

# **Transposing a culture – reflections on the leadership of a closing school**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the leadership of a closing school. It draws on the case of Newley School, a mixed comprehensive for students aged between 11 and 18 years, and examines the primary leadership activities undertaken during the twelve month period when the school re-opened temporarily as a ‘new’ school. These activities were driven by the imperative of ensuring the provision of a positive learning environment for students. The article examines the key factors underpinning the cultural change required to secure this environment. It moves on to explore the impact of cultural change activities from the viewpoint of some of the school’s main stakeholders – students, parents, teachers and governors. It highlights the importance of short-term culture building and provides insights into the potential benefits of school federations. The article concludes with implications for school leaders attempting to manage cultural change.

**Keywords** failing schools, federation, leadership, school culture, school closure

This article focuses on an unusual secondary school closure case. The school is referred to throughout as Newley School, a fictional name, in order to preserve anonymity. The names of other schools and personnel have been similarly fictionalised. Newley School was recently closed by the local County Council, having been designated a failing school which did not demonstrate the capacity for improvement. It was re-opened temporarily, for the period of one year, under the name of Kingsmead School, an annexe to Kings School, a local successful comprehensive.

This article is written from my perspective as Headteacher of Newley School at the time of its closure. Newley was a school with a long and clearly documented history. I felt it my responsibility to relate the end of its story. Equally I consider that, despite the particular trajectory of the closure process in this case, this story brings potential insights for any school leader attempting to manage cultural change.

### **Failing schools**

The formal inspection of schools began in 1993, when the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) initiated its programme of inspecting and reporting on all state-funded schools. Each Inspection Team is required to consider the standard of education provided by a school. A judgement that a school is failing to provide, or likely to fail to provide, an acceptable standard of education leads to that school being viewed as in need of ‘special measures’. Schools in the Special Measures category are required to work with their Local Education Authority (LEA) to plan for and implement a strategic school improvement programme (OFSTED, 1999).

Other schools, whilst providing an acceptable quality of education, may be found to have ‘serious weaknesses’ in one or more of their activities (DfES, 1997). OFSTED’s requirement for action planning and LEA support similarly pertains to schools in the Serious Weakness category. OFSTED’s definition of a failing school is one which does not adequately provide for and support student progress (DfES, 1997). Commentators agree, with Stoll and Fink (1998) citing poor student progress in terms

of value-added measures as the defining feature of a failing school, whilst Barber (1998) suggests 'limited capacity for self-renewal'.

OFSTED (2003) provides no details in its *Framework for inspecting schools* of the specific characteristics inspectors would expect to find in a failing school. Failure is judged instead by a school's inability to succeed in reaching an acceptable level in terms of educational standards, quality of education provided, quality of leadership and management and provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students. Some commentators, conversely, choose to identify key attributes of failing schools, with Stoll and Fink (1998) citing lack of vision, unfocused leadership, dysfunctional staff relationships and poor classroom practices as the hallmarks of failure. They concede however that the knowledge base of such characteristics is still limited, a position supported by Myers and Goldstein (1998).

### **Closing schools**

OFSTED removes a school from the Special Measures category either when Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) judge that the school is now providing students with an acceptable level of education or when a school closes. The provision of an acceptable standard of education is evidenced through a school having made sufficient progress on its key issues as identified by the Inspection Team. Crucially however, echoing Barber (1998), the school is also required to demonstrate that it has the 'capacity to secure further improvement', with capacity being defined as a demonstration of the commitment, strategy and systems necessary to bring about and support progress (OFSTED, 1997:2).

The LEA's Statement of Action, required by OFSTED as a supplement to a special measures school's Post-OFSTED Action Plan, must provide a detailed explanation of the options for the future of the school, including an assessment of the scope for the school to be closed. Furthermore, under Section 19 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, the Secretary of State may at any time direct an LEA to close a school which is subject to special measures (DfES, 1997). The once 'unthinkable alternative' (Gray and Wilcox, 1995:253) of school closure is now a viable option.

## **Newley School**

I took up the post of Headteacher of Newley School two and a half years prior to its closure following the move of the previous Headteacher to a new Headship. It was clear to me that there were considerable issues to be tackled at the school in terms of standards of teaching and learning and student achievement. I believed however that I had the experience and ability to lead Newley to success. I was only the sixth Headteacher in the long history of the school. Newley opened on 20 November, 1905, as the town's first elementary school, with 52 students on roll. The County Council assumed responsibility for the expanding school in 1908, with the school moving to its final site in 1909. When I joined the school it had become a mixed comprehensive for boys and girls aged between 11 and 18 years of age. Situated in the north of the town, in an area of mixed owner-occupied and local authority housing, the school drew the majority of its students from two large local authority housing estates, one of which is in an area of significant deprivation. The number of students on roll was 525 although the school had for some years been notably undersubscribed. The majority of students were white although a significant number of students were of minority ethnic background. Student attainment on entry was average, although the school had a higher than average proportion of students identified as having special educational needs. Newley School had a reputation as a caring school with the best interests of individual students at its heart.

