INDEPENDENT SCHOOL HEADSHIP TRANSITIONS: THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

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Leadership in independent schools is going through a significant transition and will continue to do so. With the retirements of a number of heads of school and others delaying retirement because of the economic crisis of 2009 (Kane & Barbaro, in press), independent schools are finding themselves conducting searches for new leadership at all levels. The search for heads of school has become an increasing focus and priority for schools and for the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). In 2015, NAIS’s journal Independent School devoted an entire issue to the various concerns and factors to be kept in mind as schools navigate this time of change and transition in their leadership.

A growing concern is the small number of female heads of school. Two separate studies by NAIS, one that focused on the effectiveness of the 2009 NAIS Aspiring Heads program and another published in 2010 about the current state of leadership, have reported growing gender disparity on the highest rungs of the leadership ladder. The present qualitative study examined the transition experiences of 13 heads of school and the sources of stability that are or need to be provided for these individuals as they take on the ultimate leadership role in independent schools. Employing field notes and
memos, a survey of male and female heads of school, interviews with female heads of school, and focus groups with board members and search consultants, this study deepens understanding of this transitional period for the leadership in independent schools with a special focus on female heads of school.

The results of this study better articulate the specific needs of transitional support for women Heads of school in their first three years of leadership. Participants in this study shared experiences that pointed to commonalities of their positionality as a woman, the transition into leadership, necessary preparation to becoming a Head of school, and the importance of relationship building.
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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

Leadership in independent schools is about to experience an unprecedented number of turnovers and transitions. These include the predicted retirements of baby boomers, which will leave open leadership positions, especially at the head of school level. In a study conducted by NAIS in 2009 on “The State of Independent School Leadership,” two-thirds of heads planned to retire or transition out of independent schools by 2019, and only 22% of administrators reported an interest in pursuing a headship. Moreover, in the same report, the vast majority of independent school heads were White, and women represented only about a third of those filling head of school positions (NAIS, 2009). In light of the small portion of heads of school who have been women and the paucity of information about what makes an effective transition, the transition for female heads of school represents a unique sort of experience and a potential indicator of why so few women have served in this position.

In part, this study is inspired by the following scenario. On a monthly basis, a group of female heads of school who are somewhere in their first three years as a head of school come together for dinner. The conversations around the table are humorous, sympathetic, and supportive. More often than not, the talk takes the form of lamentation: “If I only knew . . .” or “Why didn’t anyone tell me . . .” or “I’m pretty sure my predecessor didn’t have to do this . . .” All of these women are referring to the transition experiences that they had at their individual schools. As I worked on this study, I was completing my third year as a head of school, and what I had found from my own experience and that of my colleagues around the monthly dinner table was that the transition period is critical to the success of a leader and of an entire school community.
While there have been several NAIS articles and conference presentations discussing the need for transition planning, there is not enough evidence regarding what heads of schools need in their transitions. Some schools look to the business model for leadership transition, often referring to “the first 90 days” as a framework (Watkins, 2004). There is, however, very little literature suggesting that this framework is appropriate for independent school leadership.

As the turnover in heads of school increases over the next decade, independent schools will welcome and transition new individuals into these roles. Some schools may transition in a sitting head and others a newcomer to the position. A transition in leadership can be a challenge both for leadership and for members of an organization. The fact that an alarmingly small number of women occupy head of school roles together with the anticipated challenges of transitions convinced me that further exploration of women’s leadership transitions was necessary. A 2002 study conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership found that one of the top leadership challenges for women is transition. While transitions can be difficult for both sexes, women in particular have lacked the institutional support and training necessary to feel successful in leadership positions. Too often, talent is mistaken for skill, and women going through transitions are left to learn the necessary skills on their own (Schechtman, 2004).

The anticipated increase in retirements and turnover in our head of school positions is just one of the many organizational changes that schools are experiencing. Technology, global engagement, curricular changes, and a shift to millennial parents are among the issues that concern independent schools as they start to transition to new headship. Search firms and recruiters are seeking qualified candidates to fill these
positions. They are looking to find individuals who are mission-aligned and innovative yet able to understand the historical nuances of an institution and to act as a fundraiser, a politician, an educational thought-leader, an architect, a facilities expert, and so much more. As independent schools begin to face this time of change, so too is the makeup of aspiring leaders in independent school education changing. More women are taking up leadership positions, whether as division heads, deans of faculty, or assistant heads of school, but the number of women aspiring for the head of school position still seems disproportionately small.

I am deeply passionate about independent school education and the educational programming that it provides for its students and families. I am equally passionate about the future leadership of these institutions, especially by women. From my own experience and as this study makes clear, the transition in leadership is a critical time period and phase for both a head of school and a school community. While there is significant agreement in the literature about the importance of transition planning and the transition experience, little of it is specific to independent schools or to female heads of school.

The purpose of this study was to help to fill this gap in the research. Accordingly, the following research questions guided this qualitative dissertation study:

What are the transition experiences of female heads of school?

- What support do female heads of school consider necessary for a healthy and successful transition for both themselves and the school community?
- To what degree do female heads of school consider their transitions unique to their gender?
The study was based on a data from a brief survey administered to 200 heads of school in their first three years of headship, 13 in-depth interviews with female heads of school in their first three years of headship, and two focus group interviews with search consultants and board of trustee members who were part of a head transition in their own schools.

**Organization of the Study**

The current research examined the ways in which female heads of school experienced their transitions into headship. The dissertation includes five chapters. Chapter 1 frames and introduces the primary and secondary research questions that the study explores while also articulating the benefits of the research and findings for independent schools and aspiring and transitioning heads of schools. A background section provides historical context for the roles and responsibilities of a head of school/headmaster and how the role has evolved into what it entails today. Finally, the conceptual framework explains my perspective in designing and framing the methods of the research as well as analyzing the data.

Chapter 2 explores relevant extant scholarly research, theories, and models, including the history and nature of independent schools in the United States, barriers to and advantages of female leadership, women in leadership roles in independent schools, and organizational change.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology and research design and the plan and rationale for the steps taken to address the research questions. Phenomenological in nature, this research leveraged emergent design and qualitative instruments, in particular
interviews, focus groups, and surveys. This chapter further describes the data analysis plan, the researcher’s role, and validation issues.

Chapter 4 presents the most salient findings from the research in five sections entitled On being female, Transition to headship, Preparation for headship, Relationship building, and Defining a successful transition.

Chapter 5 provides an analysis that connects the findings to the conceptual framework and existing literature while exploring the implications of the study and suggestions for further research.

**Rationale and Significance**

The anticipated retirements and departures of current heads of school are alarming, and institutions need to prepare themselves for the transition in leadership. John Chubb, former president of NAIS, advised that “schools will require special kinds of leaders, leaders with the courage to ask the hard questions and the fortitude to unite their communities around new answers” (Chubb, 2015, para. 4). While choosing the next leader of an institution is a critical undertaking, even more important for the health of the community and the school is the transition to the new leadership.

A historical research study examining why independent schools have failed and closed pointed to four main factors, namely school mission fatigue, unsuccessful headship transitions, financial collapse, and lack of strategic planning (McManus, 2012). In “autopsies” of failed schools in California, an unsuccessful headship transition was identified as an important factor, especially schools that were founded as “proprietary institutions by visionary leaders” (McManus, 2012, para. 17). When founding heads of school passed on or retired, the hand-offs to new heads of school were often awkward,
leaving communities with low morale and a loss of identity in the absence of the founding members’ vision and personal beliefs on education (McManus, 2012).

Although many independent schools are no longer transitioning from a founding head, the transition from one leader to the next remains a critical step in the maintenance of the school community. Each member of a school community is affected by a transition. Damage to the well-being of a school can occur owing to insufficient attention to succession planning (Mason, 2015). A poorly-planned transition can result in a dismissal, which can in turn threaten the career of the transitioning head of school (Kane & Barbaro, in press).

The challenges that a new leader faces in her transition into a new institution are vast but primarily lie in the socialization aspect of the transition. New heads of school are acclimating to the diverse stakeholders whom they are now expected to lead, manage and tend to. New heads of school are also managing the legacy, history, and style of the leaders whom they are replacing (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Finally, a new head in her transition is in addition faced with the diverse nature of the tasks that she is expected to be responsible for and to perform.

NAIS conducted two studies related to women and leadership. One, published in 2009, focused on the effectiveness of the NAIS Aspiring Heads program “Still Aspiring: An Examination of Why Women and People of Color Are Less Likely to Attain Head of School Positions.” A second study, published in 2010 and entitled “The State of Independent School Leadership 2009: Report of Survey Research Among School Heads and Administrators,” showed growing gender disparity on the highest rungs of the leadership ladder. Only a third of all NAIS heads of school are female. Although this
proportion is slowly increasing, male heads of school still outnumber their female counterparts. Both NAIS studies point to a variety of reasons to explain why women are not reaching the headship level. In some cases, it is the lifestyle demands and the challenge of balancing the role of head of school with home life. Other women perceive that independent schools are still looking for a traditional makeup of leadership that consists of male figureheads. Women who do become heads of school often find themselves at board tables with a majority of men or in a local network of heads of school who are predominantly male.

There is currently a confluence of a significant number of turnovers in leadership in independent schools and a small but growing number of female heads of school. This intersectional moment in independent schools raises the question of whether there is a specific challenge to the transition for female heads of school that makes it difficult for them to be successful. In a survey of heads of school completing the NAIS Aspiring Heads program, participants observed that a “strong old-boy” network continued to prevail in independent schools, resulting in limited opportunities for women to attain or succeed in headships (Orem, 2014). In cases in which women have been able to attain a headship, they often stood better chances of being hired when a school was in economic crisis and therefore could not afford the salaries commanded by male heads and “sitting heads (the traditional candidates) were not attracted to struggling schools” (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014). In a 2009 study of “The State of Independent School Leadership,” 45% of female heads agreed that the top reason for their scarcity in schools was reluctance on the part of trustees and search committees “to hire nontraditional heads” (p. 41).

Independent schools that strive for equity, diversity, and inclusivity in their practices with
students and parents still cater to a male-dominated narrative and culture (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010).

A female head of school faces the same challenges that a male head of school does in the transition into a leadership role. Female heads, just like males, face a variety of constituents, a diversity of tasks and expectations, and the dynamics of following the legacy of a predecessor. However, female heads of school are expected to overcome these challenges in a shorter amount of time than males. Thus in an interview with 25 women in various leadership roles in independent schools, women were given a narrower window of time to prove themselves to their community than male leaders, who also were granted more chances to make mistakes (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010). This intersection of restricted time allowance for a transition and the general challenges faced by leaders in their transition periods merits further examination.

In the next decade, independent schools will be seeing an unprecedented amount of turnover at the head of school level. The baby boomer population will be retiring or stepping down from their positions, and independent schools will find themselves bringing new leadership into communities and cultures that, in some cases, were established over 400 years ago. Independent schools are at a critical moment for examining the future of leadership and the sustainability of leadership roles and for developing a pipeline of future leaders (Orem, 2014). These institutions expend an enormous amount of resources creating a search plan and analyzing the type of leader for which they are looking, but rarely is the same amount of resources put into analyzing and thinking about the transition period for the new leader.
The intersection between female leadership skills and the organizational change and needs of a leadership transition invites an intriguing exploration. While the literature has made clear the challenges of the transitional period in leadership as well as the potential damage that an unsuccessful transition can inflict, there has been very little research into exactly what these transitions should look like. Furthermore, no study has yet explored how a female leadership style may serve the transitional needs and stages of an organization and a leader. In anticipation of numerous retirements and handovers in the leadership in independent schools, it is critical that these schools take the time to examine the actual act of transitioning a new head of school. If the health and long-term success of an institution are in the hands of a deliberate and thoughtful transition in leadership, then there needs to be a clearer articulation of the expectations for the transition.

**Background**

The NAIS consists of 1,400 private K-12 schools in the United States and 300 in other countries. A few of these schools have been in existence for centuries and others for only a few years. Independent schools are approved by a recognized state-level evaluation process, maintain fiscal independence from government and church entities, and are governed by independent boards of trustees, directors, or advisers. These institutions stress public service and social responsibility, actively promote a multicultural and multiracial environment, and strive to build a diverse student body (Speede-Franklin, 1988). They are funded primarily through tuition, charitable contributions, and endowment income (nais.org). Independent schools serve a variety of
students and families with varying emphases on programming, academic rigor, purpose, values, and mission.

Historically, independent schools have shared a reputation for academic excellence and a focus on college preparation (Chamberlain, 1944) but have differed in philosophy, style, and organization (Kane, 1992). Adopted in the 1920s, the term “independent school” was chosen so as to be free of any connotations associated with being a “private school,” as Chamberlain (1944) explained in his book, Our Independent Schools, The Private School American Education. The word “independent” was used to signify that an institution did not depend on any tax or governmental support, was not subject to political control, and was free to choose its faculty and students and to set its own policies and standards. These schools have secured their income from tuition fees and private philanthropy and, while taking various forms and names—boarding schools, country day schools, grammar schools, academies—have retained a set of basic characteristics: self-governance, self-support, self-defined curriculum, self-selected students, self-selected faculty, and small size (Kane, 1992).

Independent schools even as far back as the seventeenth century were led by headmasters, whose roles Chamberlain (1944) described in the following terms:

The indefinable spirit of an institution, as well as its policy, emanated to a large degree from its head. Especially in a small school, the headmaster is the pastor of his flock, the advisor, counselor, and friend of everyone. He [sic] stands in loco parentis. He is also a teacher, and he is the supervisor of his teachers. (p. 151)

In his biography, Frank Boyden, Headmaster at Deerfield Academy from 1902-1968 and a colleague of Chamberlain, referred to the latter’s leadership and commitment to the school to as spanning the community, whether he was coaching a football game or
meeting with each individual student instead of sending home written report cards (McPhee, 1966); in his words, “It has been said that a thousand details add up to one impression, and at Deerfield it is the headmaster who adds them up. He thinks in pictures” (p. 75). Just as Chamberlain described the necessary leadership traits involved in being a headmaster, Boyden embodied the unifying factor of all of these traits. In his retirement letter, Boyden summed up the role of a headmaster in this way:

I have a feeling that if you’ve got something good enough to be preserved, it will be. I just kept working. I have never had time enough to concentrate on any one difficulty. The thing I have tried to build is a unity of feeling. The thing I hope is always retained here is the school’s flexibility. We’ve just kept abreast of the times. We haven’t gone wild. There’s a sense of permanence in the school. (p. 109)

The job description for a current day head of school is similar to that in Boyden’s and Chamberlain’s day. The NAIS Trustee Handbook (2015) described the head of school job as including academic leadership, supervision of administration and faculty, partnership and collaboration with the board of trustees, supervision of financial operations, maintenance of school culture, effective communication, and abiding by the principles of good practice in all school operations. While the vocabulary may have changed over the years, then, the long list of job responsibilities has remained constant.

The school head is the chief executive officer of the independent school. She leads and oversees the daily operations of an independent school by fulfilling the goals of the school board. This role is all-encompassing, often compared with but even more demanding than that of a public district superintendent (Case, 2006), in that the former has no central office to use as a resource for services that are not usually within the purview of the individual school (e.g., transportation and personnel). The head of school
position is fundamentally distinct from any other administrative position in an independent school. As Case (2006) observed,

The organizers and administrators of the independent school are responsible for creating and maintaining the infrastructure that allow every process in the independent school to seem as seamless and as easy as the processes in the public schools of memory. (p. 2)

To embody the role well, a head’s leadership must be broader, deeper, and further-reaching than was the case in any previous role that he or she has held (Kislowicz, 2015). The primary role of the head of school is to carry out the school’s stated mission. School heads are also asked to

- partner with the board of trustees,
- oversee the school programs,
- collaborate with and lead the school administration,
- attract, retain, and develop qualified faculty,
- communicate effectively across constituencies,
- be responsible for financial management, maintenance of the physical plant, strategic planning, and fund-raising,
- ensure that all elements and aspects of school life reflect the principles of equity, justice, and the dignity of each individual,
- be aware of and connected to the broader network of schools and school leaders, and
- cooperate with heads of other independent schools (Orem & Wilson, 2015).
An NAIS research study titled “The State of Independent School Governance” generated a similar list based on surveys of independent school heads and board chairs. Two surveys were administered to investigate the composition, practices, attitudes, and effectiveness of boards. Over 1,000 heads and 1,000 trustees, representing a range of schools, were asked to participate in this study, with a 40% participation rate of heads of school and 23% of trustees. Participants were asked to rank in importance 14 functions of the school head, and all agreed that the most important were, in order, “instilling climate/values consistent with the school mission” and the “recruiting and hiring of quality staff and faculty members.” Other roles that this study identified as important for a head of school were managing conflict, counseling personnel, negotiating salaries and benefits, fundraising, enacting appropriate disciplinary measures, and teaching classes (NAIS, 2006).

