

Successful Leadership in High Poverty Schools

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Abstract

This article explores leadership in schools in high poverty contexts. It focuses on how successful school principals in such circumstances lead their school and engage with their community. The article argues that leadership in such contexts is demanding and difficult but is critically important not only for the school but also for the future aspirations and life chances of the young people who learn there.

Introduction

The challenge of improving schools in the most disadvantaged contexts is currently high on the political agenda in many countries. It remains the case that many schools in high poverty contexts face acute levels of socio-economic deprivation compounded by sets of external factors that adversely affect their ability to perform. Incidences of crime, drug abuse and violence tend to be significantly higher within areas of urban deprivation and social disadvantage. As a consequence, the socio-economic challenges facing schools in the poorest communities are acute and the task of school improvement is a particularly difficult one for those principals and teachers committed to working within these contexts.

The educational reform agenda in many countries reflects a renewed interest in improving schools in the most difficult or disadvantaged circumstances. The issue of 'underachievement' has a high political profile and considerable attention plus resource has been directed towards addressing the problem (West and Pennell, 2003). However, it remains the case that certain groups of pupils consistently fail to reach their potential while other groups of pupils consistently succeed. Research has shown that children from low income families do not on average overcome the hurdle of lower initial attainment (Piontek et al, 1998). It also highlights that class differences affect children long before they start school and have a growing influence as they get older. The odds, it would seem, are 'still

stacked against schools in poorer areas' and the social class differential remains a powerful indicator of subsequent educational achievement (Gray, 2001:1).

Schools located in poor communities often face a myriad of social problems, such as high levels of unemployment, physical and mental health issues, migration of the best qualified young people and, not least, low educational achievement. These powerful, interlocking variables render the teaching and learning processes, accepted and expected in schools in more high poverty contexts particularly difficult. As Power et al. (2003) conclude in their study: [educational] outcomes in deprived areas are worse than those in non-deprived area, whether they are measured in terms of qualification, attendance, exclusions or 'staying on' rates. Inner-city areas, in particular, feature as having low achievement outcomes and lower attainment levels. (p. 26). The study also points to the need to reduce the 'compositional effects that appear to result from high concentrations of disadvantaged students' (p.65). The 'social mix' of students has been shown to be an important contributor to a school's performance therefore making it more difficult for schools in high poverty contexts to improve.

In addition, schools in poor communities are often in recipient of higher than average numbers of pupils with diverse ethnic backgrounds and low literacy levels on entry. In many cases, these schools also take a high proportion of refugee children or pupils that have been excluded from other schools. Not only does this make the student population inherently transient and diverse but it also presents teachers with the daily task of teaching pupils who they have not taught before. Inevitably this places great demands on teachers and often leaves the school in a position of having difficulty with teacher recruitment and retention. Inevitably, with disadvantage comes diversity and the more severe the disadvantage the greater the diversity within the student population (Harris and Chapman, 2004).

In summary, schools in high poverty communities not only have students who may vary in terms of their religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds but also vary from their teachers in terms of aspiration, experience and other attributes directly linked to success at school. In schools in poor communities the social stratification or class of students may be relatively homogeneous while differences in race, ethnicity, religion and language can vary enormously. These variations expand disproportionately the lower down the socio-economic scale schools go. Consequently, there are two inherent and persistent problems facing these

schools. The first is the influence of social mix of the school population i.e. a high proportion of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds (Thrupp, 1999). The second is the sheer challenge of the teaching task presented by a less affluent student population and a community disengaged from education. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds can challenge teachers' conceptions of what to teach, what to expect of students and even how to communicate with them (Knapp, 2002). This is not to suggest a deficit model of teaching in schools in disadvantaged circumstances but simply to acknowledge the extent of the task in securing levels of performance that schools in more affluent areas achieve with relative ease.

In order to achieve and sustain improvement in such schools teachers must exceed what might be termed as 'normal efforts' (Maden, 2001). They have to work much harder and be more committed than their peers in more favourable socio-economic circumstances. In addition, they have to maintain that effort in order to sustain improvement as success can be short-lived and fragile in difficult or high poverty contexts (Whitty, 2001:109). It cannot be denied therefore that there is a strong negative correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school achievement. However this should not translate into a position of believing that there is little that can be done with schools in difficult or challenging contexts. While it is important to recognise the socio-cultural factors that sustain inequalities in educational achievement, cultural deficit models underestimate the potential of schools, teachers and students to 'buck the trend'. There is increasing evidence that schools facing difficult and high poverty contexts are able to add significant value to levels of student achievement and learning (Maden and Hillman, 1999:2002). There is also evidence to show that schools in poor communities can sustain improved levels of student performance and achievement (Gray, 2001: Harris et al, 2003). But as Gray (2001 :33) concedes ' we don't really know how much more difficult it is for schools serving disadvantaged communities to improve because much of the improvement research has ignored this dimension- that it is more difficult, however, seems unquestionable'. So while social disadvantage may not be an excuse for poor achievement in academic terms it certainly remains a powerful factor and source of explanation.

