

Effective Leadership in Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances



Research undertaken with and for the
National College for School Leadership
by

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1. Executive Summary

The aim of this small-scale research project was to contribute to the knowledge base concerning effective leadership but with a particular emphasis upon leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. The schools that participated in this study were all in the category of schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCC). This category is designated to those schools in which 25 per cent of pupils, or less, achieve five or more grades A* to C at GCSE. This also includes a number of schools that achieve above 25 per cent but where over 35 per cent of their pupils receive free school meals.

The research design used a multiple methods approach (Denzin, 1979). It comprised of a review of the literature concerning effective leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances and in depth case study data collection in 10 schools facing challenging circumstances.

The research findings highlight the intensity and complexity of the leadership role in schools facing challenging circumstances. All the headteachers in the schools investigated shared high expectations and a determination to achieve the highest possible standards. They placed a high premium upon personal values and focused upon cultural rather than structural change. As Day et al (2000) note:

“In rapidly changing times, technical-rational approaches to leadership may be beguilingly attractive, yet in reality are unlikely to result in improved schooling unless accompanied by both a professional and moral dimension.”

Many of the heads were often quite modest about their own leadership but there was strong evidence that leaders were values-driven, optimistic about children and developed a consistent instructional focus at all levels of the organisation. They were highly pragmatic people who talked openly about courage, resilience and the capacity to create schools where staff worked positively for rapid and deep change.

The three main findings from this research are:

- effective leaders in SFCC are constantly managing tensions and problems directly related to the particular circumstances and context of the school. The main leadership task facing them is one of coping with unpredictability, conflict and dissent on a daily basis without discarding core values.
- effective leaders in SFCC are, above all, people-centred. The leadership practice of headteachers in this study was underpinned by a set of personal and professional values that placed human needs before organisational needs.
- effective leaders in SFCC are able to combine a moral purpose with a willingness to be collaborative and to promote collaboration amongst colleagues, whether through teamwork, or extending the boundaries of participation in leadership and decision-making.

The most important aspect of leadership for all the heads in the study concerned establishing the kinds of relationships in which their leadership could be best expressed. Being a head in a SFCC was clearly not a 'desk job' but rather it was about displaying people-centred qualities and skills.

The overarching message about leadership in SFCC is one of building the community of the school in its widest sense, ie through developing and involving others. The headteachers' behaviour with others was premised upon respect and trust and their belief in developing the potential of staff and students commonly held. Their ability to invite others to share and develop their vision was frequently commented upon by staff and students alike. Alongside these qualities however, were examples of heads being firm (in relation to values, expectations and standards) and on occasions, being ruthless.

This study highlights the intensity and complexity of the leadership role in SFCC. The heads worked long hours, were constantly on call and spent large parts of their time in face-to-face meetings with a range of stakeholders. They shared high expectations and a determination to achieve the highest possible standards. This sometimes meant pushing themselves and their staff to the limits. The way they interacted with others was the common denominator of their success. They were able to convince all those within the school and the community it served that their vision was worth sharing and pursuing.

In summary it was found that effective leaders in schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCC) :

- believe that all children can learn and succeed.
- offer leadership that is value-driven with a strong moral purpose. They are deeply concerned about the welfare and the educational experiences of all pupils in their care.
- build community and shape culture. They signal to others what is important and focus on building confidence and capability in those they lead.
- are strategic. They take a broad view of change and development by focusing on the bigger picture.
- have the confidence to be contentious and to deal with conflict.
- have no singular leadership style, but there is a greater emphasis upon forms of leadership that are people-orientated, transformational and empowering.
- use a range of leadership approaches and are adept at selecting the approach to match or fit the growth-state or developmental stage of the school.
- are highly pragmatic, resilient and determined individuals who work towards changing negative attitudes towards and within their school.
- establish coherent communities within their schools as well as a sense of a responsible community beyond and around the school.
- place educational concerns over management concerns. They create schools that are culturally tight but managerially flexible.
- are primarily concerned with helping people understand the problems they face rather than solve them.
- take advantage of external opportunities (eg OFSTED, EIC, EAZ) to generate change and to encourage staff to innovate.
- place an emphasis upon models of professional development that impact directly upon classroom practice.
- invest in the learning of staff and pupils.

2. Introduction

Effective leadership is widely accepted as being a key constituent in achieving school improvement (OFSTED, 2000). Research findings from diverse countries and different school contexts have revealed the powerful impact of leadership in securing school development and change (eg Van Velzen et al, 1985; Hopkins, 2001a; West et al, 2000).

