

# Portrait Methodology and Educational Leadership: Putting the Person First

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**Abstract:** *This article describes a variant on a methodological approach which provides ways of developing educational leaders' understandings of themselves and their situation through the production of individually written 'portraits' which focus upon the individuals' personal concerns and issues. It describes the process undertaken in forming a particular application of this approach, which is characterised by being highly private, highly personal and conducted by peers, rather than by others in a hierarchical relationship, to produce a picture of a person's concerns at one moment in time. It examines a number of possible criticisms, before arguing that there are a number of distinct benefits to its adoption. A description is provided of how such a methodology can be translated into a useful tool that provides individuals with the non-judgemental space to reflect upon themselves and their performance, and to develop supportive networks of peers who can help to sustain them in their job. This approach then could not only help remediate current issues of recruitment and retention to leadership positions, it could also provide private development space in societies and educational systems increasingly characterised by surveillance and public criticism of performance. Finally, whilst this article focuses upon the use of portraits for educational leaders, it is suggested that it is a technique that could be used by virtually anyone in order to create space for private reflection.*

## Introduction

Education in the UK since the late 1980s has become increasingly characterised by a paradoxical mixture of greater control and greater marketisation. On the one hand, the creation of a National Curriculum, the inspectorial body Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education), National Literacy and Numeracy strategies, Standard Attainment Targets, and a variety of other measuring instruments have led to a much heavier central dictation of policy, not only in terms of what is taught, and how it is taught, but also how it is judged, and how this judgement will be acted upon. At the same time, the publication of such judgements, along with the embrace of devolved school budgets, and the increase in the different kinds of state schools, have also led to accelerated competition between schools, as parents have been given more information about school performance, greater choice, and an increased ability to choose between schools. The result seems to be both the generation of greater surveillance in a low-trust culture, and more pressure on practitioners through the ambiguity and paradox generated when centralist measures fail to appreciate the uniqueness of each practitioner and their situation (Hoyle & Wallace 2005). Both of these are likely strong contributory factors in the problem seen throughout the Western world of recruiting

individuals to leadership positions in schools, and in the retention of those already in such positions (Gronn 2003; Fullan 2004; Hargreaves 2003).

In the light of this situation, it is significant that some research (e.g. Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley & Beresford 2000; Gold, Evans, Earley, Halpin & Collarbone 2003) has argued that headteachers are capable of coping with external pressures, whilst other research (e.g. Wright 2001) has suggested the opposite – that so much pressure has been placed upon school leaders that they are becoming no more than ciphers for top-down governmental demands. It was against such a background that a methodology was sought that could help investigate whether and to what extent educational leaders were able to mediate governmental legislation within the local contexts in which they worked. A variant of portrait methodology was felt appropriate for this. This is a qualitative approach which produces a written description of an individual dealing with the challenges that surround them, which unlike an ethnographer listening to a story, goes one stage further, and instead listens for a story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997: 13). Thus, as Hackman (2002: 54) says: ‘the portraitist searches for the authentic central story as perceived by the actors within the setting’.

Of course, this seeking for a story can present a problem: English (2000), for instance, argues that, in attempting to listen for a story, there may be hidden the assumption that such a story is seeking to achieve some ‘real’, ‘ultimate’ meaning or identity for that individual and their thoughts. He argues that the problem lies with ‘its failure to interrogate what it conceals, i.e. the politics of vision’. At times Lawrence-Lightfoot, a major proponent of this approach, seems to be guilty of this, as for instance when she argues (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997: 12) that ‘the portraitist’s standard’ is to capture ‘the essence ... of the actor’s experience’. Yet she goes on in the next paragraph to state that ‘there is never a single story – many could be told’. There does seem some contradiction here, yet there need not be. It is perfectly possible to assert that many stories can be told – and thus avoid reductionist or positivist viewpoints – whilst still believing that the portraitist is trying to present the picture they see, which others may read and critique. In other words, portraiture can be acknowledged by the portraitist as an interpretive exercise, which does not assert any fundamentalist beliefs in an ability to penetrate to some objective reality. It can and should welcome inputs from other actors.

