

**Primary Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances:  
Effective leadership and the potential contribution  
of complexity theory.**

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## **Abstract**

Schools operate in a multitude of different contexts, with some facing more difficult situations than others. The central question this research seeks to investigate is, 'What happens in primary schools facing challenging circumstances that results in their improvement or decline?'

It reports on a study of three English primary schools either subject to an Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) improvement category following inspection and/or coping without a permanent headteacher or with a school merger. It seeks to explore the existence of common factors across the different circumstances and examines the leadership characteristics associated with improvement or decline. Each of the case study schools is also examined more holistically through a complexity theory lens to determine the extent to which this view might add to current understanding.

The study is unusual in that, in the past, researchers have found it difficult to gain access to such sensitive contexts. The researcher in this case was seconded to the leadership team within one of the case study schools for six months and used a journal as well as participant observation and interviews to gather data.

Existing literature identifies circumstances deemed to be challenging and explores a range of aspects of leadership including the difficulties associated with it. This research identifies common themes in primary schools facing challenging circumstances, with a particular focus on leadership, and explores further the links between them, the networks they create and the contribution that these combinations might make to improvement or decline. The original contribution made by this research is to establish complexity theory as a useful approach in examining the nexus between school leadership and primary schools facing challenging circumstances, including a proposition for representing these complex school systems. It seeks to support identification of early indicators of a range of problematic circumstances (pressure nodes) and those factors potentially enabling improvement (building nodes), through the creation of network maps.



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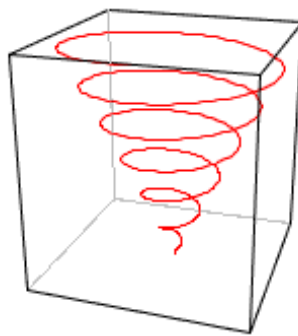
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**Chapter 1**  
**Introduction**



## 1.1 Introduction

England's education system was identified as having achieved significant, sustained, and widespread gains, as measured by national and international standards of assessment over five or more years up to 2007 (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010, p10-16). Performance levels were still deemed to be good (within their range of poor, fair, good and great) in 2010 with a continuing upward trajectory identified.

This is a system that has the potential to provide a consistently high-quality primary education across the Country. Political agendas are continually being reviewed but education remains a priority within the ebb and flow of successive governments' decision-making. This sets some of the boundaries in which the system operates, with others created from macro-level factors such as those which are economic, cultural and demographic in nature. More localised contexts such as levels of crime, housing provision and employment opportunities also influence education providers but individual schools are the basic unit of operation and have the greatest potential to directly affect children's experiences. The provision of education in individual institutions is sometimes hampered by circumstances both within and beyond their direct control. Schools, and the factors that influence what goes on within them, have therefore become the basis of my interest and of this research.

This study came into being through my work in primary schools facing challenging circumstances over a number of years. An interest developed in what happened to those particular schools that resulted in their improvement or decline. Towards the end of 2006 the opportunity to be seconded to a leadership position in such a school arose. This also presented a relatively unique research opportunity that would potentially further my existing understanding of complex situations.

This research therefore seeks to explore what happens in primary schools facing challenging circumstances that results in their improvement or decline. It is an important area to research because it relates not only to the life-chances of children who are being taught within those schools but also to the quality of life of adults working there. It is also significant

because identification of early indicators that a school is beginning to decline might allow this process to be halted or reversed. Equally, identification of factors enabling school improvement within challenging circumstances might be shared to support such schools more widely. The opportunity to contribute to the knowledge that might prevent schools from travelling along the conical helix-shaped path of decline and instead move upward through a similar trajectory of improvement is what gives this research its purpose as well as its title. Although this was the original intention of the study, the work moved beyond that during its completion to include complexity theory which provides a lens through which to examine a school more holistically and potentially adds further to an understanding of the processes described above.

## **1.2 Original Context**

The following quote contains extracts from a letter sent to Acacia Junior School following the first visit from Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) to conduct a Monitoring Inspection, four and a half months after the school was made subject to Special Measures by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

'Test results have declined steadily over recent years and have been among the poorest in the country. To put this in context, a school which has test scores two and a half points below the national average is deemed to have exceptionally low standards. This school was nearly six and a half points adrift of the national average in 2006 in English, mathematics and science.

The school now has records from assessments that purport to show children making good progress. However, this finding was not supported by work seen in lessons, or in children's books or by the quality of teaching and learning seen during the inspection.

Teaching and learning remain inadequate overall because there is still too much unsatisfactory teaching and very little that is better than satisfactory.

The curriculum is improving but remains inadequate because the impact of the school's actions is yet to be fully felt in accelerating children's progress.

The senior staff do not have the skills or experience to be able to make accurate judgements on the quality of teaching and learning.

The school has stated its intention to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses but its self evaluation form has not been updated since February 2006, when it gave an inaccurate picture of how well the school was doing.'

This is provided to exemplify one set of challenging circumstances potentially facing primary schools in England at the current time. The school concerned is one that forms a significant part of this research and whose context and journey will be further examined in this thesis.

### **1.3 Overview**

It is widely reported in the press that when organisations in the global arena face difficulties, it is the leaders and managers of those companies, and public service industries, to whom attention turns. The ongoing crisis in banking in the United Kingdom has seen company directors removed from their posts. In 2007 the Chairman of Northern Rock, Matt Ridley, was forced to resign following the near collapse of the bank (BBC news, 19th October 2007) and in 2012 a series of four major resignations from Barclays Bank followed the Libor rigging scandal that saw the organisation fined £290m for manipulating the inter-bank lending rate (The Telegraph, 26th July 2012). Recent indiscretions in journalism resulted in the resignation of George Entwistle, the Director General of the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) (BBC news, 19th October 2012). It seemed, therefore, that an examination of literature relating to leadership in



education would be an appropriate initial refinement of the literature review. This, following a consideration of a range of challenging circumstances a primary school might face, is considered within the first literature review chapter (Chapter 2).

Subsequent to that, Chapter 3 provides further review of literature, firstly relating to issues emanating from the consideration of leadership, exploring the recruitment and early stages of headship, and then some of the influences on and potential threats to that role. The third literature review chapter (Chapter 4) considers the specific circumstances of school merger as this arose from one of the case study schools, and also provides discussion more generally about change and the way it might manifest in primary schools.

Following this initial review of literature, the following questions were identified for further investigation:

- What common themes exist within and across a range of challenging circumstances?
- What leadership characteristics are linked to schools that improve or decline?
- What combinations of factors lead to improvement or decline?
- What is the potential for prediction and/or control pertaining to improving or declining situations?

Chapter 5 outlines the methodology for this research, including details of the decisions made, methods selected and data analysis. Chapter 6 provides an outline of the three case study schools and seeks to give the reader information relating to the particular challenges each school faced and a timeline of events. The first of two findings and analysis chapters (Chapter 7) follows this with identification and discussion of the themes that emerged from analysis of the research data. Initially these themes are considered individually as this has allowed them to be unravelled and examined in detail. The themes identified and discussed are building blocks in a very complex system and it is crucial to have an understanding of these individual parts in order to more fully appreciate the system they create. However, this led to the conclusion that individual examination

does not allow for a comprehensive consideration of the challenging circumstances and a more holistic approach is gained here through a complexity theory paradigm. An overview of complexity theory with some exemplification of ways in which it might be applied to school circumstances in general is provided in Chapter 8. A further findings and analysis chapter follows (Chapter 9) which discusses the particular schools studied as part of this research from a complexity theory perspective and includes consideration of whether complexity theory is an appropriate research paradigm and what it potentially offers to an understanding of schools facing challenging circumstances.

Whilst both findings and analysis chapters include concluding comments, broader conclusions are collected together and discussed in the final chapter (Chapter 10).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review 1:**

#### ***Challenging Circumstances and Leadership***

In order to understand better the situation in the school where the research opportunity had arisen, the initial literature review includes a consideration of the potential range of challenging circumstances that a primary school might face. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, initial reading related to school improvement and later became more focussed on leadership in education. The discussion of leadership within this chapter includes different types and their relative appropriateness within schools, as well as those qualities of leadership that relate to effective practices. The chapter includes consideration of gaps in the existing research literature and poses questions that might be further explored.

## **2.1 Challenging Circumstances**

In terms of defining a school facing challenging circumstances, Chapman (2005) suggests that it has, 'a disproportionately large number of negative factors acting on it' (p23) compared with the whole set of contexts that schools nationally are operating within. The range and potential impact of these challenging circumstances is wide. Harris, James, Gunraj, Clarke and Harris (2006) state:

'It is clear that the 'challenging circumstances' descriptor is one that covers a wide range of possibilities and is not just concerned with material deprivation or poverty. It refers to the multiplicity of economic and social challenges that face certain schools.' (p7)

While social and economic challenges undoubtedly have the potential to adversely affect a school's situation, they are not the only challenging circumstances that might be faced. Later in the literature review chapters some of these are explored further. For example, factors leading to the destabilisation of a school might include a period of absence of a headteacher, an adverse inspection judgement, financial difficulties or the amalgamation of two schools.

Some challenging circumstances are likely to be factors beyond the direct control of a school. MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (2004) suggest that these could be, 'persistent, long-term factors' (p38). Even shorter-term

factors such as staff turnover and personal issues affecting staff are not 'controllable' although MacGilchrist *et al.* (2004) do recognise that there are also, 'factors that are within the control of the school to do something about' (p38). This suggests that identifying each type is crucial.

There is a recognition within the literature (Harris *et al.*, 2006; Chapman, 2005) that not only are there a multitude of internal and external factors influencing a school but that some of these present real challenges in delivering the standard of education required by agencies such as Ofsted and local authorities. All of Ofsted's (2012) definitions of failing are located within the school, such as, pupils' progress over time, leadership and management failing to address inadequate teaching, frequent incidents of bullying, and specific groups of pupils not feeling safe. The judgements made are against absolutes without regard for the context in which a school is operating. While for consistency the inspection process requires such judgements, the influence of contextual factors can be significant, as outlined in the following pages.

Harris *et al.*'s (2006) research clearly demonstrates that socio-economic factors are high on the list of those things which have the potential to adversely affect the effectiveness of a school. They describe schools in disadvantaged areas as suffering a 'myriad of socio-economic problems' (p6) and include in their list high levels of unemployment, physical and mental health problems, a poor physical environment and migration of the most highly qualified young people. They go on to suggest that this impacts on schools in those areas as they lose public support and often have to deal with high levels of challenging pupils and quick staff turnover.