Hopkins (2001b) highlights the centrality of transformational and instructional leadership practices in achieving school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCC). However, the literature reveals that headteachers who manage change in schools in difficult circumstances are far from uniform in their leadership styles (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Lashway, 1997). Early empirical studies of the kind of leadership practised by principals in American urban schools found that they differed greatly in the kind of leadership they provided (Blank, 1987). Similarly, Keedy (1993) reported that a range of leadership styles was most effective in SFCC and that no particular leadership approach worked in every situation.

In the USA, school-wide reform and school restructuring programmes have been aimed particularly at low performing and high poverty schools (Herman and Aladjem et al, 1999). Consequently, much of the research evidence concerning improving schools in challenging or urban contexts is derived from the American literature (eg Elmore, 2000; Louis and Marks, 1996; Louis and Miles, 1990). Only relatively recently have researchers in the UK focused their attention upon improving 'failing' or 'ineffective' schools (Myers and Stoll, 1998; Hopkins, Harris and Jackson, 1997; Barber and Dann, 1996; Gray, 2000; Maden and Hillman, 1996).

Contemporary work has reviewed research and practice in order to inform improvement efforts in schools facing challenging circumstances (Reynolds et al, 2001). This work has included an improvement guide for schools facing challenging circumstances based upon the most successful school improvement practice internationally (Hopkins, 2001b).

While there is evidently a great deal of current interest in schools in difficulty, few studies have focused exclusively upon leadership practices and approaches in these contexts. In her summary of the lessons learned from a study of successful schools in challenging circumstances, Maden (2001) highlights the need for richer descriptions of leadership practices within these schools.

Although there are a wide range of studies that have considered leadership in schools in different contexts (Leithwood and Steinbach, 2001), a study of leadership approaches in schools facing challenging circumstances has not been undertaken. Consequently, this research project was commissioned by the National College for School Leadership with the prime aim of investigating leadership practices and approaches in schools in difficult contexts.

3. Main Findings

As a small-scale study, the possibilities for generalisation are inevitably limited. However, the richness of data collected, together with the perceptions of numerous stakeholders, ie senior managers, middle managers and teachers at each of the 10 schools offers a rich empirical basis for exploring leadership practice in SFCC.

This evidence is sufficient to suggest that existing theories of leadership only partially reflect or explain the current approaches to leadership in these schools. It is suggested that the demands that schools facing challenging contexts place upon leaders requires them to have a broad range of leadership approaches underpinned by a core set of values and a strong moral purpose. The findings from the research study highlight that effective leadership is defined and driven by individual value systems, rather than external demands or managerial concerns. Although the heads were at different stages in their careers, of different ages and different experiences, a number of common themes emerged.

Vision and values

Of central importance to leaders in SFCC was the co-operation and alignment of others to their set of values and vision. The heads in the study communicated their personal vision and belief systems by direction, words and deeds. Through a variety of symbolic gestures and action, they were successful at realigning both staff and pupils to their particular vision of the school. The heads in the study did 'walk the talk'. Through the consistency and integrity of their actions, they modelled behaviour that they considered desirable to achieve the school goals. They shared a belief and had an optimism that people have untapped potential for growth and development. They respected others and treated each person as an individual. They trusted others and required trust from others. They recognised the need to be actively supportive, caring and encouraging as well as challenging and confrontational when necessary.

"I lead through making my values explicit to others and motivating them to believe in the same vision of what the school could be." (Head S1)

"The head's values are clear and made explicit in his actions. He leads through his values and these are pretty well shared within the school." (Teacher S5)

Vision was an inherent part of their leadership relationships in which it helped them communicate a sense of direction for the school. The vision and practices of these heads were organised around a number of core personal values concerning modelling and promoting respect for individuals, fairness and equality, caring for the well-being and whole development of students and staff, and integrity and honesty. It was clear from everything said by the heads that their leadership values and visions were primarily moral (ie dedicated to the welfare of staff and students, with the latter at the centre) rather than primarily instrumental (for economic reasons) or non-educative (for custodial reasons). Their values and visions both constructed their relationships with staff and students and were constructed within them.

The heads in the study did display people-centred leadership in their day-to-day dealings with individuals. Their behaviour with others was premised upon respect and trust and their belief in developing the potential of staff and students commonly held.

“The head’s main aim is to allow others to flourish and grow, whether staff or students, it doesn’t matter. The aim is to develop others and to generate self-belief and self esteem in those that currently lack it.” (Teacher S9)

“People are your greatest asset and I firmly believe therefore that the staff and the students in this school are my best resource for change.” (Head S4)

Their ability to invite others to share and develop their vision was frequently commented upon by staff and students alike. Alongside these qualities however, were examples of heads being firm (in relation to values, expectations and standards), and on occasion, ruthless. In many respects, the way they interacted with others was the common denominator of their success. The human qualities they possessed enabled them to lead others effectively and to establish confidence in others that their vision was worth sharing.