Portrait methodology, then, is not new. The methodology has been utilised in the USA by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), and discussed in depth by her and Hoffman Davis (1997). In the educational leadership field, English (2008) describes portraiture as one of the twelve variations of forms of life writing, in which life span scope and contextual density form the axes. Portraiture is a third-person form, along with biography, portrayals and profiles. He sees a biographical approach as large, intensively researched and contextually rich, whilst regarding portrayals, profiles and portraits as rather less ambitious in scope. In distinguishing between these, he sees portrayals as ‘more biographical and more advanced on the birth-death axis’, whilst profiles and portraits he suggests are ‘usually confined to a few contexts or one major context’ (2008: 179). In the UK the portrait approach has been described and discussed by Hackman (2002) and Waterhouse (2007).

### ***The Distinctiveness of this Variation***

Whilst the details of the approach will be discussed in ‘Construction of the Methodology’ on page xx, this particular variant has a number of distinct characteristics.

First, it uses open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews, which attempt to capture the thoughts, feelings and self-reflections of individuals in particular contexts at a moment in

time. It does not therefore use the extensive and multimethod approach taken, for instance, by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983). Whilst attention is paid to school literature, to the school's written policies, and to short tours of the school by the individuals, these act as little more than background context, and are not major contributory factors to the production of the portraits. Given that these portraits are based upon perceptions alone, it might therefore be argued that there can be little confidence in them unless they are confirmed by other kinds of data, for there are plenty of instances of interviewees either not presenting a full picture of what they think and feel, or of simply telling particular untruths. However, there are a number of reasons for believing that the responses given in this research were truthful. One reason lies in the fact that all interviewees were promised confidentiality and anonymity at the outset. Indeed, at re-interview, a number of respondents commented that this allowed them to be more open about their real thoughts and feelings.

A second reason lies in the fact that the respondents were clear that the interview was not part of a larger programme of the monitoring of their professional performance, and were explicit in feeling that this gave them assurance to be open in their views. Such confidence is also supported by their behaviours at interview. Some had said that they had nothing to hide, and talked with great openness about sensitive issues (see for instance, the remarkably candid portraits in Bottery, Ngai, Wong & Wong 2008b). Others, however, talked and behaved almost as if they needed to talk to someone, as if the anonymity and confidentiality gave them a private professional space to discuss things that were not available to them elsewhere.

Finally, all of the interviewees had something critical to say of themselves and their situation, and it seems likely that had these individuals been acting self-protectively, less revealing interviews would have occurred, and less convincing and complex portraits would have been produced.

Furthermore, even though such a portrait approach may lack confirmation from other sources, it can have still considerable potential and significance, as perceptions or beliefs on their own can determine an individual's behaviour. A strongly held belief that a job no longer provides personal satisfaction, and that it creates too much pressure, is quite sufficient in itself to affect decision-making procedures, relationships with others, a school's success, and decisions about retirement. If a major concern at the present time in many Western countries is the lack of individuals coming forward to take up the principalship, or of those who are considering leaving early, then such an approach can be of immense benefit in finding out what individuals really feel about their situation and the reasons for this, in a way and to a degree that may fail with other approaches.

A second feature of this variant is that its questions focus primarily on the present situation that individuals are facing, even if some of this present needs to be understood in terms of past and future events. This gives it a different emphasis from approaches which dwell on issues of life span and life history, what one might call life-history approaches, though they do share some strong similarities. Kelchtermans (1993: 443–56), for instance, suggests that they are both 'narrative' – they both tell subjective stories; they are 'constructivistic' – experiences in both are construed as a story; they are 'contextualistic' – the stories of both are placed within particular contexts; they are 'interactionistic' – the stories are affected by the interaction with these contexts. Finally, they are both 'dynamic', for in each the person constructing the story changes as the story itself develops.

Nevertheless, they differ significantly in terms of focus. As Bryman (2001: 316) suggests, the life-history method 'invites the subject to look back in detail across his or her entire life course' and

displays 'a clear commitment to the processual approach of social life, showing how events unfold and interrelate in people's lives.' The central purpose of this variant of the portrait approach, however, is far more concerned with portraying an individual at a moment in time, with respect to the job they do, the challenges they face, and how they feel they are currently tackling these.

