No Regrets?

Starting secondary headship

Starting as a headteacher of a secondary school was one of
the most profoundly challenging experiences this researcher
has faced. How then, do new heads start to tackle their role?

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1. Introduction

"I wanted to undertake this research because starting as a headteacher of a secondary school was one of the most profoundly challenging experiences of my life."

Becoming a headteacher of a secondary school was one of the most profoundly challenging experiences of my life and certainly the most challenging of my career. This was the case despite the fact that I felt I had a number of significant factors working in my favour in terms of both my preparation for headship and my early experience of the post. In teaching, the most interesting questions are always the ones where the teacher is not sure of the answer. So it was with this research; why do people want to become headteachers, what prepares them for the job and how do they tackle it when they start? My own experience made me very keen to learn more about the answers to these questions. My own understanding of the issues was fundamental to my approach to whole project, and so I did not feel confident to include primary headteachers in my research. I also decided at an early stage to restrict my enquiry to those embarking on their first headship.

My own experience has shaped both the purpose and the methodology of this research. I think I first seriously considered becoming a headteacher about ten years after I started teaching. I attended a very early conference about the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) in Somerset where most of the other delegates were heads or deputies, and I felt a lot less out of place than I might have done. I moved from being a head of department to an advisory teacher in order to see how I would measure up to the challenge of working with teachers rather than directly with pupils. It was this challenge that most attracted me to school leadership.

I became a deputy headteacher in Norwich in 1989 and certainly saw that post as a stepping stone to headship. I was fortunate to be appointed by a head who was committed to real delegation of authority and to have two very talented deputy colleagues, both of whom subsequently became headteachers. I have always tried hard to learn from the example of others. In 1992 I took part in the programme run by the National Education Assessment Centre, one of the outcomes of which was the provision of a mentor head from another school to assist in my preparation for headship.

For the last seven years I have been the headteacher of Tarporley Community High School in Cheshire. The school was certainly doing well when I started, having clearly been skilfully led by my predecessor. The governors were knowledgeable, patient and supportive. I benefited from having two very accomplished and experienced deputies. I inherited a wonderfully dedicated and loyal staff. The network of Cheshire secondary heads is a strong one and the LEA arranged for a mentor head who was a great help to me. The school's LEA phase adviser proved to be a true critical friend. Compared to many of the heads I interviewed I had some important advantages in starting headship. Indeed there are a few who could reasonably claim that my situation should have been a bed of roses. But it was not; there were times when I found the responsibility terrifying and the pressures enormous. There are times when I still do.

A. Methodology

"This enquiry sought to capture the personal experiences of recently appointed headteachers."

In attempting to explore the personal experiences of recently appointed headteachers, it was necessary to ask open-ended questions and to engage with the participants' responses in order to probe for further explanation and to seek clarification. For these reasons a semi-structured, face-to-face interview was used as the mode of enquiry. A copy of the interview schedule is included as Appendix One. The interview was pre-tested with a headteacher who was not part of the sample group and minor changes were made.

In order to secure the agreement of heads to take part, it was considered best to make the initial approach through a personal contact. Friends of the researcher who work in education, (an LEA adviser, a professor of education and two experienced headteachers), were briefed about the project and they then contacted newly appointed heads in their areas on the researcher's behalf. This contact was followed up by a formal letter, explaining the purpose of the project and the nature of the co-operation that was being requested.

This strategy for access to a suitable sample proved to be successful, since only two out of 21 heads who were approached declined to take part. The sample group consisted therefore of 19 headteachers from six different LEAs; two in the Northwest, two in the Southwest, one in the Midlands and one in the Southeast. Whilst it would have been impossible to ensure that a group of this size was statistically representative of new headteachers throughout the country, the geographical spread, the mix of urban, suburban and rural locations, and the range of schools included suggest that the heads interviewed were, as a group, typical.

The willingness of the heads involved was not only reflected in their initial acceptance but in the way they ensured, almost without exception, that the interviews were conducted without interruption for an extended period and in the frank and open way they responded to the questions. The fact that the heads did not shy away from dealing with issues of a sensitive or delicate nature – their experience of stress, difficulties with governors, the mistakes they felt they had made – gave me confidence that they had felt able to respond honestly. The guarantees they were given of anonymity and confidentiality were very important in this latter respect. The guarantees given in the introduction letter were painstakingly restated at the start of each interview. Care has been taken in this report to protect the anonymity of the participants; it is for this reason that neither the LEAs nor the friends who facilitated the contacts are named. In the main body of the report the identity of individual headteachers is protected by a code which substitutes fictional forenames for their real names.

Consideration was given to the issue of triangulation. Ideally interviews would have been conducted not only with the heads but with others in a position to verify their answers or supply a different perspective. These others might have included a range of people; the previous headteacher colleague of the participants, governors or members of staff in the heads' new schools, representatives of the LEA etc. Extending the project in this way was a practical difficultly for the researcher given limits on time and resources, but also, may well have compromised the willingness of the heads to participate. In the event the reliability of the data lay in the obvious frankness of the discussions with interviewees, the careful interview procedures, and in the researcher's own experience of the issues discussed.

B. The Headteachers

Participants were asked to supply a curriculum vitae in advance to assist with preparation for the interview. These CVs together with the results of the interviews, enabled this brief profile of the heads to be compiled.

- There were five women and 14 men amongst the 19 interviewees.
- The average age at which they had been appointed to headship was just over 45 years.
- Three had been appointed to headship before the age of 40, three had been appointed after the age of 50.
- All the heads had previously been deputies, two of them had had two different posts as deputies.
- Nine of the 19 had periods as acting heads during their deputy-headship.
- Six of the 19 had been appointed to the headship of the school in which they had worked as a deputy.
- The average length of time spent as a deputy was nearly seven years, there was a wide variation in this respect: five had spent four years or less as a deputy, but six had spent ten years or more.
- Ten of the heads had worked in a total of four schools, seven had worked in three and two in five (these figures include the schools in which the interviewee became headteacher).
- Five of the heads came from a scientific subject background, five were historians; no other subject was represented more than twice.
- Five of the 19 had worked in an advisory capacity, three of these for a substantial period.
- Eleven had masters degrees and 13 had completed the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH).

It was not the intention to gain access to a group of heads that would be statistically representative of the entire population of new headteachers, so the figures highlighted above may not be significant. Nevertheless the complexion of this group would seem to raise a number of questions which others might find worthwhile to pursue.

- Is the average age at which heads are being appointed rising or becoming more variable?
- Is it becoming more common for headteachers to be internal appointments?
- Is it becoming more common for deputy-headteachers to have experience of acting-headship?
- Are teachers of certain subjects more likely than others to become headteachers?

2. Ambition for Headship

"Doing the job demystified it."

A. At what point in their career did the heads become attracted to the notion of headship?

i. Early ambition

Very few of the heads interviewed had embarked on their teaching careers with the definite intention of seeking to become headteachers, only two out of the 19 could be placed in this category. This was not unexpected; future heads are most likely to be drawn to the activity of teaching itself and thoughts of leadership or management, especially at a whole-school level, may have little or nothing to do with their original career choice.

There are exceptions;

"From the moment I started teaching I knew I wanted to be a headteacher, I've always had a very clear mindset on my career". (Ian)

"From the start I wanted to reach the top, I'd always preferred to lead than be led." Neil

Of the remaining 17 heads, only two others suggested that the thought of headship had been there from early in their careers; Helen suggested that with a father and two uncles who had become heads it was hard to avoid entirely the notion that this might also be her fate. She was the only head who referred to the influence of family members but she was also clear that, as a practical ambition rather than an unsubstantiated aspiration, the notion that she might follow in the footsteps of her relatives did not take hold until after she became a deputy. Ed cited the example shown by a head, whom he regarded as outstanding both at the time and with the advantage of hindsight, in explaining his early attraction to headship:

"At quite an early stage of my career, working with a very good head who talked about it as if it was the most natural thing to happen in my career. He was one of the best people I have ever worked with, there was somebody to whom I could relate who did the job, as distinct from seeing someone who would make you think why would I want to be that kind of person."

Besides explaining why the seeds of headship ambition were sown in his first teaching post, this quotation is significant in the weight it gives to existing heads as role models for those who may follow them. This is the theme of the next section of this report where it will become apparent that Ed was comparatively fortunate and that many of those interviewed saw heads who very definitely did not make them feel that 'they would like to be that sort of person'.

ii. Late converts

Whilst it was not a surprise that most of the heads took some time to develop the ambition for headship, I had not expected that so many would indicate that only *after* they had become deputies did they think seriously about moving on to headship. Ten out of the 19 fell into this category with the remaining five indicating the desire for headship as dating from some intermediate point in their careers, not there at the outset but present before they became deputies.

Ambition (and potential), for headship is commonly seen as an important criterion for appointment as a deputy but the answers given to this question suggest that a significant number of deputies when appointed are not at all sure they want to become heads. Why is this? When Bob said that he did not 'have a back of the envelope life plan', he was clearly speaking for the majority of those I interviewed. Some of the heads seemed uneasy about admitting this. As Ruth put it: "When it comes to staff development it's a matter of do as I say, not as I do."

Career progression to subject leadership seemed to be quite straightforward for many of the heads but the step to deputy was viewed with reluctance by some, anticipating the loss of the subject focus and the faculty/departmental team. Having overcome that reluctance, where it existed, a number of the heads also seemed to be intimidated by the confidence factor in looking beyond a deputy headship. Emma put this clearly: "I need to know I can do a job before I can even entertain doing it." This raises the prospect of potential heads becoming trapped in a Catch 22 situation; not applying for the job because they need to do it first.

Taking on the headship in an acting capacity is perhaps the only way that this self-defeating cycle could be broken. Mary, who indicated that it was not until she embarked on NPQH that she gave serious thought to becoming a head, had a similar point of view: "I'd literally gone from step to step as I felt able to move on and my determination came from gaining the necessary confidence." Presumably this determination could easily have wavered if something, or someone, had undermined her confidence.

iii. A very late convert

Perhaps the most striking answer to this question was given by Jane who confidently asserted that as a deputy she had considered her workload, her family responsibilities and the prospect of having to do NPQH, and come to the firm conclusion that she didn't want to become a head, only then to have the job thrust upon her in tragic circumstances. She had then felt able to confidently, and successfully, apply for the job on a permanent basis because 'doing the job demystified it.' It is easy to see how a job that is frequently characterised as lonely and isolated, and that is routinely invested with the power to determine the quality of education that a school provides, could take on the aspect of mystification for other teaching staff, and that this mystification could extend to deputies, especially in schools where the head is not really committed to a team approach. It is clearly not helpful to headteacher recruitment if the popular view of the post is that only miracle-workers need apply. Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham summarise this perception of the head as:

> "The skilled classroom practitioner plus curriculum leader, plus technical expert, plus all the manifestations associated with being the figurehead and with being 'in control' of the whole mechanism of the school all the time."