The head of school serves as the educational leader for her institution. She also helps to create and administer policies that align with the school mission while stewarding and overseeing daily operations. This vast scope of job responsibilities can complicate the transition for a new head of school, who suddenly finds herself bearing the burden of allocating the school’s resources, balancing her own time among divisions, managing business operations, becoming familiar with development and advancement, and building community relations (Kislowicz, 2015). The role can also present emotional challenges, as heads of school often feel lonely and isolated in their new positions. While administrators in a public school have the resources of a central office to ask for assistance on any particular issue, a head of an independent school lacks the systemic support network and the resources (Case, 2006).
Conceptual Framework

This study originated in a desire to understand how first-time female heads of school experienced their transitions into headship. As a leader begins her position in an organization, the transitions for her and the organization are fraught with complex dynamics and interplay among various stakeholders and constituency groups. The conceptual framework for this research, illustrated in the following figure, draws lessons from the interplay among the historical and evolving nature of independent school leadership, theoretical frameworks relating to gender, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of female leadership styles, and theoretical frameworks relating to leadership and organizational transitions. The intersection of these theoretical areas provided a useful perspective for view a woman’s experience in transitioning into being a head of school.
Figure 1. Conceptual framework for this research.

This framework for female leadership can help to inform how female heads of school perceive their transitions to be influenced by their own identity as female and other people’s expectations and perceptions of a female leader. Independent schools have historically been led by male headmasters, a fact that creates difficulties for female leaders in reaching this level and in proving their leadership abilities to their communities and various stakeholders. Female leaders, however, bring a unique style of leadership, one that was once considered a barrier to the advancement of women in business, though research now shows that female leadership styles can be advantageous to organizations. The relational aspect and communicative style of female leaders help to empower employees and provide a positive support system in an organization; thus female leadership can impact an organization in a unique way.
As I studied the transition experiences of heads of school, I examined the role and qualities of leadership in independent schools specifically in order to understand the individual characteristics necessary to be a successful head in this context. The role of the head of school has changed over time. Accordingly, both the interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities of leaders in independent schools have changed as well, thereby challenging the sustainability of the position. The current leadership demands of a head of school can be overwhelming, especially in the first year. As more women take on the position of head of school, the male-centric nature of headships may shift as women shape the position with their relational leadership and communicative style.

Finally, leadership change is the core of any and all change management in an organization or institution (Allison, 2002). Transitions in leaders indicate a change to some order within an organization (Bridges & Mitchell, 2000) that often sends community members through their own behavioral stages (Bridges & Mitchell, 2000; Parkay, Currie, & Rhodes, 1992; Watkins, 2004). A new head of school is developing her leadership capacity and learning the roles and responsibilities of her new position while navigating the nuanced dynamics of organizational change in her new school community. A new leader’s capacity is related to an organization’s response to change: as an organization and a leader experience change, the qualities of the leader can impact and frame the change experience for both the individual and the organization as a whole.

This kind of research has significant implications for independent schools. As these schools start to transition in leadership and heads of school retire, it is critical to examine the intersection between effective transitions and challenges facing female heads of school. I personally experienced a positive transition into my role as a head of school;
however, I have colleagues and friends who did not. I have also witnessed female heads of school living out short tenures in their positions in part because of unhealthy transition periods or environments that did not allow for a transition.

Moving forward, there is a critical need for more data on the transition experiences of female heads of independent schools. Currently, most research points to a need for a thoughtful, deliberate, and systematic transition, but there has been little to no study of what this transition should entail, who should be involved, the frameworks that should be provided, or how it should be communicated to the community. In addition, there has been very little consideration of the transition that a community goes through when a leadership change takes place, though such consideration can help to support the head of school. If independent schools wish to slow the turnover of heads, this is certainly an area that warrants more research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with a short discussion of the evolution of feminist theory and an examination of the gendered nature of female leadership in the corporate sector. Next comes a discussion of articles pertaining to leadership within independent school education, with a focus on the evolution of the role of the head of school. Connections are then made by looking at literature concerning women in independent school leadership. The concluding section describes the emerging discussion of organizational change and, more specifically, the nature of transitions. I have proceeded from the assumption that educational organizations are inherently gendered and use this perspective to assess literature that examines the impact of independent school leadership and gender and is relevant to the transition period for women moving into positions as heads of school.

**Feminist Theory and Female Leadership**

There is an emerging, though sparse, literature that looks at the intersectionality between gender and school leadership. Scholarship on the subject of school administration is predisposed to disregard race and gender. Poststructural feminist theory has challenged this position. For example, Lather (1992) reconstructed educational research so that it did not reflect the social values and concerns of dominant societal groups (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Qualitative research has often ignored women and issues of concern to them, and as a result “women’s lives and experiences have not been adequately captured through the traditional scientific lens” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 775). Moreover, research on leadership structures, frameworks, and qualities calls for a new lens through which to look at leadership qualities. A framework of “postheroic
leadership,” as Fletcher (2004) has argued, challenges the binary representation of leadership styles that reduces the field of organizational leadership to a battle of the sexes rather than approaching it as relational and transformational. Women will still struggle in this framework of leadership because of institutionalized bias and sexism.

The Glass Ceiling

The “glass ceiling” effect was first described in the late 1990s, with numerous studies and articles sharing findings relating to the inability of women to achieve top-level positions in corporations and organizations because of a male-centric culture and understanding of leadership (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Reynolds, 1999). Some attributed the glass ceiling to gender bias and stereotypes on the higher rungs of a corporation (Oakley, 2000; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998) and others to differences between the leadership styles of men and women (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2003).

One emerging theme is the gendered culture of the workplace and male-centric expectations of leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Eagly, 2007). The subtle gender bias that exists in organizations makes it challenging for a woman to establish her identity as a leader (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). Eagly, (2007) and Oakley (2000) have argued that male-dominated corporations have stifled women’s voices and inputs, thereby creating obstacles and challenges for them to climb the corporate ladder and gain authority. In the first large-scale national study of women executives, conducted in 1998, participants “pointed to an exclusionary corporate culture as the primary barrier for women’s advancement” (Ragins et al., 1998). The exclusive male-centric environment not only creates challenges for women in gaining access to leadership roles but also provides
“negatively biased judgments of their performance as leaders” (Eagly et al., 2003) once they are able to break through the glass ceiling and achieve leadership roles.

While some argue that the corporate environment has created the glass ceiling for women, a body of literature argues that the leadership style of women creates these obstacles and challenges. From this latter perspective, women must live in a “double bind,” in which they are expected to exhibit simultaneously traits traditionally associated with women and stereotypically male leadership traits (Eagly, 2007). This balance of soft and aggressive leadership tendencies creates a tension that is detrimental to female leadership. Female leaders are either seen as “too masculine” or “insufficiently feminine” (Eagly et al., 2003). Women who achieve leadership status often show that they are “successful imitators of characteristics generally believed to lie solely in the male domain, such as toughness and aggressiveness” (Stanford, Oates, & Flores, 1995, p. 9).

Recently, the glass ceiling metaphor has been reformulated as the “glass cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). In corporations and in independent school networks alike, there is the perception that women are being put in leadership positions in organizations in crisis, in environments in which they must turn around a situation and therefore are under close scrutiny for their performance. Some women attribute their first break in leadership to turmoil in the organization (Rosener, 1990). Furthermore, when a company appoints a woman leader, it is speculated that this strategic move signals shareholders that a radical change is on the way (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Even in independent schools, women stand better chances of being hired when a school is in economic crisis (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014).
Advantages of Female Leadership

Towards the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the literature on female leadership began to take a different stance. Rather than arguing that female leadership styles were keeping women from breaking through the glass ceiling, many began to argue that the qualities that are inherent in stereotypic female leaders are advantageous to leading organization, including those in precarious situations. These softer management skills were once considered successful for middle managers but not necessarily for executives or CEOs (Oakley, 2000; Eagly et al., 2003). Thus, according to Rosener, women “are succeeding because of—not in spite of—certain characteristics generally considered to be ‘feminine’ and inappropriate in leaders”. (p. 120) Female leadership characteristics have been associated with those of a transformational leader (Burke & Collins, 2001). Such traits of transformational leaders as being collaborative and interactive and empowering employees are also seen in women leaders (Eagly et al., 2003). Also said to be heightened in a female leader are communication and strong interpersonal skills that give women an advantage in forming relationships with colleagues and employees and supporting more productive teamwork (Stanford et al., 1995).

Independent School Leadership

Articles concerning the role of the head of school in independent schools fall into two categories; historical accounts of the roles of the headmaster/head of school and discussions of the current state of leadership in independent schools. As far back as the 1600s, the headmaster has always been a critical player in the culture and success of an independent school. The leadership skills required of the headmaster, now often called
head of school, have varied and changed over time (DiCieco, 2004), but some have remained constant (Baird, 1977; Chamberlain, 1944; DiCieco, 2004; McPhee, 1966). A 1973 study explored the common demands on a headmaster by surveying headmasters and asking them to describe their roles, for which they used such terms as “facilitators,” “catalysts,” or “captains” who are “absolutely responsible” (Nostrand, 1977). Heads of school are expected to work among a diverse group of constituents; they are managers, legal consultants, diplomats, and consensus builders (DiCieco, 2004). As I have noted, a more recent description of the role of a head of school has referred to academic leadership, supervision of administration and faculty, partnership and collaboration with the board of trustees, supervision of the financial management of the school, maintenance of school culture, effective communication, and abiding by the principles of good practice in all school operations (NAIS, 2015). In the literature over time, then, there has been a change in definitions of the role from “autonomous commanders-in-chief” (Chamberlain, 1944) to something much more demanding on an emotional and intellectual level; one must become “broader, deeper, and farther reaching than any other previous role has required” (Kislowicz, 2015, para. 3).

Much of the current independent school literature concerns the emerging backgrounds of heads of school and demographics (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010; Kislowicz, 2015; NAIS 2009; Orem, 2014). Candidates for head of school positions are no longer exclusively independent school alumni who seem to be part of an “old boys club” (DiCieco, 2004). Instead, a growing number of women are being considered for head of school positions, and candidates tend to have higher qualifications in terms of graduate degrees in education and other academic achievements. In the 2009 NAIS study
of independent school heads I discussed above, current heads of school were found to be
challenged by the increased time demands, including managing economic outlooks and
forecasts for the institution and the increasingly litigious parent and employee
environment. The same study reported that the median tenure as heads in their current
school was only seven years and that, while 44% of female heads of school reported
having left the workforce to stay at home with family at some point, only 2% of male
heads reported doing the same. These statistics suggest that women are finding it more
challenging to meet the demands of the role of Head of school than men.

The role of a head of school is complex and requires a diverse array of skills both
in leadership and management (Chamberlain, 1944; DiCieco, 2014). Though the
literature describes all of these skills, little attention has been paid to how one begins to
develop this vast array of skills and to develop the necessary emotional strength
(Kislowicz, 2015) to manage the many challenges faced in a headship.

Women in Independent School Leadership

Only 38% of all heads of school in independent schools are women. There has
been considerable research into why more women are not reaching the top leadership
position. From this literature, it appears that numerous traits are necessary for a female
head of school and that underlying assumptions often do not support the ambitions of
future female heads of school. Search firms often label female candidates as
“nontraditional” (NAIS 2009; Orem, 2014), reinforcing the notion that independent
schools are traditionally male-dominated and that the traits involved in being a head of
school are male-centric. Boards and search firms often perceive women candidates as
“out of the box” and categorize them with other applicants from non-educational fields thus disadvantaging them (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014).

Going into the search process, then, women already face the biases of being “nontraditional” and of exemplifying qualities of leadership that are complex and often dichotomous (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010; Pernambuco-Wise, 2014). As the literature about CEOs and corporate executives suggests, female heads of school are expected to show compassion combined with strong authoritative leadership. They also need to show a sense of “gravitas” without being perceived as aggressive. Women independent school leaders must have a certain academic skill set that includes academic credentials, financial expertise, and personal development. While they are not expected to be financial experts, they are expected to speak intelligently on the school’s financial outlook (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014). Many, if not all of the articles on the leadership of women in independent schools referred to the need for women to “walk a fine line” (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010) or “balance a tightrope” (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014) or some similar metaphor. The balance involves showing a nurturing side without seeming weak and thus parallels the “double bind” that mentioned in the literature on corporate executives (Eagly, 2007).

According to a 2011 report by McKinsey and Company, although women have been becoming more economically productive, business and corporations are struggling to place them at higher levels of leadership positions. The report identified several major barriers for women in this respect. The first is a lack of access to informal networks and role models, which is consistent with the loneliness described by female heads of school in the 2009 NAIS study (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014). In another NAIS study, which
examined the support that heads of school desired from their boards of trustees, women felt the loneliness of the job more acutely than men and therefore sought moral support from their trustees more often than men in the position. One respondent stated, “As a woman in this role, it is very different. Clothes, hair, children, home, all are visible and expectations are there as well as for the professional parts of the role” (Jorgenson & Pernambuco-Wise, 2016) The second barrier, which is also described in the independent school literature, concerns the lifestyle challenges and the demands of the job while rearing a family. Women find the multiple roles and responsibilities of headship to be challenging to balance with raising a family. The expectation to be a fundraiser, an educator, and the school’s fiduciary takes on time commitments that keep a Head from spending enough time at home. The third concerns the mindsets and biases relating to male-dominated and male-centric norms and traits for leadership. A fourth barrier is the mindset of a woman; for while women are ambitious and believe have the qualifications, they seem daunted and exhausted by the burden of overcoming barriers to pursuing a leadership position. In a study examining the career pathways for female heads of school, researchers referred to the tackling of similar barriers as a labyrinth” (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014).

Finally, female leadership in corporations and in independent schools alike is supported and nurtured when the composition of the board is diverse. Women are more likely to be appointed to a CEO-level position and to experience a longer tenure as the proportion of women on the board increases (Cook & Glass, 2014). Similarly, when the composition of the search committee and the board of trustees at an independent school were diverse in both ethnicity and gender, a woman’s candidacy was directly affected
(Pernambuco-Wise, 2014), provided that the women on these boards felt empowered to advocate for the candidates for leadership.

**Organizational Change**

Bridges and Mitchell (2000) observed that “transition is the state that change puts people into” (p. 2). An examination of key pieces of literature about change is accordingly necessary to appreciate transitions in leadership. A common thread in the organizational change literature is the need to acknowledge human nature and how the behaviors of people play a critical role in change management (Evans, 1996; Shea & Solomon, 2013). Change takes on various meanings for people (Evans, 1996) and can create different opportunities for individuals and organizations (Allison, 2002; Evans 1996). Change takes many forms; it may occur within a given system that itself remains unchanged or may change the entire system (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fische, 2011), in the latter case “from transformation to transformation, which is a change of its way of behaving” (p. 11). According to Allison (2002), “an organization actually can become stronger through transition. It can emerge with renewed clarity of purpose and an energized team poised for achieving success” (p. 341). Similarly Evans (1996), in writing about the “human side of school change” asserted that change challenges competence, creates confusion, and causes conflict but that, from these challenges, under good leadership organizations can transform “from loss to commitment, old competence to new competence, confusion to coherence, and conflict to consensus” (p. 32).

For Bridges and Mitchell (2000), “Change is external while transition is internal (the different policy, practice of structure that the leader is trying to bring about), while transition is internal (a psychological reorientation that people have to go through before
the change can work)” (p. 2). A transition is a significant form of organizational change that can be seen through such various lenses as time, the passing and gathering of information, social phases, and the effects on an organization. In the following sections, I discuss literature that pertains to these frameworks in regard to transitions in leadership.