A third distinctive feature of this variation lies in that it attempts a clear separation of voice between the researcher and the researched. This makes it quite different from the variation of Lawrence-Lightfoot, for instance, who deliberately wove the investigator's voice into the portrait. When this happens, as Hackman (2002: 53) suggests, 'the line of demarcation between researcher and researched ... does become a bit more hazy'. This is probably the reason for English's criticism (2000: 21) that, by privileging the view of the portraitist, there is 'no external independent referent for ascertaining the truth-telling capacity of the portraitist'. In this variant, such interweaving and privileging of access were never felt useful nor necessary: whilst a portrait 'story' was written by the researcher, an attempt was made to be as faithful as possible to the perceived meaning of the interviewee. To this end, two things were done. First, a fellow academic read both portrait and transcript to see whether they felt that the one was a fair representation of the other. Second, respondent validation was used by sending both portrait and transcript back to the interviewee for their comments. By doing so, other parties were able to retrace the portrait construction, and disagree with it if they felt it was not a fair representation.

A final distinguishing feature of this variant is that, though the use of a portrait approach is not unique in educational leadership research, its emerging use as a professional development tool almost certainly is. As will be described later, it is being developed as a reflective tool which professionals may use for their own personal and organisational benefit. It thus takes into the professional development arena the insight by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983: 378) that a portrait may become a document 'that invites response and criticism ... [because] the external wide-angle view of the portraitist may contrast sharply with the various perspectives of insiders'.

### **Some Further Questions about the Approach**

Whilst a number of potential criticisms of the approach have been mentioned, a couple more should be addressed. One long-standing criticism by policy makers, vocalised by David Blunkett (Blunkett 2000: 12), a former English Secretary of State for Education, is that there is little value in 'worthless correlations based on small samples from which it is impossible to draw generalisable conclusions'. Portraiture, on this view, is worthless, because it studies the singular. Yet such a view fails to recognise that not everything needs to be generalised to be meaningful: insight into what makes us most human may be best gained precisely by attending to the singular. Large numbers may then present wider pictures, but may fail to help us understand what is of deepest concern, what matters most. For that, a technique like the portrait approach may be far more appropriate.

A second response is to remember that there are different forms of generalisation, and that each is suitable to particular problems, particular contexts. Bassey (1999) argues that there are three different kinds – the scientific, the statistical and the fuzzy – and the last of these lends itself rather well to the individual case researched by the portrait approach. Thus Bassey (1999) argues that the scientific generalisation explains how physical forces behave, irrespective of where in the universe they occur. Yet only those who believe that the physical and social worlds obey the same laws will apply this to education, and to the individual. The

second, the statistical generalisation, has its place in educational research where large-scale trends need to be identified, as it may generate claims, suggesting a degree of probability that what was found in a sample may also be found throughout the larger population. But there is a third kind, the fuzzy generalisation, which provides legitimate reason for the researcher to argue in very guarded form that effects found in one situation may be similar to effects in another, if sufficiently similar conditions apply. The issue, of course, is to recognise what is similar and dissimilar between different situations. That may never be ultimately resolvable, but it should not prevent educators from drawing on more and more cases, examining them for similarities and differences, and attempting to 'fuzzily' generalise outwards. This modest ambition of the fuzzy generalisation recognises the complexity of the reality educators face, and prevents the inappropriate call for research which 'demonstrates conclusively that if teachers change their practice from  $x$  to  $y$ , there will be a significant and enduring improvement in teaching and learning' (Hargreaves 1996). Educational settings are too complex and too unique for such simplistic demands. Moreover, educators do not do their job to a particular context: they do it in one, and all parties are changed by the interaction. Individuals and contexts are the reality, and should be recognised – and studied – with all the complexity, unpredictability and ambiguity that this suggests.

Another question which might be asked is whether a procedure which only involved semi-structured interviews – followed by transcription, analysis and portrait-writing – can generate sufficient data and information to produce individual portraits of sufficient depth and complexity as to be meaningful and worthwhile. This concern can be answered by the comments made the headteachers/principals when they read their portraits, as well as the more in-depth replies given when a number of them were re-interviewed. These responses were very positive, remarking on how they had stimulated them to reflection:

It gives you time to stand back and think...we don't build that into headship...

You are stimulating my thinking and give me some insights...

