"Trying to feel comfortable in an ill-fitting jacket"

The professional lives of primary school headteachers in Wales

Justine Baldwin

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Abstract

This thesis aims to illuminate how the professional role of primary headteachers has changed within a devolved Welsh education system. Drawing on an interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methods, the professional lives of headteachers were interrogated through online semi-structured interviews during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis was used to systematically identify, organise and highlight patterns in their shared experiences, which provides insight into their subjective perceptions.

The findings of this study show that headteachers articulated their core purpose as being driven by, and focused on, the needs of their pupils. When this core function was compromised through the burden of management tasks and overly bureaucratic accountability, headteachers felt themselves deprofessionalised. Headteachers in this study espoused notions of increased risk, reduced agency and low levels of trust in their professional capacity as a result of organisational and political changes. Risk management, heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic, was a cause for concern, including the risk of social media and the risk of improper or inadequate training. Identified in their accounts was a paradox of leadership where headteachers are simultaneously experiencing reduced agency, increased demands in terms of practical management of their settings, and where leadership is core to school improvement. There was a strongly held belief by headteachers that they should be allowed to exercise agency and there were expressions of excitement at the prospect of designing a new curriculum as an indication that professional agency was re-emerging through the third phase of educational reform. However, trust as a core competency of headship was cited as being lost through a remaining dominance of organisational professionalism despite these latest reforms.

The relationship between headteachers and the meso-level bodies interwove all these interactions and opportunities to exercise intelligent accountability was seen as aspirational. This study found that the recruitment process for headship positions to be a-contextual, resulting in feelings of disillusionment and uncertainty when headteachers were new in post. Where a school was reflected honestly and transparently at recruitment, the appointed candidate felt in a strong position to lead the school successfully.

This study concludes that training for headship was not consistently perceived useful and relevant with the exception of a positive legacy of continuing networks of professional relationships and peer mentoring.

From these findings five recommendations have emerged that may serve to improve the professional lives of headteachers in Wales: consideration of the re-structuring of school management, reconfiguration of the headship role, investment in peer mentoring, a review of headteacher recruitment and an evaluation of the professional development offer to aspiring and serving headteachers.

While all issues existed prior to the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, many have been intensified due to its impact. While the findings refer to this impact and provide some emerging insights, and while there has been some early research into the effects of the pandemic on all sectors of education, further research in the future is needed to ensure the full impact and effects can be measured on the role of school leaders during this time of crisis.

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List of Abbreviations

CPD Continued Professional Development

Estyn National Inspectorate for Wales

EWC Education Workforce Council

GDPR General Data Protection Regulations

ITT Initial Teacher Training

NAHT National Association for Headteachers

NAEL National Academy for Educational Leadership

NPQH National Professional Qualification for Headship

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PISA Programme for International Student Assessment

PLP Professional Learning Passport

QTS Qualified Teacher Status

SDP School Development Plan

SLO Schools as Learning Organisations

VA Voluntary Aided

VAWDASV Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence

VC Voluntary Controlled

WG Welsh Government

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Personal statement

In 1997 I gained Qualified Teacher Status in Wales. I began work immediately in a large primary school. It was a steep learning curve. Nothing quite prepares you for a room full of disillusioned ten-year-olds who really do *not* want to engage in your well-prepared poetry lesson. So began my own learning journey.

I would like to look back and think that I have taught children well. That I have made a positive impact on the lives of children and young people – after all, those ten-year-olds I worked with at the start of my teaching career are now parents in their own right. However, if I am being honestly reflective, I realise that the learning has been symbiotic. I have easily learnt as much as I have taught.

I never intended to be a headteacher. In fact, at the start, teaching was just a stop gap while I waited for something better to come along. But having now been in senior management roles in primary education for over ten years, and a headteacher for eight, I believe that there is nothing quite as challenging and as varied a role as this. Where else might the course of your working day involve unblocking a toilet, having a seven-minute empathic conversation with a five-year-old, taking several animated telephone calls from parents, sending several hysterical emails to finance and then having a professional debate about the importance of peer marking with your latest newly qualified member of staff?

Although sometimes obscured by the waves of day-to-day school life, what keep us headteachers afloat on a sea of change is our desire to make things better. Better for that five-year-old, who minutes before was employing every expletive in his vocabulary in his efforts to explain that he had had no breakfast and therefore just absolutely did not want to do any maths. Better for those parents who were struggling with their own engagement with school, because after all, where had it got them? Better for that newly qualified teacher who was at that moment doubting everything she was doing in her classroom. And, ultimately, better for Wales by contributing to the education policy agenda of reducing educational inequities.

However, there have been times during my life as a senior manager in primary education that I have doubted my preparedness for the role. We nurture our pupils to make sure they have

the tools ready to ensure that they can engage in learning, that they will get the best out of each lesson and that they are ready to take their next step. But what about us as headteachers? Is there appropriate guidance and realistic expectations on leaders as we seek to guide ourselves and others through the maelstrom?

This study will help inform debates around the professional role of primary school headteachers, carried out as it was, in a rural local authority during the Covid pandemic, when the waves felt in the role across Wales were exceptionally rough and potentially risky. By exploring the perceptions of primary school leaders in Wales, I hope to contribute to the contemporary ongoing debate where leaders are both the focus of policy but paradoxically often feel denied agency.

Chapter 1: Introduction and rationale- The Oversized Jacket

1.1 The role as an oversized jacket

During a celebration service for headteachers of local Church schools several years ago, I was presented with a book called The Gift of Leadership (Croft 2016). In the introduction to this book, Croft employs a metaphor that struck a chord with me. He had written "My first year as a vicar felt like putting on a jacket which was several sizes too big." (Croft 2016 p. viii) Croft articulated that he soon realised that his new role was one that he needed to grow into, and that it was a question of *learning* how to do the job, rather than *knowing* how to do it. When I reflected on my role as a primary headteacher, his experience of a role that was not immediately a good fit resonated with my own. Indeed, in many ways I feel that I still wear that oversized jacket, but it seems to have even more pockets than it did when I originally put it on.

While the importance of educational leadership as the fulcrum for success in schools has been increasingly acknowledged and recognised in Wales (Egan and Keane 2018), my role as a primary headteacher in Wales fits me no better than when I first donned it eight years ago: I still struggle to feel confident to fill the breadth of its fit and the weight of its fabric. I often mismatch the buttons, find loose threads and get myself caught unexpectedly by the sleeve as I negotiate my way around the role.

Being in a leadership role in primary schools since 2008 has allowed me to gain a first-hand understanding of the changing professional role of headteachers over more than a decade; a decade that has seen wide-scale educational policy reform (Milton et al. 2020). As a newly qualified 'leader', the first document that impacted on my professional development was the *School Effectiveness Framework* (WG 2008b). This called for 'innovative thinking and practice at all levels' (p.7) and issued the rallying cry that this Framework was the vehicle for taking forward the commitment to give children and young people of Wales a first-class education, describing how its implementation would 'provide the best possible schools for the future' (p.7). This Framework talked about the 'moral purpose of our education system' (p.7) and began to use such stirring phrases that we hear increasingly often in education policy today: terminology such as visionary, shared beliefs, collective responsibility, and social justice. As a

new headteacher, I felt the responsibility of not only securing high standards in terms of pupil outcomes, but suddenly I was responsible for enriching learners' whole lives, extending their entire life opportunities and contributing to the economic prosperity of the community and to the whole of Wales (p.5). Leadership was described as needing to be 'emotionally intelligent, purposeful, enabling, influencing, motivating.' My jacket, which was already way too big was beginning to feel increasingly heavy to wear. I started to wonder if it was just me or if others in a similar role might also be feeling the weight of wearing the headteacher role in a similar way.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

The remainder of this thesis is presented in seven chapters.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review that focuses upon theoretical and empirical literature from the field of education surrounding leadership in primary education in Wales.

Chapter 3 outlines the epistemological and ontological perspectives adopted, and provides a justification and rationale for the methods employed to address the research questions outlined. It provides a detailed overview of the approach taken to data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Chapters 4 and 5 present the findings of the study in two parts, each focusing on two of the key research questions.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion around the key issues that have been drawn from the analysis, which is followed by a conclusion in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2: Literature review - A Peep into the Wardrobe

2.1 Introduction

This literature review is a detailed analysis of the theoretical and empirical literature from the field of education that most closely relates to this study, with a particular focus on work undertaken in the Welsh context.

The first section of the review considers general theoretical debates relating to professionalism and applies these to the professional role of teaching generally and then headteaching specifically.

The review then moves on to consider the policy landscape in Wales post-devolution. The review will suggest that there are three phases of policy-making within Wales, each representing an alternative view of the professional role of headteachers. The final section will consider key policy documents which highlight how the role of headship has been reconfigured within these three phases. This final section will look specifically at key policy documents during what has been identified as the third phase.

2.2 Theoretical perspectives on professionalism

The concept of enacting a professional role is bound up with the notion of 'professionalism' and has been long debated and researched. Freidson (1994) concluded that the term was used inconsistently, whilst Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) admit there is no single conceptual definition of professionalism. Englund (1996) defines the professionalisation of any occupation as "a manifestation of the historical and social ambition of an occupational group to achieve status and a position in society". (p.76) The prerequisite for professionalism, according to Englund (1996), is the effective acquisition of skills and competencies such that the occupation can be carried out successfully. Amongst Millerson's (1964) list of professional characteristics is an identified need for specialist knowledge gained through intensive training and regular practise to gain competence.

These positive accounts of professional work have been used to bolster teachers' claims to being a professional. Recent political reforms have resulted in a narrative that teachers are being deprofessionalised. This deprofessionalisation positions teachers in a more technical

role driven by the implementation of statutory testing, more extensive accountability across a broad range of increasingly complex roles, the imposition of external categorisation systems and the scarcity of specialist training. Ball (2003) sees 'older ethics' of professional judgement and co-operation being ousted by the incentivism of performance data and competition, i.e. headteachers' positive contribution to the value system being superseded by the hegemonic regard for hierarchical positioning: the 'hegemony of PISA' for example (Collet-Sabé 2017).

Whilst recognising the changing nature of professional work, other theorists have rejected a crude deprofessionalisation narrative (Freidson 2001; Evetts 2009b). Freidson (2001) describes all professional work as having undergone a significant shift, typified by increased bureaucracy and managerialism. This shift also accounts for increased hierarchy, imposed standardisation and technicist approaches to professional knowledge and practice, such as mechanistic achievement of targets. While in her earlier work Evetts aligned this with a deprofessionalisation approach, in her later work (2009b; 2012) she bypasses the deprofressionalisation debate and offers two alternative models of professional work: occupational and organisational professionalism. The latter of these - organisational professionalism incorporates vertical structures of hierarchy and decision making, increased standardised work procedures and practices, as well as a reliance on external forms of regulation and accountability measures. Target setting and performance reviews are relied upon for judging these standards and are used as a form of occupational control. This description is at odds with her occupational account of professional work, epitomised by a collegiate approach to decision-making, a shared understanding of professional agency and less vertical structures of hierarchy within organisations. Importantly, this approach involves relationships of trust, where 'authority' is not seen as 'control', but rather that decision-making and autonomy is seen as a basis for respect within the organisation and where strong occupational identities are guided by professional ethics. Occupational professionalism is thus guided and shaped by the practitioners themselves. Evetts (2009b) goes on to indicate that where the latter (occupational professionalism) places importance on relationships, the former (organisational professionalism) relies on structures.

However, Evetts herself states that as both are described as 'ideal-type models' (p.248) and are therefore extreme versions; that it is clear that the complex reality lies somewhere between both ideals. The issue with such a binary discourse has also been acknowledged in

some recent research (Connolly et al. 2018) where the discussion relates specifically to the (head)teaching profession. Teachers and headteachers (as they are often one and the same thing) are expected to fulfil and combine these two roles, which at first glance seems to present a paradox. Discourse that considers the contrast between competing and apparently paradoxical understandings of professionalism (whether organisational or occupational) has suggested that these may not always be mutually exclusive (Evetts 2012) and gives rise to the notion of "hybridity" where contrasting principles of professionalism co-exist (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008).

2.3 Educational reform in Wales

2.3.1 Introducing the 'Three Phases'

The separation of the education reform journey in Wales into three distinct phases since devolution has been employed in several recent studies (Connolly et al. 2018; Evans 2021) to provide a structure to map the shifting approaches of Welsh educational policy development and its impact on the profession and on learners. While these phases are not watertight and are associated with the three prominent education ministers since devolution- Jane Davidson; Leighton Andrews; and Kirsty Williams- they do act as a useful reference point to illustrate different approaches towards the teaching profession.

These three phases of reform previously defined could be characterised in terms of more or less agency; the first phase from devolution to 2010 seeing a divergence from the education reform taking place in the English system where external accountability was paramount, and teacher professional agency undervalued (Biesta, Priestly and Robinson 2015). The comprehensive reform agenda at this time in Wales on the other hand was characterised by a resurgence of trust in the teaching profession, and a rush of innovation. Phase two, which followed the well-documented poor position of Wales in the PISA tables, saw education in Wales becoming more focused on data, standards, categorisation and higher levels of accountability. Since 2015 and the implementation of the third phase, whole system reform in Wales has seen a culture of collaboration beginning to weave its way into the education landscape, and where a renewed emphasis has been placed on the value of professional agency and teacher autonomy (Biesta, Priestly and Robinson 2015).

Devolution in 1999 marks the beginning of phase one of reform in Wales, as divergence from the English system saw a rush of innovation in Welsh education policy. Encapsulated in the now famous and highly rhetorical 'clear red water' speech by Wales's then First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, Wales now had an open road to travel in education reform, 'unleashed from the shackles' imposed by Westminster (Morgan 2002). Power (2016) outlines the prominent features of the over-arching Welsh policy principles that "good government is good for you" where there is "a commitment to progressive universalism, high rather than low trust, a strong ethic of participation and a commitment to ensuring greater equality of outcome." (p.286). Power (2016) considers the direction of travel was owed in part to Wales's 'contrasting orientations to traditionalism and progressivism' (p.287) and resulted in an approach to education that was based on professional collaboration, and trust in the enabling of practitioners.

The most significant example of this progressivism was outlined in *The Learning Country* (WG 2001), a 10-year vision for education and lifelong learning in Wales. This document revealed a comprehensive strategy for education up until 2010 and included a call for the informed professional judgement of teachers to be "celebrated without prejudice to the disciplines of public accountability; and with proper regard to clearing the way to unleash the capacity and expertise of practitioners" (p.9). Here teachers seem to be given a professional status that is beyond accountability, which aligns with what Evetts identifies as occupational professionality (Evetts 2012). This foundational document included the introduction of the Foundation Phase curriculum for children aged 3-7 years rooted in international research and a flagship early years policy in 2008, based as it was on European approaches to a holistic curriculum rooted in creativity and wellbeing (WG 2008a p. 5).

At this time, there was also a consistent and unequivocal rejection of competitive education in the Welsh system that can be traced back to the ideology made explicit in the 'clear red water' speech (Morgan 2002). Key policy interventions which signalled this approach were the scrapping of league tables which ranked schools in conjunction with the rejection of standardised assessment tests (SATs) in 2001 (for seven-year-olds) and 2004 (for 11 and 14 – year-olds) which provided the data for such ranking (Power 2016).

2.3.3 Phase Two

The first phase of reform ended a decade later in 2010. The policy changes introduced at this time were precipitated by significantly lower than average performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009. These results ignited a national debate on the quality of education in Wales and led to broad consensus on the need for change. Consequently, in this second phase of reform, Wales embarked on a large-scale school improvement journey, which was encapsulated in Leighton Andrews's 20-point plan (WG 2011) and a range of policies were introduced aimed at improving the quality and equity of the Welsh school system through a focus on data, standards, categorisation and higher levels of accountability. Amongst these phase two reforms were two initiatives which could be seen as a retrenchment from key policies introduced in phase one: the launch in 2012 of the national school categorisation system (where all schools across Wales were ranked according to a colour; red, amber, yellow, green) and the introduction of National Reading and Numeracy Tests for pupils aged seven to 14. Evans (2021 p.8) refers to these policy changes as 'symptomatic of the turbulence and volatility that existed within the system at the time.' The need to effect change at pace was observed in an OECD review in 2014 and was cited as a cause of "reform fatigue" (Connolly et al. 2018 p.620) that resulted in a lack of long-term vision (OECD 2014, p. 66) amongst the teaching workforce.

Leighton Andrews's Ministerial foreword in *Improving Schools*, the 2012 document that outlined the second phase of education policy reforms, used vocabulary that can be viewed as contributing to the deprofessionalisation narrative: Wales needed a 'wake-up call', the profession was 'falling short' and 'not delivering'. Andrews told the Welsh education system that it was 'complacent', and we all needed to 'face up to the harsh truth' that education required reform as Estyn judged a third of schools in Wales to be 'not as good as they should be' (Andrews 2012). Later in 2014, and well into the second phase of reform, the school improvement planning document *Qualified for Life* linked the professional role of school leaders with vocabulary that had the whiff of the lone hero narrative: "our pursuit of greatness is based on a relentless drive for higher standards" (WG2014a p.7).

To facilitate these reforms the Welsh Government initiated changes to the structure of Welsh education. The establishment of four regional consortia in 2012 was intended to provide a

focus for developing regional school improvement and was outlined in the overarching reform plan *Improving Schools* (WG 2012). These structural changes resulted in a myriad of meso-level bodies overseeing schools in Wales resulting in what was deemed 'the messy middle' (Connolly, 2018) and identified as a potential risk to effective reform by OECD (2017).

2.3.4 Phase Three

Following criticism from within and outside of the Welsh system, the new Welsh Education Minister, Huw Lewis, commissioned a wholescale review of Wales's curriculum and assessment arrangements by Graham Donaldson in 2015. Donaldson's review which was published as *Successful Futures* (WG 2015b) outlined 68 recommendations including a new Curriculum for Wales. By accepting these recommendations, Lewis waved in what can be viewed as the third and current phase of reform characterised by one that is learner focused and more collegiate in aspiration and 'grounded in a renewed confidence in educators' professionalism' (OECD 2020b p.1).

Subsequent to the publication of this 2015-2020 strategic plan, and only one year into its roll-out, in 2016 the Welsh Government invited the OECD to conduct a rapid policy assessment of education reform in an attempt to evaluate the progress so far and to propose further recommendations that would consolidate the Welsh education reform journey.

Published in 2017, this OECD review signalled a discursive shift in policy suggesting the pendulum had swung back towards fostering teachers' agency, which was seen to be stifled within the previous reform period: this report argues that "Wales will need a different type of teaching professional" (p.25) and that teachers' professionalism needs to be enhanced. The report also acknowledged that progress had been made in many policy areas, such as the emphasis on professional learning for teachers, the importance of peer collaboration and participation between and across schools, and the steps taken in developing a new curriculum, amongst others (p.7). However, there was a call for further attention in important areas, in order that Wales continues (and sustains) its reform journey. Significantly amongst these recommendations was the appearance (yet again) of the need for the development of educational leadership by placing it as a prime driver in education strategy in Wales. There was a call for moving forward with the establishment of a national academy of educational leadership and a desire to accelerate the development of leadership standards and the

professional learning offer for leaders and aspiring leaders. In terms of policy development, the report outlined the need for an alignment with the new teaching standards and with the new model for schools in Wales to become learning organisations, which was currently under development at the time of writing. The report also advocated the deployment of highly skilled business managers for schools, or group of schools, which would aim to reduce the administrative burden on school leaders allowing them to focus on educational leadership and ensure the "readiness" of staff to deliver the new curriculum." (p.7-8).

What has followed this 'call to arms' for Welsh school leaders has been referred to as "a period of increasing school accountability and growing challenge to school leaders" (Egan and Keane 2018 p.2) culminating in *Education in Wales: Our National Mission* (WG 2017c). This growing challenge is encapsulated in the reform objective:

- Inspirational leaders working collaboratively to raise standards (p.28)

The National Mission document goes on to outline the work thus far in promoting and supporting effective, collaborative leadership; consulting on new professional leadership standards, adjusting the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and reviewing the school governance framework. Central to the reform agenda "to secure, nurture and inspire leaders now and for the future across the entire system in both Welsh-medium and English-medium settings" is the establishment of the *National Academy for Academic Leadership in Wales,* set up in May 2018 (WG 2017b).

This commitment to universalism embodies Welsh political ideals, but does it create a form of institutionalised standard of service that makes professionalism irrelevant? (Stronach et al. 2002). Could the (now realised) tendency to create a definitive list of core competencies for leadership be buying in to the generic, universal 'leader' where consensus is projected as a permanently emerging but somehow never quite realised achievement? (Day 2000). New professional standards for teaching and leadership were published in September 2017 and all serving teachers and headteachers were expected to work according to them by September 2018 (these brought together Qualified Teacher Status Standards [WG 2009c], and the Practising Teachers Standards and Leadership Standards [both outlined in *Revised professional standards for education practitioners in Wales* WG 2011]- discussed below). These embody the national agreement regarding the necessary skills, knowledge and

dispositions for the profession where five professional standards- pedagogy, collaboration, leadership, innovation and professional learning- are meant to embody the essential elements of every teacher's work (WG 2017c p.4). These standards are applicable to any teaching professional including those in a formal leadership role with the most recent evaluation finding that they have been effective in helping 'professionalise' teacher development (WG 2021).

Despite the changes initiated in phase three, a recent study of headteachers in Wales regarding perceived levels of stress (Scott et al. 2021) found similar responses when asked to identify the underlying causes for stressors to those identified in a 2018 study by Connolly et al. These were described as financial pressures, dealing with accountability demands from meso-levels (consortia and local authorities) and other external bodies (Estyn) while receiving a lack of support to do so, in combination with a feeling of general overload of work. While the scale of educational reform in Wales was less specifically cited as a cause of stress in Scott's study, the consequences of those reforms were expressed in terms of 'lack of control', 'extent and intensity of work' and 'lack of management support'. (p. 13). Uniquely, this study allowed headteachers to indicate any further stressors not already identified at the outset, and this gave rise to the indication that 'negative social media' was an additional stress. While the study had acknowledged 'relationships' as a possible cause for stress, the fact that social media was highlighted by headteachers as impacting negatively on their relationships (with parents and the community) is significant, as it gave rise to expressions of trust and value in the headteacher role (p. 17).

A further example of wider organisational change in the third phase that has enacted change of the headteacher role is the formation of the Education Workforce Council (formerly The General Teaching Council for Wales established in 2000). This is the independent regulator in Wales for teachers in maintained schools, Further Education (FE) teachers and learning support staff in both schools and FE settings, as well as youth workers and those involved in work-based learning. The Education Workforce Council (EWC) was established by the Education (Wales) Act 2014. Under the Act, the General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW) was reconfigured and renamed to become the EWC, which came into being on 1st April 2015.

The principal aims of the Council are to contribute to improving the standards of teaching and the quality of learning in Wales, to maintain and improve standards of professional conduct

amongst teachers and persons who support teaching and learning in Wales, and to safeguard the interests of learners, parents and the public and maintain public trust and confidence in the education workforce. A Code of Professional Conduct and Practice for registered teachers sets out the standards of good conduct and practice that can be expected and is intended to guide teachers' judgements and inform parents, pupils and the general public of what they can expect from registered teachers. Where this code is breached through unacceptable professional conduct, serious professional incompetence or as a result of a conviction of a relevant criminal offence, members of the fitness to practice committee have a quasi-judicial role in imposing sanctions ranging from a reprimand to a conditional registration order or a prohibition.

2.4 School leadership in Wales

2.4.1 Professional standards

As discussed above, new professional standards for teachers and headteachers were most recently updated in 2018. However, there were several iterations of the Leadership Standards in Wales during the second phase of reform in both 2011 and 2016 which reinforced the emphasis on improving leadership capacity. By considering The Leadership Standards of 2011, we can map Welsh Government policy shifts in relation to school leadership between phases two and three. The Leadership Standards of 2011 required headteachers to meet six elements (which are mostly organisational in nature) and three core strands of 'readiness'. The six key areas of leadership were: creating strategic direction, leading teaching and learning, developing and working with others, managing the school, securing accountability and strengthening the community focus. Three core strands that were used to score the *readiness* aspect of the qualification were: the professional role of the headteacher, continuing professional development and professional capability and analytical skills. Also in the 2011 Standards was a lengthy list of 'personal qualities and values' ranging from commitment, confidence and courage to reliability, resilience and respect (WG 2011).

Furthermore, the document also sets out a list of professional characteristics that are intended to support school leaders in their professional interactions, such as applying and understanding frameworks of accountability, celebrating diversity and promoting social

inclusion and equal opportunities and dealing with ambiguity and change. This range of diverse skills, attributes, characteristics and capabilities were intended to exemplify the standards expected of a headteacher, whether new or aspiring, and were reviewed and refined in new Professional Standards available to use in September 2017 (and were applicable to those in their induction year) but which only came into force in September 2018.

The new Professional Standards see a shift in the language used as parameters for the principles of teaching and leadership. The five new standards of pedagogy, collaboration, innovation, leadership, and professional learning are on a continuum from Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) through to induction and upwards to established teachers and then leadership. These are intended to be aspirational and to support professional growth, being applicable to the role, no matter where on the continuum you are in your career. In summary, there is now a continuum of leadership that all of us working in schools are part of: Pupils are leaders in their lessons. Teachers are leaders in their classrooms. Heads are leaders in their schools.

By outlining the values and dispositions of professionalism *per se*, such language hints at the wider changes in educational reform that are characterised in the *National Mission* (WG 2017c) through its use of phrases related to collaboration, inclusivity, innovation and professional learning (p. 11)

2.4.2 School leadership for school improvement

The emphasis on leadership as the driving force for school improvement can be traced through all three phases of education reform in Wales.

Policy documents published during the first phase of education reform clearly state that effective school leadership was vital in raising pupil achievement (WG2001). The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) was begun in 1997 although this was only recommended rather than statutory at this point in time. This was followed by the *Professional Induction Programme* for headteachers in their first year, which was initiated in September 2001, and subsequently the *Leadership Programme for Serving Heads.*

Within phase two of reforms, the Hill Report (Hill 2013) inspired the formation of the National Leadership Development Board and, shortly afterwards, the revised model of the National Professional Qualification for Headship emerged following its mandatory introduction in

2011. Also in phase two, in 2014, the OECD review *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective* recommended that a long-term and sustainable school improvement strategy should be initiated. One recommendation was that this strategy should invest in school leadership as a driver for school improvement. There was an acknowledgement that recruitment and training, along with career progression for school leaders, was underdeveloped both in terms of policy and practice.

Emerging from this 2014 OECD review was a series of strategic plans, including the 2015-20 *Qualified for Life: An Education Improvement Plan for 3 to 19-Year-Olds in Wales* (WG 2014a) and *A curriculum for Wales – a curriculum for life* (WG 2015a). Within the former five-year strategic plan, leadership was acknowledged as "second only to classroom teaching as an influence on learners' outcome." (p. 21) Therefore, a new commitment to the development of leadership was set out, including a revision of the leadership standards, and reviewed procedures to support school leaders in pursuing capability when tackling underperformance of teachers.

In pursuit of improved leadership during the third phase, a 2018 Welsh Government report following the independent review of School Teachers' Pay and Conditions states: "The ambitions for 'Our National Mission' rest very much on the effectiveness of school leadership" and "The importance of professional learning to the headteacher community as a vital element of achieving 'Our National Mission' cannot be over-emphasised." (WG 2018a p.32). As part of the new curriculum for Wales rollout, the Welsh Government outlined the ambition for schools to be learning organisations (SLO). This model was created between November 2016 and July 2017 following a co-construction process between representatives from Pioneer Schools, the regional consortia, Estyn, the National Academy for Educational Leadership, the Education Directorate of the Welsh Government and the OECD, and was finally launched in late 2017. The SLO model has seven action-oriented dimensions that highlight the aspirations for schools as well as the process through which it must go to reach those.

Amongst the seven dimensions, there is one that focuses entirely on leadership: Modelling and growing learning leadership. This section outlines the significant role of school leaders, and while acknowledging that there is more to school leadership than just the headteacher, it must be noted that in many primary schools (particularly those that are smaller and more

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rural) the reality is that leadership can often simply comprise one or two individuals. The requirements of school leaders in the SLO model are:

• School leaders ensure that the organisation's actions are consistent with its vision, goals and values.

• School leaders model learning leadership, distribute leadership and help grow other leaders, including learners.

• School leaders are proactive and creative change agents, with a strong focus on improving learning and teaching.

• School leaders ensure the school is characterised by a 'rhythm' of learning, change and innovation.

• School leaders develop the culture, structures and conditions to facilitate professional dialogue, collaboration and knowledge exchange.

• School leaders promote and participate in strong collaboration with other schools, parents/carers, the community, higher education institutions and other partners.

• School leaders ensure an integrated approach to responding to learners' learning and other needs

Given this long list of roles and responsibilities for school leaders, perhaps unsurprisingly, an OECD review of the SLO online survey data found that "There is a need for continued investment in the capacity of school leaders to model and grow learning leadership" OECD 2008 p.10) It is clear that within the new curriculum reform, school leaders have a special responsibility for driving efforts to make their schools into learning organisations capable of implementing it. While development of leadership skills is embedded as an integral part of the system-wide provision for professional learning, it remains with school leaders to implement that system.

In 2021, the OECD published a diagnostic report which examined the policy context that supports the professional learning of teachers in Wales. In relation to leadership specifically, the report acknowledges that "support for building leadership capacity exists, although its reach is not yet clear" (p. 26). Looking at the detail behind this statement reveals that

according to the OECD findings, school leaders may need support to implement effective strategies to develop professional learning in school. While the need for support is recognised and some steps have been taken towards this end (the establishment of the *National Academy of Educational Leadership*, integrating *Schools as Learning Organisations* model into leadership development programmes and support for leadership from middle-tier agencies through the *National Curriculum for Wales Programme*) not enough time has elapsed in order to be able to evaluate their impact on leadership development.

