

Portraits of Resilience: Headteachers in Two Different Cultures.

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Introduction

‘We are not interested in worthless correlations based on small samples from which it is impossible to draw generalisable conclusions.’ (Blunkett, 2000)

The former English Secretary of State for Education is not alone in believing that little benefit comes from observing the singular, such as the study of the two individuals of this article. Yet such a view fails to recognise three things. One is that not everything needs to be generalised to be meaningful: insight into what makes us most human can be gained by attending to the singular and unique, and despite constant emphases upon education for economic productivity, this must remain a key educational endeavour. Large numbers may present a wider picture, but may fail to help us understand what is of deepest concern, what matters most. For that, qualitative approaches may be far more appropriate.

Second, it should not be forgotten there are at least three forms of generalisation - the scientific, the statistical, and the fuzzy- and the last of these lends itself rather well to the individual case. Thus Bassey(1999) argues that the first, 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, after a sample of a population is tested, suggesting a degree of probability that was found in the sample may also be found throughout a population. Bassey then argues that the third kind, the fuzzy generalisation, provides legitimate reason for the educator to argue in very guarded form that effects found in one situation may well 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. As Pawson and Tilley(1997, p.119) argue, as we generalise outward, we may never reach some absolute ruling, but we begin to develop ideas that attempt to encompass them all.

The modesty of ambition in fuzzy generalisations 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, too unique for such simplistic demands, teachers are not robots hard-wired with the latest managerialist competencies, performing in some dystopian

cloned environment. Furthermore, they don't do their job *to* a particular context: they do it *in* one, and both are changed by the interaction. Anyone who then calls for education to mimic the natural sciences, or to reduce the work of practitioners to some set of skills or competencies, radically misunderstands the nature of educational reality. It is pointless bemoaning the fact that if only there were no individuals and contexts getting in the way, policy implementation would be so much simpler. Individuals and contexts are the reality, and should be recognised –and studied - as such. There is therefore a necessary complexity, unpredictability and ambiguity to all situations (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005). This paper, and the larger research project from which it derives, begins from this position: educational practice derives from a unique amalgam of people, places and events.

There is one further thing that the singular case facilitates: it can strip away the clutter of larger contexts and paradoxically allows recognition of a common shared humanity. An over-emphasis upon literatures suggesting that behaviours are determined at global, national, or cultural levels can prevent the realisation that humanity shares things which transcend these levels. We believe that the following two portraits do this as well.

Methodology

The two portraits below, then, are part of a research project based upon interviews carried out with primary headteachers in England and Hong Kong, which was designed to find answers to the following issues:

- How much say do individuals feel they have in deciding the educational goals of their schools?
- What priorities do they have when exercising their leadership?
- Do they oppose or mediate external demands with which they disagreed?
- Do they feel that they are able to encourage creativity in their schools?

Questions were asked about legislation, inspection procedures, marketisation, issues of time and energy, with sufficient room for the raising of other issues not identified through the original questions. Individuals interviewed displayed a wide range of experience, were of both sexes, and came from schools of different types and localities. The two individuals described here were male and female heads with relatively little experience of the job.

The questions were sent to all individuals prior to the interview. In Hong Kong, both English and Cantonese versions of these were sent. Subsequently, interviews lasting between one and two hours, were conducted in England by the English interviewer (see Bottery, 2007). In Hong Kong the interviews were led by the English interviewer, accompanied by at least one Cantonese colleague, ensuring that if a principal found

difficulty in expressing complex ideas in English, he or she was able to provide answers and discuss the question further in Cantonese. Whilst there was initial concern that the Hong Kong interviews might be complex and difficult to conduct, in actual fact they turned out to be enjoyable and open conversations.

All interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. From these transcripts, 'portraits' were then written of each of these individuals, describing how each dealt with the key areas within the context of their school. The portraits were constructed by listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts, and then devising five or six preliminary 'codes' of their perceptions of their most important current tasks and how they dealt with these. The transcripts were then scrutinized for evidence to support and develop these initial codes, and an iterative process then occurred, in which transcript material altered the initial codes, and the codes focused the scrutiny of the transcript, until the writer believed that a fair and accurate portrait had been written.

When this was complete, both portrait and transcript were scrutinised by another academic, who was asked to determine whether the portrait claimed more than was available from the transcript. In the two portraits below, no amendments were deemed necessary. After this was done, the transcript and portrait were sent to the headteacher and principal involved for their approval or amendment. They were invited to participate in a second interview if clarification of points or further questions were thought necessary. In both of these cases, neither requested this. The two portraits presented here depict very different personalities, in very different contexts. Yet each was faced by challenges which, we believe, are readily understandable in either culture, and their reactions are also readily understandable. Given the difficulties they faced, they both show considerable resilience.

