description *“to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence”* (Van Manen, 1990 in Kvale, 2013:29), in the phenomenological tradition, the researcher needs to set aside her personal beliefs, understandings and expectations about the phenomenon. This implies a requirement on the part of the researcher to separate themselves from what they know or believe about the subject matter and context of the research. Rather than taking this approach, I set out to use my proximity to the research context and the participants as a tool to enhance the study. It can be argued that there is a role for interpretation, and for the subjective reflexivity of the researcher within the phenomenological tradition, emerging

from the work of hermeneutic philosophers such as Heidegger, where *“interpretation and the awareness (and analysis) of what the researcher brings...constitute an integral part of the phenomenological analysis”* (Willig, 2013:44). The researcher, rather than bracketing assumptions, uses them to gain a better understanding with presupposition being tested, in light of evolving meaning (Willig, 2013). Others view description and interpretation as a continuum within phenomenological research (Finlay, 2009) or prefer to view phenomenology as being without such boundaries (Langdridge, 2008 in Finlay, 2009), allowing reflexivity and interpretation to play a role.

Whilst reflexivity can sit comfortably within the phenomenological tradition therefore I was minded of the need to balance the interaction that took place within the interviews, providing the opportunity for each interviewee to speak freely about their perceived, lived experience as school leaders. How this was achieved, will be discussed later in a more thorough examination of the research method.

### **3.3 METHOD AND DESIGN**

#### ***3.3.1 MIXED METHODS APPROACH***

In this study I employ a mixed methods approach, combining the use of an introductory, mostly quantitative questionnaire survey with follow-up, qualitative semi-structured interviews. The main purpose of my study, is to gain a greater understanding of the lived experience of international school leaders, in relation to the emotional demands of their work, primarily through their own rich descriptions, gleaned from semi-structured interviews. However, at the onset of the study, I was aware that the time needed to

organise, conduct and analyse interview sessions, would mean I reached only a limited number of school leaders. Mixed methods research is a “*problem-driven*” approach (Denscombe, 1998), which uses methods from different philosophical paradigms, in a pragmatic way, to resolve research problems. Combining an interview stage with an earlier questionnaire survey enabled me to reach a larger number of respondents and provide “*convergence, corroboration and correspondence of results*” (Greene et al, (1989, in Denscombe, 1998:82) across two methods, so improving their representativeness. Mixed methods may be also be used to exploit the strengths of one method and compensate for the weaknesses of another (Denscombe, 1998), with interviews allowing me to gain an in depth understanding of a small number of participants, through exploring their thoughts, feelings and reasoning, while a questionnaire allows for a superficial understanding of a much larger number of respondents. I also felt that an early questionnaire stage might provide background information about the nature and extent of the issues I am researching and aid with the selection of individuals to take part in the interview stage.

### *3.3.2 QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN*

In line with the research questions, the main goals of the questionnaire were to explore the following:

- Whether respondents find their work to be emotionally challenging and, if so, which aspects of the role present the greatest demands.
- The impact these emotional demands have upon respondents’ personal and professional lives.
- How the respondents cope with the demands placed upon them.

I employed a web-based questionnaire using *Survey Monkey*. There are many advantages to using a web-based tool. Although it was expensive, with an annual membership of US\$450, it provided a quick means of compiling a questionnaire that was well presented and easily accessible for the target population, for whom the Internet is part of the daily working life. Survey Monkey also offers a full, instantaneous, data analysis service.

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) opened with demographic questions covering the respondents' current role, length of leadership experience and current tenure and moved on to questions about each of the three areas outlined above. Questions were mostly closed, using a multiple-choice style for demographic questions and then a 5-point Likert Scale for the remaining closed questions. A 5-point Likert Scale was used in order to give respondents the opportunity to provide a neutral response to questions. In practice, few gave neutral responses. A small number of open questions were also included, in order to gain further insight into respondents' experiences. I carried out a pilot of the questionnaire with five individuals, not included in the final sample, and was able to discuss with them their experiences of using the questionnaire, making small modifications before implementing the questionnaire fully.

As the population of school leaders in AGIS schools across Germany is small, questionnaires were sent to the whole population of 63 heads, comprising heads/directors of school, heads/principals of secondary, heads/principals of primary, heads/principals of middle school and heads/principals of early years. 34 school leaders responded to the questionnaire, which is a response rate of 54%.

As an AGIS school principal, I have access to an email contact list for all senior leaders in member schools and so potential respondents were contacted by email, at their school email address, and invited to participate in the survey. The initial email contact (Appendix 2) contained an introduction to myself in my role as Primary Principal of an AGIS school, as well as my role as researcher. I provided an explanation of the goal of the research, including why I felt this research is important and may be helpful to the community, information dealing with security and confidentiality of data and practical information about how to access the questionnaire online. While confidential, the survey was not anonymous. Respondents were identifiable using their email address. This was made clear to them at the time of recruitment. This made it possible to identify potential participants for the interview stage and to contact them direct to invite them to participate.

The initial response rate after one week of mailing was 33%. A reminder was sent to the remainder of the sample after one week, which elicited further responses up to 54% of the population. 1.2% of invitations bounced, meaning that potential respondents did not receive invitation emails, most likely due to email addresses being incorrect or out of date. A higher response rate may have been achieved by following up potential respondents by telephone but I felt this was too time consuming and also a greater invasion of their privacy. I considered a response rate of 54% to be acceptable, considering the time pressures that school leaders work under and also given the personal nature of many of the questions, which may have led to reluctance on the part of some to participate.

It is important to consider the possibility of non-response bias at this point. The inclusion of all members of the population in the survey, rules out non-contact bias but it is possible that non-response through refusal may be an issue, which could bias the results. As already mentioned, it is possible that some heads may have felt uncomfortable taking part in the survey and it is impossible to know whether this may have skewed responses. Of greater concern is the possibility that respondents may be unrepresentative of the population as a whole, with those who have experienced significant emotional challenges, in the course of their role possibly being more likely to respond (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014). It is possible that questionnaire and results may be biased as a consequence.

### *3.3.3. INTERVIEW DESIGN*

The second phase of the research is a semi-structured interview with eight participants.

#### **The Semi-Structured Interview Approach**

The semi-structured interview is a very commonly used method to gather data in phenomenological research. My research uses what Kvale terms the *semi-structured life world interview* (Kvale, 2013:28) in order to obtain descriptions from participants about their lived experiences as international school leaders. According to Kvale, this type of interview is “a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subject’s everyday world” (Kvale, 2013: 30). Through the use of this method I felt participants were able to communicate the rich texture of their experience, from their own point of view, or their “*subjective understanding*” (Schutz, 1967 in Seidman, 2013:44).



The success of a semi-structured interview is dependent upon the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. If a subject is to open up to an interviewer, rapport between the parties is essential (Kvale, 2013: Willig, 2013: King and Horrocks, 2010: Seidman, 2013).

*“Rapport involves getting along with each other; a harmony with; a conformity to; an affinity for one another.” (Seidman, 2013: 68)*

Rapport is dependent upon the personal identity of the interviewer, especially where the research involves sensitive issues or matters of a personal nature (Denscombe, 1998).

According to Di Cicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006 in McConnell-Henry et al, 2010), rapport between an interviewer and interviewee is developed in four stages-*initial, exploration, cooperative* and *participation*. Only at the *participation* stage is data elicited. It is suggested that when the participant and researcher have a pre-existing relationship, the stages of rapport building are rapidly accelerated with potential for data to be elicited from the commencement of the interview (McConnell-Henry et al, 2010).

*“In our experience, the research data obtained has been very rich both in depth and breadth because time has not been wasted establishing a forum in which the participant feels comfortable to open up.” (McConnell Henry et al, 2010:3)*

### **Interviewing Peers**

The eight school leaders who participated in the interview stage were, at the time of the interviews, my peers and people with whom I have, to varying degrees, a professional and with some a personal relationship. Our connection had a positive impact on the interview process, allowing rapport to be developed quickly, leading to the elicitation of rich data.

There is a body of literature attesting to the potential benefits of researching subjects with whom the researcher shares community membership, background knowledge and

subcultural understandings. Even the most “*brutally objectifying questions*” (Bourdieu 1999, in Aase, 2008: 31) may be perceived as less threatening or aggressive when the interviewer and interviewee share an understanding of their purpose. Shared group membership may enable confessions to be made more freely due to shared experience (Platt, 1981). Knowing the respondent may enhance communication and encourage more genuine interaction (Aase, 2008). It may also be advantageous to the subject by protecting them from reductionism (Aase, 2008), producing an interviewer-interviewee relationship that is more democratic, inclusive and trusting (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014).

There are also potential pitfalls in interviewing people with whom the researcher has a pre-existing relationship. The participant may feel coerced to take part in the research at the recruitment stage, due to their desire to help and support the researcher (McConnell Henry, 2010). According to Seidman (2013), friends take for granted that they understand each other and can lack the distance needed to explore assumptions and seek clarity about events and experiences, which may lead to distortion by the researcher of the participant’s account. Failure to maintain a professional distance may also lead to role conflict, as the boundaries between researcher and friend or colleague become blurred (Kvale, 2013; McConnell Henry et al, 2010). The researcher may find it challenging to exclude pre-existing knowledge of the participant from the research and lines between prior understandings and data arising from the interview can become blurred (McConnell Henry et al, 2010). There is a risk that the researcher may exploit the informal ambience of the interview and through self-disclosure (McConnell Henry et al, 2010) or “*fake friendship*” (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002 in Seidman, 2013: 44), encourage the interviewee to share more than they feel

comfortable with later (Willig, 2013), leading to future embarrassment (Platt, 1981). Such disclosure may impact adversely on the relationship of the parties (McConnell Henry et al, 2010; Asselin, 2003), with the revelation of sensitive information having the potential to change a colleague's impression of the other party forever (Asselin, 2003). The interviewer may also become cast in the challenging role of *secret keeper* or feel obliged to take on a therapeutic or emotionally supportive role in relation to the interviewee (McConnell Henry et al, 2010).

I considered this raft of potentially complex interactional issues, carefully, at the research design stage and was aware of the need for a clear understanding of the ethical implications of interviewing participants with whom I have a pre-existing relationship. These will be considered more fully later in the discussion of the ethical issues relating to my research.

### **Interview Technique**

As already discussed, the semi-structured interview is well suited to phenomenological research, as the researcher has the opportunity to enter into the life world of the participant through a series of well-conceived questions, topics and probes. Striking the right balance between exploring the themes within my theoretical framework, drawing upon my own experiences and understanding of the context, in a reflexive, autoethnographic approach to the interviews and allowing new themes to emerge was, however, a significant challenge.

*"The interviewer needs to find the right balance, maintaining control of where it is going and allowing the space to redefine the topic under investigation and thus to generate novel insights for the respondent." (Willig, 2013:89)*

Although it was tempting to ask participants directly about their experiences in relation to the themes emanating from the literature and from my own theorising, in order to maintain the right balance, I employed a series of open ended and non-directive questions, enabling the interviewee to share their personal experiences, rather than merely checking whether they agreed or disagreed with my claims or statements. Open-ended questions were flexible enough to allow for the emergence of new and unanticipated categories of meaning (Willig, 2013; Seidman, 2013) and the use of well-placed probes, devised during the interview, added depth to the data (King and Horrocks, 2010). My knowledge of the research theme and context, developed through my shared background and sub-cultural understandings, enabled me to sense the immediate meaning of a response during the interview and react appropriately (Kvale, 2013).

In practice, I managed to achieve this balance, with varying degrees of success, by asking interview participants to reflect, in advance of the interview, upon three or four events or situations that have taken place in the course of their current role, which they found to be emotionally challenging. A detailed analysis of a critical incident or event can produce a significant insight into a person or situation (Crawford, 2009). The interviewees were free to choose any events or situations they wished to share. Many fit into the themes that arose from the literature but significant new themes also emerged.

The extent of my interaction with participants, during the interview, varied depending upon the extent of our prior relationship, the rapport that was established between us and the extent to which prompts were needed in order to encourage each participant to elaborate.

Some interviews were very interactive, where I shared, in a naturalistic way with a participant, my own similar experiences, while others were less so. What I sought to avoid were questions that would lead participants to specific themes, although in the early interviews, my inexperience led me to ask supplemental questions of this nature, in my eagerness to explore certain topics. Upon reflection, following these interviews, I chose not to use the data drawn from this type of questioning and to refrain from this approach in future interviews, as it became more apparent to me that this was contrary to the phenomenologically-inspired approach I wished to employ.

### **Sampling**

I recruited a sample of eight school leaders to take part in the interview stage of this study. I identified a range of potential participants from the returned questionnaires, with a focus on questionnaire respondents who strongly agreed that leading an international school was emotionally challenging work. My goal at this stage was to understand more about what causes school leaders to feel emotionally challenged, the impact on their lives and their coping strategies and I felt I would have a better chance of gaining this kind of understanding by focusing on individuals who acknowledged openly that this was a significant concern for them. The issue of how many participants is enough is a perennial one for qualitative researchers (Seidman, 2013).

*“The researcher’s task is to present the experience of the people he or she interviews in compelling enough detail and sufficient enough depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects.” (Seidman, 2013: 125)*

Given the sensitive nature of the interviews and the importance of establishing rapport, interviews needed to be face-to-face, requiring travel across Germany, which was time consuming. I felt that limiting myself to eight interviews would allow me the opportunity to travel to meet all participants in person, spend time with them before and after the interview, in order to establish rapport and overcome any awkwardness that may arise from this new development in our relationship. I would also be in a better position to deal with interview data from the transcription stage through to analysis and presentation if I focused upon a small number of participants. I used maximum variation sampling to attempt to obtain a wide range of participants, to allow readers to connect with what they read (Seidman, 2013), allowing for a gender balance and a balance of leadership roles, including early years, primary, secondary and whole school leaders, as well as selecting participants with differing levels of leadership experience in international schools. I also attempted to select a sample of heads with a range of years served in their current role (see Table. This, however, proved more difficult, as only 20% of questionnaire participants had been in their current role for a period in excess of eight years and the sample was weighted towards heads with less than three years in the current role. It may be that in the population as a whole there are significantly more heads with less than three years in their current post. However, it is also possible that, considering the potential for non-response bias, heads in the first three years of their role had a higher response rate to the questionnaire, possibly because they are more likely to experience significant emotional challenge during their transition period. Finally, I selected a range of schools to take part, although some participants did work at the same school in different senior leadership roles.

**Table 3. Interview Participant Sample**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Service as Head</b>	<b>Service in Current Role</b>	<b>Current Role</b>
<b>Participant 1.</b>	10 years	17 months	Head of School
<b>Participant 2.</b>	12 years	7 years	Head of Secondary
<b>Participant 3.</b>	7 years	1 year	Primary Principal
<b>Participant 4.</b>	18 years	2 years	Primary Principal
<b>Participant 5.</b>	9 years	1 year	Primary Principal
<b>Participant 6.</b>	9 years	6 years	Head of Early Years
<b>Participant 7.</b>	8 years	1 year	Director
<b>Participant 8.</b>	12 years	6 years	Secondary Principal

### **Practicalities of Interview**

Face to face interviews were approximately one hour long. The longest interview was one hour and four minutes and the shortest was 48 minutes. This did not include time spent with participants before and after the interview. Total meeting time ranged from 90 minutes to 4 hours. In order to obtain rich data, the physical and psychological comfort of the interviewee is paramount and a tense or unsettled atmosphere may reflect in stilted or undeveloped responses (Willig, 2013). All interviewees were given the choice of where and when the interview would take place. Three participants wished to visit me at my place of work; two

invited me to visit them at their place of work; one interview took place at the participant's home and two in the relaxed and neutral environment of a cafe. Although Skype interviews were a tempting option, given the travel time involved and also given that this format is commonly used in international schools during staff recruitment, I rejected the option, due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, preferring face to face interviews. The face-to-face format provides for enhanced interaction and personal contact between the parties and for a greater intimacy to be established (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014), where interviewees are more likely to talk openly about their emotions.

Interviews were recorded using digital audio recording on my mobile phone. An audio recording is simple and unobtrusive and allows for a large volume of material to be recorded and transcribed at a later date (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014). A digital recording also offers enhanced security options through password protection. A mobile phone is a much less obtrusive device than other forms of audio recording, as they are now so much part of every day life. Although I considered the impact the recording of the interview may have on the participant and the process (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2014; Willig, 2013), interviewees all seemed at ease with recording taking place.

### **3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical considerations played a major role at each stage of this research study.

*"The ethical practice of social research with human participants is a complex and demanding responsibility throughout the social research process...ethical issues will exist and emerge – often raising moral dilemmas that are not easily resolved." (King and Horrocks, 2010:171)*



I relied upon the principles of informed consent in order to preserve the well being and dignity of research participants. This principal is the foundation of the ethical review and approval process. Seidman (2013) identifies 7 major parts of informed consent that are relevant to this study and considered below. These have formed the basis of the ethical review application that was approved by the university ethical review board.

At each of the questionnaire and interview stages of the research, full information was provided to potential respondents/participants, detailing the relevant ethical issues at recruitment (Appendices 2. and 3.). Interviewees were also asked to sign a form of consent prior to taking part in their interview.

#### **3.4.1 Invitation to Participate**

A full explanation of the subject matter and purpose of the research is contained in both the respondent contact email and participant information sheet. Interview participants were informed about the identity of the interviewer, the length of the interview, the type of questions to be covered and that the participant may choose the date, time and location of the interview. The participant was also informed of my intention to make an audio recording of the interview, which would later be transcribed.

#### **3.4.2 Potential risks to the participant**

As part of informed consent, the researcher is asked to consider the potential risks to the participant. These risks may become elevated when there is an ongoing and overlapping relationship between the researcher and the participant.

*“The greater the intimacy and the apparent mutuality of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the greater is the danger of exploitation of the participant.” (Seidman, 2013:115)*

As outlined earlier, potential risks to the interviewee include coercion; blurring of the lines between pre-existing knowledge and new data; complex boundaries resulting from the professional/personal and the researcher/participant relationship and the impact that the revelation of sensitive information may have on future relationship between the parties.

These concerns can be addressed by continually emphasising the purpose of the study and the role of the researcher throughout the research process (Asselin, 2003); reinforcing the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity at every stage of the research (McConnell Henry, 2010) and ensuring data collection methods are rigorous. I also needed to ensure that I acknowledged any pre-suppositions and prior understandings about the individual participants and used only data emanating from the interviews, rather than information gleaned from my prior knowledge (McConnell Henry, 2010).

While potential risks to the participants are important to consider, it is also necessary to acknowledge potential risks to the researcher. These may also be elevated where there is a prior and ongoing relationship between the parties. Negotiating the demands of the dual role of friend or colleague and researcher can be demanding or stressful (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014). The demands of listening to stories that are emotionally laden, while maintaining a professional distance (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014) and the pressure felt by the researcher to keep the secrets of a participant, who is a friend or colleague (Asselin, 2003; McConnell Henry, 2010), require careful thought. Interviewers dealing with emotionally sensitive subject matter are always at risk of developing a semi-therapeutic

relationship with interviewees (Willig, 2013) but this risk may be elevated when there is a pre-existing relationship between the parties (McConnell Henry et al, 2010), as the researcher may feel a greater duty of care to the participant (Owton and Allen-Collison, 2014). Making clear to the participant the purpose of the research and the role of the researcher, throughout the research process, may avoid this happening but it is clear that the risk remains and that there is a need for the researcher to exercise self-care (Owton and Allen-Collison, 2014) throughout the process.