A recognised indicator of higher levels of poverty is a greater proportion of children entitled to receive a Free School Meal (FSM). Gray (2000) recognises that schools with high FSM entitlement, 'make up the greater majority of schools in Special Measures at any one time' (p7). MacBeath, Gray, Cullen, Frost, Steward and Swaffield (2007) suggest that this issue persists when they present more recent data relating specifically to primary schools.

'Poverty and low attainment walk hand in hand: 11-year-old students on free school meals are twice as likely not to have achieved Level 4 at Key Stage 2 as other 11-year-old students.' (p51)

The issues for some schools could be intensified because, '50% of primary school children who qualify for free school meals are concentrated in 20% of schools.' (MacBeath *et al.*, 2007, p41)

In areas of high socio-economic deprivation, indicated by higher levels of FSM entitlement, there is often a greater diversity within the population (Harris and Chapman, 2004). Harris *et al.* (2006) pick up on this point and describe variations in race, ethnicity, religion and language which present particular challenges for schools in the creation of a relevant and challenging curriculum and the generation of social and cultural capital for all children in their care. They go on to report that this social and cultural mix within a school population can be made more challenging by high levels of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Where these circumstances exist, staff members with specialist knowledge are in higher demand and practical arrangements such as removal of groups and individuals from lessons for extra support can hinder the smooth-running of the school day.

Pupil mobility is another challenge which some schools face. Harris *et al.* (2006) suggest this includes the requirement for schools facing challenging circumstances to, 'take a high proportion of refugee children or pupils who have been excluded from other schools' (p6). They also identify a link between pupil mobility, SEN and the issue of children for whom English is not their first language. Not only do pupils come from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, requiring a school to cope with a large number of different languages, levels of English literacy on entry to school are more likely to be low.

Pupils' levels of attendance can be an issue for schools. For example, during the academic year 2010-11 in Norfolk 5.9% of primary school children attended for 85% or less of the time school was open, thus missing almost a day each week of their education (Norfolk Key Data, October

2011). Nationally the Department for Education (DfE) reported that the 85% or less attendance figure included 430 000 children (DfE press release – 12th July 2011). Within this same document they stated:

‘There is clear evidence of a link between poor attendance at school and low levels of achievement.’ (p1)

What begins to emerge from the existing literature relating to challenging circumstances is a list of influential factors. Links between each of these individually have been made to student achievement or overall performance of a school. However, what are the relative influences of a range of challenging circumstances and what impact do combinations of these factors have?

The factors considered so far are all quantifiable. Levels of attendance and proportions of children entitled to free school meals can be calculated. There are, however, a further group of factors that are more difficult to measure. Their existence in current research literature is discussed below but their influence when combined with other factors is less in evidence.

Penlington, Kington and Day (2008) identify lack of parental involvement as an issue, following their work with schools in what they termed ‘troubled communities’ where higher levels of entitlement to Free School Meals were a deprivation indicator. They report:

‘Central amongst these challenges were a lack of parental engagement in their child’s education ...’ (p75)

Another challenge for schools that are operating in areas of disadvantage is pupil behaviour. This can not only be challenging to manage but impacts on pupils’ ‘motivation levels and the predisposition to learning and educational achievement’ (Harris *et al.*, 2006, p7). The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009a) reported that, ‘the cultural barrier of low aspirations and scepticism about education’ (p2) could mean that it is viewed by pupils as irrelevant to their lives. This could lead to disengagement with school and a lack of achievement, self-confidence and self-worth which is then reflected in poor and perhaps disruptive behaviour

both in and outside the classroom. As will be discussed further, if a culture of learning is not created within a school then it is highly likely that this will become a further challenging circumstance. As will be discussed further in Section 2.1(i) this could contribute to a school's overall inability to improve. MacGilchrist *et al.* (2004) report that:

‘One of the most powerful messages to come out of the school improvement literature is the importance of a school’s culture in relation to change. The culture of a school is seen as the deciding factor when it comes to a school’s state of readiness and its capacity to improve.’ (p38)

The unquantifiable nature of these factors is exemplified in Deal’s (1987) description of a school’s culture as, ‘the way we do things around here’ (p17).

Where elements are difficult to quantify, it appears that they are more likely to be categorised using subjective ‘labels’. Schools can be described as ‘failing’, ‘troubled’, ‘sliding’ (Stoll and Myers, 1998; Myers and Goldstein, 1998; Myers, 1996) or given other labels which all imply that they are in some way lacking compared to more successful institutions. This in itself can present a challenging circumstance. Stoll and Myers (1998) suggest that ‘troubled schools’, sub-categorised further by Myers (1996) as ‘striving, swaying or sliding’ will have a variety of reasons for being in difficulty. Myers and Goldstein (1998) state that:

‘Naming schools as ‘failing’, often has the effect of lowering morale and obscuring positive aspects. Public humiliation is not the best way to improve matters.’ (p176)

The authors also recognise that it can be equally problematic where schools are labelled as successful as they feel under pressure to continue to operate at this standard, maintaining high levels of achievement and positive inspection outcomes over successive years. From the existing literature, however, the influence of labelling on primary schools facing a range of challenging circumstances is not clear.



Another of the unquantifiable factors affecting a school is its reputation. A study by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2004a) identified reputation as one of the six key indicators of a school's ability to operate effectively. This can be fragile in challenged communities.

'For schools serving poor neighbourhoods there is a systemic downward inertia. Without local support and a strong and consistent set of forces working in the opposite direction these schools would simply concede to attrition and entropy.'  
(MacBeath *et al.*, 2007, p52)

A further challenging factor can be staff recruitment and retention. As Thomson *et al.* (2003) reflect, 'a job is always somewhere and where matters' (p128). For many teachers, a job located in a school facing a range of challenging circumstances will not be as attractive a proposition as one in a less deprived context. There is an acknowledgement within the literature that working in more challenging circumstances is more difficult. Maden (2001) states:

'Research has shown that in order to achieve and sustain improvement in such schools teachers must exceed what might be termed as 'normal efforts'. (p10)

A context which can also prove challenging for schools is the perceived imposition of centralised initiatives. Examples include the National Literacy Strategy (1998), the National Numeracy Strategy (1999) and more recently the Phonics Check (2012) for seven year olds. The education system in England is driven by central government and is continually evolving which means that those working in schools are constantly faced with new directives and initiatives. For those schools that are already facing requirements to change they can be viewed as an additional pressure, impacting negatively on individuals' morale, their ability to cope and ultimately their performance. For example, when evaluating the extent to which the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda was implemented in schools, Harris and Allen (2009) identified that:

‘The issue of multiple demands and expectations on schools was considered to be a major barrier to the successful implementation of ECM. There was a view that schools were experiencing ‘initiative overload.’ (p346)

It can be argued that in the research evidence (e.g. Gray, 2000; Muijs *et al.*, 2004; Harris *et al.*, 2006; MacBeath *et al.*, 2007; Kelly and Saunders, 2010) no single factor is identified in isolation as causing circumstances to be challenging. It is in their combining that they become problematic; this would seem to suggest that potentially the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, with the presence of each additional factor increasing the total effect disproportionately. This combining of effects is therefore an area for further research and will be considered within this thesis in Chapters 8 and 9, examining Complexity Theory.

The question for schools operating within a range of challenging circumstances and considered to be ‘failing’ is whether it is possible to improve performance to a point where a good standard of education is provided. That most schools improve, at least in the short term, is exemplified through the minority of schools made subject to Special Measures by Ofsted that are eventually closed, often in fairly dramatic and public fashion. The remainder must therefore be judged to have improved to at least a satisfactory level, even if later on they deteriorate again. How this improvement is achieved and how swiftly it happens therefore seems to be of prime importance. A review of relevant literature is included in the following section.

#### 2.1(i) Can challenging circumstances be overcome?

There is recognition in existing literature that it is more difficult for a school to improve when it is faced with challenging circumstances. For example, Gray (2001) acknowledges that:

‘we don’t really know how much more difficult it is for schools serving disadvantaged communities to improve because much of the improvement research has ignored this

dimension – that it is more difficult, however, seems unquestionable’ (p33).

The lack of research in this area is linked to ‘the complexity and difficulty of the terrain’ (Harris *et al.*, 2006, p9) but it is recognised that the improvement task facing these schools is ‘significantly harder and more daunting than that facing schools in more favourable circumstances’ (*ibid.*, p9).

Whilst acknowledging that improvement may be more difficult where schools face challenging circumstances the literature also suggests that this should not be used to excuse poor performance and that improvement is possible. Ylimake *et al.* (2007), in their study of high-poverty schools in the United States, England and Australia, reported that whilst the headteachers of these organisations ‘recognised and had empathy for the barriers to learning that poverty can produce, none allowed these conditions to be used as excuses for poor performance’ (p378). There is evidence to show that many schools facing challenging circumstances improve levels of pupil achievement (Gray 2001; Reynolds, Harris and Clarke 2005; Harris *et al.*, 2006). Maden and Hillman (1993) suggest that such schools ‘are able to add significant value to levels of student achievement and learning’ (p120). The research referred to here relates primarily to secondary education in countries spread across the globe, in some cases representing contextually different circumstances to those in England. Is it possible for primary schools to improve against a backdrop of different challenging circumstances?

If it is possible to improve within an environment of challenging circumstances, the factors enabling this are a natural progression in areas for consideration. These are therefore discussed below.

It seems from the available literature that a vital first step in the process of improvement is to recognise that there is a problem and accept the need to change. Harris *et al.* (2006) state that many schools in difficulty operate within a ‘culture of denial... preventing meaningful change from taking place’ (p130). For schools perceived to be failing there can be a lack of what Elmore (2003) terms ‘internal accountability’ (p9) and Chenoweth (2010) suggests that it is school leaders who should take responsibility for

this as they, 'must be guardians of their students' futures, not their staff members' happiness' (p20). The schools in the research mentioned above are a mixture of primary and secondary but all share the characteristic of being considered as low-performing at some point in their recent history as well as operating within challenging socio-economic contexts. Whether the factors identified are common to other challenging circumstances, with a focus on primary schools, represents a gap in the existing literature. Is a school's lack of acceptance of a need for change influential in its subsequent improvement or decline across a range of challenging circumstances?