Distributing leadership

The heads in this study adopted highly creative approaches to tackling the complex demands of implementing multiple change. The decision to work with and through teams as well as individuals was a common response to the management of change.

The heads used a number of strategies for bringing out the best in staff. In addition to formal development opportunities, these strategies included the power of praise, involving others in decision making and giving professional autonomy. Although the heads tended to concentrate on teaching staff in the first instance, they used similar approaches when dealing with governors, parents and to some extent, students.

All the heads invested in others in order to lead the school. From the perspectives of others the overarching message was one of the head building the community of the school in its widest sense, ie through developing and involving others.

“When I first came to the school, the head and SMT were considered to be the leaders, everyone else opted out. With the formulation of teams with clear targets I’ve been able to distribute leadership and to energise teachers to take responsibility for change and development.” (Head S7)

“The head has given real leadership responsibilities to others. It’s not a case of just delegating headship tasks.” (Teacher S3)

“The middle managers now have greater responsibility and authority for leading. The days of being in charge of stock cupboards are over.” (SMT S10)

Heads in the study and their constituencies consistently highlighted the importance of range of leadership strategies to address the diverse sets of issues and problems they faced. They also emphasised the contingent nature of many of the decisions they made and how different leadership strategies would be used in different contexts. The majority of schools in the study had at some stage emerged from the special measures or serious weaknesses. Therefore, staff in each school had considerable experience of OFSTED and HMI inspection. The heads commented upon the importance of careful planning for the inspection.

All the heads acknowledged that they adopted a more autocratic leadership style during the pre-inspection phase. This included paying special attention to issues such as policy implementation and consistent standards of teaching (Chapman, 2002).

During the inspection the heads adopted a more supportive leadership style in order to assist staff through the process. Leaders in SFCC took this role very seriously and consciously demonstrated high levels of emotional responsibility towards their staff during the inspection period. An important factor to achieving a positive outcome was considered to be how the head's leadership style matched the situation or circumstance facing the school at different times.

"It's a learning curve all the time. I think leadership styles have to match the needs of that school at that particular point in time." (Head S2)

"The head displays a range of leadership styles really, much depends on the situation or circumstance." (Teacher S4)

"I don't think there is one leadership style or approach. Any more than there is a single teaching style. You need breadth and diversity in both." (SMT S5)

In particular the heads in this study emphasised that while they had a broad set of values they adhered to, they did not consider this to be a fixed leadership approach. They felt strongly that they could switch to a leadership style that suited the situation and could behave in ways that did not reflect their core beliefs, if necessary.

Leading learning

For these heads, effective leadership was centrally concerned with building the capacity for improved teaching and learning. The heads were quick to dispel the 'cultural deficit' notion prevalent in many SFCC, and were committed to the belief that every child can learn and succeed. They made decisions that motivated both staff and students and placed an emphasis upon student achievement and learning.

The heads in the study talked about 'creating the conditions that would lead to higher student performance' and they were deeply concerned about the welfare and the educational experiences of minority children. They set high expectations for students, emphasised consistency in teaching practices, provided clear rules about behaviour and stressed discipline. Their developmental focus was on improving the quality of teaching and learning. In this sense, they were instructional leaders as the emphasis was upon student attainment and achievement.

"The head has reoriented our attention to the classroom level. We are encouraged to share ideas and to talk about teaching rather than how individuals behave in class."

(Teacher S9)

"The predominant culture in this school was one where teachers discuss issues of teaching and learning very rarely. In fact everything else but that! The head has changed that. He has positively encouraged debate and discussion around on classroom issues, which has been a welcome change"

(SMT S7)

The heads in this study created learning opportunities for both students and teachers. They focused their strategic attention upon the classroom and engaged staff in dialogue about teaching and learning issues rather than issues of behaviour or classroom management. They were able to make clear links between their core values and their vision for improved student achievement and learning.

Investing in staff development

A principle concern for heads in this study was one of maintaining staff morale and motivation. In a number of the schools staff morale had been low and individual self-esteem had been eroded by successive criticism of the school. Consequently, the heads consistently and vigorously promoted staff development whether through in-service training, visits to other schools or peer support schemes.

It was noticeable also, that such development did not only focus upon needs that were of direct benefit to the school but also those that were of direct benefit to the individual. The development needs of non-teaching staff were also included. The emphasis heads placed on the continuing development of their staff was an endorsement that teachers were their most important asset and that, particularly in difficult times, it was important to maintain their own sense of self-worth by valuing them.