Two months after my arrival, Newley was designated as a school in the Serious Weakness category, following a routine inspection undertaken by the Office for Standards in Education under the School Inspections Act 1996. Less than two years later, a re-inspection concluded that Newley was a failing school which required the instigation of 'special measures' in order to improve. The Local Education Authority initiated a consultation in the same month on a proposal to close the school. Following this period of consultation, the decision to close the school was taken by the County School Organisation Committee, with effect from the end of that academic year.

In its last year, 448 students between the ages of 11 and 18 attended Newley School. These students were divided into seven year groups, Years 7 - 13. Due to the rapid

closure of Newley, other schools were unable to immediately accommodate all of these former Newley students. A building programme was therefore initiated at three local schools. Year 6 primary school students due to be admitted to Newley were re-allocated an alternative school. Students wishing to undertake courses in Year 12 were similarly accommodated elsewhere. Newley's Year 13 students completed their courses at other schools in the Post-16 Consortium. Newley students due to begin Year 10 were transferred to the three local schools to embark on the last stage of their compulsory education, their Key Stage 4 studies.

Students in Years 8, 9 and 11 remained on the former Newley School site for one further academic year until the building work at their new schools was complete. For this year, Kings School, a highly successful school in a neighbouring town, assumed responsibility for these former Newley students, with Newley School being 're-opened' as Kingsmead School at the start of the new academic year. Paul Church, Headteacher of Kings School, took on the role of Headteacher of Kingsmead whilst I remained as Associate Headteacher to oversee the day to day running of the school. One year later this arrangement ceased, with all Kingsmead School students being re-located to new schools.

The Newley/Kingsmead School story raises a number of leadership challenges worthy of exploration. These include:

- The nature of the strategic leadership role in a school with no long term future
- The importance of marketing in shaping a community's perception of a school
- The extent to which the actions of a leader can bring about sustainable school improvement

This paper focuses on one of the key challenges for the leaders of Kingsmead School, that of shaping the culture of the school in order to provide a positive climate for learning. It seeks to explore the following questions:

- What were the key factors in the creation of a positive culture for Kingsmead School?

- What can school leaders learn about cultural management from the Kingsmead School story?

### **The nature of the study**

The strategic decisions taken at Local Authority level to manage the closure of Newley School were unusual. A common rationale prompted the institution of the organisational structures within the school however. In spite of its inevitable closure, the Newley Leadership Team, in common with many school leaders, wished to manage the culture of our school in order that it might most effectively support quality teaching and learning. Given the unusual circumstances of this cultural management experience, I felt it to be important to record and share any potential lessons with my peers. I equally wanted to use the writing process to make sense of the closure experience on a personal level.

To fulfil these purposes, I gathered data relating to the Newley/Kingsmead School story. This data was drawn from a number of sources including Newley School OFSTED reports, published documentation relating to the closure process, press reports and a school-wide parent and student questionnaire. It was equally important to capture the views of representatives of the Kingsmead School community. Semi-structured interviews were therefore conducted with members of the Governance Committee (1), Leadership Team (3), teaching and non-teaching staff (2) and students in Years 8 and 11 (14). This data has been used to inform and shape the process of reflection documented in this paper. The personal perspective, and hence potential subjectivity, of this study should be acknowledged. This paper has been used as a vehicle for putting this personal story into the public domain in order to contribute to the school leadership debate.

### **The closure of Newley School**

OFSTED's judgement that special measures were required in relation to Newley School provided the impetus for an LEA assessment of the viability of the school. Analysis against Stoll and Fink's (1998) 'hallmarks of failure' schedule showed that,

despite OFSTED's acknowledgement of strong leadership and clarity of vision, the school was unable to assure rigorous classroom practice.

OFSTED (2002:7) summarised the situation thus:

Newley School is not in a position to provide an acceptable quality of education. While the teaching by permanent teachers is satisfactory, and often better, that by unqualified teachers is poor, and students learn little or nothing in their lessons. Standards overall are well below average and falling, and students are achieving much less than they should be.

