

Dr Jill Berry

# **Making the leap**

## **Moving from deputy to head**



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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	<i>i</i>
<i>Preface: my story</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<b>1. Introduction: making the leap – why would you want to?</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Spheres of influence and what is distinctive about headship .....	7
My own experience .....	14
My research .....	19
<b>2. Applying for headship: key principles of making a successful application</b> .....	<b>39</b>
Deciding what to apply for .....	39
Making a strong written application .....	48
Preparing for and performing well at interview ....	60
<b>3. Managing the lead-in period: the challenges of finding the balance in the period between appointment and formally taking up the role ..</b>	<b>79</b>
The developing relationship with your predecessor .....	82
The opportunities of the lead-in period .....	92

## Making the Leap

The challenges of the lead-in period, and sources of support and strategies .....	98
<b>4. The early months in post: ‘inheriting’ the role versus ‘inhabiting’ the role .....</b>	<b>115</b>
Learning to lead in a new context .....	118
Navigating the differences between deputy headship and headship .....	128
Continuing to build the bridge as you walk on it .....	139
<b>5. Established headship and beyond: moving beyond being the ‘new head’ .....</b>	<b>149</b>
Making the most of the joy of headship .....	152
Balance and sustainability .....	158
Next steps? .....	165
<i>References and recommended reading .....</i>	<i>173</i>
<i>About the author .....</i>	<i>177</i>



## **Preface: my story**

I taught for thirty years between 1980 and 2010, carrying out seven different jobs across six different schools after beginning my teaching career as a secondary English specialist. I loved my time in the classroom (and during my years as a head I continued to teach) but also very much enjoyed the additional challenge of working with and through other staff to reach more students. I was promoted to a pastoral role in my first school (as assistant head of house in a school where the pastoral structure was house based) and then moved to my second school to be second in the English department, then head of English in my third school, head of sixth form in my fourth, deputy head in my fifth and head, for ten years, in my sixth and final school.

I was perhaps fortunate in that I worked in six good schools, alongside some exceptional teachers and support staff and many talented leaders. I also experienced some examples of less effective leadership, but think I learnt even more from these negative role models, and reflecting on how I might lead differently helped me to formulate and refine my vision of the type of leader I one day hoped to be.

## Making the Leap

The six schools I taught in were all quite different from each other: I worked in the state and independent sectors; in all boys', all girls' and co-educational schools; in comprehensive and selective schools; in 4–18, 7–18 and 11–18 schools. I also taught GCSE and A level to classes of adults in the evenings. I enjoyed my career, particularly headship, which I found joyful, though challenging. However, ten years as a head in one school felt like enough for me, and I had no aspirations to move to a second headship, so at the age of 52 I left full-time teaching/headship and decided to do something different with the final stretch of my professionally useful life.

Having completed a master's degree in education fifteen years into my teaching career, I decided to embark on a professional doctorate in education fifteen years later, and considered that this would constitute an interesting challenge in the 'post-career' phase of my life. It has been said that if you complete a PhD you 'contribute to the body of knowledge of the world', whereas those who opt for a professional doctorate 'contribute to the body of professional knowledge in the world'. The latter appealed to me as I was committed to disseminating anything I learnt to the professional community of which I had been a member for the previous thirty years.

I have always found leadership transitions fascinating. What motivates someone to move from the position of a classroom teacher without specific responsibility to their first middle leadership role? Why do some middle leaders in due course want to make the move to senior leadership? And why do some senior leaders aspire to headship? I realised that I was also going through a further transition: from head teacher to ... whatever came next. It caused me

to reflect on the challenges and the opportunities of this particular transition.

I knew I wanted to focus on some element of the leadership transition process in my doctoral research project, and opted to home in on the transition from deputy to head. This seemed to me to be the most interesting of leadership transitions, as I considered there was a paradox at the heart of the relationship between deputy headship and headship. On the one hand, being a deputy appears to be the best preparation for headship, offering as it does the opportunity for senior leaders to experience headship ‘in miniature’: when the head is out of school, the deputy in effect *is* the head. In my case, I knew I wanted to be a head when I realised how much I enjoyed deputising when my head was away. However, in many respects the two roles are quite different. Deputies are far more operational, often preoccupied with the smooth day-to-day running of the school, solving problems and keeping the wheels oiled. Heads, working closely with governors, are far more strategic, involved in the bigger picture, including public relations, representing the school in a range of contexts and engaging with the wider community beyond the school. And, of course, however much autonomy and responsibility a deputy is given, ultimately there is always someone to stand behind – the head to whom they defer. When you become a head, you have to adjust to this new professional persona (which can be a particularly interesting challenge if you are internally appointed to headship). You become ‘the one’, that figure to whom others defer.