The same OECD review found that school leaders acknowledged that the Leadership Academy was symbolic of a structural commitment to building leadership capacity for Welsh schools, with some questioning its reach given the restriction of its membership to a given number of Academy Associates. Some described confusion about the respective roles of the Leadership Academy and regional consortia, and how each functioned within the middle-tier of systems-level management. Overall, the report articulated school leaders' wish to ensure that both the aspirations and the role of the Leadership Academy sufficient align with the needs of leadership in Wales.

Studies have documented the impact that the pace and regularity of reform cited above has had on headteachers, including Connolly et al. (2018 p. 619) who suggests that the more dirigiste system introduced post-2011 within Wales has reconfigured the role of headteachers into one that reflects, and is expected to enact, an organisational model of top-down accountability and hierarchical control measures. While Connolly's study acknowledges that this may not have been an intended consequence of the organisational and political changes, it has been a consequence nonetheless, which could be considered as unique to headteachers in Wales. Connolly et al. (2018) lists these unique factors as the pace of change; the breadth and lack of connectedness of reforms; overlying accountability structures; and the lack of support structures for headteachers at a local level.

2.4.3 The professional development of school leaders[1]

Studies that include findings on the professional development needs of headteachers (Davies et al. 2018) highlight a perceived lack of training for headteachers in the managerial aspects of the role. This paucity, specifically in relation to financial management training, was cited by participants in that study as being a reason for not risking a headship position amongst deputy heads who may otherwise have considered this as a next step professionally. The paper goes on to suggest that when designing models of professional development for headteachers, there is a need to address the issue of a 'career deputy' (Macbeath 2009). However, in order to do so, there is also a need to reconsider the role of headteachers *per se*, when the perceived training need as cited above suggests that the role is aligned to narrow managerialist conceptions, rather than headteacher agency. Daly and Milton (2017) in a study of the learning and development of external mentors in the Welsh Masters in Educational Practice, argue that professional development (in this case, of teachers) should encourage internal accountability where systems should be professionally 'owned'. The paper states that the *National Academy of Educational Leadership* would be well-placed to foster and encourage headteacher agency. This same study found that high value was attributed by mentors and mentees on a sense of mutual endeavour, where there was a shared understanding of the best direction for professional practice. Similarly, another study (Connolly et al. 2018) has highlighted the value placed on experienced external mentors in mitigating the risks felt by some headteachers when faced with pressures of formal accountability measures. Headteachers in Connolly's study articulated that impartial and non-judgemental mentors who could provide confidential space to offer practical support and advice would be welcomed. Connolly's (2018) study concludes that headteacher mentors would serve to develop professional capacity (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012) and if built on the principles described by Daly and Milton (2017) would also foster their agentic dispositions.

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[1] The use of 'professional development' as a term to describe professional learning will be employed throughout this thesis. Both terms are currently used in in education and are developing distinct definitions that denote the former as 'passive' (often aligned with organisational objectives) and the latter as 'active' and 'transformative' as seen to promote teacher agency (Timperley 2011). However, the term 'professional development' will be used in this study to describe all the training and informal and formal continuous professional development opportunities experienced by headteachers interviews and does not align itself with either of these positions

The issue of headteachers' training needs is bound up with perceptions of the role both from within and from outside the profession. Connolly et al. (2018) found evidence that some headteachers relied on former training in other corporate roles to support them professionally once in post. This may cause their perceptions of the role to be more aligned to an organisational account, a very technical approach to training and to notions that headteachers fulfil mainly managerialist tasks. This in turn gives rise to the issue of risk when considering succession planning. If organisational professionalism continues to epitomise the role of headteachers in schools in Wales, with heads acting as de facto business managers (Connolly et al. 2018) training that focuses on these qualities will serve to perpetuate this. Connolly's study found that often headteachers considered their core occupational values at odds with this organisational model of professionalism, but that some also realised that a form of hybridity (as suggested by Noordegraaf, 2011) would serve them well in their role.

Many of the third wave reforms have mitigated concerns in relation to school leadership in Wales, which manifested most clearly in a 'crisis' narrative around recruiting and retaining headteachers in both academic literature (Connolly et al. 2018; Davies et al. 2018), reports in social and mainstream media (BBC 2016) and from union coverage (NAHT Cymru 2021). As an alternative to focusing on the supply-side issue in recruitment, Milton et al. (2020) produced a demand-side analysis of headteacher job descriptions from across Wales, a study that contributes a great deal to the discussion around the attributes, skills and competencies that are sought in candidates for headship. The findings of Milton's study highlight several important recurring features of the recruitment process in Wales, primarily that job descriptions were highly replicated and a-contextual as well as being dominated by organisational (rather than occupational) conceptions of practice. These indicate that there is a mismatch between the articulation of the headship role and the policy aspirations that are being articulated in recent Welsh education reform and that the role of headship needs recalibrating.

2.5 Summary

This literature review has outlined the changes to the professional work of teachers and headteachers through what it has identified as three waves of educational policy-making in post-devolution Wales. The review began with a general theoretical account of professional

work and illustrated that while it is clear that the definition of professionalism is much debated, it is evident that two contrasting interpretations - organisational and occupational professionalism (Evetts 2009b) emerge as important characterisations within which the role of headship can be considered.

Through a discussion of research literature and policy documentation the chapter illustrated how understandings of the professional role of teachers and headteachers moved between these occupational and organisational understandings of professional work. The review highlighted how these policy changes framed how teachers experienced their professional practice and how political reforms served to either foster or stifle teachers' agency.

The purpose of the study is to consider the issues raised in the literature review surrounding headteachers' perceptions of their role; the required skills and attributes, their understanding of professionalism, their observations of the impact of educational reform, and training and development opportunities.

The research questions that are derived from a consideration of this literature review are:

• What do serving headteachers perceive are the skills and attributes that aspiring headteachers are expected to hold before being appointed to the role, and how do these relate to the role in reality?

• Do headteachers perceive their professional role has changed over their tenure, and if so, how?

• What are headteachers' perceptions of the organisational and political changes that may have impacted on their professional role?

• What training and opportunities for continuous development do headteachers feel have been most helpful in fulfilling their headteacher role?

Chapter 3: Methods and Methodology - The Sewing Room

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines and discusses the methods I used to undertake this qualitative study. It clarifies the philosophical approach adopted by exploring the ontological and epistemological positions that are reflected in the research questions outlined at the end of the last chapter. Detail is provided of the research approach and methods in order to provide an overview of the issues I encountered in undertaking this project. These included interview management (Cater 2011; Hooley et al. 2012; Deakin and Wakefield 2013) issues of sampling (Spradley 1979; Bernard 2002; Patton 2002; Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) alongside information which serves to contextualise the study, such as data regarding school contexts and of the approach adopted to data analysis (Denscombe 2003; Ryan and Bernard 2003; Braun and Clark 2006). Ethical considerations are discussed in detail, with particular attention given to issues of dual positionality and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Howarth 1998; Tillman-Healey and Kiesinger 2001; Rager 20025; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Gair (2002 cited in Johnson 2009) which arose as specific concerns. Also highlighted is the attention given in this study to privileging ongoing reflexivity, in order to acknowledge and address issues of undertaking insider research and its place within my own professional learning. The data collection for this project was undertaken during the pandemic and a short section outlines the impact of Covid-19 on the study.

3.2 Philosophical Approach

As reflected in the research questions, the philosophical approach that informs this study is based on the ontological assumption that there is no single reality, no 'one size fits all' where subjectivity as a philosophical concept related to agency, reality and individual consciousness was central (Leithwood et al. 1995 p.15). Taking this ontological position has allowed me the freedom to understand the multiple realities as understood by each headteacher interviewed. It was important that there was 'truth' in what was heard and that each headteacher told their unique lived experience. Equally important was that this same version of the truth was heard and understood by me. Essentially, their personal, single and unique

lived experience needed to emerge and to inform the common, multiple experiences of the larger whole.

Bearing in mind this subjective stance, the epistemological approach taken for the study was based on the presumption that reality is neither knowable nor measurable: identified as an interpretivist epistemology (Patton 2002). An interpretivist stance brings with it the acceptance that reality is a human construct and has been applied to this study. Creswell (2009) describes the philosophy of qualitative study as interpretive, humanistic, and naturalistic where weight is given to the importance of subjectivity. This has allowed for there to be exploratory power through the qualitative approach that would lead to a depth and a richness of information. As such, the headteachers' attitudes, beliefs, and their interpretations of their lived experiences could be allowed to shine through, inform and describe, and importantly, allow the observations to be "faithful to the original" (Denscombe 2003 p.95) as their original truths are reflected by seeing things through their eyes.

3.3 Research Approach

This study was rooted within an interpretivist approach (Patton 2002); integrated as it was, with human interest and with the researcher as a social actor (as a serving headteacher myself). In seeking to answer the research questions below, the study sought to explore a general theme of how headteachers perceive their professional role. (For full set of interview questions see Appendix 1.)

• What do serving headteachers perceive are the skills and attributes that aspiring headteachers are expected to hold before being appointed to the role, and how do these relate to the role in reality?

• Do headteachers perceive their professional role has changed over their tenure, and if so, how?

• What are headteachers' perceptions of the organisational and political changes that may have impacted on their professional role?

• What training and opportunities for continuous development do headteachers feel have been most helpful in fulfilling their headteacher role?

Through an exploration of headteachers' professional roles, this study aims to establish any discrepancies between their lived reality, and their perception of headship prior to taking up the post. If any discrepancies were described, the study aims to establish how headteachers reconciled these and coped with them in their day-to-day professional role. In order to achieve this understanding, it was vital that the unique experiences of each individual headteacher were listened to carefully. It was crucial that their voices were genuinely heard; not in a way that would underpin some pre-established hypothesis of patterns and trends in headteacher experiences or to reinforce my own experiences, but in a way that would reflect the uniqueness of their lived experiences.

Therefore, the chosen research method is qualitative in entirety, as the study deals with insights, beliefs and first-hand experiences located in a specific set of circumstances. Creswell (2009) describes qualitative research as a means to gain an understanding that individuals attribute to human problems (in this case the issues associated within their professional role.) Creswell goes on to describe the process of qualitative research as one that involves data characteristically collected in the participants' setting, and where the data inductively builds from particular to general (in this case from one's role as head, to headship in general) through the researcher's interpretation of the data (Creswell 2009 p.4). However, importantly there is a value in qualitative research on the uniqueness of human experience, and so it is paramount to ensure that the voices of headteachers are heard clearly through this approach, while identifying patterns, trends and themes that it is hoped will lead to positive developments in the profession.

3.4 Research methods

The qualitative approach described above was chosen in order to enable an in-depth understanding of the role of headteachers in schools within one Welsh local authority. The authority is a large, rural county with low population density. The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) records this authority as having a higher deprivation with regard to access to services, than to any other of the 8 recorded domains (WIMD 2019). Over a three year average, 11 % of pupils aged five to fifteen are eligible for free school meals, which is lower than the Wales average of 17.9%. 12 % of pupils aged five and over are fluent in Welsh, which is lower than the Wales average of 16.2% . 3.2 % of pupils are from ethnic minorities,

lower than the Wales average of 11.0%. 19.6 % of pupils have special educational needs, lower than the Wales average of 22.6%. 97 children per 10,000 were looked after by the local authority in 2018, which is lower than the Wales average of 102 children per 10,000 (Estyn 2019).

Semi-structured interviews were considered to be ideally suited to eliciting headteachers' views in a non-judgemental and relaxed atmosphere; a managed verbal exchange as described by Ritchie and Lewis (2003). Semi-structured interviews are informal and conversational in nature and are employed to put the participants at ease and to provide insights into how they view their world, relying on relational trust between interviewer and interviewee (Newton 2010). Opie (2004) highlights the need for the interviewer to have good interpersonal skills; to be able to inject humour, warmth and rapport into the interview, while also expressing self-effacement so that importance is given to the information received.

The focus was in listening accurately to headteachers' views, expressed face-to-face and with an assurance of confidentiality. Due to the unique set of circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic, these interviews were carried out via Microsoft Teams. The process of setting up and carrying out the interviews was inevitably shaped by the pandemic in many ways, as for example, I had to consider differing levels of technological competencies when setting up online interviews, and whether internet connectivity in some rural areas was sufficient for the conversations to take place at length. Such considerations have been subsequently applied to qualitative research and resulted in findings that reveal both unique challenges and unique opportunities are presented by the need for virtual methods brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic (Kessa Roberts et al. 2021).

The advantages of employing semi-structured interviews mean that there is an opportunity to revisit questions, to ask follow-up questions, to vary the order and wording of questions, and of particular importance in this study (both in terms of the participants' workload and in the uniqueness of a pandemic) the ability to be flexible in approach. Newton (2010) describes these advantages as placing value on personal language where the nuances of meaning are important (Gillham 2000) and where accurate insight and understanding are crucial (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

The study called for rich, detailed answers and individual interpretations of the phenomena under discussion. Therefore, there were scripted questions, but these were often augmented by supplementary discussions in order to clarify and deepen understanding of the issues discussed and the wider challenges that impact on the professional and personal lives of headteachers. As Cohen et al. (2000) have elucidated, the interview is not simply concerned with gathering of data that informs about life; it is part of life itself.

3.5 Ethics

Careful consideration had been given at the outset of this research to the guidelines for ethical research BERA (2018) and institutional approval was sought and gained through Cardiff University School of Social Science Research Committee.

By including a range of participants in the study (in terms of gender, age, language of communication, school type and demography) the research was considered to be as inclusive as possible. Whilst not all schools in the local authority were invited to participate (as this would have been impractical) the study was careful to include as broad a range of contributors as reasonable in order to consider a full range of perspectives. Had a non-invited participant offered to take part in the study, this wish would have been accommodated. No interviewee was excluded for any reason.

The information sheet (Appendix 2) made it clear to participants that all recordings of the interviews would be stored securely, and that the data resulting from the interview would be anonymised. However, this was reiterated at the onset of each interview in order to reassure the participant and in the hope that all responses would be open and honest. Reassurances were also given about the length of time the data would be stored and it was explained to participants that each recording would be transcribed, and that these transcriptions would also be stored securely with all identifying features removed and destroyed in accordance with the ethical approval requirements.

Respect for the privacy and dignity of the individuals taking part in the interviews was considered. Each interview was carried out in private, with both interviewer and interviewee in a personal space of their choosing. Assurances were provided that all opinions would be respected and that none would be excluded from being represented by the study. Respect

for respondents' values and diversity was verbalised; it was made clear that there was no single expected response, and that differing views would be equally valued. All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality at the outset of the interview, both verbally and through the information sheet (Appendix 2). All gave informed consent via email, which was reiterated at the outset of the interview. It was explained that not only would their roles and their schools be anonymous, so would the name of the specific local authority within which the study was taking place. At the end of the interviews, all participants in this study were asked if they could recall anything they wished to withdraw from their responses with hindsight. None asked for any information to be revoked. (BERA 2018)

The choice of semi-structured interviews was considered to be the most appropriate method for the research purpose, as it gave the headteachers a platform for expounding their views unfettered by closed questions. This gave value to their responses and allowed them to express their views freely and autonomously. Through careful listening and gentle prompting, the integrity of their answers was assured, and an atmosphere of trust was allowed to be built between us.

All participants were made aware that the responsibility to handle their information with sensitivity and confidentiality was taken seriously. It was explained that the final purpose of the research was the hope that it would have a positive impact on the role we all shared. Dissemination of the research would be for that purpose only, and that it was made clear to all participants that the trust to act throughout with regard to social and professional responsibility was paramount. Rowling's (1999) study into grief and loss noted that with hindsight, participants took comfort in the positive outcome of such sensitive research; by sharing their experiences, others in similar situations would be helped.

There was always a risk that the face-to-face interviews would result in emotional responses through the need for sharing such in-depth and personal information. The responsibility to minimise harm, and the need to maintain the dignity of all participants despite talking about issues that would be deeply felt was at the forefront of considerations. Several headteachers became emotional during the interview, breaking down and talking about personal health and wellbeing issues. Empathy with their feelings and their context was shared, being well placed as a peer to understand their emotions and having been 'chosen' to share these emotions. Perhaps my closeness to their situation had allowed them the familiarity to expose

all. Collecting this narrative was occasionally a source of stress; heart-breaking accounts of headteachers struggling to cope with the demands of the job were being heard, along with the extra pressure and accountability they felt in keeping their pupils and staff safe in a global pandemic. This was suddenly giving voice to something outside of the originally intended subject, and it made for some painful listening. Coffey (1999) in her introduction to The Ethnographic Self talks about recognising that fieldwork is 'personal, emotional and *identity work*' (her italics) and my closeness to working in parallel with the participants, made it feel both personal and emotional: I was finding my own identity within the interviews, where the lens I had thought I was using, suddenly became a mirror.

In an effort to act ethically throughout, it was important to reflect these emotional outbursts in a way that would maximise benefit to participants, by using the strength of feeling that was being shared as a force for change and a tool for good. It was a heart-warming that at the end of each interview thanks were given for having dedicated time to spend sharing their lived experiences, and this provided reassurance that no harm had come to the participants. Several referred to it as having been a cathartic experience. Studies such as Dickson-Swift et al. (2006) have shown that participants in research which is medically sensitive can find the experience favourable, even useful and often with a therapeutic quality. Similar to outcomes in this study, Dickson-Swift et al. (2006) and Gair (2002 in Johnson 2009) also reported a sense of catharsis post interview, as participants admitted to being 'allowed' to talk about matters that had never been acknowledged previously as being important or considered worthwhile for investigation.

Overall, from an ethical perspective, despite emotional moments during the study, headteachers had been provided with an opportunity to be self-aware and to articulate their lived experience in a way that could potentially provide them with a clearer understanding of it (Rager 2006). This cathartic benefit that was witnessed seem to have justified the means, as headteachers articulated their sense of validation and empowerment that came from the opportunity to confide in someone who was interested, knowledgeable and caring (Tillmann-Healey and Kiesinger 2001; Howarth 1998).

3.6 Sampling

Thirteen participants were purposely chosen for reasons which suited the research. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases (Patton 2002). This form of sampling involves selecting individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about, or experienced in, a specific field (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Therefore, all interviewees were specifically chosen as headteachers who had served sufficient tenure (Table 1) in post to answer comparative questions relating to changes in the role over time, all were serving headteachers at primary schools in the same local authority (which was a pre-requisite of the research) and all had had leadership experience for longer than their current term of office. This purposive sampling meant that all participants would have sufficient knowledge and experiences to be able to bring depth and detail to the research questions, and richness to the study.

In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) highlight the value of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. As all participants had been spoken to initially, and were known professionally, it was judged that each would be able to bring these skills and attributes to the fore during interview.

Both male and female headteachers were chosen (nine females, and four males) which broadly reflected the gender balance within primary schools at this time. It was intentional to invite participants from a range of primary schools; denominational, non-denominational, those with a large number on roll (NOR) (>150 NOR) and smaller pupil numbers (<50 NOR), high and low levels of deprivation*, and/or additional learning needs (ALN)**, or with English as an additional language (EAL)***, as well as both rural and town-based schools spread geographically across the authority.

Table 1. Table indicating the number on roll (NOR), level of free school meals entitlement of pupils (FSM), level of additional learning needs pupils (ALN), level of English as an additional language pupils (EAL), time of headteacher in post and of their participation in a senior leadership role prior to becoming a headteacher.

HT number	NOR	FSM	ALN	EAL	Time in current HT post	Time in SMT prior to HT
1	Small	Low	Low	Low	5	9
2	Small	Medium	Medium	Low	7	8
3	Small	Low	Medium	Low	3	8
4	Large	Medium	High	Medium	2	3
5	Small	Low	Medium	Low	7	6
6	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	3	11
7	Medium	Low	Low	Low	6	10
8	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	3	5
9	Medium	High	High	Medium	7	17
10	Small	Low	Low	Low	10	7
11	Large	High	High	Medium	3	6
12	Medium	Medium	High	Medium	4	10
13	Medium	High	High	Low	5	7

*Based on number of pupils eligible for free school meals – low=<8%, medium =9% - 23%, high=>24%

** Based on number of pupils on ALN register – low=<10%, medium=11%-29%, high=>30%

***Based on number of pupils with English as an additional language – low=<10%, medium= 11%-29%, high=>30%

The decision was taken to carry out a pilot interview to 'test' the questions as the practical advantages of a pilot can be seen to apply to qualitative research (Sampson 2004). These advantages can be exemplified as either implicit (in the case of lack of initial preparation by Hammersley 1993) or explicitly (by a random application of piloting by Delamont 1993; Sampson 2001). The interview was piloted with one headteacher from a different local

authority to the rest of the participants in the study (but who was purposely sampled to fit the remainder of the criteria above) and was an opportunity to 'test' the relevance and clarity of the questions. This was a valuable exercise, as it served to highlight the importance of the interviewer role (needing to act as confident guide though the process, in providing prompts and also maintaining the thread when answers went off at a tangent.) Following this pilot, one question was rephrased to aid understanding, while all others required a more colloquial feel to make them more easily understandable. It was following this reflection that the decision was taken to provide the questions in advance, as the pilot feedback revealed that more detailed, reflective and in-depth answers could have been provided had there been more 'thinking time'. Although Sampson's (2004) experiences of piloting in research are related to fieldwork in seafarer training, the conclusion of her pilot study has resonance here, as similar outcomes were experienced in terms of the rapport established with participants (testing strategies aimed at building relationships) and integrity was recognised (testing ethical protocols). In this case specifically, these were in addition to gaining initial experience as a first-time researcher. Sampson concludes her pilot experiment by stating that the practice would be of most use in semi-structured and informal interview scenarios.

3.7 Dual positionality

All participants were colleagues within the local authority and were already known to me in various professional roles over many years. Consideration was given to the impact that a peer researcher might have in this study, as it was important to note that my dual positionality may influence both what was said to me, as well as my interpretation and understanding of participant responses, and how this could affect my belief in the truthfulness and validity of this research, or indeed, any other research contributing to the study (Holmes 2020.) Therefore, an open and honest declaration of my dual positionality was made to the participants at the outset.

As the interviews progressed, it was clear that each interviewee participated fully with the process. Each seemed to answer all questions fully, and each was keen to provide genuine, full and clear answers. Following the interview, many gave thanks for providing them with the time and opportunity to express their feelings, and to have a platform for sharing their personal feelings as well as their professional worries, challenges and causes for celebration.

As consideration had been given to the duality of the interviewer position in this study, which Delamont (2014 p.11) warns can have the result of focusing on the familiar and not seeing the different, an awareness was maintained throughout on finding the strangeness and the diversity in what was being heard, rather than just embracing the problems described by the headteachers as if they were familiar, and conduits for mine.

Wolcott (1981 p.253) describes this dilemma as finding key issues in education so familiar as to be invisible. Given my dual positionality, I knew that I needed to be wary that I might not value their answers as the information they gave may not have been worth mentioning from my own professional perspective. It struck me that the trust the headteachers placed in me was considerable. The duality of my role came with a heavy responsibility to avoid unwittingly transmitting assumptions or perpetuating the outsider perception of 'what it's like to be a headteacher'. By stating this dual positionality, it is hoped that the reader should be able to make an informed judgement about the value of the research data.

3.8 Trustworthiness

In order for this study to be considered trustworthy by fellow researchers, policymakers and the participants themselves, it was important that I satisfied the criteria for trustworthiness as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be achieved, according to Lincoln and Guba, by considering the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

I addressed credibility, as referring to the honesty with which the views of the participants are represented and reflected upon in this study, by my endeavours to adhere to those measures described above by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These include the engagement with all participants, the rigorous approaches used to observe and record their experiences, and the series of iterative procedures applied when analysing and reflecting on the data set. I endeavoured throughout to ensure that all the experiences of the headteachers in this study were immediately recognisable to those who share the same professional lives. I satisfied transferability, as referring to the generalisability of the study, through the rigorous gathering and mapping and opinions and patterns of thought and experience offered by the participants. Dependability refers to the need for the study to be logical, traceable and clearly documented, and so I met this criterion through the meticulous record-keeping in this study,

and the adherence to the seven principles of the General Data Protection Regulation, including the fairness and transparency of all stored data, as well as the integrity and confidentiality that was shown throughout. Confirmability is achieved when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all realised (Guba and Lincoln 1989). I satisfied this criterion as the findings are clearly recognisable as being derived from the data, and through a clear record of decision-making as the study unfolded.

3.9 Reflexivity - Insider researcher

It was important to acknowledge my own beliefs, value judgments and practices during this study and how these may have influenced the research (the human instrument) (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Given my role as peer researcher, consideration should be given as to whether this has impacted on the findings of the research either at the information gathering stage, at the point of thematic analysis or indeed at any point throughout the research journey.

During the interviews, I realised that I was facing the familiarity problem as defined by Geer amongst others. Geer (1964) argued for value-free research, where an insider researcher was in danger of contaminating the research by only seeing what one expects to see, or in my case, only hearing what I expected to hear.

As I worked my way through the data analysis, I attempted to take the same neutral stance that I had attempted during the actual interviews; I wanted to ensure that I was acting as a passive information gatherer. However, listening to myself being the interviewer, as much as listening to them as interviewees, I soon realised that in order to draw out the information I needed, I had unwittingly fallen right into the familiarity 'trap'. I thought I had entered into the process with my biases firmly in check, and my familiarity as peer researcher under control. But in an effort to draw out the information I needed, I entered immediately into a dichotomy where in order to do so, I had to be one of them.

I could hear the familiarity in my voice as I asked the questions, and as I listened to their answers, I knew I had lost objectivity and was unable to stop being a headteacher too. Malinkowski (1967) argues strongly for foreshadowed problems being one of the central skills of a systematic thinker. He saw these as distinctly different to preconceived ideas, which would be an anathema to thorough and meaningful research. My knowledge base as a

headteacher meant that I was foreshadowing their problems, rather than predicting and preconceiving their responses. The process of analysis made me realise that I was too embedded in my role to fight the familiarity 'problem', and that I would be better off embracing it to the benefit of my research.

In taking this reflexive approach, it is hoped that rather than trying to eliminate any effect caused by my position as peer to the interviewees, it has been openly acknowledged in an effort to understand any influence it may have, both on and in the research process (Holmes, 2020).

Several of the headteachers interviewed were coached to headship through my role with the regional consortium as a coach on the national aspiring heads programme and I had also mentored one participant as a head new in post. The implications of this could have been that they were reluctant to openly share any disheartened attitudes towards headship with the person who coached them into that very role. This placed me in both as an 'insider' and an 'outsider' researcher with these participants, where I was situated in multiple positions along the continuum of positionality as Mercer (2007 p.13) suggests:

"The researcher's relationship with the researched is not static, but fluctuates constantly, shifting back and forth along a continuum of possibilities, from one moment to the next, from one location to the next, from one interaction to the next, and even from one discussion topic to the next."

Therefore, I had differing relationships amongst the thirteen participants, where for some, I had been a mentor or coach, and for others I had singularly been a peer headteacher. I perceived no difference in these respective positionings as the research unfolded, and the interviewees also seemed unaffected by it, although three of the participants referred to my other roles in their responses. Looking back at the data gathering process, I concluded that the advantages of my peer role had been free access to the participants, a strong rapport and a deeply shared knowledge base. Any pre-conceived understandings as a result of our shared lived experiences did not appear to hamper the process. I assumed therefore that my consistent position, in terms of other factors such as gender, ethnicity, personality and professional role outweighed those differences in terms of alternate hierarchical relationships or length and depth of professional relationships (Mercer 2007). By acknowledging my dual

positionality and through reflexivity, understanding the value of both positions along with their strengths and weaknesses, I aimed to use the knowledge I gained to make things better for us all by articulating, openly and transparently, the daily challenges we face in our shared professional role.

Individually, my learning journey has been long and winding; one of self-discovery, frustrations and joys. Dewey (1933) espoused reflexive practice as an action that involved 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads' (p. 9). This study has allowed me to be active, persistent and careful as I navigated my way through my own knowledge, assumptions and aspirations. As I undertook this learning journey, the duty to represent the profession weighed heavily at times. I wanted to ensure that I looked back honestly and openly at the knowledge I was given by colleagues, while looking forward with clarity as to where it could take us.

3.10 Interview management

Technological changes over recent decades, and the development of the internet have seen the use of online interviewing increase in qualitative inquiry, reducing many of the problems related to face-to-face interviews (Hooley et al. 2012) and being used with increasing frequency to resolve issues with time, geography and mobility (Cater 2011, Deakin and Wakefield 2013). The interviews in this study took place during two national lockdowns resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, where the use of Microsoft Teams as a virtual method of data collection resolved several challenges that otherwise could have been problematic in a global crisis. For example, the participants were in locations across a wide geographical area, which due to the travel restrictions in place at the time, would have rendered them inaccessible. A virtual approach to interviewing allowed for other unique challenges of Covid-19 to be less of an issue than perhaps thought, as it also prevented any concerns regarding social distancing. Although the choice to use online technology in this study was due to health and safety issues, using Microsoft Teams also facilitated interviewing scheduling, which given the pandemic and the impact on head teachers' workloads, were especially complex at this time. Conducted in the context of a crisis meant that the interview management needed to

be carefully considered, but no less rigorously or ethically conducted, showing that virtual formats can offer potential in challenging times and beyond (Kessa Roberts et al. 2021).