So whilst there are deputies who approach that role reasonably confident that it is a stepping stone to headship, (this applies to about half of those interviewed) this research suggests that there may be a sizeable proportion for whom this cannot be assumed. Four of the five women headteachers interviewed are quoted on this point. Not too much significance can be read into this from a small sample, and there were male heads who also did not have their sights set on headship when they became deputies, but the confidence factor may be contributing to the under-representation of women amongst the ranks of heads. Candidates may feel obliged to project this confidence at interview for a deputy-headship but when given the chance to confidentially review their path to headship they will admit to serious doubts. Ironically their commitment to critical self-reflection is likely to be an important asset once they become heads.

B. What prompted the ambition to become a headteacher?

Inviting participants to say why, rather than when, they wanted to become a headteacher posed a significantly more difficult question. Psychologists would caution against the complexity of trying to uncover individuals' motives for their actions, even when these actions are comparatively simple. This question could have probably provided the subject for the entire interview. Not surprisingly a number of those interviewed found it difficult to give a clear answer. In analysing what they did say I have given most weight to the heads' immediate responses, but I would not wish to pretend that this is the basis for drawing firm conclusions about their reasons for seeking to become heads. This is surely an area for further study.

C. Being the boss

Most of the heads suggested that greater control over decision-making or a desire to exert more influence was their motivation for seeking headship. Twelve of the 19 responses fitted this description. This was true for those who had always been committed to headship, Ian said: "As a deputy your responsibilities are delineated and you still feel that there are quite a few things that you can't have a final say on."

But it was also the case for those whose ambition for headship had come much later. James felt: "I was starting to have some impact as a deputy but saw I could have more control as a head." In a number of cases the desire for greater control or influence was linked to frustration at the decisions made by others. Frank was clearly still riled some years after a specific instance: "I got very annoyed, I wanted to be in a position to take those decisions, not have them imposed upon me, I was no longer content with the power that I had within the institution." Of the three heads who had advisory experience two felt that they could be more powerful by working as a head. "Accountability second-hand was very frustrating," said Ruth.

Tom, having been acting head, felt frustrated by the limitations of the new head who came to take the post on a permanent basis: "I liked him, but I could see him making mistakes that I would have avoided but was powerless to prevent."

D. Influence

Some of the heads did not seem to see a need to extend their answer beyond a desire to become more powerful, but others quickly moved on without being prompted to speak of what they wanted to use their greater influence to achieve.

"I was prompted by the belief that I could make a greater difference to young people as head, I'd come in to teaching with a radical agenda about the power of education to transform the lives of young people, that's what I want to be about as a head." (Henry)

"The thing I really enjoyed was implementing initiatives through other people and developing those people." (Mike)

"I wanted a headship to have the authority to shape a school with the vision of a curriculum differentiated to meet the needs of all students." (Mary)

There were a few heads who, when asked what kind of a 'greater difference' they wanted to make, were not able to articulate this and thereby left the impression that having greater control or influence was an end in itself.

E. Driven by values

There were four heads whose first response was about their educational beliefs rather than about their careers.

"I just fell in love with the idea of how a school could be integral to its community." (Ed)

"I have always had a passionate interest in teaching and learning and a commitment to professional development.." (Helen)

"I have always had very clear educational values which relate to my own experience as an 11+ failure, what I remember articulating at my PGCE interview is still there." (Bob)

"An unhappy experience in a selective authority made me even clearer about what a comprehensive school can do." (Phil)

It seemed that for these heads articulating why they wished to become heads was primarily linked to their enduring educational values which would underpin their work whether they were heads or not.

F. Shades of grey

A possible classification of the responses to the second part of this question would be to place them on a continuum, with those heads who appeared to indicate that having greater control or influence was their primary motivation lying at one end, and those driven by the strength of their values at the other. Between the two would be those who wanted the greater control or influence in order to be better able to change schools in particular directions.

For the sake of completeness there were three heads whose answers did not lend themselves to this classification. One described the process of becoming a headteacher but persistently sidestepped the question of why he had wanted to become a head. Two heads, including Jane referred to above, had little option but to take on the acting headships in the schools where they were deputies and both gave the impression that it was out of commitment to these two school communities that they then applied successfully to become the permanent post-holders.

There is currently considerable emphasis placed on educational values in the literature on school leadership, eg Day *et al* (2000):

> "Findings from this book have demonstrated that effective leadership is defined and driven by individual value systems rather than instrumental managerial concerns."

In the light of this there may be some significance in the fact that only a small minority of those interviewed, spontaneously articulated their values when asked about their motivation for becoming headteachers.

G. Summary

Perhaps the most secure finding in this section relates to the first question; unless these headteachers are a quite unrepresentative group, it would seem to be quite rare for a teacher to start out in secondary education committed to the ambition of becoming a headteacher. Even when research is focussed on those who have succeeded in reaching that position, the majority have only committed themselves to the goal of becoming a head at a relatively late stage in their careers.

Is education atypical in this respect? Would it not be the case that senior positions in industry would be filled by those who have been initially recruited on to management training programmes? This is not to suggest that there is not promotion from the 'shop-floor' in industry but in education this is the only source of supply. Other public service occupations may be similar to education. The introduction of the fast-track entry scheme to teaching may change the picture, although not for a considerable period of time, and the advanced skills teacher role may have the opposite effect by persuading some of those with the potential for headship to stay with their subjects.

The picture that emerges here is of a group of people who, because many of them were not driven by a career plan towards headship, could easily have been deflected or diverted from that goal. Many of the heads interviewed have benefited from being given encouragement or opportunity at a crucial point in their professional lives. As will become apparent in the next section the critical intervention most often came from an existing headteacher. Without this they might have remained as heads of subject, believing whole-school leadership to be less rewarding or too demanding, or stayed as deputy headteachers, not confident of their ability to take the next step. How many potential headteachers do not receive that crucial encouragement or opportunity at the time they need it?

Talented and committed people can make huge contributions to secondary education without becoming headteachers. It is important to recognise this and not underestimate the importance of other positions of leadership in schools. Nor is it the case that those who are intent on headship from the outset would necessarily become the best heads. Whilst Tesco's area directors were probably not drawn to retail management by shelf-stacking or the check-out counter, in educational leadership, shop floor commitment, a passionate commitment to children's learning, should be a fundamental criterion for advancement. The point to emphasise is that with the shortage of candidates for headship and the casualty rate amongst those doing the job, we cannot afford to 'lose' en route, people capable of doing the job well. We may need some way of reaching out to those who might not put themselves forward.

3. Role Models

> "He was innovative and visionary with very powerful interpersonal skills. I have consciously tried to emulate some of his strengths – management by walking about, always acknowledging people, smiling relentlessly."

A. How did the headteachers of schools in which the new heads worked influence their perception of the job? In what way?

What does it mean to be a headteacher? Is the head a visionary educator, a team captain, a skilful problem-solver, a chief executive, a cheer-leader for staff morale, a leading professional, a resource manager, an ambassador for the school, an effective agent of change, a political operator, the guardian of moral purpose or something else that is missing from this list? Is the head meant to be a chameleon, capable of being several different things at once? Does the nature of headship depend on the school's circumstances? Is a newly appointed head necessarily a different kind of creature from an experienced one? What is meant to be the balance between management and leadership?

The literature on school leadership reflects a great diversity of view in seeking to capture the essence of being a headteacher. In the previous section I quoted Day *et al* who conclude that values are at the heart of educational leadership. Fullan (1992) also gives vision the pre-eminent position:

> "If there is a spark of genius in the leadership function at all it must lie in this transcending ability, a kind of magic, to assemble out of all the variety of signals, forecasts and alternatives – a clearly articulated vision of the future that is at once single, easily understood, clearly desirable and energising."

Macbeath (1998) offers six alternatives, including descriptors that put vision and values at the centre of school leadership:

1   Leadership means having a clear personal vision of what you want to achieve.
2   Good leaders are in the thick of things, working alongside their colleagues
3   Leadership means respecting teachers' autonomy, protecting them from extraneous demands.
4   Good leaders are pragmatic, they are able to grasp the realities of the political and economic context and they are able to negotiate and compromise.
5   Good leaders look ahead, anticipate change and prepare people for it so that it does not surprise or disempower them.
6. Good leaders are informed by and communicate, clear sets of personal and educational values which represent their moral purposes for the school.

How do aspiring heads come to terms with all this? Making some personal sense of the job, even if the picture is not clearly defined or constant, is surely essential to wanting to do it in the first place and then making a success of it.

It seemed likely that what new headteachers believed the job to be about would depend to some degree on the examples provided by heads with whom they have worked previously in their careers. The 19 heads interviewed described no less than 60 headteachers who they felt had influenced their perception of the role, despite being encouraged to be selective and disregard those whose impact had been slight. Many of the participants were able to offer a detailed analysis of the leadership style and effectiveness of several heads, including those whom they had seen in action at an early stage of their career. Frequently these analyses were provided in the most animated manner, with non-verbal communication that seemed to emphasise the extent to which these heads had left their mark.