I have a chance to reflect about what I did in the past. I think it is a good chance to do that, I like it.

They also remarked on how they felt that the portraits had 'captured' them and their approach to headship:

It was written in such a way that it was almost in the third person, but I recognised the third person...

I was comfortable that I could see myself in it. Quite surprised that you'd actually managed to tease that out

A couple of those re-interviewed two years later remarked on how they had forgotten the detail of the issues and feelings generated at the time of the first portrait, and how the re-reading had brought home vividly these feelings and thoughts:

When you look back you realise how much you've done ... because to be perfectly honest, you don't always think about all the places you've worked and all the children you've worked with, unless you see it written down ...

It is also worth adding that a couple of interviewees said that they were surprised at the portrait 'painted', not seeing themselves in quite the way described, and had passed their portrait to another trusted member of the school community for comment – which provoked the same response of 'yes, that's you':

I gave the portrait to my admin officer and she said 'yes, that's absolutely you ...'

The responses by the interviewees about their portraits then strongly suggest that the approach was successful in producing rich, complex and authentic portraits.

### **Construction of the Methodology**

The research was first conducted in England, and a first cohort of 12 primary principals was selected, in part based on geographical proximity to the researcher's university, but with the intention to have represented in the portraits experienced and inexperienced headteachers, males and females, principals who worked in 'comfortable' and 'difficult' schools, and principals from denominational and non-denominational schools. When the opportunity arose to conduct research in Hong Kong, the same approach was taken there, and eventually a cohort of 24 English and 24 Hong Kong primary and secondary principals were interviewed. In England, the primary interviews were conducted by the English researcher alone; the majority of the secondary interviews were conducted with two Hong Kong academics attending. In Hong Kong itself, given that the principals were all Cantonese, a novel approach was taken, with the English interviewer leading the interviews in English, but with the invitation for the interviewees to talk in Cantonese should they find it easier to express themselves that way. This carries a number of potential challenges. One is that the number of interviewers may prove to be intimidating to the interviewee. A second is that there may be misunderstanding in terms of both linguistic and cultural levels. A third is that the lead (English) interviewer may not know that they do not know something, and so fail to raise it. A number of strategies were employed to overcome these problems. One was the very careful piloting of interview questions with both academics and principals. A second was the provision of the questions to the interviewees beforehand in both English and Cantonese. A third was the opportunity for the Cantonese participant interviewers to interject at any time if they felt something had been misunderstood – which happened on occasions. A fourth strategy was to leave plenty of time at the end for both interviewee and Cantonese interviewers to raise any issues or difficulties. A final strategy was that immediately after each interview a sustained discussion took place between the interviewers about whether the lead English interviewer had misunderstood answers or omitted important questions through ignorance of language, culture or context. The result of taking such care was that the approach worked remarkably well, with a number of interviews ending up as a bilingual conversations between four people, a principal and three interviewers. This was not expected, but was extremely enjoyable, open and informative.

In determining the kinds of interview questions asked, published academic literature, official documentation and personal experience were used, as well as short interviews with principals as to the key questions they felt were important as a preliminary scoping tool. The result was that a number of important external issues were raised, particularly those to do with the effects of legislation since the late 1980s, the inspection procedures used by government, the effects of marketisation, parental choice, and competition, and whether time

pressures and lack of energy were issues for them. However, in addition, because views at preliminary pilot interviews suggested that personal relationships could be quite as problematic as externally generated issues, questions were included which allowed considerable flexibility in the identification of personal 'issues' or 'problems'. These concerns produced the following range of questions:

- How would they describe themselves and their schools?
- What were their current professional satisfactions and dissatisfactions?
- What were their attitudes to current legislative initiatives?
- What were their relationships with their governing body?
- What were their attitudes to external inspection?
- Did they encounter market pressures (such as problems of a declining pupil population, competition with other schools, and the need to advertise and market themselves), and how did they respond to these pressures?
- Were time pressures and lack of energy issues for them?
- Which of the above issues was the most frequent they encountered?
- Which of the above was the most serious?
- Were there any other issues they saw as particularly problematic?