All interviews were recorded with participants' permission on a voice activated hand-held recorder and enhanced by contemporaneous notes. All participants were known to me and had been invited to interview via email and provided with a participant information sheet (Appendix 2) well in advance of any agreed date. Often, due to the uncertain landscape in schools resulting from the global pandemic, these dates had to be rescheduled. The use of online technology to conduct the interviews meant that any postponements did not result in loss of either time or financial resources (Deakin and Wakefield 2013) and in fact benefited the participants by the ease and speed of rescheduling, meaning access and equity were not constrained (Kessa Roberts et al. 2021).

Each participating headteacher had been willing to give their time and energy to this process, despite the current pandemic and the pressures this has created on them. The requirements on schools and restrictions imposed during the pandemic presented challenges and required new ways of working (Heppell 2020). The use of an online platform for interviewing was beneficial, to both me as a researcher and the participants as the interview time has been limited to merely 'talk time'. Participants mentioned that this was a benefit to them, as they had not had to leave the premises. The process has been simple to access and effective in terms of recording.

Once each participant had been invited to interview and a date agreed, the information sheet (Appendix 2) was sent, and opportunity given for the participant to withdraw. Once the participant confirmed that that were happy to proceed, a Teams invite was sent along with the set of questions. It was not an original intention of the study for the participant to have the questions ahead of time. However, following the pilot interview where it was expressed that more detailed answers could have been provided with foresight of the questions, it was decided from then on to do so.

Interviews took place remotely during the school day in most cases and lasted approximately fifty to fifty-five minutes. Interestingly all interviews were timed similarly, and so it was possible to confidently predict the amount of time this would take up when inviting a participant. The interviews included some unrecorded time, where the current situation of

running Childcare Hubs and schools in a pandemic could be discussed. This immediately created a camaraderie that benefited the interview overall, and it was hoped that the experience became an example of effective peer support. Building rapport through an online interview is different from building a relationship face-to-face with participants. Previous research has suggested that building rapport can be problematic during online interviews due to a lack of easier to read visual cues (Chen and Hinton 1999; Hay-Gibson 2009) or when the participant is more reserved (Deakin and Wakefield 2013). However, in this study the use of online technology was not deemed to have adversely affected the outcome, possibly due to all professional meetings and communications taking pace online at this time (making this practice a norm) in addition to the benefit of already having a collegiate relationship with the participants.

Occasionally, there were interruptions to the interview to deal with school issues, however, it was noted by participants that they could leave to deal with the issue easily and return to the interview, fulfilling obligations to their role and to the study. Many of the participants mentioned 'forgetting' they were being recorded, as the voice recorder was out of sight. This may not have been the case if the interviews had taken place physically face-to-face, and the device on show.

Lofland and Lofland (1995 p.78) suggest that researchers ask themselves the question 'Just what is it that is puzzling me?' Therefore, it was intended that the questions were open-ended, and that the interview generated an atmosphere of a genuine search for understanding, not just an affirmation of some pre-established 'truth'. The pilot interview had served as a valuable reminder that any probes and prompts needed to be timely (so that answers were not either pre-empted or lost amongst a rambling response) and were not leading (so that answers were not manipulated to align with personal beliefs.) The pilot interview taught the value of aide-memoire; a few common probes and prompts that set the interviewee at ease and which were usually successful in eliciting further, deeper answers. Some interviewees required fewer probes and prompts, and often these were the ones where answers were fluid, well-considered and highly relevant.

3.11 Transcription

The decision was taken to transcribe each interview verbatim, as this sat well with the philosophical underpinnings of the methodology in this case; to facilitate data analysis of a central theme by bringing the researcher closer to their data (Halcomb and Davidson 2006). It was important that I captured the nuances of speech; each pause, repetition and hesitation, and as far as possible get a sense of the emotional state of the interviewee through transcription of the sounds and non-verbal cues behind the spoken words. By doing so, the unique experiences of each of the participants could be better explored as this served to allow me to gain a more in-depth insight into how their different situations were experienced and perceived. Verbatim transcription in qualitative research is a method of data collection that is associated with the naturalistic paradigm and in this study proved an accurate way to reflect such interactive dialogue.

Each recording was accompanied by a precis of contemporaneous notes, which I made in order to contextualise the interview. This increased accuracy when transcribing acronyms in particular and made it easier to recognise Welsh names within the stream of speech. It is often cited that a blend of verbatim transcription and researcher notation is central to the reliability, validity, and veracity of qualitative data collection (MacLean et al. 2004; Seale and Silverman 1997; Wengraf 2001).

During each interview, the contemporaneous notetaking did not affect the flow of the conversation but did enable me to focus on interactions that may not be picked up by the verbatim transcription. For example, the notes reflect whether the headteacher was relaxed, or positive in their manner, or alternatively on one occasion the notes read: "feel – Aagh, head in hands." These reflections were important to gain an overall sense of the interactions between interviewer and interviewee, rather than purely on the weight and meaning of the words.

Immediately subsequent to each interview, I made key points as an aide-memoire, realising that a professional doctorate means that the research often takes second place to day-to-day professional roles, and it may be some time before I could revisit transcripts. These notes proved crucial in the analysis stage, as key concepts had already been highlighted and noted

recurring ideas and phrases. Often the notes read: "Brilliant answer!" "Very good bit!" "Important point here." "This could be a theme."

Following this, I developed a reflective journal that allowed me to take a more considered approach to the initial notes. A reflexive approach to the research process is widely accepted in qualitative research (Ortlipp 2008) and journals in particular allow the researcher to learn from experience about themselves, their work, and the way they relate to their study and their milieu, and are considered a useful practice. These allow researchers to reflect on themselves "their presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process" (Mruck and Breuer 2003 p. 3).

My routine of journaling took place briefly throughout, but also as a more in-depth practice at two main points during the data collection process. A natural break had occurred between the two sets of interviews due to my work commitments and the ongoing effect of the pandemic on the management of my own school. This writing allowed reflexivity on the general patterns of conduct of the interviewees. For example, it was noted that when the headteachers were speaking of the emotional 'cost' of the role, their language became almost identical through their choice of phrases: "imposter syndrome" "this is a lonely job." My journal noted that: "They seem happy to bare their souls. Feels very personal and as if (because I am an insider researcher) there is a bond between us that allows unsaid things to be said."

I also noted some unfavourable observations on interviewer conduct in this first reflective journal: "Reading through the first transcripts shows me that I may be guilty of some closed questioning, or even suggestibility." I also noted was that some practical changes were needed within the conversation that would make it easier for the voice recorder to pick up the beginning of the interviewees' answers (this was an initially unforeseen 'sound lag' issue caused by the use of Microsoft Teams). This proved useful advice to self when handling the second half of the interviews and reinforced the value of the journal. Ortlipp (2008) describes this as being critically self-reflective where the 'messiness' of the research process is made visible to the researcher; importantly allowing me to make changes to the approaches taken before moving forward with the research.

The reflective, iterative process allowed me to build key concepts, and note recurring phrases and ideas that had been initially spotted. It was important that I ensured the accuracy of this, so once all interviews had been completed, I listened to each recording while reading the original recording and I noted any inaccuracies. This also served to remind me of the full content of each interview, as some time had inevitably elapsed between the first and last interviews. These processes could be seen as Step 1 in Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, which is discussed more fully in the next section. It was through such an iterative process that accuracy of the participants' views could be assured.

3.12 Thematic analysis

An increasingly common approach in qualitative data analysis is referred to as thematic analysis and is characterised by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a systematic method for identifying, organising and offering insights into patterns of meaning across a data set. The idea of searching out and identifying key themes (and subthemes) that occur multiple times and recording these within a matrix by way of ordering, allows the researcher to understand shared experiences and to draw out meaning from collective responses. This 'pattern' of themes and subthemes is identified through a systematic reading and rereading of the data. Denscombe (2003 p.292) describes the process as one where 'the researcher begins to identify relationships between codes or categories of data or becomes aware of patterns or themes within the data.' Ryan and Bernard (2003) describe the need to search for (amongst other things) linguistic connectors, similarities and differences, repetitions, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors and analogies. None is singularly relevant, but all need to be considered as part of the larger whole; in other words, repeating phrases used by headteachers in the interviews for this study are not in themselves a sign of a theme. I needed to consider these phrases alongside, and within the wider context of the complete data set, with all its continuities and complexities.

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as beneficial for those new to qualitative research as (contrary to discourse analysis) it can provide a way into the exploration of data which may otherwise be daunting due to a need for an understanding of complex theory. Instead, thematic analysis demystifies and simplifies the relationship between the dataset

and the reality it represents, by reversing the relationship produced by discourse analysis where language is theorised as creating reality.

I needed no deep understanding of theoretical perspectives in order to use this form of analysis, as it needed to be seen as a means to generate themes from the data set itself. In this way, the analysis was inductive, as referred to by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a bottom-up approach where codes derive from the content of the data and the mapping of the analysis matches closely. Therefore, my analysis was inevitably going to be positioned in experientiality, tapping as it would into the shared world and contemporary lived experiences of headship.

Therefore, the flexibility of thematic analysis made it a clear choice within this study, as it was important that there was freedom to explore concepts as they emerged, whether as a 'blanket' issue experienced by multiple headteachers, or a single concept that needed to be explored in depth. This was seen as a T-shaped method of analysis; the upper bar representing the breadth of multiple shared experiences of the full range of headteachers, which could be used to broadly illustrate and epitomise a theme. The downward spine of the T became the more in-depth dive down into the deeper meaning of a single theme.

As I looked at the transcripts in detail, and interviews were listened to repeatedly, I immediately identified some points of initial interest. I identified and coded these, some of which related to the semantics of the language used, or as an interpretation of it i.e., latent code (Braun and Clarke 2006). For example, a semantic code became "What gives?" as a reflection of the headteachers' thoughts on what is pushed to one side on order to do what they do, and do it well (enough). A latent code, where meaning was given to phrases and opinions given in an attempt to make more sense of what was said, would be for example "Power (empowerment) or lack of it." No headteacher talked specifically about empowerment, but as I reflected on their responses it seemed to me that a latent meaning behind their talk were issues of agency and autonomy. While it is acknowledged that repetition alone is not sufficient to warrant a code, certain strongly held views were frequently expressed by each headteacher, and it would seem disingenuous to then ignore them.

Then began the process of reviewing the codes to identify areas of repetition, connections and overlap. It was necessary for me to look for clusters around the codes in order to generate themes and subthemes. I soon realised that a common topic of concern for participants was the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic was having on their roles. There was also a cluster of codes around accountability, which overlapped with the Covid-19 pandemic cluster, but did not fit it exactly. I also realised that coding relating to emotional responses needed to be allocated to themes that reflected the cause of the emotion, not the emotion itself in order to reflect data set as a whole.

The end of this process resulted in four main themes (and 21 sub-themes across these) having been identified, which I put into a thematic map. This mapping exercise used a coloured system where I linked each theme to a specific colour. This allowed me to link specific extracts from the data to each theme and find them easily. By using this method systematically, I hoped to be as inclusive and as thorough as possible.

3.13 Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

This research is inevitably coloured by having been conducted through the first global pandemic in a hundred years; an event I could not have predicted at the outset of the research. Without doubt, each participant's professional and personal life was affected in many ways by this situation and although variable depending on how each school responded to associated restrictions (James et al. 2021) there was no doubt that all were profoundly affected. Looking back, I can clearly see that some headteachers revealed more resilience than others. All referred to 'challenge', but it was clear that some embraced it, while others were afraid, tired and defeated. I wondered how much of this was due to the day-to-day role of headship, and how much was caused by the uniqueness of the current situation.

All interviews were conducted through periods of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and perhaps due the exceptional circumstances, each interview served to reinforce the camaraderie of leadership in such challenging times. Our joint moral purpose of keeping pupils, staff and ourselves safe echoed throughout each conversation and we became more and more tightly bound by each of our shared voiced experiences. Our interactions as a group of reflexive practitioners allowed us to collaborate on how we could endeavour to accomplish our common role as we coached each other on how best to manage.

Chapter 4: Presentation of findings Part 1 - The Fit of the Jacket

4.1 Introduction

The following two chapters present the findings of the thirteen interviews undertaken with primary headteachers from one Welsh local authority. Illustrative quotations from the respondents are offered throughout to illuminate and exemplify the ideas expressed, the issues shared, and the range of views presented by the participants.

Each headteacher has been allocated a number which corresponds with the order in which they were interviewed. Table (1.) has been provided to describe the key contextual features of their current schools. Each illustrative quote identifies the headteacher in connection with their context.

The findings are broken down into the themes which were constructed as a result of the thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). These were accountability, professional agency, perceptions of change within the headteacher role and professional development for headteachers.

Chapter Four focuses on the first two of these themes: accountability and professional agency.

The theme of accountability focuses on the breadth of the headteacher role; perceptions of the encroachment of managerialism[2]; the existence of meso-level of external accountability that caused divergence from their 'core purpose'; levels of external accountability to a range of stakeholders; and ideas of trust risk and intelligent accountability.

Professional agency is explored through findings related to headteachers exercising decisional capital; having power to act and influence; and espoused notions of lone hero headship.

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[2] The term 'managerialism' is used to describe the excessive application of leadership and management in the headteachers' role within this study. Managerialist principles are aligned in this study to the ideology of Hoyle and Wallace (2005) where managerialism is founded on the belief that not only *can* all problems be 'managed' but that they s*hould* be 'managed', and that managerialism elevates management from its core function of supporting and facilitation, to a central preoccupation and an end in itself.

4.2 Accountability and Professional Agency

4.2.1 The impact of the breadth of the headteacher role

The nature and purpose of accountability structures in schools has been a key debate generally (Ball 2003; Fullan et al. 2015) and within Wales specifically (Connolly et al. 2018; Evans 2021). A significant element within this is related to the expansion of the headteacher role and the increasing breadth of accountability. As has been demonstrated in previous studies (Connolly et al. 2018 for example) the role of headteachers can often be multifarious (p.617). Similarly in this study, levels of accountability and multiplicity within the role were the most frequent cause for concern:

"…you have to be able to do this, this and this, and this….and if you say 'well, that's not my job' yes it is, because everything is the job of the headteacher!" (HT 2).

HT 10 described it as:

"Sometimes you can be a scattergun trying to do so many different things, that you end up missing what's really important because you're dealing with all sorts of different things." (HT 10).

Examples of the multiplicity of tasks provided in this study were as diverse as unblocking toilets and drains (HT 2 and 7), taking water readings (HT 9), flushing water systems (HT 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13) cleaning the community hall floor (HT 1), attending child protection reviews (HT 5 and 11), sorting out whole school heating systems (HT 12) and checking on the safety of tree branches in the playing field (HT 5 and 13) all of which were at odds with the headteachers' original motivation for taking on the role. Studies by Connolly et al. (2018) and Davies et al. (2018) refer to a disconnect between the expected roles of headship and the lived reality once in post. Several headteachers in this study reminisced about their feelings when new in post and explained their surprise after finding themselves externally accountable for things they weren't even aware were under their jurisdiction. In the quote below, the headteacher is referring to having been unaware of some health and safety regulations and statutory policies, despite being accountable for them. This is perhaps unsurprising as 'there is widespread recognition that new leaders are typically insufficiently prepared for the realities of leading a school.' (OECD 2019 p.30)

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"It's not fair to make somebody accountable for things they don't even know exist. So I just think that there needs to be clear training or clear information of these things that need to be in place for heads and the fact that, yeah, we're accountable for them without even knowing about them." (HT 4).

Connolly et al.'s (2018) study highlighted a conflict between headteachers' multiple roles and their wishes to fulfil their core purpose (p.618) which was generally described by school leaders as leading teaching and learning, curriculum planning and professional development. The same mismatch between headteachers' core purpose and their lived reality was experienced by all headteachers in this study. This was most often articulated as the juxtaposition between leadership and management. This might usefully be understood as a tension between aligning themselves with occupational professionalism (one that focuses on relationships) or organisational professionalism (one that is built around structures and administrative bureaucracy) (Evetts 2009b). One headteacher in this study described this in terms of the need to micro-manage the school, rather than focusing on the desire to lead:

"What I wanted to do was lead. I wanted to lead people and I wanted to lead learning, but what I find I am doing is managing. Managing people, managing paperwork, managing legionella, asbestos and...sorry, but it's just ridiculous things that are put on us that should not be our role...and the headteacher should not be submitting milk claims!" (HT 4)

As well as expressing the breadth of the headteacher role, this participant is articulating an aspiration to occupationally-orientated professional leadership (Evetts 2009b). Examples of the encroachment of managerialism (Freidson 2001) such as those described above are here perceived as running counter to the quest for opportunities to exercise leadership skills that would impact positively on learners. Small managerial tasks were often cited by other participants in this study in addition to the roles they perceived as the core of headship, which was described as providing positive and purposeful leadership (HT 6, 2, 4) and strategic direction (HT 5, 9, 12). All headteachers in this study recognised the importance of managing the school effectively and efficiently in the best interests of all the pupils and staff, but many also saw this as being frequently in conflict with their leadership role:

"You've got to have management in a school obviously and, you know, again, as NPQH, I learnt the difference between the leadership and the management, isn't it? But in that management, it can take a lot of your time and I do recognise obviously health and safety and safeguarding tops anything but you could be spending so much time on the health and safety of the building but therefore you are, you're losing time on that leadership and that innovation, I think, in education." (HT 6)

Connolly et al. (2018) talk about the 'reframing of headship' (p.617) where headteachers are at odds with their need to adhere to managerialist roles rooted in organisational professionalism, and their desire to subscribe to occupational professionalism which aligns more fully with their core values and principles. HT 3 expressed this metaphorically as:

"Well, there's never much removed is there? You're a container almost, as you add things in, something's got to come out, but that's never the case in education, is it?" (HT 3).

This was an expression of the feelings around leading the implementation of new curriculum reforms. This headteacher was expressing concern about how to move forward with such fundamental change, when the headship role was already so complex, diverse and managerial.

4.2.2 The encroachment of managerialism

All headteachers in this study expressed frustration at the encroachment of managerial tasks, particularly those concerning building management. Many of these related to statutory health and safety testing and the legal duty on schools (for example) to test for the legionella pathogen, as described here:

"Well, you know, it's all the legionella, isn't it and the testing and all that? There is so much...it's a shame that there is so much of that as part of the headteacher's role. Then you are losing that time to be innovative in the teaching and learning...that's what you're losing. You're losing time on that leadership and that innovation, you are losing that chance to research and be innovative." (HT7)

This quote is illustrative of many that illuminated how the standardisation of work procedures has consequences that leaves professionals feeling disincentivised in significant areas such as

creativity and innovation (Evetts 2009b p.260). Each of the thirteen participants in this study highlighted the wealth of managerial responsibilities related to the health and safety aspects of schools, and in particular the statutory testing that schools must carry out. This typified how the headteachers in this study understood their professional role and their professionalism in carrying it out. It was acknowledged that statutory testing was something they must do in order to protect the workforce and the pupils, but this obsession with fulfilling the duty exemplifies a discourse of professionalism which is constructed by forces external to the occupational group and imposed as a disciplinary mechanism to ensure appropriate conduct. Scott et al. (2021) identified managing health and safety as a significant factor in feelings of stress amongst headteachers.

While the headteachers in this study acknowledged the time-consuming element of such managerial tasks dictated from above, they also verbalised the need to comply:

> *"What you want to really be able to give to the role and the frustrations that you can't because you're drawn to the things that cannot wait, because actually doing something about pedagogy... you can just park it for a minute, even though you know you need to do that, but actually that big issue with your entrance that isn't safe, you have to deal with it because those are the things that will shut you down."* (HT 12)

The expansion of this organisational professionalism through the encroachment of bureaucracy and driven through risk-mitigation also comes at the cost to headteachers' incentive to be in the role at all, as illustrated by this headteacher's responses when talking about the initial motivation for headship, and the reality of being drawn into highly managerial tasks:

> *"...it is that business management side of things that I wasn't expecting, as I said, to be quite so prevalent within the role. I thought I'd be...you know, because I love working with children, at the end of the day, which is what we all come into the job for. I was very aware...that I was becoming more withdrawn from the pupils, which is the whole point that I went into the job in the first place. I say we all come in with a certain vision of what you want to do for the school, and I think that vision was, sort of, very much put on hold while dealing with all the extra 'businessy' managerial type things that needed to be addressed."* (HT 8)

Freidson's (2001) concept of a 'third logic' that can be articulated as professionalism free from the constraints of bureaucracy where the individual (in this case the headteacher) is free to apply their specialist knowledge and training without constraints from management. In this study, these administrative constraints were felt keenly and, in this extract, were perceived as having eroded this headteacher's ability to act autonomously and with the freedom that his skills and expertise should allow him:

"I'm not sitting here as a headteacher leading a school in education. And that's your job, you're a leader of education in primary. And I don't do it. Or what bits I do do, I'm probably not doing very well, because I can't apply my time to it! There's no spare capacity to address issues. I find it very difficult working with this local authority. As a headteacher running a school some of the...our rights have been eroded." (HT 6)

This over-emphasis on organisational professionalism and the risk that it leads to disincentive and frustration amongst headteachers can be further illustrated by this reaction from one participant, reflecting on the changing emotions during headship:

"[I imagined] it would be more about the children and learning, and actually that's getting less and less and less, and it's more about the running of the school. I'm more of a manager... and because the budgets have been cut so much, we have to do all the other jobs. I think I used to be a bit naïve because it was like 'oh, it's my first headship, and I'm going to change the world' and then probably about a year in I thought 'oh my God, I don't think I can do this until I retire....I don't know what I've done. I don't know how to get out of it." (HT 2)

The organisational versus occupational professionalism dichotomy evidenced in this study through comments such as this:

"In terms of leading education and developing your vision and ensuring great learning in your school, it is a very, very small part of the job and it shouldn't be. Managing your building, managing your staff, managing your finances are a huge part and then over and above that, come all the other things that you just don't ever see coming or expect." (HT 5)

The feelings exemplified here were that few headteachers saw little choice other than to adhere to the organisational demands from above that would leave them in a secure professional position, and occupational professionalism as being side-lined. The final comment related to the unexpected consequences of the pandemic on the level of managerial tasks asked of headteachers at this time.

4.2.3 Meso-levels of external accountability

As the literature review discussed, there is a lack of coherence in the overlapping levels of external accountability in the Welsh education system. Despite attempts to ameliorate this over time (OECD 2014 and 2017; WG 2015b and 2017c) participants within this study identified a lack of clarity particularly regarding the implementation of new initiatives related to this meso level. This is illustrated below when one headteacher referred to their relationship with both the local authority and the regional consortium:

> *"I think having two masters has been tricky. You never quite know where the advice is coming from or which advice you need to be listening to, what you're meant to be following, what you're not meant to be following. Some of those things are often contradictory of each other as well."* (HT 8)

This confusion of roles and responsibilities at the meso-level of support in Wales was further noted in this study where some respondents described this as each organisational level having the same agenda, but with different emphasis and expressed the confusion this caused, especially to those who had worked in England previously:

> *"In England, you go on training courses and the message was the same. It wasn't a Welsh Government message versus an areas message versus a local authority message. It was a message; a very clearly communicated message. However, [in Wales] it's very difficult to identify what you should be prioritising."* (HT 3)

Evidenced in this study was the feeling that policy and initiative drives were not always built on a sound understanding of what schools really need and how schools are functioning:

> *" I think that's a real shame that… that people can't come in and say, "We're going to take all the good things that are going on, but we're going to consult with people within education to see what can be done." So I think political people miss out on the*

knowledge that they've got in front of them, by communicating with heads and governors and parents and pupils, I think that… all that knowledge is missed and people come in and impose what they think needs to be done and how they perceive things, but whether they actually understand what does need to be done, I'm not… I'm not entirely sure..." (HT 10)

The lack of clarity in messages from each of the organisational levels was evidenced in this study to extend down into schools and blur the direction of strategic development. For example, some headteachers expressed that they had no choice but to implement new initiatives regardless of whether it suited the school's priorities at that time. In this case, the headteacher felt there was pressure to embrace a new policy on feedback and marking devised by the consortium but driven by the local authority, despite the fact that the school already had a well-functioning one already in place:

"...everything is so full-on. You know, the marking [policy], when the local authority was the driver for it...it comes down to school level and you're the one...sometimes you don't agree with what they're saying, and you're having to say to staff that this is the current thing, you know, and the whole marking thing, and red boxes...pink boxes and green boxes. You know, that...that was hard work!" (HT 2)

This extract simultaneously reveals that some headteachers struggled with reconciling the demands from the meso-levels and their own sense of headteachers' core purpose and professional values. Previous research (Connolly et al. 2018) has similarly evidenced that headteachers have become disconnected from their core occupational values and sometimes from their moral purpose. Evidence from this study confirms that this disconnect is still to be found in headteachers' lived experiences as this participant discussed the expectation to implement external policy, knowing the impact may be at odds with her moral obligation to pupils:

"Potentially what you're doing, it's something that doesn't interest you. But it's something that you know will have an impact on what you do and ultimately everything we do will come back and impact the children who are in our care in whatever capacity." (HT 5)

Connolly et al. (2018) suggest that this disconnect is caused through the 'reconfiguration of the role' (p.620). Disconnect was also recognised in this study as a tension felt by headteachers which put pressure on them to adhere to external measures, while staying true to their individual school vision:

> *"But I just feel that whenever…it's two steps forward, one step back at the moment. I have got the staff on board with me, but I find the time where we are fighting against advice from challenge advisors who want to see certain things, or Estyn peering over the horizon…you know, it's like, oh my goodness, shall we…shall we, you know stand by what we believe in…? When you're being monitored by someone externally, it's having the confidence to stand by what you're doing."* (HT 1).

This account not only suggests that this headteacher was struggling with an individual moral purpose, but also maintaining a loyalty to the shared understanding that existed amongst the wider staff. Headteachers in this study spoke about their efforts to question this meso-level external accountability as a means to reconcile the variance and perhaps to justify it to staff. This was often attempted with no success, as in these cases:

> *"Because you are just going to be eaten up alive. And I felt that that meant that any...any...any sort of decision making was taken away from us. We were going to be told what to do, the [consortium] were going to tell the [local authority] what to do, yeah. And...and that's just how it was going to be."* (HT 6)

> *"I think the structure from Welsh Government down, I don't agree...I don't agree with it, and I don't fully understand how it operates and how it utilises its funding correctly. [The regional consortium] is pretty much a dictatorship!"* (HT 10)

These narratives encapsulate how several headteachers felt about their powerlessness to question the external accountability that is driven by the overlapping meso-levels of the Welsh education system, and a lack of confidence in implementing strategies 'from above' when not in agreement with how these have been arrived at. Connolly et al. (2018) have referred to a dirigiste system (p.619) introduced in phase two, after the 2011 reforms which is responsible for the reconfiguration of the headteacher role in the third phase of Welsh education policy reform, and therefore their sense of agency, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

It has been previously established that headteachers feel there is inconsistency in the quality of support and challenge provided by advisers at the meso-level of external accountability (Connolly et.al, 2018) and that there is an emphasis on sanctions in conjunction with underdeveloped support. The need to refine this meso-level infrastructure was evidenced in this study as headteachers highlighted the lack of consistency that for them made working in this way a struggle:

> *"I seem to get a different challenge advisor every year and there's no consistency at all between challenge advisors. And that is fundamentally wrong...and they all have their own agendas. That makes it an unfair system and I think they've taken the word 'challenge' too far."* (HT 10)

> *"I've been here six years so far, I've changed challenge advisors six times. And that's hard. Even though it's like, you know, they all work to the same agenda, they all come with a slightly different emphasis."* (HT 2)

The extracts above reveal the remaining frustrations with the improvement system put in place to challenge and support schools. Changes to the advisory role in terms of personnel and the shifting emphasis that is placed on schools to justify their school improvement priorities have taken their toll on the relationship between schools and their advisers. Data in this study highlights how this relationship is often seen by headteachers as dysfunctional and reveals that there is a lack of reliance on the standards of both challenge and support from headteachers in this local authority. When the advisory role was deemed positive by some participants in this study, it was in the context of being told that *"all was well"* and that *"you're doing things right"* (HT 7). This confirmation seems to focus on the role of headship rather than on the strategic direction of the school; that the positive affirmation was more about the success of the role of the leader *per se*, rather than on the successful outcome for the school.

4.2.4 External accountability from stakeholders

All headteachers in this study felt there were increased levels of scrutiny from the wider community and other stakeholders such as parents, staff, governors and pupils, and in the case of Church schools, the diocese. Findings regarding each of these sources of accountability will be discussed in this section.

Each participant understood and acknowledged the importance of external accountability from a range of stakeholders in their role, seeing it as both a necessity and an inevitability. This chimes to some extent with another study where participants did not admit to being resistant to all notions of accountability but were wary from where it stemmed and whether it brought with it a sense of professional risk (Connolly et al. 2018). Connolly's study concluded that when accountability was exercised through an occupational approach, headteachers were less resistant to it. In this study, the evidence for the willingness to embrace accountability in any form was linked by some participants to their willingness to also embrace change and the increase in the need to be professionally reflective:

> *"I think it has changed. I think as heads we're challenged a lot more than I think heads were and that's probably been going on more than ten years. I think historically whatever the headteacher said, whatever the teacher said, it was supported by the community, the governors. Now that's not the case. I think it is important that we're challenged because that makes us reflective of what we're doing and it either makes us stop and change and evaluate or to carry on because we realise that we're confident in the way that we're going forward."* (HT 5)

Not only does this extract show the headteacher as willing to embrace the challenge of change brought on by an increase in accountability measures, but it also reveals an awareness of the need to be mindful of where the accountability stems from.