The 60 headteachers described by the interviewees were classified according to how positive the references to them were. This produced the following breakdown:

Reference	No
Regarded as inspirational	5
Clearly positive	15
Ambivalent	20
Clearly negative	20

i. The inspirers

A small number, only one in 12, was described in a way that seemed to justify the use of the adjective inspirational. The following quotes indicate views about the inspirational effect:

"Very strong on values, a self-effacing man with a strong community ethos and commitment to staff development. He was very comfortable with the notion of power and very rarely would he need to say just do it because I say so." Ed

"She best epitomised the leader head, very strong on values, very clear about her own frailties, in her I saw what my own headship would aspire to." (Mike)

"He was a very supportive coach, a natural chairperson, who invested a lot of trust in colleagues and exhibited a strong commitment to high standards." (Ruth)

"He was innovative and visionary with very powerful interpersonal skills, I have consciously tried to emulate some of his strengths – management by walking about, always acknowledging people, smiling relentlessly." (Henry)

"He had a clear vision, he was a team player and an enabler who recognised his own limitations but put the right people around him, I quickly felt that's how I would like to operate." (James)

Unsurprisingly vision and values are both evident in these descriptions. It is also interesting to note that three heads picture their inspirational head as a modest person. Modesty is one of Brighouse's (1994) seven characteristics of good leaders, and there were other instances of interviewees picking out this trait in positively regarded heads. Incidentally, Brighouse also rates optimism highly, even when it is unwarranted, so he would also approve of the relentless smiler. Modest leaders dispel the myth of omnicompetence, they are more naturally disposed to teamwork, probably make better delegators and understand the crucial distinction between confidence and arrogance.

There is another dimension to these inspirational heads that is worth highlighting. Three of the five are seen as being particularly strong in the development of their colleagues. This was a recurring tribute paid to a substantial number of other heads who, whilst perhaps not being viewed as inspirational, certainly came in the category of 'clearly positive':

"She exhibited professional trust, she was a true delegator and allowed people to grow." (Bob)

"He was prepared to invest great time in people and was very good at feedback, he was willing to tell me when he thought I was getting something wrong, I'd not had a lot of that before." (Jack)

"He was very good at striking the balance between freedom and advice, he was always watching without it being obvious and he let me make mistakes without interfering. This is something I've picked up from him which is often talked about but which is very hard to do." (Tom)

Given that the interviewees were keen to progress their own careers, they would be expected to value this characteristic highly, but it does seem to be fundamental to leadership in terms of getting the best out of staff. Sufficiently important to merit making an addition to MacBeath's list:

"Good leaders are skilful teamworkers who, recognising their own limitations, delegate effectively and nurture the professional development of their colleagues."

ii. The negative models

Looking at the other end of the scale, there were 20 heads who were clearly regarded in negative terms. In most cases they were characterised as simply lacking in some crucial aspect of leadership. This does not mean they did not serve as role models:

"My most valuable lessons have been seeing people get it wrong – being disorganised and inconsistent – and the stress that has put on others." (Ruth)

"His insularity, apparent lack of interest in staff development and innovation – used that to model how you don't go about the job." (Phil)

"She showed by default the importance of publicly acknowledging the efforts of staff, when I do this I aim to bring tears to their eyes." (Dan)

A lack of leadership was reflected in a number of different ways:

"He created no sense of a school community." (Dan)

"Staff would joke that he needed a map to find his way round the school." (Neil)

"There was a paralysis of decision-making, he would devote inordinate amounts of time to trivialities." (Ian)

"He was remote and lazy, he became largely an irrelevance." (Frank)

"He was ineffectual and created a leadership vacuum in the school." (Emma)

Both Frank and Emma commented on how a deputy headteacher filled the gap created by the ineffectiveness of the head and how this person served as a role model instead for them.

iii. The autocrats

There were a number of headteachers about whom the interviewees had mixed feelings. In most cases their style appeared to have been autocratic. The word bully was used on four occasions, in two of these the head was unreservedly condemned:

> "He was a bully whose effect on staff morale was immense, it was a traumatising experience to see friends and colleagues blown apart." (Mike)

> "She had to control everything, she created a climate of fear and if anyone made a mistake she would never forgive them. Staff were so scared it was getting in the way of their teaching." (Neil)

Mike and Neil were very clear about the devastating consequences for their school of these heads. But in the other two instances the bullying style of the head was linked to raising standards in the schools:

> "The new head was a classic bully but he did have a vision for how to drive up performance." (Frank)

> "He was aggressive and threatening in his treatment of staff but I wouldn't say his style was counter-productive because the school needed it." (Ian)

There were a considerable number of other instances where the head was not characterised as a bully but was clearly not someone who was committed to consultation or consensus-building:

> "He was autocratic, staff could not express themselves." (Mary)

> "He was a shouter who did everything by the sheer force of his personality, it was difficult to say whether it was the school's success or his own ambition which he was motivated by." (Helen)

Mavericks were even more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt:

> "He was a charismatic maverick who would promote people on a whim and had a great talent for getting sponsorship for the school, he was succeeded by a technocrat, and the school ground to a halt." (Jack)

> "The first two heads I worked for were old-style mavericks, autocratic but they engendered the respect and loyalty of staff." (Ben)

Autocrats tend to have favourites and some of the heads interviewed were honest enough to admit that they had been given opportunities by a head who was in a hurry to make things happen. Alternatively the explanation for the ambivalent feelings about these heads may lie in the mystification of headship referred to in the previous section. At times the fate of the school and the style of the head may seem to be almost indistinguishable. Not so much a case of the ends justifying the means, more a matter of the ends and the means being subsumed by the head who appears to embody and control everything that the school is doing. Someone once said that football managers, another job which is surrounded by mystery, get too much of the credit when things go well and too much of the blame when they do not; perhaps the same applies to headteachers.

iv. From a closer perspective

Most headteachers would surely agree that the job leaves you open to a considerable amount of criticism but, even allowing for this, it seemed disappointing that so many of the heads described were seen in a poor light – a third of the total, the same proportion that were viewed positively. To analyse this further the references to heads with whom the interviewees had worked as deputies, rather than at an earlier stage of their career were classified separately. The results were significantly different.

Reference	No
Regarded as inspirational	3
Clearly positive	9
Ambivalent	5
Clearly negative	4

Now the number of heads seen as either positive or inspirational outweighs those seen negatively by a factor of three to one. It may be that as teachers reach more senior positions they are more aware of the difficulty of the job and are therefore more sympathetic in their judgements. Perhaps a factor of loyalty comes into play, although there was still some unequivocal criticism expressed:

> "As a head you need to model the behaviour you expect from others, he didn't and people had very little respect for him as a result." (Ruth)

It may be that the heads interviewed were applying today's standards to heads from an earlier era and finding them wanting. It may even be simply that the performance of headteachers is improving. Whatever the explanation for the difference, the difference is encouraging because the influence of those with whom the heads had worked more recently and more closely would presumably have been greater than the earlier models.

As a final way of trying to understand better the influence of role models on the heads interviewed, they were asked to study MacBeath's list and identify which of the descriptors they thought best fitted the headteacher with whom they had worked as a deputy. At the end of the interview they were asked which they felt best fitted themselves. The eighth interviewee assumed that he was also meant to indicate which descriptor least fitted both his previous head and himself. Subsequent interviewees were asked to do likewise. This explains why the numbers are lower in the least like column. There were also a small number of instances where interviewees felt it would be too much of a simplification to sum up either themselves or their previous head in this way. To assist with this difficulty the heads were allowed to cast a split vote between two of the categories.

	Previous Heads		Heads Interviewed	
	Most like	Least like	Most like	Least like
Visionaries	8	1.5	0	3
Team-mates	0	5.5	2	2
Protectors	0	0.5	0.5	2
Pragmatists	6	1.5	3	1
Anticipators	2.5	0	5.5	1
Moralists	3.5	2	7	1

There is a fairly clear pattern. The heads with whom the interviewees had worked as deputies were mainly visionaries and pragmatists, whilst the new heads were more likely to see themselves as moralists or anticipators. It would be tempting to suggest that in a situation of such rapid change the new heads are in danger of being polarised between a determination to second-guess the next bright idea from the DfES, or to hold fast to enduring educational values. It is striking that none of the interviewees characterised themselves as visionaries. Three of the new heads spoke explicitly of the difficulty they had with 'vision thing', Bob was certainly not alone in feeling:

> "To look ahead and have a clear vision of what you want to achieve and articulate that for others seems to me to be very difficult in an environment of constant change."

B. Summary

Headship can be a bewilderingly complex job. Whilst it is reasonable to expect that headteachers need the facility to be a different kind of head in different circumstances, there is a limit to the extent to which they can be constantly reinventing themselves. Before they can do the job well new headteachers need to make sense of what the job means. How far does this happen by seeing existing heads at work as those bound for headship move through their careers?

These interviews suggest that existing headteachers have a profound effect on those who will eventually follow in their footsteps. Given the opportunity to talk about previous headteachers with whom they had worked, the newly appointed heads spoke at substantial length, in considerable detail and often with great feeling about their influence as role models. How else do aspiring heads formulate a view of what the job is about? As will be apparent from the next section, the effect of their professional study is minimal by comparison. The analysis here suggests that the role model effect is a complex one; it is almost as likely that new headteachers will deliberately tackle the job differently from the heads they have seen at work, as seek to emulate them.

4. Preparation for Headship

> "NCSL must reject the concept of a single model of headship and aim for a person-centred approach by cultivating perceptive self-awareness. Is it within you to be this?"

A. How well did the heads' experience of being a deputy headteacher prepare them for headship?

i. Enabling heads

The factor most frequently mentioned in response to this question was the willingness of the heads, with whom the interviewees had worked as deputies, to provide opportunities for them to exercise real delegated authority for important areas of school life. This reinforces the point made about the importance of a commitment to staff development in the previous section on role models. In 11 instances the interviewee gave explicit credit to at least one of their heads as a good enabler and there were only two cases where this had clearly not happened. Two of the positive messages on this point:

> "I felt the head treated me as an equal much of the time, asking my opinion about important issues before he had made his own mind up, two other deputies had gone on from the school to be heads in the previous six years and I had my first interview for headship after only two years." (John)

> "I felt like I had a lot of autonomy over the curriculum, and managing that with a split site and a budget deficit was a huge intellectual challenge." (Phil)

"I was given lots of opportunities to expand my experience. When there was a problem with pupil recruitment I was trusted with finding the way to turn that round." (James)

Whilst Helen, in her second deputy-headship was grateful that her head allowed her a lot of freedom in relation to her areas of responsibility, she also had misgivings about his way of doing things:

"He was not good about holding me to account, there were times when I could have done with more feedback."

Mike needed to be assertive in his relationship with his headteacher:

"I needed to press for the opportunities. Once I had proved myself he was supportive to my aspirations and gave me valuable experience, e.g. working with governors and faculty oversight, but I'm not sure it would have come without me asking."