The Nature of Transitions in Leadership

Some have argued that the transition in leadership begins during the search for new leaders. Boards, sometimes with the help of consultants, work to identify the criteria and characteristics that they are looking for in their next head of school. Although dated, Miller’s (1975) list of some of the qualifications and characteristics of candidates is informative. It includes evidence of leadership capacity, academic background, teaching experience, administrative experience, public relations success, fund-raising experience, educational philosophy, cultural background, spousal and family status, and social skills. Many of these qualities remain important today, and even more consistent is the variety of qualifications that a head of school must possess. In a 2012 NAIS article, Pernambuco-Wise wrote that the essential skills for a head of school candidate were the capacity to manage a board, an understanding of community politics, development of an inspirational vision, emotional intelligence, and emotional resilience. Search committees are often also curious about the family status of candidates, as it helps to form a picture of community involvement.

While a search process is certainly critical in an organization’s leadership transition, it is equally important to recognize some of the emotional transitions that a new leader goes through upon taking a new position with greater responsibility (Allison, 2002). New school leaders can experience stress, anxiety, loneliness, and even perceive
themselves to lack the skills to manage the demands of the job (Parkay et al., 1992). The diversity and unpredictability of the work of a leader, whether in schools or in corporations, can be taxing (Spillane & Lee, 2014). There is a sudden realization around the ultimate responsibility lying on the shoulders of the leader. The new burdens of managing personal and professional time, as well as the dedication of long hours, required of heads of school, bring on a deeper sense of responsibility and identification with the school. Naturally, this deep sense of belonging to a school community makes a new head of school take on a different emotional role from those she experienced in prior, non-head roles (Kislowicz, 2015). The entering and exiting of a position of organizational leadership is a complex process that needs attention and focus (Allison, 2002).

The transition of a new leader into an organization can determine the success or failure of both the individual and the organization (Allison, 2002; McManus, 2012; Watkins, 2004). In examining the transitions of leaders in a variety of organizations, Watkins (2004) argued that leaders and organizations need systematic methods and frameworks to employ during a transition period. A variety of questions arise when hiring a new executive director that plague both the individual leader and members of the organization. Questions about the future of programming, working relationships, the nature of the new leadership, and general organizational infrastructure can affect the dynamics and culture of an organization (Allison, 2002). Therefore, a thoughtful and deliberate planning of the transition period is necessary and critical with ongoing feedback provided to the new leader. (Kuriloff, Andrus, Jacobs, 2017) The following sections discuss the literature about various perspectives on a transition in leadership.
**Gathering and passing on of information.** One of the key components of a transition in leadership is the acquisition and passing down of information (Peet, 2012). A study involving nonprofit leaders showed that there is no formal discipline or theoretical framework for leaders to approach their transition or to gather the relevant knowledge that they need to socialize into an organization. In a parallel article looking at school leadership succession, new principals were left to fend for themselves without the support and conditions to transition into their new school and thus in the words of Fink and Brayman (2006, p. 85) “to manage from the edge”. These researchers argued that creating and protecting substantial support systems for new principals is critical in educational leadership reform. To do so, thoughtful and deliberate transition and succession plans must be created for organizations and new leaders. Kuriloff, Andrus and Jacobs further argue that “Successful succession plans provide for finding a new leader attuned to the school’s mission.”(p.169) And succession plans help to nurture and sustain other leaders within the institution. (Kuriloff et al, 2017)

**Physical time.** The complexities of the job ask for a thoughtful and deliberate transition framework, and so does the pressure of time. In the literature on public school and independent school administration, school leaders are said to be under time constraints to show their leadership and vision for the school and to show reform and changes for the institution (Parkay et al., 1992; Glendinning & Hoffman, 2010). To quote Fink and Brayman (2006) again,

In an environment of runaway reform demands, these successors are being denied the time to engage in an entry process that would help them engender the trust of their staffs and gain insight into the cultures and micropolitics of their schools. (p. 84)
The same pressures were found in a study of first-time high school principals (Parkay et al., 1992). They reported that their socialization in their new school was “intense, short, and informal rather than planned” (p. 45). Schools and organizations need to recognize that a transition takes time. Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008) provided a conceptual model for leadership transition, observing that transition periods for new leaders and teams typically took one day to nine months. In a NAIS article on head transitions, a first-year head of school observed that the transition can last from four to eight months or from when a new head is named to when she actually begins the job (Glendinning & Hoffman, 2010). Similarly, in a study of independent school heads and their transition into leadership, heads commented that their transition began months before their first 90 days and extended beyond the first three months on the job (Kane & Barbaro, in press). Watkins (2004) argued, from a business standpoint, that the first 90 days are critical for the transition of a leader. The varying periods of time cited for transition further point to the need for a deliberate and planned transition period.

Transitions as phases. The timeframe for transitions is important to acknowledge, but it is the phases or stages of transition within these time periods that need to be recognized and planned for leaders. A consistent theme throughout the literature on transitions concerns, in schools or in corporate or nonprofit organizations, the notion that there are phases to a transition in leadership, though there is disagreement regarding the number of phases, with numbers ranging from 3 (Parkay et al., 1992) to as many as 10 (Watkins, 2004). The beginning phase, in any case, is similar throughout the literature; it is an entry phase in which the leader is first going through an initial shock of taking on the role and associated responsibilities (Parkay et al., 1992) and then begins to
encounter the various stakeholders with whom relationships must be formed (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Glendinning & Hoffman, 2010; Weindling, 2000). In some cases, the first phase of transition is not necessarily considered very nurturing but as more of a “survival stage” (Parkay et al., 1992) or “letting go” stage (Bridges, 1986). A high percentage of first-time heads end up leaving or being asked to leave their first school within the first five years; therefore, a part of a new head’s job is surviving (Melvoin & Thompson, 2005). This framework of survival focuses on the leader needing to let go of her old identity and old purpose to engage and embrace her new role. Because of the variety of responsibilities and tasks associated with a new leadership role, often there is a feeling of survival, of just getting by because of the overwhelming nature of the beginning of the job.

Some of the middle phases in the transition help the leader to move from being insecure and unfamiliar to a place of control. Studies have demonstrated that in the middle phases (whether the second or third), school principals begin to set priorities (Parkay et al., 1992), accommodating their working style to move forward in their working relationship with others (Weindling, 2000) and to feel immersed in the school community (Gmelch, 2000). Some of the phrases used to describe these middle phases are “the quiet before the storm” (Gmelch, 2000), “neutral zone” (Bridges, 1986), and “control” (Parkay et al., 1992). The one aberration in the literature describing this middle phase is in a study on head transitions in independent schools, in which leaders observed that their second phase of transition was primarily focused on family and relocation to the new community, while in the third phase for independent school heads, they began to
form relationships with key stakeholders and to understand some of the “realities” of the school and necessary priorities for going forward (Kane & Barbaro, in press).

In the final stages of transition, leaders are becoming stable in their positions, routinized in their frustrations, and effective and efficient in their roles (Parkay et al., 1992; Weindling, 2000). School leaders also find themselves able to provide a vision and direction for the institution, allowing for a new beginning for the organization (Bridges, 1986; Gmelch, 2000). It seems that there is a cycle to these transition phases, in which leaders first question their abilities to lead the organization and then achieve self-actualization and are able to accomplish goals that they have set for themselves and begin to receive feedback from their board chairs (Kane & Barbaro, in press). In the study by Parkay et al. (1992) that I have cited above, school principals observed a shift from positional power to personal power in their final stage of transition as their own characteristics and commitment to the profession were beginning to be seen and felt by constituents and individual principals felt there was more to their power than just a title.

**Effects of transitions on the community.** In terms of the socialization at various moments in a school leader’s transition, there seem to be parallel phases for staff and parents. Faculty and staff go through their own range of emotions and transitions as they adjust to new leadership styles and new expectations. In cases in which the departing principal is a long-tenured and revered school leader, faculty and staff go through a grieving process while also welcoming in their new principal/head of school (Cocklin & Wilkinson, 2011). In any organization, change and transition can be difficult for members of the community. Emotions such as fear, anxiety, resentment, sadness, and distrust can reverberate through an organization during a time of transition (Bunker,
2008). Just as there are phases to a leader’s transition into her new role, there are phases for a community as well: grieving, letting go, building hope, and learning (Bunker, 2008). New heads of school and principals are often unaware or not attuned to the emotions that are going through other members of the community and therefore suffer from blind spots in their leadership that could be avoided.

The head of school role in an independent school is clearly complex, what with the variety of responsibilities, the burden of time commitment to the job, and the balance of being an educational leader and a CEO. It is just as clear that women who attain headships face even more challenges of overcoming gender biases and intense scrutiny and finding a balance of leadership that is both nurturing and assertive. Finally, the transition period for leadership seems to come in different shapes and sizes and is rarely systematic for a leader or an institution.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, I explored the transition experiences of female heads of independent schools. While there have been a number of NAIS articles and conference presentations discussing the need for “effective transitions,” there is not enough evidence regarding the transition experiences for first time Heads of school. As has been seen, some schools look to the business model for leadership transition, often referring to “the first 90 days” as a framework (Watkins, 2004). There has been, however, very little literature indicating whether this framework is appropriate for independent school leadership, nor of course has there been a detailed discussion of the unique factors involved in the transition of female heads of school.

This study is phenomenological in that it explores and describes the common meaning of several individuals regarding their lived experiences as first-time head of an independent school (Creswell, 2012). Largely qualitative in nature, this research was based on a survey and extensive interviews with female heads of school in their first, second, or third years in the position. A qualitative approach served to address the research questions formulated above.

One goal of this study, then, was to contribute to the body of research on headship transitions. More importantly, this study explored and documented how female heads of school experienced their first year on the job and to understand better the transitional experiences in a school community. A naturalistic approach to research, according to Rubin and Rubin (2012), provides room for context and for the data to acknowledge “what something feels like or how it works from the inside ” (p. 3), for “Qualitative researchers focus on depth rather than breadth; they care less about finding averages, and
more about understanding specific situations, individuals, groups, or moments in time that are important or revealing” (p. 2).

I planned several specific qualitative methods to help shed light on the transition experiences of leaders in independent schools. Individual interviews were conducted with 13 female heads of schools in their first, second, or third year of headship. These interviews allowed for a better understanding of, in the words of Maxwell (2013, p. 30), the meaning for participants of the events, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved with or engage in,” who went on to explain that it is necessary to understand the particular contexts and settings of the participants and therefore by studying a small number of individuals to “preserve the individuality of each of these in their analyses (p. 30).

The smaller sample size also allowed me to be more purposive (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 1994) in the selection of the participants and sites.

The individual interviews and collection of qualitative data were informed by the data collected earlier through a survey of heads of school in their first three years at their current schools. This explanatory, sequential method supported the qualitative data with initial quantitative results (Creswell, 2012). Responses from the survey informed my research in the following ways. First, they helped me identify individual women who might be interested in being further interviewed for the study. Second, they helped to frame the interview questions regarding transition experiences and gendered transition experiences. Lastly, they helped to shape questions for a focus group of independent school board members involved in a head of school search and for another focus group of consultants working with head of school searches.
**Participant Selection and Selection Criteria**

There are over 1,500 independent schools in the nation, all of which are led by a head of school who in many cases is in the first year on the job. To create a sample that was purposeful and meaningful, individuals were selected who had the ability to contribute to answering the research question and also an understanding of the problem at hand (Creswell, 2012). Participants were completing their first, second or third year of headship. When deciding which schools and stakeholders to involve in this study, I was conscious of the fact that the sampling of settings was as important as the sampling of people (Maxwell, 2013). Prioritizing the choice of setting along with the individuals protected the study from inappropriate generalizations and helped to focus on the diversity of responses within the setting of independent schools and on female heads of school in independent schools.

NAIS hosts a one-week program, its Institute for New Heads (INH), that introduces heads entering their first year to a variety of topics, such as finance, advancement/fundraising, diversity and inclusivity, and enrollment. Heads engage in very structured and participatory small group discussions led by experienced heads of school as well as large lecture-style presentations. The goal of the program is not only to give new leaders a crash course on headship but to also nurture their support and network systems. The program follows a cohort design so that each member feels connected throughout her career. NAIS keeps a database of all participants in this program and continually finds ways to connect and reunite cohorts at conferences and through online platforms. This list of participants is not public but can be accessed on request by a member school and educator. I participated in this institute in my own transition into my
headship and have been able to maintain contact with the directors of the program. NAIS is welcoming of individuals who are pursuing academic research and allows for access to various databases that they host. With the help of NAIS, I sent a survey to INH 247 participants in the program in the summers of 2014, 2015, and 2016, of whom 184 responded. While the invitation to participate in the survey was strategic and purposive (Miles et al., 2014), the actual sampling within this body of individuals was random.

The survey asked for female heads of school to volunteer time for a follow-up telephone or in-person interview. Because the intent of the design was to follow-up on the quantitative results and explore the results in more depth, it was necessary that participants in the interviews be drawn from the survey participants (Creswell, 2012). They came from a variety of independent schools varying in geographic location, demographics, size, and grade level. According to Maxwell (2013), the goals in selecting a purposive sampling are to achieve typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities, to select individuals who are critical for testing theories already being studied or developed, to establish particular comparisons that illuminate the reasons for differences among settings or individuals, and to select participants with whom the researcher can establish the most productive relationships in order to answer a research question. Of those who took the survey, 57 women volunteered for a follow-up interview and provided their contact addresses. To select interviewees from this group, I looked at their schools to ensure a diverse selection in terms of location and size (i.e., K-6, K-8, K-12). 45 of the 57 women were heads of K-6, K-8, or K-12 schools. I contacted these 45 women, of whom 20 agreed to be interviewed and 13 actually were interviewed, the others being unable to
participate owing to scheduling conflicts. Detailed profiles of each of these women are included in Chapter 4.

Table 1

Profile of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade levels</th>
<th>Gender of school</th>
<th>Religious affiliation</th>
<th>Succeeding long term head</th>
<th>Gender of predecessor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theresa Mead</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>Coed K-5, all girls 6-12</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Palms</td>
<td>5-12</td>
<td>All girls</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Muffles</td>
<td>Pk-8</td>
<td>Coed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melinda Bones</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>Coed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg Style</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>All girls</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Daniels</td>
<td>5-12</td>
<td>Coed (day and boarding)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Cook</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>All girls</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen Tolls</td>
<td>Pk-8</td>
<td>Coed</td>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenn Ellis</td>
<td>Pk-5</td>
<td>Coed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana Olney</td>
<td>Pk-9</td>
<td>Coed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Masters</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>Coed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison Weebly</td>
<td>PreK-8</td>
<td>Coed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Koener</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>Coed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Design

Data collection and sequencing. This study employed triangulation, relying on a variety of data collection and sources. The use of a variety of sources allowed for a richer understanding of the experiences of heads of school as they transitioned into their roles. The study utilized survey, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Throughout, I maintained a journal documenting my own analysis, thoughts, and ideas.

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1 To protect anonymity, pseudonyms have been assigned to interview participants
2 A long-term head was defined as one who had served for ten or more years.
pertaining to the issues and observations that emerged from the research. All interviews with participants were conducted over the telephone.

Most of the data collected were derived from qualitative interviews with heads of school. For these interviews to be informed, productive, and answer the research question, the sequencing of data collection was critical. A quantitative survey was first conducted with heads of school in their first three years in their position at their school. From the survey, 13 female heads of school were identified and invited to participate in a follow-up telephone or in-person interview. Finally, two focus groups were convened to gather a broader perspective on the transition experience for heads of school. One focus group was composed of board members who were part of a search process and the second of consultants working with independent schools on a search process.

Survey. A survey (Appendix A) was created and given to heads of school who are in their first three years of their positions at their current schools. The purpose of the survey was to help to generate ideas and identify patterns in the transition experiences of heads of school. These patterns helped to form inferences about certain characteristics, attitudes, or behaviors of this specific population. The survey consisted of six questions, five of which were multiple choice and one that asked respondents whether they “strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree” with 11 statements. The data were collected using an online survey platform emailed to participants, who were asked to complete it within a specific period of time.

Interviews. The core data for this study were collected through in-depth qualitative telephone interviews with heads of school. While this process was time-
consuming, it was necessary to provide a rich, elaborate, and nuanced understanding of participants’ experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The use of open-ended questions provides opportunities for a researcher to gain detailed information about participants’ perceptions and understandings of their situations. Results from the survey were used to frame interview questions. Interviewees were asked to respond to various survey results or comments in order to check for consistency of thought.