Drawing on evidence from the OCTET Project (a study of eight secondary schools that improved dramatically within environments of challenging circumstances), Harris *et al.* (2006, p131) suggest that one of the three common strands to their improvement processes was a focus on teaching and learning. The other two strands were identified as the creation of a learning community and the setting of high expectations.

Reinforcing this further, Hopkins *et al.* (2005) state that:

'it is at the level of the individual classroom teacher that most of the differences between schools seem to occur' (p4).

Stoll and Myers (1998), in discussing improvements in teaching and learning, state that:

'It is the most complex aspect of the change process and takes the greatest time because it involves intensive staff development, new learning, and frequently, the need for a fundamental shift in beliefs about ways of working with pupils and their ability to learn.' (p10).

They go on to say that, 'this is where there are no quick fixes' (p10).

Thus it is important to include in any consideration of school improvement, particularly for those facing challenging circumstances, an examination of the extent to which a focus on the development of teaching and learning

would be influential. To what extent do primary schools facing challenging circumstances focus on teaching and learning and does improvement result?

External support, in a range of forms, has been identified as important to school improvement. For example, Stoll and Myers (1998) suggest that even where headteachers are confident and experienced in leading, 'external support is often necessary' (p10). MacBeath *et al.* (2007) go further, arguing that for schools facing challenging circumstances, 'external support is critical to their survival' (p52) and reflecting that in order to be useful it should also be, 'relevant and powerful enough to vouchsafe longer term sustainability' (p52). Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) identify that in addition to enabling sustainable developments, external support should also develop the school's own capacity because:

'Without the possession of 'capacity', schools will be unable to sustain continuous improvement efforts that result in improved student achievement.' (p469).

This suggests that it is therefore not desirable for schools to become over-dependent on external sources of support. For primary schools facing challenging circumstances, is over-reliance on external support detrimental to their improvement?

Support for schools has often included particular programmes designed to address low achievement, for example, the National Strategies' Improving Schools Programme (ISP). These have been met with a range of responses. MacBeath *et al.* (2007) suggest that for schools faced with challenging circumstances:

'there is little evidence to support the belief that a set of improvement measures can be applied to schools living life continually on the edge. Prescription and straitjacket policies can not only prove demoralising for young people, cast as failures, but equally demoralising for 'failing' schools and for teachers whose enthusiasm for teaching has slowly been extinguished.' (p101).

Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) are also critical of such programmes, stating that, 'national educational policies and school improvement programmes tend towards universal programmes which treat all schools the same' (p463). Ofsted (2003), however, report more positively that schools are able to bring about improvements, 'particularly where programmes are being implemented which address low achievement and social inclusion' (p17). Although the effectiveness of external support has been debated, the context for this research seems to be limited to challenging circumstances linked to poor statistical outcomes and failed inspections. How effective is external support in primary schools facing a range of challenging circumstances?

In order to identify, implement and embed effectively the changes that are necessary to bring about improvement in a school facing challenging circumstances, strong leadership, particularly that of the headteacher, has been identified within the research literature as an essential requirement. Harris *et al.* (2006) for example state:

'No-one close to schools in challenging circumstances would ever think that leading them is an easy task. The work of these school leaders is hectic, fast-paced and demanding. However, it is well-known that school leadership plays an unprecedented role in determining a school's success and there is a very strong belief in the ability of leaders to promote and generate school improvement.' (p121)

Leadership is considered in greater detail in the following section of this chapter (Section 2.2).

Other than 'turnaround specialists' (Duke and Salmonowicz, 2010, p34), who are employed specifically to attempt to reverse the decline of schools facing difficulties based on their previous ability to do so, the research literature points to the need for most headteachers to receive some training and support in the execution of their role. Day *et al.* (2009) suggest that:

‘There are strong grounds for ensuring that ... heads receive training in the specific strategies and practices that have been identified as effective in meeting the needs of pupils from disadvantaged communities in promoting their motivation, engagement and attainment.’ (p3)

As current government policy increasingly encourages schools to support each other, one initiative that has been shown to be effective takes the form of the headteacher and leadership team from one school being linked with a National Leader of Education (NLE) or Local Leader of Education (LLE) at another school. The National and Local Leaders are those who have demonstrated that their schools have made and sustained improvements in pupil outcomes and which are judged in terms of overall effectiveness by Ofsted to be ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’. Centralised funding is provided to support work of this nature (at the time of writing) whereas that devolved to local authorities to provide support to schools continues to decrease, despite having made significant differences. In Norfolk, for example, for the academic year 2010-11, the primary schools supported by National and Local Leaders made an average of 17% improvement in the proportions of children achieving Level 4 in both English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. The schools which the leaders were deployed from also made an average of 6% improvement in this figure, suggesting that the relationship is reciprocal.

Whilst the need has been established from existing literature, links between the form, extent and effectiveness of support for headteachers working particularly in primary schools facing challenging circumstances is an under-explored area of research. It is therefore a focus for further investigation as part of this research.

It seems from the literature that any improvements made in schools facing challenging circumstances are at risk of being short-term, referred to by a number of authors as ‘fragile’ (Whitty, 2002; Bracey, 2004; Harris *et al.*, 2006; Reynolds *et al.*, 2006). Rather than simply exploring quick fix solutions therefore it would appear essential that any study examining schools in challenging circumstances seeks to understand the possible

reasons for this fragility and it will be an aspect to explore further within this research.

In conclusion, the range of potential challenging circumstances that primary schools in England face is extensive and broad as demonstrated in the literature. A significant lack in the research, however, seems to be that factors are considered individually without examining the potential combinations and impact that these might have in terms of a school's improvement or decline. This raises again the initial question posed at the beginning of this section relating to the impact of combined factors.

## **2.2 Leadership**

As discussed in the introductory chapter, leadership of any organisation tends to become a focus when situations are not favourable. Initial reading relating to school improvement (Fullan, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1992; Hargreaves, 1995; Reynolds, 1996; Stoll and Fink, 1996; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998) led to a consideration of what existing research reported in relation to leadership in education. The following section seeks to summarise a range of existing literature and identify aspects for further investigation as part of this research.

'Leadership involves the identification, allocation, coordination, and use of the social, material, and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of teaching and learning.' (Spillane *et al.*, 2001, p24)

This describes leadership in broad terms but in a primary school context the term leadership is often used to refer specifically to the headteacher's role. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2004b) reinforces this, suggesting that, 'the headteacher provides vision, leadership and direction for the school and ensures that it is managed and organised to meet its aims and targets' (p3).



Leadership and management are included within this definition and the relationship between them has long been considered. More than a decade ago, West-Burnham (1997) identified that:

‘There has been a tendency to express leadership as ‘super-management’; leaders are more competent at a wider range of tasks. Thus the model of headship is one of omnicompetence: the skilled classroom practitioner plus curriculum leader, plus technical expert, plus all the manifestations associated with being the figurehead.’ (p232)

Even at this initial stage of consideration, the expectation that an individual will possess high levels of ability in a range of skills begins to emerge.

Much research into the differences between leadership and management has taken place since West-Burnham’s. Some of this focuses on what I refer to as ‘outlook distance’. This is how far forward from the current moment in time a school leader is willing or able to look. Cameron and Green (2004) suggest that, ‘if management is all about delivering on current needs, then leadership is all about inventing the future’ (p2). Crow (2007) suggests that even successful management is not leadership, noting that, ‘schools require constant assessment, capacity building, persistent experimentation, and a host of other features that depend on innovative leadership’ (p54). Burgoyne and Williams (2007) view leadership as being concerned more with personal attributes such as vision, creativity, motivation and inspiration whilst management, ‘is more to do with the effective operation of useful routines’ (p3). The distinction between the practical aspects of running a school and the somewhat more abstract abilities required such as ‘vision’ are clear even from the small sample of literature discussed above.

The approach from central government has swung from being concerned with management to leadership. The ‘School Management Task Force’ was set up in 1990 and then ten years later the ‘National College for School Leadership’ came into being. The view of commentators in the 1990s reflected this position with authors such as Southworth (1995) arguing that

the traditional views of leadership and management were still prevalent in primary schools. He suggested that:

‘Leadership tends to be equated with the role of the headteacher who is deemed to be responsible for establishing the overall aims and purposes of the school and for managing the school with the help of the senior management team.’ (p31)

However, in more recent years, government programmes such as ‘Leading From the Middle’, created by the National College for School Leadership in 2003, have supported the notion that leadership should also be devolved to a team drawn more widely from across the school and not remain solely in the domain of the headteacher. MacBeath (2006) suggests that:

‘distributed leadership... is in one sense a pragmatic response to the impossibility of individualistic, or heroic, leadership, but also a recognition that schools cannot build capacity, sustainability, or plan for succession without seeing opportunities for leadership to be dispersed through the school community’ (p199).

Heroic leadership, referred to above, describes a situation where the headteacher attempts to deal with the challenges of their role alone. It has been suggested that there is a role for the ‘hero leader’. For example, in Ylimake *et al.*’s (2007) study of high-poverty Australian schools, they recognise that the heroic leadership model ‘was able to make an early impact’ (p366). They go on, however, to report that ‘distributed leadership was necessary for sustained improvement’ (p366). It seems that both heroic and distributed leadership might make a useful contribution to school improvement, although as with much of the research evidence examined, Ylimake *et al.*’s work was focussed on secondary schools rather than primary. A discussion of distributed leadership follows later in Section 2.2c. Is a balance between leadership and management necessary to support a primary school’s ability to improve within challenging circumstances?

A consideration of the more prominent theories and theorists relating to leadership is outlined below in order to develop understanding of what might be most appropriate for primary schools facing challenging circumstances.

James Burns (1978) might be described as the founder of modern leadership theory. He made a fundamental distinction between transactional and transformational leadership, the former focused on trading certain performance or behaviour for something in return and the latter on enabling change. These are discussed in Sections 2.2a and 2.2b.