The second phase of educational reform in Wales that saw schools being subject to a banding measure that (similarly to league tables) made public comparisons of all schools in Wales. These were subsequently refined into a 'traffic light system' in September 2014, and despite this categorisation system no longer being in force (this ended in July 2018) headteachers in this study still expressed concerns about the public scrutiny (Lingard 2011, Farrington 2015). Their perception was if a school was categorised as 'green' then they were a 'good' headteacher, and this gave them increased social standing and respect, and vice versa. This headteacher is explaining the pressure associated with being identified as a headteacher who allowed the school to go from a higher category to a lower category:

> *"I certainly didn't want to be… you know, after 12 months of being head, you know, to be the head that took the school from… you know, from yellow to, you know, to amber*

or whatever. You know, that…that wasn't something I wanted on my resume particularly at that time, although, I'd realised over a period of time that those colours don't mean…a lot anyway." (HT 8)

HT8 articulated the misalignment between externally imposed success metrics, personal values, professional values and judgements. This unintended consequence of the categorisation system that arose due to the publishing of the schools alongside their colours in the press, meant that headteachers felt ranked accordingly. Ironically, the discourse within government literature during the second phase of reform, where schools were subject to categorisation, was supposedly aimed at countering the rhetoric of accountability by suggesting that the colours within the 'traffic light' system were meant to suggest a category of support, not a judgement on the school's merits or otherwise (Connolly et al. 2018). Headteachers in Wales who participated in a recent study regarding work-related stress identified the removal or improvement of categorisation processes and measures as an intervention to reduce stress in the role (Scott et al. 2021).

Tangible feelings of being held accountable by parents and by the community was a recurring concern from many headteachers in this study, who saw this increase in scrutiny as being linked to a loss of status that could put them at increased risk:

> *"There's not the same respect for headteachers anymore from parents...we're here for them to come and say their piece. They hold us to account. And I feel that we have little power now, a lot of power and authority has been taken away from us...so we are unable to say things that we should be able to say. So, there isn't equality is there? Because we've lost that power."* (HT 10)

Evetts (2009b) describes the reaction to increased scepticism as a wider comment on how professional trust has been eroded amongst the general public. In this study, the professional expertise of the headteacher is no longer seen as welcome or necessary at times, but as a challenge to 'parental expertise'. One headteacher expressed this as a consequence of the growth of the internet and how it has made knowledge so easily accessible:

> *"The wonderful internet means that everyone knows how to be a head, and everyone knows how to be a teacher and I think that certainly has had an impact."* (HT 5)

This extract seems to encapsulate a shift from social trust professionalism to expert professionalism (Brint 1994) where anyone can 'learn' to become a headteacher, rather than having an innate ability and aptitude. The quote articulates a belief in a professional artistry (Fish, Della and Coles 2000) view of the profession of headship. However, this experienced headteacher also went on to add:

> *"Is it [the internet] a bad thing? It has its moments sometimes. I think it is all about balance. Sometimes the balance is right. Sometimes it isn't, but that's something as a head you have to manage and that's managing your stakeholders really."* (HT 5)

This indicates that the headteacher remained confident enough in how she was fulfilling her role that she could welcome scrutiny and learn from it, as long as the feedback was proportionate and fair.

Other stakeholders brought scrutiny to bear on headteachers in this study. For example, in Church schools (both Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled) there is an additional stratum in external accountability provided by the diocese and by the needs of their church community. Whilst all the headteachers of Church in Wales schools who took part in this study acknowledged this extra level of accountability (often expressed as 'pressure') that was generated by being a faith school, some also communicated the support that the diocese provided to them and the pleasure they felt at being a headteacher in a church school:

> *"I've always been a head in church schools, I absolutely love it!"* (HT 3)

> *"I am very lucky to be a diocese school because we're also hearing messages, you know, through them, you know, the meetings we have with them, the training and the support."* (HT 7)

However, also in this study, the extra pressure of accountability on headteachers of church schools (*"Sometimes it's not even pressure, just expectations"* HT 2) seemed to be expressed as a moral obligation as well as a professional one. For example, HT1 (below) recognised that the school was not closely enough linked to the local church, and this was troubling. What is articulated here seems to be a feeling of accountability that goes beyond the usual remit of the job of headship and extends to an awareness of accountability to the Christian faith, or at least to the Christian context that encompasses a Church in Wales school, as there is an

expectation that through the leadership role, a Christian ethos is upheld throughout the 'work' of the school:

> *"We all know exactly how we want the school to be... You know, it's very family orientated at the school, you know, and sort of links with the church, is... [sighs]... and that was one thing I wanted does need strengthening, the links with the church."* (HT 1)

The sentiment that there are expectations on headteachers of Church in Wales schools to have strong links to the local church and its community was a recurrent theme in this study. All headteachers of Church in Wales schools simultaneously felt the support these links could provide, while also acknowledging the extra scrutiny that could come from the local church community. For example, one headteacher felt expected to run the school in a way that the church community felt was most appropriate. It was explained that these demands ran contrary to the needs of the pupils and conflicted with accountability demands from other external sources such as the diocese and the local and regional officers. This created a tension that was hard to negotiate:

> *"And in...a church school sometimes there is even more so because there is that church element of it as well, which, you know, some people in the community want to keep as a very staid, kind of, old fashioned, kind of, approach to it. But then the reality is, you know, with all churches and therefore church schools in order to sustain the interest of the children and families in...in that sort of religious aspect of things, then that needs to progress and move forward as. So, there is a definite pull back in once direction and a push forward you know, from the other side..."* (HT 8)

These two headteachers of church schools (below) also describe feelings of pressure brought on by their sense of responsibility to the diocese:

> *"I think it's those things that are the scariest things in terms of responsibility as well, you know, in terms of your buildings, your financial planning, you know, you are completely accountable. And being a church school means I feel the pressure of that on myself and feel ultimately responsible [to the Diocese]."* (HT 8)

"I find as a Church school, you don't get any more funding from the Church, but there's a whole extra layer of things that you have to do, and places that you have to go and, you know, that's quite a lot of pressure as well." (HT 2)

Accountability in relation to the school's governing body was also mentioned within this study. The need for school governing bodies is set out in law and their roles and responsibilities are also legally defined by the Welsh Government in 2018. The headteacher is accountable to the governing body – both for the functions performed as part of the headteacher's normal role and for powers delegated by the governing body. Welsh Government guidance (2009) on the function and responsibilities of school governing bodies state that the headteacher has responsibility for the internal organisation, management and control of the school and for implementation of the strategic framework set by the governors. The headteacher should discuss all the main aspects of school life with the governing body and expect the governing body to ask questions, challenge and hold him or her to account, in the cause of supporting the school. In general, the governing body should carry out its functions with the aim of taking a broadly strategic role in the running of the school (WG 2009a).

In this study, the role of the school's governing body was frequently mentioned by participants in relation to the interview process. All headteacher interview panels require the attendance of governors, in addition to members of the local authority and in the case of church schools, a representative from the diocese. At interview, some headteachers felt the governing body at the time of their appointment had a good understanding of what the school needed, and were aware of the skills and attributes that they were seeking in their candidates:

"The governors had quite a lot of ambition to take the school forward and they were looking for someone they felt that could take the school forward and move the school forward on many fronts really." (HT 10)

However, there were those who also felt the governing body at the time were not party to a full knowledge of the issues at the school:

"The governing body wasn't brilliant at the time and wasn't effective by any means. They had their meetings in each other's houses and doing all sorts of things they shouldn't have been doing as a governing body. It was all a bit of a mess. And to be honest, they... you

know, they'd never had a headteacher report given to them. They'd never… no, honestly, just not a clue. Not the foggiest, and they didn't really know what was going on." (HT 11)

This account indicates a lack of rigour in the role of this governing body, which implies that they were not well placed to make informed strategic decisions. Other participants had an alternative account, however, data from this study shows that the formulation of the governing bodies seemed, according to most headteachers, as being based on an element of luck. This good fortune (or otherwise) resulted in whether they had a beneficial working relationship with their governing body, and can be evidenced in these comments from two headteachers, the first in relation to a period as acting headteacher before taking up the permanent position:

> *"I think I was lucky in that respect; you know. The governing body were willing to invest in me, to do, you know, the two years."* (HT 6)

> *"I feel quite lucky at the moment, and my governing body, and this was a built-up governing body over time, so I think they've… they've been good because they do… they do question things and they do… they do ask, you know, difficult questions but they do… they're very supportive."* (HT 10)

The benefits of working with a supportive governing body are articulated above, and this headteacher feels fortunate to have this support. However, the comment also shows that whether school governance is effective or not, seems to be left to chance. Where the few participants in this study did acknowledge the role of the governing body in relation to its accountability, the comments were positive as in the case of HT12:

> *"... professionally there's a lot of trust in our relationship, and actually that was something that [Estyn] really picked up on as well, that they felt that there was a really good professional trust between the staff and us as governors and me as the head with the other staff. And I think, you know, that was obviously a huge factor for the governors."* (HT 12)

This account above involving scrutiny of the governing body by Estyn, supports the findings of another study where it was concluded that most successful head and chair relationships were those where the chair was familiar (and therefore could participate) in education

discourse by virtue of either their own professional background or their engagement with local political networks (Smith 2010).

4.2.5 Intelligent accountability and issues of trust and risk

Intelligent accountability as a term to indicate a system for recognising and valuing professional trust and transparency was first conceptualised by O'Neil (2013). The term was used to denote an alternative to dysfunctional accountability systems that were seen as overly focused on the decline of confidence in the professional in modern society. The intelligent placing of trust was voiced in this study regarding this headteacher's attitude towards the suspension of inspections by Estyn due to the Covid-19 pandemic:

"…it's all those levels of accountability, and actually having a little bit of professional trust…because [recently] Estyn haven't come to visit anybody! Have schools stopped working as hard? Have headteachers stopped striving to do the very best for their children? No!" (HT 12).

Here, the headteacher positively expressed feelings that trust in leadership in the school was being acknowledged and valued by the lack of scrutiny at that challenging time. However, Covey (2006) sees lack of trust as a barometer for de-professionalising the workforce and while HT 12 felt professionally uplifted, a perception of a lack of trust to do what they do well, was seen by other participants to reduce their performativity (HT 10 below). The rubric that trust within organisations is often fragile and elusive (O'Sullivan and West-Burnham 2011 p.169) was evidenced here:

"But accountability has to be there, because we have to hold staff accountable, so we've got to be held accountable. I just wonder sometimes have we gone too far down that road and… sometimes you feel as if you're not perhaps trusted enough, that you… you should be" (HT 10).

This reflects O'Neil's summation that 'trust-free accountability is a mirage' (p.10). This headteacher was expressing some frustration in relation to producing the school improvement plan in accordance with the timescales imposed by the local authority. The accountability was acknowledged and accepted, but there was a feeling expressed here that

some external systems can become obstructive and can hamper educational objectives. This headteacher just wanted to be trusted enough to get on with it in a timely way.

Throughout the data, participants articulated their desire to be permitted to exercise intelligent accountability by being deemed sufficiently well-informed to make valid and robust independent judgements and to communicate these intelligently to expectant audiences, whoever these may be: Estyn, the consortium, the local authority, parents. A basis for more intelligent placing and refusal of trust was expressed no more eloquently that by this idiom from one headteacher when talking about the number of different methods of scrutiny that schools face:

> *"I'm not happy about being constantly judged by different people…I used to work for a head who always used to say, 'a pig doesn't get fat by weighing it…' I think [this much] accountability is ridiculous."* (HT 12).

The strong commitment of headteachers in this study to school improvement and to achieving best outcomes for children reveals an inherent professional accountability that comes internally from their desire to do the best they can for the school and the community which it serves. It also reveals an intelligent accountability that is generated from within the profession where there was a clearly articulated desire to want to leave a legacy for the future; to ensure that their tenure in post had been worthwhile and had produced a long-lasting vision:

> *"Well, I suppose I don't let the piles of things take over. I try to keep them separate from my vision…but you just have to be really secure in your vision and the best reminder of that is the children, of course…if it was a job without the children then you'd…of course, you'd fail… the leading of the children is the most important part."* (HT 4).

In education contexts, O'Neil (2013) relates intelligent accountability to a regulatory revolution where the culture of accountability has left schools with no option other than to use testing and performance tables to indicate student success. However, O'Neil argues that the alternative is not purely to rely on trusting schools to do their best for their pupils, as this subscribes to the assumption that trust is a generic attitude that is widely understood and ascribed to in society. Therefore, trust and accountability must be bedfellows: both are needed, and both are needed to work well together. HT4 above expresses how these

bedfellows can work well together by keeping the 'piles of things' in control while maintaining a focus and a trust in the school vision. This gives rise to intelligent accountability where trust is intelligently placed or refused. While O'Neil uses intelligent accountability to apply to measurability in education, it can be equally applied in a leadership context.

When framing the lived experiences of headteachers such as those illustrated in the sections above within the context of Evetts' (2009b) discourse on new and different forms of professionalism in the public services, it can be seen that accountability also brought challenge in the form of risk management. As 'professional managers' headteachers find themselves conforming to discourses of enterprise and customer care (Evetts 2009b p.251) and in this study headteachers often linked their success or failure to the success or failure of the whole school. This articulation of risk applies to both operational risk and reputational risk (Power 2004). Operationally, headteachers are used to completing risk assessments despite some headteachers not always feeling competent enough to complete them due to their lack of expertise in significant areas within health and safety:

> *"In a school environment, which is a public sector is completely different with rules and regulations. I didn't realise our responsibilities towards the safety of the buildings and the school and all the… you know, the alarms and the legionella and the emergency lighting, the fire. I had no idea. And writing risk assessments? When I first became a head, the Fire Service used to come round and do that for you. And then suddenly you have you to do it, no training, nothing. You know, so... so based on 'what?' am I doing a risk assessment on fire...?"* (HT 11)

This lack of expertise was often expressed in connection with insufficient training: *"Health and safety is always a difficult one, there's never been enough health and safety [training] within [the local authority], I've never thought over the years."* (HT 10), or training that is not up to date:

> *"I've done, sort of like, risk assessment training, I've done asbestos management training, fire safety training, all those sorts of things, but they're in the dim and distant past now."* (HT 9)

These findings bear out those of Power (2004) who highlights the 'risks of risk-management'. Amongst these practices is that of defensiveness, as well as the role of risk assessments as

'fantasy documents' (Horlick-Jones 2005). Headteachers in this study, while embracing the requirement to complete the risk assessments and to be accountable for health and safety concerns, were also defending their inability to necessarily do it well. This could lead to risk assessments themselves being fantasy documents which have little connection or relevance with day-to-day practice within schools, a thought that had occurred to some headteachers in this study:

> *"To be honest, I have written that many risk assessments I'm not sure if I'm coming or going! No one ever reads them anyway unless something happens. They just gather dust on a shelf."* (HT 2.)

Accounts of risk in this study were also connected to those related to safeguarding pupils during the vagaries and unknowns of the Covid-19 pandemic and the pressure headteachers perceived was upon them to make fast-paced decisions that could have far-reaching consequences for pupils and their families. This headteacher felt highly accountable for the potential risk associated with making a 'wrong' decision and the significant repercussions this could have:

> *"We're in this very quick moving decision-making role, and it is sometimes very, very quick moving and sometimes it can be at your door, oh, this is the issue, you've got to decide straight away because it is often about the safety of the children, but as long as you've got those…the need of the child right in the centre of every decision, they can be quite easy to make, I think. But its' huge…it's huge [if we get it wrong.]"* (HT 4)

The risk perceived by this headteacher was therefore situationally embedded (Connolly et al. 2017) and would suggest that the headteacher in this context, by trying to mitigate the risk according to personal ethic, is acting within an informal risk practice (Horlick-Jones 2005). The risks articulated in this study reveal headteachers as serving two agendas; one which is concerned with mitigation of risk by adherence to formal organisational strategies mostly related to health and safety issues, and one which is informally governed by the headteachers' moral purpose and how they perceive their actions and potential outcomes.

4.2.6 Professional Agency

Professional agency in this section is defined as headteachers' ability to act intentionally, to exercise control, to make decisions in a collegiate context that impact on their professional identity and their work environment (Kauppinen et al 2020) and which will enact change (Anderson 2010).

As with another study (Connolly et al. 2018) where headteachers acknowledged the encroachment of managerialism while also understanding their own sense of agency, some headteachers in this study also saw both leading and managing as being equally important. They acknowledged both as important in their professional lived experience, although there was a fight to maintain the right balance through exercising their professional agency:

> *"Lead, not manage, it was the message all the time and as much as you try and put it into practise, you always… you fight it, because you're always being pulled to manage."* (HT 4)

The headteachers who expressed their agency through endeavouring to maintain this balance were the ones who had developed creative internal systems to allow them the 'freedom' to lead, for example, by appointing a business manager to help take over some managerial tasks, giving them not only the physical time, but also the 'thinking time' to be able to develop and exercise their leadership qualities. It was clear that these headteachers felt empowered by this freedom and the potential it gave them to move their school forward in terms of strategic development.

> *"I'm starting to lead now, you see, because I've got the business manager and I'm starting to really grow into what I think the role should have been from the start and it's liberating. It really is, because you can actually say, this is what I believed in, this is my vision. It's changed my life!"* (HT 4)

This extract shows the freedom felt by headteachers when managerial tasks could be taken over by administration staff. This was expressed in terms of 'liberating' the participant to act as a leader and to 'grow' into the headship role as it was perceived at interview.

Other headteachers in this study took on other roles outside of the day-to-day headship in order to bring extra income into their school, which in turn gave them the agency to spend it.

This injection of finance was used to employ other staff or to release existing staff to meet the needs of their school operationally, that otherwise they couldn't have done, as explained by HT 11:

> "[I'm] going to work for the [education] department for a day a week… I've got to do it, because if I want to provide my school with what I need, you know, like I need a deputy that doesn't teach. I'm sorry, I have to. You know, if you want to provide what you need to, you have to bring this extra income in all the time. And that's a part of the job that I don't think should be there. I don't like having to do that all the time."

While this example above provided the funding to release other members of senior staff and provided professional development to the headteacher, it is clear that included in the motivation to do so, was health and safety, as HT 11 went on to explain:

> "I mean, I… I like the professional development side of it, don't get me wrong, and that's another reason why I do it. But the driving force is always trying to get a blinking balanced budget, but with an extra member of staff in each class, because I… I won't let a teacher teach these kids on their own…Because it's not safe."

This headteacher has exercised professional agency in order to manage a perceived risk, simultaneously negotiating occupational and organisational professionalism.

Evetts (2009b) describes an ideal-type of organisational professionalism which incorporates hierarchical work structures of responsibility and decision-making (p. 2) which seem to be recognised in this study by several headteachers:

> "…and the wavering, that can happen because sometimes you don't know if anyone's got your back. So, you've got to make these big decisions, but you think, hang on a minute, is this the right decision? Who can help me make sure I know this is the right decision? And sometimes what can help you is just experience." (HT 4).

The extract above alludes to a lack of collegiate responsibility in the decision-making process where team working is absent, and it is only past experience that can be relied on.

In Evetts's (2009b) description of organisational-orientated professionalism, the success or failure of the organisation is linked to an individual, and therefore the impact of decision-making can be amplified. This was also recognised by participants in this study:

"…sometimes you have to make a decision and it might not be your top…the very best decision that you wanted to make, but you have to take it and you have to stick with it, even if it is wrong sometimes. You've got to stick with it because as soon as you are an unstable headteacher then the whole foundations of the staff and everything falls with you…" (HT 4)

The perception that this headteacher had regarding the consequences of making the 'wrong' decision were clearly articulated and illustrate Evetts's warning that the danger of linking individual performance to the success or failure of an organisation is the erosion of cohesion and collegiality within it.

Furthermore, Evetts (2009b) describes the increasing standardisation of work practices as part of organisational professionalism, and this is again recognised in this study. Below, one headteacher is explaining how a challenge advisor was holding them accountable for their school improvement plan:

"So, documentation I think is one of the pressures - of having it done at a certain date and the accountability of someone coming in and nit-picking over it with a fine-tooth comb and by the end of it they have agreed with it anyway! So, I don't know what they've got from it in the end really. It's just...it's almost as if you have to justify every little thing you do and every decision you make." (HT 10)

Examples such as this extract above, serve to reinforce the findings of another study where evidence shows that increased external accountability has resulted in headteachers perceiving that reforms have been done *to* them, not *with* them (Connolly et al. 2018 p.621); or as Hargreaves and Fullan (2012 p.9) state, where there is power *over* not power *with* professionals. While Biesta et al. (2015) claim that agency is promoted in successful schools, research from Wales such as Connolly et al's (2018) study suggest that especially phase two reforms have reduced agency, not promoted it (p.621).

In this study, some headteachers could see how proactive they could be once the control measures were removed, allowing accountability to be deemed as more appropriate:

"in an ideal world, having proper release time to manage a school would be really effective and… and I think then that the systems we've got in place to… for accountability

would be… would be fair then because we're given the time to do the job properly, and then we should be held accountable…" (HT 10).

Despite now being in the third phase of reform since 2015, headteachers in this study still described reduced professional agency, overly managerialist controls, and a dominance of organisational professionalism.

4.2.7 Power to act and influence

Professional agency also refers to the argument that professionals have the power to enact change through taking principled action (Anderson 2010). Several participants felt hopeful that the most recent phase three of the education reform journey in Wales since 2015, may bring some professional agency that would allow for principled action. For example, it was the view of several headteachers in this study that as schools co-construct the new curriculum in the current third wave of educational reform in Wales, professional agency would allow them to enact change for their learners:

"I think you know we are on the cusp of a new curriculum and things [are] changing that we're hopefully going to get rid of some layers of accountability because I just feel…that you are just answerable to everyone." (HT 12).

This headteacher reflected a view that others also expressed. This was the potential that curriculum innovation could allow them the opportunity to work collegiately and collaboratively with their staff and their peers, and which would allow them to become more inquiry orientated in their approach to leadership. Many expressed this as feeling valued professionally, and trusted to have an impact on their school and its community:

"I think there is more of a role for leadership now. I suppose the change in the curriculum has been the biggest thing and giving us the freedom and the responsibility to take it forward in a way that we want to. I think possibly I'm starting to feel a bit more valued." (HT 9)

The desire to enact change was often articulated emotionally by headteachers, as in this case when the participant explained how, by taking on a role within the local authority, she was hoping to exercise agency on others' behalf, despite it causing extra workload for her:

"I do…I do…I love my job still….at the moment, I'm still trying to do what I can to improve things that annoy me….And that's the one way for me to think, 'Well, how can I change some of the things that are going on? How can I influence, though I can't change them necessarily?'" (HT 11)

This reflection positions this headteacher in an advocacy role, both in terms of intent and outcome. This educative role was not seen as hierarchical but was one that modelled on values of reflection and relational trust between themselves and other headteachers, where the power to act and influence was being used to improve the lot for all in the profession.

4.2.8 Lone hero headship

Studies in England have articulated the concept of the lone hero headteacher as an empire building and all-powerful lone ranger figure (Kulz 2017). Perceptions of a school leader as one who sits at the apex of a vertically structured organisationally orientated professional organisation have been criticised generally (Freidson 2001) and in relation to education (Ball 2003). However, there has been a tendency to embody school leaders with heroic individualism; a concept that was perpetuated and even celebrated in the media following the reported successes of newly established academies in England. Portraying school leaders in terms of single-handed saviours serves to feed the perception of headteachers as lone warriors or captains of ships (Kulz 2017) or heroes of enterprise (Ball 2007). While some responses from headteachers in this study articulate the loneliness of the role, it is not to position themselves with this heroic rhetoric. Five out of thirteen participants in this study described feelings of loneliness, such as: *"It's just such a lonely job, headship, isn't it?"* (HT 3) *"…added to the, sort of, loneliness of that position…"* (HT 8) *"…everyone says that headship is a lonely job."* (HT 5) and the irony of loneliness despite being a public-facing role:

"…be prepared to be very lonely even though your main job is people, which is a really tough one because you know that your vision and your purpose is built around people and relationships and yet it can be a very, very lonely job." (HT 4)

Often the headteachers in this study carried the loneliness as a necessary burden as they saw themselves as the ultimate protectors of staff and pupils: *"A lot of what you deal with is confidential, so it has to be a lonely job."* (HT 4) or when acknowledging isolation and loneliness as an inevitable part of their accepted responsibility:

"...that's the head's role to be the support and the bolstering and everything else, to get [staff] to grow as well. And yes, that can seem lonely at times, but we do what we have to do." (HT 1)

So, although the concept of a lone hero head was not recognised in this study, being a lonely head was. Feelings of increasing public scrutiny and accountability can intensify perceptions of loneliness (Davies et al., 2018) which lead to role-related stress and anxiety. Many headteachers in this study expressed feelings of stress and self-doubt generated by their role and shared this at interview:

"...the, sort of, loneliness of the position as well and feeling, you know, that everything is ultimately on me. And, yeah, certainly, sort of, the one thing I've said to a lot of people over the years, the one thing that changed almost overnight from being a deputy to being a head, was that when I was deputy, I used to be able to sleep at night and as a head, I can't quite often." (HT 8)

On occasions, this stress reached the point of the offer of resignation as described here:

"I resigned because I was coming into school at seven o'clock in the morning to put the boiler on every day because the boiler was so poor then, and I resigned because I felt that I was just, I don't know, totally overwhelmed." (HT 3)

And leads to poor self-esteem as recounted here:

"At this very precise moment in time, I feel so exhausted that I feel like I'm rubbish." (HT 9)

Previous research advocates the benefits of mentoring in these situations (Gilmour and Kinsella 2009) where this can support leaders in other professional fields to build decisional capital and to reinstate a sense of professional agency. Further literature highlighted by Davies et al. (2018) show that mentoring can benefit headteachers' wellbeing by decreasing the sense of isolation and increasing self-belief. Where some headteachers in this study identified feelings of loneliness, they also tried to maintain some self-belief:

"Prepare to say you're wrong whilst keeping faith with everybody and everyone knowing that that's okay." (HT 4)

And some strategies for coping:

> "I know you're a leader and I know everyone says that headship is a lonely job, but you still need your team around you and the support of that team to be able to function."
> (HT 5)

The sentiments encapsulated by this comment reveal an acceptance by many participants in this study to wear a mantle of loneliness and to bear isolation, but only in an effort to both protect and serve the school community, through showing personal commitment and accountability to the school as an organisation, and not as a badge-wearing normative heroic headteacher.

Chapter 5: Presentation of findings Part 2 - The Fit of the Jacket

5.1 Introduction

This second chapter presents findings that will illustrate how serving headteachers in this study regard organisational and political changes that have impacted on their role during their time in post. Initially, this chapter will present findings related to headteachers' overall perceptions of how headship as a generic professional role has changed in Wales during their time in tenure (tenure in role varied amongst participants from two to ten years, but all had acted in senior leadership positions for three years or more) (Table 1). Change was often described by headteachers within the context of the social standing the role affords from outside the profession (for example amongst parents, carers, pupils and the wider community). This perception of professional status was bound up with headteachers' understanding of professionalism, how this has altered through the education reform journey in Wales and the conflict this sometimes presented with their professional values. The pace of change was also a recurring issue amongst participants and is presented in this section.

Other perceptions of change highlighted by participants reflected and exemplified more general societal changes, for example the growth of the internet, and the expansion of social media. These discussions gave rise to the articulation of trust (both in the professionalism of headteachers and in their knowledge and expertise) and highlighted issues of the democratisation of knowledge and the impact that the perception of loss of expertise has on

the profession. Also raised in terms of change brought about by the rise in social media communication were issues of ethical drift that impacted on perceptions of their role, and expressions of a form of insidious accountability that undermines confidence in their role and changes relationships with stakeholders.

Changing relationships between schools and their community were frequently cited by participants as presenting challenge within their role. All participants recognised that good community relationships were beneficial to the school overall, but many also acknowledged that they presented challenges as these relationships evolved during their time in post, and as schools in Wales have become responsible for the delivery of increasing amounts of social policy. Shifting perceptions from stakeholders about the role of headteachers over time are described by participants as impacting on how they are expected to carry out the role and how the responsibility of the headship is borne.

Lastly in this section about perception of change in the headteacher role, were descriptions of change over their time in post created by fluctuating school funding and how this impacted directly on the scope of the headteacher role; as funding formulae changed, managerial tasks fell increasingly to headteachers. These narratives gave voice to the challenges, tensions and stresses as participants sought to reconcile the expectations of the role with their lived experience of headship.

Under a second theme of professional development, this chapter will present findings related to the professional learning of headteachers, including the motivation for headship, as well as the skills and attributes that headteachers felt were required prior to taking up their post including their recall of those outlined in job descriptions at their time of appointment. This will lead to a presentation of findings that relate to training for headship prior to the role and when newly appointed, and a consideration about whether the current professional learning offer is fit for purpose and equips school leaders for the future of education in Wales.

5.2 Perceptions of change

5.2.1 The pace of change, and the rise (and fall) of the profession

A frequently expressed sentiment throughout this study was the pace of change that caused many headteachers to describe feelings of pressure, exhaustion and confusion. The pace of

change was described by participants as being initiated from within the meso-levels of accountability; stemming either from the local authority, the consortia or from wider demands passed down from Estyn recommendations and Welsh Government reforms as epitomised by this headteacher:

> "...then all of a sudden you realise, oh, we've stopped that; that isn't what they're saying we should do now, and then you're having to say to staff 'Well, you know we were saying we have to do all this? Well, actually we don't have to anymore.' You know, that kind of pressure and the speed at which things are always changing has been hard." (HT 2)

Another headteacher expressed this by explaining the pressure of taking on something new before the school had fully embedded a previous initiative:

> "I think new initiatives and things that come from... Wales and the Local authority that come in...you have to drive them forward, but the problem is sometimes you haven't been able to finish what you've been asked to do in the first place, and all of a sudden, other new initiatives have come in and then they're dragging you away from something you've not done the best you think you can do at." (HT 10)

OECD reports from 2014 and 2017 identified issues in the Welsh education system caused by the high pace of reform, even referring to this as 'reform fatigue' (2017 p.21). Further research (Connolly et al. 2018) supported the OECD findings and elucidated that many headteachers felt that the education policy landscape was fast-paced, constantly shifting and placing demands on schools to keep pace with short-term initiatives. In this study, HT 10 (above) has expressed these frustrations in terms of not having time to do their best with one initiative, before another comes along. Similar frustrations for quick implementation of new initiatives were found in studies by Connolly et al. (2018) where a consequence was limited time for embedding good practice (p.616) and by Evans (2021) where headteachers linked the pace of change to their reflective practice, as the rapid fire of initiatives often prevented proper reflection and evaluation. A recent study (Scott et al. 2021) also identified the pace and scale of educational reform as one of the top stressors amongst headteachers in Wales.