Interview protocols were modeled after what Rubin and Rubin (2012) termed “responsive interviewing.” While the interview protocols provided a framework of questions for the researcher and participants, responsive interviewing allowed for flexibility, evolution of other questions, and room to adjust as I and the participants came to trust one another (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview protocol emerged as a function of themes from the survey. The selection process allowed me to gather perspectives from female heads of school from diverse backgrounds in terms of the size of their schools, previous experience, and location. Beyond providing additional insight into the participants’ experiences and perceptions, these interviews also served as a source of triangulation.

The interview procedures were designed to encourage thoughtful and robust engagement from the participants. All interviews were conducted over the telephone and lasted from 60 minutes to 120 minutes. The interviews were recorded using Revv, a recording and transcription provider.

**Interview protocol questions.** The interview protocol framework, informed by the survey, consisted of the following questions:

- Describe your leadership journey and how your pathways to headship.
• Once you received the job offer, can you share some of the communications, plans and discussions around transitions?
• What were some of your expectations of a transition plan or transition period?
• How did you begin to learn about the history and culture of your new school?
• Can you share with me some of the areas in your first year where you felt the most prepared? The least prepared?
• What was your relationship like with your predecessor? What was the relationship like with your predecessor and your school?
• What does a successful transition look like?
• How did gender come into play with your transition?

Focus groups. The final source of triangulation for the data collection came from the two focus groups. Focus groups are an effective strategy to help further explore issues related to feelings, emotions, and perceptions (Rabiee, 2004), but differ from individual interviews in that they help to reveal group perspectives and to develop shared understandings and meanings of a specific experience (Kitzinger, 1994). One focus group consisted of board members who had been through a search process at the institutions that they represented. In my interviews with the heads of school, I asked whether they would recommend a board member who was involved with their search process to be invited for a focus group. Ten board members were recommended and, after all ten were invited to take part, 7 of them responded initially and 4 eventually
participated in the focus group, the others being unable to do so owing to scheduling issues. This interview was conducted over the telephone.

The second focus group consisted of educational consultants who work to identify candidates for head of school positions and support schools through the search and hiring process. I invited seven consultants to participate in the focus group, of whom three were available in the working timeline. All were female and worked for different consulting firms. Conveniently, they were also retired heads of school who were thus able to speak of their own experiences transitioning into that role.

I designed a protocol for each focus group based on the themes that emerged from the survey and individual interviews with female heads of school. The length of the focus group was 60 minutes, which provided sufficient time to engage in substantive conversations and encourage broad participation while respecting the tight schedules of these busy individuals. My goal for the focus groups was twofold. First, I sought to generate a common understanding of an experience for a specific demographic of educational leaders in independent schools. Second, I sought to identify themes and patterns in the integration of the relationships of the three constituents (heads of school, board members, search consultants) in this shared experience of transition into the head of school position.

**Focus group interview protocol.** The interview protocol framework, informed by the survey and by the interviews with individual heads of school, consisted of the following questions:

- Can you share your history and affiliation with independent schools?
- Can you describe the search process and your involvement in a search?
• What was your role once a candidate was selected and announced as the next head of school?
• How long do you think a transition period should last?
• What kind of supports do you think should be provided during a transition period?
• What do you think a successful transition looks like?
• How do you think gender comes into play in a transition of leadership in your school or in independent schools?

**Research journal and memos.** Throughout the course of the research, I maintained a journal in which I kept an ongoing record of my own reflections and observations. Each interview provided new insights that had me reflecting on my own experience and those of others. A journal provided a space for me to document these perceptions, ideas, and notions. In addition to a journal, I kept memos that documented my thoughts after each interview. The memos helped me to keep track of thoughts, notions, or ideas that I wanted to explore or that promoted secondary questions that made me even more curious about the transition experiences. The memos helped me to deepen my understanding of the research, explore new areas of the research, and expand on observations made through other areas of the data collection.

**Data analysis plan.** This study involved qualitative research. Therefore, the data analysis primarily involved the qualitative interviews. The survey provided descriptions of the perceptions that heads of school had of their transition experience and helped to inform the questions for the interviews. The instrument for the survey asked participants to select statements with which they most agreed and to provide their own observations about transitions, and the themes and patterns that emerged produced a first set of codes.
Throughout the data collection, I compiled notes indicating emerging themes and patterns in the data. Once I developed a first set of codes from the survey, I then read interview transcripts a number of times in order to identify more emerging, recurring, and diverging themes (Creswell, 2012). I reviewed and revised the initial code list in order to consolidate codes into smaller categories by eliminating redundancy or repetition. Three iterations of code lists were formed in order to define the codes in the best possible way based on the interviews and the research question. Specific themes were categorized under three types of coding analysis, namely organizational, substantive, and theoretical (Maxwell, 2013). Classification of the data provided a comprehensive view of the findings.

**Researcher Roles/Issues of Validity**

This study examined the lived experiences of heads of school as they transitioned into their new roles and school communities. Interviews, document review, journaling, and memos were the primary sources of data, thereby providing for a triangulation of data to ensure validity (Miles et al., 1994). Qualitative researchers do not seek to prove that they have found the truth; rather, they attempt to produce a study that is credible and plausible. I collected and used a number of data sources to support my conclusions and to attempt to mitigate any potential problems associated with single-investigator research. In triangulation, a researcher relies on a number of independent data sources to discover corroborating or conflicting findings in need of further explanation (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 1994).

The second means by which I sought validity in this study was in the reporting back to participants both a transcript of their interview and a note informing them of
emerging themes from the data set. Individuals were invited to read through the transcript of their interviews in order to catch anything that might have been misinterpreted or improperly transcribed. I also reached out to a number of participants after the interviews were completed to ask for feedback or observations regarding conclusions that I had drawn from the data. A member check of this kind can help a researcher to find inaccuracies in transcripts or misinterpretations of the meaning of interviews and observations.

**Research role/positionality.** I was in the middle of my third year as a head of school when I conducted this research, having just experienced my own transition into the role and into my school community. My transition was overwhelmingly joyful and smooth, but I knew that my experience was unique and may not reflect that of other heads of school. Nor do I think that every head of school can or should have identical transition experiences. Therefore, it was critical that I remain aware of my own experiences and separate them from the observations and conversations that I had with the participants in my study. I was deliberate and intentional in not allowing my lived experience to interact with the interviews and conversations that I had with participants. Journaling and writing of memos helped me to compartmentalize my own comparison experiences so that they did not interfere in the collection of the data from the individual participants.

Aside from being a new head of school, as were my participants, I am also a female person of color. Both my gender and my ethnicity provided a lens to view this research study in a way that a Caucasian male could not. My own biases regarding how a female leader should be treated and viewed very much had the potential to interfere with
the collection of the data. Again, the use of memos and journaling helped to provide a separate place to reflect on my own feelings as a woman of color transitioning into a new school community and a new leadership role.

Limitations of Study

This study was designed to document and examine the experiences of first-time female heads of school as they transitioned into their positions. I originally set out to explore a phenomenon that I was unsure existed, but I felt strongly that the research would shed light on leadership transitions. I chose to focus on female heads of school in view of the larger conversation in the independent school network regarding female leadership and efforts to encourage more women to aspire to serve as heads of school. My hope, then, was that this study would contribute to the literature about female heads of school and provide guidance to schools as undergoing a leadership transition.

I was able to collect a variety of experiences and narratives of female heads of school that shed light on women’s perceptions of the role of gender in their transitions into leadership positions. The equivalent qualitative data from male heads of school was not collected, which would have been necessary for a comparison of women’s and men’s transition experiences. A second limitation of this study that also represents a fertile area for future research concerns the experiences of women of color as they transition into roles as heads of school. Of the 14 women interviewed, 2 identified as persons of color. While these individuals alluded to challenges in terms of their racial and gender identity, the study did not explore these experiences specifically. As discussed, women of color who serve as heads of school face difficulties associated with assuming a position that has traditionally been held by White men.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This phenomenological qualitative study examined the transition experiences of female heads of school in Independent schools. The primary goal was to understand better the experience of female heads of school as they transitioned into their leadership positions. The study also examined whether gender had any impact on their transitions.

A survey was first conducted of heads of school in their first, second, or third year of headship who had taken part in the NAIS Institute for New Heads. Of the 247 participants invited to complete the survey, 184 responded, of whom 82 self-identified as female and 84 as male. Ultimately, thirteen female heads of school completing their first, second, or third year on the job were invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. The participants for the interviews were selected from a list of 57 names of individuals who had volunteered to be part of a follow-up interview after completing an online survey. I extended personal invitations by email to all 57 women, and I chose to interview those who responded first and were able to coordinate their schedules with mine. The interviews varied in length from 60 to 90 minutes. There were two follow-up focus groups; one group consisted of independent school leadership search consultants and the other of board members who had been part of a search process at a school that they represented.

The current chapter presents the most salient findings from the qualitative data, which are presented in five sections. Section I, On Being Female, discusses the challenges associated with being a female head of school in the transition into leadership. All of the participants eagerly spoke about how they were very much aware of their
gender in the search and interview process. Once in their positions, they found that some of the characteristics of being a female were advantageous in the transition period.

Section II, Transition into Headship, offers insight into the various ways in which a school provides support and structure for the transition of a head of school. More specifically, this section presents experiences and perspectives concerning transition committees, the importance of communication during a leadership change, and the timing and varying timelines that these leaders lived through in their transitions.

Section III, Preparation, provides a description of the various ways in which the heads of school felt prepared and unprepared for taking on a headship. Participants shared their journeys to headships and often credited the involvement of the heads of schools for whom they worked.

Section IV, Relationship Building, describes the nuanced ways in which the heads of school formed relationships with various stakeholders in their communities. One somewhat surprising aspect of becoming a head of school is the number of constituency groups with which it is necessary to become familiar and to build relationships. In a transition period, a new head of school also navigates a relationship with her predecessor as the leadership transfers. Finally, a new head has to understand and balance her relationship with herself in this new role. All participants discussed feelings of loneliness and a sense of the emotional and physical burden that they now carried as a head of school.

Section V, Defining a Successful Transition, presents three major themes that emerged from the participants’ responses. The women spoke of the need for the transition to be deliberate and “planful” (M. Bones, personal communication, August 3,
2017) in cases in which heads of school have organized and fully-communicated entry plans. New heads would have liked to have had a clear understanding of the support they have from the board, search consultant or a transition committee. Finally, participants suggested that a successful transition would be measured by the positive feeling of the community as the leadership change unfolds.

Section I: On Being Female

All of the participants reflected on whether being female had any impact on their transition into headship. As discussed in previous chapters, the majority of independent schools are led by men, and school communities are used to seeing a man as the head of school. The survey asked participants to agree or disagree with the statement “My gender hindered my transition into being a head of school.” Thirty-seven of the female interviewees either strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement, while 18 agreed. Of the male respondents, six either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement “My gender hindered my transition into being a head of school”, while 57 either strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. The interviews thus seemed to confirm the survey responses, with some interviewees observing subtle areas in which they felt that being female provided a different, though not necessarily more challenging and sometimes challenging, transition experience. Thus Jenn Ellis observed that, for her and perhaps for other women heads who were following a female head of school, the challenges were not so great because “somebody else had sort of forged some of that for me.” (personal communication, August 3, 2017). Three participants spoke of how community members mistook their husbands as the head of school. Jennifer Cook recalled that, at a welcome event at the school, as she stood next to her husband greeting people as they came in, four
or five families approached her husband to shake his hand and said “Oh, are you the head of school?” (personal communication, August 2, 2017). Melinda Bones recalled a similar experience during a committee meeting at which an outside consultant was pitching a product and mistakenly addressed only the male assistant head of school. While many of the participants felt that being female was to their advantage in their transition year, they also expressed some caution about the gendered experience going forward.

I feel like a lot of the gender stuff is still ahead, because some of that springing into action and not let’s get some s__ done, that I think part of it is, men get a whole different lens on that than women do, so I think actually more of that is ahead than behind in terms of what it’s going to like to lead as a female in the environment I’m in, because the low bar of the first year of come in and be friendly so naturally goes with people’s gender stereotypes about women. (A. Weebly, personal communication, July 20, 2017)

The focus group that included the search consultants discussed extensively the role of gender in regard to the head of school position. Participants asserted that women were better at managing the earlier stages of headship, concurring with Allison Weebly that the early stages of headship were easier for women. “But if I look overall at the heads that I place, and I don’t do that much search work anymore, I think women are often, given what they’re dealing with, stronger and better early leaders” (Search consultant focus group, personal communication, November 17, 2017). Being a female head of school had its advantages and it also its challenges.

**Challenges during the search.** Many of the participants felt that their gender had more of an impact during the search process than at any other point in their transitions. They spoke of how, in the interview process, members of boards or search committees would ask about their ability to lead a school or to balance their home life
with the demands of the position. Jenn Ellis recalled a search consultant telling her that the committee was “looking for a man who’s married with kids” (personal communication, August 13, 2017). She shared her story of leaning on a male colleague who was a search consultant to help her navigate the search process and whom she described as part of “the old boys who ran all the searches. He knew exactly what to tell me to do” (personal communication, August 13, 2017). Nancy Muffles shared her experience of negotiating her contract with her board chair, who, when she asked why he had not offered her a membership to a country club, responded, “Maybe we did think that you wouldn’t want a country club membership because you were a female,” and she went on to observe that “boards still seem to be very, very traditional in how they look for heads. And it’s why men normally get the positions over women” (personal communication, August 7, 2017).

The board members who participated in the focus study interviews were all women themselves. When asked how they viewed the search process for a female candidate, one focus group participant commented, “It was not a deliberate or ‘named’ conversation with the search committee, but I am sure it was in the back of our minds as we reviewed each candidate” (personal communication, November 12, 2017). Another board member observed that she was at an all-girls school, so the gender of the candidates was very much part of the conversation, as the search committee had to discuss appropriate leadership in the context of the demographics of the student body.

**Decision-making and authority.** Participants also discussed how, once in their positions and during their first year, they felt that their decision-making ability and ability to establish authority sometimes came into question because of their gender. Diane
Olney was the only participant who moved into the head of school position from another internal administrative position. Although she had already established herself in the community in her years as a division head, she still felt that people and the board shared a concern regarding whether she could handle the decision making necessary as the head of school. Referring to her board members, she observed that “their main concern with me becoming head of school was, would I be able to make the hard calls?” and went on to share:

they [the board] saw me as more of a healer than as... in the capacity of being able to make the hard call. And I actually was insulted is probably too strong of a word, but I was sort of feeling like “Gosh, you know why you not think I would be able to make hard decisions? I’ve obviously had to make hard decisions as the head of the middle school.” So that was a tough one for me to think that people view me as somebody who would have a hard time making a difficult call. (personal communication, July 20, 2017)

Laura Koen had a similar experience with one of her board members when she asked him for some help analyzing the financials of the school:

And he said something like, “It feels really good to be able to help you with this while you’re doing things like bandaging the scraped knees.” And I said, “Well you know that what I do is much more high level and sophisticated and strategic and complex, and intellectual.” (personal communication, August 24, 2017)

Women interviewees shared how at times constituent groups questioned their expertise as educators. One participant who was not herself a mother even spoke of parents questioning whether she understood certain child development issues because she had no experience being a parent. Laura Koen leaned heavily on her educational background to overcome the questioning from her community.

Having a doctorate, and I can’t say whether or not it’d be different for a man, but I think having the doctorate has lent me a kind of authority and respect that has
served me well as a woman. I do go by doctor, because I feel like, yeah, I worked hard for it, I earned it, so I do think that in a gendered way thought it does, people just take it, take me more seriously, before I even open my mouth, because I have that. I've just felt that. (personal communication, August 24, 2017)

Meg Style commented that, even among other heads in her local network, “there’s a little bit of a need to assert yourself among the other heads in a way that’s applied to me, given the gender balance and the career. That’s where I feel it more” (personal communication, August 3, 2017). Sarah Palms spoke of how her expertise as an educator was often questioned in her first year and posed the question as to whether she would be questioned as much if she were a man. When asked her thoughts as to whether a man would receive the same questioning, she said it was hard to tell but she suspects that men are not questioned as much. Many participants shared stories and followed up with the question, “would this have happened to me if I were male?” or “would a male head of school have had this same experience?”

**Maternal instinct.** Many of the participants were highly aware of their gender and their positionality within the context of their leadership and relationships with constituent groups. One aspect in which almost all of the participants felt that their gender was an advantage during the transition was in building relationships. More than half of the participants pointed to the natural maternal instinct of a woman as an asset in the transition, especially when it came to building relationships and providing the care and compassion a community needed in the change of leadership. Sarah Palms spoke of the maternal instinct to be an expectation from the community of female head of school.