Total Quality Management (TQM) has a strong influence on leadership practices in education although it was originally created for the world of business to help companies such as Ford and Xerox improve the quality of their products and services (Sosik and Dionne, 1997). TQM was conceptualised by Edward Deming (1986) and included 14 principles that were later organised by Waldman (1993) into five factors defining the actions of effective leaders: change agency, teamwork, trust-building, continuous improvement and eradication of short-term goals. Deming was critical of the short-term and often numerical goals advocated by those favouring the MBO (Management By Objectives) approach articulated by Peter Drucker (1974). It is the presence of 'change agency', however, that will be returned to later on as it resonates most closely with organisations viewed as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) (discussed in relation to Complexity Theory in Chapter 8) and the leadership most appropriate for these. Change agency is the ability of a leader to stimulate change in an organisation through analysis of the need for change, identification and removal of the barriers to change, creation of a shared understanding of the need, and formulation of plans and structures that enable change to happen. The necessity for change is inherent in organisations requiring improvement and will be considered in Chapter 4 as part of the third literature review.

Servant leadership moves away from theories such as transactional leadership in that it emphasises the desire to help others rather than exert control over them. As a theory it is attributed to Robert Greenleaf (1970). Due to the nurturing role assumed by the servant leader, critical skills

include listening, conflict resolution and understanding. Although it has not been widely accepted as a comprehensive leadership theory, it is acknowledged as a key component by other leadership theorists.

Effective headteachers' practices can be linked to aspects of Situational Leadership. The theory is associated with the work of Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard (Blanchard and Hersey, 1996; Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, 2001) and proposes that leaders adapt their leadership according to the willingness and ability of followers to perform specific tasks. Four resulting styles of leadership are required, 'telling', 'participating', 'selling' and 'delegating', and the leader is skilled in each of these as well as in recognising which is required in any given situation. The work of Ronald Heifetz (1994) and Marty Linsky (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002a, 2002b) also emphasises the need for leaders to adapt according to the situation. The distinctions they make are between three types of situation that leaders might encounter; those in which typical solutions will suffice (Type I), those where new solutions must be sought (Type II) and those requiring a shift in the organisation's beliefs and values (Type III). Michael Fullan (1991, 1993, 2001a, 2001b) has focused on leadership for change, drawing extensively on research within education. His research is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Other authors have focused their attention on the personal qualities and attributes of effective leaders. James Collins (2001) considered what he termed Level 5 leaders, including in his list of their characteristics, honesty in looking at their organisations and intense commitment to doing what matters most regardless of the difficulty. Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton (2001) identify 34 signature 'talents' or 'strengths' that individuals might possess while Stephen Covey (1989) posits seven behaviours that generate positive results in a range of situations. Detailed in his book, 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People', they include, being proactive, seeking first to understand and then be understood, and synergising in order to capitalise on combined efforts.

Kathleen Cotton (2003) identified, from her narrative review, 25 categories of headteacher behaviour that positively affect student achievement, attitude and behaviour. There is significant overlap between this

comprehensive list and others already mentioned. Again, those resonating particularly with leadership of Complex Adaptive Systems are noteworthy as they support the notion that leadership of such organisations encompasses what is already known to be effective. Visibility and accessibility, as well as communication and interaction, parent and community outreach and involvement, shared leadership, collaboration, and support of risk taking are those that directly support the management of networks and the enabling of change (explained and discussed further in Chapter 8). Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) identified a similar overall list in their quantitative synthesis of research, determining that those factors exerting the greatest influence on student outcomes were, in order of significance:

- situational awareness
- flexibility
- outreach
- monitoring and evaluation
- discipline (protecting teachers from factors that detract from teaching)
- change agent
- culture (fostering shared beliefs and cooperation) and
- input (involving teachers in design and implementation of important decisions and policies).

They term these behaviours 'responsibilities' stating that, 'they are, or at least should be, standard operating procedures for effective headteachers' and also recognise that, 'perhaps this wide array of behaviours explains why it is so difficult to be an effective school leader' (p62). Not all studies have concluded the positive relationship between leadership and pupil outcomes, however. Witziers, Bosker and Kruger (2003) for example, examined studies across the decade leading to 1996 and concluded that 'the tie between leadership and student achievement is weak' (p418) although they do acknowledge that the indirect influence is stronger.

It seems clear from the research discussed in the above section that leadership has been considered in great detail over time. However, little of the research takes place in primary schools faced with challenging

circumstances and this is therefore a focus for this research. What forms of leadership support primary schools facing challenging circumstances to successfully change? Are there links between particular types of leadership and either success or failure?

The following four sections (2.2a – 2.2d) discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of particular types of leadership that have been identified in schools. This allows for consideration of whether each might be appropriate in primary schools facing challenging circumstances and what evidence in the research data might suggest their presence.

### **2.2a Transactional Leadership**

Transactional leadership operates on the principle of exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1971). In education settings this might involve the exchange of particular pieces of work, support or adaptability from staff members with promotion, recognition or higher levels of resourcing from leaders. Headteachers have authority arising from the position they hold and they require the co-operation of staff so an exchange may secure benefits for both parties. The short-coming of this is that it does not engage staff beyond the immediate gains arising from the transaction so there is potentially no sustainability and longer term commitment arising directly from this form of leadership.

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when the Western economy began to experience change, challenge and instability, it seems that transactional leadership was insufficient for coping with these high levels of uncertainty. An essential function of leadership was then identified as the need to generate commitment to change from a workforce by providing a vision for workers and tapping into the deeper levels of staff motivation such as their beliefs and cultures. Changes in the private sector were rapidly mirrored in education with reductions in capital resourcing and increased pressure on teachers for greater levels of student performance accountability. The traditional and rational transactional leadership was no longer viewed as appropriate and a move towards the new, and socially driven, transformational leadership followed. It therefore seems unlikely that transactional leadership alone will be identified as successful in promoting

positive change in primary schools facing challenging circumstances. If identified, it might be indicative of a less-developed style of leadership.

## **2.2b Transformational Leadership**

All transformational approaches to leadership share in common the fundamental aim that leaders foster in their colleagues capacity development and higher levels of personal commitment to the goals of the organisation. The nature of relationships between leaders and participants is based less on the exchange model associated with transactional leadership and more on the shared transformation of the organisation, with leaders acting as catalysts for change (Collins, 1999).

Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) note that there are both academic and practical origins of transformational leadership. Downton's (1973) study of rebel leadership is often cited as the beginning of academic interest in, and systematic inquiry about, transformational leadership in non-school organisations. However, charisma, often considered an integral part of transformational leadership, has its origins in the work of Max Weber (1947). Burns (1978) argues that transformational leaders appeal to the personal goals and values of the colleagues in their organisation and work both to elevate and transform these goals and values in the collective interest. The reality is that transformational leadership has assumed a dominant position in how both theorists and researchers frame successful leadership.

Transformational leadership seems to fit well with school improvement as it is concerned with a vision-driven, values-based, structural, cultural and systemic change in an organisation. These attributes have also been identified within education leadership as effective (DfES, 2004b; Southworth, 1995; Fullan, 2001a; Marzano *et al.*, 2005). It is achieved through 'elevating participants' interests' (Bass, 1990, p21) and empowering them through shared ownership of developments that involve rich communication, commitment, positive example and enthusiasm (Stewart, 1990; Coleman, 1994; Morrison, 1998). Transformational leadership is 'inspirational, motivating and stimulating' (Barling *et al.*, 2000, p157) but does rely on the 'charisma of the leader and willingness of

followers to participate' (Burns, 1978, p38). Some research evidence relating to transformational leadership is drawn from educational contexts. Harris (2000, p83) suggests that transformational leaders in schools manage the culture as well as the structure of their contexts. Culture has already been identified within the literature as significant to a school's ability to change (MacGilchrist *et al.*, 2004). The strength of transformational leadership is in its potential for effectiveness. However, its delivery is ultimately reliant on the abilities of the leader.

Transformational leadership can be described through the 'Four I's' (Sosik and Dionne, 1997), four factors identified by Bass (1985) as characteristic of this type of leader. 'Individual consideration' is the leader's ability to consider the need for success and personal development of each person, 'intellectual stimulation' includes the search for new ideas in response to problems, being innovative and responding positively to new challenges, 'inspirational motivation' is the ability to communicate high expectations and inspire people to change and, 'idealised influence' is the possession of the charisma and vision that will galvanise followers. Once again, comparisons can be drawn with research based in education. Leithwood *et al.* (1999) developed the Four 'I's into a model of transformational leadership linked to school organisations that consists of three broad categories of leadership practices: setting goals and directions; developing people; and redesigning the organisation. Links can be seen between these and the core professional leadership and management strategies listed within the National Standards for Headteachers (DfES, 2004b, p4), suggesting that they are both appropriate and relevant for modern school leadership.

There are, however, critics of transformational leadership. They suggest that it is 'simply an enriched version of transactional leadership' (Bass and Avolio, 1994, p3) to which charisma and vision have been added. Transformational leadership still seeks control and compliance from followers suggesting the need to move towards a genuine democratic and distributed leadership model. However, Leithwood *et al.* (2004) counter this with their view that transformational practices can themselves be widely distributed throughout an organisation; one does not exclude the other.



In conclusion, it seems that transformational leadership offers one form that might be effective in supporting school improvement. Does transformational leadership result in improvement in primary schools facing challenging circumstances? This discussion is extended as part of the Complexity Theory literature review in Chapter 8.

### **2.2c Distributed Leadership**

As mentioned in the previous section, distributed leadership is a further form identified in organisations, including schools. A number of authors have recognised the value of distributed leadership in schools (Hallinger, 2003; Harris, 2010; Hickman, 2010; Lindahl, 2007; Morrison, 2002; Ylimake *et al.*, 2007) and the extent to which the capacity for leadership can and should be developed more widely in order to strengthen performance and reduce the burden on the organisation's leader. That is not to suggest that in a school the role of the headteacher is redundant but rather that 'it is not the leader but the leadership that is the key' (Hickman, 2010, p252). The combination of the individual leader's role and the contribution of a wider team, a 'hybrid' (Gronn, 2010), is required. Leithwood *et al.* (2004) concluded that, 'neither top-down nor distributed leadership is sufficient, and for large-scale reform to be successful both must be provided in a coordinated form' (p58).

Distributed leadership has been defined by Harris (2010) as, 'the expansion of leadership roles in schools, beyond those in formal or administrative posts'. Evidence of the positive impact that distributed leadership practices have on student outcomes is emerging. Leithwood *et al.*'s (2006) widely cited 'seven strong claims' about successful school leadership include two relating to distributed leadership; firstly school leadership has a greater influence when it is widely distributed and secondly some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.