Newley's staffing situation underwent a dramatic change in the period between its last two OFSTED inspections. The school had a recent history of an extremely stable staff with minimal teacher movement. In the period following the first inspection during my Headship over 50% of the teaching staff left the school. Newley's designation as a school in OFSTED's Serious Weaknesses category prompted all staff to reflect on their potential role in the school's recovery process. Many, unsurprisingly, took the decision to strengthen their career through securing promoted posts in other schools. The Leadership Team instigated a rigorous staff support system to raise the level of performance of a number of teachers. A percentage of these teachers, alongside others, concluded that this was an appropriate time to pursue a career change.

The staffing difficulties often faced by schools in OFSTED categories were exacerbated for Newley by a national recruitment crisis. In the year following its designation as a school in Serious Weaknesses Newley's recruitment difficulties were extreme. Fifteen new staff joined the school at the start of the new academic year to complement the fifteen staff already in post. Six of these new staff were recruited from overseas, predominantly through telephone interviews, and had no experience of teaching the English National Curriculum. Despite intensive induction and on-going mentoring support, this situation created major challenges in terms of maintaining a consistently high quality of teaching and learning across the school.

Moreover, although Newley was in theory fully staffed, many staff were teaching outside their main subject area. A number of vacancies remained at middle management level, with the roles of Head of Religious Education, Science, Music,

Modern Foreign Languages and Sixth Form being undertaken by members of the Leadership Team in addition to their substantive duties. By the end of the Autumn Term, 25% of the new teachers had left, being replaced in the main by other overseas staff or by day to day supply teachers. This pattern of discontinuity continued throughout the Spring Term. The impact of these severe staffing difficulties on the forward movement of the school was catastrophic.

Attempts to improve the quality of education and to raise standards across the school have failed because of a severe shortage of qualified teachers to teach the National Curriculum and to manage departments. This situation has placed an unreasonable strain on senior managers and has prevented them from carrying out the changes they have planned. The school does not have the capacity to improve its work in these circumstances.

(OFSTED, 2002:8)

OFSTED's requirement that a school demonstrates its capacity for improvement (1997) was patently not being met at Newley. Students were equally clear about the impact of staffing issues both on their education and on their own reactions to a situation they resented.

Last year there was no-one to push me so I didn't do anything.

*Year 11 – Student 4*

Because we were getting so many cover teachers we didn't seem to think about the ones who were there all the time.

*Year 11 – Student 9*

We were getting so upset with our teachers that we just didn't care. We thought we might as well just muck around.

*Year 11 – Student 7*

The final decision to close Newley School was taken by the County School Organisation Committee. Despite the anger, frustration and sadness which the school closure announcement caused, the inevitability of the decision was accepted by its leaders.

The hole was just too big to climb out. With the best will in the world I just think it was insurmountable.

*Leadership Team member 1*



We reached an impasse and that impasse was insurmountable.  
*Leadership Team member 2*

Similarly, the Community Action Group, formed by parents and others to fight the closure of the school, recognised that Newley could not have continued in its then form and proposed its re-launching as a voluntary-aided Church of England Secondary School. This proposal was not accepted by the County Council.

### **The creation of 'Kingsmead' School**

The creation of Kingsmead School was an unusual but pragmatic response to the closure of Newley. Notwithstanding the closure, 225 students in Years 8, 9 and 11 had to remain on the former Newley School site for one further academic year, whilst building work to accommodate them at their new schools was completed. The former Newley School site was therefore designated as an annexe to an existing, high-achieving school, Kings School, situated in a neighbouring town. This annexe became a new, temporary school, to be known as Kingsmead School. Kingsmead School was not a Fresh Start School, that is, a new maintained school designed to replace a closing school (DfES, 2004). However, its inception bore many similarities to schools opened under the Fresh Start scheme.

Fresh Start schools are required to gain public confidence that an ambitious approach will create the opportunity to produce success from difficult circumstances (Barber, 1998). The 'difficult circumstances' of the last year of Newley School had a deleterious effect on both student achievement and self-esteem. Staff morale was low. It was crucial that the school experience was different for all from September onwards. Legge (1994:417) suggests that change can occur through 'skilfully managed organisational trauma'. Newley had certainly had the trauma. Now it was for us to manage the change. Planning for the 'opening' of Kingsmead, the 'new' school, began in earnest during the Summer Term.