The Harry Croft portrait

The first portrait is of Harry Croft, an English headteacher. Harry was interviewed on a cold and windy day just before Christmas, in his office at the school. At the time, he was suffering from a very bad cold, as well as the fatigue that comes at the end of a very busy term, at the end of a first year in post as a headteacher. Such fatigue also came, as we shall see, from other pressures to do with the nature of the school and the SATs results currently being recorded. After the provision of appropriate cups of coffee, the interview was conducted and taped. It was subsequently transcribed, and listened to twice more, before a series of 'aerial codes' were devised to express the main themes of the interview. These were:

- Harry was very new to the job of headteacher, but his problems stemmed as much from inheritance as inexperience.
- The school was in a severe area of deprivation, with very poor results, and this brought enormous pressure to bear, not only in terms of external inspection, but in terms of threats of closure.

- The focus was almost exclusively on Ofsted and SATs results, and even legislative issues were focussed through the lens of an avoidance of inspection. This had led to massive LEA intervention and advice.
- A focus on parental involvement, should have been the most important focus of the school, but the agenda was skewed because of the pressure of Ofsted.
- The pressure then was most obviously from Ofsted, and the concomitant pressure from the local authority, but the most intractable problem was from parental attitudes towards education and the school.

Harry was very new to the job of headteacher, but his problems stemmed as much from inheritance as inexperience.

This was Harry's first headship, and he had been in post for just one year *almost to the day*. He laughed ironically when responding to my question as to whether it seemed longer than that, by simply commenting *it does seem long, believe me*. There were many things, he thought, that you can learn about headship from books and from others, but there were many, many other things simply not covered. By way of illustration, he told me of the child who took his SATs papers *in splendid isolation in the loo*. Why, I asked, did he take them there – because it was the only quiet place available? Harry's response was short, and accompanied by a shake of the head and the same ironic smile – *wouldn't come out*. Such a situation, he thought, was *not something that you ever get taught to deal with*. So, for Harry, his first year in charge had been one where *everything's been a first*. What do you do in such a situation? One strategy was to ask yourself: *how have I seen other people deal with this?* But that in itself was clearly insufficient, for each person had their own unique way of dealing with things, and each school had its own history, its own context. So it was essential to also ask: *what's the history of this school, and how [would experienced others] deal with this?* Nevertheless, doing all of this was still insufficient, for Harry believed that it was vitally important to ask of oneself: *what's my own personal philosophy and belief?* Only then was it possible to begin the process of *trying to match it all up*, and even then *you don't always get it right*.

So what did Harry's personal philosophy consist of? For him, *the bottom line is, I came into this profession to help the children to improve their lot...More than that, though, they get one chance in education, and I think if we mess it up for them, we've got a lot to answer for*. In such circumstances, *my belief is that we provide absolutely the best we can, give them every opportunity we can*. However, there had to be another ingredient: *at the same time we [must] try to make it as enjoyable as we can, because nobody likes to go to work and be unhappy...And such an education was not necessarily a purely academic one: I think everyone needs to have the opportunity to prove that they are academic, but if they are not...they then need to find something that they can be a success at*.

Harry may have been in the job only a year, but he nevertheless believed that his opinion and values mattered. Whilst influential others' views – such as the LEA or Ofsted or the government of the day - were undoubtedly important for the school –and legitimately so, *their view of things is too wide. They are looking at too big a picture*. Unlike them, who

he felt had to *consider every school in the country*, Harry's job was to be solely concerned with *these pupils in this school*. The result of this focus was that *I can narrow it down a lot more than they can; I can refine it*.

Part of such refinement, of such knowledge of context, had led Harry to believe that, for this particular school, the critical issue at the present time, *the key issue to improving children's life chances*, despite enormous pressure in other directions, was that of developing the relationship between the school and the pupils' parents. Yet, currently, this was a *huge problem....we don't have people who come in and help, we don't have the level of parental support for homework, and things that we would like, and if we could turn that around, that would have a bigger impact on standards, and raise our results more than all the other projects*. Such belief in the importance of the development of that relationship was underlined when, towards the end of the interview, I asked Harry what he would do were he to be given a sabbatical away from his day-to-day job, he answered that it would be to research the question: *what is it that would bring parents into school?...What is going to turn their attitude towards education from complete indifference or very negative, into something positive? What is it that would switch parents on?* For what he in effect wanted to do was to *change the culture around the school*, and what he felt he was doing at the moment was nothing more than a *quick fix*.

Yet as we shall see, because of poor SATs results, and therefore the very real possibility of an early OFSted inspection, he was being pressured by a variety of sources to make his commitments and priorities in other areas, rather than in the ones which he felt were fundamentally far more important. The result of this was that, for Harry, whilst some of his problems stemmed from his lack of experience, some stemmed from his inheritances at the school. So what was this school like?

The school was in a severe area of deprivation, with very poor results, and this brought enormous pressure to bear, not only in terms of external inspection, but in terms of threats of closure.