There were only two interviewees whose heads had clearly denied them the opportunities they needed to blossom as deputies. Ironically the failings of these two heads led to them leaving the post, giving both deputies the chance to take over as acting heads.

ii. First among equals

The practice of a hierarchical set-up with one deputy designated as being senior to the others seems to be falling, or has fallen, into disuse and was not mentioned by any of those interviewed. However, whilst there may not have been such a formal arrangement, a number of the interviewees felt that they had held a primary position compared to other members of the management team. In a number of cases this resulted from their having been the first senior appointment of a relatively new head with an agenda for change. There were clear instances of those I interviewed feeling that this situation was very significant to their development. For example:

"I was appointed 18 months after the amalgamation and we shared the battles to establish a more pupil-centred ethos." (Bob)

"I had the marvellous learning experience of successfully shifting the culture of a complacent and underachieving school in tandem with a new head, the other deputies were either unwilling or unable to assist in this." (Ben)

These comments point not only to the interviewee having been championed by the head but also to being closely involved with the process of cultural change within a school, a very valuable experience for headship which deputies might miss in a more stable environment with a well established headteacher in post.

There were other examples, similar to the situation referred to by Ben above, where the interviewee felt that he or she had benefited from the lack of ambition of their peers. Mike explicitly expressed this point:

"One of the other deputies covered a lot of the pastoral load, the other was a very capable administrator and this left me free to look at the bigger picture and do some of the more creative stuff."

Of course there were also cases where the interviewee was effectively the first deputy because there was no other deputy. Given the decline in the number of deputies it was perhaps surprising that this position was not referred to more than twice. Emma was positive about the scope this situation gave her and Dan felt it was quite critical to his development:

> "It was great to be the only deputy, standing in for the head when she was away really gave me a feeling of leading the school."

Dan's view is supported by the fact that he moved on to headship at the age of 38, the youngest of the interviewees at the time of appointment, and after only three years as a deputy, the shortest period of any of those I spoke to, between starting as a deputy and becoming a head.

iii. Acting heads

Nine of the heads interviewed had spells as an acting head whilst they were deputies, a higher proportion than expected. In five cases this experience was a precursor to being appointed as the permanent head within the same school. The opportunity to take over the reins temporarily was not always viewed with unalloyed enthusiasm, Tom gave some insight into the complexities of this situation:

> "I started out definitely as a caretaker not a candidate for the post, but after the school failed to make an appointment first time round I did apply but was not successful, so then I reverted to being a caretaker."

He clearly felt the three phases were different experiences, with the latter as an unsuccessful candidate being the most difficult.

Frank found himself as acting head after only one year as deputy, following the abrupt departure of the head in the wake of an OFSTED report that placed the school in the category of serious weaknesses, attributed to a failure of leadership. Frank did not apply for the post on a permanent basis, but benefited from a close partnership with the new head who arrived to turn the school around.

There were specific gains that were mentioned by others who had been acting heads:

> "Being acting head for two terms gave me valuable experience of boundary management and finance, also trying to manage my time in the face of all the multifarious demands upon it."
> (James)

> "During my time as acting head the school had a major building programme, I had to deal with staff disciplinary procedures, I learnt a lot about working with governors; it was invaluable."
> (Neil)

It is also worth repeating what was noted above, that the experience of being acting head was sufficiently positive for Jane to persuade her to reverse the decision she had previously made that headship was not for her. It is perhaps surprising that more of the heads did not ascribe greater significance to the opportunity to take on the acting role. Jane was the only one for whom it was really a decisive turning point.

iv. What deputies do

Having a range of responsibilities was a feature of the heads' experience as deputies but there was evidence that this had gone beyond a simple rotation of roles between members of the senior management team. Ruth expressed this point clearly:

"We operated a system that I have brought here, everyone had some strategic responsibility, some oversight of curriculum areas and year groups, and some administrative responsibility."

Not one of the interviewees complained that they had exercised no strategic responsibility. There were seven who emphasised curriculum development, not merely management:

"I had a lot of influence over the curriculum, not just the structure but also the learning styles." (Mary)

"I had a pretty free rein with the curriculum which had to meet the needs of pupils better. I worked on the creation of a teaching and learning policy and shifting the roles of middle managers who needed to exercise more leadership." (Frank)

There were three interviewees, including two of the ex-advisers, who felt that their curriculum experience was already considerable and whose wish for a pastoral emphasis was met:

"I knew that if I was going to be a head I had to have pastoral management experience and my head made sure I got that." (Jack)

Four of the heads interviewed had been entrusted as deputies with the preparation of a bid for specialist school status, another example of their heads being prepared to delegate a responsibility of major importance to the school. This clearly provided valuable experience for aspiring heads, who had to come to terms with development planning, matching resources to targets, drawing in a range of stakeholders and leading a project team. Even beyond this, specialist status involves a vision for the whole school. Mike grasped the importance of this dimension:

"I was given the job of leading the bid for language college status, which the head wanted only for the financial advantage. But for the bid to succeed I had to develop a shared vision about how specialist status would take the whole school forward, in conflict with the school's traditional ethos, this was a fascinating challenge."

There was only one commonly expressed reservation about the range of responsibilities that the interviewees had enjoyed as deputies; seven of them highlighted a complete lack of experience with the school budget. There was some evidence that even heads who were admired for their commitment to delegation, openness and teamwork made an exception of the school's finances:

"He kept those cards pretty close to his chest." (Jack)

"I particularly lacked experience with the budget and when I took over as acting head I found it in a mess." (Jane)

Personnel matters, and working more closely with governors, were both mentioned by three interviewees as other areas where they felt underprepared.

B. What opportunities for professional development were particularly helpful to heads in preparing them for headship?

The answers given to this question revolved mainly around the opportunity to gain a masters degree and completing the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH). There were references to other experiences, such as the opportunity to lead INSET and to serve on LEA working parties, but these were very few in number by comparison.

i. Masters degrees

Eleven of the 19 heads had completed masters degrees and their views about the effect on their professional development were strongly positive. Three of the heads suggested that their masters degree had been influential in terms of their commitment to critical reflection:

"My work on my masters was one of the things that turned me into a reflective practitioner, that has been a lasting influence." (Helen)

"The opportunity for critical reflection was important, that's one of the things that its been very difficult to do since I became a head." (Tom)

It was interesting to look at the stage in their careers at which the heads completed their advanced degrees. Helen was one of three who went for this opportunity early on. There were five who took their masters shortly before they became deputies and four who waited until they had been appointed as deputies. Frank was one of those for whom taking the further degree was significant in terms of his ambition for promotion:

"I did an MA and that opened my eyes to issues of leadership and made me feel that perhaps I was capable of doing it as well. At the outset I was motivated by having the letters after my name but the joy of studying took over. It was thoroughly stimulating, relevant and real."

I have quoted Frank at some length because the excitement he expressed about his masters course and the adjectives he has chosen to describe that feeling would be echoed by most of the others. Ruth was one of these:

"My MSc was much more valuable than NPQH, it had greater breadth and dealt more with values. I came away with an holistic approach to the issue of quality and a stronger sense of what excellence should be in a comprehensive school."

The heads were not asked to compare the value of their masters course with the NPQH but five did so spontaneously and they were unanimous that they had gained more from the masters. One, predictable point was made by almost all the heads; they appreciated greatly the chance to meet, talk to and work with a group of like-minded professionals.

ii. The National Professional Qualification for Headship

There was a range of views expressed by the 13 heads who had completed the NPQH, many being amongst the first candidates to be involved and therefore not benefiting from improvements to the delivery of the programme. There were heads who had found the experience valuable but there were others who were not merely negative but were extremely critical. The responses broke down as follows:

Response	No
Positive	4
Mixed	3
Negative	3
Dismissive	3

In addition to the heads whose views are summarised above, Phil was relieved not to have to complete the qualification and for Jane the prospect was a significant factor in turning her away from headship. It seems then that the balance of opinion was negative.

There were some positive responses from the heads:

> "Although it was laborious it was very helpful because I was conscious that I had made a massive jump from head of PE to deputy head and I engaged with NPQH, encouraged by my head, from day one." (Dan)

> "There was quality delivery from an experienced and successful head who didn't feel obliged to stick to the script. I didn't really understand what vision meant until I did the NPQH." (Frank)

> "NPQH did substitute for some of the elements I had missed as a deputy, eg the budget. It helped to provide an effective warning against allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by the nitty gritty at the expense of the big issues. I also enjoyed the opportunity to work with colleagues at a similar stage of their careers." (Mike)

Tentatively, from these views it could be suggested that NPQH worked best:

- for the more inexperienced participants
- where experienced headteachers were involved as trainers
- where the participants had not done a Masters degrees and had missed out on some of the benefits.

There were a larger number of heads whose views were very negative:

> "NPQH was very disappointing, it was far too mechanistic and felt very much like jumping through hoops, meeting other aspiring heads was the most useful thing." (Bob)

> "There was very much one model with tablets of stone. I resented giving up so much of my own time to endure script-driven training." (Henry)

> "NPQH was more about evidence than learning … my masters degree was much more developmental." (Emma)

> "NPQH was really useless, I did it purely because it was a hurdle that had to be jumped." (Ben)

There was clearly a lot of resentment from committed professionals who felt that the training and qualification were imposed upon them, and a strong feeling that the expectation that people who were probably already working 60 or 70 hours a week could accommodate the requirements of NPQH in their spare time was inappropriate.

The experience of a substantial proportion of the heads interviewed echoes strongly the misgivings and criticisms of academics:

> "Much of the content of NPQH can be learned quickly, but what is missing and what is more essential are deep philosophical questions about working with people and children which require you to think about yourself and your value." (Winkley, 1998)

> "As long as those registered for the NPQH are candidates to be tested through measurement rather than through intellectual challenge, thinking will be about how best to conform and comply rather than about professional courage and creativity." (Gunter, 2001)

There was recognition from some of the heads that they had been amongst the first to participate in the NPQH programme and that they thought things had improved, some saying with a rueful smile that their deputy was now having a better experience. The DfES did introduce a substantially changed programme in 2000, which was not experienced by the heads interviewed. However these changes seem primarily to have made much needed improvements to the delivery, leaving the underlying philosophy unchanged. It should be noted that NCSL has now taken over responsibility for NPQH and expects to operate a rolling programme of revision.