The Head of the boys school can just wander around and slap the boys on the shoulder and say ‘How you doing, son?’ Everyone thinks he’s Dumbledore. If I
get one child’s name wrong, I’m a bad person. There is an expectation of a sort of maternal aspect to the school. (personal communication, July 25, 2017) Participants addressed specifically how their own experiences as mothers helped in transitioning into the community. Chris Masters and Diane Olney described their schools as being in need of some pastoral care because of the tumultuous departure of their predecessors. The former said that her school needed “someone who’s a mom” and, when asked what being “a mom” to a school means, she described it as having a “hands-on, loving approach” (personal communication, August 2, 2017). Diane Olney also commented that her board was more comfortable with “the risk of going with a woman head of school” because the school had “some healing that needs to be done” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). When the search consultants were informed that the participants believed their maternal instinct to be an advantage, they agreed that the warmth that a woman can often exude more naturally than a man is an advantage in the first year of being a head of school.

Section II: Transition into Headship

Transition Committees. Establishment of a transition committee is a common recommendation given to schools and search committees. In some situations, the search consultants help in forming the transition committee and support the group in defining and planning their work for on-boarding their new head of school. The survey results showed that the majority of heads received some type of transition plan or entry plan as they began their headship. To the statement “My transition/entry plan helped me to navigate my school and culture,” 46 of the female respondents agreed and only 8 disagreed. Of the 13 women who were interviewed, 11 were given a transition committee, the membership of which varied, with a combination of board members,
parents and faculty members. In two cases, the out-going head of school was a member of the transition committee.

There was a mixed reaction regarding whether the transition committees were helpful. All four of the women who did not have a transition committee expressed regret at not having had the opportunity. A major theme throughout the interviews was the lack of a defined purpose for a transition committee coupled with a misalignment of the needs of the head of school and the intentions of the committee members. Interviewees spoke about the transition committee’s willingness to help with the logistical aspects of a transition, such as moving, recommendations for such professionals as doctors, introduction to the local area, and supporting family members in the transition. Jennifer Cook appreciated her transition committee’s efforts to support her family and the move:

They did a lot of touring me around, touring my husband around. They sent my daughter a whole box full of uniforms and spirit wear and a little stuff mascot and things like that. They offered to help my husband get a job and had some connections for him. They helped to find a doctor. (personal communication, August 2, 2017)

However, a focus of a transition committee’s need to help with the logistics of a geographic move and transition sometimes left the head of school without a transition team and necessary school transitional support. Thus Jen Foles, who did not have a transition team or committee, reflected:

If I could play it all over again, I think the mistake that the school made was because I was a local candidate, they always saw me as a local person. And so, I think often times you think of transition committee who help somebody who’s moving out-of-state find their doctor, or figure out where to go grocery shopping, or whatever, to help with that moving into a new area part of the transition. But the important piece that a transition committee plays is to help the new head get to know the community, to understand the culture of the school, and to give
guidance along the way, and feedback along the way. (personal communication, July 18, 2017)

Participants frequently appreciated the willingness of the transition committee to support them but also expressed confusion and disappointment regarding their inability to understand the purpose or role of the committee. More specifically, the logistical nature of the transition committee felt gendered and left a gap in terms of real-time leadership support. Alison Weebly stated that she needed “some people to help me think about what I don’t even know I don’t know, and the transition committee could not play that role” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). Another participant share a similar sentiment, observing that she had been unsure whether she could use the transition team to have certain conversations. Participants who did not have a transition committee, as noted already, shared similar regrets in terms of wanting a group of people to help them think through relationship building and anticipate expectations of the community.

I just didn’t have somebody who was thinking for me about the things that I should be attending, or the things that I should be thinking about or preparing for, or the people that I needed to meet. You need someone to help broker those relationships; it’s harder to do on your own. (J. Foles, personal communication, July 18, 2017)

Sarah Palms was told that a search firm was to run the transition, but it was not much help: “I have not heard from them since the very first salary discussion. They got me through the letter of intent, and then I really don’t think I ever heard from them again” (personal communication, July 25, 2017). When the search consultants were asked about transition committees, two of them reported that it was their job not just to see the school through the selection of a new head of school but also to help with the formation and execution of a transition committee. One consultant did express her objection to
transition committees, but all three agreed that transition committees should be short-lived because it represented just “another group for the head to manage” (personal communication, November 11, 2017).

It seemed that participants would have preferred that transition committees had helped them to avoid blind spots and to anticipate issues and relationships to which a head may need to give particular attention. Two participants did comment on the gendered nature of transition committees and discussed their perceptions of the support provided for an incoming female, as opposed to male, head of school. Melinda Bones spoke of the challenges of transitioning her entire family to a new city, finding housing, looking for schools for her children, and securing a job for her husband. She reflected on the fact that members of her board did not take the time to ask her how her family was doing and she compared this response to that which a male head of school might have received.

“How are you doing?” is a really fun question to ask a guy, because it’s really cute when he has an answer and cares about his family. Everybody just assumes that women have got this. I’m not saying my board was cavalier about me . . . I do think that women get overlooked in that process. (personal communication, August 3, 2017)

Meg Style shared a similar experience with regard to the board’s concern for her husband. She spoke emotionally of three board members who regularly asked, “How’s your husband holding up?” but never about her (personal communication, August 3, 2017). When pressed further about why this bothered her so much, Meg explained that no one at her husband’s workplace had been asking how his wife was doing, and her
husband works just as much. She questioned why people were more concerned for the male spouse when the woman was working so much.

**Communication.** Coordinating communication with school communities about the selection of a new head of school and plans for her first year was an important aspect of the participants’ transition experience. Each voiced the need to keep in mind that two school communities are involved in a transition of leadership, the school that received the new head and the school that lost one. Many of the participants expressed an appreciation for well-planned coordination of communications to each school community. All of them commented on coordinated communications in the context of the interconnected nature of independent schools and expressed considerable anxiety regarding rumors and gossip, which made it crucial for each school community to take special care to communicate decisions as quickly as possible. When asked about the timing of the communication, Jenn Foles reported that there was a great deal of coordination between the schools “making sure that communication went out right, and it was sequenced, and choreographed between our two communities” (personal communication, July 18, 2017). In one particular case, the communication was not handled as precisely as it could have been, so that the news even made it to local and national newspapers and created a public relations challenge. Laura Daniels shared her experience of her school community learning of her appointment before any official announcement. Her community was upset at what appeared to be a lack of transparency and a lack of loyalty towards her from the board of her current school.

Also important, of course, is the content of the communication to school communities about the transition in leadership. Transparency was a recurrent theme
among the participants, all of whom shared that the appointment letter spoke of the new head of school, her background, the qualities she is bringing to the school, and, in some cases, details of the search process. None of the participants mentioned the communication including details about the transition, though one of the search consultants mentioned that schools are beginning to include transition plans for both the incoming head of school and the school community.

Two of the participants shared that the out-going head had also written a communication to the school community sharing his or her endorsement and partnership in the transfer of leadership. The search consultant focus group also discussed cases in which the outgoing head had written a letter to the school community. In these situations, a community can feel that there is “a very positive, mutually respectful relationship between these two individuals” and a “transfer of power that’s working well” (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

**Timelines and timing.** About a third of the survey respondents reported that their transition had begun more than six months before their contracted first day of employment. All of the women who participated in the interviews felt that the amount of time from the announcement of their appointment to the actual official start date for the position (July 1) was too long and complicated the relationship dynamics between their current and future schools. One survey respondent commented that her announcement had been made 13 months before her official start date, saying in the survey, “This is too long. I basically worked a year before I started.” Two issues relevant to the timing and timeline of a transition emerged from the interviews.
To begin with, all of the heads who were interviewed described the transition period and the lead up to the start of their new position as too long. They mentioned that they felt as if they had been working for two schools and had found it difficult to navigate when to say “yes” and when to say “no” to their future schools. One head shared a story about her decision regarding whether to attend a Halloween assembly at her new school; for despite the seemingly innocuous nature of the event, she was concerned about how she might be perceived in her new school community:

I got invited to the Halloween assembly . . . and I thought if I show up without a costume, I am the stick in the mud new head, and if I show up in costume, I’m the clownish new head, and I didn’t feel like I could get it right. I ended up not dressing up. (A. Weebly, personal communication, July 20, 2017)

The lengthy interim period also made it difficult for heads to balance their jobs at their current schools while being introduced to and learning the culture and community of their new schools. Laura Daniels shared her difficulties remaining a presence in her current school and being mindful and thoughtful about her exit while also giving energy and enthusiasm to the many “welcome” events at her new school. The balancing of exiting and entering two school communities was exhausting for some heads.

It’s a lot, I think, getting through all of that being in your last however many months of your old school. I found that to be very exhausting actually, having a nine-month goodbye . . . everyone that comes into your office after that is like I know you’re leaving so you probably don’t care, or I know this isn’t going to matter to you, or they’re practicing their emotions about the fact that you’re leaving. It’s fine for a little while, but after a while, it’s like okay. I just need to be done. (S. Palms, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

But at moments, I really had to put the brakes on it or just put up some boundaries because I felt like I was being asked to a lot more than I was really able to do because I had a full-time job while also preparing for my headship. (J. Foles, personal communication, July 18, 2017)
When asked about the long lead up to the official start date of a head of school, a search consultant discussed the need for schools to protect the head-elect from being too exposed to her new school community. The opinion was that too many visits and community gatherings before the start date allowed for potential missteps and unneeded judgment. One consultant stated that “Once you get the job, as the new head, it’s only downhill. You can only make a mistake until you’re in charge” (personal communication, November 17, 2017), meaning that new heads do not have the same protection before the start date that they will have when they are officially named to their posts.

Participants also expressed the concern that there was a lack of understanding as to what period of time should be considered the “transition period.” Three discussed how the conception of the first year as a “year of listening” was often times romanticized and unrealistic. Each also expressed their hope that the first year would be one of getting to know the community and gaining a better understanding of issues and areas of growth. Instead, they had been faced with difficult issues from the first day on the job. One participant stated that “Right from the very first time you step on campus, people start putting stuff on you and some of it is their baggage” (J. Cook, personal communication, August 2, 2017). Another appreciated her school’s attempt to give her a year to transition but reported that “They lasted till November. I was holding on as long as I could” (S. Palms, personal communication, July 25, 2017).

From this perspective, heads of school should be given more time to transition and align the transition with when they are fully present at the school. Two participants described three years as the appropriate amount of time for a transition: the first allows
for a leader to listen and learn from the community; the second allows a leader to begin to
make change; and by third a leader has more ownership.

I think the board understands that the first year is the listening year, the get your
feet wet year, you’re not going to make a lot of changes. And then the second
year, is when you start to make more of a mark and begin to implement things.
The third year is when I understand that people feel like it really becomes more
their school, and that they really are at the helm. (L. Koen, personal
communication, August 24, 2017)

So, I think transitions take a lot longer than boards would like them to take. I
certainly think transitions take longer than parents would like them to take, but the
reality is you can’t absorb everything in your first year. (N. Muffles, personal
communication, August 7, 2017)

Search consultants agreed with the observations of the participants that schools need to
understand that transitions may take longer than they expect. In fact, one consultant said,
“the transition is forever” (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

Section III: Preparation

Involvement. All but two of the survey participants reported holding some
administrative position prior to becoming a head of school; the exceptions reported
having been a college president and a business owner. When asked their level of
agreement with the statement, “I felt prepared for the first three months as head of
school,” 53 of the female survey respondents either somewhat or strongly agreed, and 10
female respondents disagreed. All 13 interviewed participants credited their previous
positions with preparing them for headship. Each had been in some administrative
position before becoming a head of school, and each spoke of the number of ways and
areas of school leadership to which they were exposed in their administrative roles, which
they regarded as their most important preparation for headship. Many of the women
talked about how, in their roles, they ended up “doing everything” (L. Koen, personal communication, August 24, 2017). Similarly Laura Daniels said that, because she “lived in a dorm, coached,” and taught, she had learned a great deal about her own leadership through trial and error in these different roles. Participants reported being the most prepared in working with faculty and with curricular aspects of the school but, more importantly, they felt prepared in the decision-making process in these areas of school. Allison Weebly, reflecting on her role as an assistant head, observed that “so much a part of your job is just helping people understand the institution, understand decisions, understand programs, and so there were a number of different versions of that, and I felt very prepared for that” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). Another head of school shared that she was able to sit on a number of board committees, which gave her a better understanding of the inner workings and management of a board. Two participants said that experience chairing their association’s accreditation process and self-study had prepared them to work with all of the constituents of a school and to be involved in areas that they would not encountered in the context of their normal roles and responsibilities. “Our school was being accredited, I was asked to chair the accreditation process so that really helped me to learn a lot of pieces of the that I sort of didn’t really have in my wheelhouse” (N. Muffles, personal communication, August 7, 2017).

In discussing the leadership areas to which they had been exposed prior to becoming a head of school, each participant credited a mentor, often another head of school, with helping them find opportunities to learn more about school leadership and such tasks as board work, decision-making, and building relationships with key stakeholders. Jennifer Cook credited her head:
She encouraged me to teach in a different division. She put me in front of the board. She had me chair parts of the self-study and different areas of the school that would give me some experience in working with adults. (personal communication, August 2, 2017)

Meg Style echoed a similar experience with her head of school, whom she was able to shadow at board committees: “He gave me a lot of opportunities to just see the kinds of things to see how you participate” (personal communication, August 3, 2017).

Three of the interviewees were part of the NAIS Aspiring Heads program, for which they had been assigned mentors and leadership projects to be managed over the course of a school year. These participants felt that the Aspiring Heads program had given them the necessary exposure to the various types of skills necessary to seek out a headship.

**Least prepared.** Participants discussed areas in which they felt least prepared in beginning their careers as heads of school, which in each case fell outside the context of teaching and learning. Thus, areas such as maintenance, finance, and development involved the greatest among learning for these leaders. One participant mentioned that she felt least prepared for dealing with and managing the board. Finally, many of the participants asserted that it was impossible to be prepared fully for the position of head of school. Jenn Foles commented, “You’re never full prepared for all that you take on. There are some things that you just can’t train for, I guess” (personal communication July 18, 2017). Allison Weebly recalled the sudden death of a faculty member early in her first year of being a head of school and the pastoral role she suddenly found herself in.

Certainly over the years as assistant head, I sat with many people who, one of the parents had a miscarriage, found out about an illness, I played the pastoral role but the way in which the head’s role is an amplifier, really struck me in dealing with something like a death in the community, and it felt different than when I had done that as an assistant head. (personal communication, July 20, 2017)
Section IV: Relationship Building

Relationships with constituency groups. One of the most important tasks and responsibilities for a new head of school is developing relationships with the many constituents in a school community. This was expressed clearly in the search consultant focus group,

the hardest thing for first-time head of school is just realizing how many constituencies they’re trying to be responsive to and keep happy and recognizing how hard, how challenging that is. The only key to success for a new head is to get to know the school community (personal communication, November 17, 2017)

Similarly, in answer to the question “In your transition into headship, which of the following was the most challenging for you?” a survey respondent commented “Just understanding how much there is to navigate and how to navigate the many pillars of constituent groups. . . . These relationships can begin as early as the interview process” (J. Foles, personal communication, July 18, 2017). Another participant shared that her only goal for the first year was “all about immersing [herself] in the community. They were all about getting to know people, getting to know the culture” (C. Masters, personal communication, August 2, 2017). All of the participants shared the strategy of meeting with each faculty and staff member at the beginning of their first year. Chris Masters explained that these interviews helped her to understand more about her school community,

about why they’re here and why they stay and what are the strengths and what are the weaknesses. That was, it took forever because there’s, I don’t know, 60 of them or something, but that was so valuable, because a picture came together, as you might imagine. (personal communication, August 2, 2017)
Another participant recognized the need for these one-on-one conversations because of the validation that the faculty needed to feel in such a time of change.

But once I got to the school in July, I realized that a lot of what the school needed was just some tender loving care and somebody who was going to be nice and someone who is going to listen to people…people just want to be heard and valued. (N. Muffles, personal communication, August 7, 2017)

Many of the women interviewed credited their gender with helping build relationships. Chris Masters, reflecting on the needs of her community in the transition, said “I think women connect things better, I think we’re more relational authentically, so I think that was what the school needed” (personal communication, August 2, 2017). So also Nancy Muffles, reflecting on being the first female head of her school since the founding headmistress, discussed being compared to that revered figure.