The issue of the need for rapid change was intensified in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic when co-ordinating the school's response to each new operational guidance that was being issued by the Welsh Government to schools. Headteachers in this study felt that their role

was expanding quickly at this time, to include providing medical advice and support about testing, symptoms and self-isolation, as well as providing wellbeing support about mental health to staff and parents. This was in addition to the health and safety implications of rapidly changing risk assessments that needed to reflect current protocols in-line with national guidance. HT 1 felt that the leadership role was having to adapt very quickly to the changes brought about by each new operational guidance:

"...before, if you'd be in a role, you could adapt to it and then improve either yourself or the role with it. Because it's changing all the time now, sometimes I feel sometimes I'm just playing catch-up." (HT 1).

The Wales Centre for Public Policy issued a briefing note in February 2021 that summarised the findings following an initial scan of evidence of the main education response to the pandemic (Foster 2021). This briefing note acknowledged that school staff have had to adapt rapidly to the changes required in order to maintain standards of education and to manage safeguarding and wellbeing issues exacerbated by Coronavirus (p.5). The rapidly expanding role of schools as delivering a social function were frequently highlighted by participants in this study, as schools became centres for delivering health advice and welfare packages, as well as transforming education so that it could be accessible through alternative formats. These sentiments are expressed clearly in this reflection by one headteacher in this study as the school's reaction to the pandemic was described:

"Yes, that certainly impacted [on me] because with the government closing all the schools with three days' notice, that was a huge decision for them to make but, equally for us, to try and manage, because you're trying to manage suddenly preparing distance learning with three days' notice, preparing your teachers, calming anxieties, planning ahead. It's then getting a grip of an understanding of the bigger picture and very quickly developing a new vision, a new strategy and training your team to bring them with you on that journey and so, yes, that has had a huge impact...I think so far this has probably been the biggest challenge of my career." (HT 5)

This participant was describing pressures which were seen as overwhelming at times, unsustainable in the long term, and sometimes unrealistic to implement in the time available. Almost all headteachers in the study talked about how closing schools due to the pandemic

with little notice had been hard to manage effectively, and how co-ordinating the process of implementing successful distance learning had been a difficult challenge. Also mentioned were the ongoing efforts needed to manage the expectations and anxieties of staff and parents, given the rapid and frequent changes to protocols. The challenges caused by the pandemic can be seen as exemplifying the core issues that were expressed in relation to headteachers' professional roles; the need to quickly embrace new government or local authority initiatives, the increased awareness of risk in an unfamiliar, highly charged and high stakes situation and the many layers of accountability needed to keep the entire school community safe in such an uncertain environment. The expectations placed on headteachers during the pandemic served to illustrate the tensions within their professional role and their status as respected leaders as they struggled to fulfil the increasing demands under increased scrutiny and accountability.

Notions of the changing professional status of headteachers were also expressed in this study in terms of their hierarchy within the community, and gave rise to discussions around definitions of professional work. Most frequently, this was expressed in terms of a 'drop' in hierarchy where the status of headteachers was perceived as having lowered amongst the standings of professions in general. For example, there was an overall view that the encroachment of an organisational and managerial understanding of headship and an increase of bureaucracy into the role had resulted in headteachers bemoaning the loss of any sense of professional 'worthiness', as expressed in these terms:

> *"It's almost as if we're on a …[sighs]… but we're almost on a par with sort of...lower management level sort of, you know, even probably below a manager of Tesco."* (HT 1)

In this data, the headteacher is rejecting the organisationally-orientated account of professional practice (Evetts 2009b) where the role is reduced to management of the service sector. Such reductive notions associated with organisational professionalism were echoed by other participants: *"I think years ago a headteacher was on a big pedestal."* (HT 3). Participants' hierarchical notions of ranking within professions were also associated with issues of respect, and were expressed in various ways:

"A lot of the things I think have changed is the way you are…the way as a teacher and a headteacher, I'm perceived in the community. And I don't think it has anywhere near the standing it used to have." (HT 1)

"When I was younger, a headteacher was a …you know, really looked up to in the community, and I think that's gone." (HT 2)

"Yeah, certainly something I've noticed, even in the time that I've been head, is that I don't think it's a… that it's a particularly respected profession from parents, from the, sort of, community generally. I think that that level of respect has, kind of, gone from this role a little bit. I think, you know, we were at the same level as, sort of, doctors and other professionals in years gone by." (HT 8)

"…in my day, a teacher was a really good profession to be in, and you know my parents would respect a teacher. Now, you've either got parents who think they know better than you, or you've got parents who just, you know, don't care. Then they have no respect for your opinion whatsoever. You have to remind parents you are professionals." (HT 11)

The perceived loss of social standing and respect articulated by HT 1, 2 and 8, and which was being reasserted by HT 11, was explained by a sense of increased public scrutiny. The perception of many participants was that increased public scrutiny allowed parents to exercise power over them, as described here:

"Parents won't think twice about coming and giving a mouthful or saying what they think and giving their opinion!" (HT 1)

"Parents seem to feel they've got more of an access to you now than they did. And some seem to think they've got far more power and leeway on what they think they can do, and what they want their child to have, and in essence it might not be what they could have. So, I think you're… you're more likely to be challenged, as I say, from… from parents in that point of view." (HT 10)

The narrative from the participants (above) indicates that headteachers sense a changing relationship between the headteacher (or the school) and the parent: one where the school (as the business) serves the parent (as the client) and which encapsulates Freidson's (2001) 'logics' of managerialism and commercialism. HT 10 describes this relationship in terms of the

parent 'wanting' specific provision for their child (which may not be what they could or should have) and has echoes of Evett's (2009b) paradigm, where in the wider world of relationships between professionals and clients, this is converted into one of 'customer relations' (p. 252) through the evolution of quasi-markets. Through marketing techniques such as customer satisfaction questionnaires for example, which shape the organisation according to the opinions of the consumer, Evetts surmises that professional organisations are turning themselves into marketplaces. Freidson's (2001) concept of the 'third logic' is that workers with specialised knowledge should have the ability and freedom to organise their own work without directives from management or the influence of free markets. When seen in relation to education and schools specifically, this consumer/supplier relationship was evidenced in this study as headteachers often felt themselves providing education according to the desires and wishes of the parents:

"We are providing education for their children on their terms. And if they don't like it, they will take [their child] to the next school and then write about us on social media!" (HT 1)

While Welsh Government education policy changes have sought to avoid market-driven reforms (Power 2016) some policies, such as those around home/school relationships results in schools accumulating what could be deemed as 'customer satisfaction' information through parental questionnaires, student satisfaction surveys, relational trust surveys for staff for example. Looking at this as a model, reveals parents as customers, pupils as consumers and schools as defined by the work organisation rather than by professional competencies. One headteacher explains this implicitly through this narrative:

"You know, I don't know whether it's just at our school, but, you know, I… I'm certainly challenged frequently by parents about things which I haven't been previously. I think, you know, that's again maybe a nature of, you know, the catchment changing, but I think it's also a nature of just parents feeling that they can… they've got the right to, sort of, question things and to challenge schools on things and to… you know, to tell us exactly what they feel. We need to know, but sometimes it gets taken too far." (HT 8)

While recognising that home/school relationships are important, this participant was attempting to tease out the reasons why the relationship between the school and the

headteacher had changed and why there was an increasing level of challenge from parents. Several other headteachers in this study expressed this in connection with their relationships with pupils:

> *"That's the sort of attitude you get from the way...some of it you get through the children, the way they speak to you as a reflection, you can hear the parents' words. So, if at home we're not held in any sort of standing, that then rubs off on the next generation."* (HT 1)

Several headteachers also expressed that the erosion of authority comes from *within* the system, which demonstrates the 'dis-empowering' of headteachers (Collet-Sabe 2017). Here the headteacher was discussing political changes to the role, which were perceived as having consequences for the organisation of the school and over which he had no power:

> *"There's not the same respect for headteachers anymore from parents and children.   So... and we're there, I think, at times for parents to have a go at the educational institution. Yeah. We're there for them to come in and say their piece. And I feel that we have little power now, a lot of power and authority has been taken away from us to be... so we are unable to say things which we should be able to say."* (HT 7)

Although this headteacher was speaking about a loss of respect from parents, the perception was that this had been caused by the dis-empowering of the role by the wider system. The result of this loss of power to make organisational changes in the school resulted in feelings of powerlessness which rubbed off on parents' perception of this headteacher, who went on to say:

> *"And I think that [respect] needs to come back, because without it we will not be able to actually do what we want in education in schools. Because we've lost that power. And it's the wrong word, power, isn't it, really? It sounds like you're... you know, you want to be some sort of despot, but it's not that at all."* (HT 7)

This participant was trying to articulate that headteachers are forced to conform to regulatory procedures, which takes away the freedom to act. So, it is not a loss of power, but a loss of freedom that is being described here. The loss of freedom was a concept expressed by other headteachers, and sometimes this was a loss of freedom to act, and sometimes a loss of

freedom to speak. This latter issue was expressed in terms of the new role that social media played in the lived experiences of headteachers.

5.2.2 The challenge of social media

Discussions involving headteachers' experiences with social media were linked to wider issues of trust; firstly, trust in professional ethics, and secondly, trust in professional knowledge and expertise, as well as notions of ethical drift and, as mentioned above, a sense of a lack of freedom or right to reply.

Without exception, all headteachers in this study mentioned the part that social media plays in their day-to-day role as school leaders. It was acknowledged that this could be beneficial at times, especially so in light of the blended learning approach during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need to communicate quickly and efficiently with parents during this period of time. However, headteachers also discussed negative experiences unique to the technology-based internet society in which they function as professionals:

> *"I think we've been at both ends [of the social media issue]. I think we do need the social media aspect to help us communicate with our parents, to help them develop them in supporting our learners but equally it can be used negatively."* (HT 5)

Another study into causes of work-related stress for headteachers in Wales, has highlighted social media as a stressor (Scott et al. 2021). Similarly, the negative impact of social media in parental relationships was frequently mentioned in this study, as was the overall portrayal of professionality of teachers and teaching. The obligation to behave morally in-line with the expectations of that profession, or to be aware of the "the ethical imperative" (Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933) was acknowledged by many participants in this study in relation to social media representation. However, simply belonging to a profession does not guarantee integrity and trustworthiness (Susskind and Susskind 2015) as can be seen in cases brought to the Education Workforce Council (EWC Outcomes of Hearings). Several headteachers in this study expressed their concerns that the profession itself was responsible for lowering its *own* professional standing through ethical drift, and sometimes social media played a part in this insidiously:

"But I think [the professional standing of] teachers has definitely slipped and whether some of that has been a reflection on the professionalism of some teachers or how they are portrayed in social media has had some part in that. And because it only ever hits the headlines if a teacher has done this or that. I don't know what has caused the shift in it, I definitely don't think that we are perceived as...in any sort of social standing." (HT 1)

The extract above encapsulates the contradictions and challenges that are imposed on headteachers by developments in the way society communicates electronically and how social media can expose the profession to increased scrutiny. The extract also implies acknowledgment of an ethical drift, where a gradual reduction in how the profession is perceived has occurred, despite the belief they were adhering to the same ethical standards they have always had. This public scrutiny and judgement serves to extend the accountability of headteachers from within their embedded work context to their role in society as a whole. Although prescient in his analysis, Hargreaves (2000 p.176) describes this as teachers facing a "paradoxical challenge in the postmodern age" where they are simultaneously expected to interact with the wider community and become increasingly accessible in terms of communication, and yet in doing so become publicly vulnerable:

"We're also the first generation where we're the first ones thinking about our digital footprint. There's a generation [of teachers] who went through the social media storm without any thought of the implications in their future life. And some of that as well are things that are coming back to haunt them now." (HT 1)

HT1 articulates the position of teachers in the debate about professional status, recognising that all headteachers were teachers first. The participant acknowledges that headteachers are held accountable to higher ethical standards than some other occupational groups, and therefore are expected to be able to judge for themselves the standards of their own behaviour. Self-regulation has become symbolic of the status of the 'professional,' and brings challenges and risks. There is an expectation on headteachers to be effective communicators, and information technology certainly allows for that, but many headteachers in this study attributed the open conduit that social media facilitates as a source for parents to openly and publicly express their dissatisfaction about their child's education:

"I mean definitely social media has a huge, huge part to play. You know, if you tell them something they don't want to hear, well they either slag you off on social media, or they move their children." (HT 2)

This comment raises more questions about trust and its place in the relationship between schools and the community they serve. There was a clear perception by headteachers in this study that they were sometimes not trusted to do their role well by parents, and if this trust was damaged, the parents were able to express their feelings about this via social media, an avenue that was not open to the headteachers themselves. The perception of many headteachers in this study was that social media has provided a one-way system for an insidious form of external accountability and public scrutiny for which they had no right of reply, and which has given rise to the suggestion of a 'national parent protocol' that controls how parents interact with schools especially with regard to social media (Scott et al. 2021 p. 17).

Susskind and Susskind (2015) also consider that professions established a reputation for trustworthiness in order to signal their reliability in society and refer to professionals as 'gatekeepers' of knowledge and expertise (p.231). The increased availability of information on the internet reduces the need for professional expertise, as knowledge becomes democratised; a feeling expressed by this headteacher:

"The wonderful internet means that everyone knows how to be a head, and everyone knows how to be a teacher and I think that certainly has had an impact. Is it a bad thing? It has its moments sometimes. I think it is important that we're challenged because that makes us reflective of what we're doing and it either makes us stop and change or evaluate or to carry on because we realise that we're confident in the way that we are going forward. So, I think it is all about balance." (HT 5)

This headteacher is expressing how, in a democracy, perhaps knowledge *should* be shared (with parents) and this could lead to improved relationships where the hierarchy between the professionals and the community they serve is made more equitable. Headteachers who shared this view articulated this by expressing that they did not want there to be a 'them and us' relationship, where parents felt beholden or fearful in their relationship with the school.

These headteachers resisted expert/novice hierarchical conceptualisations and welcomed more open relationships with parents, as these often came with mutual trust and respect:

> *"We try to help everybody don't we? And we try to be that missing link for everybody in the community really, because we've got that direct contact with them. So, I think that's been a big surprise, is how much parents depend on you and call on you for things other than the education of their children, which I actually I really enjoy, I love that parental contact, and I love to give that support."* (HT 4)

The 'big surprise' alluded to in this extract was the level of support expected and needed by the community from the school, which had not been anticipated by the headteacher at the time of appointment. Many headteachers in this study acknowledged their understanding that more open relationships worked well in a multi-agency context where the school and the family worked in partnership to improve outcomes for children. However, while these relationships were highly beneficial, they did not come without their own anxieties and challenges.   This was a similar finding to another study that found managing parents' expectations, a lack of support from parents together with a lack of trust and respect in the role of headteachers were causes of work-related stress (Scott et al. 2021)

5.2.3 Challenges and changes in community relationships

Almost all participants in this study acknowledged that while their role was very different from that of their predecessor in post, they felt this was a necessary shift to reflect the changes in society, and the increasing challenges that families now face; because communities had changed, school must as well. The implication in the extract below being that schools are responsible for delivering more social policy in a more challenging society:

> *"Back in the day, heads were just leading schools, and they were just responsible for the children...and that was as challenging as it got. What's different is the challenges that children face now, the parents, the community."* (HT 13)

Many headteachers expressed their concerns about how their role was perceived by the community in which they worked and whether this meant that they were winners or losers of respect and trust. Without exception, all headteachers in this study spoke about their relationship with the community and how this was something 'extra' to their role: *"..a big*

thing to do with headship, is the community, and… and what you have to do within a community is all the extra things that you have to turn up to!" (HT 2) Despite being seen as an additional role, a relationship with the community was one that the headteachers knew was crucial to acknowledge and to maintain. This supports another study into family engagement where it is recognised that schools need to understand and respect parental values and ideals in order to work symbiotically and supportively (Sarjeant 2020). While in this study, it was also noted that parental engagement and community relationships were now part of school culture, it was also indicated that this had potential for risk and negative outcomes.

Some participants reported this relationship as a comfortable one that worked well: *"I had good relationships with parents and children and the community, and I thought, I could really make it work there, and... and make the school prosper."* (HT 7) or a difficult one that needs working on: *"I've always liked bringing the community in, which is always harder than you think. I think some... a lot of... large sector of the community is quite scared of being involved with the school I think they feel because it's an educational setting that they... it makes them feel a bit inferior..."* (HT 7)

Sometimes a respectful relationship with the community was hard won and had taken time to cultivate and develop: *"my first years were building lots of bridges that had been a bit trampled on previously, to sort of get that back together...to be more part of the community again."* (HT 1) but without fail in this study, was expressed as a relationship worth fighting hard to build and maintain because of the benefits it brought forth: *"And then, you know, I was the bee's knees. Every parent loved me to death, because I'd made… you know, I'd brought together the school community in a way nobody else had."* (HT 11) *"So, I guess the working with other parts of the community has grown, and I think that's helped our school."* (HT 9)

While all headteachers in this study acknowledged that good working relationships with their community are beneficial to the whole school, many also spoke about how hard these relationships were to maintain in light of the increased managerial roles put on them:

> *"I think [the community is] really interesting because [it] is so rich, the opportunities within the community are so rich, and I think it's really frustrating because as a headteacher you are a big part of the community and you show a high profile within*

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that community, which I have maintained and tried to maintain, but I don't do as much as I would like to do, again, because of your reduced capacity because you're doing stuff at premises management and things like that." (HT 3)

HT3 was expressing irritation and disappointment that due to increased managerialist tasks, insufficient time was available to build a functioning relationship with the wider community, while knowing how this could enrich experiences for the school and its pupils. This echoes findings in another study (Connolly et al. 2018) where headteachers expressed a separation between their core professional values and their increasing managerialist roles.

5.2.4 Changes to school funding and the perceived impact on the headteacher role

In this study, changes to school funding models were perceived by almost all headteachers as a noticeable change during their tenure and also cited as a cause for anxiety. The impact was felt keenly by those headteachers who had teaching responsibilities (in this study all but three headteachers had class responsibility). The two participants below expressed that due to funding cuts, they both had to take over administrative tasks that would usually have been covered by a secretary or bursar. This resulted in what little non-teaching time was available to them being spent on completing administrative functions rather than being able to exercise leadership, as in HT6:

"[My role has changed] significantly over the last six years. I have become more of a teacher, not headteacher because there's no funding for me to out of the class. I've become more of a manager and an administrative person because I can't afford to have an admin person all day every day." (HT 8)

Or to influence teaching and learning, as in the case of HT6:

"I just feel that everything is brought down to school level to try and do as much of it as we can really, which then impacts, going back to teaching and learning, it's impacting on your capacity to do that because the business side of things obviously is huge really. So, it's that management of things and the capacity [of headteachers]. Yeah, increased pressure, diversity [of roles] and reduced capacity." (HT 6)

The headteacher below is similarly describing a level of managerialism in the role that had not been expected at the outset but which now fell to the head due to perceived funding cuts:

"It's a very different ...it is a very different job to what ,you know sort of ten years ago I thought I was signing up for. [I thought I would be doing] more about the children and the learning, and actually that's getting less, and less, and less, and it's more about the running of the school. I'm more of a manager, as I can't afford to lead." (HT 2)

The implication here is that being able to 'afford to lead' required funds that the school did not possess; funds that would enable this teaching head the non-contact time to exercise leadership. Not only does this extract show how funding has impacted on the headteacher role (and how they saw their ability to exercise their core professional values) it also shows a perception of an increase in managerial tasks over the last decade. This seems at odds with the timeline of measures put in place through Welsh Government policy over this same time period. Despite the third wave of reform since 2016 (Egan 2017) being defined by greater professional agency, HT 2 sees an increase in managerialism in the years leading up to 2021 which seems to epitomise a reduction of educational leadership into educational management. Whether changing definitions of school leadership can be seen as either purely semantic or reflective of more substantive changes (Bush 2008) there was, in this study, an acknowledgement that leadership was 'important' and managerialist tasks less so:

"They sell the headteachers as a leader, that's actually become like a less important secondary role that you spend the ...the least amount of time on in a week." (HT 6)

The feeling here was that the role of school leader had been mis-sold to this headteacher and that while the importance of leadership as a driver in school improvement was well understood by headteachers, it was becoming increasingly squeezed due to the high levels of managerialist directives. There was a clear sense from participants that educational leadership was being reduced to educational management, and the reason for this was frequently cited as being caused by changes to school funding.

Finding other ways to fulfil the plethora of roles in schools was a view that was expressed in similar ways by many headteachers in this study:

"I've got a secretary as well but, you know, she's only part time so I have to do a lot of these duties as well. I did not know about that. The buildings I did not know about. What else can we talk about? Which just takes up your whole day. The managing... block... unblocking toilets yourself, cleaning sick off the floor, yeah. Dealing with

behavioural issues... because I don't have the staffing anymore, because I'm down to skeleton staffing. There is nobody available, there's no spare capacity and staffing to actually address these issues. So, I have to, in my... in my management leadership, go out and deal with them. Because I'm also teaching, depending on the weeks, 40 to 50 percent of the time." (HT 7)

This raises an interesting point about the role of auxiliary staff in schools, and the role of caretakers in particular in the schools that took part in this study. Out of all thirteen headteachers in this study, only one of the corresponding schools had a caretaking role on the staff, and this was on a part-time basis. The reasons for not having a caretaker in the school's staffing structure were due to financial constraints that resulted in the decision to trade the role with others that would benefit the school in terms of teaching and learning. Almost all participants went on to say that some caretaking responsibilities (locking and unlocking the building, small premises repairs, changing lightbulbs, unblocking toilets, sweeping leaves and snow) were now done by either themselves directly or by members of their families. For example:

"Because we don't have a caretaker, who else cleans the leaves out of the drains and gutters? And I... and I do find that it tends to be families of headteachers who become honorary caretakers." (HT 1)

"... years ago, I remember when I first started teaching there was a caretaker in [X] you know. It's like… things like that, you don't have caretakers anymore.. My… [husband] says to me all the time, you know, he's my caretaker, he does my odd jobs, or, you know, if things need putting up, and he goes, "oh, I never get paid", and I'm like, "yeah, but you're married to me, so I'm afraid that"… "it comes with"… you know, "with the job." (HT 2)

"So yeah, that is my… that's my biggest thing that I've noticed that's changed, and it's… you know, you go to schools now. There's not a caretaker, you know? Here, there's not a caretaker, so me and [the deputy] are out putting grit outside. I'm trying to put shelves up. I'm trying to put stuff in a skip. It's constant, like… we… we joke about it and say we could write our own job description on a toilet roll and it still

wouldn't be long enough. That's what we say, because that's… that's the biggest thing. I do not sit here doing what I should be doing…" (HT 11)

Accounts such as these, endorse the findings of a previous study that reframes current headteachers as having to adhere more and more to managerialist approaches to professional practice (Connolly et al. 2018). This study finds this need exacerbated by funding issues that have seen auxiliary posts all but disappear. Many headteachers expressed sadness as being unable to fulfil their own expectation of the role whilst striving to fulfil managerial expectations. For example, as a long-serving headteacher, HT 11 describes the stresses felt around the Welsh Government's expectation to continue to implement the new curriculum, while still dealing with the rapid operational changes required due to the pandemic:

"I think in the olden days, they used to listen to the profession, as in really listen, and respect our views. Now I think they listen and then they just do what they want anyway, I think." (HT 11)

This headteacher felt that previously the profession may have had a 'voice' in the way that schools could operate, but now, no longer do, thus impacting on their professional lives.

5.3 Recruitment to headship, professional development and training of headteachers

These final findings will focus on the participants' motivation for moving into a headship role and their perceptions of the skills and attributes asked of them prior to the role illustrated through recounts of their journey through recruitment. Also presented in this section are findings that relate to headteachers' perception of their early training experiences (e.g. NPQH) leading into headship and how these prepared them for the role. Finally, findings related to headteachers' experiences of professional development while in post and training for future needs will be presented.

5.3.1 Motivation for headship

Each participant was asked about the interview process they had engaged in to be successfully appointed to their current post. Amongst the thirteen interviews described there was a high degree of consistency in the process, which typically included leading collective worship (for Church schools) or a whole school assembly, a presentation to staff and/or governors, a budget or data task and a formal interview. In addition, most took part in a panel discussion

with pupils through the school council, and five participants were observed teaching, despite more than five having teaching responsibility for doing so with the post. Nine out of the thirteen headteachers were already working in the school at the time of the interview, either as a deputy headteacher or as acting headteacher. Frequently, there was only one candidate and never more than three candidates in total. If the interviewee was already in post as acting headteacher, they were generally the only candidate. This was explained by several participants who had experienced this as: *"I heard so many people saying to me, 'Oh, that school is yours already, I wouldn't dream of trying for it.'"* (HT 6) implying that the post, although widely advertised was seen by other potential candidates as already being filled.

Participants were asked about their motivation for moving into school leadership posts, and headship specifically. A range of reasons to describe what had incentivised them to do this were noted, these included: natural progression through the school; being inspired to lead by a previous headteacher, or being motivated by frustration by the actions (or inaction) of a previous headteacher. This participant was describing the incentive to move from deputy into headship: *"[I wanted to make] what I wanted to happen….rather than making suggestions in meetings and then someone putting their own spin on it. To actually being able to follow a thought through right to the outcome."* (HT 1)

This suggests that the motivation for taking on the headship role here was a lack of agency in the deputy role. Similar feelings were expressed by other participants in these terms: *"I don't want somebody else coming in to do this; I'm going to do this myself,"* (HT 8) and *"I just knew that I wanted to be the boss."* (HT 2). These feelings were most often expressed when they were already in post in the school as a deputy or acting headteacher, and there was a possibility of an outside candidate taking on the role, as described here: "*...then somebody else is going to swoop in and take on the headship instead.*" (HT 8) and as: "*I couldn't sit back and let somebody else then come in to do it!*" (HT 6) or more fully by this headteacher, who was in an acting role at the time:

> *"I mean, one other motivator to apply was, we did have people come and look at the school beforehand and one of their comments was, "Well, if I get the job, I'd sort the school out".   And it's like; whoa..!! It was... it was like; really? It's... it's about understanding, because a school, it is a full community with your... your... your parents,*

your pupils, your staff, all working together, you know each other really well. It... it's... it's no new brooms coming in...!" (HT 1)

This headteacher had felt possessive over the school, seeing it as a whole community that required protection from 'an outsider'. There was a sense here that the school was in a good position that had been established as a result of collegiate working, and someone coming in to lead and who may not ascribe to this, would not be welcome. A similar strength of feeling was articulated by this participant, who was also in an acting headteacher role when the job for permanent headship in the school arose:

"I think you feel... when you've worked in a school as well, you feel a real responsibility to the people and the parents and all of the stakeholders, and it's really hard to separate... you can't separate your emotion from it because we're emotive people, aren't we? We are driven by emotion, and that is the goal, isn't it, to be able to benefit your school community the best way you can? And I think you say that, so stand back and say, gosh, I think this is right for our school, because the school community is going really well, and then potentially somebody to come along and take it somewhere different, where I wasn't quite ready to do that!" (HT 12)

This headteacher clearly felt a loyalty to the school community and, knowing that a detailed knowledge and understanding of the local community was important to the role, was reluctant to relinquish control and risk this knowledge being lost. Other motivations for taking on a headship role were often described as being linked to a 'passion' for teaching and learning as by this headteacher:

"So, I want to say I fell into it [headship] but I don't think that's true. I don't think I did fall into it. I think it was more of a case of having a passion for education, for watching a school succeed, watching an impact a team can have when they work together." (HT 5)

Only very few participants talked about their interest in leadership in general and there was limited expression of the enjoyment gained through the challenge of leadership. No participants talked about financial motivation. In summary, the main motivators for taking on the post were linked to natural progression and a desire to 'do right' by the school through having prior involvement in the senior leadership structure.

5.3.2 Skills and attributes for headship offered at time of appointment

At the time of appointment, all participants described the professional skills and attributes they offered to the role in similar terms. These were primarily; the ability to problem-solve, to have good organisational and communication skills, the ability to delegate, and to have creative thinking skills. In addition, other skills such as proficiency in the Welsh language, change management skills, being an excellent practitioner in the classroom, being a confident decision-maker and being reflective were featured in the participants' accounts. Personal traits offered at interview were predominately described as having a good work ethic, being resilient, offering a clear vision, being enthusiastic and/or innovative, having an appreciation and understanding of the local community and being flexible and empathic. Other important personal traits were consistency and continuity, an understanding of inclusion, the ability to be selfless and approachable. Possessing these professional personal skills and attributes also motivated participants in the application process.