### **3.4.3 Rights of the participant**

Both questionnaire respondents and interview participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and of their right to withdraw their data from the study at any time up to a given deadline. Interviewees had a right to request copies of the audio recording of their interview and/or the transcript at any point following the interview-taking place as well as request a copy of the research report prior to submission. Following receipt of the transcript or report, the participant could, if they wished, request transcripts be rewritten in order to more accurately reflect their interview or ask that any or all of their data be removed from the report.

### **3.4.4 Possible benefits of the research**

Both respondent email contact and participant information sheet outlined the potential benefits of the research in highlighting the emotional challenges international school leaders face and the potential for improved training and support resulting from raised awareness.

### **3.4.5 Confidentiality**

Protecting the confidentiality of participants in this study is of paramount importance in maintaining their privacy and dignity. The international school world is a small one. The world of AGIS schools is even smaller. If participants are to share sensitive information, they must feel certain that their identity is protected and the information they share is treated with respect. While the questionnaire was not anonymous, questionnaire respondents were assured that their identity would not be linked to the data they provided in the report. In the participant information sheet, interviewees were assured protection of their identity in a number of ways. They were assigned a pseudonym in the report and their data and personal information is stored separately from each other. Only I transcribed interviews. All personal information about the participants, recordings of interviews and transcripts, is kept in password-protected areas on the hard drive of my computer with back up to secure, cloud-based storage. In the final thesis, individual participants are not identifiable from “*the structure and fabric of their stories*” (Seidman, 2013: 83). Neither the names of schools nor the cities in which the schools are located is identified in the report. Personal information about the participants such as age, nationality and career information is shared only in a way that enables interviewees’ anonymity to be preserved.

#### **3.4.6 Dissemination of the research data**

Both respondent and participant information sheets make clear that data may only be disseminated for the specific purpose of the research and may not be shared for any other purpose, in order to respect the privacy of those taking part.

### **3.4.7 Contact information**

Both respondent email contact and participant information sheet contained the researcher's contact information.

## *3.5 ANALYSIS OF DATA*

### **3.5.1 Questionnaire Data**

This is primarily a qualitative study, where a questionnaire has been employed for a specific and limited purpose. This purpose is to carry out a sweep of AGIS school leaders, in order to determine whether they experience emotional challenges in the course of their work and if so, the cause of these challenges; the impact these challenges may have on their personal and professional lives and the strategies they use to help them cope.

In analysing the data produced by the 34 completed questionnaires, I utilised the tools provided by Survey Monkey, which collates the data and presents the findings in a series of charts and tables. I decided to use only descriptive statistics as a simple and straightforward way of analysing and presenting, my mostly numerical data, that is frequently used in educational research, to assist the discussion of "socially significant" findings (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2013: 160).

The tools provided by Survey Monkey analysed and presented data for me, requiring only checking on my part to ensure tables and charts were accurate. I then used Microsoft Office tools to reproduce charts and tables within the body of this thesis. In order to aid the

reader's understanding of charts and tables, I simplified many, combining or omitting categories in a way that maintained the integrity of the data.

### **3.5.2 Interview Data**

Qualitative research is a matter of interpretation (Gibbs, 2007) and, throughout the process of data analysis, I was aware of the potential differing perspectives of myself, as researcher, and the interview participants and the impact this may have on my interpretation of the data. This begins with transcription, which is in itself an interpretative process, with issues of *"accuracy, fidelity and interpretation"* (Kvale, 2013: 97) and requires careful thought and handling in order to make a *"good, careful attempt to capture some aspects of the interview"* (Gibbs, 2007: 51). Approaches that seek to examine participants' personal experiences in depth require full verbatim transcription (King and Horrocks, 2010). This is, however, very time consuming and as I transcribed all interview recordings myself, I made the decision to exclude some elements of each interview from the transcript. Interviews were reflexive and fairly interactive, to varying degrees, often involving me sharing my own experiences with a participant in order to promote further discussion. In interviews where this happened extensively, some of my more lengthy comments were excluded from the transcript, in order to focus better upon the story of the participant. I listened back to interviews with typed transcripts in front of me, to ensure they were a faithful reproduction of what was said by each participant and checked carefully for errors to ensure they were as accurate as possible.

Seidman (2013) recommends in depth analysis should be avoided until after the interview stage has been completed, in order to avoid imposing meaning from one interview to the

next. I, therefore, avoided transcribing or listening to interviews until all interviews had been completed. It is impossible, however, not to anticipate results prior to the interview stage, based upon reading and personal “hunches” and not to work with the material informally as it comes (Seidman, 2013).

Actual data analysis was a manual exercise. This provided me with a flexible, creative approach that was easy to access (Gibbs, 2007). With only eight interviews, I felt confident that effective analysis could be achieved without the need for software. This gave me more control and removed the need to use an electronic approach with which I am not familiar. Once all transcripts were complete, I followed the routine for analysis recommended by Seidman (2013). I felt Seidman’s approach offered structure but was not over complex for a relatively novice researcher. It encouraged me to be systematic in my treatment of the material, forming *“articulate criteria for winnowing and sorting”* (Seidman, 2013: 134) and moved me beyond relying entirely upon my intuition, which may be biased or prejudiced. Seidman (2013) cautions that the researcher should come to the transcripts with an open attitude, *“prepared to let the interview breathe and speak for itself”* (Seidman, 2013: 119) and that in order to achieve this, the researcher must examine his/her interest in the subject to ensure it is not biased or prejudiced. Seidman’s approach was, in practice, however, a little simple for my needs, especially in dealing so directly with people’s emotions and so I also employed techniques recommended by both Saldana (2013) and King and Horrocks (2010).

I began by “*marking passages*” (Seidman, 2013), or what Saldana (2013) calls, “*precoding*”, by highlighting, underlining and circling passages that were of interest in each transcript. In identifying what is of interest, I tried hard to strike a balance between questioning my own judgments and having confidence in my own judgment and ability to recognise what is of essential interest (Seidman, 2013). I then moved onto labelling or coding, working on the paper transcripts to identify categories that arose from the passages I had marked. This involves the risk of trying to force excerpts into categories rather than letting them develop from the experiences of the participants (Seidman, 2013) and is challenging for the novice researcher, as themes arising from the literature and our own hunches are implicit in all our dealings with the data.

*“The act of coding requires that you wear your researcher’s analytic lens but how you perceive and interpret what is happening in the data depends on what type of filter covers the lens” (Saldana, 2013: 6).*

Following an initial round of coding, I created a simple coding table, where I recorded the codes I had developed and their definitions. I then carried out two further rounds of coding in order to label transcripts with new codes that had developed during the analysis, “*striving for codes and categories to become more refined, conceptual and abstract,*” (Saldana, 2013: 8).

Throughout the coding process, I was minded of my three research questions. For this reason, I carried out three separate coding exercises, each relating to one of my three questions.

For the second exercise, I employed an approach akin to *Saldana’s Emotion Coding*.



*“Emotion codes label the emotions recalled or experienced by the participant or inferred by the researcher about the participant.” (Saldana, 2013: 105)*

This was particularly challenging for me as participants in the study conveyed their emotions with varying degrees of comfort and clarity and not all were able to express and label them easily. This tempts the researcher to make inferences about the subtextual emotions expressed by participants (Saldana, 2013), based on their words, body language and facial expressions. I am not a psychologist and felt the need to tread carefully in this area. Analysis in this area was skewed, therefore, mainly towards identifying emotions explicitly expressed by participants.

Following the coding stages, in line with Seidman’s approach, I studied the categories of codes for thematic connections between them. The main goal here was to identify connective threads within and across the eight interviews, which formed themes in the research findings.

*“Themes are recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts characterising participants’ perceptions and/or experiences which the researcher selects as relevant to the research” (King and Horrocks, 2010: 54).*

In order for a theme to be determined, it must usually apply to at least a substantial minority of cases in the research (King and Horrocks, 2010). Once I had begun to identify themes, I developed a thematic table (Appendix 4), which I used to cross-reference emerging themes with each participant. Using this, I was able to return to each transcript individually and pick out appropriate excerpts to illustrate themes in the finding chapter.

Whilst it had been my original intention to present qualitative findings on a thematic basis, I was drawn to the idea of also presenting profiles or vignettes of some of the participants. The reasons for this will be discussed further in the findings chapter.

### *3.6 ISSUES ARISING FROM THE RESEARCH*

In this section I discuss challenges and issues, which arose from the research methodology and design. I have chosen to deal with this as one discreet section, rather than at relevant points throughout this chapter, as I am better able to consider the difficulties I had to overcome as a whole and present them as one story. In order to keep a record of the challenges encountered when engaging with potential and actual participants in the study, I kept informal notes throughout the period of the research.

The first challenge I encountered was in recruitment of participants for the interview stage. I wished the sample to represent a balance of school leaders in different positions in school, particularly a balance between early years/primary and middle school/secondary principals. From my experience in international schools, I have learned that early years and primary schools are widely considered to be more highly emotional contexts than middle and secondary school, with parents of younger children being more emotionally involved and teachers exhibiting closer emotional ties to their work. Maybe because of this, a greater number of early years/primary principals were interested in taking part in the interview stage of the study. Three of the secondary principals I approached were unwilling to speak openly about the challenges they face in their schools, feeling it would be unprofessional to discuss what happens in school with a leader of a competitor school. I suspected these

individuals had talked together before arriving at their decision and I felt disappointed. Two more felt they did not have the time to take part. Contrary to this, all of the Early Years/Primary Principals I approached were keen to participate. It is worth noting that those who refused to participate are less well known to me and this may have had an impact on their decision. Nevertheless, my final sample is slightly skewed in favour of lower school heads.

As mentioned previously, in the early interviews, I had a greater tendency to ask specific questions relating to the themes I wished to explore, rather than focusing entirely on themes emerging from the stories participants told. This issue diminished with each interview, however.

The extent to which four of the interview participants confided very personal fears and challenges surprised me a great deal. I felt privileged to be trusted with such personal information and determined to treat it sensitively in the research. However, I was also minded of how these revelations might impact on our future relationships and found myself feeling a sense of responsibility towards three of these individuals, who seemed in need of support. I was also aware of the possibility that some or all of these participants were using their interview for therapeutic purposes and of the need to protect myself. Fortunately, the interviews came at a time when I was planning a move outside of Germany, and this prevented against any future awkwardness.

There were three participants who I felt held back from expressing their true feelings during the interviews. On one occasion, my prior knowledge of the participant and his working life

caused me to believe that he was avoiding discussion of emotional situations he had recently been involved in. I am aware of the ethical requirement to include in the study only the information that is obtained in the course of the research and was therefore unable to use this information, which I felt may have been valuable to the study. For the other two participants, I was left with the impression that, while they were willing to talk openly about challenging situations and events in a factual way, they were not able or willing to share fully with me the emotional impact that these challenges had upon them. This was first rating.

### 3.7 VALIDITY OF THE STUDY

Lincoln and Guba (1985) set out a set of alternative criteria for judging the soundness of qualitative research that they argue better reflects the underlying assumptions of this kind of research than the criteria traditionally used for quantitative studies. These criteria are *credibility; transferability; dependability and confirmability*. Lincoln and Guber (1985) suggest a range of tests within each of these criteria, in order to establish the soundness of a research project. I will adopt these criteria and refer to some of these tests in this examination of the validity of my study.

The *credibility* of a study refers to confidence in the truth of the findings. Lincoln and Guber (1985) suggest that only the participant in a study may judge the credibility of the results.

Techniques to establish credibility include prolonged engagement and persistent observation of the context and subject in order to ensure the researcher has a sufficient understanding of the culture and can identify the characteristics and elements of the situation that are most relevant. I would argue that my position as an insider is sufficient evidence of my understanding of both the scope and the depth of the field and lends

credibility to the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also refer to triangulation as a technique for ensuring credibility. The use of a mixed methods approach in my study, drawing upon both questionnaire and interview data from a range of participants provides, I would argue, rich and robust data from multiple sources, adding to the study's credibility. In addition, the inclusion in this thesis of negative case analysis, where I consider and discuss elements of the data that do not support patterns emerging from the data increases the credibility of the study.

*Transferability* is showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts and may only be judged by those seeking to transfer the findings to another context. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that research studies should include thick descriptions, describing the experiences of participants in sufficient detail to enable the reader to draw conclusions about the transferability to other situations, places and people. In this regard, my study is rich with thick descriptions of the experiences of the interview participants, enabling the reader to determine the transferability of the findings of my study to alternative contexts. The idea of *dependability* emphasises the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context in which the research occurs, describing changes that occur in the setting and how these affect the research. Techniques for ensuring dependability lean heavily upon the use of external audit of the research. This is not something I have included in my research design as I feel it is not appropriate to the interpretive nature of the study. Understanding in interpretive research is co-created between the researcher and participant with no objective truth to be audited. Furthermore, it is my belief that an external auditor

cannot know the context or the data in the same depth as myself and any audit would, therefore be perfunctory and of little real benefit to the study.

Finally, *confirmability* refers to the degree to which others may corroborate the results of the study and also explores the researchers bias, motivation and interest in the study.

Techniques to ensure confirmability may include provision of an audit trail and full consideration of the researcher's reflexivity. I have taken care to provide both a very thorough examination of the research path taken, rendering transparent the research design, data collection, analysis and reporting, including a rationale for decisions made, as well as a full discussion of my position in the research, my beliefs, values and relationship with the participants, which should all contribute to enhancing the confirmability of my study.

### *3.8 CLOSING*

In this chapter, I have set out my research methodology, method and design and provided an overview of my ethical practice. I have sought to establish how I will blend a phenomenologically-inspired methodology, allowing interview participants to draw upon and describe their lived experiences, with an autoethnographic approach that is rooted in my own reflexivity and experience of the research field. I have provided an overview of the advantages and drawbacks of interviewing participants who are known to me and established a justification for this approach, which I consider will be of significant benefit to the study. I have outlined my reasons for employing mixed methods, utilising a quantitative questionnaire survey in support of my primary research method of semi-structured

interviews. A detailed overview has been provided of my research design, for both stages of the study and a discussion of how data was analysed and is presented. I have discussed at length the ethical considerations of the study and have outlined the challenges I encountered in carrying out the research. I have also provided an examination of the trustworthiness of my research based upon the criteria for qualitative research suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

In Chapter 4, I present my findings in relation to both the questionnaire and interview stages of the study

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 OPENING

In this chapter, I set out my research findings, beginning with the questionnaire findings from 34 respondents, which are presented in a series of charts and tables. This is followed by a presentation of my interview findings, gleaned from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight participants. Interview findings are presented in two parts, beginning with a series of short vignettes of the stories of four participants and followed by a more comprehensive thematic presentation and analysis of findings, based upon themes emanating from the literature review and some new, emerging themes. Finally, I compare and contrast the findings from the two parts of the study, examining where they concur and where they differ.

### 4.2 QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

In this section I examine the findings from the questionnaire survey of 34 AGIS heads and present their responses to a range of questions relating to the emotionally challenging nature of their work. Charts 1, 2 and 3 set out the respondents' length of service as international school leaders, length of incumbency in current role and job title in current role. The majority of respondents (61.78%) are experienced heads with over 5 years experience in leadership roles with only 2.94% of respondents having less than two years service as an international school head. The majority (67.74%) have been in their current role, however, for five years or less, with over 17% having been in post for less than years. primary/ heads/principals were the largest group of respondents with large numbers of

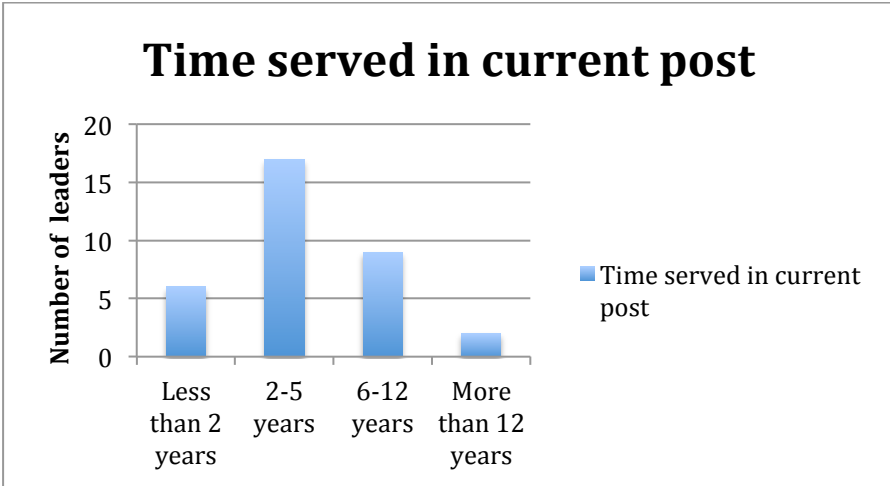


respondents in both the head of school/director and secondary head/principal roles. Middle school and early Years heads/principals were fewer in number due to the small number of these roles in schools across Germany.

**Chart 1. The School Leaders Sample: time served as an international school leader**



**Chart 2. The School Leaders Sample: time in served in current post**



**Chart 3. The School Leaders Sample: leader’s current role**

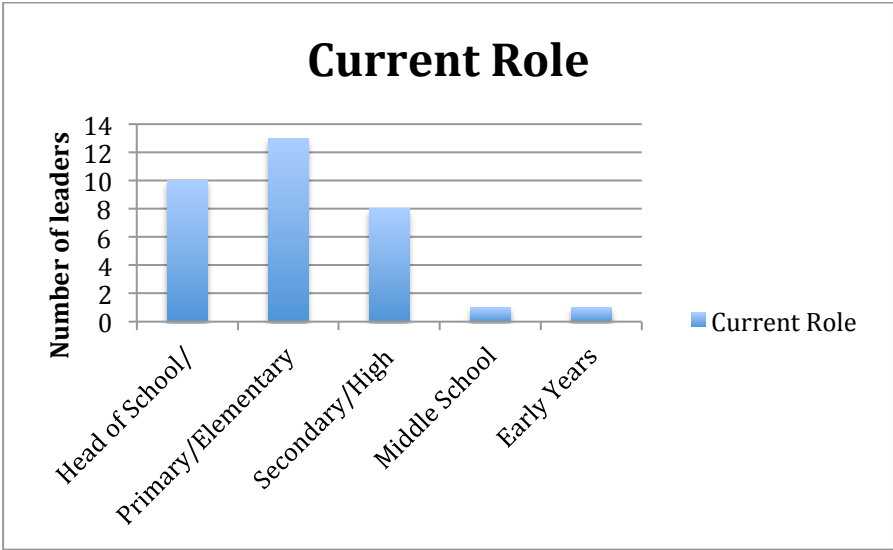


Table 3 sets out respondents’ general thoughts about the emotionally challenging nature of their work. 97.08% of respondents agree or strongly agree that leading an international school is emotionally challenging work, while 72.7% find working with people from other cultures emotionally challenging and 66.67% consider working in a country outside their home country to be emotionally challenging.