This section should perhaps begin by saying that there were some undoubted positives about the school as far as Harry was concerned. One simple one was that current pupil numbers were relatively stable, and *over a period of four years, we're predicting numbers of pupils on-roll to drop by [only] five*. As was seen in other interviews, declining rolls placed special pressures upon headteacher not normally experienced by others without such decline, pressures like the contemplation of staff reductions, and the increased importance of retaining existing children, as well as, in this city, the very real threat of school closure. Another positive was that, in the medium term, a regeneration housing project in the city would almost certainly lead to major beneficial changes to the local area in the next few years, which was likely to support such pupil number stability, and perhaps even enhance numbers. Harry had also inherited a very committed staff, who really knew the area and its problems. Finally, he was particularly enthusiastic about the fact that everybody commented on *how calm and how caring the school is when you come into it*. For Harry, this was most important - *a really good strong secure base to be building from*.

So there were some very positive things to be said about the school. Yet, nevertheless, there seemed little doubt that Harry had inherited a very challenging situation. The school was located *in one of the most deprived wards in the country. We are ranked number 1 out of 23 on the deprivation index for [the city], for electoral wards, and nationally, out of 7932 electoral wards, we are ranked 15th.* The school also faced *high levels of pupil mobility....* which in the previous year had stood at 48.3%, *the third highest in the city.* When half of an entire student population move within any one year, planning and continuity of teaching become extremely difficult. The area was also marked currently by large amounts of housing that were currently *private rented, short-term let.* It was perhaps then unsurprising, that the school had a high number of *free school meals*, as well as a substantial number of *extremely challenging* children with *special educational needs.* Indeed, *almost 50% of the cohort were on the special needs register, and about 15% from this special needs register [was] for behaviour, and that behaviour was quite extreme for 2 or 3 of them* – hence the child who did his SATs test in the loo. On top of that, Harry added, *for the city in particular, we have high levels of English as an additional language.* And whilst this was ‘only’ around 15%, this was still *seven times the city average.* Finally, the staff were having to work within *a building that is particularly cramped, hasn’t been decorated for 20 years.* Certainly, my impression upon entering the school was of an overlay of bright materials and ideas trying to disguise a rather poor basic build.

But perhaps the major pressure on Harry stemmed from the poor SATs results that the school had posted before Harry took over, and the lack of significant improvement since. This situation has to be taken within the context of a city which had a very poor academic reputation nationally – even if this reputation was really only deserved at the secondary level, and whose LEA was about to undergo an Ofsted itself, having had a very critical previous one. Ofsted holds fears for many. For Harry, it was *because people feel that careers are made or broken on the strength of a group of people for a few days in your school looking round... what they write can be extremely damning to you...* But it was not just the public disgrace: *even if it doesn’t affect your career, it can affect you psychologically. You can feel almost a failure. I mean, if we as teachers wrote a report about a child and said nothing positive whatsoever...*

Nor should it be omitted from the overall scenario, that there was severe pressure from central government upon this LEA to take action, in a scenario of a declining school population, in identifying a number of primary schools for closure. In such a situation, there was understandably heavy pressure on Harry from the LEA to produce SATs results which would prevent the triggering of an Ofsted inspection, which might add further to the pressure on the LEA. So whilst numbers were relatively stable (one criterion for possible closure), the poor results were, to Harry’s mind at least, *one of the main reasons we were on the long list [for school closure].*

The focus was almost exclusively on Ofsted and SATs results, and even legislative issues were focussed through the lens of an avoidance of inspection. This had led to massive LEA intervention and advice.

If you have a series of bad results, which unfortunately we have, then... you're likely to get Ofsted again. As mentioned above, this was not just a concern for the school; the LEA was also under intense scrutiny, and there was therefore considerable pressure on Harry to change this situation. The result, Harry felt, had been that *the focus of what we are doing has been skewed enormously towards preparing for SATs...* and this was problematic for him in all sorts of ways. For a start, he had inherited a staff who *don't agree with SATs at all*, and so there was real resistance when he had to make this the school's priority, and say to staff *this year we've got to do Maths, English, Science, Maths, English, Science, to get our results up to avoid the consequences.* Not only did the staff dislike *the notion of training for the SATs...they also didn't like that it detracts from the other subjects on the curriculum.* Such an intense school focus also went against Harry's personal philosophy of the need for a broad education, as well as running against his fundamental belief that the school should be principally concerned with developing greater parental involvement. Yet, having said that, Harry's views on SATs were shades of grey, rather than ones of black and white. He did believe, for instance, that *there is an academic ability attached with [them]...there is that knowledge element, there is that skill element....*In addition, he also felt that it was the school's job *to make sure that children leave... with the best possible chance of success, and to be able to hold their heads up alongside any other child in the city.* So in terms of the ratification of academic ability, in terms of raising the children's self-esteem, and in terms of *the kudos of getting level 4*, Harry candidly felt that *at the moment we've let some of our pupils down...* So he was clearly personally conflicted over this.