Now that can either be good or it could be bad. In my case at the moment it’s working in my favor. I think that there were a lot of people who wondered why it took the board so long to have another female head of school here. I think by virtue of being a woman and being—I don’t know. I was going to say I’m maybe more open to building relationships, but I don’t think that’s necessarily fair to male heads of school. I mean, male heads of school do that very well too. The relationship building part of me has been the single best thing in the past year. (personal communication, August 7, 2017)

One search consultant spoke of one of her clients, a new head of school, who unabashedly asked for help throughout her first year as a head of school. The search consultant said, “She got off to a bang up start. She’s willing to accept help. She’s willing to ask for help.” Her openness in this respect allowed her to build relationships and trust with various constituency groups.

**Relationship with boards.** Many of the participants described the relationship between themselves and their boards as a critical component of the transition process. In
Sarah Palms’s case, the board did not take on any institutional projects in her first year so that “they could just focus on our relationship more than on other projects or a growing campaign” (personal communication, July 25, 2017). Diana Olney also spoke about her relationship with her board chair and how he had been more of a mentor to her in her first year than a boss. Jen Foles felt that the board’s job was to help make connections for the new head of school and to “broker those relationships because it’s harder to do on your own” (personal communication, July 18, 2017). Interestingly, members of the board focus group did not put as much emphasis on relationships between a head and a board as much as those between a head and her community of students and families.

In some ways, since the board hires the head of school, there’s a natural assumption that we would be there to support her and so I don’t think we prioritized her relationship with us as much as we wanted her to form strong relationships with the parents and students. (personal communication, November 12, 2017)

Although the board focus group did not place an emphasis on the relationship between the board and the head, Allison Weebly spoke about her board chair, who was female, being more comfortable with a female head of school. And in fact, being a female head facilitated some of the relationship building between her and her chair.

I went out to dinner with my board chair last night, she and her husband took me and my husband out to celebrate one night last year, and she said to me before about going to the leadership and partnership conference, she wasn’t going away with the old male head, that there was a way in which gender was the tailwind in my relationship with her. (personal communication, July 20, 2017)

Jenn Ellis spoke about how being a female made it more challenging to form a relationship with some of her board members. Although she felt that she was in a liberal city and in a liberal setting, she also felt that, in the board room, the culture remained
male-centric: “There’s a lot of wink, wink, nod, nod, old boy internal joking, stuff. It worries me that I’m not one of these old boys” (personal communication, August 13, 2017). Meg Style had a similar experience with her board in trying to form strong relationships with members. She described being self-conscious of the fact that the board had “alpha dogs who think you look like a little kid girl” (personal communication, August 3, 2017) and that, therefore, the board members might not take her seriously enough to try and form a trusting relationship.

Relationship with the administrative team. Several of the interviewees spoke of the immediate challenges of working with their administrative teams and specifically navigating the culture of the administrative team and its members’ work habits. Melinda Bones reported

I did encounter some people, either in the leadership team or occasionally in the parent body, who I could see were adjusting to me as a woman. I don’t know actually if that was to me as a woman or me as a leader. I can only think of one person who was really bothered by me as a woman that was really clear. (personal communication, August 3, 2017)

Two interviewees specifically mentioned that relationship building with the administrative team was the most challenging aspect of the transition. A common theme was the exhaustion of having to explain how certain things would be done or approached.

I have really worked hard with the school to set habits in place for our faculty and staff that require that they too are reading and researching and going to conferences and thinking about best practices. The school I came to was pretty insular and so I asked them to look out and look up and out more as an administrative team. That is a habit, that’s who I am, and I have to keep articulating it all the time to remind people. “This is how we make decisions. This is how we make changes. This is what we do.” (J. Cook, personal communication, August 2, 2017)

Meg Style observed of her work with the administrative team,
I think what it should have signaled to me earlier on than I did, although I was pretty quick, was this is not a place where people were “get up and go” kind of folks. I think that’s probably the biggest impact. (personal communication, August 3, 2017)

Some of the heads who were interviewed had had to dismiss members of their administrative teams. Chris Masters encountered a situation in which there was considerable infighting among members of her executive team.

The admin team all hated each other, and I mean hated so much that there were certain members of it who wouldn't speak to each other in meetings. It was so, and no one told me that, and I don’t think anyone really knew. The board didn't know. Our first retreat ended up with these two, the HR Director and the Assistant Head for Academics screaming at each other, I mean literally screaming at each other, and I had to cancel the second day of the retreat because it was so dysfunctional, and we ended up doing another thing a month later, a team building equine therapy thing. It sort of worked, but not really. (personal communication, August 2, 2017)

When asked whether her transition committee had helped her navigate this challenging dynamic, she responded that no one really knew that this was happening with the administrators.

I don't think anyone knew except the administrators, and they don't really tell you the really bad stuff until you get here, but that one I had to figure out for myself. I didn't realize the extent to which, number one, they were exhausted from trying to hold it all together, and number two, how long the dysfunction of their relationships had been allowed to play out. It was so unprofessional, the stuff that was going on. It was so gross, because what really bothered me about it, it was so not in the best interests of the kids, and it made us look dumb. (personal communication, August 2, 2017)

Masters went on to report that, to her regret, the culture of her administrative team distracted administrators from keeping the students interest at heart, and she admitted that the turnover of administrators made her community uneasy. She spoke of the tension and anxiety that can arise in a community after so much turnover and change during a
leadership transition. After she had let go 12 people in her first year, Chris perceived that community members questioning her leadership: “Why does everybody leave? Are you firing them? Do they not like you?” (personal communication, August 2, 2017).

Inherently, a community feels the loss of the faculty members, and healing the loss can be challenging. Laura Daniels let go of 19 people in her first year, and while she did not like having to do so, she said she had had to navigate working with the legacy left by her predecessor, whom she described as “very conflict-averse, and as a result of that there was a lot of mediocrity in the leadership and in the teaching” (personal communication, August 23, 2017).

In general, the interviewees who had struggled in their relationships with their administrative teams pointed to the culture that their predecessors had left behind. As Laura Koen put it, “So, the challenging thing is really breaking down the working, like the culture of their working environment that you’re predeceasing” (personal communication, August 24, 2017). Melinda Bones, followed a long-term head of school, and she also referred to her predecessor, remarking that “at the end of all those 30 years of headship, she was operating at a very strategic and visionary level with highly empowered people on her leadership team” (personal communication, August 3, 2017). The empowerment that the leadership team had felt, Melinda explained, was a difficult barrier for her to break through in order to establish her own leadership within the team.

**Relationship with predecessor.** In fact, a common thread throughout the interviews was the role of the predecessor in the transition. Three survey respondents described their relationships with their predecessors as the most challenging aspects of their transitions. In some cases, like that of Melinda Bones, the out-going head was a
long-term, beloved leader of the school; in other cases, the out-going head was leaving for reasons that were not positive in the eyes of the community. Regardless of the circumstances, though, the participants referred to unanticipated challenges of the relationships with their predecessors.

Seven of the participants shared a similar experience of succeeding a head of school who had been in the community for a long period of time and was beloved and respected by the various constituent groups. Often, the out-going head was credited with being a pillar of the institution and a key player in its establishment in the independent school network. Participants shared the challenge of being asked to appear at events and be on campus while also wanting to respect the out-going head’s desire to say goodbye and be celebrated by the community. Allison Weebly decided to say “no” to attending many events because she knew that “the outgoing head also needed some room to just close his career as a last headship for him.” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). In sharing her story about the out-going Head, Laura Daniels observed of her predecessor,

And then just leaving was very painful for her, and so I was just very aware and sensitive to—they wanted me to come up to reunion weekend in May before my July 1 start, just to have her introduce me to the alums that had come back. I felt badly for her because that was her last reunion. . . I just felt her pain. (personal communication, August 23, 2017)

Community members, such as parents and faculty members, also found the dynamics of having an out-going head and a head-elect to be challenging. They were feeling the sadness of having to say goodbye to their head of school too, but they also had a sense of excitement for the incoming head of school. Allison Weebly had the opportunity to watch a head transition prior to becoming a head of school herself and had
seen the community members eagerly embrace the new arrival. She advised that “people want to, as a well intended-compliment, demonize the prior head and glorify the current head as a way to appreciate certain characteristics of that new person” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). She felt strongly that this dynamic can be challenging for the incoming head “in terms of over inflating what the new person is going to be, or letting expectations soar too much in that first year” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). Participants spoke of the way in which community members would be grieving while also demonizing their out-going head and discussed the difficulty of leading in the midst of these emotions. Melinda Bones observed:

you are not leading your school, you are working in the wake of someone else’s leadership. I wanted to be very cognitive of that. I wanted to be very respectful of that. I wanted to acknowledge that, and I wanted to establish my leadership in my way. (personal communication, August 3, 2017)

Sarah Palms spoke of numerous conversations on which faculty or parents tried to compare her to her predecessor and her difficulty in navigating such conversations.

I know I’m different from her, but let’s not try to decide who’s better and worse. Don’t tell me she was bad. I found that hard just to deal with emotionally, and I was glad when it started phasing out. People just stopped doing it. (personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Three heads of school spoke about the experience of having a predecessor who maintained a relationship with the school. Alison Weebly’s predecessor remained a part of the community as the grandparent of a student, a role that she kept distinct from his role as a former head of school. She had a conversation with him in which she invited him to “come as a grandparent, don’t come as a former head of school, just come as a grandparent and enjoy grandparent’s day” (personal communication, July 20, 2017). The
two other participants, Jen Foles and Laura Koen, described their on-going relationships with their predecessors as more challenging, both observing that the out-going head could undermine the leadership of the new one by remaining present and in touch with the school community.

The presence of that person can really undermine the current head, in a way that’s hard to get back. Because that new head is just trying to develop her own relationships, really get her own arms around the school. And the presence of that person, because they have so many years of relationships, can undermine that in two seconds. And in this digital world in which we live, even though that person may not physically be present on campus, maintaining those connections, digitally or otherwise, also can have the same affect. (J. Foles, personal communication, July 18, 2017)

Meg Style gave her predecessor credit for trying not to be a presence during her first year but reported that, when she had had to lay off some employees, his inability to stay out of the situation became problematic. People started to reach out to him to discuss the issues, and he found himself pulled into conversations that undermined her leadership.

The circumstances of the previous head’s departure influenced the ability of the new head to build trust in school community and especially within her administrative team. Many participants spoke of how the culture and leadership style of their predecessor often left faculty and administrators skeptical and distrustful of their leader. Chris Masters had replaced a head of school who had left on account of a well-publicized legal difficulties and thus walked into a situation in which there was “a huge lack of trust of the administration,” and while she had “slowly won the faculty over just by being super transparent, what you see is what you get, and being predictable,” she still felt that the trust issue was something she would “be battling forever” (personal communication,
August 2, 2017). Jennifer Cook similarly spoke of her predecessor as someone who had a specific agenda that did not involve building the community.

I’d been warned that the former head was here a very short period of time. She came in to do some specific things. She was not here to make friends. She was not there to build community and she really didn’t. . . . It left the administrators kind of wounded and having a hard time trusting the head of school, so I had to build some of that back up. (personal communication, August 2, 2017)

**Relationship with self.** In describing their relationships with their constituents and predecessors, the participants frequently spoke of their changing relationships with their inner selves. As Melinda Bones put it, “I think understanding the culture that you come from and your assumption is a really key part of surviving your first year of headship” (personal communication, August 3, 2017). All participants reported major adjustments in their views of themselves. As I already mentioned, they felt a sudden sense of loneliness as they took on their headship. For Chris Masters, one of the most challenging components of the transition was the realization that she had to keep her distance from colleagues.

You can’t really have any friends, at least not where you work. With moving to a new area, you may gravitate to certain people on the faculty, but I can’t really be friends with anyone on the faculty, and you don’t really want to be friends with anyone on your board. I think it’s kind of lonely, and I don’t think anyone can change that, I think it’s just the nature of the job, if you want to do it right and not fall into a bunch of trap. (personal communication, August 2, 2017)

Jennifer Cook put it this way,

It is the loneliest job, and I really did not anticipate that. You can’t possibly understand it until you are a head, but it is so lonely because you can’t talk to anybody. The people who know the most about the school, I can’t talk to them about stuff. I talk to the board here, but the board sure doesn’t really get what I do. It’s so lonely, and my husband is a parent, so I can’t talk to him about stuff. (J. Cook, personal communication August 2, 2017)
Jenn Ellis framed her sense of loneliness in not just being the leader of the school but also female: “It worries me that I’m not one of these old boys and I can’t connect” (personal communication, August 13, 2017).

The second adjustment that the participants referred to was a sudden feeling of the burden of leadership. Heads of school are at the top of the command chain in an institution. In the end, the head is responsible for all decisions, even those about which she is not involved. Participants shared that the challenging part of shouldering this burden was having to display a calm and reassuring demeanor for parents and the board. Meg Style felt that the biggest surprise for her was the “you’re the top person. The responsibility of staff is yours. I didn’t understand how that was going to feel” (personal communication, August 3, 2017). Heads spoke of a continuous anxiety that hovering over them, whether from the pressure of being at the top or the realization that no matter wherever they went in town, they were heads of school. When asked her thoughts on the statistic that an informal communication presented at INH that one-third of new heads would no longer hold their positions at the end of their first year, Jenn Ellis commented,

It looks like things are good, but really are they? And then you share that statistic and I think, “Holy Crap.” . . . It’s different when you have top cover, right? It’s different when somebody else is running the show. (personal communication, August 13, 2017)

Jennifer Cook spoke about living in a small town where everybody knew that she was a head of school: “Everywhere I go I’m a head of school. That’s another thing I hadn’t anticipated. I’m always the head of school all the time so that took some adjusting” (personal communication, August 2, 2017).
Finally, participants spoke of how their relationship to their body and general self-care was hard to maintain. Two participants shared that they had experienced significant physical changes to their bodies during their first year as head of school because of the stress and pressures of the transition.

I lost a ton of weight. Not on purpose, at the beginning and it was because of the challenging transition. So I didn’t realize that... I wasn’t really paying attention in terms of that happening... I thought I was really maintaining this good strength and holding it together, and I think I was in terms of decisions and getting work done and things like that, but I didn’t realize that people were looking at me saying, “wow, she’s looking really tired and she’s losing weight.” So, that was sort of an interesting change that I didn’t feel like I necessarily had control over. (D Olney, personal communication, July 20, 2017)

Meg Style shared a similar experience when asked to describe her first year as a head:

I haven’t slept much. I gained some weight, which is pissing me off. It’s been hard. My goal for next year is really figuring out how to balance out a little bit. I know that this job is not 100% balanced in any way, but I need to start taking a little better care of myself if I’m going to stay in the game. (personal communication, August 3, 2017)

When pushed further about this experience and the toll it had had on her, she answered, “I don’t know, I don’t know yet. Maybe I’m tired and it’s been really hard. Really, really, really hard. I decided early on not deciding for three years if I like this job” (personal communication, August 3, 2017).

Section V: Defining a Successful Transition

All of the participants were asked to characterize what a “successful transition” in leadership would look like. The women focused on different aspects of the transition, but all reported that the transition needed to be intentional, thoughtful, and deliberate.

You want to advise the new head to be intentional, because everything, being a head of school is a spotlight profession, and everybody’s going to watch what you’re doing. You’ve got to be intentional, and you’ve got to think it through so that you entry plan enhances your tenure as the head of school, and doesn’t cause people to ask questions. (Search consultant, personal communication, November 17, 2018)
Participants spoke of four distinct ways in which a transition could be considered successful. The first involved providing the new head of school an entry plan or “a roadmap, a plan of what the transition looks like” (J. Cook, personal communication, August 2, 2017). Meg Style also asserted that the written and organized plan should be clear so that community members knew their roles in it (personal communication, August 3, 2017).

The second way in which participants felt that a transition would be considered successful concerned the communication of transition plans to the community and their transparency. Chris Masters felt that there could not be enough communication between constituencies so that all community members felt comfortable in the change of leadership. Jen Foles echoed this sentiment: “Having that transparency would be a success for me, in my opinion” (personal communication, July 18, 2017). Meg Style added that the transparency and communications should start at the interview process rather than from the announcement of the head-elect.

