Personality, moral purpose, and the leadership of an education for sustainable development

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This paper describes how two primary head teachers, nationally recognised as role models for the development of an education for sustainable development (ESD) in their schools, manage the implementation of this area. In doing so, it shows how they adopt two very different approaches to ESD and to their job generally, and suggests that whilst there are some commonalities between them, educational leadership needs to be seen as driven by a moral purpose, engaging and re-engaging with each situation, entering into a dialectic with others' visions, leading to the re-conceptualisation of problems in different ways. This not only suggests a continued tension between such uniqueness and standardised approaches to headship, but raises questions about current policy imperatives for developing models of sustainable leadership.

Keywords: leadership; moral purpose; education for sustainable development

Introduction

Educational leadership in the UK is at something of a crossroads. From a strong emphasis on 'standards and competencies' at the turn of the century, official pronunciations are now more thoughtful, having moved away from visions of a single transformative individual leading a workforce in the delivery of national standards through trained sets of competencies, towards both a more contextualised and value driven approach. Not that targets, benchmarks and Ofsted have gone away: the result is that currently, official views of educational leadership

tend to come across as an uneasy blend of different concerns: an Ofsted-style micro- management, with a delivery of standards largely predicated upon an economic model, and yet a growing recognition of the moral, contextualised and distributed nature of leadership. Gronn's (2003) notion of 'designer leadership' – individuals trained in desired competencies, and then inspected and rewarded or punished on these – is now more balanced by Leithwood's (1999) assertion a decade ago that 'outstanding leadership is exquisitely sensitive to context', and by governmental embrace of books with titles like The moral imperative of school leadership (Fullan 2003) and the publication of official texts like that of Porritt et al. (2009) with a section beginning (12) Leading from moral purpose, and a diagram of leadership practice (25) with 'moral purpose' as the quality at the very centre.

Yet with the apparent embrace of differing and wider perspectives must also come a different ontological and epistemological understanding of the world: that any one vision is not objective, that one cannot be certain in the assertions of most things educational, and that causation is hardly ever nicely and simply linear. If this is the case, then educational answers will not be produced by reductionist analysis using standardised understandings; instead a less certain, more provisional, and complex appreciation of the world and the causality within it will suggest the need for more systemic thinking which attempts to understand the interconnectedness and interdependence of things. This acknowledges its 'wickedity' (Bore and Wright 2009) – an acceptance that many issues and problems within it as 'not easily defined, [with] many causal levels and [which] cannot be solved by generic principles or linear heuristics'. Bore and Wright (2009) contrast 'wicked' problems with 'tame' problems, which are well-defined, stable, and belong to a class of problems which can be resolved generically' (4). Understandably, governments have a preference for recognising problems as 'tame' because they allow for easy recognition and easy judgement of their resolution as right or wrong. Yet, such understandable preference can and does lead to the classification of 'wicked' problems as 'tame' ones, and as the authors argue '. . . as a result illegitimate "solutions" are attempted with the

result that many simply do not work.' (ibid.). This recognition of 'wickedity' was in part recognised in the UK in Blair's early premiership days with talk of 'joined-up' thinking, and with the development of an Every Child Matters (DfES 2004) agenda which attempts to combine the expertise of different professions and workforces in providing a more holistic conceptualisation of children's well-being, as it is clear that no single organisational identification of a problem and its solution is going to be sufficiently encompassing to be satisfactory. Yet whilst such recognition is to be welcomed, it remains tangled in a web of tame problems and solutions, exemplified through competencies and standards, and their inspection and micro-management. This failure of ontological perspective has also prevented the appreciation of what Hoyle and Wallace (2005) describe as the necessary paradox of leadership: that whilst government have legitimate objectives for schools to take on board, there are other stakeholders at micro-, meso- and macro-levels, other values, and other ways of thinking, which need attention and response. Governments then need to have the courage to allow these to flower. It might well be argued that one of New Labour's failures was its inability to allow the development of other such models.