C. Summary

The heads interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about their experience as deputies and the way it had prepared them for headship. A substantial majority had worked as a deputy for a headteacher who had empowered them through genuine delegation. Almost half had taken over the headship on an acting basis whilst deputies. A number had, they felt, benefited from being appointed by headteachers who had not been long in post themselves and alongside whom they were able to work as close allies in moving the school forward. Several of those interviewed felt they had enjoyed a privileged position within the senior team, as a first among equals.

This may not be sustainable experience for the aspiring heads of the future, as models of distributed leadership gain ground. The forward-looking organisation of responsibilities and roles within the senior team also appears to have facilitated progress towards headship in a number of cases. The old stereotype of an inflexible divide between a curriculum and a pastoral deputy, with both weighed down by excessive, and sometimes mundane, administration hardly featured in the accounts of the interviewees. Only in the lack of budgetary experience was there a significant gap perceived in the quality of the heads' preparation as deputies.

In describing their professional development for headship the interviewees concentrated on taking masters degrees and completing the NPQH. The former, entered into on an entirely voluntary basis and at a time of the participants' own choosing, were regarded as stimulating and valuable for their long-term impact upon philosophy and ways of working. Views about NPQH, which was clearly regarded as an imposition rather than as an opportunity by some, were mixed but negative on balance. There were widespread misgivings about its format, delivery and underlying philosophy in the group of heads interviewed.

New headteachers who are relieved to have jumped over the NPQH hurdles or through the NPQH hoops are hardly likely to respond enthusiastically to the prospect of a further programme of gymnastics. However, NCSL now has an innovative pilot programme, *New Visions for Early Headship*, based around group problem-solving, peer coaching, collaborative study groups and e-consultancy, which promises to offer a supportive programme more suited to the needs of new heads.

No one involved in helping to prepare school leaders for headship should underestimate the profound challenge that this entails. For all that the heads interviewed were very appreciative of the value of their experience as deputies, there was still the view, expressed most forcefully by Bob in describing his first twelve months as a head:

> "The last year has been horrendous, professionally very, very challenging and there were times when I nearly said that's it. I'm going to do something else, and that was about not being prepared for the enormity of what I was taking on."

Ruth, herself a NPQH trainer, put it more succinctly 'NPQH only deals with the easy bits.'

Whilst Jane was clear:

> "NCSL must reject the concept of a single model of headship and aim for a person-centred approach by cultivating perceptive self-awareness – is it within you to be this?"

5. Problems of succession

> "The school knew that it didn't want more of the same but was not clear about what it did want. The previous head had kept the governors at a distance and they had not thought through what was required in a new head."

The first three sections of this report deal with aspects of starting headship prior to appointment, this section and the two that follow it focus on the interviewees' early experiences in post. The first two questions that the heads were asked in the second half of the interview were:

A. What sense did the heads form of the expectations which the school community had of the new headteacher? How far was that view of the school confirmed by their experience of the school after starting the job?

In many cases the answers to these questions were unexpectedly overshadowed by the highly problematic circumstances in which the new head started and this will be the focus of this section.

i. What would be ideal?

One of the reasons for undertaking this research was the personal knowledge that moving into headship is a hugely challenging situation. The school community is likely to invest a great deal of hope and expectation in the appointment of a new headteacher, for whom making a good start will be so important; trying to retrieve the consequences of an uncertain beginning may turn a difficult task into an impossible one.

So how might we characterise the circumstances that would give a new headteacher the best possible chance to make a good start? Clearly there could be a range of views on this issue but the following factors would probably be regarded as helpful by most aspiring heads.

- The governors have made an appointment that makes a good match between the needs of the school and the qualities of the new headteacher.
- The school is in good shape having been well led by the previous head.
- The previous head has not been in post for so long that there is likely to be a reactionary response to any new head however talented and well-qualified.
- The new head has the chance to be well-briefed by and to take over directly from the previous head, without the possible complications of an interregnum
- The leadership team is supportive to the new head and does not harbour the grievances of an unsuccessful internal candidate.

So what is the reality? None of the 19 heads took over in circumstances that met the five positive conditions outlined above. For the majority their succession to the post was much more difficult. Many felt that the governors did not know what the school needed from a new head, the majority followed a predecessor who cast a long shadow for a variety of reasons, and only five of the 19 took over without there being a deputy-head in post in an acting capacity.

There were clearly examples of heads who felt that they had made good starts despite the position they had inherited and almost all were disposed to put a brave face on the situation (optimism, it was suggested above is a quality of good leaders). For example, John took over from a head who had been forced to resign through ill-health, necessitating the appointment of an acting head for an uncertain period of time and with a governing body that he felt had not been well connected to the leadership of the school. Nevertheless he was upbeat about the way he had started:

> "The acting head was welcoming despite his disappointment at not getting the job himself and I felt I got to know the school really well before I started."

Others said they were less fortunate.

ii. Do the governors know what they are looking for?

The appointment of a new headteacher is probably the biggest test that a governing body can face. Tom was one of the few heads who felt that his new governing body had really measured up to this task. He took over from a long-serving, charismatic and highly-regarded predecessor but this had not stopped the governors from reaching a clear view of what the school needed from the new head.

> "They wanted someone who would offer curriculum expertise, financial acumen and a diplomat who would bring evolutionary change."

Contrast this with the experience of Mike who also followed in the footsteps of a very long-serving head who had come to dominate the school.

> "The school knew that it didn't want more of the same but was not clear about what it did want, the previous head had kept the governors at a distance and they had not thought through what was required in a new head."

In some cases the governors were not in touch with the performance of the school.

Ruth said simply:

> 'The school was much less self-aware than it should have been.' and Henry felt that the governors were missing the obvious: 'It was clear that the LEA knew the school was in trouble but there was massive denial amongst governors and staff that anything was wrong.'

The role of the LEA was something that a number of the heads mused over. For example Helen felt that the LEA was very informative *after* her appointment but that they had not been able, or not been willing, to prevent the governors presenting a very misleading picture of the school during the interview process. Every candidate for headship could benefit from reflecting on her words.

> "I was naïve, I went along to the interview partly for the experience and then got a bit caught up in the competition. A veil was drawn over the hiatus surrounding the departure of the previous head and I was kept away from some areas of the school. The governors were not very open and I was a bit too inexperienced to ask the right questions. I ended up taking the job a bit blind."

It is understandable that pride may lead to governors wanting to present the school in the best possible light and there may also be an element of anxiety about losing good candidates from a small field. There were two heads who stated explicitly that when they were appointed they had not faced much competition. Governors must at times feel torn between making an appointment that is clearly not ideal and running the risk that re-advertising the post will not bring any stronger candidates whilst extending the period during which the school has no permanent head. There were two heads who suggested that making the right appointment may not necessarily be a matter of rational analysis.

> "It was hard to put into words, they had failed to make an appointment the first time round, it was almost a case of a magical mutual attraction." (Mary)

> "What was extraordinary was that when I arrived for interview I knew I had got the job, there was just something working between me and the school." (Frank)

If the governors do not seem to know what they are looking for, and if fate does not intervene as it did for Mary and Frank, then it may fall to the candidate to try and make up the governors' mind for them. There were several of the heads who had told the governors what the school needed.

> "The school needed a period of consolidation, the pace of change pursued by the previous head had left people behind and caused divisions which needed healing." (Phil)

> "We hang onto the traditions, the values and the ethos and we improve the results, motivate the able kids better, enter into partnerships with other institutions and secure technology college status." (Jack)

Of course internal candidates are much better placed to do this than those who only see some documentation about the school in advance of arriving for interview. Jack and Phil were two of six deputies who were promoted from within. Ben was also in this category.

> "The reason I got this job was because the staff and governors were scared stiff that someone else would come in and try change all the good things that had been achieved. In a field that was weaker than the governors had expected other candidates exacerbated these fears."

iii. A hard act to follow?

Reference has already been made to the particular challenge of following a head who has been in post for a long period. Such heads may be very closely identified with the character and success of the school and the prospect of their departure may induce feelings akin to bereavement on the part of the school community. Ian was in this position.

> "I followed a leader who was regarded as inspirational. The school didn't want to lose him and I knew that I would be judged against him."

At least Ian found his predecessor very welcoming during the period between his interview and taking up the post.

> "He gave me the chance to make all the appointments and lead the new-parents' evening, really he could not have been more helpful."

Mike's predecessor seemed more intent on enjoying his final term in the limelight.

> "He was not welcoming and as a result I arrived knowing very little about the school."

It is easy to see how a new head can feel pressured by staff expectations into following the line of a powerful predecessor but those expectations are only likely to become harder to dispel if the attempt is not made from the outset. In total, there were six instances where a combination of the previous head's length of service and their reputation made life more difficult for the new head.

iv. Arriving at a time of crisis

There were three new heads whose predecessors had been discredited. Helen followed a head who had 'left under a cloud'; the head whom Bob succeeded had suffered votes of no confidence from staff and governors; and Ed came after a head who had been forced to resign in the wake of a financial scandal. Obviously these crises created a particular test of leadership for the new heads.

> "The staff were desperate to be led, they were like a dysfunctional family who had suffered a collective collapse of their self-esteem." (Helen)

> "The ineffectiveness of my predecessor meant there was great pressure for rapid and widespread change. The key question was about the level of consultation, given the urgency of the issues. I stuck to my guns and involved staff because not to have done so would have sent out a clear message that I didn't value them." (Bob)

> "Of course the scandal made the take-over hard. The teachers were demoralised and the governors desperately needed to feel proud of the school again." (Ed)

Cometh the hour cometh the leader? Except that it should be remembered that these were not experienced heads but deputies facing the challenge of simultaneously making sense of headship whilst repairing the failure of their predecessor's leadership. All three emphasised the importance of value-driven leadership in these circumstances. Ed, whose experience of an inspirational head is documented above, and who had also worked for a head whose integrity had earned him the sobriquet, 'Honest John' was quite explicit about the importance of these role models.

> "I really drew a lot on those foundations in trying to respond to the needs of the school."

v. Following an acting head

The only interviewees who avoided the situation of following an acting head were the five who succeeded heads whose retirement allowed the replacement to be appointed in good time. In many instances the new heads were very positive about the efforts of the acting head but this was not a unanimous opinion. Helen was probably the most unfortunate.

> "I was not made welcome by the acting head. I managed to insist that I should attend the new-parents' evening and was given a short slot at the end after the school cat had spoken."