Through an analysis of the responses from participants when asked about the interview process that led to them becoming successful in their current headteacher post, it can be concluded that all serving headteachers for this study described their job description and person specification for the role as 'generic'. This strongly supports the findings in Milton et al.'s (2020) study where a demand-side analysis of headteacher job descriptions, found them to be 'highly replicated' (p. 15):

> *"Whenever you see the advert for Heads, they're so generic, aren't they, in the job spec? You could just pick one, and that would be the same for every one that's been advertised..."* (HT 2)

Almost all headteachers admitted that the requirements for the post as set out in the job description and person specification had not influenced them in their decision-making about whether or not to take on the post. Instead, there was a general sense that they already knew what headship was about, either through working alongside heads in a deputy role, or as a result of being in an acting role previously. There was an overall sense by participants in this study that the job description was not significant in the recruitment process and was explained as such: *"It's almost like you go for the job of headship, knowing that that isn't what it's going to look like."* (HT2) This indicates that the majority of headteachers in this study

simultaneously understood what the role of headship would entail, while also realising that the job description would not be accurate to the lived reality.

What was reported by participants as having more significance in their decision to apply was knowing the school as a previous employee or visiting the school to get a more realistic picture than the job description could give: *"I think maybe that was my perception of seeing what the school was, rather than it being made very clear to me that that's what it was, in all fairness."* (HT 10). One headteacher felt completely misled about a new post, even after discussions with the local authority and the governors about the needs of the school, and what they were looking for in a headteacher: *"So I feel I was sort of undersold, if you like, that one. I wasn't given the full picture."* (HT 11) This participant then went on to explain that looking back at this experience, it was not the local authority's or the governors' intention to mislead, but the fact that they didn't know the full picture either. Milton et al. (2020) conclude that a-contextual job descriptions may suggest a "lack of agency" on the part of school governors, and it is this lack of specificity that can also be seen in this study, as very few recalled any significant requirements from the job description at the time of interview. Unusually, in one situation, the wider advertisement did seem to give more clues to the specifics of the school context: *"I can remember the wording of the actual advert, which was, 'if you want to come to a leafy suburb, don't apply', I remember that bit."* (HT 9) This headteacher was applying for a school in an area of multiple deprivation and saw this phrase in the advertisement as a useful and accurate indicator having now been in the post for the last seven years.

Headteachers in this study were asked whether they felt the job description indicated the need for specific skills and attributes once in post, or even if these were a focus at interview.

> *"I think certainly the first year there was a lot of redundancy, a lot of financial management that needed to be sorted. Well, there's no mention of it in within… you know, within the job description. I suppose you've got, you know, "Demonstrate strategic planning and financial management skills," which would… well, it's a bit… a bit of a catch all phrase, I suppose, isn't it there, for… you know, for covering some of those things? But, certainly there was no discussion about the, sort of… that, sort of, people management and, you know, financial management at that time. but, no, certainly in interview that wasn't talked about specifically, no."* (HT 8)

This headteacher explained that at interview, nothing about the financial issues at the school were discussed either, and this created a situation that was hard to deal with in the first few terms of headship. The level of change management needed at the school came as a shock to this same headteacher and resulted in the feelings articulated here:

> *"I think it's that, sort of, business… management side of things that I wasn't expecting, as I said, to be quite so prevalent within the role. I thought I'd be… you know, because I love working with children, at the end of the day, which is what we all come into the job… to do, and, you know, I was very aware in that first year that I was becoming more withdrawn from the pupils, which is the whole point that I went into the job in the first… first place, you know, so…"* (HT 8)

This example indicates that there was a lack of understanding about the school's financial position either by the governing body or by the local authority which would explain why neither financial nor change management appeared as a thrust at interview. This extract also serves to question if the desired skillset here was even fit for purpose, when the successful candidate felt so at odds with the reality of the role once in post.

Other accounts reveal similar experiences such as in this recount where the headteacher felt that the only elements that featured in the interview were managerial and organisational practices:

> *"They are looking at someone who can manage the school, because I… I suppose ultimately for governors and other people, that was the key thing, just get someone in to move the school forward and having someone to manage it as well, and I think they were obviously very concerned at the time because they'd… they'd not… this job had been advertised quite a few times before I took it. And there was… there was a concern there as well, I think that they needed to get a head in place, and they wanted to try and find a head in place. But I think leadership was hiding a lot of the… a lot of the underpinning skills, if you like, that they would hope that would be there, but were they written down and clarified? Probably not."* (HT 10)

 This headteacher infers that the leadership element of headship was not given importance or significance either in the job description or by the panel at interview. The impression given at interview, was that the governing body required someone to simply manage the school

because it had been without a head for so long. This supports the conclusion in Milton et al. (2020) that job descriptions are "dominated by organisational conceptions of practice" (p. 15) and which evidence the disconnect between the apparent requirements of the headship role and its articulation in policy as one that is occupationally orientated (WG 2017b).

Three headteachers felt that while the job description did not ask for a specific skillset, the thrust of the interview *did* seek to find them capable or otherwise of carrying out certain leadership tasks. These headteachers were recalling the interview for their current headships:

> *"I felt that they had a budget review, you could see they had a budget issue. And I felt they wanted to see, would I say that there were redundancies on the horizon and we'd have to go through redundancy process. And it was... and... and it was a real task in way because that was the school budget."* (HT 7)

> *"I had to do a financial, sort of, exercise where I looked at how I would manage the budget. I had to do an assembly. I taught the year 3-4 class, and I had to do a presentation to the staff on how I would lead them from their inspection and out of their category that they were in, and then I had a formal interview as well. It was very much to lead the school out of its situation with Estyn at the point, and to take the school forward."* (HT 9)

> *"I think because in the school historically there had been weaknesses in terms of assessment, monitoring, building up the SER. I think I was quizzed, looking back now, more on that aspect than perhaps I would have been in other interviews because obviously there was concern there. Equally, they knew the school was heading for another inspection, so they needed to know that somebody was secure in aspects where the school had been cited as perhaps being a little bit weak."* (HT 5)

These examples reveal that where a school has a clear path for development (redundancies, inspection or post-inspection) the interview process was specific to this end and indicating a degree of transparency with candidates. However, these accounts still show the degree to which the process was aligned to managerialist principles.

Other headteachers recalled similar thrusts at interview which indicated that the governing body and local authority needed a "*safe pair of hands*" (HT 12) or "*I would say they were*

looking for stability" (HT 6). These too reveal the request by governing bodies and the local authority panel members to recruit to competencies that align with a hierarchical understanding of management structures.

Relatively few participants acknowledged that at interview it was apparent that the governing body and the local authority knew the school well and understood what was needed from a new appointment as expressed by this headteacher when recalling the interview:

> *"So, it was to do with creating strategic direction, which does fit in with the job. Leading, learning and teaching, and to do with strength in the community focus were the main areas that they put on it, and that's again what they wanted me to build on in the interview as well... So, it... it aligned exactly, from what they asked on the job spec, to what I then put in the statement, they'd... it... almost exactly into the sorts of questions they were asking me. You know, so for example, on the community focus, it was trying to draw out who I considered all the stakeholders to be, how I involved them in the school, what I would plan to do to tie that into the vision. And it did quite... it did link quite well."* (HT 1)

This headteacher went on to recall that the job specification matched what was asked at interview and has also matched the skills and attributes that have been required in post since: *"... what they were asking for, I felt I could give. And what I feel I **have** given.*" HT1 finished by saying: *"We all know exactly how we want the school to be"* revealing the strength gained from an open, honest and transparent recruitment process and how the role subsequently rolled out, and which lead them into being in a strong position to manage the strategic direction of the school.

5.3.3 Training prior to headship and when newly appointed

This study seeks to understand the perceptions of headteachers regarding their early training needs and experiences of professional development. Questions were asked about their feelings about preparedness for headship prior to taking up the role, and whether this training was fit for purpose as they reflect on their current role.

Most participants in this study had similar experiences of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) that position it as a useful experience, but one that focused

on theorising and exemplifying leadership, rather than supporting aspiring headteachers to understand and deal with the plethora of managerial tasks that would come their way once in post:

> *"I would say that my training in NPQH was… focused on how you can lead and not manage… it was the message all the time and as much as you try and put it into practise, you always… you fight it because you're always being pulled to manage."* (HT 4)

> *"I didn't know about all the legal side of being a premises manager…none of that comes under your NPQH and I think unless you're a head having to do it, you don't know anything about the legal side."* (HT 1)

> *"I don't think the [NPQH] programme built you up for [the reality of the role], no. Basically, the programme built you up for really what the role of a headteacher **should** be. It's the leadership of the school, isn't it? But obviously within that programme, there's nothing that tells you how to look at a finance spreadsheet, there's nothing that tells you how to ensure you've got your health and safety of your building sorted. There was nothing on that programme that taught you how to have difficult conversations, with staff or parents or anybody…"* (HT 6)

> *"NPQH was… it was useful in terms of an awful lot of reflection on leadership styles … However, how much of what we talked about in those five or six days, I've actually used practically in the job day-today I'm not too sure. I think we all had aspirations within NPQH of the type of leader we wanted to be and the things we were going to do and everything else, and I think when you're in post it becomes a little bit, like, sort of, survival really, isn't it?"* (HT 8)

While these participants found it useful to review their practice against the Leadership Standards in place at the time of their study and to identify priorities for further leadership development through the NPQH process, the majority perceived the experience as one that lacked functionality in practical terms. Some even expressed that they felt better to forget the training, as they realised there was no place for it in the reality of the role:

"...all that lovely stuff that we learn about in NPQH, which is all about vision and…values and everything. To a certain extent, we have to kind of like put that to one side. We park that, because we're just…surviving." (HT 11)

Many participants in this study mentioned the benefits that the leadership coach gave them during their NPQH programme:

"...working with an experienced head and just talking things through, and I think that was such a valuable part of it...and, yes, [she] had the answer to all my questions, but [she] also explained how [she] got there and that [she] didn't always have the answers and that… so I found that really, really valuable. Yes, I suppose so having that relationship with other headteachers who don't judge you and just… can just… been there and this is what I would do. NPQH, for me, was just perfect. I loved it. I loved every second of it." (HT 4)

The feelings expressed here illustrate the benefits of coaching where the role is to encourage reflection and analysis, while offering guidance and suggestions. Several other participants also mentioned similar benefits of peer support that stemmed from meeting other candidates during the programme, and which has offered long-term benefits to their current role:

"I remember one big positive that's come from [the NPQH] is that, you know, [X and Y] and me obviously did the NPQH together and we've, you know, stayed closely in touch since then. You know, so I think having that, sort of, networking between the three of us, sometimes it's just nice to even just to throw a… a text across saying, "I've had a really rubbish day today," and then, you know, one of the others will say, "Well, it can't… can't be as bad as what's happened to me," or whatever and, you know, you just, sort of, you know, bounce off things like that and it does make you feel a little bit better that other heads are the… you know, similar… similar stage, you're experiencing similar things really." (HT 8)

"I think the… the… the most positive I think, or the… the most I've learned was actually doing the NPQH, because I did it when you still went, and you had like term leave, face-to-face days, and then you did a project, and then you had a res… residential…And I learnt so much from that, and also I made some really good networks that I still use now, like eight/10 years on..." (HT 2)

These serving headteachers are recalling positive experiences of their initial training for headship which indicate the importance of peer-to-peer support, and for those who have maintained this support, describe it as an informal 'safe space' for them to be able to communicate openly and without judgement with other newly appointed headteachers:

> *"That's somewhere... that's somewhere I feel we're... we're all completely open and honest about everything and everyone, and it's just sort of... it's... no holds barred, yes! That... that's my... that's my... that's my steam off point, it's... yeah. Keeps me sane! And lots of it is when we started off as new heads, it was... you don't want to look stupid asking a question that you should know the answer to...As a head. And I think because we were all new heads together, we could just ask each other, you know; are the... did you see the email, what on earth am I supposed to do? And they just, you know, either say, "No idea, I'll find out", or, you know, somebody would know the answer. And it was more a... more a support network in those first years as a head."*
> (HT 1)

While these extracts demonstrate the value of informal peer support by other aspiring or newly appointed heads, another study has emphasised the importance of expert mentoring as a tool for nurturing agentic dispositions (Conolly et al. 2018 p.622). Similar findings from this study endorse this position and clearly show how headteachers value the impartial and non-judgmental support of experienced peers when they are new in post:

> *"I had one [a mentor] as part of the new and aspiring headteacher programme as the new head...from a very, very similar sized school to mine, which is really helpful, and we could sort of compare notes on many, many things… they wanted you to succeed, and they wanted to help, and they weren't afraid to share. So, I think that peer model is, yeah, really, really valuable."* (HT 4)

The value alluded to here is that gained from outside of the usual formal accountability frameworks, where a newly appointed headteacher is able to explore ideas and strategies informally and which encourages independence, self-direction and autonomy. According to these accounts, the emphasis was on the relationship with the mentors and the pastoral support they could give, as much as it was focused on learning from their expertise:

"...we've not just been thrown into the deep water like I thought it would be. There's continuous support ever since to help you swim through that water. It's just knowing that there's… that's been the pleasant surprise, that you just know that there's so many people out there to help you out. And that no question is a silly question!" (HT 6)

Similar feelings regarding the value of mentor support to newly appointed headteachers, extended in this study to experienced heads who received peer mentoring following an inspection:

"And then the other thing that I found most useful I think in the whole time was after inspection, as part of our menu of support, I had, I think it was five days with [an experienced headteacher]. I don't know what they called it…Peer-to-peer support or something like that, and it just was… I used to go for the morning, and we'd have something, I don't know, marking or something would be… or, you know, there would be a focus, and we'd spend a morning, and we'd talk through things, and we'd look at resources, and… and then I'd have the afternoon where I'd go home, and I'd do a bit of work on it, and I just found that the most useful thing that I've done in the… in the last six years." (HT 2)

This account reveals the informality of this relationship and the lack of scrutiny that was appreciated by the mentee, having been through a recent inspection. Connolly et al. (2018) conclude that mentors can play a critical role in growing headteachers' professional capital and state that "the promotion of mentoring opportunities for HTs is imperative" (p.621). Evidence of the positive impact that mentoring can have on feelings of isolation can be typified by this account of a mentoring session:

"...he just spoke about everything that I believed in in leading and… oh, that really helped because I suddenly realised, oh gosh, I'm not on my own, I'm not the only one that thinks this, and oh, I might be all right, you know? Maybe I'll be able to do this, and he put so much confidence into me. It was really emotional though, because he really… he started to dig really, really deep into what you thought about your job and why you were in it, and it was almost like a self-discovery sort of training that was and I was really pleased that it wasn't just here's the list of stuff you do as a head, let's talk

about it and tick it off. It was actually… yeah, it was really meaningful, and that, for me, was great." (HT 4)

Many new headteachers can be overwhelmed by the myriad of challenges that face them once in post, and this participant expresses feelings of isolation that are mitigated by the mentor. This account also highlights the inconsistency in experienced for newly qualified headteachers, as others recall very different experiences. Several referred to training offered when newly appointed as inadequate for the realities of role. These were short sessions focused on finance training and management of premises, data and personnel:

"So, when you become a new head, I don't know if it was the same… when I became a new head, we had a sort of like an introduction session with finance and all different aspects of the job that wasn't mentioned in your job description, but it just didn't go deep enough and it didn't… it didn't do it. It was almost… it was, at the very, very beginning of the role and this is your training on this, but you don't even know what the role is… so… The training doesn't help because it was before you saw what the problems were." (HT 4)

This was similarly expressed as: *"...my induction as a head was sitting in an office, in [X] and have 30-minute deliveries from all these different areas of the Authority and that was it."* (HT 3) The opinion was that these sessions were not sufficiently in-depth to make their role as a new headteacher a comfortable one, as expressed by the same participant who regretted not having more involvement as a deputy head in financial aspects in a previous post: *"I realise now that I wasn't really involved in that process and that has really inhibited me or had a massive impact on my confidence as a new headteacher."* (HT 3) and added that the NPQH programme had not covered this aspect of headship either. Other headteachers explained that when new in post they felt ill-equipped for some aspects of the role, as this participant recalls feeling about personnel management:

"I did not know that I would be, from a structural point of view of the school, in charge of contracts, employment services and that's quite confusing at times. That the whole [online HR management system] I've never had any training on [it]. So, I did not... I did not know that!" (HT 7)

and fire risk safety assessments:

*"And then suddenly you have you to do it, no training, nothing. You know, so... so based on **what** am I doing a risk assessment on fire, fire risk assessment?"* (HT 7)

The consensus view in this study was that initial training through the NPQH programme did not always equip these participants well enough for their role as newly appointed heads. Previous experiences, such as being an acting head was seen as more valuable, in allowing them to 'practice' the role as expressed by several participants and explained here: *"I knew what I was getting into. I think also as well, having been an acting head, it's like a try before you buy."* (HT 1) Even so, many headteachers expressed that previous leadership and management experience, in addition to the mandatory training for headship was still not always sufficient to equip them for the role ahead. This extract from an experienced headteacher is articulating concerns about training prior to the role, while also doubting if training is missing in important areas as a serving headteacher:

"NPQH didn't really help, because I don't think that anywhere near scraped the surface of what being a headteacher was. I mean, things... you know, things that we have to do like safeguarding training and safeguarding fora and things, those are always useful, and they do help you do your job a little bit better. But coming into it, there's nothing to say about behaviour, how to deal with that and what to do. There is nothing about the counselling side of it, and the people side of it, and the child counselling side... and even the parent counselling side of it. There is nothing about dealing with people whose child has just died, or dealing with... you know, really serious life things that happen... To our staff, our parents and our pupils, and there's never been anything with that. That... that's a bit... an area that I still feel sometimes, am I doing this right or not? You know? Have I got enough empathy with this parent, and, you know, have I said the right thing or done the right thing? And that just isn't there, and that is a big, big part of the job which you wouldn't see on a job description." (HT 11)

The feelings articulated here illustrate the complexity of the headteacher role in managing the range of high stakes situations that are unexpected and unpredictable, and for which the training is scant or even non -existent. This headteacher is reflecting on this emotional situation where there is an increased perception of risk if the situation is handled incorrectly. Other participants in the study also mentioned the risks associated with lack of suitable training opportunities in more task based managerial roles, such as financial management:

> *"… the investment in a new head is crucial because that investment then pays dividends because then they're on their feet quicker and I feel that I could have been on my feet much quicker if I'd had the right financial development and support."* (HT 3)

and the impact this had on wellbeing: *"Again, as a new head, you don't want to let on that you're not coping either and the thing was I wasn't eating."* (HT 3)

Reflecting on the experience of being new to the post left this headteacher feeling unsupported in key areas of the role. Had support been offered, this participant felt that the role would have been more easily managed, and the self-confidence to act decisively would have been established earlier on in the career. Other headteachers in this local authority referred similarly to a 'gap' in training, where, as newly qualified headteachers, training was on offer, but when in post, appropriate training was lacking:

> *"There was nothing in the middle, and I just think you're sort of left to your own devices in…headship!"* (HT 2)

> *"Maybe little… little… a couple of very small golden nuggets but they're not big enough, yeah."* (HT 7)

> *"I didn't get much training as before or whilst I was a Headteacher, I did the serving Headteacher course but that, you know, that was good, the first part of it was good but then the follow up was very brief."* (HT 9)

> *"Just to… to improve your skills really as head… you know, in a headship. I just think sometimes we are just left to our own devices, and… and sometimes you do something, and you think, 'oh, actually, I did that really well', and then other times you think, 'I don't know'… 'I don't know if I'm even doing this right, but, you know, that'… 'that's the way I've always done it', or 'that's the way it was done when I came here'…Yeah, I do think there's a big gap between starting, and then being an experienced Head."* (HT 2)

In summary, the views of most participants in this study were that training prior to headship was not fit for purpose and that while some expressed the benefits of early iterations of the NPQH programme it did little to equip them for the demands of the role ahead of them.

However, the majority of headteachers were keen to share the value they saw in the relationships they built around them, whether this was through informal peer-to-peer networking, the coaching provided through the NPQH programme or the peer mentoring when new in post. These relationships offered a safe environment for them to seek professional support, without scrutiny and accountability, and where they could explore ideas, and share successes and failures with no risk or judgement.

Amongst the reforms in the third wave was a commitment to professional learning for headteachers through an enhanced learning offer for both extant leaders and those aspiring to lead. The establishment of the *National Academy for Educational Leadership* in 2018 as part of this third wave was also an acknowledgement that there was to be a new investment in the professional development of headteachers. However, despite these significant reforms, only two participants in this study mentioned the new *National Academy for Educational Leadership* at all. HT12 infers that the new *Academy* was perceived as being out of reach and not something that was accessible:

> *"There really is nothing else out there, if I'm honest, you know, and for me, you know I'm not at the stage of sort of, you know, going forward to be someone in the National Academy of Teachers, I'm not experienced enough as a head and I dipped into some of the things online that you can watch of theirs which have been quite interesting and a lot of your CPD is just sort of learning from people around you."* (HT12)

While HT12 felt there was more value to be had in learning from those around you, HT9 who had recently become an Associate of the new *Academy* saw some benefits to having access to the experiences on offer, despite having joined during the lockdown period of the Covid-19 pandemic:

> *"I think certainly having the opportunity to take part in those webinars and you know, learn from that, I think it's been strange in the fact that we haven't really got to know the group as such, you know, seeing a snapshot of people, you can get very different impressions, can't you, and I think I look forward to when I can actually perhaps start to build a network up."*

HT9 here is anticipating the benefits from networking on a broader basis, reinforcing the finding in this study that peer support was deemed as beneficial in both a professional and a pastoral capacity.

5.3.4 Training while in post

The participants in this study were asked to outline the professional development that is offered to them as serving headteachers, and to consider if the training on offer is relevant to their current role. Through discussion, it became apparent that training was seen in several distinct categories. Firstly, all statutory training such as safeguarding and child protection training, training related to premises management (fire marshal training, asbestos and legionella awareness training, sprinkler training, evacuation chair training as some example) as well as mandatory training for all public sector staff in GDPR, VAWDASV and the PREVENT duty amongst others, that brings compliance with the Welsh Government National Training Standards and Framework were seen as having primary importance. A second category of training was linked to finance management, personnel management (including safer recruitment training, sickness and absence management training as examples) and pupil management systems training, and was acknowledged by participants as being highly relevant to the role. Finally, a category of professional development that was connected to leadership development and wellbeing for staff and pupils, as well as personal wellbeing was also mentioned in participants' accounts. While it was acknowledged that all training was important, the first category was seen by headteachers as non-negotiable, the second desirable and the third aspirational. Additional to these areas of training, was professional development in connection with any new or changing initiatives, for example those covering any pedagogical reforms, curriculum development or the introduction of new accountability measures that needed to be communicated, which were all viewed by headteachers in this study as crucial to their role. Constraints on time and funding dictated which training and professional development could be accessed.

This account from one headteacher recalls that since having undertaken the NPQH programme, only statutory training in premises and personnel management, child protection and safeguarding had been undertaken. The following account illustrates how the headteacher must decide to make a trade-off between professional development in teaching

and learning, and leadership, and the training required in order to comply with the managerialist demands of the role:

> *"I don't think I've done any training since that hasn't been premises related. The only things I've done since were, you know, along the lines of safe recruitment training and all those ones...I've done [none]... not for leadership, I've done a couple of courses which were more to do with teaching, because I was still a teaching head. So...like, a science course, and then I've done things like premises management and legionella and fire marshal and all those...I haven't done anything to do with leadership."* (HT 1)

HT1 suggested decisions around which training to take up or give up was based on time constraints linked to the timetable of teaching: *"Yes. You know, and... and suddenly that [statutory training] can take up all your non-teaching time."* (HT 1) In this case, the decision was made to forsake leadership training in favour of mandatory training and development in teaching and learning practices. The view that mandatory training should be given priority was frequently expressed due to the need to be compliant in case of disciplinary action or litigation:

> *"... to be honest, in terms of CPD probably the most useful training has been things like [online HR management system] training and, you know, using financial systems and, you know, even stupid things like legionella and that kind of stuff, whatever. You know, those are the things you're managing day-to-day, those are the things that could, in theory, close your school if anything goes wrong or whatever, you know. So, you know... so you need to... you need to know what to do with those. You know, so in... so in terms of CPD again a lot of the CDP that's been useful has been more management side of it than towards the leadership side of it."* (HT 8)

This encapsulates a commonly held view amongst practitioners in this study that frames the difficulties with training and development as being a tension between training which is statutory and managerialist in focus, and if not accessed could put the school and the headteacher in risky, or even litigious situations, and the professional development programmes that contribute to the headteachers' leadership skills and qualities. The justification for solely accessing statutory training due to time commitments was frequently expressed, and not only in relation to teaching commitments: *"...the only way you can do*

anything that's going to support you in your role, that you need professional development-wise is to do it in your own time. But you have to, because school is just too busy." (HT 11) A further account reveals a headteacher who feels that time constraints prevent any proper engagement at all, as in the first account, and when returning to school in the second account:

> *"There probably is, but do I now spend my time looking to engage with that? No. Because I... I feel like it's an additional layer for me to tackle, and I haven't got the time. So, I don't actively look. Not for me personally."* (HT 7)

> "*And I just think they put so many courses on in such short spaces of time, you're bombarded. It's like…You need to go to this one, this one, this one, and then you'll go to something that's really good, and you'll be like, 'oh, this is brilliant, I want to do this', and you go back to school the next day, and there's a list of like 20 things all of a sudden you've got to do, and all that stuff that you were so keen to do gets further, and further, and further pushed back because you're back dealing with…[other things]"* (HT 2)

All headteachers expressed that a choice that had to be made when deciding which training they had time to access, even if that training would impact positively on their wellbeing or involved all headteachers across the region:

> *"I mean, this… this… the latest on your own headteacher wellbeing. I'd have loved to have gone, but there's no way I could give up every Thursday morning for three weeks on the trot. Then there was that The Child Looked After stuff that came out. Every Monday afternoon for four weeks?! I just… I can't give that amount of time."* (HT 11)

> *"But I would say that I have been… very picky. I… I do… I've learned now to… to say, "No I'm not going to that", even if it's at the Headteacher Conference in [X], and all headteachers need to go. If I don't think there's things on the agenda, I think I'm going to benefit from, I'd rather be here with the children or moving the school forward, looking at things on the SDP rather than go…… I have been on some less than interesting CPD over the years as well that have been a waste of time."* (HT 10)

The accounts from these five headteachers illustrate the difficulties in accessing training during the school day, and balancing development needs with the operational demands of

running the school. Various strategies had been used by headteachers to resolve this, including many who expressed that training 'on the job' was essential as explained here:

"You know, like I said earlier, finance was the one that concerned me but yes, you know, I think the training is basically going to the finance surgeries. You know, it's not an official training, but I think that is training in its own right, you know, as you talk through every line of the budget. So no, otherwise I haven't had any other training with that, but, again, the best training is doing it. I've not had so much training but, again, going through two inspections, that's as good a training as anything." (HT 6)

*"And… and I think part of being a headteacher is learning on the job. Part of it is. You can't have a course for… [everything]...there's parts of the job where you just think that there's no way this could ever have been conveyed to me in a course or in a webinar, or in any other way. It… you know, I needed to **live** this…"* (HT 11)

These accounts typify the opinions expressed that some parts of the headteacher role are best learnt through example, even if this means learning from mistakes in their practice:

"But you see, it's… it's almost like the training to me hasn't kept pace with the…evolution of the of the job. Or by the time they've brought something in, it's too late. You've done it and… and lived it and breathed it, so you've taught yourself, in other words. Learnt by your own mistakes whether you've done something right or wrong." (HT 11)

This account echoes that of others in this study, where headteachers express dissatisfaction with training on offer, as it lacks relevance to the role. This relates to issues of the fast-paced evolution of the parameters of the headship role referred to in earlier studies (Connolly et al. 2018) and where professional development is not seen as keeping pace with the multifarious responsibilities of headteachers (p.618) especially those rooted in an organisational approach to leadership and management. The following extract illustrates the frustrations felt by this headteacher with regard to the plethora of training on offer when new initiatives are introduced:

"It's really hard then, and it's also there's so many things… we seem to get either we have nothing for a long time, or we're just bombarded like with a new thing, whatever the new thing is, and it's really hard to maintain all the time." (HT 2)

The accounts from HT 11 and HT 2 encapsulate concerns felt by all participants in the study, which leaves them feeling unsure about their skills. Frequently, this was relevant to finance management, as above from HT 6, and below from HT 2 and HT 7:

"I mean, it's a bit… the biggest thing, and probably it was in the job spec, but that it's written in such a way so… vague, when you drill down that… you know, that section is actually something else, but, you know, it's like the finance part, that's a huge, huge part of… of your job as a head with zero training." (HT 2)

"But now we seem to have to be finance experts now!" (HT 7)

When referring to this shortfall, several headteachers made reference to their previous professional lives unrelated to education, and how these were beneficial to them as they moved from teacher to headteacher:

"You can see people coming through the system who do come into it just like I did, wanting to teach, but don't have a business background, don't have a financial background and you can see some of the areas, they just were beginning to sink in, and they got to a point where you could see they couldn't obviously see a way out. Now, luckily, I have got a little bit of a financial background. My A levels were in the business study side of it. Initially, that's where I was going to go before primary school teaching and so I have that really as a background to help me drive, not only the leadership side but also the teaching side, forward." (HT 5)

"Prior to teaching, I was an administrator, and I can do paperwork and I can plan, and do all the building stuff." (HT 1)

The sentiments expressed here show that both these headteachers realise that skills learnt in previous, more task-based roles, have benefited them in headship. When those skills are not learnt through prior experience, headteachers felt insecure and vulnerable:

> *"It's a bit like the counselling, isn't it? And the child protection stuff. That is a huge part of the job if you're in a certain school, which you've never been trained to do."* (HT 11)

Wider societal issues such as that mentioned above, increase the perception of risk that headteachers feel in post; a feeling that is compounded by fewer (or less available) support mechanisms in place through the local authority. This headteacher expressed the need to look for external expertise: *"So it's been down to myself to find the right experts to bring me up to knowledge on different areas."* (HT 5) Proactive headteachers who are able to reflect on their practice, develop strategies to mitigate the risk associated with 'not knowing'. They seek expertise and support through networks of peers or external mentors, and find avenues for professional development that take them beyond their day-to-day role, as in this example:

> *"Two things that I think have enriched my role recently. One is being a pioneer, curriculum pioneer, and being in on that right from the outset... The other part is being involved in the leadership side being selected to do the coaching, coaching for the NPQH, but equally being on the assessment panel listening to enthusiastic up and coming heads from different Authorities to ours in terms of their research projects, in terms of what they've been developing in their classrooms has been amazing CPD."* (HT 5)

This headteacher admitted that these roles were outside the usual remit, and took up a great deal of time, but they brought immense benefits to personal professional development and to the school overall:

> *"...it's made me think 'I don't know about that'...and allowing me to go on and sort of research different areas that hadn't even crossed my radar in [this local authority] but also within that, having those conversations with other heads from different authorities, talking about what they were doing in their school, what they were developing."* (HT 5)

Accounts such as these reveal headteachers taking up professional development opportunities beyond their day-to-day role of leading and managing a school, in order to bring benefits to themselves and the school. The benefits suggested are described in terms of learning from peers and from networking within and across authorities. On a wider scale, the

same benefits were experienced by headteachers who took up opportunities to visit schools abroad, as these headteachers describe:

> *"Yeah, it's had a bigger impact and also opened doors, I guess, created links, and just getting to know more people who are like minded and yeah, I would think probably as CPD work, that's probably the best thing that I've done."* (HT 9)

> *"That was amazing, really amazing. Again, made lots of really good links with people outside of [the local authority], so where I visited their schools and how they've visited my school, really, really good. So, I went out there, just looked at how the schools were structured, just so, so interested to see a little bit outside the box."* (HT 12)

These headteachers describe far-reaching benefits to themselves as leaders and to the school overall that are gained by building relationships with wider networks of professionals outside the physical boundaries of their schools (OECD 2016). In both cases, the benefits were long-lasting and gained through collaboration with like-minded professionals and similarly defined schools. In essence, the benefits were those previously identified in research that are brought about by collaborative inquiry, in these cases through a school-to-school or *across school* professional learning community (Harris et al. 2018 p. 5).