**Table 4. General thoughts about the emotionally challenging nature of international school leadership %**

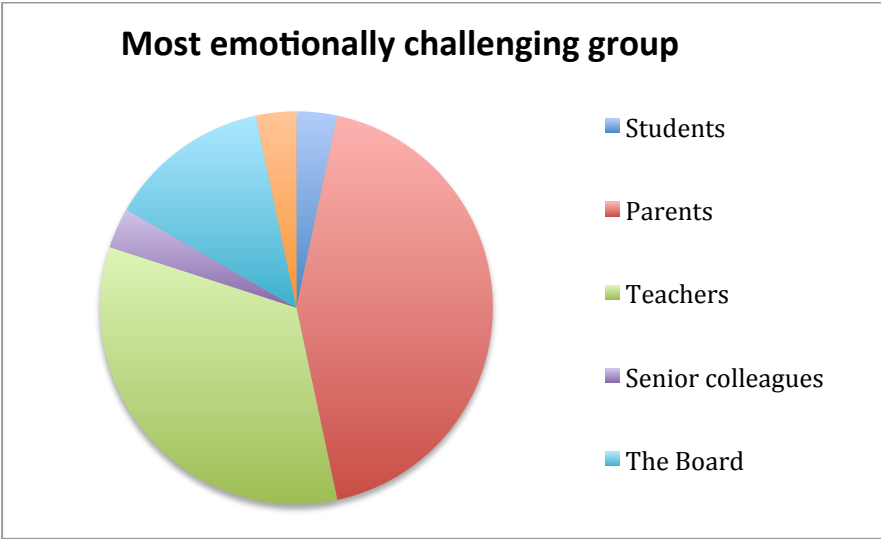
Statements	Strongly agree/agree	Neither agree not disagree	Strongly disagree/disagree
Leading and international school is emotionally challenging work	97.08	0.00	2.92
Working with people from other cultures is emotionally challenging	72.7	15.5	12.12
Living in a country outside of my home country is emotionally challenging	66.67	18.18	15.15

Respondents were asked to consider which groups within the school community they find emotionally challenging to work with. Table 4 sets out the findings. 81.82% find parents to be emotionally challenging and 75.53% agree or strongly agree that teachers are emotionally challenging to work with. 50% of respondents find students to be emotionally challenging while numbers for local government/outside agencies and senior colleagues are 70.59% and 25.01% respectively. Respondents were asked to choose which group they find most emotionally challenging (Chart 4). Parents topped the list at 38.24%, followed by teachers at 29.41%. Senior colleagues, students and administrative/ancillary staff are considered to be the least emotionally challenging, each at 2.94%.

**Table 5. Working with specific groups is emotionally challenging %**

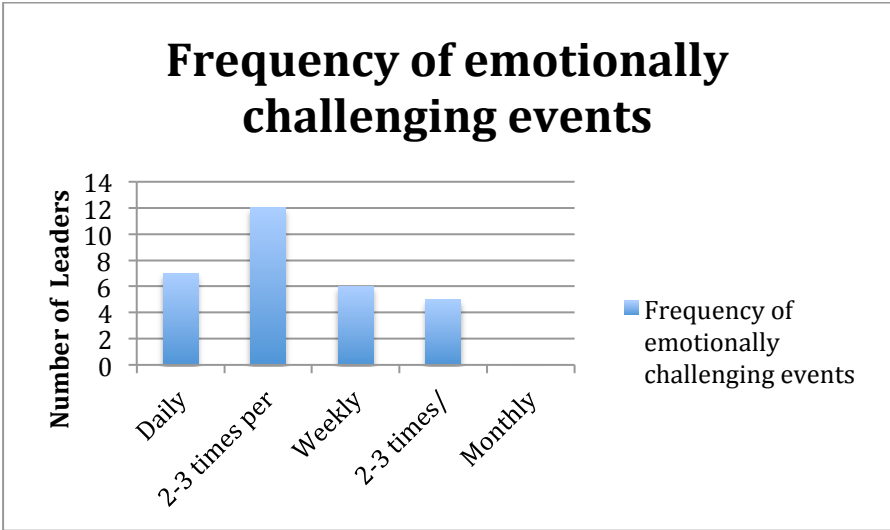
Group	Strongly agree/agree	Neither agree not disagree	Strongly disagree/disagree
Working with students	50	32.36	17.64
Working with parents	81.82	12.13	6.06
Working with teachers	75.53	11.76	12.71
Working with senior colleagues	25.01	34.36	40.63
Working with the Board	42.42	27.28	30.3
Working with administrative and ancillary staff	30.31	33.33	36.36
Working with local government and outside agencies	70.59	29.41	0.0

**Chart 4. Most emotionally challenging group**



When asked about the frequency of emotionally challenging events at school (Chart 5), 20.59% reported daily occurrences while 35.29% reported occurrences at least 2-3 times per week. Only 2.94% considered occurrences to be monthly or less frequent. One respondent referred to 8-10 occurrences per day while two reported that frequency was inconsistent and varied depending on the time of year or what was going on in school over any given period.

Chart 5. Frequency of emotionally challenging events



Respondents were asked to consider a range of statements relating to the impact of emotional challenges on their personal and professional lives (Table 5). Almost half (47.05%) agree or strongly agree that they have felt close to breaking point at times, although slightly more (52.95%) strongly disagree or disagree. Almost half (48.48%) feel their work is negatively impacted by the emotional challenges they experience in the course of their role, whereas, maybe surprisingly, only 9.09% notice a negative impact on their personal lives. 50% feel there is a negative impact on health and over 75% admitted to hiding their emotions at times.

**Table 6. Impact of emotionally challenging nature of international school leadership %**

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree
There have been times when I have felt close to breaking point	47.05	0.0	52.95
Impacts negatively on work	48.48	21.22	30.3
Impacts negatively on personal life	9.09	55.55	36.36
Impacts negatively on health	50	23.53	26.47
There are times when I hide my emotions	75.76	21.21	3.03

Respondents were asked to consider a range of coping strategies that may be employed during emotionally challenging times (Table 6). With the exception of hobbies and interests, scoring only 20.59%, respondents reported all of the coping strategies listed to be helpful. The most helpful being a healthy lifestyle (85.29%), followed by support from family and friends (84.84%) and senior colleagues (81.82%). Both seeking support from colleagues outside of school and leadership training/professional development are also considered to be helpful coping strategies. 75.76% feel that they would benefit from further professional development to help them to cope (Table 7).

**Table 7. Coping Strategies %**

Strategies	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree
I seek support from senior colleagues	81.82	9.09	9.09
I seek support from colleagues outside of school	63.64	18.18	18.18
I find leadership training/professional development helpful	66.66	27.27	6.06
I find a healthy lifestyle helpful	85.29	5.88	8.82
I seek support from family/friends	84.84	12.12	3.03
I find hobbies and interests helpful	20.59	67.65	11.76

**Table 8. Desirability of further professional development %**

Statement	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree
I would value more professional development to help me to cope	9.09	15.15	75.76

Finally, respondents were asked three questions about their resilience in the face of emotional challenges at school (Table 8). High numbers of respondents they agree or strongly agree with all three statements. 92.6% reported that in the face of emotional challenges at work, they reflect on how they might do their job better; 76.92% agree or strongly agree that they bounce back quickly and 77.78% think the emotional challenges they face help them to become a better leader.

**Table 9. Resilience in the face of emotional challenges %**

Statements	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree
I reflect on how I might do my job better	92.6	7.4	0.0
I bounce back quickly	76.92	19.23	3.85
It helps me become a better leader	77.78	22.22	0.00

### 4.3 INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In this section, I set out the findings of the interview stage of the research. Findings are presented in two parts, firstly as vignettes of the stories of four participants and secondly as a thematic analysis drawing upon all eight interviews. Four of the participants' stories were, in my opinion, very compelling but lost some of their essence in a thematic presentation.

Profiles or vignettes are a way to display a coherence which a thematic approach does not

allow and *“can bring an aesthetic component that makes both the researcher’s and readers’ work enriching, pleasurable and at times touching the spirit,”* (Seidman, 2013: 122).



#### 4.3.1 VIGNETTES

##### **Vignette 1.**

*Subject- Participant 3-David*

Participant 3, David, is an experienced primary school teacher and international school leader, with seven years senior leadership experience in schools around the world. David was single at the time of the interview, having recently broken up with his partner, who had not relocated to Germany with him. David lives alone. At the time of the interview, he was close to the end of his first year in his current post, his first in Germany.

David experienced significant struggles during his first year in post. Many of his difficulties relate to his relationships with staff. He describes his first year in role as *“good... but it has been very hard and frustrating and much lonelier than I thought it would be.”*

He describes the attitude of staff towards change management as being a particularly stressful for him.

*“Even though they say this needs changing they do not want to change. Coming in and trying to change their approach to teaching and learning and changing the curriculum...you then get people who stand up and say no.”*

He describes a situation where staff confronted him over his approach to a new initiative and launched *“personal attacks”*, which *“were sustained over several weeks”* and left him feeling *“incredibly isolated.”* He describes the staff during this time as *“extremely resistant and volatile and unforgiving”*. He felt that the situation was exacerbated because of lack of clarity about his role, causing him to *“look incompetent”*.

*“That has an emotional toll, which has been really quite difficult to deal with. Certainly in the sense of having to argue your point all the time. Feeling judged all the time, being under a microscope, being torn apart. There is no sense of team no one helps me out.”*

In expanding on the lack of team effort, he describes an *“us and them mentality”* where staff consider themselves to be separate from leadership, both at school and socially. This is quite different to the culture in his home country and has led to him feeling *“isolated”*.

*“I have always gone out and had a drink with my boss when I was a teacher. Here I have found out two days later that the staff have gone out for a meal without me. It is not as if I am sitting here with a big pile of friends and family near by”.*

*“I have always thought that a staff that plays together works well together and this is the first time that I have not been able to make that happen and it has been particularly difficult. I have not found it anywhere else.”*

He describes how at interview, the staff made clear to him that he was not expected to use the staffroom *“as it is a place for teachers”*.

*“Where I am supposed to go an relax and sit in a comfortable chair?”*

He felt that this was inhuman and evidence that staff see him only as the job title and not as a person. When describing the impact that being socially ostracised has had on him he responds, *“I could just have got up and left, it is that bad.”*

He describes differences between his priorities and those of staff in his school, whom he feels, place a greater emphasis on work-life balance than he is used to and the difficulties this has created.

*“Teachers here think a lot about their workload and do not think as much about the children.”*

*“Your perspective when you walk through that door should not be all about me and not them. This is askew here and I have found that difficult.”*

Later in the interview he describes how he has found it hard to settle in Germany.

*“I have found it harder to settle here than in other place. The language is hard although I have been having a go at learning German. I have found that quite difficult. I have tended to become a creature of habit going to the same place to do the same thing as I can get what I want and they know me.”*

He feels his limited language skills have impacted on his social life.

*“When I lived in London, I would go to the theatre and places and I did not have to think about translating the menu. I have become quite lazy going out and socialising although when I go out I enjoy it.”*

He feels this has made life less enjoyable and made his stay in Germany “*less sustainable long term*”, although he also refers to the breakdown of his relationship playing a role in his feelings about the city and his plans to move on.

*“This is not a city I plan to stay in long term. It has been a city I have had personal trauma in. My relationship broke up and it has taken its toll.”*

When asked about his coping strategies, David refers to his love of cooking as a way to relax.

*“Yes (my partner) knew that when I cooked a three-course meal then it was a hard day. I can switch off and think just about the food and the cooking.”*

He also talks about his interest in research.

*“Having time to think about things that I want to think about...The research moves on all the time and you have to keep up to date. Recently I got into how when you introduce change for example it is like death and there are 7 stages.”*

## **Vignette 2.**

### *Participant 6-Jenny*

Jenny is an experienced primary school teacher. She has worked in three international schools, all in Europe. Since leaving her home country, she has taken senior leadership roles in two schools and has been at her current school for nine years but had only been in her current role for one year at the time of the interview. Prior to this she was employed in another, more senior role at the same school, but took a demotion to another leadership role after 5 years in post, because she felt she was not coping with the stress of the role and wanted a better work-life balance. Jenny is single, without children and lives alone.

The experiences that Jenny shares in her interview are mainly based upon her previous role as Primary Principal. She begins by describing a difficult situation with a German member of staff, who displayed *“passive aggressive behaviour”*. Jenny describes how she would, *“sit in meetings on the front row and glare at me and whisper to her friends.”* This made Jenny feel, *“nervous and frustrated.”*

*“When I challenged her about anything, she had the greatest excuses and was very convincing. She was very manipulative. She would deny it was intended to cause problems.”*

Jenny describes how the staff member interacted poorly with other staff, causing problems.

*“She totally took over and spread seeds and did not respect the literacy coach. She is a kindergarten teacher and the assistant lasted a month or 6 weeks before she was in hospital with stress. She treated her abominably.”*

Jenny also describes how she was unable to dismiss the woman, who was on a permanent contract, because of German employment law and instead was forced to work with the staff member. Later in the interview she describes a similar situation with a senior colleague in the primary school who she was forced to work with because of his contractual position.

*“I could not work with him. I told the Director this. I even told him that. You need a teammate but I did not have that and it was a huge cause of stress over years. I could not get him changed and no one would support me. He was not able to do the job.”*

*“I told him at the end of the year that he needed to improve and he did but he was still not good enough. He had hardly been a teacher and I have no idea why he was appointed a teacher. He does not even like kids.”*

She goes on to describe a third situation with an incompetent member of staff.

*“It was terrible. She had no skills, she was creative but she could not plan or teach it was horrible. She was not teaching anything. The kids did not even know how to use a ruler. I told her I would co teach with her. These kids came to me and they could do nothing, they had no skills, they did not know what to do.”*

She describes the impact all of this had on her.

*"I ended up absorbing a lot of it. My mind would not shut down and I was constantly problem solving. I had insomnia and my blood pressure went up. There was never an end, it was constant. Constantly low grade with spikes."*

There was also a serious impact on her personal life, which she feels has been absent since she began at the school, until her recent change of role.

*"I did not have a personal life and this year I realise how much of a personal life I did not have because I have it back. I now have time in the early evening and have to remember what people do with this time. Oh yes, they have friends."*

*"Being the principal is the loneliest job in the world. You know you go to a function and the staff are drunk and come up in your face all glassy eyed and I don't want to see it... So I don't go to these things or I go an hour late and leave after an hour."*

She describes how she has spent most of the last nine years alone.

*"I would have a huge DVD collection and would watch a movie or play spider solitaire. I am a lone wolf person."*

*"I am used to alone time and have to balance this with social time. You know I realised recently that I have not had anyone over to my apartment for a year."*

She describes how personal relationships with parents at the school have not worked out for her.

*"I have been burned a couple of times having friendships with parents. One woman moved away after five years and it was a good thing as she was taking advantage."*

She points to a weekly massage as being a treat that she gives herself and the reasons for this.

*"You know I have had a massage therapist come to my house once a week for a couple of years now. This is the thing that I gave myself but it is not social interaction... Also because I am not in a relationship I have noticed that if I do not have a massage I become tactilely deficient and kind of flinch when the kids touch me. I do it so I remain comfortable with touch."*

She describes how she coped with the pressure of the role.

*"I just put my head down and got on with it at the expense of the rest of my life."*

*“What I did not cope with was truly balancing my life. Part of that is the problem being single. I don’t enjoy travelling by myself anymore. I get bored and it is not the same and so I stay home and not spend the money.”*

When asked if she ever came close to breaking point she responded *“yes a couple of times”*.

*“I had a teacher who came to me once and he just dumped on me big time. Told me that I did not care about my staff. He pushed all my buttons because I really do care... So I still remember what it is like to be a teacher and I work hard to look after them so it was like a kick in the stomach and I cried for three days.”*

She describes how in her new role her situation has changed.

*“So this year I have been more sociable. Because of my new role I have been able to be friendly with parents in the primary school. Going for a girls’ night out, for dinner, to an Xmas market. I feel I am working towards a better balance.”*

### **Vignette 3.**

#### *Participant 7-Cameron*

Cameron is an experienced secondary school teacher. He has spent most of his career teaching in international schools in Europe and Asia. He has worked in Germany before, many years ago. He is currently working in his first Head of School post, although he has taken on senior leadership roles in other schools. At the time of the interview Cameron was at the end of his first year in post. He lives with his wife and young baby.

Cameron begins the interview by reflecting that, despite the many problems he has faced in his first year in role, he feels he has coped well, compared to his previous placement in Asia.

*“Many hard things have happened but I have been able to take them emotionally, physically and psychologically in my stride more because I feel closer to German culture than my last context... In (country in Asia) it is like walking out onto a street you have not walked on before and not knowing where to go.”*

He also describes the positive impact of the support he has received in his current school.

*“The level of competency at all levels below me is higher here. I feel more supported and less vulnerable... It is not about me but about the team and how we work together. I am grateful to have this team around me. There are not a lot of weaknesses around me but a lot of good people, which have made me better.”*

He describes his personal transition to Germany and the difficulties he has faced at home.

*“My wife was not settled yet this was where she wanted to come. I would have gone anywhere but she wanted to come here or (another European city) and I did that for her. I adapted very quickly but she was not working, home with a child and emotionally struggling. She was learning to be a mom and not seeing her friends that live here and she felt I was not supporting her at home.”*

*“Wondering if she was going to run off back to... her family. It was hard and having to suck all that up and every morning in the metro I write her a message. I give her my thoughts I keep it positive and show her I am here to support her and give her my schedule so she knows when she can depend on me. My father left me when I was four and I don't want to lose them and I have moved somewhere to keep them and... I have to get myself psychologically ready for school in the walk from the metro to school.”*

He describes the professional transition to his new role with a lack of training and experience.

*“...trying to do this demanding job and figure this out. The kind of skills it takes to come in and understand a school's culture. The kind of skills that I have to see the big picture. My job was to figure out what the school needs... We don't train people to do this to combine the soft and hard skills so for me the first challenge was dealing with the personal challenge.”*  
He talks about the fear he experiences and about his own weaknesses.

*“It was hard and there was fear. Fear is a killer. Having these fears and being able to come here and get the job done. Number two is coping with what I perceive to be my own weaknesses. Because I am aware of my own weaknesses... I know the way I am annoys my wife and will annoy other people. For example I am optimistic to the point where I seem insincere to other people and when I have done that in a meeting I think shit I just went there.”*

*“Weekly SMT and CEO meetings, I put a lot of stress and pressure on myself to be well prepared. I better have my shit together for these meetings because the SMT really bring it and I really feel the pressure to know what I am talking about otherwise I will be exposed. I don't have as much experience as them or know the school as well.”*

He refers to feeling “not worthy” when he makes a mistake at work but also “determined to figure it out.” When asked about coping strategies he refers to a good night sleep but also

*“Get feedback, hear it, absorb it and move on.”*

#### **Vignette 4.**

*Participant 8- Peter*

Peter is an experienced secondary school teacher. He has lived in Germany for 12 years and during this time he has been in senior leadership roles in two international schools. Prior to this he taught in the UK. He is currently a Secondary Principal. He lives with his wife and child.

He begins by describing a situation at school where he had been preparing for a visit of the local education authority inspectors, who were due to inspect the school following significant changes to the curriculum imposed by them, when he is given important information by the board that he was previously unaware of.

