National College for
School Leadership

The school of the future: key issues for school leaders

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Summary

Everyone agrees: the school of the future will be radically different from the model of the last 130 years. Technology alone will ensure that. But what of the leaders? If schools are to be that different, there will be a radical shift in the challenges faced by their leaders and in the qualities needed for such a role. This paper considers five such challenges, together with five sets of leadership qualities that will be necessary for schools to be effective in improving student learning.

Future school leaders will face new questions. If the organisation is so diverse in its operation, how will it be possible to establish a common culture? What will be the implications of strategic relationships, as opposed to strategic planning? Society is increasingly looking to education for moral leadership. What will be the implications for schools? Current understanding about the nature of learning includes an emphasis on emotional intelligence. What will this teach us about future pedagogy? How will school leaders manage the practicalities of student learning?

In order to tackle challenges effectively, leaders have always needed to possess a wide range of qualities. What will be the future qualities? Some will be current, others resurrected, and a third set new. Amongst them will be: personal values, effective relationships, conflict resolution, a passion for vision, and the ability to harness the will of a diverse group of partners.

Future challenges

Forming the culture

Every school needs its culture – the essence of the organisation that encapsulates its identity. Yet cultures develop. Over time, the needs of a school, and consequently its culture, change. To some extent the culture reflects the style and personality of the school's leader. A new leader may find a moribund, complacent or stagnant culture which is ill-fitted to future learning. What challenges will leaders face in changing the culture of a school?

In an area of social deprivation, there may not be a synergy between the values of the community and the culture of education. In short, in such situations it is simply "not cool" to learn. Recent attempts in the UK to parachute in super-heads to change the culture of such schools have not met with resounding success. Such experience begs the question: is it always possible to change the culture of the school? If the answer is positive, then under what circumstances? How is the community involved? What is the role of other agencies? If negative, then how can the leader best provide for the learning needs of the young?

Future schools will be very diverse learning institutions. Gone will be the daily timetable with learning occurring in the same location with a group of 30. Students will come and go, draw from

the resources of the community, use a multitude of learning strategies and work with a variety of learning peers, including adults. In such a context, how will the leadership establish and develop the school's culture? It can be argued that as diversity grows, so does the importance of a culture. The insecurity of cultural absence is likely to hinder rather than foster effective learning.

Strategic relationships

Schools have already developed far from the hierarchical model of local authority control. Gone is the standard format of the mid-20th century, with each being a replica of its neighbour. Now strategic development is of less importance too. Even the typical three-year plan, with 12 months firm and two years draft, cannot survive in an age of uncertainty. The importance of strategy will remain, but it is through relationships, and not plans, that it will be exercised.

The nature and quality of the leader's relationships, both internal and external, will be critical to the success of the school:

- drawing from the resources, human and physical, in the local community

- seeking partnerships with business and commerce

- bidding for the latest round of local and national funding

Success in all of these spheres will be dependent on optimising the benefits of established relationships and forming new ones on a regular basis.

Leading a diverse organisation will require a similar set of strategic relationships. What will be the nature of effective communication? How will the leader lead when teams are constantly being formed, developed and disbanded, all according to need? Staff will be members of multiple teams – sometimes the leader, sometimes the gofer – but how will the school leaders equip them for the role? Indeed, how will they manage the result? What can school leaders learn from the cutting-edge, fast-growing companies in this respect?

Moral leadership

Society has very high expectations of its schools. Until 15 years ago, education received little more than a paragraph in a political manifesto. All that has changed. Rarely out of the headlines, education itself is increasingly being looked to for its social leadership and responsibility. Amongst such a range is moral leadership: "If children do not have consistent, and local, role models of moral responsibility, the schools should meet the need." Whether or not the assumption is true is an irrelevance. How will leaders respond to the call for schools to provide such an education? Whose values are we talking about anyway?

On the other hand, schools have always been involved with moral questions. Right and wrong are constantly on the lips of every self-respecting teacher. Education is a change business, as the young are nurtured and developed. So what is different? The answer must be in society's expectations and in the fact that leaders in other spheres do not have the same expectations made of them. Ultimately moral leadership requires consistency of action. How will it be possible to provide such leadership within a diverse organisation, with a range of interpretations given to the content?

