Effective school leadership

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Introduction

Although it is recognised that headteachers play a crucial role in school-wide efforts to raise standards of teaching and pupil learning and achievement, evidence-based knowledge of what makes successful leaders remains elusive. The most popular theories are located in the transactional and transformational models identified more than 20 years ago (Burns, 1978) and lately reinvented through such terms as 'liberation' (Tampoe, 1998), 'educative' (Duignan and McPherson, 1992), 'invitational' (Stoll and Fink, 1996) and 'moral' leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992). What is clear from these, and from the effective schools literature, is that successful leaders not only set direction but they also model values and practices consistent with those of the school, so that "purposes which may have initially seemed to be separate become fused" (Sergiovanni, 1995, p119).

Yet relatively few research studies have sought information from heads recognised as effective, and fewer still have sought educated opinion from those who know most about them, ie their students, staff, governors and parents. In 1998, the National Association of Headteachers, the largest in the UK, commissioned such a 360-degree study.

- Twelve heads were selected from schools of different sizes, operating within different phases, and located in a range of geographical, economic and socio-cultural settings.

- All the schools had received a positive inspection report by Ofsted, particularly with regard to their leadership. All were performing better than average, and the heads all had a good reputation amongst their peers. Gender and experience were also factored in.

- All schools were visited for three days by members of the five-strong research team, a substantial number of interviews was conducted, and local documentation supplemented these.

Analysis of all the data revealed a surprising consensus among the different constituencies in each school and between them.

- All held similar constructions of why the head in their school was successful. Their heads were:

  - values-led

  - people-centred

  - achievement-oriented

- inwards- and outwards-facing

- able to manage a number of ongoing tensions and dilemmas

- All emphasised that the sets of core personal values of the heads were based upon care, equity, high expectations and achievement, which were clear to and shared by the overwhelming majority of the school constituencies and which were the drivers for the life of the school.

- All emphasised the importance attached by the heads to monitoring standards in the school, to keeping ahead of the game so that their schools responded rather than reacted to new external demands, testing them against their own standards and minimising bureaucratic demands on staff.

- All spoke of the improvement-oriented collaborative school cultures which the heads promoted, and the emphasis upon continuing professional development which met both organisational and individual needs.

- All spoke of the time and care which the heads gave enthusiastically to their work: the way in which the heads modelled their values.

- The heads themselves were clearly strategic, reflective practitioners, exercising a range of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and able to analyse, evaluate, articulate and communicate with a range of agencies locally and nationally.

Leadership tensions and dilemmas

Significantly, alongside these positives there were also ongoing problems. Heads worked long hours and were enabled to continue to develop partly through the unsung support of external networks of colleagues, friends and family. It was, however, both their personal values and their abilities to maintain and develop learning and achievement cultures, whilst at the same time manage ongoing tensions and dilemmas, which were the main features of their success.

1. Leadership versus management

Leadership is essentially the process of building and maintaining a sense of vision, culture and interpersonal relationships, whereas management is the co-ordination, support and monitoring of organisational activities. To enact both roles successfully requires a careful balancing act.

> Leadership is about having vision and articulating, ordering priorities, getting others to go with you, constantly reviewing what you are doing and holding on to things you value. Management is about the functions, procedures and systems by which you realise the vision. (Infant school deputy)

2. Development versus maintenance

> If I don't develop others, the school won't develop. So that's my priority. Other jobs can be delegated but not this one. (Primary head)

There was a tension between the amount of time and energy devoted to system maintenance and that devoted to ensuring that staff were always more than competent and were challenged and supported actively in seeking higher standards.

3. Internal versus external change

> The pressure is from outside, but I have to manage the pressure inside... (Secondary head)

The growth in external scrutiny of schools creates its own tensions. Headteachers found themselves positioned uneasily between those forces outside schools instigating and promoting changes, and their own staff who, ultimately, had to implement them. They demonstrated their leadership by the selection of which initiatives to take on, the relative support which they provide for their implementation, their knowledge of how others were tackling new initiatives, and the ways in which they adapted initiatives to their particular values and circumstances.

4. Autocracy versus autonomy

> Although we can work closely, there has to be a time when decisions are taken, and she has to say whether we can or cannot do this… (Primary deputy)

In school cultures of collaboration, in which decision making is no longer the exclusive preserve of headteachers and yet heads remain responsible and accountable for the school's success (or otherwise), a key leadership skill that these heads displayed was their ability to manage the boundaries of autocratic and democratic decision making.

5. Personal time versus professional tasks

Increasing external requirements upon schools had led many heads to commit more and more of their personal time to school-related business.