In addition to such tensions and pressure, it was also clear that the LEA was putting massive pressure on him. At the time of interview, the school had not one, but several improvement plans to which Harry had to attend. *We've got our school improvement plan, but we've also got an LEA support plan, and we are in a programme called the Intensifying Support Programme.* They all had the same objects – *all focus on attendance, behaviour, and standards in core subject...* and all had just one objective, for *everything is just geared towards making sure that we are doing everything we can to avoid...Mr.Ofsted knocking on our door.* Now Harry was happy to acknowledge that there were *huge elements of what they [the LEA] are doing that have been supportive;* nevertheless the overall result was beginning to amount to *a nightmare*, for now Harry saw his biggest problem as not being parental issues, market issues, even Ofsted issues, but *the attention that I've received from the authority because of poor results.* Thus he had had *11 people consulting and advising me over the last term...[and] every time you get an advisor or a consultant...they write a report: a Service Visiting Report (SVR).* Harry had already had 22 of these in that particular term - *and I know that I'm owed about 8 or 10 that haven't yet come through.* Moreover, included in each report, at the bottom, was a section designating the *'action required by the school.'* So when one considers the impact of the meetings, the three separate improvement programmes, the 11 people consulting and advising, and 22 reports requiring action, and with more of the same still to come, it was unsurprising that Harry should feel fatigued, that he was under the weather, and should feel that *I've spent half the term talking about what I'm going to do, and the other half of this term preparing for the meetings where I'm talking about*

what I'm going to do, and absolutely not enough time at all to do what I'm supposed to do.

In such a situation, Harry felt he needed to manage the LEA advisors as much as they were trying to advise, steer and manage him. A first step in this had been for him to begin to consolidate the three programmes into just one. In addition, Harry was clear that he had to make sure that when people came in with advice, *I've kept them focussed on what I consider to be the major issues, rather than them trying to say: oh well, I think you should do something on this.* Finally, he felt that he needed to ensure that they understood the sheer volume of advice flooding at him. At a recent review meeting, for example, he had laid out all the different sets of plans on a table, *so that when they came in, I said 'I'm not trying to make a point, but which one are we talking about?'* He related, with the same ironic laugh, how *they took that point.* Whether this would reduce the quantity, and mean that people would attempt to coordinate advice, rather than simply respond to the pressures being placed upon them by simply sending more material down the line to Harry, still remained to be seen. What was clear was that the current actions intended to help Harry only served to increase the pressure on him, and reduce the time he had to deal with advisory agendas and advice. The fact that he continued to believe that the really important issues for the school lay elsewhere didn't even seem to be picked up on others' radar.

So the school focus essentially boiled down to addressing anything and everything that kept Ofsted from the door. *I mean, our policy for things like attendance and punctuality is geared to being able to prove to Ofsted that we are doing everything we can...because...low attendance figures can trigger an Ofsted.* Essentially, then the policy was one of *trying to make sure that (1) we avoid it until it's our turn in the cycle, and we don't bring it forward, and (2) that when they do come, whether it's early or when we expect it in the cycle, that they are satisfied with what they see.*

Harry was very well aware of what Ofsted would be looking for – which amounted to evidence to back up decisions being made – and he simply didn't feel that currently the school had it. The focus then was determined for him, with *most of the decisions I make [being] geared towards thinking 'what would Ofsted look for? What would they deem acceptable?...every decision is based on: 'is this acceptable to Ofsted?'* It was not surprising then when Harry said that *for the next couple of years it will be my driving force...because there isn't the back-up evidence that I know will satisfy them...I don't have the banks of evidence, I can't open my cupboard and say there is my monitoring file, there is my policy audit file, and so on...*

Once again, we are back to problems caused, not by inexperience in the role of headteacher, but by inheritance, for Harry had been deputy headteacher at a school where there were these *banks of evidence*, which were maintained *at an appropriate level*, and he strongly believed that had things happened differently, and he had been appointed headteacher there instead of here, his situation and his approach to the job would have been very different from his current one, for there *I could have put my energy into developing the things that genuinely are the right things to do.*

A focus on parental involvement, should have been the most important focus of the school, but the agenda was skewed because of the pressure of Ofsted.

Given such pressure to meet Ofsted demands, it was perhaps unsurprising that other agendas were dragged into, and then interpreted, in the light of such concerns. Markets were one such issue. Interestingly, Harry thought that there were at least two markets at play in schools generally, and at his school in particular. One was that to do with parents, their opinions, and their involvement in the school. Further, within the term ‘market’, Harry included not only parental influence upon school decision-making through the power to move their children to other schools, but also the strong educational need to involve parents in the school for the benefit of their children. Now in terms of pupil numbers, it has already been noted that numbers were relatively stable, and were predicted to be so for some time to come. This in one sense reduced market pressure, but high pupil turnover reduced such predictability, and counterbalanced such benefits. Regardless of such calculations however, Harry was very conscious, given the generally precarious situation of the school, of parental opinion, and of how instances of poor behaviour by some pupils could be the basis for parental disaffection. He was not unmoved by it. Candidly, he admitted that there were *parents who come along to admit their children to the school, and there are times when I don't want to admit, because I know that other parents will want to then remove their children...but I get my hand forced there, because if they're in my catchment area, and I have places, I can't say no.* This desire to be selective also applied to exclusions: there was, on occasion, the temptation to push for an exclusion because it would send *a message to parents that we are dealing with this...that we are not letting it slide by*, for there was little doubt in Harry's mind that *that's the bit that they see as being just, because it's more public.*