Even though most of the acting heads were much more helpful than this, in a number of cases there was still a question mark against the effectiveness of the leadership of the school during the interregnum. The danger of 'drift' is clearly increased if the period of an acting head is a long one. Helen succeeded an acting head who had been in post for 14 months, replacing a head who was 'parachuted' into another school, initially for a period of two months but who never returned.

> "The acting head was very generous, welcoming and honest, but a school can go back a long way in 14 months."

It should not be overlooked that until they take up their post, newly appointed heads have a job to do in their existing schools, where they are likely to be making a pivotal contribution and may have important projects to complete before they depart. Their situation is even more complicated if they are also relocating from a distant part of the country. Their capacity to exercise 'remote-control headship' must be highly questionable and to attempt it may be ill-advised.

B. Summary

The model of school governance in this country has often been called into question. It is not appropriate to rehearse these arguments here. The appointment of a new headteacher may be the test most likely to expose the shortcomings of a governing body that is struggling to meet its obligations. In theory the responsibility for the strategic direction of the school rests with the governors and should provide the context in which they can make an appropriate appointment. The experience of these new heads suggests that this seldom happens.

The situation may be exacerbated if the field of candidates is a small one, which is increasingly often the case. As a consequence an internal appointment may be more likely. Such appointments may be the conservative escape route, 'better the devil we know' etc. But it is also true that internal candidates have the knowledge which makes them much better placed to tell the governors what the school needs, something the governors should have worked out for themselves. It should also be stated clearly that the internal candidate may simply be the best and most deserving person for the job.

The LEAs are restricted to an advisory role in headteacher appointments. Candidates are not necessarily well-placed to judge their influence, but LEA representatives did not appear to be significant from the accounts of the interviewees. This research raises a question mark over the competence of some governing bodies to make headteacher appointments and LEAs lack the clout to intervene in such circumstances. This is a matter for serious concern.

Newly appointed heads may take over from predecessors whose attitude to their replacement is not conducive to the best possible transition. Perhaps chairs of governors need to be more alive to this possibility, although there is little they can do when serious ill-health or incompetence removes the incumbent. They could possibly be more proactive when circumstances necessitate the appointment of an acting head, to ensure that this does not undermine the school's sense of direction. This should not happen if the school is able to put in place an able deputy, effectively supported by the governors, for a brief period.

The interviews took a largely unexpected turn when this topic was discussed. The depth and range of the problems associated with the interviewees' succession to headship had not been anticipated. Starting headship is a great challenge whatever the circumstances. That is a basic premise of this research. The evidence of these interviews indicates that it is commonplace, not exceptional, for this challenge to be compounded by the particular situation facing the new head. If starting headship can be fairly characterised as walking a tightrope, many new heads seem to discover that someone or something is shaking the rope.

The National College for School Leadership will need to take this into account when reviewing existing training programmes. A consultancy-style event for new headteachers, of the sort which is planned within the NCSL's New Visions, Induction to Headship Pilot Programme, which appointees attend as soon as possible after appointment and prior to taking up post, could help them to review possible approaches and strategies for starting headship and to have some expert assistance in their analysis of the particular context of their new school.

6. What New Heads Do

> "I should have taken more time to find out staff views and reflect on them. If I had it would have narrowed the gap between their perception and my message about what needed to be done. As it was staff morale dropped badly."

The interviewees were asked four questions about their actions following their appointment; about their efforts to find out more about the school, their priorities, their successes and their mistakes.

A. How did heads get to know the school better before taking up post?

The degree of contact between the new head and the school varied greatly. To some extent this was due to practical considerations. Several heads had taken jobs that involved a considerable journey from their current school. Some had a much longer 'lead-in' period than others. As indicated in the previous section the attitude of the outgoing head was another factor. Some were more helpful than others.

John and Ian provide examples of the more favourable situation. John's new school was within easy travelling distance, he was interviewed in June for a start the following January and was made very welcome by the acting head. He also sought guidance explicitly from his current head and his designated mentor head about the best way to approach his new school.

John was very positive about this period. "I visited the school quite often. I took assemblies, attended the open evening and other meetings. I interviewed all the staff and found them very frank about the issues facing the school. There were few surprises once in post, by then I'd got to know the school really well."

Ian moved to a school not far from his previous job and took over from a retiring head who was keen to be as helpful as possible during the lengthy period between the interview in January and September when Ian took up post. He said: "I made all the new appointments, six in all, I attended governors' meetings and parents' evenings for most year groups and I led the induction evening for new pupils and parents."

Ian must also have benefited from a very supportive head in his previous school to be released for the time involved in making six appointments. It is obvious from their comments that both John and Ian were keen to establish a profile in their new school as well as find out more about it.

There were a number of other heads who would be envious of the level of contact that John and Ian managed to establish during the period between interview and commencing the job. Mike had a very different experience: 'I was able to make a couple of meetings with senior staff but the outgoing head was not at all welcoming and, largely as a result of this, I arrived at the school knowing very little.'

James faced perhaps the most challenging situation of any of the interviewees in the run-up to starting his headship. The period between interview and beginning the job, October to January, was shorter than most. However the real difficulty arose from the fact that, at the start of the autumn term, James had been seconded from his deputy post to be temporary head in a school that had recently been placed in special measures.

'It was hard to give my new school a quality focus,' he said. Amongst his many other qualities James surely has a talent for under-statement.

A one-to-one interview with members of staff is a familiar strategy for new heads and was adopted by a substantial minority of them. Only John was able to complete the interviews prior to taking up post. In several cases the interviews were preceded by a voluntary questionnaire, which asked the heads' new colleagues to outline their role and their view of the issues facing the school.

> "The questionnaire response was very helpful in shaping my perceptions of the school and in making the most of the precious time available for the interviews." (Tom)

> "The structured conversations with senior staff and the completed questionnaires from staff and governors were invaluable. They enabled me to prepare a bid for language college status within six weeks of starting in post, which chimed in with many of the things they had communicated to me." (Ruth)

> "These interviews were very fruitful. My new colleagues seemed to be honest and appreciative of the opportunity. I was able to establish a consensus, which I shared, of the difficulties facing the school." (Mike)

These comments illustrate an important point. The interviews are likely to be a time-consuming strategy but one which can help to make staff feel valued from the outset and which can start to build up a mandate for change on the part of the new head.

B. What were the new heads priorities in their first term in post?

Given that many of the heads, for a variety of reasons, found it hard to get to know the school as well as they might have wished, it was surprising that more of them did not identify this as a priority for their first term. Perhaps some of them took this for granted and did not mention it. In many cases though the picture painted by the new head was one where there seemed to be issues that urgently required attention and that took precedence over a measured period of familiarisation with the new school. Reference has already been made above to Ruth making a bid for language college status in six weeks. There were other examples of new heads in a hurry.

> "I needed to move quickly to appoint a new assistant headteacher to take on the curriculum leadership, if I hadn't I would have ended up doing it myself." (Tom)

> "My first priority was to shake out three under-performing teachers, not something I enjoyed doing but the problem needed sorting out after being allowed to fester too long." (Ed)

> "Getting Technology College status fast was the priority." (Jack)

> "I had to find some teachers from somewhere, if I hadn't there would have been a strike, the staff had reached the end of their tether covering the gaps." (James)

James, who also faced an OFSTED inspection five weeks into his first term, filled the gaps partly by teaching a 0.6 timetable himself!

There were a number of heads that saw an improvement in pupil behaviour as an urgent priority.

> "It was important to improve the work ethic of the kids. This was something that had slipped appreciably during the interregnum." (Mary)

> "We went for a quick fix on discipline. It wasn't really the way I wanted to work but I decided we couldn't afford to sit around and talk about it for a couple of years." (John)

> "I needed to make the children take me seriously. I cancelled the Year 11 leaving do. I've probably had more impact on the pupils than the staff. The uniform is sorted." (Frank)

Pupil behaviour is an issue where the symptoms of a problem can be much clearer than the causes or the solutions. Poor behaviour manifestly undermines the quality of education that a school is able to provide, so it is easy to understand why it would be viewed as a priority. However it is a tricky situation for a new head, anxious to respond to staff concerns and to pass what might be seen as a test of the strength of his or her leadership by taking action that will bring a prompt improvement. This has to be weighed against the need to be clear about the underlying causes of unacceptable behaviour (which might be an inappropriate curriculum or inconsistent expectations on the part of staff), and reaching agreement about the response, which is then implemented by all staff working together.

There were other heads who felt that cultural change was required if the school was to find a way forward.

> "When I arrived some of the staff and pupils had high academic expectations, now most do." (Dan)

> "We had to respond better to the needs of a group of disaffected year 10 pupils with some different provision, previously the ethos had been one curriculum fits all." (Bob)

> "I wanted to turn round the school's behaviour policy from one that was driven by sanctions to one that was driven by rewards. The celebratory assembly at the end of the first term was a breakthrough that helped to confound some of the doubting Thomases." (Henry)

It seemed very clear that Henry's breakthrough had not come without a huge personal effort to nip poor behaviour in the bud. He recounted how in his first assemblies he had promised pupils that he 'would be everywhere'. He was able to describe a particular occasion when he had happened to be in exactly the right place at the right time to prevent pupils from stepping out of line. Having sent them on their way with a suitable admonishment he was gratified to hear one of them say, '***, he is everywhere', counting the positive feedback as more significant than the bad language.

The final point to make about the answers to this question is that some heads articulated a very demanding agenda when it came to identifying their priority for action. This was perhaps best exemplified by Helen's response, whose sense of the urgency of these issues was entirely consistent with the rest of her interview. 'I needed to establish the standards I expected from staff, including SMT, and students. I had to sort out the budget that was in a mess. It was also vital to find a way to set up effective working relations with the governing body.'

All new heads need to establish the standards they expect. The size of the challenge is related to the gap between those expectations and the prevailing standards. In the case of Helen and several other new heads the gap was substantial. The limited flexibility that schools have with their budgets makes it very difficult to take corrective action once a problem takes hold. And when it comes to relationships with governors, many experienced heads would suggest that they are the trickiest that they have to handle. Helen was one of several new heads who found these relationships in a poor state of repair when they started. Those who followed a long-standing and successful head were likely to find that the governing body had been 'managed' in a way that was not consistent with their responsibilities and was not sustainable by the new head.