The National Standards for Headteachers emphasise the importance of a leader's articulation of a clear vision which can be used to guide a school towards the fulfilment of its core aims (Teacher Training Agency, 1998). The vision for Newley

School – the commitment to achieving a thriving school in which all students received a quality education and fulfilled their potential – needed to be re-shaped to fit the particular circumstances of the new school. Initial discussions to develop the shared vision required to drive the practical arrangements for the education of Kingsmead School students were held with a wide range of stakeholders comprising Governors and all members of the staff team. An in-service training (INSET) day was used to debate and agree a vision for the school, with a further INSET day devoted to reaching a consensus on consistency of practice for the coming year. Following a process of debate, staff agreed a vision for Kingsmead School:

To provide the highest quality of educational experience for our students as we prepare them for their move to other educational institutions or the world of work.

The process of debating and agreeing the vision was more significant than the final statement however. It reminded individuals that we were part of a team with a common purpose and laid the foundations for the resurgence of effective team working within the school. Members of staff, working collaboratively in cross-department groups, proposed that that the vision would be realised through:

- a change of culture from the previous year
- consistency in policy application
- the establishment of a stable staff

The translation of this agreement into policy and practice which would positively affect the day to day reality of Kingsmead School was, inevitably, more complex than this summary of the decision-making process suggests. The impact of the three agreed interventions on the life of the school is explored below.

### **A change of culture from the previous year**

School culture is notoriously difficult to define. Hargreaves (1995) characterises organisational culture as manifesting itself in knowledge, beliefs, values, customs, morals, rituals, symbols and language. Schein (1985:6) views these characteristics as

manifestations of an organisation's culture rather than its essence. This he believes to be:

the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs which are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic, 'taken-for-granted' fashion that organisation's view of itself and its environment.

The beliefs and values of Newley School had been dramatically challenged in the school's final year. Although historically perceived as academically inferior to other schools in the area, the 'taken-for-granted' view of the school prior to this year was of an ordered organisation which had the well-being of children at its heart. This view was now eroded on a daily basis as teachers failed to do what was expected of them and children, lacking reinforced boundaries, behaved inappropriately. Staff and students capture the ethos of the school at that time.

There were people out of lessons, in trainers, not wearing the uniform.  
*Year 11 – Student 9*

My grades were really low... Teachers had no control over us.  
*Year 11 – Student 4*

There weren't enough people to manage the children.  
*Leadership Team member 3*

The school had lost its safety. It had lost its belief that certain things would happen.  
*Teacher 1*

The 'customs and rituals' of the school disintegrated. Parents attending the OFSTED pre-inspection parents' meeting expressed grave concerns regarding teaching, behaviour and inconsistent homework (OFSTED, 2002:11). If Kingsmead School was to be successful in realising its vision, faith in the school had to be restored. 'The way we do things around here' (Deal and Kennedy, 1983:140) had to both change and be seen to have changed.

Cultural change is viewed as difficult to secure, requiring long-term intervention (Ball, 1987; Maden, 2001; Renschler, 1992; Stolp, 1994). Indeed, the school improvement literature proposes that schools concentrate not on changing cultures but instead on building internal capacity. For Fullan (1992), internal capacity can be

summarised as the ability of those within a school to create and manage significant moments of positive change. Using this internal capacity to underpin sustainable improvement will, it is suggested, bring about the cultural change sought (Maden, 2001). Hargreaves (2004) develops this argument, viewing capacity building as reliant on long-term interventions designed to shore up success, or prevent further decline, such as developing policy and practice to attract and retain high quality staff. He goes on to question the ability of schools in challenging circumstances to adopt such capacity building measures however.

For Kingsmead School, sustainable improvement was not a requirement or even a possibility. The school needed to be successful for just one year. Capacity building was unnecessary. Cultural change, conversely, was vital. Hargreaves' (2004) exploration of the lack of dignity associated with failing schools resonates with the experience of the closure of Newley. A determination to restore the dignity of the school community through cultural change drove the strategic planning process as we prepared to 'open' Kingsmead.

Prosser (1999) characterises culture building as a way of constructing reality. The Leadership Team envisioned the reality of Kingsmead as a school in which 'safety' would be restored, a place where students' emotional well-being would be nurtured and where student learning would be promoted and supported. It was vital to construct the reality of Kingsmead in such a way that teachers and students believed in the school's ability to ensure that this vision would accord with their day to day experience. If the belief, and hence support, of these key stakeholders was not secured then the enterprise would fail.