“Teachers in this school have had their morale eroded and chipped away by successive OFSTED. It is important to invest in them and their capabilities, to raise morale and to foster ‘can do’ culture.” (Head S6)

“If you are constantly told you are failing, you believe it. You are a failed teacher.” (Teacher S7)

The emphasis placed on the continuing development of their staff reflected the recognition among heads that the teachers were their most important resource. Consequently, they were highly skilled at using a combination of pressure and support to promote the efforts of teachers, particularly when working with the most difficult students. They encouraged teachers to take risks and rewarded innovative thinking.

The heads set high standards for teaching and teacher performance. The focus and emphasis upon improving teaching and learning was common across all case study schools. Time was provided to ensure that teachers met to discuss teaching and were able to observe each other teaching. In addition, teaching performance was monitored and individual assessments made.

Poor teaching was not ignored or tolerated within the schools. Where it did exist, it was challenged and strategies were agreed for improvement. Where this did not occur, the necessary steps were taken by the headteacher to deal with the problem. In the majority of cases, a combination of structured support, monitoring and an individual development programme addressed the problem of poor quality teaching. For these heads, effective leadership was about capacity building in others and investing in the social capital of the school.

Relationships

The heads in this study were good at developing and maintaining relationships. They were considered to be fair and were seen as having a genuine joy and vibrancy when talking to students. They generated a high level of commitment in others through their openness, honesty and the quality of their inter-personal relationships.

The heads engaged in self-criticism and were able to admit to others when they felt they had made a mistake. They placed a particular emphasis upon generating positive relationships with parents and fostering a view of the school as being part of rather than apart from the community.

“It is important that staff and students are involved in the life of the school and relate to each other in a positive way.” (Head S1)

“The head has ensured that we work more in teams and work across our subject areas. This has made us build broader relationships and work together.” (Teacher S8)

Stoll and Fink (1996) describe ‘invitational leadership’ as a form of leadership where leaders place a high premium upon personal values and relationships with others. Heads in the study did reflect many of the dimensions of invitational leadership. They placed an emphasis upon people rather than systems and invited others to lead. It was clear that while they possessed a range of leadership strategies to address the diverse sets of issues and problems they faced, at the core of their leadership practice was a belief in empowering others.

“Ultimately, the job of the leader is to give others the confidence and capability to take on new responsibilities. It’s really about giving power to others rather than keeping it at the top.” (Head S10)

“In many respects we have more power than before. We are involved in decision making, we are able to take ideas forward and to challenge new ideas and developments. I guess we are more involved, more part of the decision making process than before.” (Teacher S6)

“The head has deliberately devolved leadership to others. I was concerned at first that this would mean we would lose control over the management of the school but it has generated much more interest from the staff in being involved in decisions. There is less apathy and less resistance to change.” (SMT S5)

While the heads emphasised the contingent nature of many of the decisions they made and how different leadership strategies would be used in different contexts, the central belief in distributing leadership to teachers remained unaltered. This form of leadership starts not from the basis of power and control but from the ability to act with others and to enable others to act. It places an emphasis upon allowing and empowering those who are not in positions of responsibility or authority to lead.

Community building

A distinctive feature of schools that are improving is how far they work as a professional learning community. Within the schools in the study, a climate of collaboration existed and there was a commitment to work together. However, this climate was the result of lengthy discussion, development and dialogue amongst those working within and outside the school. It was deliberately orchestrated through the provision of opportunities to build social trust. This included providing opportunities for dialogue between staff and parents.

The heads in the study emphasised the need to establish an 'interconnectedness of home, school and community'. This involved communicating and understanding the needs of the community, to establish a dialogue with parents and to connect with the formal and informal community leaders.

The headteachers in the study visited homes, attended community events, communicated regularly with the public about successes and engendered trust by showing care for young people. They understood the forces within the community that impeded learning, they were aware of the negative forces of the dominant culture and they listened to parents' views and opinions regularly.

The heads tried to create integral relationships with the families in the communities they served. They recognised that 'family, school and community relationships directly affect student outcomes' hence the need to connect with the community was of paramount importance to the success of the school.

"The first thing I recognised that needed to be done was to get the parents into the school, so we screened world cup games on parents' evenings." (Head S10)

"This school is located on the edge of a large predominantly white, working class estate. There is long term unemployment, low aspirations, high levels of crime and drug abuse. The biggest problem we had was getting the community to see us as a resource rather than the enemy"
(SMT S3)

Within the various schools in the study there was a strong and clear commitment to academic achievement and this was regularly communicated to parents. This academic capital was developed through a commitment to the success of all pupils and a shared belief in rewarding and praising pupils.