C. What did the heads feel had been their most important achievement to date?

In a substantial majority of cases the responses to this question mirrored those to the previous one. Despite the challenging circumstances that many of them faced at the outset, 13 of the heads indicated that at least one of their top priorities had also been their most important achievement during their first year in office. The satisfaction and relief that many of the heads drew from their perceived successes was manifest, perhaps none more so than James. 'A lot of the youngsters at this school have little enough security in their lives without their teachers coming and going at the drop of a hat. To be able to say to them in September you've all got a proper teacher meant a lot.'

There were however six answers that did not fit a pattern of matching an achievement to a priority.

"Improving staff morale – this is really the crux of other developments … it is difficult to overestimate the importance of public praise and recognition for their efforts." (Jack)

"Gaining a good Ofsted report. Not that this was really my achievement. The staff responded brilliantly. It was a real good team effort. It brought us together and increased peoples' confidence about the future." (Emma)

Bob was another head who made a modest response to this question:

"Two things, neither of which I can really claim the credit for. First the impact of the new buildings on the way the school feels. Second the unexpected increase of the 5 A-C percentage from 36 to 44. I'd been trying to raise expectations and convince the staff that we had a genuinely comprehensive intake. The improvement in the examination results was a hugely convenient fluke."

For all the commitment and skills that a new head needs, it helps if they can also have a bit of luck.

D. What would the heads do differently if they had the opportunity to start the headship again?

The most frequent answer to this question was unexpected; five of the 19 heads could not think of anything and several others struggled. A number, not all, were clearly embarrassed at this apparent lack of modesty. In fact it is more likely to be a reflection of the very limited feedback that heads receive. This issue is dealt with fully in the next section of the report.

Some of the other answers given to this question may be instructive even though they were not common to many of the heads.

"I should have ensured that there was better communication over the changes to the awards evening. I left this to a senior colleague, I should have done it myself." Ruth

New heads need to be aware of the symbolic significance that actions, which are minor in one sense, may have if they can be perceived as changing the culture of the school. Ruth felt that the awards evening was organised in a way that was elitist and inappropriate to the ethos of a comprehensive school. This meant that the changes were a significant indicator of her values and she recognised, with the advantage of hindsight, that her new colleagues needed to be given the chance to fully understand her thinking.

There were three heads who confessed that they felt they had not managed their time well. For Emma it was a case of wanting an open-door policy but then finding that at times she was swamped by the concerns of colleagues to an unacceptable degree. Neil felt that he had devoted an inordinate amount of time to site and fabric issues when he should have made it a priority to delegate to someone else much sooner.

The work of most deputy-heads is more clearly delineated than is the case for heads, who face the challenge of deciding how to divide their time between a wide range of competing demands. Mike's answer to this question is relevant to this point.

> "I should have had a higher profile, taking assemblies, being on the corridors etc. I was probably guilty of applying the models of headship that I had seen previously. If I had my time over again this is the thing I would do differently."

Of course, Mike would also need to decide what he would do less of in order to be more visible around the school. Many people will be familiar with the adage about it being more important for leaders to do the right things rather then doing things right; advice that is especially pertinent for new heads.

E. Summary

This is the section of the report where it is most difficult to draw general conclusions because the answers to these questions were the ones that most depended on the particular circumstances of the school in which the new head was taking up the position.

The interviews illustrate a range of approaches on the part of the interviewees to the period between appointment and taking up post. Many were constrained by practical circumstances in the level of contact they could manage with their new schools, meaning that for most they arrived still needing to find out a lot more about the school. The strategy of one-to-one interviews with staff was mentioned more often than any other, but still only by a minority of the heads. Some gave the impression that the issues facing them were too pressing to allow for in-depth gathering of staff views. Whether or not they may have been confusing the urgent with the important is a question at least worth posing for those on the point of starting headship.

Henry faced a set of challenges as urgent as any of the heads. His expression of regret may be instructive for others. "I should have taken more time to find out staff views and reflect on them. If I had it would have narrowed the gap between their perception and my message about what needed to be done."

Most of the heads felt that they had achieved some significant success during their first year. Given the openness they showed during the interviews there was no reason to doubt these claims even though it was not possible to corroborate them. In many cases it was clearly important for the heads' confidence and resolve that they had this sense of achievement.

The prevailing impression formed from the answers to these questions is one where the new heads faced a tough start that would have tested the skills and resolve of a highly experienced practitioner. If the preferred model for starting headship is one where the new head enjoys a calm honeymoon period, during which he or she is able to come to terms with the role and become familiar with the existing culture of the school, then most of these heads have clearly missed out.

7. Coping with Isolation

> "Alcohol has been indispensable. Without it I don't see how I could have switched off at all. I'm not proud to be saying this but it's the truth."

Describing headship as a lonely job is not original but, that does not mean it is not true. The new heads were asked three questions that dealt with this aspect of headship – about their sources of external support, about the feedback they received, and about their levels of stress.

A. What measures had the LEA, local heads' association or other agency put in place to support the heads at the point where they took up the post?

This question elicited the full range of possible answers. There were heads who were very positive about the quality of support that they received.

> "I never felt that I had nowhere to turn." (John)

There were others whose experience was the exact opposite.

> "I suppose I just felt that I've got to get on with this the best I can on my own." (Jack)

And there were some whose situation was clearly better than Jack's but less advantageous than John's. In fact the heads divided into three equal groups according to their view of the support they were given.

Response	No
Positive	6
Mixed	6
Negative	7

Most of the heads were provided with a designated mentor, usually an experienced head from within the LEA. Thirteen of the 19 made reference to a mentor.

> "I consulted her about how to approach the school in the period after my interview. My contact with her was really quite significant, we walked round each other's schools and discussed a lot of issues." (John)

Six explicitly mentioned that they had missed having a mentor.

> "… a professional mentor who can talk with you. I didn't have that and I think I could have done with it – someone I could discuss issues with, someone to ask awkward questions. Not having that was quite tough." (Ed)

Unfortunately as many as eight of the heads were disappointed by the way their relationship with their mentor failed to live up to their expectations. In a number of cases they intended no criticism of the individual concerned.

> "I felt reluctant to ask for too much. I could have learnt a lot more but he's a busy man with a school to run. The process needs to be formalised." (Ben)

Most of the heads were dependent on the goodwill of a volunteer, but this was not always successful. It may also be a mistake to assume that serving heads necessarily have the skills of mentoring.

> "If I'm honest I did feel very lonely when I started. My mentor head was well intentioned but not very helpful. He was too concerned with giving his answers to the issues rather than providing critical reflection." (Mike)

The heads who were more positive tended to be those who had access to a network of heads rather than feeling they were dependent on a single individual. Tom was a good example.

> "Whilst the relationship with my mentor head did not prove to be that strong the head down the road has been very helpful and I am still in regular contact with two of the heads from my previous schools."

James was another who benefited from the continuing interest of his previous head.

> "I had some very helpful coaching sessions with the head of my previous school. The local heads group were supportive and the area secretary of SHA was invaluable when there was a danger of the staff shortage leading to industrial action."

There were positive references to the Secondary Heads' Association by a number of heads, but the support from the association was seen, unsurprisingly, as being limited to advice about a specific issue.

Dan was another head who went back to a previous head for guidance and his comment may be another clue to the relative lack of success of the mentor relationships. 'I'd rather confess my ignorance to someone far away.'

It is very important that new heads feel able to ask what they may perceive as dumb questions as well as smart ones; if they feel that they are simultaneously trying to establish their credibility with local heads this may be difficult.

The LEA was seen as very supportive in a number of instances. There were heads who felt that given the highly adverse circumstances in which they had taken over, the LEA was bound to do all it could to help them.

> "The LEA was helpful, they had to invest in me." (Jane)

> "The LEA was brilliant, it had to be." (Helen)

It should be said that there were other heads who might reasonably have had the same expectation as Jane and Helen but did not find the same response from the LEA. For some heads the LEA was personified by an adviser with whom they were able to form a very helpful relationship.

> "For the first 18 months my adviser was very good but in the last four months I've had three and only met one." (Ed)

> "My link adviser has been enormously supportive – a true critical friend." (Henry)

But in other cases this relationship was unproductive.

> "My adviser was as new as I was and had only ever worked in primary schools so had little to offer." (Ruth)

> "My link adviser was not helpful. She had never been a head and if I mentioned something I was worried about I felt it would become an official concern at County Hall." (Bob)

B. What opportunities did heads have to a) gain feedback, and b) critically reflect, on their performance since taking up the post?

These answers were less mixed than those for the previous question; they were very largely negative. Nearly half of the heads stated that the feedback they had received was either negligible or non-existent. Those who were rather more positive had benefited from some morale-boosting appreciation from staff and students, but when they were asked about constructive criticism it was conspicuous by its absence. Only two of the 19 heads felt they had received significant feedback.

The two positive responses came from heads where three potential sources of feedback came together to create what they felt was a fairly full and reliable picture. In Jane's case it was the LEA, HMI monitoring visits, and the evaluation of a major curriculum project. James, whose school had an OFSTED inspection during his first term, described his experience thus:

> "The LEA inspector has been useful, so too as the registered inspector and I have really cultivated one of the deputies to play the role that I felt I played for my previous head and give me the messages that I need to hear."

A number of other heads referred to a deputy or member of the leadership group who they hoped would become a source of feedback.

> "I don't get much feedback at all but there is some from my deputy." (Tom)

> "The deputy is well-established and sufficiently confident to comment adversely on several occasions." (Ian)

> "I've tried hard to be clear that I'm open to feedback but it hasn't really happened so far." (Dan)

It is easy to understand that senior colleagues may be inhibited about expressing a view on the performance of the head, even a complimentary one, but James's reference to cultivating this role is an indication that this reluctance may be overcome if the head works at it. However if this process takes a year or two to bear fruit, then the new head has to function without this source of feedback for a significant period at a time when it might be most valuable.

The governors, especially the chair, should be another potential source of feedback, but for these heads that potential remained unrealised. These comments were typical of the references to governors:

> "As far as the chair of governors is concerned, we have not got beyond the platitudes stage yet." (Tom)

> "It's difficult to get reactions from the governors, I'm on my third chair since I started just over twelve months ago." (Bob)

Some of the heads seemed fatalistic and almost resigned to operating in a feedback-free zone.

> "This is just a vacuum, the governors seem happy just to let me get on with it." (Frank)

> "No, no feedback really, like people say it is a lonely job." (Mary)

In these circumstances it is easy to appreciate Ed's and Bob's points of view.