However, as noted above, Harry also strongly believed that ‘the market’ referred to parental involvement and attitudes to the school, and he ultimately saw the school as *not about Ofsted, but about children and their families. We are here, he believed, to serve the people of this community, and provide an education for their children.* And yet he felt that *we are not making progress with the parents...we are making lots of progress in terms of Ofsted...but what I want have is a set of parents who understand what's going on in the school, who support what's going on in the school, and come into the school.* The ultimate tension for Harry then was probably that whilst *I'm not here to satisfy some man with a clipboard...yet that drives me more than the needs of this community.* For Harry, that was *a terrible admission, but I think it's true.*

If parents were one market, the other was *the pool of staff that I attract to the school.* Harry was clear about the effects of such a market, and strongly believed that *it's a market which I'd better be in, to get who I want.* This was, he believed, now a much more informed market, for *as teachers are applying for jobs, they do go onto the website and they do read Ofsted reports.* The result, thought Harry, was that Ofsted was now becoming a kind of *Which* report on schools, and so, consequently, *if you do get a bad Ofsted report and then people advertise a job, people look at the Ofsted report and think: not going there.* The result, he feared, was a vicious circle: *you wont be able to get the*

quality staff you need in order to lift the school from the position it's in. So far, he felt he'd been lucky: he'd made two new (and good) appointments for the school, but one had resulted from a personal knowledge of the school, and the other from recommendation from someone who knew the school. Such personal experience and word-of-mouth was very useful, but what concerned Harry was that there might be *many other people out there looking for jobs, because it was a promotion post*, but who didn't have such knowledge, and simply didn't bother to apply.

The pressure then was most obviously from Ofsted, and the concomitant pressure from the local authority, but the most intractable problem was from parental attitudes towards education and the school.

Given all of the above, it is perhaps not surprising that 'the market', in terms of parental wishes and expectations, was not a part of Harry's subconscious to the extent that Ofsted concerns were. It was also not surprising that Harry should *feel terrible that market forces aren't a bigger part of my subconscious*. So this was Harry's current dilemma. *We are forced down this route of raising standards through paperwork, you know: make sure your planning's right, make sure your assessment's right, make sure you're doing this, make sure you've got this on the wall, make sure you've got that on the wall.* But the problem for Harry was that *we are not changing the culture and the attitude towards learning*. The end result seemed to be that whilst within the school *we are actually making the staff work harder*, the idea should be *you don't work harder, you work smarter*, and Harry didn't feel they were. So whilst *we are making lots of progress in terms of things like Ofsted*, he felt that *we are not making progress with the parents....I want to get parents into the school more, and there are lots of projects I've talked about with various staff, but we simply have not got time. We want to have...family training days, curriculum days, get people...my staff meetings for next term are booked up and into the summer term already, with...this business of working towards any potential Ofsted inspection.*

Ultimately, then, Harry felt there was a price to be paid for such commitment, such focus, for he thought that *what I won't have is a set of parents who understand what's going on in the school, who support what's going on in the school, and come in to the school*. And the reason was simple: *because the focus has been elsewhere, nobody has put any time or energy into it, so we are not making any progress.*

Harry was then faced by any number of pressures: the pressure of inexperience as a head, the demands of a new school and its culture, poor results, pressure from the LEA, the threat of an Ofsted visit and its possible consequences, as well as his own personal pressure to really get to grips with the culture of the area and its lack of involvement in the school. Yet, despite all the demands associated with Christmas, and working with a heavy cold, there was also a determination to succeed, for despite these pressures, there was never any suggestion throughout the interview of moving to an easier challenge. Harry had his values and his vision, and he seemed determined to surmount present difficulties and realise them.

The Emily Wu Portrait

Emily's interview took place at her school – a fairly run-down part of Hong Kong. For the western interviewer, used to primary schools with space and fields, to drive into a busy shopping district, and then to have a large metal gate opened by a parent helper onto a school with a small playground overshadowed by high-rise flats, was something unusual. For the other interviewers it was of course normal and unremarkable. Emily's room was snug and comfortable, with enough room for three interviewees and the principal. Once our china cups of hot water had been delivered, we were ready for the interview.

The English interviewer had been told (and had read) of Chinese cultural characteristics such as saving and losing 'face', of a reticence to divulge the personal and the problematic, and of the real issues and difficulties of conducting an interview in an interviewee's second language. However, these issues never became a problem. Emily chose not only to give the interview almost completely in English, but gave opinions which were forthright, critical and personal. It will be clear as this portrait develops why it became imperative to ensure the anonymity of the interviewee!

The aerial codes for this interview were:

- the importance of context: of understanding how the organisation and relationships between AM and PM schools on the same site generated a very particular set of issues and constraints, particularly when allied to the issue of declining numbers;
- The internal problems perceived by Emily; and the sheer uninhibitedness and criticality of Emily's opinions;
- The perceptions of these problems then produced a highly concentrated focus on the internal problems of the school; most of the responses to questions about time, energy, legislation, inspections, and markets, were replied to in the light of internal issues.
- However, Emily was aware of external issues, particularly regarding curriculum reforms, and was not hesitant in vocalising these. .