The 'active complicity' (Gray, 1991) of the student body, and, more implicitly, of the staff team, was solicited in a number of ways. Symbols were used as mechanisms to promote an acceptance of the possibility of a changed reality. Fidler (1997) draws upon Firestone and Wilson (1985) in explaining the power of symbols to elicit such belief in the potential for cultural change. All external references to Newley School were removed and replaced by symbols relating to Kingsmead School. The school signs, letterhead, computer screen saver, welcome mat and website were changed to reflect the name and images of the new school. All photographs of students wearing

the Newley uniform were removed from the school and replaced by those depicting students in the Kingsmead uniform. Students were issued with this new uniform by the LEA. Students were also issued with covers for their planners and exercise books emblazoned with the Kingsmead School name and logo. The staffroom was remodelled to service a much reduced staff team. It was re-decorated and renewed furniture and computers installed. An interpretation of these changes as merely morale boosting strategies or as an appeasement neglects to take account of their inception. The drive for these changes came from the Newley School Leadership Team rather than the Local Education Authority. We were convinced that overt visual signals were needed that the school which children and teachers were returning to in September was substantially different from the one they had left the previous summer. We equally understood that physical changes alone would not enable us to fulfil our vision for the year. We hoped, however, to use these symbolic changes to begin to create the environment in which the cultural change which we sought could occur (Pardy, 1991).

Students and teachers alike acknowledged the artificial construction of Kingsmead School.

It's a fantasy school.  
*Leadership Team member 2*

It's the same school with a different name.  
*Year 11 – Student 7*

However, the altered experience of being part of the 'new' school was equally understood.

It doesn't feel like you are walking into Newley any more. It feels like you are walking into Kingsmead. I don't know what it is about but somehow it just feels different to last year.  
*Year 11 – Student 5*

The main force in creating this difference in 'feel' came not through symbolic gestures but initially through a more fundamental re-assertion of the school's values and purpose. The new Headteacher, Paul Church, played a significant role in this.

## **Leading cultural change**

School leaders are in a key position to influence the culture of their school (Ball, 1987; Bush, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Grace, 1995). Paul Church's role in leading cultural change at Kingsmead School was clear. It was vital for him to personally re-assert the school's core values. The Kingsmead Leadership Team could then develop, together with the staff team, a shared understanding of how these values could be translated into practice to enable the school to deliver its key objective.

A clear sense of what Newley stood for had become lost in the year of its closure. Students understood the need for a re-definition of the values of their school.

It helped him (Paul Church) being here because he had good values of education.

*Year 11 – Student 1*

Hall and George (1999) note that school populations look to a new Headteacher to construct a new culture for a school. Students and staff at Kingsmead School certainly expected the formal articulation of the values of the 'new' school to come from its Headteacher. They equally made judgements on the extent to which Paul Church could deliver a new reality, based on his reputation as Headteacher of Kings School.

I think Mr. Church has had an effect on the students because he's the Head of a really good school ...I think the students wanted to make a good impression.

*Year 8 – Student 4*

It's all about the perception of Kings. The perception of Kings is that it's a highly academic school and performs very well. That has worked in your favour this year.

*Governor 1*

He had this quiet assumption that we would all do what he told us to because he's the Headteacher and nobody questions that. Nobody has for years and years.

*Teacher 1*

The cultural capital of established success (Grace, 1995) was thus a key determinant of the extent to which the new Headteacher was accepted into the school and trusted

by all to lead it to a successful conclusion. The need for a new Headteacher to establish his credentials to lead required changes (Gray, 2000) was negated by the assumption that what worked at Kings School would work at Kingsmead School.

The use of symbols to create an environment conducive to cultural change at Kingsmead School has been explored above. Significantly, the Headteacher himself became the predominant symbol of the cultural shift (Wilson and Corcoran, 1988). A classic charismatic leader with a magnetic personal authority (MacBeath, 2003), he encouraged those within the school community to believe that success was attainable. Charismatic leadership is not always the magical antidote it might first appear for schools in challenging circumstances however. Fullan (2001), drawing on Storr (1997), warns against the use of a charismatic leader as an antidote to the chaos resulting from complexity. However, the complexity of the multiple agendas of OFSTED, the Local Education Authority and the Governing Body which Newley School had been subject to had been removed at its closure. To achieve the very elementary agenda of Kingsmead, charisma was, on one level, exactly what was needed.

The Headteacher's role at Kingsmead School was in many ways unusual. The multiple innovations which Headteachers are usually managing (Fullan, 1992) did not exist in the life story of this school. Freed from the demands of both a Post-OFSTED Action Plan and the usual requirement of managing externally-imposed directives (Grace, 1995), the Headteacher in this context could focus on the leadership activities particularly pertinent in this situation. There was only one objective for the Kingsmead Leadership Team - to prepare students to leave us by providing them with a high quality educational experience. Paul Church used this narrow focus to effect rapid change in the way the school 'did things around here'.