A semi-structured format allowed for the detailed exploration of those issues perceived as particularly problematic, and the transcriptions of these interviews were then used to produce a portrait of the person interviewed. Analysis of the interviews with English primary principals (Bottery 2007) suggested that some headteachers were able to maintain personal ethical and educational visions, but this was heavily dependent upon their personality, and the kind of context they worked within. These findings were substantially confirmed by the further interviews conducted slightly later in Hong Kong (Bottery, Ngai, Wong & Wong 2008a).

### **Stages in the Production of a Portrait**

A number of stages were involved in each portrait's production. Initially, the headteachers were contacted and the purpose of the research was explained, as was the promise to anonymise all portraits, and that they would have total control over content throughout the research process. Permission to tape interviews was always asked, and always granted. It was explained that they could delete or change any of the content up to the moment of publication. This, it was believed, would generate trust and confidence. The interview questions were either posted or emailed well in advance of the interview. Whilst it is recognised that this might have led to the preparation of 'fabricated' responses beforehand, this was done in part to generate trust, but also to allow interviewees the time to reflect on these questions. As argued elsewhere in the paper, such trust has reaped rich dividends.

The interview was conducted at the interviewee's school. Full explanation was again given prior to the interview, and the interviewee was asked if he or she had anything to ask. When this groundwork was completed, the recorder was turned on, and the interview was conducted. Either the researcher or a research assistant then made a verbatim transcript of the interview. If the research assistant made the transcript, the researcher checked the accuracy of the transcript by reading it whilst listening to the tape again. When satisfied with the accuracy of the transcript, the complete tape was again listened to whilst the transcript was read, and issues discussed were written in the margin, whilst key responses to the issues were highlighted.

Immediately after this process was performed, the researcher put the transcript to one side, and, based upon listening to the tape and reading the transcript, began the portrait construction by drawing up a preliminary set of 'aerial codes' – reflecting on what was perceived by the interviewer as the respondents' main concerns, their views on their ability to deal with these, and the strategies used.

These preliminary codes framed the beginning of the first draft of the portrait, being used as section headings for the description. For each section, the transcript was checked for such discussion, and a summary written of the position of the interviewee on these issues, with extensive use of their own words. However, as the transcription was checked, and as the sections were written, there were normally felt to be better ways of describing the overall picture, and so many of the code descriptions were amended, as occasionally were the number of codes.

When a portrait was eventually completed, it and the full transcript were sent to a fellow academic to check that all interpretations and assertions in the portrait were backed by the evidence of the transcript. Very few changes were suggested at this stage, but where they were, amendments to the portrait were made in the light of this feedback. The portrait was now sent with the transcript to the interviewee for their thoughts and comments. An invitation was given for discussion of the portrait. Some headteachers and principals provided written comments on their portrait; others were happy to discuss this by phone; whilst others invited the researcher back to the school for further discussion. Very few changes were made on the basis of such feedback, but where this happened a further draft of the portrait was written.

## Early Results

Whilst results from this stage of the research have been described in a number of other publications (Bottery 2007; Bottery et al. 2008a, 2008b) it is worth noting some of the insights reported in these papers:

- All the headteachers and principals prioritised local concerns over larger issues, and were particularly concerned about the welfare of the children in their care.
- Responses to larger contexts were heavily dependent upon the individual personality and local context.
- Whilst small numbers were interviewed, there was a distinct difference between the English headteachers and the Hong Kong principals in that the former felt there was a much less trusting, critical and adversarial approach deployed by their government in its policies, statements and practices.
- Nevertheless, both cohorts felt that the pace and quantity of reforms in their system was creating a stressful situation, both for themselves and their colleagues.

## The Second Stage of the Research

The first stage of this research then provided a cross-sectional portrait of an individual educational leader dealing with work issues at one moment in time. Whilst the general portrait approach was adopted for the kinds of reasons described, the specific variant developed for this research highlighted a number of unexpected benefits. It was mostly in order to develop more formally these insights, but also to see how individuals had changed, that, after approximately two years had elapsed, ten of these interviewees were re-interviewed again, five from each location. Their portraits and transcripts were then sent to



them again, the same interview conditions were repeated, and another semi-structured interview was conducted which covered the following six main areas:

- what they now thought of the portrait;
- what had changed since the last portrait;
- what had remained much the same;
- what they thought of the portrait as a research instrument;
- what they thought were the benefits and drawbacks to the portrait approach; and
- how they thought the portrait process might be used as a developmental tool.