Each of these areas will be dealt with in turn.

The importance of context: of understanding how the organisation and relationships between AM and PM schools on the same site generated a very particular set of issues and constraints, particularly when allied to the issue of declining numbers.

For a number of reasons, at the time of the interview, there were still a number of school buildings in Hong Kong which in effect housed two different schools: a morning (or AM) set of pupils, and an afternoon (or PM) set of pupils. These 'schools' had separate principals and separate teachers. One might have thought, then, that few problems would arise from such an arrangement, except perhaps issues of daily transition, of storage of materials, and other factors stemming from the sharing of the same site on a daily basis.

This, however, was not normally the case: more usual, in fact, was a situation where the AM and PM principals shared a similar curriculum, and general planning of the school. It was actually nearer the case to view the situation at Emily's school as there being only one school, but with two principals appointed to run it. In such situations, how was authority determined? For Emily the situation was pretty clear: whether she liked it or not, she occupied the less powerful principal's position. This was in large part determined by the fact that the previous AM principal had left, and Emily, at that time teaching in another school, had applied for the job, *but I failed to become the AM principal*. And who became the AM principal? *Actually, the AM principal is the previous PM principal...and then they had a vacancy here for the PM principal...* This was now the post that Emily occupies, after the school supervisor asked to take up the post. So Emily, at the time of interview, had only been a principal for a short period of time— *a greenhorn* as she called herself. Given this, and the fact that the other candidate got the post that Emily originally wanted, it was perhaps unsurprising that Emily would be clear about the current hierarchy in the school, for as she said, *they promoted the PM principal to be the AM principal...*(our emphasis).

As if this was not difficult enough, Emily also encountered three other problems which might well have finished off a less resolute individual.

First, Emily found herself in the situation where, because of the widespread problem in Hong Kong of declining primary numbers, her own PM school was going to be closed for the following academic year, and the AM and PM schools would be merged into a whole day school. At the moment, said Emily, *we don't know who will become the full time principal...* Yet Emily was no fool: she knew that she had failed to beat the other candidate for the AM school position a little while ago, and would almost certainly be facing the same person again very shortly for the whole day school position.

Second, and to add to her problems, because the AM principal had been the PM principal only a little time ago, when Emily wanted the teachers to do something different from what they had been used to, *they will tell Y, and then Y will stop me from that doing so...* Indeed, the hierarchy was so pronounced, that the AM principal did not feel the need to justify her decisions: *[Y] just says I want it to be like that, I don't need to explain to you because I am the principal...*

Yet the problems for Emily didn't stop there. It is conceivable that someone could put up with being treated as a deputy principal instead of a full principal, and of not being consulted, if the situation in the school is a healthy one. But Emily did not believe this to be the case. *My school* she said, very early in the interview, *is just like a Jurassic park*. After my eyebrows came down from the ceiling, we began to explore why this was the case. This then forms the third set of problems, and deserves a section on its own.

The internal problems perceived by Emily; and the sheer uninhibitedness and criticality of her opinions.

Emily then found herself in a situation where she was not only allocated an inferior position, but where even that position was undermined. Perhaps the real problem, as Emily saw it, however, was that the school was in urgent need of reform and yet few others seem to realise it...*the teachers are quite used to the old system...there is not any system here, no discipline, no system, and they cannot see the problems...* Emily's primary concern was *the teaching and learning area*, because *I think everything starts with that...* and yet *I found most of the teachers here are not so conscientious and diligent about their work...* She had, for instance *checked their marking of exercise books*, and she thought it *quite outrageous to find how bad they can be to deal with the daily routine...* and undoubtedly part of the problem stemmed from the fact that *the teachers are very enclosed by their present environment...I mean, they feel safe to have a job before and they not need to think of any improvement*

However, Emily was also clear in her own mind where the real problem lay: *the main factor [is] the previous organization did not keep an eye on them, or they just don't care about how the teachers do in the classroom...* Indeed, she felt that not only did the previous regime ensure that teaching quality didn't fall, but that it didn't include the teachers in any decision making, which probably contributed to the problem: *I want to adopt some policies to be fair, open and transparent enough to let all the teachers know what is going on, but I think the previous practice is not like that, they keep everything secret to themselves, and they don't reveal the truth to the teachers that often.* There then existed, Emily believed, a regime employing a fairly deadly combination of not including teachers in decision –making, whilst at the same time *nobody says you are doing a lousy job and nobody cares at all and they will just keep them.*

It seems important to include here the kind of students that the school admitted, for this seemed to intensify Emily's concerns. *About 80% of our students are new immigrants coming from mainland China, and we've got a lot of family problems.* However, Emily was at pains to point out that *I don't think they should have problems because they come from the mainland China...I mean the location of the school will have some impact on that...from the school I taught before...there are new immigrants from Mainland China too, but they are very good students, they've got fabulous performance and their parents are very good.* However, this school seemed to have a very different kind of intake...*there are many cases such as child abuse, family violence, and some of the parents don't have time to take care of their kids...* The result, Emily felt, was that *the teachers here will think all of the students are just losers, because they believe they can't learn, because their standard is very low...they just give them up...* Yet if she felt that the teachers didn't have a high regard for the children, she also felt that this feeling was reciprocated. When asked why the parents chose this particular school, she felt it had little to do with its quality or its distinctive message, but simply *because this school is not a good one...because they can get in easily.*

The perceptions of these problems then produced a highly concentrated focus on the internal problems of the school; most of the responses to questions about time, energy, legislation, inspections, and markets, were replied to in the light of internal issues.