Sergiovanni (1998) points out that within schools professional capital is created as a fabric of reciprocal responsibilities and mutual support. The heads in this study involved others in decision-making and had professional trust in them. They cultivated professional dialogue among teachers, placing a high premium upon their own professional development and the professional development of their staff. In this respect, they developed professional and intellectual capital by encouraging their schools to become inquiring communities.

4. Strategies for Improvement

Across the schools in the study, it was evident that the heads had adopted particular strategies for improvement. The combination of these strategies was dependent on the particular context and circumstance of the school but in each case there was evidence that a number of these strategies had been successfully put in place and had made a positive difference.

This finding would seem to support the view that differential school improvement strategies are required for schools at different stages of their growth and development (Hopkins, Harris and Jackson, 1997). In SFCC the problems are much more immediate and pressing, hence the strategies adopted by the schools combined short-term 'tactical' approaches to change (Hopkins, 2001) and longer-term strategies aimed at changing the culture of the school. The eight strategies for improvement identified in the study are the practical ways in which the heads operationalised their core vision and values.

Improve the environment

The majority of schools in the study were located in positions that meant that their immediate surroundings were often very poor. A number of schools were located on council estates or in inner city contexts that presented a run down, and at times, hostile school environment. The physical condition of the majority of the schools was initially very poor with leaking classrooms, broken windows, graffiti covered furniture and litter covered corridors.

Consequently, one of the first actions taken by heads was to improve the immediate environment in which students and staff worked. Resources were allocated to painting and repair work, to new furniture, to a new reception area, to display boards and refurbishment of the staff room. Emphasis was placed on litter removal and students were given the task of sanding down desks to eradicate graffiti. This strategy had a symbolic and real purpose as it demonstrated to staff, students and parents that the school was changing and improving.

"It was clear to me that the chances of generating high quality teaching and learning in an environment that was dirty, full of litter and covered in graffiti was limited. Consequently, I set up a 'litter squad' where groups of pupils regularly collected litter and monitored the clearing of litter. I bought brightly covered litterbins and located them in the school playground. I set up a repair shop for broken desks and chairs involving pupils and teachers in their repair. I painted the reception area and displayed pupil work. Not rocket science really but it encouraged pupils to take a little more care, to have a little more pride in themselves and the school." (Head S4)

Generate positive relationships

Within all the schools in the study the heads acknowledged that a major difficulty resided in the quality of the relationships between staff and also among staff, students and parents. In many cases relationships had deteriorated over time resulting in a negative culture within the school characterised by low expectations and a high degree of mistrust.

The heads in this study invested a great deal of time in creating opportunities to develop for more positive relationships. For staff, opportunities were provided to work together across teams and within teams, social events were organised and staff development activities included the expertise and involvement of those within the school. For pupils, staff–student committees were organised, student councils were established, lunchtime and after hour clubs were set up and trips were organised.

For parents, there were evening classes and drop-in sessions. All parents evenings included a social component and more opportunities were created to give parents positive feedback and to invite them into the school. An emphasis was placed upon breaking down social barriers and creating a climate within school where staff, students and parents had more opportunities to talk.

“The main problem at the school was the fact that relationships had broken down between staff and pupils. There was little trust on both sides. By providing more ‘neutral’ opportunities where staff pupils could meet together some of these barriers slowly eroded away. We set up lunchtime clubs, staff–student football matches, visits to theme parks and a staff–student council where issues or views could be raised. Giving staff and students a voice is important but providing them opportunities to talk to each other in different situations is of paramount importance.”

(Head S10)

Provide a clear vision and high expectations

Within SFCC there are often low expectations of what students can achieve. Many SFCC have a cultural deficit notion of schooling and expect little from the community and little from the students. When faced with low expectations from staff and students, the heads tried to generate a belief in a culture of improvement. A first step in achieving this was to set clear expectations with students and staff, to share a vision of improvement, particularly with students and to re-affirm this on a regular basis.

Students, staff and parents were constantly reminded by the head what the school had to offer them and what part they played in its development. By setting clear expectations, creating a vision and sharing this vision with others, the possibility for improvement was significantly enhanced.

The heads in this study were able to establish a more positive climate for learning within their school by ‘talking up’ the school, setting clear expectations (eg behaviour, truancy, attendance) and by encouraging respect for others. They imparted a sense of urgency for maintaining high academic standards and exerted pressure upon staff and students to excel.