5.3.5 Training for the future

During interviews with head teaches for the purposes of this study, it was acknowledged that there were 'gaps' in the provision for training, that training was too slow to reflect the changing needs of the headship role, or that when new initiatives were brought in, headteachers felt bombarded by it. The question was asked about the training and professional development that headteachers felt would be appropriate and relevant for their lived experiences:

> *"As... as a leader, so I'd... I'd like to do something on the lines of either coaching or mentoring. I mean, I was told I was [X's] mentor, with absolutely no idea what I was supposed to be doing for her. Except sort of... except to sort of mirror, what had done when [X] was mentoring me, I'd had... not had any training or anything to do it."* (HT 1)

This headteacher was recalling the benefits of being coached through the NPQH programme and mentored as a newly appointed head, and was aspiring to provide this same worthwhile experience to others. Other participants expressed their desire to have the time needed to fully process training and to allow opportunities to be reflective, challenging and impactful. It was acknowledged that this time would be better away from the school premises, where time is uninterrupted, set aside and dedicated to the experience:

> *"I would have liked something that took you out of your school, that you had time to reflect on your practice, challenge your practice, away… you know, like, so it's not you're going to [X] and having sandwiches in your car. Whereas if you did a… a more intense thing away from school, you have the headspace then to do something with it."* (HT 2)

Some headteachers expressed the desire to improve their managerial skills in order to be 'better' at the role, even if it was a role they took on reluctantly:

> *"If that's what they want me to do well, if that's what the local authority want me to do well, to actually run a budget well, I think they need to invest a little bit more training into how heads do manage it, or give everybody a cluster business manager."* (HT 4)

Overall, all headteachers participating in this study expressed their desire for training and professional development that would enable them to function in an optimal way to fulfil their core purpose and to reflect their professional values, as expressed here:

> *"I... what I'd like to do is... is, as I said before, lead something with the new curriculum to... be innovative and work with children to progress with their learning, with their reasoning skills, yeah. Does that... because I... I don't think... I don't think it's recognised enough... because ... at the end of the day, whatever we feel as educators, our prime role is to teach people to live in this society of ours and become valued members of society through the world of work. That's... that's our job, isn't it?"* (HT 7)

A summary of the training needs highlighted by headteachers in this study reveal that each aspire to be the best they can be in their role. Whether this is fulfilling the managerialist administrative tasks; keeping the school community safe from financial disaster, fire, water

borne bacteria, falling trees or asbestos, or working collaboratively with other peers locally, nationally or internationally to bring about improved outcomes for the pupils in their school, all aspirations were driven by the desire to be competent, equitable, responsible and compassionate in all their actions. Earlier research into headship identifies two key issues in relation to training and development needs for headteachers. These focus on the changing role of headteachers over time, which place increasingly far-reaching demands on those in post, and the frequent articulation by headteachers regarding feelings of isolation and loneliness (WG 2009b). More contemporary studies (Davies et al. 2018) come to similar conclusions, showing that these issues have not been alleviated during the intervening years.

When asked about training for future needs, many participants in the study highlighted the expected responses that aligned with their aspirations to perform to the best of their capability by keeping up-to-date with further curriculum changes. However, these often were expressed in conjunction with feelings of being overwhelmed by the plethora of training on offer and confusion about how to prioritise amongst the meso-level of accountability already mentioned:

> *"I think that Welsh Government and [the local authority] are working incredibly hard to implement the new curriculum and schools as learning organisations. However, ...we were going to training or conferences that were delivered by Welsh Government one day and then you go to the [local authority] heads meetings the next, and it was the same, and it was very difficult to… you feel like you want to be a good headteacher. You know there is lots of change going on so therefore you've got to go and listen to what this change is and think about how to implement it and deliver it in your own school. However, it's very difficult to identify what are prioritising."* (HT 3)

This led to an overriding concern expressed in this study were the headteachers' feelings of tension between the love of their jobs: *"...however horrendous this has been, I would never not have done it, because I love it and I'm so proud of the school, and I'm so proud of the staff and the children and everything about it."* (HT 12) and their fears that the job can take too much from them personally and professionally:

> *"I think sometimes as heads we're very selfless as well. I think we're… we're at the back of the queue for lots of things that go on, and I think sometimes if we're not*

careful, we're the ones that end up with office stress and various things because it's been too late to save ourselves to some degree." (HT 10)

The account above echoes the findings in Davies et al. 2018, where data illustrated similar perceptions amongst headteachers at the fear that there would be 'no one looking out for them" (p.12) This belief was predicated on the same basis as articulated above - that while support mechanisms were in place for other staff, none were present for headteachers. This is a finding clearly articulated in this study by the two headteachers below:

"I've been on some training myself with… with ACES, and part of that was resilience training for staff and I found it really, really helpful. So, we fed that back to all the staff in school, but sometimes I know… we've got to look after the wellbeing of heads, but actually nothing's done to look after the wellbeing of heads." (HT 4)

"So, I think they need to look at the mental health support of headteachers, so ELSAs are offered supervision once a term, heads aren't, because I've put supervisions in place for my staff but no-one's put them in place for me." (HT 3)

A consequence of these feelings of lack of interest in the mental health and physical wellbeing of headteachers were some expressions of lack of aspiration and ambition, and feelings of just 'hanging on in there' (HT 10) until retirement:

" I still love the job. I still like what I do...but also, more of looking forward at me and where I'm going to be by the time I reach 60 and it's probably fair to say that… that that's my goal, is to try and get there in one piece. And to stay intact! And I think for me it's… it's by having that goal of trying to stay fit, healthy and well and doing a good job, which is important to me. I've got no aspirations now." (HT 10)

"I think it's very hard for somebody who's not in education to understand the type of stresses that we're under. I know that I can't sustain this at this level for another however many years I've got to do this for. You know, somebody depressingly told me a few years ago that I'm only halfway… halfway through my teaching career or whatever, and you think, 'Oh, my goodness. Really?'" (HT 8)

By contrast, some headteachers shared an alternative narrative; one that spoke to a more positive outlook on the road ahead for headship. These accounts were often shared by

headteachers who had embraced a wider perspective of professional development, seeing it as a collective responsibility to improving schools:

> *"Leadership basically has changed altogether because you know. Everyone within school now is a leader. It's not just on the shoulders of the headteacher. It's that shared leadership, it's that collaboration and that's the change I see."* (HT 6)

This sentiment upholds the ambition exemplified in 'Our National Mission' (WG 2017b) where the description of schools as learning organisations was initially propounded. A few headteachers in this study saw themselves as facilitators of change as they endeavour to build a learning culture which is built on a shared understanding of what is meaningful and purposeful for that school, as here when referring to the work undertaken with staff on developing the school's vision for the new curriculum:

> *"Well, I suppose the change in the curriculum has been the biggest thing and giving us the freedom and the responsibility to take it forward in a way that we want to, that's…you know, the message that comes from the area training that, you know, you've got to make it fit your school and what your school needs, which were actually being looked at a bit more, you know, independently and not to fit a square peg in a round hole."* (HT 9)

This study found that where headteachers had been active within professional learning communities (PLCs) as a practice underpinned by distributed leadership, (Harris 2009) teachers working together on a shared area of enquiry was an established practice:

> *"I have got forward thinking staff as well, and they like to know what's going on. They like to trial things. They keep an eye out. I've got the privilege of working with staff who don't have a curriculum that they pull out every year and they keep going over it. They like to challenge themselves. I always say to them I want to be excited about coming into school. I want to be enthused and, if we're not as a team, then the children aren't going to be. So, it's about creating things that we hope that they will enjoy and that's obviously we do that through the pupils leading with us as well."* (HT 5)

Accounts such as that above goes some way towards evidencing that the third wave of reform (Egan, 2017) is reaching all local authorities in Wales. Following the more dirigiste second

wave of reform in 2011, a new wave epitomised by greater professional agency was promised, and signs of steps to develop the professional capital of headteachers may be appearing in schools in this local authority. Some headteachers reported signs of recognition of the professional value of heads, as did this participant who had been in the role for 25 years:

"I think, possibly, headteachers were, sort of, quite valued at one point and I think we've gone through a phase where we weren't. I think maybe that's turning again a little bit now…just my perception of what people think that you need to give them or what they ask of you…" (HT 9)

Other headteachers in this study felt that despite a sense of approaching change, it was important that they still remained proactive:

"Yes, I think you do need to be proactive. You have got to have an eye on what is happening, and you have got to push yourself to be involved. We talked earlier about 'what gives' and I said my private life, and it's reading around what we do, it's keeping your eye on things that are coming out. It's looking at the Welsh Government site. It's talking to people from other Authorities. It's talking to people from England and even other countries, listening to what is being developed and if you're doing that, things that come in aren't a huge shock for you." (HT 5)

And some headteachers remained sceptical that not all change may be for the best:

"I'd like to say I think it [the new professional standards] will make it better, but it will be how it's perceived, how they use it, isn't it? Is it going to be used in a proactive supportive way, or is it potentially going to be another stick to beat people with?" (HT 12)

The headteachers interviewed for this study ultimately remained hopeful that any further reforms initiated by the Welsh Government would serve to foster their professional agency, build leadership capital and alleviate some of their managerial burdens in order to allow them to exercise them.

Chapter 6: Discussion -In the Fitting Room

6.1 Introduction

This study aimed to provide a critical analysis of the professional role of primary headteachers in one rural Welsh local authority. The research questions that guided this study were:

- What do serving headteachers perceive are the skills and attributes that aspiring headteachers are expected to hold before being appointed to the role, and how do these relate to the role in reality?

- Do headteachers perceive their professional role has changed over their tenure, and if so, how?

- What are headteachers' perceptions of the organisational and political changes that may have impacted on their professional role?

- What training and opportunities for continuous development do headteachers feel have been most helpful in fulfilling their headteacher role?

This discussion chapter will address each of the research questions in turn with the intention of responding to the substantive and theoretical issues identified. While all issues existed prior to the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, many have been intensified due to its impact. Harris et al. (2020) refers to school leaders as being the 'pinch point in the system' (p. 244) where so much is expected of headteachers from all sides; local authorities, staff, governors, parents and the wider community, while simultaneously attempting to implement many new iterations of operational guidance. All participants in this study inevitably referred to the pandemic and its impact on their role as this research took place over the course of the early onset of Covid-19. While the findings refer to this impact and provide some emerging insights, and while there has been some early research into the effects of the pandemic on all sectors of education, further research in the future is needed to ensure the full impact and effects can be measured on the role of school leaders during this time of crisis.

6.2 Motivation, skills and attributes for headship

All participants in this study were initially asked to recall their original motivation for taking on a headship role. They were subsequently asked to provide details of the job description and person specification that are essential parts of the process in headship candidature,

before finally describing the experience on the day of their interview. They were asked to recall whether the paperwork prior to application was comprehensive in terms of the expectations of the role, whether a clear set of skills and personal attributes were expected and whether these aligned with their expectations of the needs of the successful applicant. Participants were asked whether any further clarity was provided at the interview through questioning by the panel. The headteachers in this study were then asked to consider whether the skills and attributes asked of them prior to and at interview, were those required in their lived reality. By tracing the complete experience through from motivation to appointment and on to the lived reality, a clear picture of any anomalies in the process would be highlighted.

This study sought to discover headteachers' motivation for seeking their current post, rather than understanding any disincentive *not* to take up the role. Recent surveys in Wales (NAHT Cymru 2021) indicate that there is a significant lack of incentive to move from deputy or assistant headteacher positions into headship where more than half of assistant and deputy head teachers surveyed (53%) indicated a lack of aspiration to headship, with more than a fifth (23%) undecided. Connolly et al. (2018) found disincentive through increased potential for risk and the perceived move towards organised professionalism in headship. However, this study found examples of recruitment which go against the 'crisis' rhetoric used by the media (BBC, 2016) and the deficit narrative employed by leadership unions (NAHT Cymru 2021) that describe aspiration to headship as being "at risk of collapse" (p.4). For example, headteachers in this study cited previous inspirational colleagues as a reason to actively pursue headship, along with stories of loyalty to the school and its community, in addition to natural progression from a deputy headteacher post. Other studies put forward the notion of a 'career deputy' (MacBeath et al. 2009) as a senior leader with no incentive to progress to headship, perhaps witnessing first-hand the pressure of mounting accountabilities and workload of the headteacher (Rhodes and Brundrett 2009). Connolly et al. (2018) highlight insufficient succession planning in schools which allow for deputies to move into headship (p.15) as well as the intensification of the perception of risk in the role of headship along with an increase in managerial bureaucracy that disincentivises deputies from progressing onwards. However, this study found no evidence of 'blocking' by deputies or of the disincentives outlined by Connolly et al. (2018) which could be explained by the lack of

deputies in the participating schools due to low pupil numbers. For example, in the cohort of headteachers studied, only half of those interviewed had a deputy post within the school's staffing structure and the extant headteacher had often risen from senior teacher (either in the same school or a neighbouring one) into headship via an acting headteacher position. Many smaller schools were 'two-teacher' schools; the headteacher and one other. Several participants in this study expressed that their incentive to move into headship from being 'the other' member of staff was due to loyalty to the school and not wanting 'an outsider' to come in above them. The rurality of the local authority where the study was conducted may also account for the lack of issues with succession planning, as fewer schools mean fewer headships and job opportunities, and greater distance between schools, so unless relocating across the county or living away from home during the week due to over-long commutes, the incentive to take on the headship in the existing school was strong.

All participants described the skills and attributes they offered to the role in similar terms, as the ability to problem-solve, to have good organisational and communication skills, the ability to delegate, and to have creative thinking skills. Other skills such as Welsh language skills, change management skills, being an excellent class teacher, being a good decision maker and having the ability to reflect were also mentioned by participants as featuring in their professional offer to the role.

Amongst the personal traits headteachers felt they offered to the role were having a good work ethic, being resilient, offering a clear vision, being enthusiastic and/or innovative, having an appreciation and understanding of the local community and being flexible and empathic. Also offered as important personal traits were consistency and continuity, an understanding of inclusion, the ability to be selfless and approachable.

While it was important that the study drew on the headteachers' perceptions of the skills and attributes they felt they offered to the role prior to taking up their post (the supply-side) it was also important to gain an understanding of the desired skills-set at the recruitment stage (the demand-side) as well as the skills required once in post.

Published job descriptions for headship in Wales have been previously researched (Milton et al., 2020) through a demand-side content analysis of job descriptions. Advertisements for headship, including the job description and person specification are constructed by the

governing body of the school with the support of the local authority HR department, and in the case of Church schools, the diocese. The demand-side analysis of job descriptions for headteachers in Wales (Milton et al. 2020) concluded that very few are written to the specific school context or feature bespoke requirements for the skills and attributes of the leadership role. Similarly, all headteachers in this study recalled that their job descriptions were generic, although wider information about the school occasionally contextualised this through a brief description. This study revealed that where a school had a clear path for development (redundancies, inspection or post-inspection) the interview process was specific to this end, even if the job description hadn't been. While some examples indicated a degree of openness and transparency with potential candidates, they also revealed how headship is framed in terms of the weight given to managerial and organisational tasks, lone-hero headship and vertical management structures, and high levels of external accountability where success is judged by meeting external performance metrics and technocratic principles. Other studies highlight similar framing of the headship role in Wales into one dominated by managerialist principles (Connolly et al. 2018; Milton et al. 2020) and furthermore, this study and other studies also find evidence of a disconnect between such an organisational account of the professional work of heads teachers and the policy aspirations within the current third phase of education policy (Connolly et al. 2018; Davies et al. 2018; Egan 2017). Where job descriptions articulated a need for shared enterprise, and where this was a thrust at interview, headteachers in this study recalled gaining strength to fulfil their role through a clear, shared vision that was initially offered up through the recruitment process.

Such a generic approach to recruitment found some headteachers in this study at odds from the very start of their role due to unclear and misrepresentative job advertisements and/or interview questioning and this sometimes led them to subsequently having to face unforeseen situations once in post (unexpected redundancies, poor budget position, discipline issues for example). A lack of specificity about the headteacher role and the absence of transparency about the school's needs communicated during the recruitment process, resulted in some participants in this study lacking confidence in the governing body and local authority from the outset. Smith (2010) has suggested that governor staffing sub-committees often feel their role in recruitment as superfluous, as the process of headteacher recruitment is dominated by local authority officers. Another study has suggested that the

perception of governors as having a redundant role within the recruitment process is due to their lack of confidence in understanding the school's needs and therefore impacting their ability to produce a job description that is genuinely contextualised and highly pertinent to the setting advertising the post (Milton et al. 2020: p. 14). This study found evidence to suggest that, once in post, it was clear that there was a lack of awareness by the local authority in terms of the needs and character of the community local to the school, and at times, not a sufficient in-depth understanding by the governing body of the needs of the school and the challenges it faced; challenges that were certainly not communicated through the job description or even explored at interview. The findings of this study endorse the suggestion by Milton et al. (2020) that a 'recalibration' (p. 14) of headship towards a more occupationally situated one is needed in order that the position is better articulated in the recruitment process. Furthermore, this study also suggests that in order for headteachers to feel confident when securing a new headship role, the recruitment process needs to present them with greater accuracy and clarity with regards to all aspects of the school and its community and the potential challenges they may face if they accept the post.

This study evidenced that through the recruitment process, the role of headteacher was presented as one that is situated in an organisational approach to professionalism (Milton et al. 2020) and which is at odds with headteachers' core professional values (Conolly et al. 2018) and which, in turn, became a cause for work-related stress (Scott et al. 2021) as the job rolled out. Evidence was presented by participants that they offered up a plethora of skills, attributes and personal traits at interview that were not specifically requested, but which are nonetheless required on a daily basis once in post. Despite believing they had a sound understanding of the role in reality (through having been an acting head, or by close working with the previous headteacher for example) all participants in the study articulated their surprise, disappointment and occasional trepidation at being required to offer a wider range of skills, attributes and personal traits that they ever envisaged needing at the outset of their career. For example, at interview, very few participants mentioned offering skills related to organisational approaches, such as financial skills, business management skills, premises management skills or data management skills. Yet, these were described by headteachers as forming a core element of their professional lived experience. Ironically, despite feeling that, as potential candidates, they offered a vast range of relevant values, beliefs and dispositions,

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once in post headteachers felt these proved insufficient to adequately fulfil the role. This was explained by them as being due to the continually expanding role of headship, which has moved it beyond its core purpose of leading teaching and learning (where the motivation of headteachers is to lead on curriculum development) and into one that is characterised by the intrusion of bureaucracy and managerialism. Many of these managerialist tasks were described by them as being outside the headteacher role but which fell to them, nonetheless. Headteachers in this study felt that due to funding issues, auxiliary roles in schools have all but disappeared and in conjunction with increased levels of accountability, the lived reality of headteachers in 2021 show them struggling as they endeavour to manage their professional duties, adhere to their professional values and lead fulfilling professional lives.

These findings contribute to other studies where there is an articulation that the headship role is in need of recalibration and reframing (Connolly et al. 2018 and Milton et al. 2020) if there is such an apparent mismatch between the perception of the role (by governors, local authority and diocesan officers) and the skills and attributes which are employed in reality. Such a disconnect can also be applied between headteachers' professional lives and the occupationally-orientated conceptions of professional practice that is articulated in the latest phase of educational reform in Wales, and which is explored further through the discussion of the following two research questions.

6.3 A changing professional role?

The headteachers in this study described an overall perception that their professional role was constantly shifting through many changes to education reform that have been observed in Wales especially since devolution; changes between phase one (1999-2009) and phase two (2010-2015) and then a realignment closer to their professional values in phase three (2016-present day). OECD (2014) identified the main strengths and challenges of the Welsh school system, and amongst the findings were issues caused by the high pace of reform that lacked a long-term vision and which was sometimes too high paced. The report concluded that the impact of this high rate of change was a teaching profession who felt increasingly overwhelmed and who showed a lack of engagement with, and commitment to the process of change. OECD (2017) referred to this as 'reform fatigue' and Evans (2021) suggests that

this 'fatigued' state presents a genuine risk to the successful implementation of further reforms such as the imminent new curriculum for Wales.

Further research (Connolly et al. 2018) highlighted how this fast-paced rate of change in Welsh education policy reform has also led to extra pressure on headteachers to implement knee-jerk initiatives with little time to consider their efficacy and appropriateness to their school context, while also being a leading cause for work-related stress (Scott et al.2021), giving rise to feelings of increased risk and vulnerability (Davies et al. 2018) and being amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Data from this study endorses these findings and reveals headteachers as exhausted by the rapidity of the reform process. The need for compliance with each of the reforms was also provided as a cause for consternation and stress, especially where this conformity was demanded regardless of relevance to their school and/or local community. Participants knew that fundamental to pupil outcomes, is a school that reflects its community, knows it well and engages with it (Sarjeant 2020). So, to implement edicts through a 'top down' vertical work structure and when this is not always appropriate was often associated with feelings of risk.

Also fundamental to the headteachers' perceptions of change was an observable shift in their professional status, and from which arose issues of trust and respect. Despite the rise of (head) teaching as a professional occupation over the last two centuries, almost all participants in this study perceived their roles as headteachers as having been lowered in terms of professional status and position in the community during their time in tenure. This shift was associated with the introduction of metrics of accountability within phase two reforms, which reduced professional agency, but paradoxically amplified risk, thus resulting in an overall sense of what Ball (2003) described as 'deprofessionalisation'.

Power, as exercised in modern day professional institutions has been termed as a form of surveillance, and in schools can come from above (regulatory bodies), beside (peers and communities) and below (pupils) (Bourke et al. 2015). The headteachers in this study expressed a sense of increased scrutiny from each of these perspectives, which has arisen as a consequence of the more closely monitored state control of the enactment of changing educational policy post 2011. What was perceived by headteachers as the public naming and shaming of schools brought about by the categorisation system of 2014 in the second phase of reform, was linked to how the participants in this study felt their roles were perceived by

parents. For example, if their school was categorised as 'green' then they were a 'good' headteacher, and this gave them status and respect. Conversely, when red or amber, headteachers lost professional reputation and regard through the drop in this ranking system and the need for support to raise them back up it.

Facilitating this perceived shift in professional status was explained by participants as the rise of social media. Headteachers reported their concerns with the undermining of trust in their profession through negative public reporting, where not just parents, but wider society is given a conduit for public scrutiny through social media. The escalation of online social networking as a means of communication has increased the potential for interaction as well as the potential for challenge and stress (Scott et al. 2021) and so could be seen as a threat to the wider social standing of the teaching profession. Susskind and Susskind (2015) consider that the professions established a reputation for trustworthiness in order to signal their reliability in society, and that what will replace this in the new technological future is a form of quasi-trust (p.237). Quasi-trust, as a form of diluted traditional trust in professionals, will be signalled more by confidence in a service than by a fiduciary duty to an individual person, i.e., headteachers in this context. Information technology was widely acknowledged in this study as allowing headteachers to be effective communicators, but many also voiced their concerns that the open conduit that this facilitates was a source for open and forceful expressions of dissatisfaction with education showing that as yet, this quasi-trust is not in place. Evetts (2009b) states there are questions to be asked about complex systems of accountability and control, and whether they damage trust; describing this as a contemporary paradox, where there is an increasing expectation for professionalism in modern society, but where society feels able to increasingly challenge the trust and competencies of professionals. There is evidence in this study that supports this view, as some headteachers felt they should be trusted and respected more by parents to get on with the job they were employed to do.

Also reported by headteachers were changes in the profession surrounding the democratisation of knowledge brought about by the development of the internet and the resulting ease of accessibility of information. Susskind and Susskind (2015) refer to professionals as 'gatekeepers' of knowledge and expertise (p.231) who stand between individuals and organisations and the information they need. Both these paradigms are

predicated on the assumption that technological advances in society will lead inevitably to profound changes to relationships between experts and non-experts, and a displacement of traditional professions and those who carry them out. Some headteachers in this study articulated this by expressing that they did not want there to be a 'them and us' relationship, where parents felt beholden or fearful in their relationship with the school. These headteachers wanted a relationship on a more equitable footing, one which was more open and honest, while acknowledging that this could come with risks. Amongst these headteachers, there was a recognised need, not to fall, but to actively step down, from the 'pedestal' of headship in order that they can be seen as approachable and accessible by the school and wider community. These headteachers resisted expert/novice hierarchical conceptualisations and welcomed more open relationships with parents, as these often came with mutual trust and respect.

Both the issue of the democratisation of knowledge and the issue of increased scrutiny of professionals are linked through the 'incremental transformation' in how expertise is produced and distributed in society (Susskind and Susskind 2015). Also linked is how social media allows (and perhaps encourages) a form of insidious accountability within professions which increases as levels of trust in professionals' expertise diminishes, and which poses a risk to occupational professionalism built on trust between practitioners and clients (Evetts 2009b). This relationship of trust, which was articulated in terms of that between the school and its community, was given significance by all headteachers in this study without exception. An Estyn report published in July 2020 emphasises the benefits that can be brought to all parties when schools and their communities work well in partnership (Estyn 2020). A series of recommendations for schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government is included in the Estyn report that emphasise the need to plan strategically to ensure that strong partnerships with families become an integral part of the work of schools, as this improves wellbeing and achievement of pupils. It was very frequently acknowledged by all headteachers in this study that open and honest community relationships worked well to improve outcomes for children, and it was a common understanding that these relationships were highly beneficial. However, this study also shows that community engagement did not come without anxiety and challenge. One of these challenges was linked to changes to the headteacher role as it becomes increasingly aligned to managerialist and bureaucratic logics

which resulted in insufficient time and energy for headteachers to build functioning relationships with the wider community, while simultaneously knowing how much this could enrich experiences for the school and its pupils. This finding echoes that of another study (Connolly et al. 2018) that suggests the encroachment of an organisational understanding of headship and an increase of managerial bureaucracy into the role has resulted in headteachers feeling misaligned from their core values and being unable to implement what they know would work. This particular challenge is explored in detail through discussion on the organisational and political changes to headteachers' professional roles in the following section.

6.4 The impact of organisational and political changes

As discussed above, the headteachers in this study perceived several key changes to their professional role during their tenure, as well as an overall sense of overly fast-paced reform and reduced support. Overwhelmingly, headteachers described the ramifications of organisational and political change in the profession during the second phase of reform (2010-2015) as an expansion in managerial bureaucracy brought about by increased accountability measures in connection with a lack of professional agency. The consequences of which were expressed as being far-reaching and highly damaging to both the current headteachers' professional function and their personal wellbeing. While reforms in phase three from 2015 onwards attempted to ameliorate this situation by re-engaging with headteachers and re-establishing their professional agency through initiative such as the construction of a new curriculum, some of this ambition has been thwarted by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There have been many critiques of the overly dirigiste system which characterised the second phase of reform following the 20-point plan of Leighton Andrews in 2011 (Andrews 2011) and the conflicting accountability frameworks within the meso-levels. Findings in this study support previous research (Connolly et al. 2018) where unnecessary overlapping of meso-levels of accountability and additional scrutiny via governing bodies, the local authority and the regional consortia were felt by headteachers as a cause for confusion and tension, as they all create challenge, and do so alongside inconsistent and sometimes conflicting support mechanisms. An example of this arose in accounts of headteachers' relationships with their challenge advisors where many reported a rapid changeover between advisors and

inconsistencies between them, and tensions regarding who they should be answerable to amongst the still 'messy-meso'. Unsurprisingly, the most recent OECD report published in 2020 following a review of Wales's readiness to implement the new Curriculum for Wales policy, highlighted the need to continue to develop the role of regional consortia by enhancing schools' improvement service infrastructure. In this report, following the finding that regional consortia still focus on challenge, rather than support, suggest that one way continue to strengthen school improvement systems would be to invest in challenge advisors as the initial contact for schools in order to enhance schools' ability to develop as learning organisations (OECD 2020b p. 84).