Some of the latest thinking from the National College on models of leadership (NCLSCS 2009) falls short in this regard. Whilst claiming in the introduction to the document that 'policy has focused on increasing diversity and encouraging the development of new types of leadership', and that 'there is no "right" way to structure a school's leadership and governance arrangements', the document itself consists of descriptions of different ways of organising institutions which provide schooling (single schools, collaborations, partnerships, federations, mixed federations, trust, academies, and local authority initiatives). It therefore attempts to deal with the purely pragmatic – how does one manage a single as opposed to a federated or trust school? At no time does it engage with debates about the nature of leadership, on whether it should be transactional, transformation, paternal, democratic, or distributive. Yet in not engaging with this issue, it fails to ask questions about the moral purposes of leadership. Perhaps it is

assumed that because certain agenda (Ofsted criteria, SATs, etc.) are stipulated by government, the central purposes of schooling are determined, and the rest is little more than philosophical froth. Yet the reality is that as soon as one engages in such pragmatic questions (how should I/we run this school? this federation?), one necessarily has to refer to spoken or unspoken value assumptions about the purposes of schooling: is it 'I' or is it 'we' that will run the school, and what does this say about my leadership values, and the role of others in this enterprise? Perhaps it is believed that there really do need to be developments of new types of leadership; but then, why stop at a consideration of pragmatic issues, and not offer some opinions or guidance on whether a diversity of school structures will require new value underpinnings or a continuation of formerly recommended ones? The situation, it would appear, needs further clarification.

The need for discussion in this area is well captured in the approach needed to develop an education for sustainable development (ESD). Whilst it now seems generally accepted that truly sustainable development is one which 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, 8), an educational approach to this requires an understanding of the complex interlinkages between, and the sustainability, of environmental, social and economic activities – of what Sterling (2009, 16) calls an 'ecological' view of the world where the dominant emphasis is upon the relationships between its various parts. Yet given governmental emphases upon economic agendas (Barry and Paterson 2004; Huckle 2008), and an apparent inability to break out of a control model, it is perhaps unsurprising that ESD is a topic which has received little attention by the leaders of schools until very recently. A recent Ofsted report (2008, 4) concluded that:

Most of the schools visited had limited knowledge of sustainability and work in this area tended to be unco-ordinated, often confined to special events rather than being an integral part of the curriculum.

A review of the research in this area by Symons (2008, 3) says much

the same thing:

Schools which have embedded sustainability report a range of positive outcomes. However, research suggests that the majority of schools have limited knowledge of sustainability, work on sustainability tends to be piecemeal and uncoordinated, and its impact tends to be shortlived and limited to small groups of pupils.

Finally, specifically referring to school leadership, writing for the NCSL, Jackson (2007, 43) concluded that there was a serious mismatch '. . . between what schools are saying about the importance of sustainability and what they are doing.' A recent report (Birney and Reed 2009, 4) echoes this: 'sustainability in the majority of schools remains unprioritised, partial and uncoordinated.'

But how is the effective leadership of this area to be developed? What model of leadership should be adopted? Here, the previous incarnation of NCLSSC, the NCSL (Jackson 2007), did take a position on the kind of leader required, and espoused a 'distributed' model as the best way forward, a recommendation backed up by Birney and Read (2009). This paper, however, whilst thinking it undesirable to take an NCLSSC position of 'no position', also questions the adoption of any particular model of leadership, and instead argues that a greater appreciation of the uniqueness of individual approaches, of the strength through individual difference, needs much greater attention. It therefore suggests that whilst policy makers have now embraced the concept of 'context', they need to go one step further and embrace the concept of personality in the determination of leadership purpose.

This paper investigates this proposition by using a 'portrait' methodology which has previously been used in both England and Hong Kong to provide an overview of the varied ways in which head teachers and principals see and tackle their jobs (Bottery 2007; Bottery et al. 2008a) and also to describe in detail the highly personal responses of primary head teachers to the challenges they face (Bottery et al. 2008b). This approach is then capable of demonstrating how different

personalities mediate the challenges and contexts within which they work. It suggests that if policy implementation and professional development are to be successful, an understanding of the personal nature of headship and an appreciation of the interaction between them and the local conditions within which they work will be critical. This paper then uses this approach to describe the approaches of two English head teachers to an education for sustainable development (ESD). These individuals have some real commonalities: both are strong personalities, both have been nationally recognised for their work in this field; both have recently gained part-time doctorates whilst being practising headteachers (Dixon 2009; Robinson 2009); and both have clear views about sustainability and its implementation. Yet they are very different individuals with very different approaches to ESD. This paper will then provide portrayals of each and contrast their approaches, suggesting that each has been successful in developing this area, and pointing to the need for a policy approach to leadership development which recognises, celebrates and supports a more individualistic, contextual and artistic nature of the role.