*“...the one that leapt out at me as emotionally challenging was being sat in a meeting and being handed a copy of a letter in a meeting in April of this year (2015) that was dated March 2014 that said the secondary school would be teaching two periods of Maths in German this school year...I just could not believe it. I could not imagine how I would prepare for the visit and also how I did not know about this. There was a total collapse of confidence in the people around me. How could this be allowed to happen? How was I not shown this letter and how did we not prepare for this.”*

*“We were not allowed time to plan for this and not to communicate to me or the team it was very difficult for me to accept it and move on and deal with it. The trust and competence and how I appear to my peers and the visitors. Communication is not one of the strengths of this board but still-urgh- this caused everything to wobble.”*

He describes how this made him feel, *“gobsmacked. Like someone had just smacked me in the face.”*

*“My biggest concern was the consequences of the (local authority) visit and the change of the teaching focus of the school that this would mean and the implications for our staff, students and parents. It was possible that our status would be revoked. (It made me feel)*



*Sick, sick in the stomach, an overwhelming sense of responsibility that leaves a feeling of nausea.”*

He goes on to talk about his views of the board.

*“The board and CEO you cannot rely on them and their priorities do not line up with those of the SMT. You cannot rely on the CEO to stick to a principle that has been agreed and he does not work well under stress and he becomes unreliable.”*

He talks about how the situation made him feel “*inner rage building*” which he did not verbalise. He later describes a meeting with angry parents that emanated from the previous situation he discussed.

*“The communication to parents was not good because we knew we were going to do this in March /April but the board did not authorise us to communicate it...till September...the parents were not happy so we organised a meeting to talk to them about what we were doing and what it would look like. Our focus for the start was to put staff up to talk about what we were doing but they were butchered as the parents were not interested... Parents were angry because they were not told before and also because things in school were changing outside of their control and they are paying. They were negative towards the idea.... I was surprised that the parents were so negative. There were some who were really, really, really angry. Emotion came up pretty quickly an aggressively.”*

He describes how this made him feel “*really tired*”, “*knocked back*” and “*frustrated.*” He then describes a situation at school where a member of the school community, a young, woman, was murdered recently and the impact of this on the community and himself.

*“There was an emotional buy in from the school community. It was a shocking event and you just have to feel it and get through those feelings. Some parents with links to the family had a very emotional response. We had a memorial in school which gave people the chance to grieve.”*

He describes how standing up and speaking at the memorial, in front of 300 people, as being the most emotionally challenging aspect for him.

*“The emotion built up during the service. It made it very hard to stand up and focus.”*

*“The responsibility of the school for the mobile section of the community really comes into its own in a situation like this. It was like in my last school when a mother died of a brain tumour and providing support for the kids and the father...”*

He agrees that this is not something he ever thought would be part of his job, *“but it is positive the trust that the community places in you is uplifting.”*

When asked about his coping strategies he mentions running, having a small glass of wine and talking situations through with others but his main strategy is *“going into problem solving mode.”* He also mentions having *“an emotional mode and focused mode and that helps me.”*

*“We have learned a lesson that if you mess up that badly then deal with the mess first.”*  
*“Problem solving is my usual response and that is what has been needed.”*

He has also considered making changes to the leadership structure in the secondary school to relieve the pressure.

*“Appointing a curriculum coordinator. She will need a lot of support, which I will do rather than trying to do what she will do. There is potential to build stronger teams in the secondary school.”*

He talks about the impact of a very stressful year on him personally...

*“Health wise sleep wise has suffered. Ambient stress has been higher. I have not exercised as much as usual and I have been sicker more often. Have had colds and coughs that I do not usually get. The eye has started to twitch over the last 6 weeks. That is a warning sign. Either I am going to burn myself out or something is going to have to give.”*  
...and the impact of this on the longevity of his tenure...

*“It has been a tough and stressful year, I have learnt a bit but it has not been negative. For me I need something else. I do not want to spend the rest of my life doing this working with something that has been imposed by outside in this way. Thinking about the next career stage.”*

### 4.3.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In this section I present a thematic analysis of findings, reported as a range of themes and sub themes, emanating from the stories told by the participants. They are presented in three parts, in line with my research questions:

- What international school leaders find emotionally challenging.
- The consequences and impacts of emotional challenges on heads.
- The coping strategies employed by heads.

#### **What International School Leaders Find Emotionally Challenging**

It is clear that for participants in the interview stage of the study, adult relationships and the impact of adult emotions are the most emotionally demanding aspect of the head's role.

Participant 1.

*"As a head you deal with more adult relationships and adult emotions can be very difficult."*

#### ***Relationships with Staff***

The single most common cause of emotional challenges identified by heads emanates from issues relating to staff. Six of eight participants mentioned at least one situation or incident relating to staff. Participant 5 refers to the emotional nature of teachers in general and those in her school in particular.

*"Mmm well teachers are hard work. They can be very emotional. They are worse than children. It wasn't like this when I worked in an office. Teachers' emotions seem to be there up front all of the time. There are always a small number of staff who drain you for different reasons."*

Participant 1 agrees that teachers are more emotional than employees in other workplaces.

*"I think this is something you find more in schools. You have teachers who have gone from school to university back to school and have not lived in the real world. Also teachers are used to exercising high levels of control in their classrooms over this bunch of kids. I find that teachers are not as reflective as they could be, especially secondary school teachers. I think that if people from other businesses came into schools they would be absolutely amazed."*

Heads find the most emotionally demanding aspect of leading staff is related to staff performance and discipline, with five heads mentioning issues relating either to staff underperformance or staff disciplinary matters, or both. Issues range from drunk staff failing to turn up for school; staff failing to attend important meetings; a staff member hitting a student; staff refusing to implement change or being generally ineffective and unable to perform their duties to the standard expected by the school. Participant 2 describes dealing with a drunk member of staff who failed to show up for work.

*"Yes a few years ago we had a member of staff...There had been two or three times he had come to school late or drunk and he had received warnings. Once...he did not turn up. Tried to ring him but nothing...I went to his apartment and banged on the door. I was really worried and asked the caretaker to open the door but they wouldn't. I went back to school and a colleague, H. came with me. We went back and hammered on the door and eventually he answered and I was so relieved that he was OK but he was very drunk. He was handed a second formal warning after that. Anyway, the BR in the next meeting, were furious that I had been to a colleague's house when he was ill and invading his privacy."*

Participant 6 describes an ineffective teacher she has recently appointed.

*"She had no skills, she was creative but she could not plan or teach. It was horrible. She was not teaching anything."*

Participant 4 describes how a member of staff had a breakdown after being suspended as part of disciplinary action.

*"He really did have a breakdown. When I saw him later he was a shadow of his former self. It was quite a shock."*

Dealing with difficult or confrontational staff is emotionally demanding for heads. Three participants describe emotional behaviour in staff meetings as being challenging for them.

Participant 5 refers to an incident where staff confronted her in a meeting following disciplinary action against a fellow member of staff.

*"I would never speak to someone else the way they spoke to me. I felt ganged up on and bullied by them. They feel like they can say anything and not have to take into account my feelings. I would go home feeling exhausted."*

Two heads mention incidents occurring in staff meetings, relating to change management.

Participant 3 describes being subjected to "*personal attacks*" in a meeting about a new curriculum development and how it made him feel "*alone and isolated*" while Participant 4 refers to the whole of the early years staff crying in a staff meeting about wide ranging changes being implemented in their department and how this affected her.

*"We had them crying in meetings at times. Sometimes one would start and then they would all be crying. This is something I had not come across before."*

In discussions about their stressful encounters with staff, several participants describe the absence of humanity in the way that staff confronted them.

Participant 5

*"They spoke to me like I was not a person but just the office."*

Participant 1

*"There is also almost a lack of humanity to it as people expect that this person, the school leader should get everything right because they are at the top, have the title and being paid the most."*

Supporting staff members through serious personal crises is identified as another emotionally demanding aspect of the role. One head describes being looked to for personal support following a miscarriage and another giving significant levels of care following the death of a child.

Participant 5

*"It was privilege to help her but it was a huge strain. Being strong for her, finding the right words, witnessing her pain, trying hard to be strong and be useful. Not letting her down."*

Participant 4 considers this aspect of the role to be more pronounced when leading international schools, due to the lack of a social network available for internationally mobile staff.

*“they do not have that network of support, especially when they have not been here long. They don’t have the family to talk to. Mom is not there and no aunts.”*

Finally, being involved in relationships between staff can be a cause of emotional strain for heads. Participant 4 refers to confrontations and disagreements between an underperforming teacher and the rest of the team.

*“He was having lots of rows with colleagues as well and not pulling his weight in the team. They were not happy with him... It is hard. So when I gave him a warning we sent him home unpaid for two days for screaming at a colleague as a last sanction. All of the team wrote in and put in complaints about him.”*

Two other heads cite situations where they were supporting middle leaders experiencing difficult relations with teachers and one refers to an incident where a member of the board physically assaulted a staff member.

Participant 1

*“This is no doubt one of the most stressful situations that I have ever dealt with... (because of the) complexities of dealing with this kind of situation and the emotions involved. Trying to control the stories that come out, a potential legal case...also navigating other people’s emotions that you do not have any control over.”*

### ***Relationships with Senior Colleagues***

Half of participants have found relationships with senior colleagues to be emotionally challenging. Situations or incidents recounted include disagreements over the direction of the school; poor advice/support from senior colleagues; working with weak senior colleagues and supporting a senior colleague who had been sacked from his post. Participant

2 was sacked by a new head of school but reinstated under Germany's strong employment laws.

*"...when (the new Head) came in the board sacked me and my oppo in the primary department. My oppo took the package they offered but I refused and fought it and won...I was not prepared to go under those circumstances. It was extremely stressful having been there so long but I hung on in."*

She describes the stress caused by a constant flow of new head teachers to the school, each bringing new changes, many of which she has not supported.

*"I have to be professional, even if I do not agree with what has happened. I have to support it outwardly as I am management. It can be quite hard and lonely not being able to be honest about what I think and how I have been treated."*

Another participant describes supporting her head of school through the remaining school year following his dismissal during the first term.

Participant 5

*"It was stressful as I was trying to support him on a personal level to deal with this rejection and also the anxiety he was feeling about the future... He also checked out professionally and was not able or decided not to fulfill his role properly so I was filling in the gaps and stepping up to take on extra responsibility without making it obvious to the rest of the staff."*

The same participant also refers to poor support from her head of school and assistant principal over a staff disciplinary issue, early in her incumbency, as compounding an already emotionally challenging situation. She recounts how she was encouraged to issue a formal warning to a staff member, without being informed that this was the first in the history of the school.

*"the support I was getting from my senior colleagues ...was counter productive. In many ways they made it much worse. This meant that I did not feel I could really trust anyone in school."*

### ***Relationships with the Board and External Administrators***

Three participants cite relationships with the board of directors/governors as being emotionally challenging. These include the difficulties of dealing with parent boards and dealings with dishonest or unscrupulous boards. Participant 1 describes the dynamics of working with boards made up of parent governors, each with their own agenda.

*“there are some things that boards should not get involved in, especially with parent boards in international schools. You need to have a strong board chair. Where you have parent boards, parent governors bring their personal issues and emotions into meetings it can be very tricky.”*

Both Participant 5 and Participant 8 describe working with boards that lacked transparency and honesty in their dealings with SMT and the additional strain this has placed on them. For Participant 5, this manifested in poor communication about the expectations of the local authority.

*“...I felt that the CEO and the board were not telling me the whole truth about the motivation of the authority. It turned out months later that this was true. So I felt helpless and powerless.”*

Participant 8 has also faced a similar situation, just prior to an inspection visit from the local authority, with potentially serious consequences for the school.

### ***Relationships with Parents***

Although mentioned less frequently than relationships with staff, issues and encounters involving parents are a source of emotional challenge for some participants. Five heads recount disputes with parents, which range from groups of parents questioning the effectiveness of curriculum changes to issues relating to individual students. Participant 8 refers to a meeting with a large group of angry parents over unexpected changes to the school's status, as required by the local authority, while both Participant 2 and Participant 5



discussed situations where parents' expectations relating to student disciplinary matters caused emotional strain. For Participant 2 this related to issues of cyber bullying and the parent expectation that this is a school matter.

*"...one of the sets of parents was not happy and then after we dealt with it all came in and just took their daughter out of school. Just like that. They also contacted the Chair of the Board and I received a letter to say one of the girls was in fear of her life. It was not anywhere near that bad...it was really draining."*

While for Participant 5 a small group of parents felt she had mishandled the disciplining of their children following a bullying incident and angrily pursued her.

*"I had to discipline some boys who had been punching a younger boy and so I called them in individually and spoke with them in a stern manner as is the norm in the British system. Several parents were very unhappy about this and felt I had not treated the boys well although I was very respectful would never raise my voice to a child. They pursued this for a while and tried to get other members of staff on their side, unsuccessfully."*

Participant 5 also recounts a situation where parents were angry following a letter she sent to the parent body asking families to leave the playground immediately after school, due to safety concerns.

*"The parents were very upset and it caused an outrage among some of them who were very angry with me...The community is much more important to people here and telling them they could not congregate at the end of the school day so moms could not chat etc. was a big thing for them."*

Finally, Participant 4 discusses what she perceives as a very serious conflict between a parent and teacher, over the treatment of a child with special educational needs and describes how this escalated into something very unpleasant leading to demands for the teacher to be removed.

*"The child had learning needs and we wanted to work with them (the parent) to support him. She thought we were being too negative and she was then picking on the teacher to such a bad extent that we had to support the teacher."*

### **Other Relationship Factors**

In addition to managing relationships with key stakeholders, heads find balancing the needs of stakeholders, during times of potential conflict, to be emotionally challenging work.

Participants 1 and 4 both discuss situations where the needs of parents, students and teachers have come into conflict and the stress they experience during these times.

Participant 1 describes an incident where a teacher hit a student.

*“This was stressful because of course I needed to take steps to protect the child and to take the parent’s complaint seriously but I also wanted to protect the teacher. This guy had an impeccable record and it was very serious as his livelihood was at stake. I was very aware of that. If he lost his job as a result of this then it would be hard for him to find another one. It was very emotional as I was aware of needing to look after all the different stakeholders. I also wanted to protect the reputation of the school.”*

Participant 8 describes a situation where the board of directors pressurised him and his senior colleagues to withhold important information from the parent community.

*“The communication to parents was not good because we knew we were going to do this in March /April but the board did not authorise us to communicate it till much too late and (the parents) did not know till September. In the back to school nights the parents were not happy.”*

### **The Nature of the Work**

Some participants refer to the nature of the tasks they have to perform in their current roles as being emotionally challenging for them. Participant 2 speaks about a time when she was delegated the task by her head of school to obtain staff signatures agreeing to a salary cut.

*“The first time the pay cuts came through I was given the job of going around the staff members individually and asking them to sign something to agree to the pay cut. It was my responsibility for the secondary school...(I felt) terrible. Asking people I knew well who did not have much money to take a pay cut.”*

Participant 1 similarly speaks of delivering news in his first staff meeting that a prior pay cut would not be returned that year. He found this to be *“incredibly stressful”*.

*“It was stressful because I did not know everything and it was about decisions that I had not been part of, did not know all of the background and the reasons for the decision. I also did not have a solution to it at that point. I could not say this is bad but will lead to something better. It was just bad news. It was also stressful because I did not know the staff well enough to deliver that news. I had not built any relationships yet and that was stressful.”*

Participant 8 discusses how he led a memorial for a community member who had recently died while Participant 5 shares how she was expected to sit in meetings between staff and local authority inspectors in which staff were heavily criticised.

*“The inspectors were incredibly harsh and one of them was quite rude and offensive to the teachers. It was really tough. They kept looking at me across the table for support and I kept having to try to jump in and offer words of support or argue with the inspectors.”*

Many participants feel that it is the nature of the work to feel responsible for everything that goes on in school and the emotional challenges this creates is an important theme running through the interviews. This is summarised aptly by Participant 1.

*“My role as a school leader is to make sure everyone is as successful as they can possibly be and when someone makes a mistake, I feel a sense of responsibility because I might have influenced them or created the working conditions that caused them to make the mistake. So I feel responsible for every last thing that goes wrong, even if it is distanced from me.”*

Other heads echo this sentiment.

Participant 5

*“I had only been there just over a year but I felt a huge sense of responsibility for the school and pressure to do the right thing.”*

### **Leadership Performance**

Concerns about their own performance or how others perceive their competence is a source of emotional strain for some heads. Participant 8, a director of school, described his concerns over working with a senior leadership team who are more experienced than him and his anxiety over his own competence while Participant 3 refers to an ambiguity in his job description and how this impacted on the staff’s view of his competence.

*“It is not people’s fault but they are getting mixed messages and it makes me look incompetent which makes it even worse. That has an emotional toll, which has been really quite difficult to deal with.... Feeling judged all the time, being under a microscope, being torn apart.”*

Participant 5 makes a similar comment when discussing the aftermath of a staff disciplinary issue and the involvement of the Betriebsrat.

*“Well I was worried I had made a mistake and that people would think I did not know how to do my job properly. I hated being judged and put under the microscope.”*

Participant 2 also speaks of the negative way that the teachers perceive her leadership competence as an older female.

*“This is emotionally stressful. How my colleagues see me now. They do not respect age and experience in western culture. Middle-aged women are at the bottom of the pecking order. It is a bit of a strain knowing that people don’t respect you when you still have a lot to offer. Some colleagues I think do respect me but others think I should be out playing bowls!”*

### **Isolation**

More than half of participants interviewed refer to the emotional strain placed upon them by the isolation and loneliness of the role, which may impact upon their personal as well as their professional lives. Both Participant 1 and Participant 5 touch upon professional isolation. Participant 5 refers to having no one to confide in at work and feeling alone.

Participant 1 echoes this and shares how he has found his new head of school role more isolating than previous senior roles.

*“In the past two years, since becoming a head, I have found it more stressful as there is no one else to go to... There are very few people you can talk to as a head. You cannot be friends with the staff... You have to be comfortable in your own company. It is an oxymoron as it is such a sociable job but you have to like being alone too.”*

Both Participant 6 and Participant 3 describe how the isolation of the role at work spilled over into their home lives as they were unable to build relationships inside or outside of school. Participant 6 identifying herself as *“a lone wolf”* describes her social isolation and

discusses how she spends her evenings watching DVDs alone and playing spider solitaire, with a weekly massage being her only social interaction.

Participant 3 describes his inability to make friends among the staff and his loneliness outside of work.

*"I am lucky that my current boss has a happy character and is not like this or I would have no one."*

Some participants share the added loneliness and pressure they experience as an international school leader at the centre of an isolated community, where there is no external LEA style support.

Participant 1

*"There is no network to look to for support. You have to create your own network. There is no infrastructure for dealing with problems outside the school and so you have to create all of this inside the school and deal with things you would not have to deal with ordinarily."*

### ***The Role of Transition***

Several participants discuss the role that transition plays in the emotional climate of the school, and the impact this has on them. Stories include issues relating to the transition of staff, parents and the heads themselves. Participant 1 refers to the role of the head during the transition of new staff coming from overseas.

*"So it is more emotional than other schools. You have international staff coming in from all over the world...There are all of these issues of new people transitioning into the country."*

Participant 4 makes clear the responsibility she feels in appointing staff that are new to the country and the need to get this right.