> I work at least 60 hours a week…it worries me because I don't know how long I can go on putting in the amount of energy. (Primary head)

Although most heads in the study had found ways of managing the demands of intensification, the personal opportunity costs were universally high and, long term, potentially damaging.

6. Personal values versus institutional imperatives

Whilst there was little evidence in the study of opposing sets of values within the schools, tensions did arise from externally-generated pressures of rationalism, and from definitions of efficiency and effectiveness which were perceived as challenging strongly-held people-centred values.

> He holds traditional human values – care for people and community and giving back to society the benefits of what you have been given at school. You are a better person if you achieve academically, but that is only part of being a balanced person. (Primary teacher)

7. Leadership in small versus large schools

Heads in small primary schools were disadvantaged on two main counts. Because they had regular, significant class teaching responsibilities, they were unable to fulfil their strategic leadership roles satisfactorily:

> …it's all the stress of planning and preparing and co-ordinating as a class teacher which is too much… (Primary head)

The breadth of the curriculum which needed to be addressed also provided additional demands upon the small number of staff.

8. Develop or dismiss

For heads who have to make decisions about teaching standards, continuing poor teaching by a member of staff creates a leadership dilemma, cutting across the heads' personal framework of values and beliefs, their ideological and educative commitments to the development of everyone in the school community.

> You can support somebody who is incompetent for as long as you like, but there comes a point where you know that it is not going to make any difference, particularly if they have been doing it for a long time. (Infant head)

Engaging in dismissal procedures touches upon the culture of the school, staff morale, and the nature of the relationship between leader and led. The heads in the study, however, had not shrunk from taking such tough decisions, illustrating the clear if painful boundary that must be drawn at key times between the personal and professional relationships which are at the heart of the educational health of school communities.

9. Power with or power over

The basis of this dilemma is the extent to which similar and dissimilar values can be reconciled. The heads in this study sought to achieve a balance between consulting and involving staff in their decisions while still providing a clear direction forward, but were aware that such involvement might well lead to demands for a bigger say in the direction, and that this might well challenge their right always to make the final decision.

> We are leaders in our own little domain, and sometimes it's hard to accept the overall leadership…because you think you have got a better way of doing it… (Primary teacher)

10. Subcontracting or mediation?

This final dilemma reflects the position of most heads in the study as they found themselves legally responsible for the implementation of externally-imposed change, some of which challenged their own moral purposes, sets of core values and practices, and analysis of the needs of their particular school.

> At the end of the day, the head has to have integrity and to stick to core values and beliefs. It is important that the head can demonstrate integrity in the face of adversity… (Infant head)

The heads had not become 'subcontractors', unthinking links in a chain leading from those who developed policy to those who received it. Nor were they subversives, attempting to undermine the authority of policy imperatives. Rather, they managed changes with integrity and skill, integrating them into the vision, values and practices of their schools.

Implications for leadership training and development

The characteristics of successful leaders, and their ability to be simultaneously people-centred whilst managing a number of tensions and dilemmas, highlight the complexity of the kinds of values-led contingency leadership exercised by these successful heads. The study illustrates that there are no neat solutions to situations which hold within them so many variables; that successful leadership is defined and driven by individual and collective value systems rather than instrumental, bureaucratic, managerial concerns.

Leaders in this study were identified as being reflective, caring and highly principled people who emphasised the human dimension of the management enterprise. They placed a high premium upon personal values and were concerned more with cultural than structural change. They had all moved beyond a narrow rational, managerial view of their role to a more holistic, values-led approach guided by personal experience and preference.

What, then, are the implications for the leadership training and development of aspiring and serving school leaders? Nations across the world are extending their provision of training and development programmes. In England, the establishment by the Teacher Training Agency of such programmes for aspiring and serving headteachers as Headlamp, NPQH and LPSH provide a testimony of the importance attached by government to effective leadership, and this has been further underlined by the establishment of a high-profile, innovative National College for School Leadership.

Currently, even the most recent training programmes fail to address the key themes which have emerged from the study. Since values, it seems, are central to successful leadership, reflection upon these must be central to training. Alongside this must be a focus upon critical thinking, emotional and cognitive (echoing Roland Barth's wise dictum that heads must be the "leading learners" in their schools), and intrapersonal as well as interpersonal skills development. Recognition of the intimate link in successful leadership between the personal and the professional, between the development of the individual and the organisation is paramount.

Finally, problem-solving and the management of competing forces must be key components of leadership training for school improvement if schools are to become the high-achieving learning communities espoused by government. Rational models which focus upon the development of behavioural skills and competencies are insufficient if the needs of those aspiring, new and experienced heads, who wish to become and remain successful in the changing times of the 21st century, are to be met.

References

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