Methodology

Portrait methodology was first described by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) in the USA as a qualitative approach providing a written description or 'portrait' of an individual dealing with the challenges around them. It attempts, as Hackman (2002, 54) describes, to provide 'the authentic central story as perceived by the actors within the setting'. One of the authors of this paper developed a variant of this approach to investigate the situation of English head teachers (Bottery 2007), before working with colleagues to contrast such experiences with those of principals in Hong Kong (Bottery et al. 2008a, 2008b). The variant used for both these studies was what became known to the researchers as the 3Ps approach – semi-structured interviews with individuals who were interviewed by peers, who knew that the questions would be about them as persons rather than about their performance, and where they would be guaranteed privacy – no element of the interview would be used without the

express permission of those interviewed (see Bottery et al. 2009 for a fuller description and discussion). The end result is a detailed pen-portrait of that individual which can then be used as a vehicle for self-reflection. In the case of the two portraits presented below, both individuals read their portraits independently, both read a final draft of the article with their portraits anonymised, and both agreed to the article with their real names attached. This says much about them as individuals – and particularly about their desire and strength to stand by the moral purpose they so clearly exhibit in their practice. To both we are profoundly grateful.

The particular study from which these portraits were taken was derived from an interest in the development of the leadership of ESD, and in particular an investigation into the extent and manner of its implementation in schools in England. To this end, a number of schools around the country were identified from relevant policy literature as being exemplars of good practice in what is still generally acknowledged as rather patchy coverage. In addition to tours of the school and classrooms, the reading of relevant policy literature, and talking to children and teachers, the portrait approach was seen as an appropriate methodology to find out how the head teachers saw the development of this area in their schools. This paper then provides two portraits describing two very different approaches to ESD by two very successful head teachers. It concludes with a discussion of these similarities and differences, and of the implications of this study.

The David Dixon portrait

David describes himself as 'pretty self-sufficient', a man managing the practicalities of running a school, moving the school to a committed position on ESD, who sees the need for an academic and theoretical underpinning for such commitment, going beyond what he terms 'received wisdom'. He has just completed a doctorate in the area, which has led to a fairly radical stance on what schools, education and society need to do to address ESD issues.

Background and the path to headship

David's origins were largely in 'rural environments', and when it came to training as a teacher, it seemed natural to him to take environmental education as his main subject. He got his first job in 1979 in a middle school 'which had a strong emphasis' on environmental studies; from here 'I aspired to be a subject leader' in the area, achieving this in 1985. At first he thought environmental studies was viewed as an important element of the curriculum, but then with the National Curriculum 'everything went back into subject boxes', and he felt 'it somehow jumped off the radar'. However, he still thought it 'made sense to teach in a cross-curricular way', and so 'I tried to keep most elements of it'. Even then there was a sense of being a man apart: 'I pursued it as a class teacher, but I found it was quite difficult to convince other teachers to adopt that approach, and part of that is still true today'. Now, as then, he feels that 'knowledge of environmental education and lifecycle education on the biology side is very scant in primary education...but also the social side of it as well, the way that society operates in relation to the natural world'. Then and now, he feels, it remains 'on the periphery'.

After that he became a deputy head teacher for six years, 'and then I became a head teacher where I am now'. At the time of interview, he had been head teacher for 14 years.

Setting up ESD

The school David inherited 'wasn't eco-friendly at all'. It is located in an area of council housing – which is 'no. 3 in child poverty' in the local authority, a curious blend of the very old and the very new. It was 'based in an old army camp', and that is still easy to see, even if one thing David 'started to do was think about knocking the building about because it was so old and horrible'. A strong reason for doing this was that 'this made an impact in terms of how people started to perceive the school'. There were other kinds of problems that had to be faced: 'the learning environment was very poor' . . . and he thought that if Ofsted had been doing inspections then, 'it would have been in special measures'. It wasn't just the learning environment that was a problem:

'the behaviour of the children was appalling, the curriculum wasn't working, so it was really a start from scratch job'. David was concerned to make 'the curriculum more motivational', and he thought that 'a cross-curricular approach' was the best way to achieve this. There is clearly a link here with ESD, but there were two problems in particular in making this link stronger. One was that the integration of various elements was hampered by those teachers 'who don't particularly understand any of those elements very well'. It was important therefore 'to make it more understandable', and that was best accomplished, he suggested, by concentrating on 'a manageable chunk that people will understand...it is trying to do a part that people will understand at a very practical level...' The second problem was the initial 'very poor behaviour of the children', and whilst a 'rigid behavioural management scheme' was put in place, it was also felt necessary to 'make the curriculum more relevant to the children', and this was where 'the cross- curricular, hands-on experiential learning started to be introduced'. In terms of ESD, David concentrated at first on 'easy wins' and 'low hanging fruit' – after introducing recycling bins, 'special events started to come in, green days, low energy days . . . slowly introducing more of this into the curriculum'.