*"We have to make sure that teachers are the right fit and that it works for their family. You are changing lives really and if it does not work then we have contributed to that..."*

Some share how difficult parent transitions can impact on school life. Participant 4 recounts a severe situation, which she perceives as being connected with a mother's transition issues on arriving in Germany.

*"The child had learning needs and we wanted to work with them to support him. She thought we were being too negative and she was then picking on the teacher to such a bad extent that we had to support the teacher... The mother has now gone back to the UK where she has a support network and family. She would say part of the reason she left was the school and I would say the reason was that she had not transitioned well... Her husband was the boss and she had no-one she could go too as she was the boss's wife. She was isolated and she was attacking the school. She went into battle mode."*

Participant 1 also makes reference to the potential problems caused by poor parental transition.

*"You have these highly professional women who have moved to a new country with their husband's job and their lives have been turned upside-down. The school is the centre of their world and they are overly involved in the school."*

More significant than staff and parent transitions is the issue of the head's own transition.

Participants 3 and 8 both describe issues relating to their personal transition into Germany as posing serious emotional challenges for them during their first year and beyond.

Participant 8 shares the strain he felt as a result of his wife failing to settle well in a new country and the difficulties of juggling his support for her, and their new baby, with his role at school.

*"I was walking into work and feeling wow that was a hard night and wondering if she would be able to hold it together with our young son... It was hard having to suck all that up."*

Participant 3 describes the social isolation he felt well into his second year in post and the impact this and the breakdown of his relationship with his partner was having on the sustainability of his leadership at the school.

*"...it is less sustainable longer term. This is not a city I plan to stay in long term. It has been a city I have had personal trauma in. My relationship broke up and it has taken its toll. It has memories that are negative. It is not the fault of the city."*

Participant 5, an experienced expat, discusses the unexpected difficulties in adjusting to the new German context during her first year.

*"As I had lived in Asia for 6 years, I thought that living and working in Germany would be easy by comparison... getting used to how German the school is was hard. I did not expect it to be so German. Staff speak German a lot and I felt inferior because my language skills are not good. Board meetings were in German and went on for 3 hours, which was really hard for me. I used to really dread them. German culture is quite hard to get used to in the work place."*

Participant 3 also refers to the difficulty of learning German language as impacting on his transition.

*"I have found it harder to settle here than in other places. The language is hard although I have been having a go at learning German. I have found that quite difficult."*

Participants 1 and 5 both felt that challenges they faced during their first year in post were more intense as they did not yet know the school and had not built relationships and trust with individuals. Participant 1 felt emotionally challenged when he had to deliver news that a pay cut would not be reinstated to staff, in the first month of his incumbency.

*"It was stressful because I did not know everything and it was about decisions that I had not been part of, did not know all of the background and the reasons for the decision...It was also stressful because I did not know the staff well enough to deliver that news. I had not built any relationships yet and that was stressful."*

He also felt badly placed to deal with an issue of which he had no prior similar experience to draw upon.

*"I had just come from a school where we never had to have these kind of conversations. Talk about money was all about percentage increases so it was a position that I had never had any experience of before."*

Participant 5 was expected to support the teaching community in her first term in post, when, following a visit from school inspectors, a long standing and well respected member of staff was refused a teacher licence, sending shock waves throughout the staff.

*“She was devastated, felt shamed and she was really worried about her future. The other staff were angry and worried about what this might mean for them. It left everyone feeling very insecure. They looked to me for support...I had not had time to build relationships with them yet and suddenly we were thrown into this situation where they were relying on me.”*

Participant 4, a very experienced school leader, reflects on how a particular change management situation, in the second year in her current post, was much more emotionally demanding for her because it was something she had not encountered before, while Participant 8 talks at length about his lack of experience in the role of director of school and the many emotional challenges he was facing as a consequence of being in his first year of headship.

### ***The Role of Cultural Dissonance***

Many incidents or situations recounted by participants as being emotionally challenging included an element of *cultural dissonance*, mostly in relation to clashes between expectations heads brought with them to school and the realities of the German culture.

Several participants refer to the change averse nature of staff in schools in Germany and the emphasis placed upon work life balance compared to those they have encountered in other contexts.

Participant 5

*“German culture is quite hard to get used to in the work place...the way that change happens so slowly and everyone sits around talking about everything ad nauseum but nothing gets decided or done...people value their work life balance. They get angry if you make them work too hard. They are very conscious of their rights which is great on a societal level but it was a lot to adapt to.”*



Participant 6 shares her belief that the poor attitude and behaviour of some of her female staff is the result of their poor treatment by the communist system, in former East Germany, which has impacted on their confidence and self-esteem. She refers to the behaviour of one woman.

*“She would deny it was intended to cause problems but it was a Stasi mentality playing both ends off against each other.”*

Some participants mention the permanent nature of staff contracts in Germany and the added stresses brought about by their inability to dismiss underperforming staff or institute a formal competency procedure, with instead an emphasis being placed on finding ways to work with incompetent teachers. One participant describes a process dragging on in excess of a year with no end in sight and no prospect of moving the teacher out of the school.

Participant 4

*“My guy is still not out. I am building up evidence that he is not meeting the standards and keep working at it... I don't think it is going anywhere. It is a long process. This guy has young children and has just bought an apartment here so he is not going anywhere.”*

Within the German cultural context, the presence of the Betriebsrat or Works Council in some schools, also impacts on the pressures faced by school leaders when disciplining staff.

Participant 5

*“...we have the works council in school in Germany and they got involved. They kept wanting to meet to go over all of the facts and who said what and so on. They were combing over the finest details of all of the emails and conversations trying to catch me out. It was like being cross examined in court.”*

One head also mentions how underperforming staff cannot be dismissed from their post for four years if they become a Betriebsrat representative and how a staff member sought works council election to avoid disciplinary action. For two participants unanticipated cultural expectations in their current school regarding the relationship dynamic between

heads and staff were a source of emotional strain. Participant 5 describes how she perceives the role of principal in Germany to be different to that of a head in the UK.

*“In my school the role of the principal is taken much more seriously than I expected. There is a lot more resting on your shoulders. In British schools I don’t think staff and parents really take their school heads that seriously. Here you are the key member of the community. It is nice but it is hard too.”*

Participant 3 recounts, very movingly, his shock at finding his new school much more hierarchical in staff-leadership relations than he was used to in his home country and his feelings on being socially excluded by his team.

*“There is an us and them mentality. At home there is not the division between classroom teacher and leadership...I have always gone out and had a drink with my boss when I was a teacher.”*

One participant relates a situation where cultural differences caused disharmony between her and German parents who were angry at the way she had disciplined their children, following a serious bullying incident.

*Participant 5*

*“In Germany...resolving conflict is left to the kids and some parents have an anti-authoritarian approach which is a backlash against what happened in the 1930s and 40s I think. Anyway, I had to discipline some boys who had been punching a younger boy and so I called them in individually and spoke with them in a stern manner as is the norm in the British system. Several parents were very unhappy about this and felt I had not treated the boys well.”*

### **The Consequences and Impacts of Emotional Challenges on School Leaders**

In this section of the findings, I outline the consequences and impacts for heads of the emotionally challenging incidents and situations they have shared. These include the emotions they have experienced and the impact on their personal and professional lives. In describing the emotions felt when dealing with challenging incidents and situations at school, the most common words used by participants describe the general stress they

experienced. *“Stressful”* and degrees of stressful, including *“very stressful”* and *“incredibly stressful”* are commonly used. Some also refer to incidents or situations as *“emotionally stressful”* or *“emotionally draining”* or simply *“draining,”* *“a strain”* and *“a huge strain.”* *“Hard”* or *“very hard”* are also common words used to describe how heads experienced emotional challenges.

More specific emotions often voiced were frustration, annoyance, anxiety, worry, fear and feeling nervous. One participant described feeling *“not worthy.”*

In describing the physical or psychological impact of challenging incidents or situations, participants refer in several ways to feeling tired. *“Tired”* and *“exhausted”* is voiced by several heads, while one participant describes feeling *“really knocked back.”* Inability to relax is a theme that comes up frequently. Participants describe finding it *“hard to switch off,”* *“hard to relax,”* describe *“going over and over it in my mind”* and how *“my mind would not shut down.”* Several heads share feelings of being overwhelmed or feeling that the stress was never ending such as it being *“hard to escape and establish normality,”* as well as trying *“to get out from under all this stuff and do what I should be doing.”* One head describes how she *“frequently reached crisis”* and another *“felt close to breaking a couple of times.”*

Participant 7 describes how an emotionally challenging incident with the board *“caused everything to wobble.”* Another shares how their resources were *“depleted.”*

Four heads share how they hide their feelings at times of challenge or keep their emotions under control. One describes this as *“keeping a professional face.”* Participant 7 describes how during a challenging meeting he *“felt inner rage building but did not verbalise it.”*

Impact on their home life is a theme touched on by two participants. Participant 6 shares how she *“did not have a personal life for 9 years”* and *“got on with it at the expense of my life.”* Participant 1 describes how the emotional nature of his work *“makes me useless at home”* and shares how having talked and listened all day, he needs to sit quietly when home, rather than talking with his wife.

Unsurprisingly, health was a concern of many heads. Several refer to insomnia as being a consequence of the stress they were under; one describes waking up at 4 a.m. worrying. Participant 7, a marathon runner, describes how during a particularly emotional year at school he had been exercising much less and had been ill with colds and coughs more frequently. He also describes a twitching eye that had developed in the last six weeks and felt this was a *“warning sign.”* Participant 6 has been diagnosed with high blood pressure. Participant 1 feels that the health impacts of the role are not sustainable long term. Participant 7 went further.

*“Either I am going to burn myself out or something is going to have to give.”*

Three Participants describe the impact on them of acute emotional strain brought on by a specific incident.

Participant 5

*“I could hardly speak. I did not know what to do with myself.”*

*“(it was) one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life.”*

Participant 7

*“(I was) gobsmacked. Like someone had just smacked me in the face.”*

*“Sick sick in the stomach. An overwhelming sense of responsibility that leaves a feeling of nausea.”*

Participant 6 describes an encounter with a member of staff as *“like a kick in the stomach”* and told how she cried for three days as a result.

Summarising his recent experiences, Participant 7 describes how he had dealt with more emotion in the last twelve months than in the previous ten years and that the past year had *“whitewashed”* everything that had gone before. Participant 3 refers to his experiences in the previous year as *“having an emotional toll that is really quite hard to deal with.”*

While the majority of heads involved in the interview stage of the study clearly find the emotional challenges they face at work to have a negative impact on them, Participant 4 feels she is able to take these challenges in her stride, without ill effect, drawing on the experience she has accumulated over many years in school leadership. With in excess of twenty years experience leading international schools around the world, she feels she has developed an ability to put any emotional challenges she encounters into perspective and exhibit a resilience, which has enabled her to deal with the day-to-day pressures of the role with minimal personal impact. She refers to *“not losing sleep anymore”* not taking the challenges personally and being able to *“separate it out”* from her personal life.

### **Coping with the Emotional Challenges**

The most commonly mentioned strategies for coping with the emotional challenges of the head’s role was seeking support from senior colleagues. Half of all participants refer to discussing issues with their senior team or with senior colleagues at other schools.

Participant 4, a primary principal, talks about leaning on the senior leadership team in her school.

*"...my senior colleagues...are very supportive. We have a great team and you could not have that confidence if you were on your own. I really value the colleagues and how we have each other's backs."*

Participant 7, a head of school, refers to the support of the team around him during his first year in the role.

*"I have been very lucky and not been left vulnerable because of those working around me who have pulled me out of a hole a few times."*

Participant 1, also a head of school, shares how he seeks support, both professionally and socially, from heads in others schools.

*"I have found it incredibly useful to contact people I know in similar positions to talk it through with them."*

*"(I) go on conferences...and meet other heads who I know pretty well. It is good to sit with (them) and have a relaxed conversation."*

Half of the participants refer to reflection and improvement as a useful tool following difficult situations or incidents and see them as an opportunity for growth.

Participant 6

*"One of my coping mechanisms is to change things up and to embrace change...I always try to see if there is something I can do to improve things...Is there a grain of truth in the hurtful things others say. What can I learn from this?"*

Participant 7 refers to how he draws from the mentality of US sports coaching which emphasises continual daily growth.

Participant 3

*"I think I learn more during hard times as well."*

Three Participants refer to experience, both generally and in similar situations, as having a large impact on how they cope with the emotional demands of the role.

Participant 1

*"I think you have a set of experiences over time that you have in your locker and you can draw upon them and so over time I think you get better at it and it gets easier. You can reflect more on what you did before and how you might handle situations."*

Participant 4 discusses the advantage of her many years experience in dealing with difficult parents.

*"That is hard. Not personally...It helps that I have a lot of experience. I do not feel personally attacked...I have seen most things and dealt with most types of people... I have seen parents who are bullies and I make it clear to them that they cannot bully me."*

Participant 5 talks about drawing on her general life experience when supporting others through difficult times and the advantage she sees of being a more mature person.

*"I am really glad that I have already had a lot of life experiences to draw upon so that I can support people when they need it in their hour of need. I am not sure how heads and principals who are only in their 30s manage with this side of the job. I don't think I could have done it when I was that age."*

Possessing strong values and self-belief is a mechanism for coping mentioned by two heads.

Participant 1

*"Well it is all down to my own value system. Even if others think I make the wrong decision at times, if I can live with it and it is in line with my values then it is OK. We need to have self belief as international school leaders...If we did not have self belief and our own value system we would not survive."*

Participant 3

*"when you are leading you have to have your professional values and I have developed some important values about teaching and learning. They are important when times are hard and people question you, knowing that you are right."*

Rationalising is another theme that arose during discussions on coping. Participant 1 refers to how he makes decisions during times of emotional challenge.

*"I use what I call the circle of stakeholders and ask what will be the impact on kids, on parents, on staff? So I try to be logical and consider all of the stakeholders."*

Participant 8 refers on several occasions during the interview to how he goes into *"problem solving mode,"* both during difficult meetings and during periods of challenge, this being his *"default mechanism."*

Coping strategies employed during the heads' free time, for the purposes of relaxation and rejuvenation was a common set of themes that arose, although each individual strategy was only mentioned by two participants, with no one strategy emerging as commonplace. These strategies were exercise, hobbies, friendships, alcohol, sleep and making personal time.

Participants 1 and 8 refer to how exercise helps them to cope, although it has already been noted that for Participant 8 this decreased during a very challenging time at school. Only

Participants 2 and 3 refer to having hobbies and drawing upon them to help them relax.

Participant 2 shares how she sings in two choirs and *"keeps her hand in"* as a musician while Participant 3 finds cooking to be a useful method of relaxation.

Participants 5 and 7 share how getting a good night's sleep is helpful in coping during challenging times. Participants 1 and 8 mention having a beer or a glass of wine as being a strategy they employ in order to relax, although Participant 1 comments that this could become a problem. The same two heads share their attempt to create personal time as a strategy for coping with Participant 1 talking about trying, usually unsuccessfully, to make time to take a lunch break and also referring to equally unsuccessful attempts to create *"a barrier between home and work"*. During a recent time of stress, Participant 8 committed to keeping the weekends work free, although this was not possible all year round.

*"I cleared the weekends. Stayed late on a Friday and had the weekend with no work"*

Only Participant 2, a head who has lived in the same city for many years, refers to friendships outside of school as being useful way to relax.



*"It also helps here in (city) that I have been here a long time and I have a good network of friends outside of school. I appreciate that I have a life outside of school."*

She also mentions taking holidays with her daughters as being a source of relaxation and is the only participant who refers to their partners or families directly as being a source of relaxation. To the contrary three heads mention needing to have time alone and the ability to enjoy their own company as being significant in helping them to cope with the demands of their role.

Participant 1

*"You have to be comfortable in your own company. It is an oxymoron as it is such a sociable job but you have to like being alone too. When it gets to a Saturday night and I have not seen my wife all week, I still need some time to myself to do something for me-hit some golf balls, go for a run or sit in a coffee shop...I need to be on my own just to switch off. I need that buffer before I can be a reasonable human being."*

Heads describe emotional labour as both a consequence of the stress they experience and a coping mechanism.

Participant 1

*"Stopping and remembering that your own emotions are involved as well, whether you like it or not. I think that is the key to it, managing your own emotions in very emotional situations..."*

Participant 2

*"Also with parents you have to put on a face. Keeping a professional face. They can be saying things that I feel are totally unreasonable but I have to keep smiling and being polite and taking it all. This woman came in to see me yesterday...She was blatantly lying and I just had to smile and accept what she was saying. That is draining."*

Participant 5

*"The staff confronted me about it in a staff meeting and I had to be very diplomatic and keep my real feelings under control."*

## 4.4 COMPARING INTERVIEW AND QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

In this section, I compare the questionnaire findings with those from the interview.

Identifying where they are similar and where they differ. The comparison is presented in line with the three research questions.

### *4.4.1 WHAT INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS FIND EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGING*

From both the questionnaire responses and interview data it is clear that participants in the study find international school leadership emotionally challenging. Questionnaire and interview data differs as to which aspects of the role are challenging, however. While participants in both parts of the study agree that working with parents, teachers, senior colleagues and the board are all emotionally challenging, there is an absence of agreement about the emotionally challenging nature of work with other stakeholders. Approximately 50% of questionnaire respondents found working with students to be emotionally challenging work, however, not one interview participant chose to share an incident or situation relating directly to a student. Participant 3 mentioned a situation involving cyber bullying among students but here, it was the parent's reaction to the situation that caused strain. Likewise, 36% of questionnaire respondents felt that working with ancillary or administrative staff was emotionally challenging, whereas none of the interview participants mentioned this. When asked which group of stakeholders they found to be the most challenging, 43% of questionnaire respondents chose parents, with only 33% finding teachers most challenging. The interview data shows incidents or situations involving staff to be by far the most frequently mentioned by participants.

#### *4.4.2 THE CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACTS OF EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES ON SCHOOL LEADERS*

There are some clear variations in data from each part of the study in relation to the impact of emotional challenges faced by school leaders. While over 48% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the emotional challenges they face impact negatively on their work, this is something briefly hinted at by interview participants. Conversely, only 9% of questionnaire respondents felt that the emotional challenges impacted negatively on their personal life, when this was something mentioned frequently in the interviews.

Questionnaire and interview findings were similar for health outcomes and emotional labour. 50% of questionnaire respondents felt a negative impact on their health, matching the number of interview respondents who referred to a health impact. 77% of questionnaire respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they hide their emotions when under emotional strain at work, which fits with the large number of interview participants who describe emotion management.

#### *4.4.3 COPING WITH THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES*

Healthy lifestyle was the most useful coping strategy for questionnaire respondents with 85% agreeing or strongly agreeing that this was helpful whereas elements of a healthy lifestyle were mentioned by only half of interview participants. The most commonly mentioned method of coping by at interview was support from senior colleagues, which matched the high number (81%) of questionnaire respondents who found this to be a useful coping strategy. However, while 63% of survey respondents found external colleagues to be a source of support, only one interview participant mentioned this.