This led me to reflect on what it really means to move from the solution-finding, at times mechanical nuts and bolts, of the deputy role to the one-step-removed head

## Making the Leap

teacher role. What is the nature of this transition? How can aspiring heads, and heads-elect, prepare for it? How can they navigate it so that they begin their headship in as strong a position as possible?

My doctoral research focussed on the challenges of making this transition and the strategies incoming heads use, including the channels of support they access as they face these challenges. In this book I explore my research findings, informed by my wide reading in the field of educational leadership, and underpinned by my experience of making the transition myself and supporting others who are negotiating the process. I hope that what I have to offer is useful to those who are deciding whether headship is the right step for them; to those who are actively aspiring and applying; to heads-elect who are negotiating the lead-in period between being appointed to headship and formally assuming the role; to established heads preparing the next generation of school leaders; to outgoing heads managing their own transition and, I hope, supporting their successors; to governors whose responsibility it is to manage head teacher succession; and to other senior leaders who have an important supporting role to play when the head of the school changes.

It may be that this isn't the kind of book you read from cover to cover, but a book you dip into as different elements become relevant to you: deciding whether to apply for headship, negotiating the application and selection process, making the most of the time immediately following successful appointment and so on. However you choose to use it, I very much hope you will find it helpful as you navigate your leadership journey.

## *Preface*

Researchers such as Leithwood et al. (2006) and Barber et al. (2010) have established that school leadership is second only to the quality of teaching in its effect on successful pupil outcomes. Preparing and supporting future generations of incoming head teachers is crucial if schools are to be strong and stable institutions where students and staff thrive. I hope this book has a part to play in this preparation and support of future school leaders.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

Making the leap – why would you want to?

## **Spheres of influence and what is distinctive about headship**

It seems to me that when you start teaching, your sphere of influence involves the pupils in the class, or classes, you are timetabled to teach. You focus on their learning in your subject or, if you are a primary teacher, in a range of subjects. You may also build your pastoral skills through your role as a tutor or form teacher, taking greater responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the pupils in your group and, through this, supporting their learning and progress. You care about them as people as well as pupils, and this may also lead to a fuller contribution to the wider life of the school and activities beyond the classroom – for example, through the extra-curricular programme the school offers. Building relationships through such activity can support and strengthen the relationships with those you meet in the classroom. In addition, involvement in the wider life of the school may enable you to establish positive contact with a greater number of children.

## Making the Leap

For many teachers, the contact with pupils, and the focus on subjects and activities about which they themselves are enthusiastic, and usually talented and knowledgeable, is the appeal of the profession. Being able to communicate the rewards of developing expertise in that subject/area, sharing your passions and enthusing others, is energising and thrilling, though it is also undoubtedly tough, especially if some of those you teach are reluctant to engage and prefer to focus on testing you. However, with increasing experience and growing confidence this can become easier. You learn as they learn – as you continue to practise and hone your craft.

Sometimes you reach the point where you consider yourself ready for further challenge. Inevitably, if you take on greater responsibility, perhaps initially as a middle leader, your teaching is likely to reduce as you are allocated more time for your leadership role. However, my view is that as your sphere of influence expands you begin to affect the lives of more pupils, by working with and through other staff. As a teacher of English my focus was the pupils in my classes. As a second in department and later a head of English my focus was the pupils in all the English lessons, taught by all the English teachers, in the school. I worked with and through other adults to reach more children.

Middle leadership will be a new challenge and will provide you with fresh experiences and opportunities. You realise that encouraging pupils to follow your lead is one thing; encouraging adults to do the same is a challenge of a different order! But leadership can be hugely stimulating and rewarding. How do you earn the trust and respect of those within your domain? How do you win hearts and minds, inspire and encourage? How do you ensure that

## Introduction

you get the right balance of support and challenge? It is part of your responsibility to hold the members of your team to account, and not simply to be their indiscriminate advocate who tries to protect and defend them. It takes courage to ensure that, as a team, you all have high aspirations and that any difficult issues are addressed and not ignored. But it is crucial to do this in a positive and supportive way, to lead the team so that everyone has a part to play in its ongoing development: your role is to coordinate the efforts of all the team members, to see the best in others and to be aware of, and make the most of, their complementary strengths. You are not the only one with ideas; you are not necessarily the source of the best ideas; you are not even, necessarily, the best teacher in the team (although you have to be a good, credible teacher). Your job as a leader is to help everyone else to be their best, so that the team grows in strength and effectiveness under your leadership.

There are advantages to having a middle leadership role: often the team you lead has a clearly defined identity with obvious parameters, and it may be of a manageable size. Often teaching and learning are still fundamental to your role, and, for most of us, the things that brought us into the profession in the first place may still be at the core of your day-to-day activity. You can lead change from this position; if the domain for which you are responsible is successful, well led and well respected, you can become a beacon of excellence which demonstrates what can be achieved when the conditions, and the degree of support and challenge, are right. You show convincingly what *can* be done.