The skill of the headteacher is being willing and able to distribute leadership 'knowing to whom, when and for what purposes' (Lindahl, 2007, p328), finding 'an appropriate balance between solo and distributed leadership' (Bush and Glover, 2012, p34) reinforcing the notion that response by a headteacher needs to be specific to the context.

Day *et al.* (2009) identify that successful school leaders:

‘improve teaching and learning and thus pupil outcomes indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, teaching practices and through developing teachers’ capacities for leadership’ (p2).

One approach to the distribution of leadership favoured in recent years has been the manifestation of Senior Leadership Teams (SLT). In primary schools this often comprises the headteacher, deputy headteacher and core subject leaders such as those for English and mathematics or the person who leads on assessment or Special Educational Needs within the school. There is a growing move, however, to make membership of a leadership team flexible in order to capitalise on the range of skills and expertise within a school staff. The National College for School Leadership (2009, p13) reported that ‘success is being delivered by effective well-led teams where leadership is distributed across an increasing variety of roles’. It is recognised within the existing research (Bush *et al.*, 2010; Bush and Glover, 2012) however, that effective teams require time to develop and do not represent a ‘quick fix’. The weaknesses of distributed leadership are not limited to time constraints. An additional problem within primary schools in particular is the limited number of individuals that it is possible to engage in leadership responsibilities without diminishing their potential impact in the classroom. This issue is returned to as part of the Complexity Theory literature review (Chapter 8).

Even when the outward appearance suggests that leadership is being devolved, there are differing degrees to which this might be happening. Penlington, Kington and Day (2008) citing Day *et al.* (2007, p14-15) provide an example of this:

‘Some headteachers distributed leadership so that other leaders were responsible, or at least had a significant voice in decisions about what happened within the school. Other headteachers retained a much closer hold on decision-making, with the effect that responsibility and authority was

not as widely distributed within the school. These two forms of distributed leadership have been referred to as 'decisional distribution' and 'consultative distribution'.' (p70)

There is an acknowledgement within the literature that the devolution of leadership should still be guided by the overall 'vision' that the headteacher possesses for the development of their organisation. Lindahl (2007) suggests that development, 'requires leaders who can help others to become contributing forces toward that vision' (p328). Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) state that, 'leaders who inspire move people with a compelling vision and shared mission' (p255).

It seems from the discussion above that the presence of an individual leader and distributed forms of leadership in some combination is desirable. For primary schools facing challenging circumstances, this has not been a focus within existing research. Therefore, is a balance between individual and distributed leadership effective in primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

## **2.2d Invitational Leadership**

Invitational leadership is about the headteacher providing everyone in the organisation with the opportunity to contribute to leadership that will move the organisation forward. The uniqueness and strengths of individuals are recognised and capitalised upon. Novak (2005) states:

'Invitational leadership is built on the guiding ideal that education is fundamentally an imaginative act of hope and this hope is communicated through persistent, resourceful and courageous practices ... the role of invitational leaders is to encourage, sustain and extend the contexts in which imaginative acts of hope thrive.' (p44)

In schools facing challenging circumstances the loss of hope is arguably the single biggest obstacle to harnessing the commitment and energies of staff to make the leap of faith and embrace the opportunity to change their organisation for the better. Whilst replacing staff members is one option,

releasing the potential of existing staff through empowerment to influence the direction of improvements should not be dismissed. It would, however, require skilful invitational leadership. Changes of this nature can represent cultural shifts in schools where there has been a history of 'command-and-control' leadership. The foundations of invitational leadership identified by Novak (2005, p45) include the notions that a democratic ethos is required, where all people matter and respect and trust are therefore paramount, and that people value their own experiences and are seeking to improve them through a collective approach. A consideration of invitational leadership might contribute to a greater understanding of primary schools facing challenging circumstances and their improvement or decline.

### **2.2e Concluding Comments**

There has been an acknowledgement in recent years that the role of school leaders is not straightforward or easily defined. Ball (2008) says of New Labour's 'transformational leaders' that they:

'are expected to instil responsiveness, efficiency and performance improvement into the public sector but also to be dynamic, visionary, risk-taking, entrepreneurial individuals who can 'turn around' histories of 'failure' deploying their personal qualities in so doing' (p140).

More recently, the newly appointed Head of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, who famously turned around a failing school in one of the most deprived parts of London into the now flourishing Mossbourne Academy reported that:

'I was rapped over the knuckles for saying good leadership is about power and ego, but that's what the independent [school] sector has, very powerful figures who resist government interference and won't do anything that won't benefit their school. We need those slightly maverick figures who know what they believe in and fight for it. Do we need empire builders? Yes, we do.' (The Telegraph, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2010)

As will be discussed further in Section 2.2f (i), existing literature suggests that no one type of leadership is appropriate permanently in a school so it is an examination of the dynamics of leadership therefore that presents an area for further research. The discussion relating to appropriate types of leadership for schools facing challenging circumstances is extended as part of the literature review and theoretical consideration of Complexity Theory (Chapters 8 and 9).

### **2.2f Effective leadership**

The previous sections have established the existence of a range of types of leadership within organisations, including schools. This section explores the qualities that leaders possess and the extent to which they are essential and/or desirable across the leadership types.

There is growing evidence to support the view that effective leadership is critical to improving a range of outcomes for pupils including attainment and achievement (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Marzano *et al.*, 2005; Robinson, 2007). So if it is crucial to have effective leadership, what are the features of this leadership that give it its strength?

The Ofsted Framework emphasises the vital connection between what leaders do and what happens in the classroom:

'Effective headteachers provide a clear vision and sense of direction for the school. They prioritise. They focus the attention of staff on what is important and do not let them get diverted and sidetracked with initiatives that will have little impact on the work of pupils. They know what is going on in their classrooms. They have a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses of their staff. They know how to build on the strengths and reduce the weaknesses. They can focus their programme of staff development on the real needs of their staff and school.' (Ofsted, 2001, p1)

Following that, in 2004 the government published the National Standards for Headteachers (DfES) in which they identified what they saw as the core professional leadership and management practices. These are sorted into the following six non-hierarchical sections.

- *'Shaping the Future;*
- *Leading Learning and Teaching;*
- *Developing Self and Working with Others;*
- *Managing the Organisation;*
- *Securing Accountability;*
- *Strengthening Community.'* (DfES, 2004b, p4)

In a more recent government publication, 'Making Great Progress' (DfES, 2007), the Department for Education and Skills looked at schools that had seen children making greater than expected progress and drew out from them some common characteristics which the leaders in those schools were found to possess. These can be summarised as: (i) heads see themselves as the **headteacher**; (ii) senior leaders are close to the learning; (iii) heads retain their energy and enthusiasm; (iv) an absolute and sustained focus on improving standards; (v) established systems allowing time to think and act strategically and innovatively; (vi) a confident and assured style of leadership; (vii) passion for order and thoroughness; (viii) organising a team around functions rather than status; (ix) the forging of strong, professional relationships; (x) doing jobs that need to be done (summarised from p10-12).

Unlike the previous publications, this one was restricted to research in successful schools rather than across the broader spectrum of all schools. Although there are similarities, it is interesting to note that successful headteachers were found to maintain strong links with teaching and learning in the classroom. The presence of established systems and teams completing tasks suggests that time could be freed up for the headteacher to engage with learning and teaching and thus the school's success could potentially be perpetuated.

One of the crucial abilities that a headteacher needs to demonstrate, and listed within the Making Great Progress features, is that of interrogation and interpretation of statistical information. Whilst softer indicators of children's performance such as behaviour for learning, attitude and creative ability are recognised as important there remains an emphasis on statistical outcomes, requiring schools to engage with data summatively and formatively in order to ensure that children are making appropriate progress based on their starting points. Within the research literature, this view is reinforced by researchers such as Day, Leithwood and Sammons (2008) when they say, 'effective headteachers use and ensure that staff adopt evidence-based approaches to the use of assessment data' (p90) particularly employing a broad range of strategies in this regard within challenging circumstances and in 'schools in highly-disadvantaged contexts' (p92). While this final piece of research refers specifically to difficult situations, much of the previous commentary relates to already successful organisations. Is the ability of a school's leadership to utilise data influential in the improvement efforts of primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

In a research report looking at the impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes, Day *et al.* (2009) state:

'Data were used extensively to inform changes in teaching and learning. Pupil data were used to scrutinise performance and to plan appropriate teaching strategies. The use of data to identify and support the progress of students who were not reaching their potential and/or who were disaffected was also high on the agenda.' (p119)

It seems that an ability to use data can support the headteacher and other leaders in securing accountability for pupil outcomes, an important aspect of staff performance management. Duke and Salmonowicz (2010) identify personnel matters as being one of the most difficult aspects of a headteacher's role. They state:

'It is hard to imagine a low-performing school without personnel issues. If teachers are keys to student success,

they also must share responsibility for student failure.  
When a school has been designated for a turnaround initiative, it is likely that at least some of the staff have not been doing all they could do to promote effective learning.’  
(p52)

Other authors have written about the traits of successful school leaders. Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008) claim that, ‘almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices’ (p36). They go on to divide these into four categories, ‘building vision and setting directions; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organisation; and managing the teaching and learning programme’. They then describe some further attributes that effective leaders in challenging circumstances often possess, including open-mindedness, flexibility within a system of core values, resilience and optimism. Cameron and Green (2004) add to this list the need for leaders to be ‘awake and aware’, stating that, ‘the notion of peripheral vision is key ... having an awareness of what is going on at the edges, and being observant about motion and change’ (p267).

Effective leaders are able to manage the tensions and dilemmas (Berlak and Berlak, 1981) that present situations with varying degrees of potential for control. It seems that little influence or control is possible where tensions such as external imposition of initiatives or scrutiny exist whereas dilemmas offer a greater degree of ‘wriggle room’ in terms of the choices headteachers make relating to possible courses of action. Dilemmas in primary schools could be exemplified through the role of a teaching head in a small school where the commitment to direct classroom practice vies for the individual’s time with the more strategic leadership role.

Glatter (2009) takes the description of characteristics one step further suggesting that effective leaders not only have particular knowledge or skills, they also possess what he terms ‘higher order capacities’ which he proposes are, ‘reading the situation’, ‘balanced judgement’, ‘intuition (not just hunch but tested against stored memory and ordered experience)’ and ‘political acumen’. It seems that these are valuable traits but it is the ability to apply them which provides the ‘acid test’ of good leadership.