The agenda had to be small. Really narrow. He just kept saying the same thing over and over again in different ways. Behave and do your best. Respect each other. It was all about self-respect and other things followed from it.

*Teacher 1*

Staff and students understood the "Paul Church effect".

I don't know what it would have been like with anyone else but Paul's inimitable style made him ideal for this situation ... He's here every week, the children see him, he talks to them...

*Leadership Team member 1*

He treats you personal, single, like when you are walking down the corridor he asks you questions.

*Year 11 – Student 8*

He had a big kindness mixed with high expectations.

*Teacher 1*

Staff and students interpreted this amalgam of interest in them as individuals and high academic expectations as indicating the things which were important in the school and moved towards basing their own actions on this model.

The new Headteacher continued to use marketing to shape public perception of Kingsmead School, extending his reach to those outside of the school community through the use of the local press. Press reports surrounding the closure of Newley had been damning. Comments about students and teachers were often vitriolic and personal, with the school referred to in the local press as 'a dumping ground for problem children'. Teachers faced weekly editorial proclaiming that their best was not good enough and that the school was 'on the scrap heap'. Paul Church used the press to celebrate Kingsmead School. Press reports focused on a new reality for a new school. The formally reported 'problem students' were re-constructed as prefects and winners of awards. The fractured self-belief of staff and students began to heal. The school community began to believe that we could make the school work. Blanchard and Johnson (1996) affirm that people who feel good about themselves produce good results. The feel-good factor had certainly been restored to Kingsmead and the climate of the school improved accordingly. This was the result not only of a sense of restored belief however. The daily experience of the positive effects of co-operative team working and the re-engagement of students with the learning process combined to produce a sense of renewed optimism throughout the school.



### **Consistency in policy application – reviving collaboration**

The articulation of the new vision for the school, together with the rekindling of a positive attitude, underpinned the success of Kingsmead School. The Newley experience had taught us however that ideals have to be translated into consistent action if they are have any tangible impact. The key role of the Kingsmead Leadership Team was to translate the Headteacher’s cultural signposts into policy and practice.

The disintegration of Newley’s routines was a visible sign of the inability of the staff team to work together in the school’s final year. Staff relationships were rendered dysfunctional through the fracturing of the team of teachers and support staff who both understood the direction the school was trying to take and had a personal stake in it (Stoll and Fink, 1998). 50% of this group had left the school, replaced in the main by teachers with only a temporary commitment or by day to day supply staff. The sense of team working collapsed under this pressure.

Last year the staff couldn’t get together. It felt like everyone was working individually. Every time we tried to put something together in a chain it would break. Also, when you needed to use that chain, to pull on it, it would just come away in your hands.

*Teacher 1*

The need to restore a sense of team working was primarily addressed through a ‘Re-establishing the routines’ programme. The aims of the programme were twofold. Firstly, it sought to remind staff of our joint responsibility for the efficient working of the school. The name of the programme was deliberately chosen to reference the previous acceptance of this responsibility. Secondly, it sought to secure compliance in the performance of the basic routines which define school life – taking of registers, checking of uniform, undertaking of break and lunch duties and so on. Poor staff relationships and low levels of competency had interacted in the previous year to engender a sense of isolation and, in some, an abnegation of any sense of responsibility, a common feature of failing schools (Gray, 2000, drawing on Reynolds, 1995). The ‘Re-establishing the routines’ programme served to remind staff that we were once again a team, and as such, expectations needed to be met.

Staff embraced the programme, the Leadership Team enforced it through a policy of support and challenge, and a new working partnership was secured.

Everyone works together now.

*Support staff 1*

People have pulled together, tried to support each other and it's been a good last year.

*Leadership Team member 1*

The second intervention underpinning the strong sense of teamwork at Kingsmead was the consistent application of the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) policy. A high quality programme was re-introduced, focusing on improving teaching and learning through strategic planning. Gray (2000) draws attention to Hargreaves' (1993) observation that staff in failing schools adopt the coping strategy of living one day at a time. The daily experience of life at Newley in its final year was so unpredictable in terms of student behaviour and staffing difficulties that many teachers could face only what that day might bring and no more. Personal development was sacrificed to classroom survival and the demands of endless inspection. Teachers were now once again asked to plan strategically for their own development within the context of a whole-school programme. Developing staff as reflective practitioners served the dual purpose of reinforcing the centrality of the teaching and learning agenda and of shoring up personal self-image in preparation for their move to new posts.