“In this school we had suffered from weak leadership over several years. The school had little direction or purpose. We were drifting downwards with no sense of how to save the situation. The new head provided a clear vision and direction that gave staff a sense of security for the first time. While we might not always agree with the head and find the direction acceptable, without any sense of direction or purpose we would continue to spiral downwards without a hope.” (Teacher S3)

Provide time and opportunities for collaboration

Within many SFCC a lack of attention, emphasis and investment in staff development over time is a common feature. The resulting erosion of professional confidence and capability can be a major barrier to improving schools in difficulty. In such cases, teachers may feel de-valued and de-skilled, particularly if the school is in 'special measures' they can become the prime focus of blame.

It was considered important by the heads in this study to give teachers the time and opportunity to collaborate. Opportunities and new approaches to professional development such as mentoring, coaching and peer review were put in place. Where teaching practices were poor, improvements were achieved through investing in forms of professional development and collaboration that raised teachers' knowledge base and skills. Providing groups or teams of teachers who had not worked together before with a specific task or an area for improvement resulted in major benefits to the school and the individuals involved.

“One of the first things the head did was to set up cross-subject teams so that people had the opportunity to work together outside their subject areas. The problem is that departments can become very insular and you never talk to other teachers or work with anyone else. The cross-subject team changed this and allowed us to work on whole school themes and issues together.” (Teacher S4)

Focus on teaching and learning

Schools that find themselves in difficulty can be subject to a wide range of external interventions that can compete for time, energy and resource. The demands of numerous initiatives can prove to be counter-productive in securing school improvement, particularly in schools where there are additional problems of social disadvantage. One way of rationalising and focusing improvement efforts is to locate them strictly in the area of teaching and learning.

Teachers in SFCC need to acquire skills to be successful with students with particular sets of needs. They need to use a variety of teaching approaches to ensure that all children have access to learning in the most efficient and effective manner. It is also important that they provide opportunities for student initiated and student directed learning activities and that teachers relate instruction to practical and meaningful student experiences.

Consequently, the heads in this study provided staff development opportunities that focused specifically on effective teaching strategies and approaches. They placed a consistent and continual emphasis on improving the quality of teaching and learning.

“The head set up working groups on different 'teaching and learning' themes simply to raise the issue of quality and consistency with staff. In the past we had concentrated on systems and paperwork, as a SMT now we were leading groups that debate and discuss differentiation, assessment, learning styles. It has allowed the staff to concentrate on what matters and to address the real issues, ie how to improve teaching and learning.” (SMT S5)

Disperse leadership: build teams

The importance of clear and purposeful leadership is recognised in SFCC. In many cases, schools in difficulty can suffer from a sustained lack of direction and can drift.

While firm, directive leadership may be required at the outset of turning around a school in difficulty, it would appear that a more democratic form of leadership is needed as the school begins to move and improve.

Effective leadership in SFCC was characterised by building leadership teams that motivated, raised morale and sustained performance over time. Teachers were given leadership responsibility, encouraged to work together in teams and had set targets to meet. In this sense, effective leadership in SFCC was a shared and dispersed entity, concerned with knowing how to motivate others, how to establish and manage teams and how to convince staff they can make a difference. Honesty, trust and openness in a leader were perceived as important and this was modelled by giving staff real responsibility to lead.

“I am involved in a team that is exploring the issue of pupil access to the curriculum. In a school like this pupils come with quite different standards of English and diverse cultural backgrounds. This feels quite a responsibility but the team seem to be working well together and staff are responsive to the messages because it’s us and not ‘top-down’.” (Teacher S7)

Engage the community

Schools in difficulty are often located in communities of extreme poverty and deprivation. As a consequence they have to deal with problems that are a by-product of the socio-economic context in which the school is located. Indeed, the community may view the school with mistrust and suspicion. It may be seen as having relatively little to do with the lives and aspirations of those within the community it serves. A main task facing the heads in the study was to build bridges with the outside community and to form relationships with families that extended beyond just getting them into the school.

The heads believed that schools that have solid and lasting links with the local community were more likely to gain their support and loyalty in difficult times. Hence, They created opportunities for parents to come in to school, to talk to teachers, to use the facilities and to see the school as a resource for them and their children.

The heads tried to break down traditional barriers between the school and the community by seeking ways to integrate and involve parents in school life. Social, sporting and charitable events offered some points of entry for parents but evening classes and community meetings were also used to encourage parents to view the school as an important resource for the local community.

“Our biggest challenge was getting parents into the school. We did this by inviting them in for a range of activities and events that had nothing to do with education or their children. We tried to make the school a source of learning, socialising and information for them. We ran computer classes, football coaching days, motor maintenance classes and internet-access days. They worked to varying degrees but it brought parents into the school.” (Head S9)

Evaluate and innovate

For many schools in difficulty a culture of denial predominates preventing meaningful change from taking place. The heads in this study put in place robust evaluation mechanisms in order to identify areas for improvement. By providing an internally driven means of diagnosing developmental needs, the possibility of change was increased. If staff recognise that evaluation mechanisms and data gathering offer them powerful ways of planning development and change, they are more likely to use the information for developmental purposes.