The contemporary research evidence shows that schools in high poverty contexts can improve levels of student performance and achievement (Borman et al ,2000; Harris et al, 2003) and highlights that the quality of *leadership* is a major contributory factor of this

success (Reynolds et al, 2001 and Hopkins 2001). It shows that leadership of schools in poor communities is one of the major levers for subsequent success and achievement (Harris et al, 2006). The existing empirical base highlights the importance of leadership in securing long term change and development in schools but also highlights the limitations of the charismatic, autocratic single leader in securing any form of sustainable improvement (Harris, 2008;2009). The idea of turning around 'failing' schools through the leadership efforts of one person has been shown to be misguided and has proved to be generally less than successful. While the leadership of the principal is undoubtedly important, any individual's efforts however great is unlikely to generate the momentum needed to improve performance unless there is deep engagement and involvement from staff, students and parents in the community. The evidence suggests that the most successful leaders of schools in poor contexts are those who distribute leadership widely and recognise the importance of connecting the school to its wider constituency and community (Harris et al, 2006).

Leading in Poor Communities

The importance of leadership as a lever to secure improvement in schools in difficult contexts should not be surprising. The research base is pretty unequivocal about the importance of leadership in securing successful school change, development and improvement (Fullan, 2001). It points towards the fact that successful school leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of students explaining up to a quarter of the school level variance in pupil achievement (Hallinger & Heck (1998). It is also well known that school leadership plays an unprecedented role in determining a school's success and there is a very strong belief in the ability of leaders to promote and generate school improvement. This is reinforced in the research literature which consistently emphasises the powerful relationship between leadership and school development.

The dominant message is unequivocal - effective leaders make a difference to the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of students (Leithwood and Jantzi 2000). The research evidence consistently demonstrates that the quality of leadership determines the motivation of teachers and the quality of teaching in the classroom. Based on a series of comprehensive and systematic reviews of the literature across all types of schools, Hallinger and Heck (1996) concluded that the effects of school leadership on pupil outcomes were

educationally significant. In summary, leadership makes a difference to school effectiveness and school improvement.

Research focused on schools in high poverty contexts (Harris and Chapman, 2002; Harris et al 2006) has identified some *common features or characteristics* of successful leadership practice. While it is clear that more research is needed in order to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of effective leadership in such contexts, these studies offer a contemporary snapshot of leadership in schools in disadvantaged contexts. .

The data revealed some common themes about the leadership of the principals in these school settings. It showed that of central importance to the leaders of schools in poor communities was the co-operation and alignment of others to their set of values and vision. The principals communicated their personal vision and belief systems by direction, words and deeds. All of the principals reinforced the fact that they had deliberately chosen to work in school in a poor community. It was clear that their vision and values emanated from a core belief in the ability of all children to learn and in the school's potential to offset the effects of disadvantage on student performance.

Secondly, the data showed that the principals' vision was shared both within and outside the school. The principals were successful at aligning staff, parents and students to their particular view of what the school stood for and how it should operate. They had a great optimism around learning and all subscribed to the view that within their school there was huge potential for student growth and development. They respected staff and students 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.

Thirdly, vision was an inherent part of their leadership relationships which helped them communicate a sense of direction for the school. The vision and practices of the principals in schools in poor communities were organised around a number of core personal values concerning the modelling and promotion of respect (for individuals), fairness and equality, caring for the well being and whole development of students and staff, integrity and honesty. It was clear from everything said by the principals that their leadership values and visions were primarily moral (i.e., 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.

In summary, the principals of schools in poor communities displayed 'people-centred leadership' as their core leadership behaviour. This was premised upon respect, trust and a core belief in developing the potential of both staff and students. 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 the principals being firm (in relation to values, expectations and standards), and, on occasion taking very tough decisions, for example, tackling teachers who were consistently under-performing. The principals did not gently cajole staff and students towards success but provided both pressure and support while concurrently building positive relationships. 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. The data also revealed a number of common leadership themes

- **Vision and Values**

Of central importance to leaders in all schools, but particularly in schools in poor communities is the co-operation and alignment of others to a shared set of values and vision. Establishing a clear vision and communicating a sense of direction for the school is a critical task for leaders in schools in difficult circumstances. A lack of direction or common purpose can be a contributory factor to a downward spiral of performance amongst staff in schools in high poverty contexts. Re-establishing direction and regaining staff confidence is essential if subsequent changes are to be successfully implemented. The emphasis upon core values such as respect, fairness, equality, integrity and honesty is a way of defining or re-defining the moral code of the school and setting in place minimum standards of conduct. With a well defined vision and established values in place, the possibility of raising staff and pupil expectations of performance is enhanced in all schools but particularly those in high poverty contexts.

- **Leading Learning**

For all the principals, 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 schools in poor communities 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 principals 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 and 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 principals 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 Professional Development**

A main concern for the principals in challenging school contexts is often one of maintaining staff morale and motivation. In a number of the schools in both studies staff morale had been low and individual self-esteem had been eroded by ongoing criticism of the school. In response the principals 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 which were of direct benefit to the school but also those which 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 support and value them. Consequently, the principals 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 principals set high standards for teaching and teacher performance. The focus and emphasis upon improving teaching and learning was common across all schools. In most cases, time was provided to allow teachers to meet to discuss teaching approaches and they 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 head teacher to deal with the problem. In the majority of cases, a combination of support, monitoring and an individual development programme addressed the problem of poor quality teaching. For all the principals, effective leadership was about capacity building in others and investing in the social capital of the school.