### ***Benefits of this Portrait Methodology Variant***

There seem to be at least six benefits from this particular variant. Most of these were vocalised by the respondents, though a couple are conclusions drawn by the researchers. These benefits then are:

#### ***The object of this approach focuses specifically on individuals, rather than on their performance***

The interviewees remarked that activities like mentoring, or the visit of school improvement partners were normally focused on issues of performance, and only tangentially focused on themselves as individuals. Indeed, none of the individuals interviewed could think of professional provision for them which precisely focused on them in the way this approach did:

When the SIP (School Improvement Partner) comes in, it will be about school issues, it won't be about me...

You go on a management course, fill in a profile about what you look like...and it's going to feed that agenda and tell you or ask you if you are meeting that agenda, and if you are not, they are not interested, and if you are, they tick boxes, as opposed to somebody who is coming in and saying, ok, where do you think you are going? Such as you did.

What people have got to realise is that this is personal development ... and that is so important...and yet is overlooked by a lot of people...

It is a good chance for me to be myself.

It seems then very important to reflect not just on what is done, but to understand the person who does it, and why they do it. This is because underlying motivations, values and concerns, and previous memories and experiences, and deeper-lying aspects of personality mediate the pressures, challenges and opportunities that are faced, and result in particular performances at any moment in time. If these are not understood – both by others and by the actors themselves, then the ability to develop better personal strategies, performances and coping mechanisms, is not strengthened. This variant on the portrait approach allows for an individual and a knowledgeable other who lacked a vested interest to discuss such things. Then, if further insights are produced, subsequent discussion might take place on such needs – not only professionally, but emotionally and spiritually as well. This approach is then able to identify and respond to other, perhaps more important issues than simply those of performance.

*Such portraits provide individuals with feedback on how others see them*

Having another person's view provides individuals with an independent source of feedback on how others see them. Indeed, as noted earlier, a small number of interviewees were surprised at the portrait written, but were not unhappy to be given a different view of themselves, particularly if this view was given by someone who knew them well and whom they trusted. This does not just provide potentially valuable personal knowledge of the self; it can also be invaluable to anybody whose job is to present a public image which may not always match what is felt inside. It is a view of themselves which the interviewee may not see, or may not realise is 'leaking out'. Thus a tendency within an interview for a respondent to return to the same issue on a number of occasions may well lead the interviewer to point this out in the portrait, and for the interviewee, perhaps for the first time, to notice this, and then to reflect on whether this indicates a concern which is greater than formerly realised. In this way, this research approach can provide a trusted outsider's view of an individual's concerns for that individual to reflect upon.

*The process allows the individual to talk without feeling that they are being evaluated on what they say, and thus allows them to speak more honestly*

The role of 'a trusted outsider' is critical to the success of this method:

The critical thing is the relationship and whether I trust them.

It's got to be somebody that you trust. In many ways I've let my guard down doing this, because you don't stop performing when your SIP walks in, you crank it up a notch, you know what they are going to expect you to be, and you've got to be in character. Same with an Ofsted inspection...

As already noted, currently most professional reflection is facilitated with a strong focus on performance for school improvement, normally conducted by individuals appointed for such a purpose. Whilst this is clearly highly important, an exclusive focus on such issues not only generates the danger that a focus on the individual may be lost; it also normally entails an evaluation, of which some kind of official record may be kept, and in the low-trust environment that currently exists, there is likely to be considerable concern over the consequences of such evaluations. Thus, as a number of interviewees remarked, where hierarchy and authority are involved, they were always likely to be on their guard, always likely to be careful about what they said:

I would have been more guarded to an Ofsted inspector, or anyone from the local authority because you know they have another agenda ... they will be making some kind of judgement on you and [therefore] what you say, you say favourably, to try and ensure that the judgement will always be favourable. I know you will make your judgement, Mike, but with respect, it doesn't influence my career. Potentially, the judgments made by Ofsted and the local authority do ... and therefore you are guarded.

I don't have to distrust you because I don't think you would have other purposes in getting something from me...