But David felt there remained ongoing problems. Because 'it's a big challenging school . . . when we advertise for posts, we get very poor responses'. The result was that 'we can't select exclusively on how eco-enthusiastic somebody is'. Of course, 'people looking at our website know what our ethos is . . . but we do have to do extra work with people who join the school' and particularly with 'younger teachers' who are 'probably less aware on some of the issues'. The doctoral study backed this perception up: David found that it was largely 'a generational thing – the younger teachers are Thatcher's children – they are more self-centred. It's a different mind- set'. Part of his job then was to get 'some of these new teachers to look at some of their own values, because I think unless you start to live a more sustainable life yourself, you can't go into a classroom and embed it in the curriculum very successfully'.

The importance of ESD in the larger scheme of things

But if there is a lack of awareness of the ESD agenda at the school level, David did not feel that it stopped there. The change from link inspectors to SIPs (School Improvement Partners) had, for David, narrowed their role from an advisory to a monitoring one: 'I think the new SIPs have a smaller remit than the old link inspectors. When we had link inspectors . . . there was more time and space to discuss some of these issues. But now there is not'. The result was that 'the SIP and I have never had any discussions about this . . . It has always been the case of just looking at your targets for improving attainment . . . unless you can do it in the context of "how is it going to raise attainment?"' The result has been that 'unless you can maintain your attainment at a certain level which is deemed to be acceptable, then if you start talking about this agenda you are sort of slapped down and reminded that you have got to get these other targets up'.

David felt that this governmental concern with targets and attainment was very important in explaining why there was limited official backing for ESD: 'as yet, research is not showing a definitive link between an ESD approach and a raised attainment...This is why I think they are standing back and not making this statutory'. However David was of the opinion that things might be changing: 'the

OFSTED research that has been done is suggesting that there is a link . . . They have looked at schools with this sort of agenda and found that they tend to be better in terms of attainment'. Nevertheless, David remained to be convinced of so direct an effect: 'who is to say which way this is causal . . . I think a lot of schools tend to be in the leafy suburbs, so you have got a lot of things that make an impact that aren't directly attributable to an eco-agenda'.

The result seemed to be that government priorities and its appointees were less than supportive of this agenda, unless it could be clearly demonstrated that the pursuit of ESD raised attainment. But even when it was given support, David was concerned about what was on offer. For a start he felt that 'there was no working definition like

there is for other areas of the education system...and it is easy to have tokenism . . . you can have a green flag school, but it may not be a particularly sustainable school'. He described current government, NCSL and Ofsted approaches as 'giving a sort of watered down version of what a sustainable school might be'. Another problem for David was that most teachers and head teachers did not really have a grounding in the knowledge base of this area from the physical and social sciences, though 'the [head teachers] who you could describe as the deeper green definitely do...they understand how the planet basically works'. Finally, David believed that to fully appreciate the problems humanity is facing one needed what he called 'a sort of eco-postmodern' stance: this needed to be 'critical of the modern in terms of the economic neo-liberal model'. He felt then that there was a need to 'stand back and look at it in a critical way and literally look at radical alternatives . . .' This meant being 'very sceptical of received wisdom, to question the way we have our economic system'. Yet he saw very limited evidence of this perspective, only a rather diluted government version, 'through NCSL and OFSTED . . . so you really have to put your head above the parapet to take things further, or to question policy'. David clearly recognised that 'that seems a bit subversive or outside the remit of what a school should be doing, but there are clearly issues that need addressing.' Unsurprisingly, given the 'watered-down' approach he thought was being recommended, he also believed that 'the general CPD system and network really hasn't got this as a main agenda item . . . you're not in schools encouraged to think about what should be the values of education...there doesn't seem to be a lot of discussion of that, it seems to be all utilitarian, how we are going to implement things . . .' The result was then unsurprising . . . 'It's very difficult to find out about these things in sufficient depth'. This was a major motivation for reading for a doctorate.

The doctorate and its findings

There were other reasons that David gave for embarking upon a doctorate, however. The first – 'a bit of sado-masochism I suppose' –

may well be applicable to many doctoral students. The second – that 'I've always been interested in the theoretical sides of education . . . because it helps to give you a fresh perspective on things . . .' is also likely to be fairly common amongst those who feel that 'you get very bogged down with the day-to-day stuff and don't always have the time to question it . . .' But there was also a highly personal element here – 'it's going back to childhood experiences: I failed my 11þ and ended up going to quite a rough secondary modern . . . it was only when I got to the end of teacher training that I thought of myself as good as others in terms of academic achievement, so it has given me the incentive to try and improve myself academically'. Finally, there was a 'practical angle' as well: 'I always thought I never wanted to soldier on as a head to 60–65' and doing a doctorate 'might give me some other career options . . .'