## 4.5 CLOSING

In this chapter, I have set out the findings of both the questionnaire survey of 34 respondents and the semi-structured interviews of eight participants. For the questionnaire findings I have outlined the major findings using descriptive statistics presented in a range of tables and charts. For the interview findings I have presented comprehensive data in the form of vignettes and a thematic analysis of themes arising from the literature and newly emerging themes. In the final part of the chapter I compare questionnaire and interview findings identifying major areas where findings are similar and where they significantly differ.

In Chapter 5, I discuss my findings in the light of prior research and identify to what extent the findings of the study conform to the existing body of literature as well as identifying new emerging themes.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### 5.1 OPENING

In this chapter, I discuss the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to each of my three research questions and in the context of the prior literature set out in Chapter 2. I also discuss new knowledge that has emerged from the study.

### 5.2 WHAT INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS FIND EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGING?

The emotional challenges encountered by the heads in this study mirror of the themes emerging from the literature but new ideas also emerge.

#### *5.2.1 RELATIONSHIPS*

The literature points to adult relationships as a common source of emotional challenge for school leaders. These may be relationships with superiors such as the, board and external authorities, relationships with subordinates in the form of staff or relationships with other community members, such as parents.

#### **Relationships with Staff**

The literature highlights three main areas in which relationships with staff may be emotionally challenging. The first is where a head experiences lack of support from teaching colleagues (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Freidman, 2002) or where staff members demonstrate lack of commitment to their work (Beatty, 2000). These difficulties are compounded when there are differences in values between staff and leader (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011).

The second is managing staff responses during times of change (Blackmore, 2004; Hargreaves, 1998; Brennan and MacRuairc, 2011). The study links these two areas together, as school leaders identify how a lack of support from staff for new initiatives becomes a focus for disquiet or confrontation between heads and their teaching teams. Some heads see this lack of commitment arising from differing values, possibly cultural, about the importance of work-life balance and general attitudes to change, which is more pronounced in Germany than in other countries they have worked. This fits with the literature, which identifies Germany as both a high uncertainty avoidance culture (Hofstede, 2016) and a society that values its work-life balance (OECD, 2014).

Whilst not prominent, the third aspect of staff relations highlighted in the literature is management of staff performance or staff discipline (Yarv, 2009). This is an area of great significance emerging from the study and it is therefore surprising that it is not more prominent in the literature. The management of underperforming staff or a staff discipline issue was raised by over half of interview participants. Furthermore, the emotive language used by heads to describe incidents and situations of this nature demonstrates how this is one of the most emotionally challenging areas of their work. Heads find operating within the strict confines of German employment law to be particularly demanding. Teachers are usually employed on permanent contracts in Germany, with no competency procedure for supporting or moving on underperforming staff. Heads describe unsuccessful attempts to mentor and coach struggling teachers to improve their practice, taking place over many months or years, with no option for dismissal. This is different to prior experiences in other contexts, especially Asia, where teachers are on short-term contracts. The involvement of

the Betriebsrat is seen as contributing significant additional stress for heads, unused to having their words, actions and judgments questioned.

### **Relationships with Senior Colleagues**

The literature offers little focus upon the relationships of heads and their senior colleagues but this is a significant, theme emerging from the study. Although only 25% of questionnaire respondents feel that relationships with senior colleagues are emotionally challenging, interview participants refer to them with much greater frequency. Situations discussed included direct conflicts with senior colleagues, such dismissal and reinstatement; working with weak senior colleagues; disagreements about the direction of the school and receiving poor support and advice from SMT members. Supporting senior colleagues during times of personal and professional crisis is also emotionally demanding for heads, bearing out Beatty (2000). These findings need to be balanced by the significant support participants receive from senior colleagues, which will be discussed later.

### **Relationships with the Board and External Administrators**

Benson (2011) and Hawley (1995) identify relationships with the board as a major factor influencing the turnover of international school leaders. Changes in board membership, board micro-management, differences with the board and board behaviour all impact on the length of head teacher tenure (Benson, 2003). The study bears this out. Heads find micromanagement by the board, especially relating to communication with other stakeholders, to be challenging and undermining of their ability to perform, bearing out Beatty, 2000 and Schermuly et al, 2011. Heads in the study also find lack of board honesty

and transparency to be challenging for them as well as working with fragmented boards, with inconsistent agendas.

Study findings demonstrate relationships with German education authorities to be a significant course of stress for heads. Participants have been surprised at the top down approach in one city, where the authority interferes in issues of curriculum and staffing. Heads find the attitude of authority inspectors to be hostile and unhelpful and the decisions they make to be often problematic, sometimes having a significant negative impact on the school community. Resolving issues, emanating from these decisions, is time consuming and draining.

### **Relationships with Parents**

Both the literature and the study agree that relationships with parents place emotional demands on school leaders. Over 80% of questionnaire respondents find relationships with parents to be emotionally challenging, while interview findings indicate that there may be a significant role for international school heads in the emotional regulation of parents, bearing out Crawford (2007). This will be considered in more detail later, in the discussion of transition. Parental challenges raised by heads in the study, match closely those arising in the literature, including dealing with angry and anxious parents during times of change (Blackmore, 2004); managing demanding parents (Freidman, 2000; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009) or those who challenge the head's authority (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Tucker, 2015).



### **Other Relationship Factors**

Balancing the needs of a variety of stakeholders and the ethical dilemmas caused by conflicting loyalties is a theme touched on briefly in the literature (Kelchtermans et al, 2011). The study, however, is rich with examples of where heads have felt conflicted in this way. These include dilemmas in balancing the needs of students against concerns for staff welfare in staff appraisal and discipline issues or where heads keep secrets from the wider community in support of senior colleagues or the board. Conflicts between staff and fee-paying parents may pose a greater dilemma for school leaders in the private sector, where parents expect a higher level of support from school leadership. Supporting staff during such conflicts poses significant challenges for heads in the study, as they risk losing a family from the school or the unhappy parents stirring up trouble within the community.

#### ***5.2.2 THE NATURE OF THE WORK***

According to the literature, the head teacher's job is filled with "*dirty work*" Beatty (2000). This may involve unpleasant tasks, which most human beings would find challenging. The study highlights several examples, including implementing a pay cut for staff; enforcing disciplinary action against a member of staff, despite a mental breakdown; leading a memorial service for a deceased member of the school community and facing a large meeting of angry parents unhappy with curriculum changes enforced by the local authority. What stands out in listening to heads describe these experiences, is the sense of responsibility that the majority of them feel comes with their role and how readily they accept the burden of performing these *dirty* tasks.

This, overdeveloped sense of responsibility (James and Vince, 2001), is borne out by the literature (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Kelchtermans, et al, 2011) may lead to heads feeling personally accountable for everything that goes on in school, even when it is beyond their control. Examples from the study include taking responsibility for new staff members relocating to Germany and overseeing the implementation of unwanted and unrealistic changes required by the education authority. This overarching sense of responsibility seems to be what defines many of the heads in the study and what drives them through difficult times.

Decision-making is an integral part of the head's work and a significant part of their role. The literature demonstrates that, for many school leaders, this aspect of the work can be emotionally demanding (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011; Gill and Arnold, 2015). Surprisingly, participants in the study do not report that they find decision making a challenge. Heads are able to reflect upon their decision-making, good and bad, quite objectively, analysing where they went wrong and what may be improved for the future. Others utilise tools before making hard decisions, such as the "*circle of stakeholders*" mentioned by one head, and some consult with colleagues, both inside and outside of school prior to making important decisions.

Both the literature (Beatty, 2000) and the study identify the role of community leader as a source of stress for heads. Leaders of international schools are expected to provide support for community members, outside what may be considered the boundaries of their professional role (Hayden, 2006). Heads in the study share examples of this, ranging from

supporting a teacher who suffered a miscarriage or the death of their child, to supporting the whole school community following a death in the community. Participants share how this role takes on a greater importance in international schools, where part of the population is living away from their home country and support network. The literature demonstrates how this blurring of the boundaries, between professional and personal, for school leaders may cause their own home life to suffer, as the demands of the role impact on the quality and quantity of personal time they receive (Ackerman and Ostrowski (2004)). This is supported by the findings of the study, with several heads sharing the impact that this aspect of the role has on their personal lives.

### *5.2.3 LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE*

The literature (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Gill and Arnold, 2015) outlines the fear that school leaders experience about their leadership performance. The study shows that endless public scrutiny and judgment is demanding for some heads, with ongoing scrutiny by staff and the Betriebsrat the most draining. Heads experience anxiety about perceptions of their competence by staff and parents and fear that their leadership skills may be called into question. One head shared how teachers judge her as an older woman, failing to take her seriously and implying she has nothing to offer. Another, less experienced head, shared perceptions of his own inadequacies and his fear that he is not up to the job and is at risk of being exposed. Ackerman and Ostrowski (2004) consider that for those heads whose personal identity is most intertwined with their leadership role, poor performance or doubts raised about their competence can be devastating. This is borne out by the study, where one participant shared how she cried for three days after being criticised by a teacher for being

uncaring. For this head, caring was a key element of her leadership style and to have this called into question damaged, not only her professional pride, but wounded her personally.

#### *5.2.4 ISOLATION*

There is a considerable amount of literature on the isolating nature of the school leader's role (Crawford, 2007; MacBeath, 2009; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Beatty and Brew, 2004; James and Vince, 2001; Gill and Arnold, 2015; Kelchtermans et al, 2011) and the damaging effects this can have. Findings from the study support this, with over half of interview participants expressing feelings of loneliness. MacBeath (2009) considers this isolation to be structural and the result of a lack outside support, coupled with a lack of colleagues within school in which the head can trust and confide. The different structure of international schools, with many schools having primary and secondary principals in addition to a head of school/director might be said to mitigate against this, with peers being readily available within school to share the burden, listen and give advice. Despite this, however, it is evident from the study that international school leaders still experience professional isolation, as relationship with senior colleagues may be problematic for a variety of reasons. What the literature does not discuss is the private loneliness of school leaders. This is a major new theme emerging from the study, not considered elsewhere. Whether this is something unique to international schools, where heads are less likely to have a network of family and friends outside of school to support them is worthy of further investigation. A small number of heads in the study describe devastating loneliness in their private lives, which they feel emanates from their role as a school leader. They share how their loneliness at work spills over into their personal lives, due to their inability to form friendships at work

and being incapable of forming new relationships outside of work, due to lack of time, lack of language to interact with the host community or poor social skills. This may be more significant for heads new to a country who have not had time to build social networks and who may be experiencing transition issues. Two heads in the study describe how attempts to make friends within the school community backfired on them, with one being shunned by staff on a social level and another forming unhealthy relations with parents that tested professional boundaries. One head describes her weekly massage to be the only human interaction she experiences outside of school, while another feels the social situation rendered his current post unsustainable for him in the long term.

#### *5.2.5 THE ROLE OF TRANSITION*

The transitory nature of international schools creates a unique environment as community members adapt to ongoing changes in their own lives and the lives of those around them (Langford, 1998). It is the postulation of this study that this transitory nature potentially impacts on a range international school stakeholders and provides challenges for international school leaders.

#### **The Impact of Transition on Internationally Mobile Families and Third Culture Kids**

For some families adjusting to an international move, the transition may be hard and crisis may result (MacLachlan, 2008). Children may experience a sense of loss (Dixon and Hayden, 2008, compounded by an unwillingness to form new friendships for fear of future loss (MacLachlan, 2007). This may impact negatively on their sense of identity, with children feeling unsure as to who they are (Gillies, 2003). This can be the cause of much physical and psychological pain (Dixon and Hayden, 2008) and may result in physical and mental health

problems (MacLachlan, 2007; Downie, 1976). It is not difficult to imagine how these factors may impact on the school environment and on the role of the school leader, responsible for the care of students in transition.

This is not supported by the findings of the study, however. Although interview participants discussed the transition of adult members of the community, at length, the transition of students was not an issue raised by heads in the study. While 50% of respondents to the questionnaire found relationships with students to be emotionally challenging, only 3% thought this was the most emotionally challenging group of stakeholders to work with. This is supported by the interview findings, where participants make very little reference to the challenging nature of relationships with students. The overriding impression from the research is that adult relationships are the most demanding and, whilst problems of student transition may well exist, they are not sufficiently demanding to merit a mention when heads are asked to discuss three or four challenging situations or incidents.

Internationally mobile parents experience their own transitional journey and challenges, including that of culture shock, at the same time as they are supporting their children through the transitional process (MacLachlan, 2008; Langford, 1998, Hayden, 2006). According to the literature, concerns about the welfare of their children may lead to profound guilt and fear in some parents (MacLachlan, 2008; Langford, 1998). Mothers may bear the brunt of this, as a move with their husband's job, to countries where they are not able to work, throws them back into the role of full-time wife and mother and forces them to place their careers on the back burner (MacLachlan, 2008; Langford, 1998). It is a premise

of this study that this can have potential to create emotional challenges for the school leader, as parents bring their transition issues into school.

There is evidence to support this in the study findings, where heads relate examples of difficult parent transition impacting on their work. Heads acknowledge how the school plays an important role in supporting the transition of internationally mobile families, taking on a significant role in their lives and supporting them through difficult times, in the absence of family support networks, bearing out Dixon and Hayden (2008), MacLachlan (2007) and Hayden (2006).

### **The Impact of Transition on Staff**

Several studies have identified transition issues for staff relocating to work in international schools (Roskell, 2013; Joslin, 2002; Odland and Ruzicka, 2009; Stirzaker, 2004). As with internationally mobile families, teachers face challenges as they seek to establish new personal and professional lives, in an unfamiliar context (Stirzaker, 2004). Pressure and strain created by the unfamiliar context (Roswell, 2013) and the failure of the new life to meet expectations, (Odland and Ruzicka, 2009) may all lead to dissatisfaction among new staff. I have argued that this can lead to emotional challenges for school leaders, as teachers bring their issues into school.

Although the study does not bear this out with specific examples, one participant refers to the potential issues of transitioning teachers and the responsibility she feels to recruit individuals that will be able to cope well with the transition. Although not a feature of the

literature, heads in the study refer to the important role played by the school community for staff working in international schools, similar to that experienced by expat families.

Participants share how staff members discuss very personal matters with them and seek advice and support during times of crisis.

### **The Impact of Transition on the Head**

The literature pays very little attention to the head's own transition but the impact of personal and professional transition on school leaders new to their post, is a major theme to emerge from the study. We know from the literature that the average tenure of international school leaders is short (Hawley, 2004; Benson, 2011) and it, therefore, follows that at any one time, a large number of heads are experiencing transition, as they take up new roles. Clearly, as an expat living and working overseas, transition has potential to affect school leaders in the same way as it does other internationally mobile employees (Hayden, 2006). This is, however, an under researched field.

Heads in the study refer to the emotional challenges that occur during the first few months of their tenure in a new role, often connected to their lack of experience in the context in which they are working or unfamiliarity with the school community. This in part, echoes Hayden's (2006) concerns about the lack of transferability of prior experiences of international schools heads as they move to unfamiliar cultural contexts. This includes language demands, which may impact on international school leaders during their first months and years in post. As board meetings or dealings with external bodies sometimes taking place in the host language, heads can be left to rely more on support from host



country administrative staff than they are comfortable with. Bearing this out, participants in the study found the difficulties of learning German placed extra pressures upon them in the early part of their incumbency, with lack of the local language also impacting on their feelings of personal isolation.

Hayden (2006) also highlights the difficulties international schools face in providing appropriate professional support for a new head teacher, as no one else in school has experience of headship. Boards members are busy, often with careers outside of school and the provision of support from within the staff raises issues of confidentiality. While one head mentions receiving excellent professional support from a very experienced senior leadership team, another refers to receiving poor support from senior colleagues, which led to misguided decisions during their transition.

While the international school literature acknowledges these difficulties in professional transition for heads, there is no mention of the potential challenges outside of the work domain. For some study participants, the personal challenges they faced during the first year in their new post was of great significance, either because of their own inability to form social connections or the poor transition of their spouse. One head found his inability to socially adjust spilled over into the work domain, impacting upon his work adjustment. , bearing out Hasleberger et al, 2014. Another found his spouse's poor adjustment crossed over into his own, also echoing findings in the literature (Black and Stephens, 1989; Takeuchi et al, 2002; McNulty, 2012). For both of these participant heads, factors relating to their personal adjustment had a huge impact on them, their ability to perform their professional

duties well, their personal happiness and their perceptions of the long-term sustainability of their appointments.

#### *5.2.6 THE ROLE OF CULTURAL DISSONANCE*

The work of Oberg (1963) and others (Lysgaard, 1955; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963) demonstrates how those visiting new countries or transitioning to a new life may experience *culture shock*, which may lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings and cultural dissonance between the visitor or expatriate and members of the host country. The later work of Hofstede (2003), sets out to establish a framework for better understanding this dissonance in organisational settings. Hofstede's five dimensions of culture, adapted and developed by later theorists (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997; Dimmock and Walker, 2010), have been used to examine cultural differences encountered in multi-cultural educational settings (Fail, 2004; Shaw, 2001; Hofstede, 2010; Dimmock and Walker, 2010), including international schools.

These examinations focus mostly upon the different attitudes and approaches to school leadership and teaching and learning between western, Anglophone cultures and those in the Far East, in countries like Japan, China and Singapore and the misunderstandings and dissonance these may cause within and across all groups of stakeholders. It is a postulation of this research that this complex mix of cross-cultural interactions presents an emotionally challenging environment for the school leader.

It is clear from the findings of the study that heads perceive there to be elements of cultural dissonance in their schools and that situations arising from this may be emotionally demanding for them. The majority of the dissonance reported, relates to differences between staff and the school leader. There is evidence that the head brings with him/her a set of expectations, based upon his/her own, western Anglophone, cultural background or experiences developed while working in other cultures around the world, which may be at odds with the culture of the school.

Heads in the study report staff in their schools to be averse to change and feel that this is connected with different attitudes to change within the German culture. Even where the majority of teaching staff in school are not German nationals, it is felt that a more German attitude to change pervades the organization and heads are frustrated by the slow pace of change in their German schools. In Hofstede's research ([www.geert.hofstede.com](http://www.geert.hofstede.com)), Germany scored high for uncertainty avoidance, both generally and when compared to countries such as the USA and UK, where the majority of the heads in the study originate.

*"Germany is among the uncertainty avoidant countries (65); the score is on the high end, so there is a slight preference for Uncertainty Avoidance. In line with the philosophical heritage of Kant, Hegel and Fichte there is a strong preference for deductive rather than inductive approaches, be it in thinking, presenting or planning: the systematic overview has to be given in order to proceed...Details are equally important to create certainty that a certain topic or project is well-thought-out."*  
(Hofstede, 2016)

Heads have also found that their decisions and approaches to work come under much greater scrutiny, by both the staff and the Betriebsrat, than they were used to in previous roles. As a much more participatory leadership style is expected in their current schools,

some heads have had to develop new skills in this area. This is also supports Hofstede's findings.