The third trait of a successful transition for the participants would be reflected in the amount of support given to the new head of school. Whether at the board level or in working with a search consultant or transition committee, all participants expressed their wish that more support be given to new heads of school throughout their transition periods (J. Cook, personal communication, August 2, 2017). In response to the question about a successful transition, Jen Foles said, “Definitely a transition committee, a formal committee whose charge is with helping the head of school transition and every aspect of that. Every head needs that team of people because you need those different constituent
groups and different perspectives” (J. Foles, personal communication, July 18, 2017).

Both Sarah Palms and the search consultants expressed the view that a successful transition is ultimately up to the board and its relationship with the new head of school.

A successful transition . . . has as much to do with the board as it does with what the skill set was or how right the fit might with the newly appointed head of school. Another cautionary note for boards . . . is think about continuity in terms of the board, and board leadership . . . there’s too much turnover, particularly in the board leadership and it can be destabilizing. (Search consultant focus group, personal communication, November 17, 2017)

The last characterization of a successful transition concerned the overall morale of the community. Participants spoke of the need for a community to be able to trust their new head of school and feel positive in light of the change in leadership. Diane Olney looked back on her own transition and asserted that her transition was successful because “from an emotional or cultural or morale standpoint, there was an uptick.” (D.Olney, personal communication, July 20, 2017). Laura Koen also used her own transition as a measure of success.

Success would be seeing more engaged families, more families willing to go and talk up the school, which would get translated in stronger admissions I feel like it’s all sort of interwoven. It all has to lift at the same time, and it’s just the transition goes well if I’m able to what I need to do in terms of having the vision, inspiring the change, making sure that we’re doing what we say we’re doing. And showing people so they can appreciate that and continue support. If I can get that off the ground enough so that people see evidence of change in these first couple of years, I think that would be successful. (personal communication, August 24, 2017)

A board member from the focus group looked back on how quickly her head of school made a community feel at ease, heard, and valued and how that trust had begun to form
between the head and her constituency groups (Board focus group, personal communication, November 12, 2017).

**Conclusions**

In the hours of interviews conducted for this study about the transition experiences of female heads of school, four major themes emerged: 1) the use and efficiencies of transition support systems; 2) the ways in which female heads of school are prepared for headship through mentorship and involvement in the workings of a school while in another administrative position; 3) the importance of building relationships with constituency groups and re-evaluating one’s relationship with oneself; and 4) the challenges and advantages of being a woman when transitioning into a head of school position. Finally, the interviews attempted to define what a successful transition might look like to both a community and to a new head of school.

Interwoven throughout these themes was an undertone of the gendered nature of leadership in independent schools and how it impacts the transition of a female head of school. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that relationship-building and explicit, personal support for the head of school was considered necessary by the participants for both a head of school and a school community to thrive and succeed during a change of leadership. In particular, the interviews shed light on how being a woman impacts the transitional components of leadership. The manner in which each head of school experienced her transition may have been different or have taken different turns in the course of a transition period, but they all converged on these central themes.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The role of the head of an independent school can be incredibly rewarding and also extremely complex. Transitioning into this leadership position presents challenges that range from understanding the needs of various constituencies to understanding one’s own leadership style and capacity. The role of head of school position demands an individual who is an expert in a variety of areas beyond education, such as finance and operations, fundraising, and, recently, the navigation of parents’ evolving mindset owing to societal changes. Because of these diverse and often disconnected components of independent schools, and in light of the literature on independent school leadership, the head of school position appears to be one that needs constant and careful support, especially in the first years of a head’s tenure.

The transition from a middle administrator position into being the “top dog” is beset with the potential areas for mistakes on the part of both the leader and the school community. Because independent schools have traditionally been led by men, female heads of school face unique challenges. This study set out to examine how being a woman impacts the transition experience. This final chapter is divided into four sections that articulate the female transition experience into the role of head of school: in the first, the findings of this study are discussed in relation to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks introduced in Chapter 2; in the second, implications for future female heads of school and independent schools are considered; the third presents the limitations of the study and considerations for further research; and the fourth section offers my reflections and concluding thoughts.
Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature

At the time when I conducted this study, I was in my third year as a head of school and in many regards had completed my transition into the position. Fortunately, I had a board and consultants who helped me and my school to understand and craft a transition plan that gave me the time and space to learn more about my role. It was their generosity in terms of time and conversation that allowed my first-year transition to be a healthy, positive, and joyous year for many. As noted, however, my experience is unique, and I have heard countless stories from my colleagues of transitions that seemed toxic, challenging, and fraught with anxiety. Therefore, we must look out for each other and support each other.

Stability in independent school leadership is necessary now more than ever. With increasing tuition costs, a potentially unsustainable financial model, and a changing landscape in terms of technology, parenting mindsets, and demographics, independent schools need thoughtful and prepared leaders. Most importantly, I contend, independent schools need leaders, especially female ones, who stay in the position long enough to see a school through transformation, innovation, and growth. There has been, however, a glaring absence of research into the very specific time period in which transitions take place.

Based on the numerous interviews, follow-up conversations, and my own reflections as a first-time head of school, there is a need in the research and in the education of board members and other leaders in independent schools to understand the strengths and challenges that women face as they transition into the leadership role of head of school. This dissertation was a first attempt to do that.
This section analyzes the research findings in light of the conceptual frameworks presented in Chapter 2. The analysis drew primarily on theories about female leadership styles and its advantages and organizational change theory.

**Female leadership style.** The literature about women in leadership refers to the phenomenon of the “double bind” (Eagly, 2007), wherein women are expected to establish authority and leadership resembling stereotypically male qualities while also exuding softer, maternal traits. Research on independent schools has noted a similar challenge, with female leadership having to “walk a fine line” (Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010) or “balance a tightrope” (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014). While the transition experiences of the women interviewed for this study were consistent with the double bind phenomenon, they also attributed their feminine and maternal instincts with assisting them in their first year as heads of school.

During their first year, heads of school need to establish their leadership style in their community and to exert authority in a way that neither inflames emotions nor threatens the school’s historical and institutional ways. Heads also need to show off their expertise as educators in order to garner trust and respect within their communities. Demonstrating this leadership and establishing authority were among the most challenging areas for the female heads of school in their transition. Participants frequently reported that their ability was questioned in areas of leadership that are often considered male-centric, such as finance or operations. Simply put, the women were questioned as to whether they could make the “hard calls” (D.Olney, personal communication, July 20, 2017).
According to the literature on the double bind phenomenon, the tension of having to be masculine in their leadership while also showing a feminine side creates a glass ceiling effect for women in leadership. The women in the present study, however, made clear that their gender had worked to their advantage during the transitional stage of their leadership. Rather than finding themselves hitting a glass ceiling or feeling that they were in a double bind, these women found that their leadership style helped them to form relationships and gain the trust of constituent groups. The maternal instinct, then, is necessary during a time of transition. Consistent with Rosener’s (1990) arguments about the advantages of female leadership, the women in this study “are succeeding because of—not in spite of—certain characteristics generally considered to be ‘feminine’ and inappropriate in leaders” (p. 120).

In any organization, change and transition can be difficult for members of the community. Emotions such as fear, anxiety, resentment, sadness, and distrust can reverberate through an organization during a time of transition (Bunker, 2008). Communities go through phases, such as grieving and letting go. During any type of change, whether in leadership or structural, individuals feel a range of emotions, from confusion to conflict (Adams, 1996).

A community in transition thus needs a pastoral leader. Diane Olney and Chris Masters spoke of their unique situations of needing to heal a community after seemingly unusual and traumatic changes in leadership. The former had replaced a head of school who was suddenly asked to leave in the middle of the year and the latter one who, as mentioned earlier, had run afoul of the law, and both spoke of the need to build trust again in their communities, using such language as “heal” and “take care” in reference to
their transitions. Other women who participated in this study also felt that their maternal instincts had helped them to form relationships quickly and to support their communities in times of change. Eagly (2003) and Stanford (1995) described the female leader as someone with strong communication and interpersonal skills who can help to form relationships by empowering others and, eventually, rebuilding trust. This perspective is consistent with that of the women in this study as they described structuring their transitions (e.g., spending time with each employee one-on-one, researching and learning the school’s history and culture, taking time to listen).

These findings challenge some of the literature that describes the first year of headship as one of difficulty. If anything, the women in this study worried more about future years, after the initial stage of building relationships, when they would engage more in active leadership and priority setting. In the theoretical framework for organizational change as a phased structure, the first phase of transition has been described as one of “survival” (Melvoin et al., 2005) and the second phase as the “quiet before the storm” (Gmelch, 2000). The present study suggests that, in fact, these phases are reversed for female heads of school, at least those in this study. Given the usefulness of the maternal instinct and female leadership styles in the first year of headship, “the quiet before the storm” would seem rather to describe the first phase of a transition and “survival” the second. A heightened level of support and awareness on the part of a community and a leader therefore seem called for in the second year or phase of a head’s transition. In sum, the findings presented here indicate that the maternal and relational aspects of female leadership are advantageous in helping a community to heal and grow during a transitional period, from my informants’ points of view.
**Transitional support.** The qualitative data and interviews suggest the need for a different approach to support for heads of school, especially female ones. This is particularly true because transition committees and entry plans have tended to be gendered and male-centric, assisting heads of school in the more logistical aspects of a transition rather than with establishing leadership in the community. Participants appreciated the willingness of transition committees to help with the logistics of a move but also expressed a need for support in other areas of their leadership. The literature about women and leadership has emphasized the gendered (i.e., male-centered) nature and expectations of leaders in the business world and in independent schools (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Reynolds, 1999), and its implications carry over to transitional support in independent schools.

Transitional support for female heads of school, then, needs to include both logistical and emotional aspects. Indeed, in some ways, it should replicate the “double bind” (Eagly, 2003); for just as women must show male-centric leadership behaviors and more female-centric relational behaviors, transitional support should combine logistical and emotional considerations. Consistent with the literature on the type of support that heads of independent schools desire from their boards of trustees, the participants in this study felt the loneliness of the job and would have benefitted from moral support and closer attention as individuals.

As detailed in Chapter 2, a 2011 McKinsey report described barriers that women face when trying to achieve positions of leadership, specifically limited access to informal networks and mentorship, lifestyle challenges and job demands, underlying male-centric mindsets and biases, and lack of gender diversity on boards. Experiences
and stories shared through the interviews shed light on the notion that female heads of school feel the need for transitional support in each of these four areas.

Regarding the lack of informal networks and mentorship, Meg Style observed that, even in her local network of heads of school, she as a woman had had to assert herself more than anticipated. She was accordingly thankful for the contacts that she had made through the NAIS Institute for New Heads, and indeed all 13 interviewees mentioned that program as a place for collegiality and networks. For many, this network helped to provide the check-ins and support that they felt they had needed during their transitional year. The women who had worked with a transition committee expressed the wish that it would have assisted in making the connections with networks outside the school community.

The barrier relating to lifestyle and job demands, particularly with regard to raising a family, is also found in the independent school literature (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014). According to the participants in this study, transition committees were better at addressing the lifestyle and family-rearing aspects of female leaders than they were at providing emotional support. Those who had worked with a transition committee were thankful for assistance in finding a home, locating reliable service providers, such as doctors and dry cleaners, and in acclimating to a new town in general, though they perceived a lack of a genuine concern for how they were handling the move. It should be noted, however, that the responsibilities of a transition committee extend beyond logistical or general check-ins with the individual. The case of Jen Foles is informative in this respect. She was among the participants not assigned a transition committee, for her new school felt that, as a local candidate, she did not need the logistical support; but
she was left struggling in other areas of her transition into the school with which she would have liked help.

Regarding the lack of gender diversity at the board level, both the 2011 McKinsey report and Pernambuco-Wise (2014) pointed to the need for more women on boards as a means to support female leaders and to increase the selection of women to take on leadership roles. Allison Weebly shared a story of going out to dinner with her female board chair, during which they had agreed that their relationship was characterized by greater ease and comfort than had been the case when the head of school was male. She also felt that she had enjoyed a special kind of support in her transition that only a female board chair could provide. Advice as trivial as what to wear to the school gala or as crucial as how to manage a difficult employee was important to Allison and made her wonder what she might have missed had she not had a female board chair.

The importance and challenges of relationships. The survey results and qualitative data from the interviews emphasize the importance of relationship building in the transition period. Survey respondents referred to navigating and responding to the various constituent groups as being among the most challenging aspects of their transitions. They spoke of the range of personalities that they had to come to know and appease, since heads of school build relationships with individuals ranging from young children to elders with extensive institutional memory. Satisfying all members of the community is the hardest task for a new head of school, especially in a transition year when she is trying to establish herself as a part of that community.

The literature about organizational change discusses the ways in which a community or an organization experiences leadership transitions. Evans (1996) and
Bunker (2008) have asserted the importance of acknowledging the transitional emotions in an organization or community. Leaders are not necessarily attuned to the emotions in a community and can have blind spots in their leadership (Evans, 1996), particularly in the formation of relationships within the community. Jen Foles spoke at length about her need for help in finding these blind spots. She and Allison Weebly shared incidents that to an outsider seem innocent—a pizza gathering for the school community and an all-school Halloween assembly—but in fact were critical for building relationships with younger and older constituents. Indeed, more than being opportunities to build relationships, these events signaled the community that the new leader appreciated and valued traditions in a time of change.

This need to acknowledge tradition and the past while helping the community to embrace new leadership was an emergent theme and challenge for participants in this study. The relationship between the new head of school and her predecessor was a theme that emerged unexpectedly for me as a researcher. There seemed to be no literature that had addressed this notion, but this study made clear that this relationship is challenging and complex for the incoming head of school. It should be studied.

The notion that organizations go through a grieving process during a change or transition (Cocklin et al., 2011; Evans, 1996) comes closest to describing some of the sensitivities that new heads feel about their predecessors. Participants in this study who had replaced a long-tenured head of school acknowledged the need to allow their predecessors the time and space to say goodbye, feeling that they deserved to have closure with their community without feeling encroached upon by the excitement regarding the incoming head.
Building on the comparison of change in a community to grief over a loss, this study also shed light on the dynamic in which the new head of school is leading in the wake of another’s leadership. Intuitively, one might think that a new leader would have the opportunity to begin anew with her leadership and vision. Jen Foles shared her struggles relating to her predecessor’s continuing relationship with the school community, which she believed had undermined her ability to establish her own leadership and relationships within the school. Chris Masters, on the other hand, had replaced a head of school who had not left on good terms and found herself challenged to establish her leadership in the face of the distrust left behind by her predecessor within the school community. These examples reveal that the wake through which a new leader must navigate is difficult and often confusing and complex in nature.

**A Maternal Care.** A number of the women who were interviewed in this study shared their experiences of using their natural maternal instinct to their advantage in forming relationships with constituent groups. Yet in the interview discussions, some women made comments as to whether there was a heightened expectation to be warm and nurturing because of being a woman and the expectations of being maternal. A leader’s ability to care for her community should not be solely associated to her gender or be an assumed expectation of the leader because of her being female. Instead a person’s ability to care for others is a skill and requirement for any leader, male or female. As Nel Noddings writes: “The language of care ethics has arisen largely from women’s experience, but that is not to say that it is inaccessible to men.” (Noddings, 2012, p.53) A caring relation is one of the first relations that humans experience and carry with them through adulthood. Therefore in any community, stakeholders yearn to be cared for.
Schools, especially, are places where “natural caring” is of utmost importance. 

(Noddings, 2012) Noddings writes that just as in homes, in schools “people address and respond to one another in ways characteristics of caring, and they do so by inclination, because they want to care and be cared for, not out of duty.”(p. 54)

The over emphasis of the maternal instinct in the interviews in this study implies that there needs to be a much more broader conversation about the expectation of care and the pastoral care that members of a school community naturally need and respond to. Rather than assuming that a female leader will bring a natural maternal feel and care to her leadership, organizations should focus on all leaders and community members sharing and expressing care for each other rather than putting the expectation solely on the Head of school.

**Displaced emotions.** I must note that in many of the interviews, the participants alluded to emotions of frustration and anger but they never expanded on their feelings. When asked about the frustration that they might have felt in their transition or any anger they felt because of sexist treatment, the women tended to shrug off their feelings as if to say there was no place or time to feel this negativity. Each participant who expressed some negative emotion often expressed it with a follow up joke or a tone of sarcasm.