To conclude, leadership traits are not simply a list of skills and knowledge which can be acquired by an individual in order to enhance their ability to lead. As far as headship is concerned, the test for their presence in an individual might be considered to be the once mandatory, in England, gaining of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Headteachers are then thrust into the circumstances of a particular context and expected to apply these attributes to lead a school forward.

The final outcomes will be the best indicator of leadership effectiveness. Fullan (2001b) states that, 'the litmus test of all leadership is whether it mobilizes people's commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things' (p9) but it is unlikely to be leadership in isolation from other factors that results in improvements and this notion will be returned to in Chapter 8 examining Complexity Theory.

In conclusion, it seems from the available literature that effective school leaders do indeed possess a range of common characteristics. To what extent are leadership characteristics already identified as appropriate in successful organisations, present, necessary and effective in leaders of primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

#### 2.2f (i) What is it that effective leaders actually do with the skills they possess?

Day, Leithwood and Sammons (2008) describe the process which effective headteachers undertake to effect change as involving an ability to:

*'... diagnose (needs), differentiate (in levels of importance and timing of strategies to meet these) and actively coordinate these strategies.'* (p87)

Glatter (2009) follows his description of the 'higher order capacities', outlined earlier, with further explanation:

'Knowledge – for example of models of leadership and of social and legal contexts – and skills are clearly important but the higher order capacities are crucial in enabling the

knowledge and skills to be applied appropriately in the complex situations in which school leaders find themselves daily.’ (p227)

The implication is not that every situation requires different practices but that successful leaders, ‘apply contextually sensitive combinations of the basic leadership practices’ (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008, p31). This reinforces the view that it is not the possession of the skills and attributes that makes individuals effective leaders but rather an ability to apply these characteristics in the correct combination and balance and that this requires an ability to judge each unique set of circumstances based on what Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) have termed its ‘context specificity’. Marzano *et al.* (2005) draw attention to the link between the extent to which leaders are able to adapt their leadership behaviour to particular situations and their level of comfort with disturbing the status quo, the leadership responsibility they term ‘flexibility’ (p60). More recently Glatter (2009) identified that current contextual trends will require effective school leaders to possess, ‘the ability to live with uncertainty and learn from mistakes, agility, adaptability, preparedness to distribute leadership, work across boundaries and build trusting relationships’ (p226). Is a leader’s ability to respond to ‘context specificity’ influential within primary schools that are faced with challenges?

#### 2.2f (ii) The OCTET project as an example

Research conducted in schools facing challenging circumstances has not so far been a focus of this review of literature. The OCTET project appears to be the closest example, in terms of a consideration of leadership in those situations, to what this research seeks to investigate. It is therefore outlined below.

The OCTET project looked at the features of eight secondary schools which had in their fairly recent past improved dramatically within an environment of challenging circumstances. Writing about the findings of that project, Harris, James, Gunraj, Clarke and Harris (2006) reported that:

'... the OCTET heads displayed people-centred leadership in their day-to-day dealings with individuals. Their behaviour with others was premised upon respect and trust and their belief in developing the potential of staff and students commonly held. Their ability to invite others to share and develop their vision was frequently commented upon by staff and students alike. Alongside these qualities, however, were examples of heads being firm (in relation to values, expectations and standards) and, on occasion, taking very tough decisions, for example initiating competency proceedings against teachers who consistently under-performed. These heads did not gently cajole staff and students towards success but recognized that balancing pressure and support while building positive relationships was of prime importance. In many respects the way they interacted with others was the common denominator of their success. The human qualities they possessed enabled them to lead others effectively and to establish confidence in others that their vision was worth sharing.' (p122)

The improvements in these schools did not, however, happen by chance. MacBeath *et al.* (2007) suggest that:

'One of the distinguishing features of this 'Octet', as they came to be known, was that they had not resigned themselves to a hopeless future. They were judged to be schools that with visionary leadership could be turned round, offering wider lessons that could be learned about improvement, even in the most apparently hopeless of places.' (p59)

These two quotes alone serve to demonstrate that it would be difficult to define either the type of leadership or the specific attributes possessed by those leaders too narrowly. It reinforces the woven nature of the role and the need for balance between seemingly opposing responsibilities dependent upon the specific context and over time.

This particular research is limited in that it relates only to secondary schools and within that group only to those that were identified as initially low-performing rather than facing any other challenging circumstances. It is, however, important because it reinforces that the qualities of leadership already discussed were recognised as influential in improving these particular schools. A further difference between the Octet research and the specific situation forming the initial context for this study is the stage at which the study was completed. The Octet research took place only in situations where improvement had already occurred whereas this study will be happening during the period of challenging circumstances, where improvement is not assured.

#### **Summary of issues raised**

For primary schools facing challenging circumstances:

- What are the relative influences of a range of challenging circumstances and what impact do combinations of these factors have?
- Is it possible to improve against a backdrop of different challenging circumstances?
- Is a lack of acceptance of a need for change influential in subsequent improvement or decline?
- To what extent do schools focus on teaching and learning and does improvement result?
- How effective is external support and is over-reliance detrimental to improvement?
- Is a balance between leadership and management necessary to support a school's ability to improve?
- What forms of leadership support schools to successfully change?
- Are there links between particular types of leadership and either success or failure?
- Does transformational leadership result in improvement?
- Is a balance between individual and distributed leadership effective?

- Is the ability of a school's leadership to utilise data influential in improvement efforts?
- To what extent are leadership characteristics, already identified as appropriate in successful organisations, present, necessary and effective in leaders of primary schools facing challenging circumstances?
- Is a leader's ability to respond to 'context specificity' influential?



## **Chapter 3**

### **Literature Review 2:**

#### ***Exploring Origins, Evolution, Influences and Potential Threats***

### **3.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter the different types of leadership and attributes associated with effective practice were discussed. This chapter refines further that consideration to include the way that the role of a headteacher in particular is arrived at and how it potentially evolves over time. Having considered those aspects of leadership that are directly related to the headteacher's role, the literature review next seeks to examine some of the wider influences that are potentially relevant and/or pose threats to the effectiveness of primary schools facing challenging circumstances. This begins more internally with the governing body and then moves beyond the school to consider sources of external support and the centralised aspects of test results and Ofsted. Consideration of literature relating to these associated factors is used to provide insight into those aspects it might be important to examine in practice. Some sections are brief but this is to enable coverage of a broad range.

#### **3.1a Recruitment and Retention**

Closely associated with the issues surrounding the quality of a school's leadership is that of recruitment and retention of staff. Whilst this is problematic at all levels within a school, from support staff such as a caretaker and midday supervisory assistants, through teachers and learning support assistants to members of the senior leadership team, it would seem to be particularly crucial for a school to be able to appoint an appropriate headteacher to lead the organisation. This section considers those factors currently influencing schools' difficulties with this aspect of their work, and whether the issues are intensified in places where they are already faced with other challenging circumstances.

'There is a war for talent. This is the McKinsey thesis in their book of that title (Michaels *et al.*, 2001). It depicts a corporate world in which exceptional leaders are hard to find and holding on to gifted managers and executives is the major challenge facing business sustainability. The McKinsey thesis finds a close parallel in the recruitment and retention 'crisis' in school leadership, now the subject of a



substantive literature, much speculation, considerable media interest, and a growing corpus of empirical data.’  
(MacBeath, 2006, p183)

The educational press has reported a decreasing supply in the United Kingdom of school leaders (Ward, 2004; Griffiths, 2005; Shaw, 2006). This situation has also been recognised by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) (2006a, 2006b, 2007) and in annual reports on the state of the labour market for senior staff in schools in England and Wales (Howson, 2007, 2010).

The British Government’s 2010 White Paper, ‘The Case for Change’, reported that 59% of headteachers across the Country are aged 50 and over and one in four are due to retire during the next three years. The ‘demand’ for headteachers is increasing as a result of this significant ‘retirement bulge’ (IPPR, 2002; LDR, 2004; Ward, 2004) what the National College for School Leadership describes as a ‘demographic time bomb’ (2006b, p5) where a growing number of individuals are seeking ‘early retirement’ (Kruger *et al.*, 2005). These are just two factors contributing to the difficulty in recruiting and retaining leaders in schools. The issue of increased demand for headteachers is exacerbated by the decrease in supply as many middle leaders and deputies do not wish to progress to headship (Draper and McMichael, 2003; Thomson *et al.*, 2003; Barty *et al.*, 2005; Hayes, 2005; Shaw, 2006; MacBeath, 2011). In the United Kingdom it has been estimated that this position applies to 43% of incumbent deputies and 70% of current middle leaders (NCSL, 2006b). Smithers and Robinson (2007) reported that in three quarters of English and Welsh primary schools, teachers with the qualities to become a headteacher did not want the job. MacBeath (2011) highlights the phenomenon of ‘career deputies’ suggesting that they are ‘people who do not want the stress, workload, external accountability and ultimate authority for success or failure in a high stakes policy environment’ (p105).

In January 2010 re-advertisements exceeded a third of the total number of headship posts advertised in the United Kingdom (Howson, 2010), highlighting another costly and time-consuming issue for schools unable to recruit during the first and sometimes subsequent rounds of the process.

The role of a headteacher is continually changing and is not necessarily one to which individuals aspire. Smithers and Robinson (2007) reported that English headteachers could think of 58 types of externally imposed extra demands but no examples of tasks taken from them within the previous two years. They suggested that the position is seen as requiring commitment above and beyond what is reasonable for a career, with responsibility not only for the lives and futures of youngsters, but also those of adults and often crumbling buildings, onerous bureaucracy and challenging contextual circumstances too. In human resource management (HRM) terms, Coleman and Earley (2005) draw attention to the worldwide trend of decentralising the management of schools that has also moved the responsibility for managing people to the institutional level. Brundrett, Rhodes and Gkolia (2006) explain that:

‘This involves getting the right people in place to do the job (staffing the organisation), making sure the job is done well (performance management) and supporting their ability to achieve organisational goals and promotion (development and succession). Leadership supply remains a vital element in the life of any school. The appointment of individuals to leadership positions within schools has potentially profound implications, not only for those individuals, but also for their colleagues and the schools in which they work.’ (p260)

The standards and standardisation agenda may also have contributed to the decrease in the number of applications for headship positions (Fink and Brayman, 2006; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). A group of Australian researchers (Thomson *et al.*, 2003) examined news articles from Australia, the UK and the USA relating to the explanations for the perceived ‘recruitment crisis’ in school headships. They found two extremes, one where individuals saw the role as giving rise to ‘sleepless nights, heart attacks, and sudden death accountabilities’, and the other where the appointed person is expected to be the ‘saviour principal... who is able to create happy teams of teachers, students, and parents and for whom all reform is possible’ (p128). It seems that at either end of this continuum, application for such a position is unlikely to be a particularly attractive proposition.