The doctorate was centrally concerned with developing a new leadership model for ESD which asked whether it was 'valid to give someone a green label when we don't know what this means...' To this end, David looked at 'definitions of greenness . . .' and then started to look at issues of 'green wash, green tokenism, how certain groups wanted to control what the definition of greenism is. And eventually it took me to green leadership...and from there looking at the NCSL leadership approach towards sustainability . . . and exploring whether green leaders' used distributed leadership as the major way of operationalising this idea in their schools.

David 'ended up looking at eight leaders of green flag eco-schools . . . it looked into their childhood and training and professional influences, to see if there were any commonalities which led to this line of thinking'. One thing that David thought was 'not insignificant' was that 'six of them were from church schools...' which he thought might be explained by their 'caring ethos'. But beyond that, there seemed to be two different reasons why his sample had gone for green flag status, what one might call the utilitarian and the committed. The utilitarians consisted of those who saw ESD as a useful aspect of the curriculum which could ultimately deliver improved easily measured standards. But

the committed were 'a bit like myself, had a lot of childhood experiences, that led them down this road' – they seem to have commitment which was 'really deep-seated', and they also 'seemed to be the type of leaders who lived their life in a sustainable way'.

Very interestingly, 'most of them did seem to share one common theme: they seemed to be very Machiavellian', by which David was referring to a reality of headship: that 'it is the head who is ultimately accountable', and David's concern was that 'if you are too distributed . . . you may end up with people doing things which may ultimately make you suffer as a head . . .' Moreover, 'it seemed that the heads I was looking at (and I include myself in this) didn't follow distributed leadership: they might use it as a technique in order to deliver the ESD approach . . . but their value system was based on the belief that we needed to do something to combat the ecological crisis'. In other words, these heads – and David – had a personal 'moral framework they were working from' which they felt at times had to override a fully implemented distributed leadership model. This was why David said that he doubted the sense of 'the incessant promotion of distributed leadership': it had its place, but he felt that there were other (and sometimes more important) considerations and values that a leader had to be address. For him, the driving force was very clear: 'we need to do something to combat the ecological crisis'.

The Sue Robinson portrait

A critical element of David's approach to ESD is the belief that you need to be an expert in it. Thus, to lead and develop an education for sustainable development would need a grounding in the natural and social sciences of economic, social and environmental sustainability. David's portrait describes a head teacher with these qualities – he has gained a doctorate in this area, and through personal values, staff selection, organisational acumen, and the force of his personality, has made this the distinguishing feature of his school. Like Sue, he is visited by academic and governmental researchers who enquire how they do what they do. Both are individuals with a core moral purpose to

their conception of the job. Both have gained doctorates part-time, but whereas David's is a study of 'green' the leadership, Sue's is a study of the development of headship in a context of constant change and a history of increased steerage of the profession. One of the main recommendations of her doctorate is of the need for governments to allow the greater exercise of personal and professional judgement in responding to the local context of leadership. And whilst Sue recognises the importance of ESD, she has other priorities and is comfortable for others in the school to lead on it. Moreover, whilst David had strong reservations about the role of distributed leadership in driving this agenda, Sue made a strong case for its necessity if the ESD agenda was to be sustainable beyond her headship. This portrait therefore needs to cover her general approach before it talks about sustainability, because Sue's approach to ESD is a consequence of her vision of leadership.

Sue's background

Sue was a problem child: 'I wasn't a popular child in school, teachers never liked me, probably because I never shut up . . .' She was 'privately educated', but 'not terribly well behaved...I was bored witless when I was at school'. She 'left school at 15 . . . dropped out of some A levels prior to university and never went'. So as a child she was outspoken, easily bored, and, I suspect, did not like being told what to do without very good reason. If the child is mother to the woman, then Sue seems a very good example, as the same traits seem very much part of what she is today. But there are other traits which need indicating: she is unconventional and surprising, and when you interview her, torrents of passionate words pour out of her mouth, and what she says much of the time is provocative and courageous, in that she dares to do and say many things that other head teachers would never dare utter. She declares that as a head teacher 'you can do what you like, you have been able to do what you want in the curriculum for years'. She then goes on to state flatly that 'I don't think I am remotely courageous', that she is fact 'incredibly lucky', because she has had the good fortune of being surrounded by lots of capable people: 'I think