The displaced emotions make for some concern for the mental health and emotional care of these new Heads of school. Female leaders already have to navigate and balance so many stressors in their roles. In addition, participants in this study, seemed to displace their emotions into humor and sarcasm rather than finding an appropriate outlet to express their feelings in order to receive appropriate support. Diane Olney even made a comment about wanting to strike neutrality so that she would seem
approachable. And so she just maintained a “focus on the kids, focus on the kids mentality, and that was really helpful” (D.Olney, personal communication, July 20, 2017).

**Personal Reflection**

Throughout this study, I continually reflected on my own transition experience into headship. As I wrote earlier in this chapter, my transition, both into my school community and into my role as head of school, was joyful and supportive. This is not to say that the transition did not come with a lot of hard work, difficult moments, or challenging relationships. As I approached each interview, I was continually listening for connections and similarities between my own experiences and those shared with me and for the guidance provided by the search consultants and board members in the focus groups. Interestingly enough, challenges around fundraising or the development of a relationship with her board chair did not come up in the interviews. From my own experience and from the literature, I had assumed that the responsibility of fundraising would be a frequent narrative in the transition experiences of a Head of school, and yet it did not come up in any of the participant’s conversations with me. I also expected for the women to spend a significant amount of their time sharing stories about their relationship with their board chair and its importance in the transition into headship. Only two participants briefly mentioned this in their interview.

After each interview, I was struck by the fortitude, resilience, and stamina of the participants. Although the interviews took place during the summer, they were often fitting their telephone conversations with me in among other meetings or conducting
them on the drive home from work. One participant even continued her interview during a stop at Trader Joe’s on her way home from school.

At the end of each interview, there was a sadness that the fellowship between two female heads of school was coming to an end. Often, participants thanked me for the conversation and remarked on how therapeutic and cathartic it had been to share their experiences as they transitioned into a headship. Many observed that they had never taken the time to earmark this period of leadership or to reflect deeply on their and their communities’ actions, thoughts, and emotions during the transition. Melinda Bones commented, “there is definitely something in the transition, and I am so glad you’re looking into it because there’s just something there to be explored” (personal communication, August 3, 2017).

When I set out to conduct this study, I was expecting to hear stories about how being a woman complicated the transition into headship. From my own perspective, it had always seemed that women have continually been at a disadvantage when pursuing leadership positions in independent schools. I have been asked time and time again to sit on panels to discuss the pathways to leadership as a woman and have continued to share a narrative that the pathway is a difficult “labyrinth” (Pernambuco-Wise, 2014). Pessimistically, I was expecting to hear transition experiences that were filled even more with gendered tensions and unrealistic expectations and disappointments. I was also expecting to hear the participants bring up challenges in regards to fundraising or a struggle to form a relationship with the board chair. Neither issue surfaced in the survey responses or in the interviews, which contradicts the literature that already exists around Head of school leadership.
Instead, the women shared how their maternal instincts and female-centric leadership styles contributed to successful transitions. They exhibited qualities naturally suited to building relationships and trust, to embracing a school community and providing it with the care and thoughtfulness that it needs during a leadership change. I was most struck by a comment by a search consultant who, when asked about the role of gender in the transition experiences of first-time heads of school, warned me that “it is important that we not take the tag, ‘oh these poor women leaders’” and urged instead celebrating the fact that there were “knockout” women taking leadership roles in independent schools.

Earlier in this study, I wrote about the ever-changing dynamics of independent schools and the new challenges and trends that these schools are facing. Independent schools are struggling with unsustainable economic models, a shift in parental mindsets regarding education and child-rearing, and a world of technology that can be detrimental to students’ social and emotional well-being. I mention these challenges because I considered them indicative of the challenges that new female leaders will need to face even as they contend with their female identity. Instead, what this study showed is that independent schools can, during this time of uncertainty for the United States and its education system, benefit from leadership styles that come naturally to many women, which involve relationship-building to empower community members and constituent groups and make them feel cared for in a nurturing and supportive manner.

Implications for Future Female Heads of School

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the ways in which 13 first-time female heads of school experienced their transitions into the position. Overall, the
findings suggested that female heads of school tend to face gendered experiences in their transition year. While some of these experiences involved challenges, the participants suggested that their female leadership styles were an advantage in the transition year.

Independent schools continue to experience high rates of turnover among heads of school in part because of an ongoing wave of retirements. While there remain relatively few female heads of school, their numbers have been growing in recent years, raising hopes for greater gender diversity in the top ranks at independent schools. As the number of female heads continues to increase, it is important that schools take special care to support them as they begin their tenure. For while there may be more female leaders in schools in general, the male-centered culture of specifically independent schools will be slower to evolve. It is therefore critical that structures and frameworks for transitional support evolve to address the unique challenges and issues that a female head of school may face.

The previous section analyzed the general findings, drawing connections among the research, the theoretical and conceptual framework, and the literature pertaining to women in leadership positions and organizational change. The analysis showed that the findings presented here are consistent with previous literature on independent school leadership, challenges that women face in leadership positions, and the dynamics of organizational change.

The following section explores recommendations for future female heads of school and school communities that are seeing themselves through a leadership transition. These recommendations are informed by the insights of the women who participated in
this study as they attempted to define a “successful transition,” as well as by the other findings and subsequent analysis and my own experience as a new head of school.

**Articulated and purposeful transition plans.** The first recommendation is that schools spend more time thinking through and articulating a transition plan for a new head of school. Throughout the interviews and in the literature, it remained clear that a transition plan can be helpful for a new leader if it is created with the proper amount of intentionality and as part of a concerted effort to take into consideration the range of emotions that surface during a transition in leadership. Such a plan should account for the makeup and role of the transition committee and provide for the logistical and emotional support to be extended to the new head of school and for transparency in communicating with constituents.

While most of the heads of school who took part in this study had worked with a transition committee, the purpose and tasks of these committees were often misaligned with the actual needs of the head of school. To correct for this, the transition committee should consist of both men and women so as to allow for gender diversity and advocacy for the leader from all points of view. The literature as well as the participants in this study suggest that gender diversity at the board level allows for stronger advocacy for female leaders. I further suggest that gender diversity on a transition committee can provide the same type of advocacy.

The transition committee needs to be clear regarding its purpose and its role. The incoming head of school must understand and be able to distinguish the role of the board from that of the transition committee. The interview participants spoke of confusion in this regard; the search consultants observed that a transition committee can
become a “de facto board,” thereby creating challenging dynamics for a new head of school. Transition committees should, as discussed, provide support for both the logistical aspects of the transition and the emotional aspects so that the new head of school can provide the most effective and responsive leadership possible. Female heads of school appreciate the logistical support but also hunger for support in building relationships in the community, anticipating blind spots, learning about the culture and community of the school, and providing guidance and non-evaluative feedback. As one participant put it, she “did not know what she did not know” (L.Koen, personal communication, August 24, 2017); a transition committee can fill that knowledge gap.

Figure 2. Support for heads of school during transitions.

The need for a change of mindset regarding “transitions.” This study strongly suggests that there needs to be a shift in mindset regarding what constitutes a “transition period.” The literature relating to transitions and organizational theory has framed them
as finite periods of time that can be thought of as falling on a chronological timeline or as phases of experiences and stages of change. When discussing their transitions, the participants often alluded to the fact that, even in their third or fourth years of serving as head, they felt as if they were still transitioning. Schools are by nature ever-changing places, most obviously as some students enter and others graduate each year, and a head of school must constantly adapt and build new relationships. The same transience characterizes boards, the members of which rotate on and off, and a head of school must learn to establish authority with the new faces at the table. Under these circumstances, it can be difficult to limit a transition to a finite period of time.

As the mindset changes in this regard, it is equally important that a head of school be aware of the emotional stages involved in a change in leadership. The powerful metaphor of grieving and loss accurately conveys the depth and complexity of a community’s emotions at this time. While new female heads of school seem to be acutely aware of the need to build relationships and learn the culture of a school, they may be less aware of the community’s sense of loss as a leadership change proceeds. Understanding of this emotional dimension of transition can help a new head of school to be responsive to the needs of her community and better prepared to serve as a pastoral leader even as she leverages her maternal instincts and relational abilities to forge trust and relationships in the school.

**The role of the predecessor.** In reflecting on this study, I was most surprised by the participants’ observations regarding their predecessors, which seemed to form a common thread through their narratives. Whether a predecessor was leaving on good terms or bad, the triangulation among the school community and the outgoing and
incoming heads proved to be very challenging, and it was apparent that particular attention is required during two of the phases in the process. The first is in the time leading up to the new head’s first day on the job, when a healthy and timely excitement regarding and welcoming of the incoming head of school into the school community is appropriate. A school needs to strike the right balance between introducing the new head of school to the community and allowing the out-going head space and time for closure. The head-elect also needs space and time to wind down her tenure at her old school. Throughout this phase, the head-elect must be protected so as not to be subject to any premature judgments by a school community and to have the necessary time and space to establish her leadership with the support and endorsement of the board.

The second phase of the relationship between an incoming head of school and her predecessor that requires particular attention is in her first year on the job. Many of the participants in this study shared experiences about challenges associated with predecessors who maintained connections to the school community. One even suggested that there was a need professional development for retiring long-term heads to help them to understand their new role and how to move on from a school community. This stage of the transition seemed to be the most sensitive for the interviewees in relation to their predecessors. Many struggled with feelings of insecurity, with the sense that their leadership and ability to build trust were undermined by lasting relationships and communications between their predecessors and the school community. For these reasons, then, departing heads need clearer guidance for their participation in the school community, especially in terms of their interactions with incoming heads.
My final hope is that women with ambition see the head of school role not as intimidating but as inspiring and capable of bringing rewards and great joy. The narrative about women becoming heads of school has been negative and indeed overwhelming for those who consider pursuing this leadership path. The narrative and mindset should evolve in order to make clear that women can contribute to schools and lead them into the future.
APPENDIX A: SURVEY OF HEADS OF SCHOOL

1.) Male/Female

2.) What year are you in your headship?
   a.) first year
   b.) second year
   c.) third year

3.) What was your position prior to being a Head of School?
   a.) Division Head
   b.) Assistant Head of School
   c.) Dean of Faculty
   d.) Dean of Students
   e.) Department Chair
   f.) Interim Head
   g.) Other ______________

4.) How many months before the official start of your job was the announcement of your appointment?
   a.) 1–3 months
   b.) 3–6 months
   c.) 6–9 months
   d.) 9–12 months
   e.) More than one year

5.) Was a transition plan or an entry plan designed for you?
   a.) Yes
   b.) No

6.) If yes, who designed the transition/entry plan?
   a.) Search consultant
   b.) Board member(s)
   c.) Administrative team
   d.) Me
   e.) Combination ______________
7.) When did your transition begin?
   a.) first day in the position
   b.) 1–2 months before the first day
   c.) 3 months before the first day
   d.) 4–6 months before the first day
   e.) more than 6 months before the first day

8.) In your transition into headship, which of the following was the most challenging for you?
   a.) Board/Head relationships
   b.) Parents
   c.) Mission/Institutional knowledge
   d.) Faculty
   e.) Students
   f.) Senior leadership
   g.) Operations
   h.) Curriculum
   i.) Community life

9.) For the following statements, please choose:
    Strongly agree/somewhat agree/neither agree nor disagree/somewhat disagree/strongly disagree
    (i.) I felt prepared for the first three months as Head of School.
    (ii.) It was clear to me what skill sets were necessary during my first year of headship.
    (iii.) I was given an adequate amount of time to transition into being a head of school.
    (iv.) Not enough information about my school and its operations was passed onto me as I began my headship.
    (v.) My board was understanding of a transition period.
    (vi.) My transition/entry plan helped me to navigate my school and culture.
    (vii.) It was clear to me what my priority objectives were in my first year of headship.
    (viii.) During the transition period, I felt supported by all constituents of my school community.
    (ix.) The transition period was more challenging for my school community than it was for me.
    (x.) I felt lonely in my first year of being a head of school.
    (xi.) My gender hindered my transition into being head of school.

10.) Where are you now?
    a.) At the same school that I began as a head of school
    b.) At a different school than where I began as a head of school
c.) No longer a head of school

11.) Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview?
   a.) Yes (please provide contact information)
   b.) No
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR HEAD OF SCHOOL SEARCH FIRMS

Interviews will be conducted with various search consultants who help to lead and guide head of school searches. The results of these interviews will be used as data to help guide and inform interview questions for participants in the research project.

Question 1: Please describe the search process and your involvement with the school and candidates.

Question 2: What do you look for in recruiting candidates to introduce to the search committee?

Question 3: What is your role once a candidate is selected and announced to a school community?

Question 4: What do you think is the biggest challenge in a Head’s first year?

Question 5: How would you define the transition period for a head of school?

Question 6: What should a successful transition experience look like both for the Head and for the school community?

Question 7: Do you think the transition experience varies depending on the size of school? geography? What the prior head’s experience was? (i.e., founding head, long-tenured head, short-tenured head).
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR HEADS OF SCHOOL

The interviews are unstructured, with the goal of establishing a positive rapport between the interviewee and interviewer. All interviewees will be asked to address the topics below, but each interview is likely to take its unique path. Interviewee responses may lead the conversation in unexpected or unanticipated directions. All interviews will be taped and transcribed. All data recorded will be strictly confidential and participants will be asked for consent for the use of their information in this research study.

Question 1: Is this your first headship? If not, where have you previously been a head of school and for how long?

Question 2: Tell me how you came to be the head of your current school.

Question 3: Once you were selected to be the head of school, what types of communication or contact did you have with the school prior to your official start day?

Question 4: Was a transition plan created for you? If so, how was the plan created? What was the timeline of this plan? Who was involved? Who was it communicated to?

Question 5: Did you have a transition committee? If so, who was involved and what was communicated to you and to the committee as to their role? If not, why not?

Question 6: What were your expectations or understanding of a transition period?

Question 7: How did you go about learning the characteristics of your school, such as mission, vision, constituent groups, issues, and opportunities?

Question 8: Can you share with me some of the areas in your first/first two/first three years where you felt the most prepared?

Question 9: Can you share with me some of the areas in your first/first two/first three years where you felt the least prepared?

Question 10: What do you wish you had more of in your transition?

Question 11: Would you consider your transition a successful one? Why or why not?

Question 12: What do you think a successful transition looks like or contains?

Question 13: How do you think your gender played a role in your transition?
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FOCUS GROUP WITH BOARD MEMBERS

I will convene a focus group of board members who were part of a head search in the past three years. The intention of this focus group is to have a better understanding of how the board (the hiring body) sees the transition for both the head of school and the rest of the school community.

Question 1: What was your role on the search committee (e.g., board member, chair of the search committee)?

Question 2: In the search process, how was the transition period discussed or taken into account? What preparations were made? What supports were put in place?

Question 3: How long did you and/or the search committee think the transition period would last?

Question 4: What does turnover look like?

Question 5: Did the transition period ever come into consideration when selecting the head of school? If so, how?

Question 6: If the search committee did discuss the transition period, did gender ever come into the conversation? If so, how was the gender being discussed with the transition period?

Question 7: When reflecting on the transition period for your respective head of school, what aspects of this time period do you consider were successful? What did you do that was most useful and least useful?
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW CODES

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<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Abbrev.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Deductive codes</strong></td>
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<td>Communication</td>
<td>Comm</td>
<td>Timing of communication of appointment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Trans</td>
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<td>Transition: committee</td>
<td>Trans:com</td>
<td>Transition committees – its role, makeup and purpose</td>
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<td>Timing</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Transition timelines and duration</td>
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<td>Challenges: gender</td>
<td>CH:G</td>
<td>Challenges involving being a woman in the position</td>
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| **Inductive codes**           |         |                               |
| Communication: predecessor    | Comm:pr | Communication between HoS and her predecessor, predecessor and community |
| Transition: relationship building | Trans: rel | How relationships begin to form between HoS and her constituents |
| Preparation: mentorship      | Prep:M  | Mentors in helping to prepare HoS for the position |
| Challenges: interpersonal    | CH:int  | Challenges involving relationships and loneliness of the position |
| Challenges: information      | CH:inf  | Lack of information and clarification provided going into the position |
| Preparation: involvement     | Prep:inv | How she was involved in aspects of school life before being a HoS |
REFERENCES


Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. Sociology of Health & Illness, 16(1), 103-121.