(a) Time. Given Emily's views on the context she worked within, it was perhaps unsurprising that most of the other questions were interpreted in the light of this context. For example, when she was asked whether time was a major issue for her, whilst the original intention of the question was to explore whether principals managed to fit all of their various demands into a very intensive workload, and what were the major pressures within this workload, Emily interpreted it in a very different way. First, time was a problem because *if I want to modify this school, I may not have enough time because I may just be the principal for the rest of the half year and certainly know that won't be enough...* Her perspective then was a six monthly rather than a daily one. When I asked her to think of the question on a day to day basis, the answer was understandable: there wasn't enough time because of *so many problems, so many things I need to do.*

However, time was important to Emily in a different way, more to do with timing. Given that the former PM principal had been appointed to the AM position to start the new academic year, the sponsoring body found themselves in a position, very late in the day, of needing to appoint a new PM principal. In the circumstances, then, Emily had only been invited to be principal of the PM school at the last minute. The result of this was that *I don't have much time to know more about this school before I came here...* However, and perhaps more importantly, systems were already in place for the coming year, so that *after I came here...I just could not change that when I found they have problems, because it is already set and already made known to everybody....*

(b) Energy. There was a similar, contextualised, response to questions of energy. The original question was designed to elicit perceptions on whether external or internal issues had a significant effect on energy levels. Emily interpreted it in terms of wasted energy: because her hands were tied so much, any energy which was expended on transforming issues which had an impact on the AM sessions – and that meant nearly everything – would be wasted energy. This was in part down, Emily felt, to the dominance and attitude of the current AM principal, but she was also aware that there were issues in the PM session as well, and illustrated her awareness of the fact that real change anywhere needed the energy and enthusiasm of more than just the principal, for she knew that *I need a group of people to be cooperative with me, to work with me; I could not make this school a better one by myself.*

(c) Legislation. Even questions of legislation were interpreted in the light of Emily's current predicament. When asked whether there were any decisions that she felt were right, but which would have been difficult to carry out because of the consequences of violating educational legislation/guidelines/ordinances, the question's original intention was to probe for whether there were educational issues or aims (such as greater creativity and greater autonomy) which were hampered by directive and centralising legislation. Emily's answer was to suggest that there was a major problem in her ability to sack teachers, *because it is not so easy to sack a teacher in Hong Kong.* Now she acknowledged that such difficulty *is good in one way because it can protect the rights of teachers.* However, given her situation, it is perhaps understandable that she should say *but it is so bad in the other way if you find some of the teachers are incapable of doing*

what they should do, and you just can't do anything to stop them...you will need to undergo a very complicated process, and ultimately you cannot sack them.

(d) Inspections. Even in terms of inspection, Emily related this to the situation she currently perceived. She believed that in the past *they have that quality assurance inspection before, and they got very poor results*. She was also told by the school's supervisor that, largely on the basis of that report, *there are a lot of changes, a lot of good changes in this school already*. Yet once again, Emily was unequivocal: *if that is a good change, then it is not good enough!* Indeed, Emily felt that most of the staff were so casual in their approach, that *they don't know at all about the external inspections, so they would not care about which area would be inspected...*

(e) Markets. It was already clear from the fact that the AM and PM sessions were going to merge, that there were problems with numbers. Part of the reason for this was a declining birth rate in Hong Kong; but as other interviews showed, principals believed that it was still possible to do something to halt a slide in numbers by establishing a good reputation for academic results, and by providing a good quality education. Reputation then was seen by many as critical, and therefore market issues were a constant concern. Emily was no different: she was clear that the most serious issue confronting the school was the market, *because it is totally out of our control...the other aspects, the legislation, the inspection, or time or effort, there are always ways to resolve them, but not the market*. However, and continuing the same critical theme, Emily believed that school performance was already so poor in the eyes of the parents that *I could not do anything to damage the market consequences any further!* This however was not a counsel of despair: as with all the other issues, Emily was very clear on what she would do if her hands were not tied in the way they were – even if this indicated that she did believe that some market problems were resolvable: it was this one, at this moment in time, that exhibited these characteristics. Thus, given a free hand to implement changes, *I think you would need to adopt a special kind of strategy to make the student to learn better, because you would need to cater for their needs, and if the parents feel that your school is taking care of the students quite well, they will put their children to our school*. This seemed very positive, the expression of an educational vision of good education, and solving market problems and declining numbers through establishing a reputation for good quality education. All the more frustrating then that she believed this was not something she was in a position to do at present.