people are actually a lot better than people usually give them credit for'. She talks of the role of head teacher as really very simple, that at bottom all you have to do is trust people '...the people I have trusted have all come through' and yet as the interview proceeds, one realises that the strategy may be relatively simple to describe, but its cultivation and its assessment are based on a continuous process of talking, listening and consulting, because 'I am around the school like a rash, I am here at 7.00 am and I don't go until 6.00 pm...but I walk round it, I go in and out of the classrooms...I talk to the staff, and the most important conversations are sitting at the desk at the end of the day . . . it is here that you learn about school'. So Sue's approach may be relatively simple to describe – management through people – but its realisation is anything but.

When Sue eventually decided to go into education, it was she says 'because my friend went into education'. The choice as she describes it was stark: 'It was either that or mucking out horses, and I decided it would ruin my nail polish'. Nail polish or not, she found she had a gift for teaching – and that she cared about what happened to the children she taught: 'I actually met this child...and he couldn't read. I was listening to him read, and he said, "I can't read" . . . I said you can read actually, but the words are all in your head, but you haven't actually chosen to say them yet' and she showed him how, and with some justifiable pride told me how 'he is now a gynaecologist at a hospital.'

Running the school

Sue is an enthusiast, not just about the school, but about life generally and certainly about her doctoral study: 'I couldn't get enough of the reading . . . it was like a light bulb'. But enthusiasm does not seem to get in the way of appreciating and utilising others' talents: in fact it seems fuelled by it. She is eclectic, looking for talent and help anywhere and everywhere, and cultivating it when she finds it. When Sue describes her school, the eruption of words and detail, along with protestations of how simple and straightforward it all was, can lead the outsider to think that there is something slightly mad or magical

here. Certainly it is a highly personal approach, and it is perhaps unsurprising that she said that her favourite quote was that 'using standards and competences to describe leadership is like using a quantity surveyor rather than an artist to capture the grandeur of St. Pauls'. But to think that this means her approach was a product of feeling and whimsy would be seriously misleading: there is a cleverly conceived and articulated plan here, which is organic rather than mechanical in nature, and it is central to how Sue and her school deal with the issues of sustainability.

A critical aspect of Sue's leadership, like David's, concerns values, and their infusion into the school: 'I think what I set, from a head's point of view, is the school's values'. And for Sue, probably 'our core value has to be respecting other people . . . And if you are doing that and caring for each other, and you are looking at being respectful, you have to be the same with the planet, because that is what our children are going to live in'. The first link to sustainable values is then made – like David Singer's (1981) notion of an expanding circle of moral concern, in Sue's eyes, respecting and caring for other people should lead to a respect and care for the planet as well.

But if part of the first phase is in identifying and developing a conception of the area of moral concern, an equally important part is in creating a process which develops through other people: – 'I think the key element is allowing your school to evolve through trust and relationships and distributed leadership'. However, it is one thing to espouse the values; it's quite another thing to ensure that they are embraced by the whole school. This is why Sue told me that 'it's not me, because lunch time supervisors will do it, our school business manager will do it, other children who come here will do it, it has to be shared . . .' and the triumph for Sue comes when the children say, for instance with respect to bullying, 'we don't do that here, that's not part of what we do...'.

But Sue can be disconcerting: uttering a statement like 'I think all you need are values, you don't need anything else, and you let everything

else work itself out . . .' sounds like an open invitation to Ofsted to put the school into special measures, but then she immediately makes it clear that this is not all that is needed, 'because you question all the time, and you say is this in the best interest of the children? Is this going to help make them good citizens? Is this going to help them access the future?' Nor must one forget that she is into the school early, home late, and always round the school 'like a rash . . .' So whilst she thinks 'that the beauty of primary education that it has that flexibility', the job, it is evident, still requires huge amounts of continual looking, questioning and probing at what is being done. So the values are initially espoused by Sue when she arrives, and then gradually embraced by all those at the school. These form the backdrop to everything else. And Sue is clear that whilst she can have many ideas, she cannot have them all, and for that she needs a talented staff. For her, a core function for the head teacher then is being a 'strategic school leader, because you can't possibly know everything there is to know about everything'. Again, disconcertingly, she can give the impression at times that again this is all a matter of luck. She says 'that if you trust people, 90% of the time they will come through for you', but trust for her entails checking that trust given is trust used appropriately. And it is clear that she has teeth as well, which are used when deemed necessary. Her enthusiasm is then backed by massive hard work, as well as by a lack of toleration for those who do not make the effort. This is also why she believes that 'you do need Ofsted…I've worked in a lot of schools, and . . . you go in [to some] and cry, because you think how could you be allowed to do this to children . . . ?'