> "It would be easy to tell yourself that you are doing a wonderful job, because that's what I need to tell myself. There no point in beating yourself up the whole time." (Ed)

"Feedback has been very limited, there have been no clear signals from the LEA. Here was I suffering great doubts about my ability to turn the school round, it would have been empowering to have had a positive message." (Bob)

Whether it be to boost heads' self-belief or to help them avoid making mistakes (or at least repeating them), feedback is important. This is a simple truism that could be applied to any member of staff in any organisation. Unfortunately for most new heads feedback is in very short supply.

C. How did heads manage the stress of starting headship?

Dan made a very helpful contribution to this aspect of the research, especially since he was the first interviewee. His answer was:

"It's not such a big deal, in fact the job is less stressful than being a deputy when I had to take responsibility for someone else's decisions, at least now I am making the decisions."

From this point on, the question was prefaced by asking whether the new head regarded being head as more stressful than being a deputy. Mary agreed with Dan, her answer was almost identical. Jane, whose experience of being a deputy had become quite unhappy, was also more positive about being in the head's chair. However for the great majority of those interviewed the move into headship had brought a higher stress level associated for most with a step change in responsibility and a much greater difficulty in switching off from the job. For a number of heads, coping with this stress was clearly very difficult.

"Of course I'm not comfortable with thinking day in and day out, how long is it to the holiday?" (Ed)

"I'd always been good at making the most of the holidays, but when it came to the end of the summer term I was just too shattered to do anything, I suppose it was nervous exhaustion." (Helen)

"I had trouble sleeping and there were gut-wrenching times when i didn't want to come to work, I'd never felt like that before." (Henry)

Given the strength of some of these responses it seemed important to examine them in relation to other variables covered by the interview. Did the internal appointments fare better given their familiarity with the context, if not the role? Were those who had been acting heads better able to cope? Were the problematic circumstances in which many of the heads had started a key factor? Did the level of support make a significant difference?

The degree of difficulty that the heads identified in handling their stress level was classified on a four-point scale so that it could be ranked against these other factors.

	Very difficult	Difficult	OK	Coping well
	5	6	4	4
Internal appointments	1	2	2	1
Experience as acting heads	1	4	2	2
Especially problematic successions	5	3	0	3
Lack of external support	2	3	2	0

The first two lines do not appear to shed much light on the issue; the internal appointees and acting heads are distributed quite evenly across the four categories.

However it is noteworthy that all five of the heads who had the most difficulty in handling the stress had experienced successions that were particularly challenging. The fact that three who were in this position were amongst the four heads who seemed to be coping best warns against drawing simple conclusions. Reactions to stressful situations are individual. Perhaps these three felt almost a sense of release in being confronted by a situation that they felt could only improve. The answers relating to external support may also be significant since none of those who seemed to be coping well were amongst the seven who were most negative about the lack of support they received from external sources.

Unsurprisingly the heads were better able to identify the causes and symptoms of stress than the strategies that might help them beat it. Exercise was the antidote most often mentioned. The importance of having someone with whom they could unburden themselves and of being ruthless in getting away for at least part of the holidays were also mentioned by a number of heads. Even these elementary precautions were difficult to stick to in some cases.

"I play tennis or try to do something physical at least three times a week but the job keeps getting in the way." (Ed)

"It doesn't help that I'm too impatient, I keep thinking why can't people just get things done instead of wasting so much time telling me why they can't do them." (Helen)

It is easy to say that new heads must pace themselves and recognise that adjusting to the role itself is a big challenge that is likely to absorb a great deal of their nervous energy. It is equally easy to see from this research why so many new heads find this very difficult to do.

D. Summary

The level and quality of support, to which new heads feel they have access, is very variable. The LEAs may be unable to ensure that a strong and effective level of support is an entitlement for new heads rather than a happy accident of circumstances. The code of conduct that governs their relations with schools obliges them to concentrate their resources on schools giving cause for concern. Whilst they might wish to ensure that all new secondary heads have access to an adviser who has recent and relevant experience, this presupposes that LEAs are able to recruit such people in sufficient numbers.

The research suggests that many new heads receive little feedback about their performance. It was noted in the previous section of this report that in reflecting on their first 12 months or so in post, many of the heads found it difficult to identify a single mistake and a third were unable to do so at all. This is surely a result of a lack of feedback, rather than infallibility.

The heads had some alarming things to say about coping with stress. Of course this problem is a matter of huge concern across the whole education service and in many other walks of life, so it would be wrong to suggest that heads are a special case. However, if heads are unable to cope with their own stress levels, one very likely consequence is increased stress for many others working in the same school. The most obvious conclusion to draw from this is that whatever new heads were doing to deal with stress before they became heads they need to do more of after they take up the post. The danger is that the demands of the job will put the squeeze on the stress-beating activities.

This section of the report raises issues that need to be addressed if headship is not to become an increasingly unattractive job with an unacceptable casualty rate. There will be no panaceas but these interviews suggest that a scheme of properly organised and funded mentors could bring significant improvements. This proposal will be developed in the final section of the report.

8. Mentoring - How to things make better?

At the end of each interview the new head was asked the following question:

A. In summary, can you identify something that you feel strongly would have made a significant difference in terms of either your preparation for headship or your early experience of the post?

The following suggestions were made by more than one person:

- The provision of a personal mentor

This was the most popular proposal, mentioned by seven of the 19 heads.

- The introduction for deputies of some kind of internship or shadowing opportunity with an experienced head

This was suggested by four of the heads. At the time of writing the DfES has a pilot programme of internships for deputies operating with successful schools in challenging circumstances.

- There should be a full LEA induction programme for newly appointed heads

There were two heads who identified this as a priority.

The remaining ideas were all put forward by one of the heads.

- There needs to be some way to broaden the vision of candidates for headship by giving them exposure to other schools and systems
- The concept of an internship might go some way to meeting this suggestion
- The NCSL needs a specific programme for newly appointed heads.

Such a programme is proposed in the College's *Leadership Development Framework* out for consultation at the time of writing, and a new programme *New Visions: Induction to Headship* is presently being piloted.

- The NCSL needs to provide a database of professional development opportunities, which allows heads to identify the opportunities that will best meet their needs and to discuss them with other heads
- There should be guidance for new heads on working with governors and unions in adverse circumstances

This proposal was closely linked to the particular context of the head concerned. It is interesting to note that it is the only suggestion that relates to a content feature of continuing professional development

- There needs to be a more effective support network for deputy headteachers
- There should be a more effective forum for headteachers to share good practice

Perhaps the NCSL's Talking Heads online communities will meet this suggestion.

B. Mentors for Heads

The degree of support for the idea of mentoring provision is significant. Seven of the heads proposed this as a priority. It should be borne in mind that a number of the heads would not have been likely to suggest mentoring as an improvement because they were already in a productive relationship with a mentor.

It is clear from the heads' comments that mentors probably need to have successful experience of secondary headship themselves. Without this their ability to fully appreciate the issues and pressures facing heads is in doubt. They also need to understand the role of a mentor and have the skills to do the job well. Their availability also needs to be properly funded; the role is too important to be performed on a volunteer basis.

There is a choice to be made between recruiting serving heads on a partial secondment or offering the opportunity to those who have recently retired from headship. The availability of the latter group is less problematic but the pace of change means that their 'currency' may be relatively short-lived. An advantage of using serving heads is that the role would provide them with stimulus and development, and may also provide opportunities for senior staff in their schools to take on additional responsibility. Their secondment would need to be limited, perhaps to one day a week, in order to minimise the impact in their schools. There is no reason of course why both groups should not be involved. NCSL's notion of the 'consultant' head takes us some way forward in this regard.

Ideally the mentoring relationship would begin whilst the aspiring head was still a deputy, but ready to apply for headship, and extend for at least the first two years after appointment. In the first phase the role of the mentor would be to complement the support being given by the deputy's own headteacher. Given this time span the mentor could provide support in the following ways, which all pick up issues explored in the interviews:

- Help to broaden the experience of the deputy where this is a priority, through the mentor's own network of contacts.
- Provide guidance with the process of application for headship; working especially to try and ensure a suitable match between candidate and vacancy, and reviewing the learning points from unsuccessful applications.
- After a successful interview, working on the approach of the new head to taking up the post.
- Being prepared to give intensive advice and support during the early weeks and months of headship.
- Facilitating critical reflection, being a direct source of feedback and being willing to gather feedback from others on behalf of the head.
- Advising on the new head's continuing professional development.
- Giving an early warning signal about the dangers of stress.

A recurring theme of this report has been the way in which the intrinsically very demanding job of starting headship is frequently complicated further by particular circumstances. A mentor, able to provide support, and challenge, could make a very powerful difference to this situation. In recent times the DfES has found funds for threshold verifiers and performance management consultants. Has their contribution to school improvement matched what might be achieved if an effective mentoring scheme was provided to ensure that new heads are given a better chance of making the good start which is so vital to the success of the schools they lead?

9. Acknowledgements

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11. Appendix

Interview schedule: starting secondary headship

Section a – prior to appointment

1   At what point in your career did you first become attracted to the notion of becoming a headteacher? What prompted this ambition?

2   What did you do consciously to prepare yourself for headship?

3   Who encouraged you to pursue the ambition of becoming a head? What form did this encouragement take?

4   Have the headteachers of schools in which you have worked influenced your perception of the job? In what way?

5   How well did your experience of being a deputy-headteacher prepare you for headship?

6   Looking at these six descriptions of school leaders, which do you think best fits the headteacher you worked with as a deputy?

7   What opportunities for professional development were particularly helpful in preparing you for headship?

Section b – since being appointed as headteacher

8   How did you get to know the school better, a) before taking up post, b) since?

9   What sense did you form of the expectations which the school community had of you at the start of your headship?

10 What were your priorities for your first term in post? What actions did you take in pursuit of those priorities?

11 What measures have the LEA, local heads' association or other agency put in place to support you in starting headship?

12 What opportunities have you had to a) gain feedback, b) critically reflect, on your performance since you started as headteacher?

13 How have you tried to manage the stress of starting headship?

14 What do you feel has been your most important achievement to date?

15 What would you do differently if you had the opportunity to start your headship again?

16 Which of these six descriptions of school leaders best fits your own view of the role?

17 In summary, can you identify something which you feel strongly would have made a significant difference in terms of either your preparation for headship or your early experience of the post?