“Highly decentralised and supported by a strong middle class, Germany is not surprisingly among the lower power distant countries (score 35). Co-determination rights are comparatively extensive and have to be taken into account by the management. A direct and participative communication and meeting style is common, control is disliked and leadership is challenged to show expertise and best accepted when it's based on it.”  
*(Hofstede, 2016)*

While the UK and USA have similar power distance scores when compared to Germany, the combination of high uncertainty avoidance with low power distance may produce a context that is very different to that in participants' home countries or countries where they have held prior leadership posts. Many of the heads in the study have a background of leading international schools in middle and Far Eastern countries such as the UAE, China, Korea and Thailand where power distance relationships are very different. Heads also find that strong workers' rights in Germany, in the form of permanent contracts and the absence of formal procedures to dismiss incompetent staff, have had a negative impact on their work. This may also be explained by low power distance relationships in German organisations, leading to higher levels of employee rights than heads have previously encountered.

Heads also mention the direct and hurtful way that teaching staff speak to them at times, not only scrutinising leaders' work meticulously but feeling able to pass comment and criticism openly, contrary to the expectations based on the prior experiences of heads.

Hofstede explains the impact of the high individualist nature of German society on its approaches to communication.

*“Communication is among the most direct in the world following the ideal to be “honest, even if it hurts” – and by this giving the counterpart a fair chance to learn from mistakes. (Hofstede, 2016)*

The individualist nature of German society is also in direct contrast to the collectivist approaches employed in schools in the middle and Far East, where many heads have previously served. In these cultures, loss of face brought about by confrontation, is to be avoided at all costs, and communication is likely to be more subtle and complex (Dimmock and Walker, 2010).

Finally in this section, heads in the study point to the importance for staff of work-life balance. In their opinion, this can lead to lack of commitment to the school and students and is in direct conflict with heads’ own approaches to their work and those they have experienced on other contexts. This is contrary to Hofstede’s findings ([www.geert.hofstede.com](http://www.geert.hofstede.com)), where as a masculine and restrained (low indulgence) society, German people place a lower value on leisure time and *“live in order to work”* (Hofstede, 2003). However, Hofstede’s findings are in direct contrast to the findings of the OECD Better Life Index 2015 (OECD, 2014), which shows Germany to be 7<sup>th</sup> of 36 industrialised countries for work/life balance, based upon the percentage of employees working very long hours and the percentage of daily time spent on personal care and leisure activities. The OECD survey finds only 5% of German employees work fifty or more hours per week, compared to the 13% OECD average and that workers spend 64% of their daily time on personal care and leisure activities, slightly above the OECD average (OECD, 2014 and bears out the findings of my study.

Although much less commonly mentioned, heads in the study also find there are elements of cultural dissonance between themselves, or their teaching staff, and students or their families. Much of the literature relating to these relationships, (Fail, 2004; Shaw, 2001; Dimmock and Walker, 2010) compares high power distance/collectivist cultures in the east with low power distance/individualist cultures in the west and the misunderstandings or dissonance that may develop as a result of these differences. While one head refers to a situation where students and families from Asian and African cultures were afraid of an Australian member of the teaching staff, who exhibited an over-familiar approach, perceived as aggressive by those used to a more formal and respectful style, this kind of dissonance was not commonly mentioned by heads. What was mentioned more often, however, was a dissonance between heads and local German parents, mostly in relation to behaviour management. In AGIS schools, heads find parents sometimes more likely to side with the child, rather than supporting school leadership in such matters, which matches the findings of Allen (2000), in relation to low power distance cultures. The direct approaches to communication preferred in German society, already mentioned, may also have an impact here, with school leaders perceiving German parents as more likely to voice concerns and complaints than they may have come to expect when working in other cultures, particularly the Far East where parents are much less likely to confront head teachers.

### 5.3 THE CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACTS OF EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES ON SCHOOL LEADERS

According to the literature, the emotional challenges that heads face bring emotional consequences that impact on their personal and professional lives. Heads most commonly feel anxiety (Beatty, 2000; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011), anger (Beatty, 2000; James and Vince, 2001), frustration (Yariv, 2009; Crawford, 2004), vulnerability (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004), isolation (Gill and Arnold, 2015; James and Vince, 2001), fear (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Beatty, 2000), self-doubt (Gill and Arnold, 2015), disillusionment (Johnson et al, 2005) and upset or sadness (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Johnson et al, 2005). This parallels the study where heads express feelings of frustration, annoyance, anxiety, worry, fear and lack of worth. Heads also talk, sometimes at length, about their feelings of isolation and loneliness, both professionally and personally.

According to the literature this constant barrage of emotions can lead to heads feeling stressed (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009; James and Vince, 2001), suffering from problems with their sleep (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Johnson et al, 2005) and feeling tired (Gill and Arnold, 2015; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009). Heads in the study also expressed feeling stressed, exhausted and suffering from sleeplessness as well as feeling pressure, being under emotional strain or feeling emotionally drained, leading to an inability to switch off or relax. The literature sets out how head teachers manage their emotions by engaging in emotional labour (Crawford, 2007; Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011; Beatty, 2000), which may lead to

emotional exhaustion (Schermyly et al, 2011; Friedman, 2002) and burnout (Friedman, 2002; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009). Similarly, heads in the study confirm they engage in emotional labour, in order to maintain the professional face expected of them. The literature sets out how heads experience a blurring of their personal and professional lives (Blackmore, 1995; Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009), borne out by participants in the study, who confirm this. Some, however, go further to describe a complete absence of a personal life, sometimes over a period of many years.

Participant heads also describe the overwhelming nature of the emotional challenges they face, much more strongly than is found in the literature, referring to the depletion of their resources and feeling close to breaking point. Health concerns also take on a greater significance than in the literature, which outlines briefly how school leaders may suffer ill health consequences (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009). Study participants discuss periods of low-grade ill health during times of high emotional stress, including *“warning signs”*, such as eye twitching and high blood pressure. Some also refer to concerns about the long-term sustainability of their leadership role in relation to health.

Where the findings of the study and the literature differ the most significantly in this section, is in relation to the extreme emotional reactions some heads experience in response to severe and acute emotional challenges. Heads describe reactions such as crying for five days, feeling *“sick in the stomach”* or *“like someone had smacked me in the face”* or *“kicked me in the stomach”*, being rendered *“unable to speak”* or *“not knowing what to do with myself.”* Also descriptions of cumulative or longer term challenging situations as being *“the hardest*



*thing I have ever done in my life” and “experiencing more stress in a one year than in the last ten years put together,”* demonstrate the serious impact that chronically challenging situations can have on school leaders.

## 5.4 COPING WITH THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES

In Chapter 3, I identified the Resilience Capabilities Model (Lucy et al, 2014) as a framework for considering the resilience of school leaders and the strategies they use to enable them to cope with the challenges they face. Prior research identifies several strategies that may be analysed in the context of this five-part model. These include gaining perspective by engaging in reflection and drawing on challenging experiences as a form of professional growth (Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Zembylas, 2007) or taking time away from the school environment (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011; Kelchtermans et al, 2011); drawing upon connections, by seeking support from others, both inside and outside of school (Pratt Adams and Maguire, 2009; Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011) and managing emotions as a form of emotional intelligence (Brennan and MacRuiarc, 2011; Ackerman and Ostrowski, 2004; Crawford, 2007).

Heads in the study bear out these findings to varying degrees. Reflection and growth come across as a strong coping tool for participants in the study, with many able to reflect upon a situation rationally and consider how they might improve their leadership practice in the future. For some, such reflection came mostly in the period immediately following a crisis and sometimes involved the support of mentors and colleagues. Here the willingness to learn and develop as leaders was clearly apparent. While not commonly mentioned, some

heads find time away from school, attending courses and conferences to be a useful coping tool, while others mention taking a walk outside of the school environment during the working day in order to gain perspective. In line with the literature, heads in the study engage frequently in emotional labour, controlling their emotions, even during very difficult encounters, in order to maintain an air of control and professionalism.

Participant heads also rely upon connections to help them cope by seeking the support of others, particularly senior colleagues, both inside and outside of school. This is for some tied in with attending courses and conferences, where meetings with other school leaders can take place and heads feel able to relax and share their problems in a safe environment. The importance of senior colleagues, as a source of support, is possibly of greater significance in international schools, where there is likely to be a larger senior team, than in other schools. Surprisingly, only one interview participant refers to seeking support from family or friends, although this was more commonly mentioned in the questionnaire responses. Many heads seem to prefer not to take their work problems home with them and find greater support from colleagues within the profession than from personal and social networks. This may also reflect a paucity of personal, social networks available to internationally mobile heads. It is worth noting that the only participant head to mention having a large social circle is the longest serving in her current role, who has lived in the same city for over 20 years. This is in stark contrast to a small number of others, who describe a miserable, lonely personal life, devoid of social interactions, and to the majority of interview participants, who made no mention of friendships at all. It should not be surprising that internationally mobile

individuals, on mostly short-term appointments, who spend the bulk of their lives at work, and are unable to draw on work colleagues socially, have few friends.

The five-part model of Lucy et al (2014) refers to the importance of managing physical energy, through taking exercise, healthy eating and proper relaxation. Surprisingly the literature relating to school leaders makes little reference to this. This may be because heads' commitment to their roles and the long hours they work leaves little time for relaxation and leisure. By contrast, heads in the study find their personal time to be important in helping them to cope with the demands of the job, although many find it hard to carve out this time, either during the working day, in the form of a lunch break, or in the form of work free evenings and weekends. A small number of heads mention exercise such as swimming or running as a useful strategy, while an equally small number refer to hobbies such as cooking, having massages or watching DVDs. Only one mentions an activity involving socially interacting with others (singing in a choir), with most engaging in solitary pastimes. Sleep was also found to be a useful coping tool for a few heads in the study, as was alcohol, although heads mentioning this were conscious that this was not a healthy or long term coping solution.

In line with the *Resilience Capabilities Model*, some participant heads share how strong values and a sense of purpose or self-belief are important in helping them to cope with the challenges they face. Such factors allow heads to be clear about the actions they should take, even in the face of staunch opposition and make coping with the fallout of difficult decisions easier to handle. This sometimes involves rationalising the decision making process

or going into what one head called “*problem solving mode*”, putting emotions to one side and focusing upon what needs to be done to move beyond a crisis.

Absent from either the model of Lucy et al (2014) or the general literature is the role that experience plays in enabling heads to cope with demanding situations and incidents. Heads feel that coping becomes easier as they become more experienced, both professionally and personally, as experience increases the chance of having previously encountered similar situations or incidents. Being able to draw upon these experiences was a great help and comfort for some heads.

## 5.5 CLOSING

In this chapter I have discussed the findings of my study in relation to the three main research questions and in the context of prior literature in the field, identifying both where the findings bear out the literature and where they do not. I have also pinpointed new knowledge that has emerged from my research in relation to each of the three research questions.

In the following conclusions chapter, I will provide an overview of this thesis and identify the most significant points arising from my findings, discussing in detail how my research contributes new knowledge to the field and may in turn inform future practice.

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 OPENING

In this chapter I conclude my thesis. I begin by reviewing the purpose of the research and then address the key findings in relation to each of the three research questions, identifying new knowledge that has emerged from my study. I move on to consider how this new knowledge may inform practice and make recommendations for the future. Following this, I consider the limitations and strengths of the study before discussing possible areas for future research in the field and making a concluding summary.

The purpose of this research has been to use an interpretive, mixed methods approach to explore the lived experiences of international school leaders, working within the context of AGIS schools, in relation to the emotional challenges they face in the course of their role; the impact these challenges have on their professional and personal lives and the coping strategies they employ. The study has focused on three main research questions.

1. What are the emotional challenges faced by international school leaders as part of their role?
2. What are the consequences of these challenges and how do they impact on heads' personal and professional lives?
3. What strategies do international school leaders employ to enable them to cope with the emotional challenges of their work?

I will now summarise the key findings and conclusions in relation to each of these research

questions.

## 6.2. WHAT ARE THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS AS PART OF THEIR ROLE?

The findings demonstrate that heads in the study face a wide range of emotional challenges as part of their role. Many of these challenges are similar to those experienced by head teachers in a range of contexts outside of international schools, while some may be more specific to the international school context. A small number of challenges have emerged from the study as being most significant to heads within the context of AGIS schools. These are

- Difficult relationships between the head and teaching staff.
- The professional and personal isolation of head teachers.
- The professional and personal transition of the head during the early part of incumbency.
- The pressures experienced by heads in their role of community leader.

Prior research shows that adult relationships play a key role in emotional challenges of the school leader's role (Crawford, 2009; Harris, 2007). My study demonstrates that, while relationships with other stakeholder groups are a sources of emotional strain for AGIS heads, it is the relationships with teaching staff, particularly interactions involving staff performance management, staff discipline and change management that international school heads find the most demanding. Heads in the study find managing staff relationships more demanding in the German context than other contexts they have experienced. This may be due to a range of

factors, including the stronger employment rights afforded to staff in Germany, including the role of the Betriebsrat in upholding employees' rights; the perceived aversion to change of many of the staff they lead, creating conflict between teachers and leader; the high participation culture in the German workplace, with staff expecting to be fully involved in the decision making process; direct and frank approaches to communication and a significant emphasis being placed by staff upon work-life balance. For many heads in the study, all or some of these factors clash with the expectations they have brought with them into AGIS schools and are in stark contrast to their prior experience in different contexts across the world, particularly in Asia.

Professional isolation is acknowledged as being a significant problem for school leaders (Crawford, 2007; Beatty, 2000), where a lack of internal and external support for heads leads to "*structural loneliness*" (Macbeath, 2009). This is no less the case for AGIS heads but, for some, this may also be compounded by significant personal loneliness, as they experience a lack of opportunities to develop social relationships. This may be due to the need to separate personal and professional relationships in school; language difficulties and lack of personal time, as a consequence of long working hours.

For many members of an international school community, the move to a new school is a difficult time, fraught with issues of *culture shock* (Oberg, 1963) and transition (Schlossberg, 1981). For many heads in the study, the transition to their current role has been a significant cause of emotional challenge for them, as a move represents not only a move to a new role

and school but a to new city and, usually a new country. Most are not proficient in the German language upon arrival and have little prior experience of German culture. The emotional struggles these heads have encountered in trying to reconcile their own professional expectations and priorities with those of the school community, particularly those of staff, during the first year or two in post, is a strong theme emerging from the research. The learning curve is steep for any new head teacher but for AGIS heads, working within an unfamiliar physical and cultural context, this is perceived as particularly so. This is compounded for some, by issues of personal transition, as they deal with loneliness in their private lives or may experience pressure to support their family undergoing their own transition.

Finally, head teachers are community leaders, playing a key role in emotionally supporting and guiding their flock (O'Connor, 2006). For leaders in the study, this aspect of the role takes on a much greater significance in international schools, where a large part of the community is living away from their wider support network, creating a greater role for the school role in caring and supporting its stakeholders. For many of the eight interview participants, while this part of their role may be very rewarding, it proves a significant source of emotional strain. The support of individual families and teachers during times of personal difficulty, as well as support of the whole school community during major crises is a part of the role for which heads often feel unprepared.



### 6.3 WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF AND IMPACTS OF EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES ON SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES?

Heads taking part in this study experience a whole range of emotional consequences emanating from the challenges they face, which lead some to emotional exhaustion and at times feeling close to breaking point, as well as suffering ill health warnings. What is perhaps unexpected is the severity of the emotional consequences AGIS leaders experience, which they often couch in dramatic language, and the significant cumulative impact of chronically challenging times, which lead some to worry about their health and question the sustainability of their role in the longer term.

At the time of the interviews, one of the participants had recently moved from a more senior role in her school to a less demanding role, citing the emotional challenges of the job as the catalyst for this change. Since the interviews took place, three other participants have moved on from the roles they held; two taking less senior roles in new schools, following short sabbaticals, and the third taking a longer sabbatical before returning to an equally senior role. At interview one head expressed the desire to move to a less demanding role upon the completion of his daughter's schooling and another is hanging on for retirement in two years. Only one of the eight interview participants expressed the view that her current role was sustainable long term.

### 6.4 WHAT STRATEGIES DO INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS EMPLOY TO ENABLE

## THEM TO COPE WITH THE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES OF THEIR WORK?

The literature demonstrates that head teachers employ a range of coping strategies, which I have examined using the framework of resilience capabilities, developed by Lucy et al (2014). These include gaining perspective, by taking time away from school and utilising reflection for the purpose of growth; drawing upon connections for support and employing emotional labour as a form of emotional intelligence, in order to manage emotions and maintain professional face. For AGIS heads, gaining perspective, drawing upon professional connections and utilising emotional intelligence are each important coping strategies. What is notable is the lack of reference made to personal support from friends and family, especially among interview participants, which may reflect their lack of personal support networks in Germany. In addition, heads in the study draw upon their purpose, values and strengths, rationalising and problem solving during difficult times. They also seek ways to manage personal energy, through engaging in exercise, hobbies and interests outside of school, although for most, these are solitary pastimes rather than opportunities for social interaction.

## 6.5 DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

These findings leave us with a picture of AGIS school leaders exposed to significant and multiple sources of ongoing and for some, relentless emotional challenge. While leaders in the study experience similar challenges to heads in wider contexts, within AGIS schools they also encounter additional demands that may be more specific to the AGIS context. The research confirms my earlier postulations that many of these specific challenges relate either to the

transitional nature of international schools or to the differing cultural expectations found within international school communities. What is interesting, is how much of the emotional challenges heads experience arise from their own cultural assumptions and the expectations they bring with them to the role and also to their own transition issues, rather than those of others. While the emotional fallout associated with the ongoing transition of families and staff does impact on heads, of much greater significance is their own transitional journey; the difficulties some have building personal relationships, learning the language and developing a social life outside of school. While the mix of cultures within school may lead to cultural dissonance between groups of stakeholders and individuals, it is conflicts brought on by dissonance directly between the head teacher and others in the school community that are most marked. These conflicts result, in the main, from a clash between the expectations the head brings into school and those of their staff. The head's expectations having developed from a blending of their own cultural mores and those they bring with them from previous posts, often in Asia.

These differing expectations may, at least in part be due to the impact of German culture on AGIS schools. According to Hofstede (2003), German culture represents a combination of low power distance, individualism, high uncertainty avoidance with direct and honest approaches to communication and very high levels of worker participation, all of which are likely to impact on the workplace. There is some evidence (OECD, 2014) that the importance of work-life balance for German employees may also impact on their approaches to work. These key values may represent significant contrasts between German culture and the culture of Anglophone

western countries, from where the majority of AGIS heads originate, as well as contrasting with eastern countries where many heads have worked prior to arriving in Germany.

While some of the difficulties that AGIS head teachers face when encountering the German cultural context, may make their job harder, it can be argued that many of the challenges they experience are at least partly of their own making, caused by a lack of understanding or appreciation of the cultural context in which they are operating and a belief that their approach to leadership and school improvement, underpinned by their own cultural mores, is the best approach.

In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed possible links between head teacher stress and both head teacher performance and the length of their tenure, and examined the potential importance of these factors for school effectiveness. It is clear from the findings that the emotional challenges AGIS heads encounter in the course of their roles lead to significant stress, which may deplete their resources and lead to ill health. The extent to which this stress impedes their performance at work is not clear but what has emerged is a potential link between stress and the tenure of heads in their current roles. The findings show there is concern among AGIS heads about their ability to sustain the pressures of their roles long term and also provides evidence of some heads leaving their posts after short incumbencies of one, two or three years, with others are waiting for opportunities to move to less demanding roles elsewhere.