The result of such an approach, for Sue, is that if you have a talented, committed and hardworking staff who you can trust, then (and again a little disconcertingly) 'you don't need a literacy or numeracy strategy, and you don't need a particular curriculum: what you need is children to have the skills . . .' and the skills are 'if they can problem solve, if they're creative and they enjoy it, and then they want to do it, that makes the curriculum . . .'.

So an ability to generate a set of core shared values is allied to a trust in others' abilities and commitment to create a stimulating and complex curriculum; and these are backed up by her talking, visiting and watching, and watching and talking again. But there is more than that. If everyone shares the same core values, and has the same commitment, then Sue believes that 'trust works because people don't want to let you down', and this means that other people will want to do some of the work of oversight and observing and talking as well. This is part of how Sue described what happens when she says the school is 'actually run by a committee . . . we have constantly got teacher voice, pupil voice, parent voice, and last week we had governors in . . . so it's this multilayered approach all the way', and when she says 'I think that is the only way that it works', one begins to see what distributed leadership means for her.

Yet Sue's portrait has an extra complexity which needs capturing, because, despite the talk of sharing and trusting, and distributing leadership, Sue is convinced that as a head teacher 'you have to be charismatic...' because 'the key in leadership is intentional influence'. One ends with apparent paradox – the advocacy of charismatic distributive leadership! Surely, one might say, the roots of charisma and distributed- ness are at odds, with the first saying 'follow me' and the second saying 'take the lead'? Sue thinks not, believing that the combination works when charisma inspires confidence, trust (and being trusted), cooperation and collaboration in others, and which does not stifle and overwhelm personal initiative but actually encourages it. So for Sue, a charismatic head needs to be able to motivate and encourage and empower precisely because a strategy of 'Go in, follow me, I will solve your problems, is not sustainable, because when you are not there ...' For Sue, then sustainability is a critical issue, and she believes that her style of leadership encourages this.

The meanings of sustainability

For Sue, sustainability 'is a catchall term'. She used it in two different ways. First, it can be primarily about 'the curriculum and recycling and

making sure the school is as green as it can be'. And to really work, this cannot be an isolated enthusiasm: it's a 'lot more than just learning to turn the lights off . . . doing eight weeks of recycling'. If it is going to be about 'ensuring the sustainability of the planet, and green issues, then it has to be . . . embedded all the way through, an integral part of the school'.

But she also sees sustainability as a much broader concern; it is 'the sustainability of whatever you are doing – the sustainability of the SEN agenda, or sustainability of Children's Centres, or sustainability of distributed models of leadership'. In this sense, the green agenda is one part of a larger objective, a process of 'looking at those elements that are necessary and allowing them to evolve organically', through debate, discussion, observation, talking, using different talents, etc. etc. So when Sue says that the global green environmental agenda 'doesn't wake me up personally at night...' it does not mean that she is not interested: '...I can understand the intellectual argument...I think it is being realised that something has to be done about it...' and her core values of respect and care, as we have seen, expand to embrace global agendas. But it does mean that because she feels her most important concern at the school is that of addressing the needs of a 'very diverse community . . .' this means that her personal focus currently has to be on the 'personal, social and health agenda . . .'.

But her focus elsewhere is balanced by the fact that she has set up a system whereby others at the school are empowered and trusted – and feel sufficiently trusted to bring up a green agenda and pursue it. Sue candidly admits that 'to a certain extent it's come on my radar because it has been brought to my attention rather than that I have gone out and found it...a lot of sustainability started because people have an interest in it'. So its identification as an important concern for the school does not have to come from her, and nor is the 'curriculum imposed top down from the senior leadership team'. The result is that 'it is not a question of someone sitting down and saying OK, we will make sustainability a part of our school . . . . . . it is everyone coming in with different ideas about it, and at different levels . . .' One begins to

understand what she means when she says 'it comes back down to people and relationships again you see . . .'.

A portrait which embodies the paradox of charismatic distributed leadership probably needs to finish with another. Sue advocates the encouragement of personal and contextual solution of problems within a government framework where currently 'the biggest problem is micro-management', where government does not allow the individual leader to use their professional judgement sufficiently. Her solution is quietly subversive: 'the leaders who succeed are the leaders who can manage the agenda...and manage it in a way that they know is best for their children'. So is this the best way to further the ESD agenda? Surprisingly perhaps, currently Sue believes 'the government has to push it more, and I hate to say this but it has to push it through the control agenda, it has to push it through Ofsted'. In a world where there may not be the time to develop the number of charismatically distributive heads required to sufficiently promote a vigorous ESD agenda system- wide, there may then need to be paradoxes not just at the personal and organisational level, but at the system level as well.