However, Emily was aware of external issues, particularly regarding curriculum reforms, and was not hesitant in vocalising these.

Whilst Emily understandably concentrated upon internal issues, she was not unaware of external pressures upon the school. Her approach displayed the same ability to view things critically, but this seemed a balanced criticality. Thus, whilst she was not opposed to curriculum reform, for instance, *I just don't agree with the way they...implement the changes to the schools...how come they can expect teachers to take up so many new roles in a short period of time to deal with all those changes...to plan a new curriculum framework is not a simple task*. The preferred method seemed to be to provide each

school with a *Curriculum Designer (CD)* – a new post for 5 years. However, this teacher will need to start doing the changes while he is still learning how to do it. These CDs, then, would have in-service training to help them understand the new reforms and their implementation, but Emily thought a *very poor system to deal with such a drastic reform*. Such in-service training, for example, is *not compulsory for the principal*, and in her own school, *my principal does not know about the curriculum reform at all, and he just relies on that CD to do it, but if you don't know about curriculum reform, how could you ensure that the CD would do a good job, right?*

Emily was also concerned at the lack of consultation in their creation. Thus, she believed that these changes were *introduced by the EMB* [the Hong Kong Education Department], *not originated from school...and before they introduce that reform, nobody knows what they are going to do*. Moreover, when asked whether she had been consulted on the reforms, she stated that *No, they did not have that process*. Indeed, it seemed that she doubted whether a consultation process would make much difference: *even if you say it, even if you tell them how you think, your opinions, they will just neglect it, because they believe they are doing the right things*. Further, when I asked whether she thought that the lack of consultation regarding her opinions might be due to the fact that she was a very new principal, she doubted whether *very experienced principals* would be able to provide much insight: *they may not see the problems at all...they may just rely on the CDs*.

Emily then had a forthright personality, who believed in the central importance of the role of principal in the school, yet who recognised the need for the support of the team; who believed in her own ability if she had her hands 'untied' and if she had the time to turn things round. Such a portrait may suggest that Emily was a hyper-critical individual. This was not the impression from those conducting the interview. What came across strongly was a sense of frustration occasioned by Emily having a vision of what needed to be done, and yet apparently blocked on virtually all fronts from achieving it.

Observations and Conclusions.

Harry and Emily practiced in very different cultures, in very different kinds of schools, facing very different challenges. One was working in a gritty, inner-city school in Northern England, focussing necessarily on Ofsted and LEA demands; the other was working in a PM School in an area of declining rolls in Hong Kong, feeling deprived of any real power by the presence of a dominant AM head and a staff acquiescent to her. Yet through their uniqueness, these portraits do a number of surprising things.

A first is that whilst they are cultures apart, through reading their personal stories, and seeing how they struggle in very difficult situations, it is possible to recognise their common humanity. They show similar reactions to the situations they face – frustration is there, just as on occasions is exasperation; yet so also is a similarly resilient attitude – this is not going to defeat me. Both the interview and the portrait suggest that they intended to continue doing the best for their school and their children regardless of the constraints and pressures they faced. In some small way, then, these portraits suggest that it is

possible to understand what others, very different from ourselves, are feeling and doing. The struggles of two individuals may then paradoxically provide a measure of hope that humanity can cooperate in solving the more global challenges it currently faces.

But secondly, if this paper has shown that individuals from different cultures share a similar resilience, it should be pointed out that not all the interviewees showed this. There were individual differences within and between societies. Some in apparently better situations, through age, or diminution of ability to implement their missions, showed much less resilience than Harry and Emily (see Bottery, Ai, Wong and Wong (forthcoming)). One therefore has to be careful: each encounter between context and personality is unique – and is always changing.

So finally, we return to the need to appreciate the particular circumstances of each headship, if policy is to have successful implementation. Where policy is unthinking and the local is ignored, or the local is seen as impediment to the visions of those at the centre, then policy success is likely to be low. As Hoyle and Wallace(2005) argue, successful policies are those which appreciate the local, and ‘successful’ professionals are those aware of the ambiguities, dilemmas, and ironies generated by the nature of the conflicting demands of policies, organisations, and people, and who are able to display the characteristics needed to deal with such realities. These involve, we suggest, a pragmatic and piecemeal approach towards implementation, and an understanding of the need to mediate between legislation and the context within which it has to be realised. This suggests the need for individuals – in collaboration with others working in the same context – to ‘construct’ an implementation which reflects their particular circumstances, just as it suggests an approach by policy makers which appreciates this reality and allows sufficient flexibility for this to be possible.

The result then is a very different picture of professional practice from the hierarchical, rationalist, planned and controlling one currently provided by many official bodies. It is instead characterised by context, personality, and pragmatic implementation. Whilst it does not ignore the need for central pressure and direction, it also suggests the need for a degree of local autonomy as a necessary element of local implementation. Whilst it does not deny the need for a central role in headship education, it suggests that this will be much more effective when it tries to understand the headteacher or principal and their perceptions of the challenges they face. That is the beginning of a model of a centre-periphery relationship which could spell real success for schools.

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