I know [with this interview] that is not going to end up on ME1 [a local authority form]. It's not going to be reported to Ofsted, its not going to be reported to anyone else ... it's not going to be something for which I'm going to held to account.

Particularly in low-trust environments, individuals are never sure if their comments will taken down and used against them. The portrait method, when conducted by a person already known to the interviewee, who promises and delivers on issues of confidentiality and anonymity, is unlikely to provoke such concerns, and is indeed more likely to inspire the degree of trust needed to enable the interviewee to feel that they can speak with freedom.

Why, however, should an individual doing a job to the best of their ability need confidential sessions with others? Why would they not wish to have their thoughts out in the public domain? There are probably three different answers to this, all of which suggest different kinds of benefits from the approach.

*The exercise provides space for private reflection before decision-making goes public*

One answer is that the best decisions are normally made when space is given for 'mulling over' a problem, where alternatives are raised, discussed and dismissed, and where time is given for the right decision to be made. If, however, problems are specified too quickly, and decisions are made too hastily, then problems may be reified before they have been properly framed, and solutions may be produced that are incorrect because they have addressed poorly described problems. Even where the problem described is the right one, mulling over solutions is going to be very important. Allowing individuals thinking space with trusted others, produces more detailed thought, facilitates the ability to think creatively, and generates more productive solutions. In so doing, it may also reduce personal pressure and thus boost individual morale.

*The use of such an approach may help in reducing problems of recruitment and retention seen throughout the Western world*

This process focusses specifically on individuals, rather than on their performance; it provides feedback on how others see them in leadership positions; it allows individuals to talk without feeling that they are being evaluated on what they say; it provides space for reflection before a decision affecting others is made. All of these benefits may well help to reduce the stress upon educational leaders. This is not an insignificant issue at the present time, as current concerns over recruitment to leadership positions, and of retention, seem in part at least to be linked to perceived increased stress. An important use of the portrait approach could then be as a means of providing individuals with the non-judgemental space to reflect upon themselves and their performance, and to develop supportive networks of peers who could help to sustain them in their job. This approach then could be an important strategy in the remediation of current issues of recruitment and retention with respect to leadership positions.

*The use of such a methodology may contribute in a small way to the creation of a freer and more democratic society*

A final answer may lie in the fact that it is the mark of a healthy society to have private as well as public spaces created. Thus, in cases where opinions and actions are made public, by definition they are open to a greater accountability, and also to a greater surveillance. Where there is greater surveillance, there is also greater room for abuse of such surveillance. Even in systems which are set up for the most altruistic of reasons, they may well be used for

oppression, power or personal gain. Whenever surveillance is increased, such as in total CCTV coverage of a city area, or in the creation of a national identity card system, its benefits (preventing hooliganism, tracking suspected terrorists) have to be weighed against the possibility of its abuse (e.g. monitoring and recording the presence of those involved in legal protests; administrative chaos and potential criminal activity). In such a situation, it may well be advisable to deliberately create systems where there is inviolable private space. Using a portrait approach in a confidential trusting atmosphere between two peers may be part of that politically healthy response.

## **The Portrait Approach as a Personal Development Technique in a Professional Setting**

This variant on the portrait approach has been described as capable of capturing rich and complex pictures of individuals and their attitudes and feelings towards the work with which they are engaged. It has been used by English and Chinese academics in attempting to understand the pressures and challenges that face headteachers in England, and principals in Hong Kong. The question to be asked now is: could this have wider relevance as a personal developmental technique? As recounted above, it had a number of strengths that made it an attractive technique for the interviewees. Given the potential benefits, this section will examine how it might be used in a professional as well as a research context, as a way of helping individuals to reflect upon and understand themselves and their situation. The experience of using this approach suggests a number of issues and opportunities.

### **Choosing a Partner**

It is important to repeat that trust and confidentiality are perhaps the most critical factors in the success of this approach, as it is crucial that interviewees are confident that those asking questions and drawing up the portrait should be people who will not 'leak' the information, or use it for other purposes without explicit permission. This factor is crucial in deciding who the partner would be.