Although a complex nexus of personal and professional issues influence an individual's desire to pursue the role of headteacher, national circumstances such as salary levels, local issues such as the support network provided through the local authority, and individual school contexts are of significance. Whatever leads individuals to this decision is contributing to the evaporation of the talent pool.

There is increasing evidence to suggest that high levels of workload and bureaucracy in UK schools serve to deter individuals from aspiring to leadership posts (Draper and McMichael, 2003; Hayes, 2005; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Fink and Brayman, 2006; NCSL, 2006b). Workload is discussed further in Section 3.1c of this chapter. Day (2004) has suggested also that, 'passion has been lost at the hands of over-managerialist approaches' (p430). In the United Kingdom in particular, studies have indicated that poor confidence, fear of assuming a new professional identity, little career advice and the devolution of decision-making to school level prevent some teachers from pursuing or achieving leadership positions (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009; Rhodes *et al.*, 2008; MacBeath, 2006).

As power is pushed down, so too is accountability. Fink and Brayman (2006, p81) suggest that, 'while enjoying more power, school leaders are reporting less room for manoeuvre'. It seems from the literature that dealing with a changing role for headteachers can be viewed in two ways. Some find it a lonely position with impossible exigencies while others view themselves as 'champions' who are keen to put their personal mark on the school but are restricted by the imperative for more distributed forms of leadership. Wallace and Hall (1994) describe the empowerment of other actors diminishing the singular power of the individual leader. Researchers (Bennis, 1997; Surowieki, 2004) have commented on this juxtaposed position where in both situations talent is treated as a quality possessed by individuals rather than potentially as something that may be distributed and shared between people and therefore better defined in the synergy that manifests itself in effective and successful groups.

Rhodes and Brundrett (2009) suggest that talent pool development and leadership succession are influenced by:

‘... the factors of school size, performance, location and reputation. Combinations of these factors can bring about high staff turnover or can alternatively result in staffing stability and low turnover. Whilst not preventing leadership development, both conditions are likely to impact on shorter-term leadership succession planning.’ (p393)

Whatever the factors influencing this position, if the ‘pool’ from which headteachers are being drawn is ever-decreasing, then the supply of suitable applicants for headship appointments is also likely to be shrinking. Left unaddressed, a crisis situation could be reached.

Unplanned headteacher succession can be especially problematic, identified by Leithwood *et al.* (2008) as ‘one of the most common sources of schools’ failure to progress’ (p29). They go on to suggest that appointing a new headteacher is ‘one of the most important strategies for turning around struggling schools’ (p29).

Do multiple factors interact to influence a primary school’s ability to recruit and retain a headteacher? Further, are they significant in those facing challenging circumstances?

### 3.1a (i) Succession planning

The view that schools in challenging circumstances provide good opportunities for leadership development and succession has been challenged. Rhodes *et al.* (2008) conducted a study of succession planning involving 70 schools and reported that ineffective schools with poor reputations in ‘difficult areas’ are perceived to have poor staff retention rates and therefore less good support for leadership development and succession possibilities. School reputation is once again identified as potentially influential.

‘Planning for succession is not just a reactive response to job replacement resulting in fire-fighting staff vacancies; it is about a longer term view based on forward-thinking relating to leadership needs and school development. It assumes

that incumbent leadership is sufficiently skilled to look forward and to bring about the necessary interest and development of staff who have shown talent, potential and an aspiration to develop further in this way.' (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009, p393)

MacBeath (2006) asks the questions, 'Do exceptional leaders grow successful schools?' or, 'Do successful schools grow exceptional leaders?' In the context of schools facing challenging circumstances, especially those where they are deemed to be 'failing', the 'successful school' circumstances do not exist so there becomes a reliance on the appointment of a successful leader to enable the school to move forward. Where a school is made subject to Special Measures by Ofsted, the headteacher taking the school 'in' is rarely the same individual that brings the school 'out', perhaps reflecting their inability, in that particular set of circumstances, to turn the school around.

There is a tension between the search for talent and the creation of talent from within and these themes run through the educational literature. Leadership qualities can be nurtured and grown within schools and can contribute to developments at all levels but it is not necessarily the right thing for a school to promote from within to the position of headteacher. MacBeath (2006) identifies the common theme in the literature as:

'... where there are genuine learning cultures that offer opportunities to lead and allow people the experience of assuming responsibility for others, professional expertise flourishes and hidden talents emerge.' (p201)

Given a national (IPPR, 2002; Hartle and Thomas, 2004; Shaw, 2006) and an international (Fink and Brayman, 2006) shortage of leaders, the notion of pro-activity in 'growing one's own' leaders within schools is rapidly emerging within the UK (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2005, 2006). It would be short-sighted of a school, however, to restrict its search for leadership to within its own organisation. Leaders with the ability to challenge appropriately as well as support through different approaches might only be identified through what MacBeath (2006) describes as 'casting the net

wide'. Michaels *et al.* (2001) conclude that, 'cultivation of the treasure within and seeking the challenge from without are complementary rather than antagonistic strategies' (p16).

The identification of potential talent is as yet an under-researched area of leadership (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2005, 2006; Brundrett *et al.*, 2006) and the extent to which leadership talent can be developed and transferred to new situations is unclear (MacBeath, 2006). It is important that an understanding of this is developed so that appointments to such a crucial role within schools, particularly those facing challenging circumstances, are successful. The influence of succession within a school, particularly to the position of headteacher, is important to investigate further in primary schools facing challenging circumstances and is therefore a focus for this research.

When there are increased numbers of vacancies for headteachers those jobs which are perceived as being more difficult are more likely to be less desirable to many applicants and therefore potentially attract a smaller field for interview. This could in turn reduce the likelihood of recruiting an effective leader, if anyone at all, and once again the problems for schools facing more challenging circumstances are exacerbated. The 'growing' of potential leaders in a localised 'talent pool' could be vital in averting a recruitment crisis.

'This locally based thinking is relevant to all those concerned with ensuring the continued supply and recruitment of high-quality leaders in schools, and represents an essential element in the creation of a vibrant and self-renewing profession.' (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009, p393)

For primary schools facing challenging circumstances it is important to understand those factors that may contribute to their improvement or decline. To what extent are issues associated with recruitment and retention influential in the improvement efforts of primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

### 3.1b Lack of Experience

Following recruitment, the successful candidate taking up the post of headteacher will be doing so with experience of the role that ranges from none to extensive. This section examines the issues associated with the lack of headship experience that a first-time, or sometimes headteachers taking on a second or subsequent position, might have. It includes consideration of how individuals might be prepared for this significant undertaking. The issue has been identified repeatedly within the research literature, for example:

‘I don’t think there was any one thing that made me feel that I was a headteacher, but for the first couple of terms I really felt that I wasn’t me, and I was between opposing ideological or philosophical camps. I was somebody else who was being forced to play a part in a play, and I didn’t have the script...’ Head of an English primary school, 1997.  
(Daresh and Male, 2000, p89)

‘... transition [to headship] ... a *slow but demanding* process of professional growth and personal development.’  
(Kelly and Saunders, 2010, p139)

‘The first 12 months or so of headship constitute a notoriously difficult and demanding time for the neophyte headteacher.’ (Bolam *et al.*, 1995, p35)

Taking on the role of headteacher has been widely acknowledged as difficult. Hess (2003) has suggested that it is related to the range of new skills required for the twenty-first century and that traditional preparation programmes ‘do not equip candidates for these challenges’ (p1), whilst MacBeath (2006, p195) recognises that first-time headteachers might feel isolated, particularly during the early stages following appointment.

Whatever the circumstances surrounding appointment to the role of headteacher there is likely to be a period of turbulence for that individual. It is necessary for the appointee to learn not only about the new role but also

the context within which it is set; referred to in the literature as professional and organisational socialisation (Greenfield, 1985). Professional socialisation might occur during the period leading up to appointment when an individual is consciously preparing to make such a career move. Kelly and Saunders (2010) draw on the work of others summarising that:

‘Motivation for headship appears to develop, typically, during the period of extensive (and almost subconscious) professional orientation prior to securing a post, and this orientation period seems to be part of a process of ‘anticipatory socialisation’, whereby post-holders prepare themselves, overtly or covertly, by gathering social and technical experiences to qualify them for the job (Taylor, 1968; Greenfield, 1985; Eraut, 1994).’ (p131)

There are circumstances, however, which lead to the taking on of the role of headteacher without an individual having made a conscious decision to do so, such as, when a deputy headteacher is required to take on an acting headship unexpectedly and sometimes for an extended period of time. What is the impact, if any, of enforced first-time headship responsibility, on a school’s ability to improve?

Professional socialisation can involve the gaining of a relevant qualification, for example, in England the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Crow (2007) identifies that, irrespective of which school, professional socialisation provides, ‘the knowledge, skills and values that an individual will need to carry out the headship’ (p52). Organisational socialisation is specific to the particular context and circumstances of the school where a headteacher is to take on the role. Crow highlights the possible tension between the two forms of socialisation stating that, ‘professional socialisation may emphasise change, innovation and reform, while the organisational encourages stability, maintenance of the status quo, and tradition’ (p52).

During the initial stages of their first-time headships, Kelly and Saunders (2010) identify that for headteachers there is, ‘a degree of initial shock about the relentless demand to address a range of pressing issues of



unexpected complexity' (p140) which are often not those highlighted during any previous training. They go on to highlight the issues of 'looking in', dealing with internal matters before considering longer-term strategic ones, and time-management, problematic particularly where distributed leadership is not established. So, do the relentless demands of the initial stages of headship influence the improvement capacity of primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

### 3.1b (i) Training and preparation for headship

In England the government has demonstrated its conviction that there is value to pre-service headteacher training through its funding of the NPQH. Bush (2008) supports this view, stating that, 'it seems only reasonable that heads should undertake specific preparation for the role' (p307). There are those, however, who value this less, suggesting instead that it is a more extensive process. Duke (1987) states:

'School leaders do not emerge from training programmes fully prepared and effective. Their development is a more ... incremental process, beginning as early as their own schooling and extending through their first years in the job. Becoming a school leader is an ongoing process of socialisation.' (p261)

A better technical knowledge and awareness of a range of the possible challenges to be faced might be gained, along with a clarification of expectations and an opportunity to consider prioritisation of tasks to be completed, through training, both before and immediately after appointment to a headship. But the job, by its very nature, is unpredictable, complex and at times undoubtedly difficult and no amount of training, however good it is, could prepare an individual for every aspect of this. Weindling and Dimmock (2006) suggest that, 'living the experience' (p337) is the most valuable learning.