The sense of teamwork which characterised Kingsmead extended to the leadership of the school. The focus for the year provided by Paul Church was made reality by the actions of all Leadership Team members, who planned for and managed the transformation of Newley School to Kingsmead School. Moreover, through their ongoing support of both staff and students and their insistence on adherence to the routines of the school, they enabled the school community not only to aspire to a new 'way of doing things' but to achieve it on a daily basis. The combination of charismatic leadership and strong management proved to be a winning formula for the school.

### **The establishment of a stable staff – the elimination of ‘surprise teachers’**

Headteachers play a key role in establishing the norms and meanings of a school (Peters and Waterman, 1982). In the case of Kingsmead School, this role was shared with members of the Leadership Team who promoted the school’s policy and required practice. The actual impact of this intended ‘new way of doing things’ on the day to day reality of life in school for students was dependent however on the actions of a stable team of teachers.

A number of strategies were instrumental in securing staffing stability for Kingsmead School. The LEA offered a financial incentive through enhancing the salaries of all staff who remained at Kingsmead for the full academic year until its closure. Teachers also felt supported and empowered by the rigorous professional development programme which included opportunities to undertake developmental roles within the school. A high proportion of Newley’s permanent staff had worked at the school for ten years or more, a number for twenty-five years. The closure of the school had at first appeared to signal the end of careers for some. It was vital to adopt an intervention programme which prepared individuals to take on new challenges and to face change with resolution and courage. An individualised mentoring programme was therefore adopted which supported the efforts of individuals to secure new posts and promoted a sense of hope for the future.

Fullan (1991) argues that educational change simply depends on what teachers do and think. Students were clear that this was the case at Kingsmead School.

I don’t think the name or anything had any impact ... I think if we still had all the problems we had with new teachers then everything would still be the same.  
*Year 11 – Student 4*

Newley’s staffing situation was so unstable in its final year that it caused profound insecurity in both staff and students. Supply teachers, re-christened ‘surprise teachers’ by students, became an inevitable and unfortunate feature of every student’s learning experience. Students were categorical when reflecting on the impact of the quality of teaching staff on their own motivation and learning.

We're getting a better education than we did last year because of all the new teachers.

*Year 8 – Student 4*

Now we have proper teachers it's easier to get on with the subjects.

*Year 11 – Student 1*

Everybody is geared up and wants to do the work.

*Year 8 - Student 2*

These reactions were supported by the results of whole-school student and parent questionnaires conducted at Kingsmead. 93.9% of students said they were working harder than in the previous year, with 95.6% stating that their teachers used lots of different ways to help them to learn. Parents were equally positive, with 100% of parents agreeing with the statement 'My child is making good progress in school', compared with 57% previously. 91% agreed with the statement 'The teaching is good' compared with 48% previously.

Leadership Team views accorded with students' perceptions, acknowledging the importance of the renewed sense of security for adults as well as for children.

We made lots of cosmetic changes which I think made a bit of a difference. But I don't think that's what the children saw as the big change. I think that what the children saw as the huge change was the stable staff. I think the children appreciated the fact that several of us had made a commitment to stay to the end of the year and that was reflected in their attitude towards us.

*Leadership Team member 2*

There's a stable staff and they (the students) feel secure and the staff feel secure.

*Leadership Team member 3*

Day, Harris and Hadfield (1999), drawing on Patterson et al. (1997), contend that people, rather than systems or structures, make the critical difference between success and failure. In the case of Kingsmead, the stable staffing allowed the vision for the success of the school to be translated into reality and rendered success attainable.

## **Key implications for school leaders**

Stoll and Fink (1995) propose that the process of closing one school and re-opening it as another implies a destruction of the culture of the old institution. Gray and Wilcox (1995) rather more tentatively suggest that a closure brings with it an expectation of the introduction of a new set of norms. This expectation was affirmed in the case of the closure of Newley School. This study has sought to explore the key factors in the creation of an expected new culture for Kingsmead School. On one level, the study affirms Hall and George's (1999) findings that cultural creation is dependent on how teachers perceive and interpret the actions of the school leader. At Kingsmead however the process of cultural construction was rooted not so much in the act of creation as that of transposition. The view of Kings School as a traditional school with a strong discipline and work ethic set up expectations for Kingsmead School. The new Headteacher, through a combination of the explicit articulation of the agenda for the school and personal action, affirmed that the expectations at Kings were indeed to be felt at Kingsmead. He became what has been referred to as the critical reality definer for the school (Mac an Ghail, 1992).

It is rare that a Headteacher working single-handedly can effect fundamental change in a school however (Gray and Wilcox, 1995). It was certainly not the case at Kingsmead School. Frost (2003), drawing upon Gronn (2000), suggests that effective leadership activity relies not solely on individual endeavour but on 'conjoint agency', that is, on the actions of a number of people working in an elaborate pattern of activity. Student and staff perceptions of Kingsmead acknowledge this collective leadership activity, manifested through team-working. They equally point to the key role such teamwork had in the translation of the Headteacher's values into the actions which made a difference to their day to day lives.