Discussion

David and Sue have been successful because of who they are. Both reject a competencies and standards approach to leadership, and instead have chosen – with some courage – to pursue their personal moral vision of education. Paradoxically, they have become nationally recognised because they reject national recommendations for leadership; and they have done this in very different ways. Whilst dissimilar, they both take strong positions, they both have transformative abilities, and they both appreciate that the nature of the world they live in, and of leadership itself, is more complex and non-linear than most present discussion suggests.

The strength through difference of David and Sue probably cannot be overstated. They are successful at least in part because they have not followed a prescribed agenda: they have had the courage to develop their schools from the moral position they take, rather than through

accommodating to a set of standards and competencies. David's moral position was a fusion of a global environmental vision and a concern for the children in his charge, leading to a passion to convey and make part of the consciousness of those around him a greater sensibility of global issues of sustainable development. Sue begins differently: her moral position, essentially concerned with the growth and empowerment of individuals, means that sustainability, as many other agendas in the school, is driven through the encouragement and promotion of different individuals' interests in the context of the school and its particular challenges. This has resulted in different visions of sustainability: David's is focused on the environment, and through that on the interconnections between environmental, social and economic issues; Sue's is more focused on local social sustainability, a perceived need to have wider sustainability in all endeavours, of which environmental, social and economic concerns are one part. This is not to favour one version over the other, but to argue that each position has its strengths, underpinned and driven by personal moral commitments. The essence, it might be argued, of leadership is in the exercise of a personal moral responsibility which cannot be reduced to – nor dictated by – any particular set of skills and competencies.

This is further emphasised by the complexity, paradox and irony they both see in their role and in the wider world, which contradicts any simple vision of headship functioning. Both have wide visions of the role of education. Sue's vision, captured in the argument of her doctorate, is located within a political and economic picture of societal and global flux, of constant change and demands upon education practitioners, with head teachers needing to move beyond the traditional role, to work across and through other institutions as well as their own in describing the nature of new problems, and creating new solutions. It is an 'ecological' vision of the need for joined-up systems thinking, for recognising an organicity, complexity and wickedity (Bore and Wright 2009) to thinking and practice, very different from traditional and standard models of practice. This resonates strongly with the kinds of ironic situations that Hoyle and

Wallace (2005) argue head teachers – because of the very nature of the job – find themselves in, but which seems to receive so little official recognition. It is this lack of recognition which leads Sue to her occasional subversive utterances about governmental policy. David's vision is more environmentally focussed, viewing current political and economic practice as fundamentally damaging to the ecosphere, and believing, as Sue does, that too few people see the complex interlinkages embedded in current systems. It is not surprising then that David expresses similar concerns about government policies and visions, and feels impelled to be similarly critical. Once again, one has two different personalities, coming from different positions, but who have arrived at similar epistemologies, and therefore similar understandings of the changes that need to be made.

These portraits suggest that for headship to be successful, centrally defined standards and prescriptions need to be interpreted in a manner which allows them to dovetail not only with the context within which an individual practices, but also with that individual's approach and moral drive. The fusion of these can never be entirely predictable, entirely linear, because it is of the nature of such interaction that the unexpected will happen. Leaders then must have something of the ethical dialectican (Bottery 2004) about them; leaders need to have internal moral compasses, yet be aware of the complexity of the external world, and of their own personal and epistemological limitations. They must know that they need to listen to others, and to adopt a 'provisionalist' attitude to the world, but one which increasingly recognises a future orientation, an ecological awareness, and the greater embrace notions of global public good and cooperation, as opposed to national or private self-interest and competition. David's and Sue's academic work and their practice both make it clear that the interconnected nature of global, national and local pressures on education will not be understood or appreciated by simple linear and uniform solutions, but by an appreciation and embrace of the complex, the ambiguous, and the non-standard. Both head teachers appreciate this need, and both have the moral courage to go beyond the standard in attempting to formulate better problems and make better solutions

than officially sanctioned ones. In striving for creative resolutions, they, and others like them, may well fail: but in a world of economic meltdown, social dysfunction, and severe environmental degradation, a mediocrity of leadership caused by a culture of standards and conformity is no longer an option.

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