By providing feedback on issues directly connected to teaching and learning, evaluation was viewed as a means to an end and not simply another form of accountability. The heads talked about needing to have optimism in the face of failure, to pursue all goals with energy and persistence and to have the ability to find common ground and to build rapport with others.

“The one thing the head did immediately was to protect the school from new initiatives. We had every initiative going and the teachers were tired of yet another new solution to our problems. The head allowed us a period of consolidation then engaged us in steady, planned changes that met the needs of those within the school instead of being at the whim of those outside it.” (Teacher S8)

These eight strategies are not definitive or comprehensive but illustrate the ways in which effective leaders in SFCC generate the capacity for change and development within their schools. It is quite clear from the study that effective leaders in SFCC are constantly managing tensions and problems directly related to the particular circumstances and context of the school.

In many cases the problems they face are beyond their influence or control. Hence the challenges associated with improving the school are greater in schools in such contexts. The heads in these schools are faced with implementing strategic change in often quite volatile and difficult circumstances. Hence, the strategies highlighted in this report do not presume to offer a blueprint for change but simply highlight some of the ways in which effective leaders in SFCC have promoted cultural change and succeeded in securing better teaching and learning conditions for staff and students.

5. Summary

This study highlights the leadership approach that was most prevalent in SFCC. It was one that generated social capital by building relationships and distributed power to others. As one teacher commented:

“I think it is no good having your standard leadership style in a school like this. The problems are too immediate, too pressing. It is more about critical delegation, about maintaining expectations, about giving others power and responsibility. There is no leadership formula in schools like these. What is important is the leader’s fundamental belief that the school can change and that staff and students are the key to that change. That’s where recognising that others are the key to change makes the difference.”

Consequently, the overarching message about leadership in SFCC is that success comes from building the community of the school in its widest sense, ie through developing and involving others. If schools are to be real learning communities this is unlikely to be achieved by operating with models of change and improvement dependent upon individual or singular leadership practices.

What characterised each of the heads in the study was their commitment to distributing power and authority to others. They had an understanding of organisational capacity, its role in sustaining change and how to enhance it. At the core of building organisational capacity was the generation of personal capacity through teacher empowerment, involvement and ownership.

By reinforcing the message that individuals matter and by investing in the quality of relationships within the school, the heads generated high levels of commitment, energy and effort from their staff. This resilience, sheer capacity for hard work and continuing adherence, under the most challenging circumstances, to provide the best opportunities for the learning and achievement for pupils made a significant difference to the school and its ability to improve. In summary, the heads in the study were centrally concerned with convincing all those within the school and the community it served that their vision was worth sharing and pursuing. In all cases they had changed their schools for the better.

6. Implications for Further Research

Inevitably, this research raises questions about leadership in SFCC. It would be interesting to know, for example, how far these findings resonate with leaders in a larger sample of schools in challenging contexts. Similarly, it would be interesting to know if, and to what extent, the leadership approaches and practices in schools in challenging contexts translate to schools in more affluent circumstances. The issue of the relationship between school context and leadership is one that requires more investigation. The transferability of leadership approaches to different school contexts is debatable and therefore is worthy of further exploration.

This study highlights a number of ways in which leaders created the capacity for change and development at their schools. The importance of the relationship between leadership and school improvement remains unquestionable but there are few studies that highlight exactly how leaders generate and sustain school improvement.

There needs to be further research that explores how leaders create the conditions for school improvement and most importantly, are able to sustain this over time. We know a great deal about the actions of the heroic heads who turn around failing schools but less about those heads who are able to maintain and sustain school improvement in less turbulent circumstances. How do leaders successfully guide their schools through different cycles of change and development? Are different leadership approaches needed at different stages in a schools development? How far is distributed or teacher leadership a means of sustaining school improvement?

One of the fundamental questions raised by this research is the extent to which existing theories that dominate the leadership literature adequately reflect contemporary practice. The heads in this study exercised leadership through others and they focused upon developing various forms of human capital.

Taking this perspective, leadership is a fluid and emergent rather than as a fixed phenomenon. It implies a different power relationship within the school where the distinctions between followers and leaders tend to blur. It also opens up the possibility for all teachers to become leaders at various times. It implies a redistribution of power and a re-alignment of authority within the school as an organisation. It suggests that leadership is a shared and collective endeavour that engages all teachers within the school. It also implies that the context in which people work and learn together is where they construct and refine meaning leading to a shared purpose or set of goals.