There is no doubt that school leaders involved in the study are resilient. Despite experiencing

ongoing and considerable stress, they show up to work each day, sometimes overcoming significant personal hardship, in order to fulfil their responsibilities and support their community; a community that may be unaware of the emotional challenges faced by their leaders and the impact this has on them. The range of coping strategies that they employ, may not, however, be adequately reducing the impact of the stresses they encounter to allow for successful and sustained leadership experiences. The model of Lucy et al (2014), provides a potentially valuable tool to assist Heads in developing a greater understanding of resilience and how this may be developed to support their physical and mental well being and in turn help them sustain their leadership. How this tool may be utilised will be discussed in the next section.

## 6.6 INFORMING FUTURE PRACTICE

While practical steps may be taken to reduce some of the demands experienced by AGIS heads, other challenges are inherent in the role and the only prospect for improving the head teachers' experience is to support them in developing their personal resilience capabilities. I will begin this section by considering the practical steps that may help lessen the demands placed on AGIS heads and then explore how head teacher resilience may be improved.

For head teachers, conflicts with teachers in relation to performance management, staff discipline and change management are unlikely to diminish, while for AGIS heads the cultural context that serves to exacerbate these conflicts will not change. What may be improved is the approach of school leaders themselves when approaching a role in a new cultural context.

Raising international school leaders' awareness of the cultural baggage they bring with them

to each new role, and providing support to enable them to better understand the cultural context they are entering, may help reduce the levels of cultural dissonance in AGIS schools. Awareness may be increased through a greater focus on cultural factors in international school leadership courses and workshops; while culturally specific training and cultural mentoring/coaching could be provided by regional organisations, like AGIS or by schools themselves. In Thailand, for example, all teachers are required to complete a comprehensive Thai Language and Culture course, provided by their school, before being granted a full teacher licence. Heads also need to take more responsibility for their own cultural preparation and development, prior to and in the early stages of their incumbency; seeing this as a priority and actively seeking opportunities to improve their cultural awareness, including language training.

School boards need to be more aware of the potential for both professional and personal isolation of their heads and the impact this may have on them. In larger schools, in-house procedures should promote greater collegiality and support from within the senior leadership team or the board, to ensure that all school leaders have mentors they can turn to for support. Time for team building within the SMT and opportunities for heads to get to know each other and spend time together outside of the school environment should be provided. A greater emphasis should also be placed upon developing and supporting membership of regional and local networks of head teachers and improving the opportunities they offer for mentoring and support, with adequate time being provided for heads to meet with colleagues and build relationships.

Boards also need to be made more aware of the potential pitfalls of professional and personal transition for heads and ensure that there are procedures in place to fully support them. For these procedures to make a real impact, board and senior leadership teams need to take a genuine interest in the transition of their new leaders. Most international schools provide induction programmes for new teachers but provision for new heads seems much less common. The appointment of a transition mentor/buddy from within the senior leadership team or the board should be standard procedure but to my knowledge is rare. More attention also needs to be paid to the personal transition of heads and their families that goes beyond helping them to find housing, and should include support to build social connections outside of school. This could be achieved by appointing individuals, within the school community or relocation professionals, to introduce heads and their families to a range of social activities, clubs, gyms etc. This support needs to be ongoing, with regular follow, in order up to establish what further support is needed, beyond the first few weeks. Schools should also consider prioritising language support for both head and spouse to reduce social isolation, with lessons scheduled during the school day for heads, or financial support for lessons for both head and spouse included as standard contractual arrangements.

Helping AGIS heads to develop greater resilience capabilities may take many forms. Developing relationships with other heads, both inside and outside of school, as discussed above, can assist head teachers in gaining perspective and building connections as well as providing opportunities to be honest about their challenges and receive emotional support. Boards have

much to offer heads in ensuring they are managing personal energy effectively by acknowledging the need for a proper work-life balance. Working heads into the ground with excessive evening and weekend events; reducing school leaders' holidays to 30 days per year, as is standard practice in Germany, and expecting head teachers to be available to answer phone calls and emails 24/7, all spreads their inner resources very thin. Instead boards should consider actively encouraging heads to have the balanced life that is held so precious by German society at large; include gym or sports club membership as part of the remuneration package; ensure heads take sufficient holiday to allow them to recharge fully and limit the number or length of evening meetings and weekend commitments.

Much emphasis in this section has been placed on school boards and senior leadership teams but school leaders need to take responsibility for their own resilience, seeking opportunities to become more aware of what resilience is and how to develop it. Despite the concept of resilience being very much part of the zeitgeist over the last few years, very few heads, in my experience understand much about what resilience involves. The work of Lucy et al (2014) has potential to provide an effective and practical tool to assist Heads in better understanding the concept of resilience and how an individual's resilience can be improved, through a focus upon developing the five resilience capabilities. Since completing my research, I have had some success in supporting this process, through the delivery of workshops focused upon developing resilience in school leaders, using a modified version of the Lucy et al (2014) model. I plan to move towards resilience coaching with middle leaders in my own school, preparing them for future senior leadership roles.



Resilience training and coaching should be viewed by Heads as just as essential to their practice as a higher degree, and by boards as a key element in the support that they provide to leaders of their schools. This has potential to have a significant impact on head teacher performance and the sustainability of leadership in schools.

## 6.7 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This is a small study of 34 questionnaire respondents and eight interview participants all working in AGIS schools as head teachers. The extent to which the findings and conclusions are transferable to other contexts outside of AGIS schools is open to debate. However, given the paucity of prior research into the emotional challenges faced by international school leaders, the study does provide a basis upon which a bigger picture may be developed through further research. The strength of the study lies in the thick descriptions provided by the interview participants, who speak very frankly about the emotional demands they encounter in the course of their roles. In my opinion, my position as an insider researcher, working with participants known to me, has contributed significantly to the quality and richness of the data produced by this study. Despite the potential drawbacks of using autoethnography, in this case, I would argue, it has lent itself to high levels of trust between interviewer and participant and enhanced the interview experience, encouraging participant heads to speak freely about their lived experiences and emotions.

New understandings that have emerged from this study about the emotional challenges AGIS

school leaders face, the consequences and impacts experienced and coping strategies utilised now need to be explored with larger numbers of participants and in a wider range of international school contexts worldwide. The findings in relation to both the personal loneliness of international school leaders and the personal transition problems of new international school heads, are other areas that would be well served by additional research as the issues arising from these are unexplored and have potentially serious implications for head teachers and their employers. Finally, it would be beneficial to further explore the extent to which the emotional demands of the role may be connected to the rapid turnover of international school head teachers in a range of contexts.

## 6.8 CLOSING

What emerges from this small-scale study is a picture of highly stressed head teachers whose stress is brought about, at least in part, by the emotional challenges they encounter in the course of their roles. Some of these demands may apply to head teachers in all contexts, while others may be specific to international schools. Both the differing cultural expectations at play within the community and the professional and personal isolation leaders experience, present them with significant challenges, which are magnified during a head's transition into a new post. These factors combined with the head's community support role represent considerable demands unlikely to be encountered in other contexts. These demands lead to a range of consequences and impacts for heads that may include the inability to sustain their roles over long periods of time, pointing to evidence of the need for increased support for heads and the development of improved resilience capabilities. This can be done through a

range of initiatives and approaches to reduce the pressures heads are under and to provide them with strategies to improve their resilience. These have implications, not only for training providers and school boards but also for head teachers themselves, who must take on responsibility for improving their own cultural awareness and building their personal resilience.

## 6.9 A FINAL WORD

As a final word, I came into this research as an experienced but stressed international school head teacher, somewhat surprised by the additional emotional demands I perceived came with my role as an AGIS head, compared to prior international school leadership roles. From casual conversations and observations of colleagues around me, I felt sure that I was not alone in this. I knew that the head teacher's role was a demanding one, both home and abroad, but I also suspected that there may be factors relating to working within the international school context, and specifically in Germany, that may bring additional or different pressures to bear on school leaders, although I was not sure what these were exactly. I am not surprised, therefore to learn, upon completion of my research, that others have noticed the same and that many of their stories reflect very closely my own experiences. What has surprised me is their openness and the trust they demonstrated in me by sharing their stories. I am saddened by the loneliness, misery and desperation that some of my colleagues shared and the fears they voiced about the long-term health implications of working and living under the stresses they described. They are a dedicated and passionate group of individuals, who care very much about their communities. Whilst they should take more personal responsibility to minimise

their stresses and build their resilience capabilities, they deserve to be equally cared for and supported, to enable them to sustain their roles without the huge personal costs they are currently experiencing. I hope that this research will help to raise awareness of their needs and lay the foundations for further studies in the field.

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## APPENDIX 1.

### SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Leading an international school is emotionally challenging work.
2. Leading an international school is more challenging than leading another type of school.
3. Working with people from other cultures is emotionally challenging.
4. Living in a country outside of my home country is emotionally challenging.
5. Working with students at my current school is emotionally challenging.
6. Working with parents at my current school is emotionally challenging.
7. Working with teachers at my current school is emotionally challenging.
8. Working with senior colleagues at my current school is emotionally challenging.
9. Working with the Board at my current school is emotionally challenging.
10. Working with administration and ancillary staff at my current school is emotionally challenging.
11. Working with local government or other outside agencies at my current school is emotionally challenging.
12. Which of these groups do you find the most emotionally challenging to work with in your current school?
  - Students
  - Parents
  - Teachers
  - Senior colleagues
  - The Board
  - Ancillary and administration staff
  - Local government or outside agencies
13. How often do you encounter events or situations that are emotionally challenging at work?
  - Daily
  - 2-3 times per week
  - Weekly

- 2-3 times per month
- Monthly
- Less than monthly
- Other (please specify)

14. Write down 5 words or phrases that describe how you feel when you encounter events or situations that are emotionally challenging at work.

15. Evaluate the following statements:

- There have been times when I have felt close to breaking point due to the emotional challenges in my current post.
- When I experience emotionally challenging events or situations at work, it helps that I have confidence in my own abilities as a school leader.
- Dealing with people at school whose educational or personal values are different to my own can be emotionally challenging.

16. Evaluate the following statements:

- When I experience events or situations that are emotionally challenging at school, this impacts negatively on my work.
- When I experience events or situations that are emotionally challenging at school, this impacts negatively on my personal life.
- When I experience events or situations that are emotionally challenging at school, this impacts negatively on my health.
- When I experience events or situations that are emotionally challenging at school, I hide my emotions from the staff.
- When I experience events or situations that are emotionally challenging at school, I seek support from my senior colleagues.
- When I experience events or situations that are emotionally challenging at school, I seek support from colleagues outside of my school.
- When I experience events or situations that are emotionally challenging at school, I seek opportunities to get away from school such as attending conferences and

workshops.

- Leadership training or other professional development has helped me to cope with the emotional challenges of my work.
- Healthy lifestyle choices help me to cope with the emotional challenges of my work.
- Networks outside of education, such as family and friends, help me cope with the emotional challenges at work.
- Hobbies and interests outside of education help me to cope with the emotional challenges at work.
- I would value more professional development to help me cope with the emotional challenges of international school leadership.

17. Please give details of any other strategies you have for coping when you experience emotional challenges at work.

18. Evaluate the following statements:

- When I experience emotional challenges at work, I reflect on how I might do my job better.
- When I experience emotional challenges at work, I bounce back quickly.
- Emotionally challenging experiences at work help me to become a better leader.

19. In which country are you currently working?

20. How many years have you been an international school leader?

- Less than 2
- 2-5
- 6-8
- 9-12
- More than 12

21. Are you

- male
- female?

22. How many years have you been in your current role?

23. What is your current role?

- School Director/Head of School
- Head of Primary/Elementary Principal
- Head of Secondary/High School Principal
- Head of Middle School/Middle School Principal
- Head of Early Years/Early Years Principal
- Other (please specify)

## APPENDIX 2.

### QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT INITIAL EMAIL CONTACT

Dear AGIS Colleagues

I am currently studying for the Ed.D at the University of Birmingham, UK and working as Primary Principal at Berlin International School. I would am conducting a study into the emotional challenges that we face as international school leaders, the resulting impacts we experience and the strategies that we employ to cope with these challenges. It is hoped that the research will help to inform school heads, school boards and training providers of the needs of school leaders in this area and lead to better support being provided.

The study will take place in two stages-a questionnaire survey of all AGIS school leaders, followed by an interview stage of a small number of willing participants identified at the questionnaire stage.

As an AGIS school leader, I would like to invite you to take part in the questionnaire stage of the study. This is an online survey and should take less than 10 minutes to complete.

- Participation is entirely voluntary.
- Following completion of the questionnaire, you may withdraw your data from the study up to the deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2015.
- All information shared with me is strictly confidential and will only be used for the purpose of my research.
- Your identity will not be linked to the questionnaire data you provided in the presentation of the research.
- All data will be stored electronically. It will be protected by complex passwords, which cannot be accessed by anyone but myself. The university requires that data be stored for a period of 10 years, after which it may be destroyed.

In order to access the survey, please click on this link [[SurveyLink](#)]

If you have any difficulty accessing the survey, please let me know.

*CONTACT INFORMATION*

Name: Helen Kelly

Email: 

*FURTHER INFORMATION*

This study has received ethical approval as part of the ethical review process of the University of Birmingham, UK.

Many thanks and best wishes

Helen Kelly  
Primary Principal  
Berlin International School

## APPENDIX 3.

### INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

*International Schools as Emotional Arenas-coping with the leadership challenges in a German context*

#### **The Researcher**

I am the former Primary Principal of Berlin International School undertaking the Ed.D. course at the University of Birmingham in the UK. I am researching into the emotional impact that leading international schools in Germany has on school leaders for my final Ed.D thesis.

#### **The Research Description**

The main purpose of the research is to gather data from existing school leaders working in Association of German International Schools (AGIS) member schools. Data has been collected through a questionnaire survey of AGIS school leaders, in which you took part recently. It will be followed up with interviews with a small number of school Directors/Heads and Principals. The focus of the research is to investigate the emotional demands and challenges encountered by international school leaders and the impact this has on their personal and professional lives. It is intended that the research will be of value to the international school community in helping to establish the particular emotional challenges and demands faced by their school leaders and so raise awareness and enable support for school leaders to be improved. It is also hoped that the study will be of value to those who train international school leaders, informing them of training needs.

#### **Invitation to Participate**

As a school leader in an AGIS member school, I would like to invite you to participate further in this study by taking part in a face-to-face interview.

Please note the following relating to the interview

- The interview will be conducted with me.
- It will take place at a time and place to be agreed between us.
- The interview will take about one hour to complete.

- A sound recording will be made of the interview and a typed transcript produced, by myself following the interview.

In the interview I will ask you to recall three or four situations/incidents or types of situations/incidents, which you have found emotionally demanding, or challenging in your current role. You may talk in specifics or more generally if this makes you more comfortable. It is hoped that the conversation will be collegial and supportive.

### **Your Rights**

- Participation is entirely voluntary.
- You are free to withdraw from the study, at any time prior to the interview.
- Following the interview, you may withdraw your data from the study until a deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> July 2016.

### **Confidentiality/Anonymity and Data Security**

- All information shared with me is strictly confidential and will only be used for the purpose of my research.
- Your anonymity is guaranteed. Your identity will be protected and neither you nor your school will be identifiable in the final research paper.
- All data will be stored electronically. It will be protected by complex passwords, which cannot be accessed by anyone but myself. The university requires that data be stored for a period of 10 years, after which it may be destroyed.
- You and your school will be assigned a code name for the purpose of storage and sharing of the raw data with members of the university.

### **Contact Information**

Name: Helen Kelly

Email: 

### **Further Information**



This study has received ethical approval as part of the ethical review process of the University of Birmingham, UK.

## APPENDIX 4.

### THEMATIC TABLES

<b>Sources of Emotional Challenge</b>	
<b><i>1. Relationships with staff</i></b>	
-Supporting staff with professional/personal problems	P4-lost baby P5- child died P5 -Senate
-Poor relationships/confrontations	P6-no love in primary school P6-East German women P3-no support from staff P1- staff meeting over salary P5-written warning
-Change management	P3-curriculum P4-early years P5-staff revolt
-How head perceived/competence	P3-lack of clarity about job role P8-board dishonesty impacting P7-senior colleagues P5
<b><i>2. Relationships between staff</i></b>	P5 P1-violent incident
<b><i>3. Staff performance management and discipline</i></b>	P4-incompetent teacher P6-deputy head P2-drunk staff P5-written warning and incompetent staff P1-staff hit child
<b><i>4. Relationships with senior colleagues</i></b>	P2-sacked P7-pressure to perform P6 –deputy incompetent P5-poor advice and support
<b><i>5. Relationships with board</i></b>	P8-dishonesty P1-unrealistic P5-poor transparency no trust
<b><i>6. Parent issues</i></b>	P4-transition P2-cyberbullying P8-very angry parents P5-behaviour management P2-curriculum changes

<b>7. Cultural differences</b>	
Employment rights/Betriebsrat	P5-BR scrutiny P2-BR with drunk teacher P1-general P6-permanent contract P4-permanent contract
-Work life balance	P3-different outlook to head P6, P5
-Staff/leadership relations	P3-hierarchy unexpected P5-different expectations
-parental expectations	P2-cyberbullying P5-behaviour P4-transition issues
-change management	P3, P4, P5
<b>8. Transition issues</b>	
-Head's own transition	P7-wife not settling P3- made no friends, lonely P5-issues in first few months/professional transition P1-issues in first few months/professional transition
-Transition of staff	P4-staff having no support network P1- supporting them
-Transition of parents	P4-angry parent P1-makes reference to it
<b>9. Lack of similar prior experience</b>	P7, P1, P5, P4
<b>10. Awareness of own weaknesses</b>	P7
<b>11. Issues with education authority</b>	P5-inspection of teaching P8- curriculum changes and interference
<b>12. Feeling isolated/lonely/not understood or appreciated</b>	P6-personal isolation P3-personal isolation P1, P2, P5
<b>13. Sense of being responsible for everything</b>	P1, P6, P5, P8
<b>14. Community leader/support</b>	P5-death of child P8-community murder P4-miscarriage

<b>Consequences and Impacts of Emotional Challenge</b>	
<b>Health impacts</b>	
• Tired/Exhausted	P1
• Twitching eye	P8
• Colds	P8
	P5

• Worry about long term health	P1
Unable to sustain long term	P3, P8, P6
Feeling overwhelmed	P3
Emotionally drained	P6
More stress than in the last 10 years	P8
Stress	P8, P6, P5, P7
Frustration	
Anger	
Feeling responsible	P1, P6, P8
Feeling judged, scrutinised	P5, P2, P7, P6
Anxiety	
Feeling isolated or lonely-personal and professional	P3, P6, P1, P5
Hiding real feelings-emotion management	P2, P8, P6
Taking it personally	P6, P2, P3
<b>Coping Strategies</b>	
Taking a break • Free time • Conferences	P1, P8
Support from colleagues inside school	P4, P3,
Support from outside networks	P1
Support from home (only questionnaire respondents)	
Exercise-running, swimming	P1, P8
Leisure time-cooking, choir, massage, DVDs, yoga	P2, P3, P6
Alcohol	P1, P8
Sleep	P5, P7
Reflection and improvement	P6, P3, P5
Values-circle of stakeholders	P1
Sense of purpose/problem solving	P8