## Making the Leap

However, as a successful middle leader you may feel, in due course, that you would like to have the capacity to make a greater whole-school difference. The leadership skills you are developing, and the achievements you are able to secure within your team, may give you a taste for what you could go on to accomplish with greater responsibility, increased authority and a wider brief. You may, in time, begin to look for a senior leadership position.

Senior leadership posts vary, and if you reach this point in your career it is important to be clear about what kind of area of responsibility appeals to you, and what you believe your temperament, skills and passions best suit you for. What lights your fire? It may be the pastoral element of school life that you find energising and rewarding. It may be the curriculum, timetabling or the leadership of academic teams. It may be a focus on teaching and learning, on professional development, on staff induction and support or on digital learning. It may be the coordination of the extra-curricular elements of the wider school community. Whatever your whole-school role, your sphere of influence will expand. The number of lives you are affecting – both in terms of students' experiences and the full range of teaching and support staff – increases. Your influence on the direction of the school also grows. You can make a bigger difference.

And as a senior leader, especially as a deputy head, you have a taste of how it might be if, in effect, there were no restrictions to your influence, your responsibility and your capacity to direct the school's development. As a head, you will work closely with your governing body, but in many respects you *are* the school – you represent what the school stands for and you take it on the journey you

## Introduction

believe to be right for that particular school at that particular stage in its development. This is a huge privilege and a weighty task. But if you have the right temperament, it is, I would suggest, the best job in the world.

So as your career progresses and you move from one leadership role to another, your sphere of influence gradually grows. You will be required to take on new challenges and will, in every new job, be called upon to do things you may never have faced before. You will have the chance to learn, to grow, to prove yourself. You will make mistakes and survive them. But I believe that the qualities that make you a good teacher are closely related to those which will serve you well in leadership. Every teacher is, in fact, a leader of learning within their own classroom. If you decide to move to middle leadership, to senior leadership, to headship ultimately, you will continue to refine these skills, but in my opinion good leaders are good leaders at whatever level.

What makes headship distinctive? It is undoubtedly a big job. You need a clear grasp of the big picture – what the school stands for and where it is going – because no school stands still. During the course of a working week you may experience a huge range of different tasks: a governors' meeting debating future strategy; a finance meeting looking at budgetary priorities and constraints; leading an assembly; interviewing staff; meeting parents. You might be working within the community as a representative of the school you lead and a spokesperson for education. You will certainly spend considerable time with your senior leadership team, making the most of their complementary skills and ensuring that, in the words of Dylan Wiliam, they work '*as a team*' rather than simply '*in a team*'. Heads

# Are you considering making the leap? Maybe you're applying for headship roles, or have already secured one and are wondering how best to manage the transition

Drawing on her personal experience of headship, her doctoral research and her extensive reading on the subject, Dr Jill Berry offers practical advice which will be invaluable to anyone considering their next leadership challenge.

Headship is demanding, but it is also extremely rewarding: Jill's points for reflection and experience-based advice will encourage you to be clear-sighted about the challenges and responsibilities that lie ahead. Managing the transition and the first few months and years of headship successfully will ensure that you are on the most positive trajectory possible as you continue your leadership journey.

## Suitable for teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders who are considering school headship

This book will make anyone a better head and, as a result, their school a better school.

**Simon Smith, Headmaster-elect, Rydal Penrhos**

Skilfully written, engaging, thought-provoking and underpinned by high quality academic research ... will certainly inspire you to make the leap in leadership.

**Stephen T. Logan, Deputy Head Teacher, Malet Lambert School**

I finished the book inspired, reassured and determined to continue my bid to become a head teacher.

**Dr Tim Jefferis, Deputy Head, Oswestry School**

A must-read for deputies on the journey to headship and for those considering making the leap or supporting others to do so.

**Helena Marsh, Executive Principal, Linton Village College**

As a recently appointed head teacher, this is the book I wish I had read before I took up the post.

**Chris Hildrew, Head Teacher, Churchill Academy and Sixth Form**

I would encourage all those who aspire to headship, or who are newly appointed, to read this immensely valuable guide.

**Clare Sherwood, Head Teacher, The Cathedral School**

Straight to the point, easy to read and impossible to put down.

**Kelly Leonard, Assistant Head Teacher, Turton School**

The most impressive and useful book I have read about preparing for headship and how best to make the transition from deputy to leader of a school.

**Kevin Carson, Senior Deputy Head, The Grammar School at Leeds**

**Dr Jill Berry** taught for 30 years, initially as a secondary English teacher. She has been a head of English, head of sixth form and deputy head and was a head teacher for ten years. Since 2010 she has completed a Professional Doctorate in Education, worked as an associate for the National College for Teaching and Leadership and carried out a range of leadership consultancy work.

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