- **Distributed Leadership**

Evidence suggests that highly creative approaches to tackling complex problems are required in schools in poor communities and that the leadership task is one that cannot be undertaken by an individual. This implies distributed or shared forms of leadership where tasks are not the sole responsibility of one person or indeed, the leadership team (Harris, 2008). All the principals in both studies invested in the leadership of others. In such schools often the decision to work with and through teams as well as individuals is a common and effective response to the management of change. Successful principals in such contexts tend to distribute certain strategic leadership responsibilities or core developmental work to teams or individuals within the school.

While principals in schools in poor communities clearly recognise the need to take responsibility for all decisions made, they also acknowledge the importance of empowering teachers who are not necessarily in positions or responsibility or authority to lead important initiatives or developments on behalf of the school. The overarching message is one of the principal building the community of the school in its widest sense i.e. through developing and involving others in leadership and innovation.

- **Community Building**

Recent research has reinforced the importance of school leaders connecting with the community and of hearing and taking account of parent (and student) voices (Chrispeels, Castillo, & Brown, 2000). Principals in high poverty contexts tend to be acutely aware of the need to engage with their community. They visit homes, attend community events, communicate regularly with the parents about successes and engender trust by showing genuine care for young people. They understand the forces within the community that impede learning, they are aware of the negative forces of the sub-cultures and they listened to parents' views and opinions regularly. The principals tried to create integral relationships with the families in the communities they served. They recognised that 'family, school and community relationships directly affected student outcomes' hence the need to connect with the community was of paramount importance to the success of the school.

The principals were also highly responsive to the demands and challenges placed upon their school by other external forces. Schools in poor communities are often in receipt of much more attention and intervention from the district and central government level than schools in more affluent circumstances.. The principals saw their role as protecting teachers from unnecessary intrusion or burdens by acting as gatekeepers to external pressures. While there were innovations and new initiatives at each school, these had been carefully selected to ensure that they matched the developmental needs of the school and would not simply compete for teachers' classroom time and energy.

The principals 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, honest and the quality of their inter-personal relationships. The principals 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. Stoll and Fink (1996) describe 'invitational leadership' as a form of leadership where leaders place a high premium upon personal values and inter-relationships with others. The principals in both studies 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.

Commentary

The evidence suggests that leadership within schools in poor communities takes two forms. The first is concerned with the implementation of policies and initiatives aimed at addressing structural concerns within the school. The second is concerned with cultural change and development where leadership has a transformational intention and quality. The principals displayed both kinds of leadership and had instigated many changes and deployed many strategies aimed at improvement. They had deliberately and carefully selected key areas for development and change.

The principals acknowledged that there had been times when the quality of the relationships between staff and also between staff, students and parents had not been at an optimum. In some cases relationships had deteriorated over time resulting in a negative culture within the school characterised by low expectations and a high degree of mistrust. Therefore they had invested a great deal of time in creating opportunities for more positive relationships to be developed. For staff, opportunities were provided to work together, to work across teams and within teams, social events were organised and staff development activities included the expertise and involvement of those within the school. For students, staff – student committees were organised, student councils were established, lunch time 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 there were more opportunities 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.

Leadership is a complex undertaking in any school, but for schools within disadvantaged contexts, it presents extra challenges. The core message about successful leadership in schools facing difficult or located in high poverty contexts is one of *building capacity* through *empowering, involving and developing others* and by providing systems of *learning support, guidance and assistance*. Capacity building should be the central aim of all schools but for those in high poverty contexts it is imperative to ensure that school improvement is long term rather than short lived. While there are no ‘quick fixes’ for schools facing high poverty contexts (Stoll and Myers, 1998), there is an emerging evidence base to suggest that distributed forms of leadership and more contextually specific approaches to development

are more likely to contribute to raising attainment in schools in difficulty (Harris and Chapman 2006).

Increasing external scrutiny, intervention and pressure upon schools in high poverty contexts are strategies that are least likely to bring about improvement in schools in the poorest communities in the long term. An alternative approach is one where improvement approaches are carefully matched to individual schools and to the individual school context. This requires leaders to accurately diagnose and prioritise problems and to put in place strategies for improvement that fit the developmental stage and needs of their school. It also implies moving away from highly prescriptive forms of leadership practice to more evolutionary approaches that are responsive to individual school context and circumstances.

No one close to schools in high poverty contexts would ever think that providing them with leadership is an easy task. The work of these leaders is hectic, fast paced and demanding. Successful leaders in poor communities 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 their moral purpose and core values. Successful leaders of schools in poor communities tend to be, above all, people-centred combining a willingness to be collaborative with a constant striving for improved teaching and learning. While the demands upon such leaders are considerable, the personal and professional benefits far outweigh them ensuring that there is leadership continuity, capability and continuity in our most challenging school contexts.

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