Forms of intelligence

Education is inextricably linked to our understanding of intelligence. Cognitive ability has dominated our thinking for some time, but new forms of understanding are emerging. Emotional intelligence is the latest, and pedagogical leaders have much to grapple with in devising new strategies for learning. How can schools make use of the full range of intellectual capability?

What does recent research have to teach leaders about their own learning? Leaders have the confidence to ask risk-taking questions. They can draw upon, and adapt, the ideas and experiences of others. What does this tell them about effective learning strategies for those facing the uncertainty of puberty or family trauma? What are the implications for school leaders as they develop a curriculum that ensures that cognitive and emotional development work in harmony?

Managing learning

It was much easier when the only resource was a board and a stick of chalk. Information and communications technology changed that forever. Leaders have only just started to question how they will manage student learning in the future. While human contact between teacher and student will remain, the way in which learning occurs and resources are used will be very different. The scenario of the eager learner will be a joy to manage. The insatiable appetite, self-directed at home or in the local library, eager for the next tutorial, will be a delight.

But what of the reluctant or even resistant learner? How will the teacher manage his learning? She may attend for the tutorial, but could well have done little in the past week or even 24 hours. What will 'managing the learning process' really mean when the student is not immediately under the direction of an adult? As the focus moves from input to outcome, motivation and relevance will become increasingly important. The problems of access to facilities will pale into insignificance in comparison with motivating the reluctant reader or harnessing the energy of a student who would rather be in the local park with the peer group.

Key qualities

In order to face the challenges successfully, five sets of qualities will be needed. Each will be necessary, but none sufficient of themselves. Indeed the whole group will be necessary, but not sufficient, for effective leadership. They do not pretend to support a full analysis of successful leadership, but have been chosen for their instrumental value in tackling the five challenges identified above.

Passion and vision

Vision used to be sufficient of itself, but is no longer. The ability to think big and imagine the impossible requires passion in addition to vision. Transforming a culture, or re-engineering the management of learning, will require a dedication far beyond that normally required of a professional. Radical solutions must become the norm if current aspirations are to be met. An employer can expect vision, but passion must be the bonus.

Personal values

If moral leadership is to be exercised and pedagogy re-engineered with any degree of success, then future leaders will need a firm set of personal values. No doubt many will have their own lists, but integrity, social justice, humanity, respect, loyalty and a sharp distinction between right and wrong will all need to be included. Strategic relationships will soon founder unless such a value system is held with conviction and exercised on a regular, consistent basis.

Inner strength and courage

Some might argue for these to be included in the set of personal values, but they are more associated with the expression and practice of values than with their content. The challenges are likely to be so demanding that the faint-hearted will falter and personal values will be compromised unless strength and courage are present in abundance. Young people find it difficult to forgive those who let them down part-way through a task. Visionary projects, delivered

with passion, will fail unless the leader has the ability to counter adversaries and remain confident until the conclusion has been reached.

Conflict resolution

Major challenges cannot be met with conflict. More importantly, it will be the ability to resolve conflict successfully that will single out the effective school leader of the future. Those who reach a resolution will do so by maintaining the dignity of all those involved, whilst ensuring that weakness plays no part. It will require toughness without being hard, together with the humility to admit mistakes when they are made. A greater emphasis on relationships, as opposed to task, will be needed if conflict is to be resolved satisfactorily and the energy harnessed for a creative solution.

Harnessing the will of others

It has always been true that the plans of leaders come to nothing without the will of the people. In the context of a diverse organisation, strategic relationships and a plethora of partners, harnessing the will of others will be critical. The ability to argue a case, persuade the reluctant and release the brainpower of all the stakeholders will be instrumental in ensuring that a school is led with distinction for the benefit of all its learners. The demands of future generations will be satisfied with nothing less.

Postscript

This paper draws upon the thinking of a group of school leaders who have been working with me in order to tackle the question "What will be the leadership paradigm for the school of the future?" Their strength is that they are all currently involved in school leadership and can therefore talk "from where it happens". I am grateful to Jill Clough, Keith Cox, Kate Griffin, Margaret Griffin and Bernard Trafford for the stimulation of their argument and the breadth of their thinking, from which these ideas have been drawn.