The original change model proposed realising the school's vision through the application of three key interventions – a culture-building strategy, promoting consistency of practice and securing stable staffing. Experience with Kingsmead School leads me to the view that cultural change is not secured through discrete interventions but rather is the result of consistency in policy application, itself made viable through the establishment of a stable staff.

It is interesting to consider the degree to which a changed culture enabled Kingsmead School to achieve success. Our vision for the school was to provide the highest quality of educational experience for our students as we prepared them for their move to other educational institutions or the world of work. This vision was realised to the extent that the culture of Kingsmead enabled students to re-engage with the learning process. Students and staff were happy and positive. The quality of teaching was secure. GCSE results were poor however, with 17% of students gaining 5 or more A\* - C grades compared with a target figure of 32%, based on prior attainment. In Stoll and Finks' (1998) terms, Kingsmead was a failing school. The time required for cultural change to impact on bottom-line results is thus starkly illustrated.

What then can school leaders learn about cultural management from the Kingsmead story?

#### *Simplifying the agenda*

The Kingsmead School experience suggests that it is possible to promote cultural change through the adoption of a simplified school improvement agenda. The culture of Kingsmead was founded on a strong value system and an elementary set of expectations, translated into reality by carefully conceived and executed routines and firm daily management. The culture was underpinned by the simplicity of the agenda of the school. All that mattered was classroom practice and the quality of relationships. Maden (2001) points to the work of Gray and colleagues (1999) in noting that rapidly improving schools adopt only one set of improvement initiatives at any one time. This could not be the case at Newley. Faced with an intensive programme of inspection, with its acknowledged negative effect on staff recruitment and retention (Gray and Wilcox, 1995; Hargreaves, 2004), we yet had no choice but to implement a complex Post-OFSTED Action Plan. Closure removed both the necessity to demonstrate improvement and the accompanying pressure on staff. It removed staff recruitment issues through a significant reduction in student numbers. It dramatically impacted on behavioural issues through the elimination of supply/short term contract teachers. These structural changes allowed us to simplify the agenda and to concentrate leadership activity on the ultimate purposes of the organisation, thus affording Kingsmead the potential for success.

### *Focusing on the staff*

The Kingsmead School story suggests that a stable and revitalised staff can create a climate favourable to cultural change. At Kingsmead the high-profile CPD programme, supplemented by personal mentoring, reflected a recognition of the primary importance of staff in a time of change. This recognition was key to maintaining a sense of self-worth (Day *et al.*, 1999). A degree of internal capacity was built through focusing on staff development and involvement, providing a climate sympathetic to cultural change.

### *The influence of the Headteacher*

Our experience suggests that, under certain circumstances, the Headteacher's focus of attention can come to be understood as the priority for a school. Moreover, the Headteacher's actions can be interpreted as a model for the 'way of doing things around here'. It would, however, be dangerous for school leaders to be seduced into a belief that they can effect school improvement single-handedly. OFSTED (2000:7) pronounced the Headteacher's leadership of Newley School to be 'outstanding'. Newley's final inspection report noted that a positive feature of the school remained the Headteacher's 'strong leadership and management' (OFSTED 2002:7), despite the school plummeting into special measures. Successful school improvement should not then be attributed exclusively to a Headteacher's personal qualities or strategic actions. Indeed there is no guarantee that a leader who has been successful in one school can transfer that 'recipe for success' to another. The realisation of the potential impact of a Headteacher's leadership activity appears to be dependent on a number of key factors within the school which together create a climate for success.

### **Lessons for practice**

The story of Newley/Kingsmead School supports the contention that a school's culture can be modified (Stoll and Fink, 1995). It does, however, provide a challenge to the dominant view of cultural change as secured only through long-term intervention, often over many years. Instead it offers the possibility of short-term cultural change, enabled by:

- the simplification of a school's improvement agenda
- high levels of investment in recruiting and developing the staff team
- the effective deployment of the influence of the Headteacher
- the transposition of aspects of culture from one school to another through a federation

The issue of the sustainability of cultural change facilitated through such interventions is not explored in the Newley/Kingsmead story. For the leaders of Kingsmead sustainability was irrelevant, given the inevitable closure of the school at the end of the year. This story does however raise the possibility for school leaders that the securing of short-term cultural changes could be the precursor of more sustainable culture building.

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