It has been suggested that these tensions have been resolved during the third phase of reforms since 2015 through policy reforms that highlight the need to increase headteacher professional agency following the 'dark shadow' cast by phase two of reforms (Evans 2021). However, several headteachers in this study still felt greater degrees of managerialism encroaching their role, and fewer opportunities for professional agency during their tenure. Whereas professional agency should see headteachers having the capacity to make decisions and choices, take principled action and be enactors of change (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012), headteachers participating in this study described feelings of stress, loneliness and risk in the process of exercising agency. The causes of this were identified as time management (being under pressure to make the 'right' decisions) and the level of external accountability that meant that decision-making became nominal and not meaningful. It has to be acknowledged that this study took place during a global pandemic where there was a sudden increase in managerial responsibilities laid at the doors of school leaders. Participants felt these responsibilities keenly and expressed the need for unequivocal compliance. This unique set of circumstances may have coloured the participants' perceptions of their ability to enact change, when a sense of powerlessness and uncertainty was all encompassing in society at this time.

Despite attempts to foster levels of agency in the third wave of reform, headteachers in this study expressed difficulty in exercising autonomy especially when this had budgetary implications. For example, all headteachers without exception communicated their difficulties reconciling funding to the reality of how they felt the school should run operationally. Dependent on their specific role, and mostly, but not exclusively limited to

those in teaching roles, headteachers expressed frustration at their inability to secure funding to allow them to relinquish some of the managerialist tasks (often related to premises management) which they felt accountable for. This resulted in these teaching heads having to spend what little time was available to them in completing functions such as clearing drains, unblocking toilets and completing milk claims, rather than their core purpose. Headteachers at larger schools where levels of challenge were perceived to be greater in terms of higher levels of pupils with additional needs, also expressed dissatisfaction with how their schools were funded. It was widely felt that this was due to the unique situation and the needs of school communities not being fully understood, appreciated or heard in the wider education system.

By contrast, a few headteachers expressed excitement and the 'freedom' to explore change and innovation in their professional role, which grew out of intelligent accountability mechanisms emerging from the most recent reforms, mostly in connection to new curriculum developments.

Therefore, the findings in this study provide evidence that the impact of organisational and political changes are being felt keenly amongst serving headteachers in this local authority, especially when looked at in relation to their perceived role prior to headship. This perception could be explained in several ways; as a teacher prior to taking on a leadership role, the understanding of accountability in headship could have been different to that supposed. Also, accountability comes in many forms, and it may be that there was a perception that formal accountability had lessened (as per policy) but that informal accountability had increased. Or perhaps there had been a lag in accountability measures filtering through to headteachers in this rural local authority as a lingering transition between the second and third waves of reform.

It was important in this study to seek clarity on how headteachers felt regarding different forms of accountability and where and how they were generated. Internal accountability in schools is generally viewed as collective professional responsibility to all its learners and is driven by a continuous cycle of internal monitoring where each rotation of scrutiny leads to a self-sustaining and internally reinforcing strategic commitment. This was generally well understood by participants in the study and was often cited as one of the core principles of their headship role. External accountability differs through its focus on adherence to

externally defined reform requirements, and the implementation and observance of professional standards and regulatory policies (Fullan et al. 2015). In this study, these external pressures were acknowledged by all headteachers as being necessary in the role, but were strongly acknowledged as having too much precedence within it. Fullan et al. (2015) argue that internal accountability should be the priority for policy makers, as it is through this that individuals and groups carry the responsibility for continuous development. In comparison, external accountability that is borne by system leaders, and includes cycles of monitoring and intervention, can only be effective if the internal accountability is robust and willingly done in the first place. The data in this study showed that organisational roles such as form-filling, data and premises management and the emphasis on setting and reaching targets had come at a cost to those tasks and responsibilities which are less easily measurable, but which can bring more substantial benefits such as community relationships, staff and pupil wellbeing and curriculum innovation.

This finding clearly upholds Evetts's (2009b) argument where it is stated that standardisation of work procedures through the expansion of organisational professionalism can lead to disincentive in key areas that are crucial to headship such as creativity and innovation. This was clearly evidenced in this study, through the accounts of headteachers lamenting their inability to exercise these professional values. Therefore, those increased accountability measures which drew headteachers away from this core purpose were a cause for resentment and frustration. Freidson (2001) refers to the 'logics' of managerialism which encroach on the core professionalism within organisations, and outlines these as increased standardisation, hierarchical structuring, and technicist practices. The form of professional work which results from Evetts's (2009b) organisational professionalism is illustrated in this study through the headteachers' duties in fulfilling statutory health and safety measures in connection with school buildings (legionella testing, taking meter readings for example) and grounds maintenance (tree surveys and equipment checks); duties that headteachers felt compelled to carry out due to the heightened risks associated with non-compliance. These practical duties may once have been fulfilled by auxiliary staff but were now carried out by headteachers due to loss of funding for these supporting posts. This was felt especially keenly by those headteachers whose role included an amount of class teaching. Exacerbating these frustrations were those around the lack of training in some managerial tasks, for example

those focusing on the financial management of the school. Those headteachers who had a background in finance either through previous study or employment, expressed good fortune at having this expertise. Others expressed low self-confidence and felt isolated by their lack of it. The articulation overall was that those managerial tasks that could potentially pose a risk to headteachers in their professional roles, were the very ones that they were less well equipped to carry out and for which they had least support. This epitomises the general de-professionalisation identified by Ball (2003) and which Collet-Sabé (2017) describe as the 'proletarianisation' of professional work. In some instances, participants in this study described measures taken operationally in order to release them from taking on these managerial tasks. These varied from utilising grants to fund auxiliary posts such as cluster business managers or fulfilling other roles within the local authority in order to bring extra funding in to 'buy' headteachers' release time in order that they could exercise their core professional roles.

Although both Fullan et al. (2015) and Evetts (2012) acknowledge the detrimental effects of external accountability and organisational professionalism, Evetts sees limited benefits to external forms of regulation through transparency and forms of wider quality assurance measures. While data generated by this study found much evidence of the pressures of external accountability on headteachers, many leaders also acknowledged that these organisational systems are indeed necessary to mitigate risk; a concern that headteachers felt especially keenly at the time of this study, carried out as it was during the uniquely challenging time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Increasingly, professionals are finding their day-to-day work articulated in the language of risk (Horlick-Jones 2005; Connolly at al. 2017) and this can apply to both operational risk and reputational risk (Power 2004). Operationally, headteachers are well used to completing risk assessments for school day trips or residential visits, outdoor activities and in connection with health and safety. However, it was articulated in this study, that some headteachers did not always feel competent enough to complete risk assessments due to their lack of expertise, especially when these related to significant areas within health and safety as in the circumstances of the pandemic. The specific accountability measures around all schools' responses to the pandemic, epitomised by fast-paced changing protocols as the pandemic rolled out, intensified the strain between accountability and risk. Headteachers understood the importance of their role in managing internal accountability,

where keeping pupils and staff safe from risk of harm, and ensuring the continuation of effective online or blended education were of paramount concerns. Managing the internal risks associated the specific crisis around Covid-19 meant that accountability from external sources (such as losing momentum in the implementation of the new curriculum) was a risk they were compelled to take.

While critiquing these various forms of accountability and concomitant intensification of risk, the headteachers in this study invoked a notion of intelligent accountability. The study framed this through the work of Freidson (1994, 2001) O'Neill (2013) and in particular Evetts (2009b, 2012 and 2013) where a reduced form of accountability that is located within organisational professionalism gives way to notions of intelligent accountability that are located within occupationally orientated professionalism. All participants welcomed intelligent accountability and understood this is a means of attaining self-improvement through increased occupational professionalism, and where headteachers would be able to go further towards fulfilling their core purpose. This core purpose was described in terms of leading teaching and learning, building mutually trusting and respectful relationships with the local community, and nurturing a collaborative, creative and innovative culture all of which would lead to improved outcomes for pupils and their families. These core functions were identified as being linked to headteachers' professional values and were described as having formed the motivation for taking on headship in the first place in almost all cases.

Few participants in this study acknowledged the role of the governing body in relation to accountability mechanisms, indicating that most headteachers perceive governing bodies as rather anachronistic in what is now a more dirigiste system. Therefore, this data would indicate that the role of the governing body in primary schools in this local authority is in need of development, or at least evidences that there is an inconsistency in the quality and acuity of school governing bodies. This finding reinforces those of the 2013 report on the Welsh Government task and finish group put in place as part of the national reform agenda, that concluded that governing bodies need to be up skilled in their role, and that recruitment to schools' governing bodies should cast the net wider to ensure the 'very best individuals' participate WG 2003 p.3). Discourse around issues of school governance has previously reflected a tension between legitimacy and accountability (Haikio 2012) and whether schools should either have governors who solely have an interest in the school (either as a member

of the community, the Church, the local authority, as a member of staff or as a parent) and without whose support the school may case to exist (Lozano 2005) or whether it should be comprised of governors who have a set of skills that would benefit the efficacy of governance and therefore the strategic development of the school overall. Another study has concluded that there are merits to both the stakeholder and the skills-based models (Connolly et al. 2016) and the Welsh Government review group conclusion back in 2013, was that school governance should be based on a new 'StakeholderPlus' model (p.3). This acknowledged that stakeholder interest on its own is not enough to secure the improvements needed in schools, but that appointing governors solely to a pre-defined skills-set (where there may be limited interest in the school and the community) is also not efficacious. Therefore, a combination of both skills-based and stakeholder models is most effective and not mutually exclusive (governors can have a vested interested and also be highly skilled) and where the school can benefit from the authenticity that the stakeholder approach can bring. This study provides evidence that the efficacy of the governing body was perceived by headteachers are being down to chance, where some felt 'lucky' to have a good working relationship. Where this luck had come into play, the school and the headteacher benefited from the relationship which brought mutual trust and support.

Throughout the interviews, it was apparent that all headteachers felt the weight of accountability, whether this was external forms of regulation or by intelligent accountability guided by codes of professional ethics, personal values and collegiate decision-making. When framing the lived experiences of headteachers in the context of Evetts' (2009b) discourse on new and different forms of professionalism in the public services, this study found evidence that all forms of accountability brought challenge in the form of risk management. Seeing headteachers as 'professional managers' finds them obliged to conform simultaneously to discourses of enterprise and customer care, (Evetts 2009b p.251) In the field of education, this can link the success or failure of leadership, to the success or failure of the whole school. This amplifies the failure of any school, as can be seen in press articles that report of the outcomes from Estyn inspections and those that reported on schools' categorisation bandings.

In summary, this study chimes with findings published by the Education Workforce Council (2017) where headteachers expressed that layers of accountability could be welcomed as part

of the expected challenge of the role. However, where external accountability led to duplication and inconsistency, and where it increased risk and decreased feelings of trust, it was cited as a reason for disillusion and disincentive. Furthermore, this study also echoes that of Connolly et al. (2018) where most participants clarified that whilst not reluctant nor resistant to comply with some accountability measures and all that this may inflict, would prefer to exercise an occupational approach to their professional responsibilities and be trusted to apply intelligent accountability. And finally, this study reinforces the findings of the 2021 NAHT survey of headteachers that found many leaders feeling:

> …mistreated, distrusted and unsupported. Furthermore, the government's constant interference in matters of professional expertise has undermined the independence, agency and autonomy of leaders with decades of classroom and management experience. (NAHT 2021)

6.5 Professional development for headteachers

This study sought to understand the perceptions of headteachers regarding their training needs and experiences of professional learning and development in relation to their preparedness for headship prior to taking up the role, and as they reflect on their current and ongoing role. Participants were also asked to outline their current professional learning and development, as well as speculating on future training needs given the reforms ahead, and in light of the importance placed on leadership development in the success of schools. A report following the independent review of School Teachers' Pay and Conditions in 2018 states: "The ambitions for 'Our National Mission' rest very much on the effectiveness of school leadership" and "The importance of professional learning to the headteacher community as a vital element of achieving 'Our National Mission' cannot be over-emphasised." (WG 2018b p.32). The emphasis placed on the role of headteachers as being the lynchpin in the school community, and on whom success depended, was commonly expressed throughout this study. Feelings of pressure to succeed were frequently discussed and the term 'imposter syndrome' was used by several participants when describing themselves, especially when new in post.

The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) became mandatory for all new headteachers in Wales in 2011 and is now part of the Professional Learning Pathway. There

is an expectation that prospective applicants will have already engaged in considerable professional learning that evidences their readiness for headship through the NPQH assessment. The NPQH is intended to be part of the leadership continuum and is not a taught course but is framed as a development and assessment programme. Most headteachers recalling their involvement with NPQH for this study reported similar experiences of the NPQH programme that position it as a useful experience, but one that focused on theorising and exemplifying leadership, rather than supporting aspiring headteachers to understand and deal with the plethora of managerial tasks that would come their way once in post. The consensus view in this study was that initial training through the NPQH programme did not always equip these participants well enough for their role as newly appointed heads, although aspects of the experience were valued, and are worth highlighting. For example, the role of the NPQH coach and the informal networks of peers that were built up during the period of training resulted in many participants in the study recalling positive relationships with coaches who provided them with guidance, reassurance, expertise and opportunities for reflection. These relationships were equally valued when provided by the mentors that most headteachers had while new in post.

The importance of expert mentoring as a tool for nurturing agentic dispositions has been previously noted (Conolly et al. 2018) and in this study, peer networking provided informal 'safe spaces' where ideas could be tested and where it was often recalled "there was no such thing as a stupid question." The value of these peer networks was reported as being of longstanding benefit, as the relationships sit outside the usual accountability frameworks offered by Challenge Advisors for example. Peer support was recounted as providing non-judgemental advice, selfless encouragement and opportunities to 'test' strategies and explore innovation. In addition to the professional support provided by peers, all participants without exception explained the importance of the pastoral support that accompanied these relationships. Although peers may not have had the same level of expertise as the mentors, they offer similar benefits in terms of the non-judgemental advice, practical support and the provision of a listening ear. Connolly et al. (2018) concluded that mentors play a crucial role in nurturing headteachers' professional capital, and this study would concur with that finding while also adding the potential for peer support. Peer support in this study was credited with

assisting headteachers to bear unwanted feelings of isolation, inadequacy and self-doubt amidst the complexity of the headteacher role.

Participants in the study were selected due to having a significant tenure in post, and as such would be able to reflect on the training that had benefited them and the training that was currently needed. Many participants described managing a range of high stakes situations in their professional role that were both unexpected and unpredictable. It was noted that training was scant or even non–existent in many of these situations, which exacerbated feelings risk and isolation. Common with other research studies (Connolly et al. 2018; Davies et al. 2018) were examples involving the school's finances that may impact on staffing through the need for business cases and staffing re-structuring. The weight of responsibility that headteachers felt connected to the livelihoods of members of staff and the implications that could occur as a result of any mismanagement was a common theme in the interviews. Many headteachers felt ill-equipped and poorly trained to make significant financial decisions that could have far-reaching and even unintended consequences. The same was frequently cited in connection with premises management tasks, where headteachers were involved in making decisions about fundamental building changes (changes to heating systems, alterations to sites) when not trained and having no expertise. Despite service level agreements with the local authority intended to support headteachers with these tasks, many felt this was a 'light touch' only and once advice had been provided, they were left to their own devices. By comparison, those headteachers who had worked in industry or who had held managerial posts in administration and finance felt relieved about their background knowledge, which gave them the confidence and strength to face these situations that many others felt were unfamiliar and out of the realm of their experience.

Once in post, headteachers in this study articulated the need to consider access to training carefully, as it often necessitated a compromise between that which was seen as mandatory, (safeguarding, health and safety training, and data protection training for example) that which was seen as desirable, (finance and personnel management) and that which was aspirational (training on staff mental health and training related to their own wellbeing and career aspirations.) Consideration had to be taken carefully as time often prevented them from attending all the training they felt applicable and/or necessary. Fear of disciplinary action or litigation was a key factor in making the final decision about which training to access.

The paradox of the situation was not lost on many participants who felt exasperated at the ambitions from 'Our National Mission' which emphasise the importance of effective leadership and which stress the significance of headteacher professional learning as a vital element for achieving the mission, when their time and energy are taken by completing training that is selected through fear of risk and litigation.

Training through experience was cited by many participants as being vital. For example, previous experiences, such as being an acting head prior to a taking up a substantive post, was seen as valuable in allowing them to 'practise' the role. Several headteachers also admitted that 'training' sometimes resulted from making mistakes in their practice and this is how they learnt most effectively. It was acknowledged that this came with risks that they were forced into taking, as the demands of headship had not allowed them time to access the appropriate training. Recounts often included narratives that described balancing commitments, taking the 'least bad' option and 'making do'; all of which indicate a low expectation in regard to professional development.

Where this deficit narrative was not prevalent, headteachers reported valuable opportunities taken by exploring training further afield, such as study trips abroad or linking with networks beyond the local authority. Both brought valuable and rewarding feelings of collaborative enquiry but came at a cost of taking time from the day-today management of the school. All found this a worthwhile trade-off due to the benefits that the experiences brought, while also acknowledging that the space created by their absence had to be negotiated and backfilled.

Chapter 7: Conclusion- An Ill-fitting Jacket.

This conclusion aims to identify why the participants felt that the role of headship was, at times, an uncomfortable fit. To extend the metaphor of the title; why did the jacket feel so badly cut, so poorly fitted and so awkwardly styled?

This study involved participants from one local authority in Wales primarily described as rural and therefore created a unique context for the research of headteachers' lived experiences. In addition, the interviews with participants were carried out during an unprecedented time: during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants' responses will inevitably have

been affected by their experiences in ways that may not be consistent with their responses otherwise, but which have provided a rare insight into their role.

This study found that all headteachers interviewed articulated their core purpose as being driven by, and focused on, the needs of their pupils. Whether this was their learning needs or their need to be safe from risk and harm heightened by the pandemic, all participants described their core purpose as being motivated by their desire to do right by children. When this core function was compromised through the burden of managerialist tasks and overly bureaucratic accountability, headteachers felt themselves deprofessionalised and reduced in terms of respect and status.

Most headteachers in this study espoused notions of increased risk, reduced agency and low levels of trust in their professional capacity. Risk management loomed large in the discourse of headteachers and was a leading cause for concern in relation to many areas within their role; for example, the risk of social media (seen as a cause of insidious undermining of professional expertise and knowledge while simultaneously being a potential vehicle for reputation damage) and the risk of improper or inadequate training (health and safety training having to take precedence over other training needs due to fear of litigation). Reduced agency was articulated by many in relation to the need to be all things to all people, which was felt to have created a paradox of leadership where increasing emphasis is placed on school leaders to be experts in an increasingly wide range of practical management skills while also hearing the mantra that leadership is the core of school improvement, and all against the backdrop of fast-paced and persistent reform. There was a strongly held belief by headteachers that they should be allowed exercise agency by getting on with being the expert in *their* field while other experts got on with their job of legionella testing, fire auditing or overhauling the school's heating system for example. This expertise felt especially thwarted when headteachers knew their school and community well but a lack of agency to provide what was needed and wanted was perceived despite being cognisant of the benefits this would bring (Sarjeant 2020). Excitement at the prospect of designing a new curriculum was, for some, an indication that professional agency was re-emerging through the third phase of educational reform. However, trust as a core competency of headship was frequently raised in connection with the participants' feelings of being drawn away from that which they know to be 'best' or 'right' for their school in order to serve another master – that of technicist

approaches of organisational professionalism. The relationship between headteachers and the meso-level bodies interwove all these interactions. Many participants expressed this relationship as one that caused confusion, a blurring of the lines of accountability, and an unnecessary burden that hampered the job of headship. For example, it was often expressed by headteachers that they felt a lack of professional trust from challenge advisors who demanded the production of time consuming and repetitive evidence, rather than acknowledging that the headteacher knew the school and its community well and served it well. Intelligent accountability was seen as an aspiration, rather than a certainty.

A similar lack of knowledge of school context was evidenced through accounts of headteachers' experiences of recruitment. Few participants felt that the local authority or even the governors knew the school well enough to be able to describe its needs to a candidate, either through the job description or at interview stage. This study, alongside others in relation to headteacher job descriptions (Milton et al. 2020) found them to be a-contextual and highly replicated. The result of this for many participants was often to take on a role that was not entirely as anticipated and led to feelings of disillusion and uncertainty when new in post. Where a governing body knew its school well, and the school was reflected honestly and transparently in terms of its strategic planning, the successful candidate felt in a strong position and felt able to lead the school successfully.

Overall, this study has to conclude that the training available prior to the role of headship was not consistently perceived as entirely useful and completely relevant. Elements of the training programmes described resulted in a positive legacy through a continuing network of professional relationships. Mentoring was consistently mentioned as a positive experience where this created a safe space to explore ideas and express emotion was highly valued.

A frequently expressed emotion by participants in the study was one of loneliness and isolation. Sometimes this was acknowledged as an inevitable consequence of the role as the 'buck stops' with headteachers (HT 4). This gave rise to some expressions of lone hero headship (Kulz 2017) although these participants did not ascribe the all-conquering warrior figure, but felt they had made a conscious decision to rise to the challenge that headship brings.

Chapter 8: Recommendations – Making the Jacket Fit

As I considered forming the recommendations following this research, I reflected on the title of the thesis – *"Trying to feel comfortable in an ill-fitting jacket".* The metaphor of a role that sits uncomfortably around your shoulders has overarched this study. But ultimately the aim of the research was not about how to make an ill-fitting jacket more wearable; about how to retain a role that is not fit for purpose and that feels uncomfortable every time you step into it. This study aimed to make the jacket a better fit; to reconstruct the role of headship by making alterations and by changing the weight and breadth its structure. Sometimes, in order to make a jacket fit, there is a need to unpick it, to recut the fabric and to resew the seams. These recommendations aspire to do all of these. The jacket needs to feel natural, safe, suitable and embraced by all those who wear it.

This study has considered the changing professional role of headteachers in one rural authority in Wales during the early stages of a global pandemic. It has illustrated how, despite changes in the third phase of political reform aimed at the contrary, headteachers still feel high levels of managerialism and external accountability as a legacy of the second phase of reforms which align the headship role with a model of organised professionalism, and which necessitated heads in conforming to predominantly technicist and mechanistic practices. While some recognised and embraced the beginnings of increased agency brought about by third phase reforms, many felt that the current state of the profession was still at odds with their core professional values and perceived a lack of trust to act according to the needs of their school. A recent headteacher survey (NAHT 2021) highlighted that lack of professional recognition and trust, unsustainable workload and high-stakes inspection combine to drive attrition and undermine aspiration to lead (p.4). While all these issues were recognised by participants in this study, dissatisfaction was felt especially keenly in relation to the desire to exercise agency in strategic decision-making and to engage with their community in a way that would bring about benefits to all pupils. Feelings of deprofessionalisation led to an increased sense of risk in their professional capabilities, and was further exacerbated by a mismatch between professional development needs and the training on offer, and by a misrepresentation of the headship role by governing bodies and local authority officers at recruitment. Expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation were only mitigated by seeking out

networks of peer support where informal and non-judgemental conversations were vital for wellbeing.

It is the recommendation therefore that reforms should be taken to foster agency and reduce risk in headship, moving it towards an occupational model of professional work. These should include:

- Consideration of the re-structuring of school management to allow for more defined roles and reduced accountability. For example, the introduction of business and premises managers, community managers and welfare managers that have the expertise to manage financial and building demands, aspects of family engagement and safeguarding issues, leaving headteachers to focus their expertise on leading teaching and learning.

- Within this reconfiguration of the headship role, to align the professionalism of headteachers to an occupationally oriented model where headteacher agency is promoted, professional capital reinforced, and intelligent accountability valued.

- To promote and invest in peer networks and mentoring, including the entitlement of headteachers to regular supervision in order to combat headteacher stress and feelings of isolation. The role of the *National Academy of Educational Leadership* has become active in this role and needs to ensure that the offer is separate from formal accountability structures and is one where headteachers feel safe to unburden themselves of the weight of headship without judgement or reprisal.

- To review recruitment processes so that context specific job applications offer a transparent reflection of the role of headship that are not dominated by organisational conceptions of practice, but which reflect the more occupationally oriented conceptions of professional practice that is currently articulated in the third phase of educational reform in Wales.

- To ensure that the professional development offer to headteachers is fit for purpose as an aspirational head, a new headteacher in post and to one who is experienced, ensuring that the offer reflects the occupationally oriented role and reflects the core purpose of headship as one that serves the needs of pupils and the community.

Chapter 9: Appendices

Appendix 1

Table 2 Interview questions.

Context/Warm-up questions:	
• Describe the school where you are currently a serving head teacher. • How long have you been in current post?	

Background questions:	
• Describe your route to headship? • When did you first take up the role as head teacher? • What experiences led to you applying for headships? Describe any critical experiences that led to you deciding to become a head? (Tell me more. Help me understand. Get the whole story.) • Can you recall your original motivation for becoming a head teacher? /Which of the previous experiences was the main motivator for becoming a head?	

Research questions	Interview questions
What do serving head teachers perceive are the skills and attributes that aspiring headteachers are expected to hold before being appointed to the role?	• You were obviously successful in becoming a head, how many interviews did you have?/How many attempts did you have before being a successful head teacher candidate? • Did you go through a formal application process, and if so what did this look like on the day? • Can you recall the expectations of the role that were outlined in the advert for the job description and person spec? • When you got into the interview situation, can you recall feeling that what was being asked of you at interview was actually aligned with the specifications in the advert? • What were the skills and attributes you felt you were bringing to the role at the time of your interview?
How do these attributes/ skills relate to the role in reality?	• Looking back, do you now feel that the job description aligned with the role in reality? • To what extent was the person spec a good reflection of the skills you now realise that you need in the role? • (Depending on answer) Can you elaborate/describe/articulate the variance between the outline in the advertisement and the reality? What would you make sure was in the person spec?

Do headteachers in Primary Schools (in a single Welsh LA) perceive their professional role has changed during the last 10 years? If so, how do they perceived this has changed?	• (Again depending on answer) How do you reconcile this variance in your day-to-day role and in your perception of/attitude towards your role? • (OR) How hard is it to reconcile these variances in your day-to-day role and your perception of/attitude towards your role? Has it changed? In what way? Help me understand? Can you give me an illustrative example?
What are headteachers' perception of the organisational and political changes that they feel may have impacted on their professional role.	• Can you tell me about some of the political or organisational changes that impact on your role as HT? • Could you describe what this impact looks like, both in practical (day-to-day) terms and in your attitude towards your role? • Do you feel positively or negatively about the impacts you describe?
What training and opportunities for continuous professional development do headteachers feel have been most helpful in fulfilling their headteacher role?	• (I am going to talk about your professional learning now.) Did you do any CPD prior to taking up the role that you felt was useful? • Could you identify some of the CPD opportunities that you have in your current role? • Which of these has been the most useful in terms of positive impact on your strategic leadership role, or in terms of your management of the school? (Prompt if no mention of informal learning.) • Which has been the least useful? • In your opinion, are there sufficient relevant/useful CPD opportunities for head teachers? • OR Do you feel that the CPD that is currently offered to head teaches, reflects the current role? • Do you have any suggestions about how this could be managed differently to improve it (or to improve further)? In other words, are your needs as a professional being met by the current provision for CPD?
Summarising questions:	

- Overall, do you feel there is a discrepancy between the articulation of your role (through person specification/job description) before you took it up, and the reality of it, now you are doing it?
- Do you feel over your time in post, that the professional role of head teachers has changed since your time in the role?
- If so, what are these changes – what do they look like, and how has it made you feel about your role?
- Is there anything that you would like to add to our conversation today?

Appendix 2

Information sheet to participants.

This interview is being conducted for the purposes of research into primary school leadership in one local authority in Wales and which will contribute to a Professional Doctorate study at Cardiff University School of Social Sciences. The information gathered through the semi-structured interviews with serving Powys Head teachers will inform research on head teachers' professional roles.

It is hoped that this research will not only contribute to improved professional training for head teachers in this local authority, but may also support the call for better professional circumstances and an enhanced outlook on the future for existing school leaders.

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews. Due to social distancing protocols initiated after the COVID 19 pandemic these will be conducted remotely and will not be face-to-face.

The interview comprises a set of 20 questions that set out to inform research around leadership roles, organisational and political changes in primary schools and leadership development.

The interview will begin with six background and contextual questions. The interview will end with four summarising questions.

The interview seeks your views as a serving head teacher, and you have been selected along with another 14 head teachers from a range of primary schools (representing small and large schools, Welsh and English medium schools, Church and non-faith schools, and those with both high and low free school meals numbers on roll.) Gender has also been considered, and a balance of male and female head teachers has been sourced for interview.

Please bear in mind that participation in this interview is entirely voluntary, and there is no financial remuneration or gift incentive.

If, after the interview has taken place, you decide that you would like to withdraw the information you have provided, you are at liberty to do so. The interview will be recorded for the purposes of the research only and will not be shared with any other individual, other than the transcriber. All information will be completely anonymised, and no school or individual will be identifiable within the final thesis.

Your consent will be recorded both verbally at the start of the interview and through a signed consent form. All consent forms will be digitised and stored on an encrypted computer and the physical copies destroyed. These will be retained for the duration of the project. Data (i.e. actual interview recordings,

not just transcripts) will be retained for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years post-publication and then destroyed in accordance with GDPR.

As a serving head teacher within the same local authority myself, I am aware of my position as an insider researcher. I am sensitive to the fact that no information disclosed through the interview (including your choice to participate) will impact on our professional relationship.

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