There are a number of partnership pairs which might be considered. A first would be where principals interviewed other principals. One variant of this would be between two individuals who knew each other well, because they worked in schools that were geographically proximate. This would have the benefit of the interviewee not only performing the same role, but understanding very well the context and the personality involved. However, it may not always be the ideal solution for, as a number of interviewees suggested, where a market situation existed between schools, there might be concern by the interviewee that information provided might be used to the other's competitive advantage:

Inevitably, in the same authority, there is competition...

It's not that I don't trust them (headteacher colleagues): the issue is I'm in competition with them I suppose...

Some principals are having some sorts of competition among them...so I don't think it is a good idea of finding a principal to interview another principal...

This concern was reflected when the researchers were invited, subsequent to the research, to provide CPD sessions to headteachers in England and principals in Hong Kong using the

portrait approach. In England, the programme began with the agreement that the headteachers would learn how to interview and write portraits themselves. However, after the first day, all agreed that they were uncomfortable with such level of disclosure to colleagues, and the remainder of the programme was run with academic experts in educational leadership and management taking on the interviewing role. In Hong Kong, a principal-to-principal approach was rejected at an early stage of discussion, with principals expressing a clear preference for academics leading the interviews, for much the same reasons.

A second alternative, then, and the one most favoured by those re-interviewed, was to use an academic to conduct the interviewees and write the portraits. It was felt that this kind of individual would be professionally distanced, yet would have the expertise to raise useful questions and to understand the implications of particular answers. They might also, through their expertise in research, be more skilled in interviewing and constructing portraits than another principal. It is then for these reasons that both professional development sessions in England and Hong Kong were conducted using this variation. These sessions are being evaluated and will be reported in later papers.

A third alternative – where headteachers and principals geographically distanced from each other are used to interview and write portraits of each other – has yet to be tested.

### *Generating a Process*

A second issue is to ask whether a full portrait technique needs to be used in developmental situations: an adumbrated version of the portrait might work, where the interviewer, after recording the session, reads the subsequent transcript whilst listening to the tape, and then devises a series of aerial codes. This process might be sufficient to generate a useful conversation. This process is being trialled in the Hong Kong sessions, whilst a full portrait approach, the one described in this paper, is being used in England. The adumbrated version will then use a very similar format to that outlined earlier, but then generate a much shorter portrait of only about a thousand words. Again, comparisons will be made to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the approach in this respect.

### *From Cross-sectional to Longitudinal*

A further element of this process is to investigate whether this could be turned into a systematic, continual process, where such portraits are developed throughout an individual's career. Certainly, there was considerable enthusiasm for such a development:

I think it would be wonderful if you could do a progressive one...

I think it helps one to grow ... I think doing this kind of thing systematically, in the long run, will help the principals to work better and better. It helps the professional growth.

Preliminary evidence then strongly suggests that a longitudinal series of portraits would be a very valuable development of this cross-sectional approach:

The thing I've most enjoyed about this is coming back to it. If you did it as a biannual interview, you would see the development through your career, you would see your confidence grow ... you would see your skills developing, and you would see your focus shift and crystallise...

## Going beyond Leadership Positions

A final point which needs to be made is that whilst the individuals who were subjects of this research were headteachers or principals, this approach clearly need not be confined to people in this position. Whilst it seems highly appropriate for such people, its use could be extended to any individual in a working context, for all within society would benefit from the creation of such private spaces. All could benefit from reflection not just on a one-off picture of how a trusted other saw them in a work situation at a particular moment in time, but by the kind of life-long series of portraits which such a technique could lead to. To that extent, the portrait approach has extremely wide possibilities within education and beyond.

## Conclusion

The position of the educational leader can be an isolated one, increasingly subject to what may appear as 360-degree surveillance and evaluation of their performance, which may well contribute to the problems of co-option and retention seen throughout the Western world and beyond. This panopticon can lower morale and stifle creativity, and thus may lead to caution and conservatism in action. In such a world, it is increasingly important, for both practical and ethical reasons, to create a process where educational leaders feel that they are able to express themselves about what concerns them most, without feeling that what they say will be taken down and used in evidence against them. This portrait approach variation provides such intellectual, emotional, spiritual and professional space. It champions the need for privacy and places the notion of trust centre stage. It recognises that the core of educational activity and achievement are not visions, strategies or processes, but people. It provides a space where individuals can reflect upon themselves and their unique contributions to the educational process.

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