Recent research by Harris (2002) points towards the need to re-conceptualise leadership as a distributed phenomena and to understand the emotional dimensions of leadership. This work reinforces the potential of teacher leadership as a means to generating and sustaining school improvement.

The idea of the 'emotionally intelligent school' is one that places a premium on the quality of relationships and invests in individuals rather than systems or structures. Most importantly, this work highlights the limitations of rational models of leadership practice and development to influence organisational change and development. In short, this work is based on the simple but profound idea that if schools are to become better at providing learning for students then they must also become better at providing opportunities for teachers to innovate, develop and learn together.

Coping with the unprecedented rate of change in schools in the 21st century will inevitably require alternative approaches to school improvement and school leadership. If schools are to become learning communities, they cannot operate with models of change and improvement dependent upon individual or singular forms of leadership. Consequently, research is required that explores how teacher leadership can be fostered and developed and how far this form of leadership contributes to building professional learning communities within schools.

7. Research Design

The schools that participated in this study were all in the category of schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCC). This category is designated to those schools in which 25 per cent of pupils, or less, achieve five or more grades A* to C at GCSE. This also includes a number of schools that achieve above 25 per cent but where over 35 per cent of their pupils receive free school meals.

Currently this amounts to approximately 8 per cent of secondary schools in England. Many of these schools are in special measures or 'serious weaknesses'.¹ While the schools in the SFCC category vary considerably, schools in low SES² urban areas (OFSTED 1999; OFSTED 1999) schools with falling roles and schools serving inner city communities are over-represented in this group (Gary, 2000). The aim of this small-scale research project was to contribute to the knowledge base concerning effective leadership but with a particular emphasis upon leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances.

The research design was comprised of:

- A review of the literature concerning effective leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. This was undertaken in order to generate propositions and hypotheses for testing.
- In-depth case study data collection in 10 schools facing challenging circumstances. Contextual, performance and survey data included:
 - OFSTED and HMI reports and PCSI data (where available)
 - Raw GCSE data and league tables data
 - Value added and family group data (where available)
 - School management conditions rating survey
 - Semi-structured interviews with headteachers, middle managers and classroom teachers conducted at each school.

The study consisted of three phases. Phase one involved the literature review and generation of research questions and propositions. Phase two involved the data collection, within-case analysis and initial reporting. Phase three incorporated between-case analysis and testing initial findings with headteachers from SFCC at an NCSL seminar.

¹ 10.6% were in special measures at the end of summer term 2000 compared to national average of 2-3%.

² An average of 36% of pupils in SFCC schools are entitled to free schools meals compared to the national average of 13.5%. However, the range is from 84% to 6%.

Selecting 10 case study schools out of a population of 620 schools proved to be a difficult task. It was therefore decided to identify a smaller sub-set of schools from which the 10 case study schools could be selected.

Using two main filters or criteria for selection the population was reduced from 620 to 56. Firstly, only schools where almost 25 per cent achieved top GCSE grades in both 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 were included. This reduced the population to 378 schools. Secondly, only schools inspected between January 2000 and May 2001 were considered. It was anticipated that OFSTED evidence would provide a basis for identifying schools that had effective leadership practices and that were gradually improving. This reduced the population 56 and allowed for the sample of 10 to be selected.

The selection of case study schools was controlled by two factors. Firstly, care was taken to ensure that the schools represented, as far as possible, a wide range of contexts and were geographically spread. Secondly, OFSTED reports were used to gauge sound leadership practice within the school and evidence of an upward improvement trajectory. Consequently, the final sample included:

- Schools located within a range of socio-economic and cultural situations (inner city, urban, rural, and mixed catchment areas) and those with predominantly one ethnic group and also mixed and multiethnic groups
- Schools that were demonstrating gradual improvement in performance
- Schools with different characteristics based on the headteacher (gender, time in post and previous experience)

In the early stages of the research, clear sets of ethical and practical guidelines were agreed with the schools. The research design used multiple data collection methods (Denzin, 1988) including:

- Analysis of documentary evidence
- Management conditions rating survey
- One-to-one interviews
- Group interviews
- Questionnaire survey

Documentary evidence was used to contextualise the questionnaire and interview data. The management conditions rating survey (Hopkins et al, 2000) provided an insight into school culture. One-to-one interviews were conducted with headteachers and group interviews were also conducted with senior managers, middle managers and classroom teachers. Middle managers from the core subjects were interviewed. Transcripts were analysed using theme analysis.

A thematic analysis of the qualitative case studies revealed common patterns across the data. A number of key themes emerged across the 10 case study schools, which have been outlined above.

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