It seems from the literature that some training is a necessary part of the preparation for headship but that this should be balanced with on-the-job experience. What balance between pre-service training and on-the-job

experience is appropriate for headteachers appointed to primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

### 3.1b (ii) Influence of the previous headteacher

The influence of a previous headteacher, series of headteachers or leadership team should not be underestimated. Research relating to this aspect of schools focuses almost exclusively on situations where the influence is negative. In some schools there might be a very positive legacy which can be further built upon by the incoming headteacher. The 'old head' might be leaving to take up tenure in a new school, having decided that they have reached the limit of what it is possible for them to achieve in their current school and leaving the way open for someone with a 'fresh pair of eyes' to move the school forward. However, in other schools the previous leadership has had a lasting negative impact. This is not a small-scale problem, with Bolam *et al.* (1995) identifying that:

'One of the most pressing problems, reported by about 64 per cent of new headteachers, concerned the practice and style of their predecessor.' (p35)

Weindling (1992, p334) termed this the 'shadow of principals past' which seems aptly to describe the leadership legacy which some new headteachers have to overcome. As suggested above, there have in some circumstances been not just one but a series of headteachers whose leadership practices need unravelling. Morrison (2002) warns that 'a school who neglects the significance of the past risks overlooking a key variable in the successful management of the school' (p18).

Crow (2007) identifies potential negative influences of the outgoing headteacher as:

- 'poor relationships with the LEA or diocese;
- poor relationships with staff;
- insensitivity to the school context;
- rift between the governing body and the headteacher;

- conflict with parents over student discipline; and
- the leadership styles of these headteachers' (p60).

An additional problem can arise if a previous headteacher has denied the senior staff the opportunities that would develop their leadership. The repertoire of skills on which they draw when promoted becomes more limited. Kelly and Saunders (2010) confirm the importance of this provision reporting from their study that new headteachers were better prepared for their role where they had had 'the opportunities to broaden and deepen management and administrative knowledge prior to taking up post' (p139). When faced with challenging circumstances, to what extent is a primary school's headship history influential in determining its ability to improve?

### 3.1b (iii) Headteacher mentors

One way of providing support for the development needs of a newly-appointed first-time headteacher is through a mentor, usually a serving headteacher with a number of years experience and a proven 'track record' of leading school improvements. Under the original government scheme, a good definition of the role of the mentor was provided by the Welsh Consortium as 'a process of (peer) support' which is intended 'to get beyond anecdote and sympathy into development'. They went on to define the main purpose as being, 'to help newly appointed headteachers to manage the transition into headship in a non-judgemental way.'

As with all continuing professional development (CPD) provision, mentoring is not always viewed positively. Where the relationship between the mentor and mentee does not develop as intended, the new headteacher could come to view the visits as another layer of bureaucracy which has to be dealt with. However, following research completed by Bolam *et al.* (1995), they summarise positive responses to support from a mentor.

'By the nature of the job, a head is alone and is unlikely to divulge 'failures' to colleagues. To have someone who is in, or has been in, a similar situation, is sympathetic, trustworthy and supportive, is invaluable.' (p37)

So, within the context of primary schools facing challenging circumstances, is the role of a headteacher mentor useful and/or effective in supporting improvement?

### 3.1b (iv) Headteacher as the leader of learning, change and people

These three aspects of a headteacher's role are considered together as they all relate to the change in relative position that is associated with promotion to headship. Being the 'leader of learning' is a different role to being an effective classroom practitioner. As James and Connolly (2000) identify, however, 'being a credible practitioner is important for the authority of educational managers' (p88). Although effective personal practice is an obvious advantage, the leading role requires a headteacher to identify in others their developmental needs and put in place structures and strategies to help each individual move forward. The role can involve skills of coaching and mentoring, rather than pure demonstration, and also the identification of others who could also lead aspects of this work.

The notion of a modern headteacher's role as the 'head' *teacher* is not to take away a recognition that the role has changed dramatically over the past two decades. Ten years ago, Daresh and Male (2000) identified that the outcome of these changes:

'... has been to increase the responsibility of the headteacher whose job has been transformed towards the image of the 'Chief Executive' rather than the 'Leading Professional' end of the continuum of role descriptions.'  
(p91)

In many English primary schools the number of staff is small so it is vital that the headteacher is at least able to direct developments in learning and teaching. In larger institutions this could perhaps be delegated although in schools facing challenging circumstances, the delegation to colleagues of developments in learning and teaching is not always a possibility; it could be suggested that it is because they lack expertise in the classroom, or the ability to develop practice, that the school has found itself in such difficulties.

In previous roles, first-time headteachers may have led developments within their schools, for example as a subject leader, leader for assessment or deputy headteacher. They may not have had the opportunity or experience of determining the strategic direction and of leading and managing the change associated with this more holistic view. From a whole-school perspective the content of improvement work could be considered to be secondary to the development of a capacity to change in individuals and in the school as an organisation. This relates to the headteacher's ability to have and effectively share with others a vision for the future direction of the school. James and Connolly (2000) argue that, 'since leadership is essentially about influencing change, building the capacity to change is crucial' (p88).

Weindling and Dimmock (2006) identify that, 'internally appointed heads tend to make fewer changes and to move more slowly than external appointees' (p335) although this is counter-balanced where schools are placed in an Ofsted category as, 'the head has an external mandate to change and will move much more quickly' (p337). This research once again draws attention to the question posed in Section 2.1 in relation to the woven nature of factors influencing a school's ability to improve.

Being able to lead change within an organisation seems to be intrinsically linked to the ability to lead and manage people. A headteacher therefore needs to be at least proficient in, 'working with adult professionals both inside and outside the school' (James and Connolly, 2000, p88). The relationships built in this regard may be different to those established by teachers with their colleagues. The increased level of responsibility associated with headship includes the need to ensure that teachers' practice is effective which is likely to mean that there are times when unpopular decisions have to be made and discipline issues have to be addressed.

The literature seems to suggest that internal promotion of a headteacher makes the standing apart from staff more difficult. Daresh and Male (2000) reported the comments made by a newly appointed headteacher who was an internal candidate:

'You get treated differently and treat people differently.  
There is a natural unease in every teacher in relation to their  
head, regardless of how good, bad, or indifferent they are.  
People are cautious with you, and in turn, you can't behave  
in the way that maybe you would like to with them.' (p96)

So, for primary schools facing challenging circumstances, does internal promotion to the position of headteacher influence subsequent improvement?

As a newly appointed headteacher, whether to a first or subsequent position, key members of the existing staff can be very influential. In a negative way they can become what was referred to anecdotally during NPQH training as the 'well-poisoners', influencing others because of their perceived position within the school. More positively, key staff can become the headteacher's barometer through which to determine staff opinion. Crow (2007) reported a situation thus:

'They made me feel that what I was trying to do was right.  
They reaffirmed my opinions or sometimes they didn't.  
Sometimes they challenged them. But I knew I had some  
people who were on my side.' (p62)

Does a headteacher's ability to lead people through processes of change, particularly related to learning and teaching, influence the overall ability of a primary school facing challenging circumstances to improve?

### 3.1b (v) The influence of governors

An inexperienced governing body could be a problematic situation for a first-time headteacher because this potentially adds to the workload. Where a governing body, particularly the chair of governors, is experienced, this can be a good source of support, socialisation and on-the-job training for the headteacher (Scanlon, Earley and Evans, 1999; DCSF, 2009; Ranson, 2011). If the governors themselves lack the skills and knowledge to fulfil their role in challenging the school, then the process

of self-evaluation is weakened and this leaves the school in a potentially vulnerable position.

The role of the governing body is discussed in more detail later in this chapter in Section 3.2.

### 3.1b (vi) Personal development needs

The UK Government acknowledges the importance of developing its school leaders through the provision of the Headteacher Leadership and Management Programme (HEADLAMP) in England. The scheme was introduced by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and provides £2500 across the first two years in post for every first-time headteacher in England and Wales. The money is intended for use to support individuals' continuing professional development.

When individuals move into headship, especially for the first time and particularly when they are thrust there through circumstances other than their choice, they could be so busy managing their new organisation that they do not consider their own training and development needs. Whilst some first-time headteachers are linked with a more experienced 'mentor' headteacher, this relationship can be one providing moral support and practical guidance. It is perhaps indicative from the limited range of courses on offer nationally that headteachers' consideration and development of their own leadership skills is limited. The importance of personal professional development is acknowledged by authors such as James and Connolly (2000) who suggest that, 'leaders should take a leading role in their own development and growth' leading themselves 'reflectively and reflexively' (p88).

So, to what extent are professional development opportunities exploited by recently-appointed headteachers in schools facing challenging circumstances? Further, can links be identified between this and improvement or decline in their organisations?

In conclusion, it seems from the existing literature that the influence of a headteacher's lack of experience can be considerable in situations where

the individual remains unsupported and on-the-job learning is not rapid. However, existing research does not specifically relate to primary schools faced with challenging circumstances. Therefore, what is the influence of a headteacher's lack of experience, when appointed to a primary school facing challenging circumstances, compared to that of an individual with a successful track record?

### **3.1c Workload**

MacBeath (2006) identified a number of factors affecting headteachers' performance that recur frequently in the literature relating to what happens to individual leaders to 'diminish energy and creativity' (p188) and sap their abilities to manage creatively. He suggests the four most significant of these factors are; workload, stress, accountability and bureaucracy, and 'intensification'.

A Workload Survey conducted by the National Union of Teachers in England revealed in 2007 that a quarter of headteachers were working more than a 70-hour week. Hoy and Tarter (1995) observed that headteachers 'are often over-whelmed and occasionally paralyzed by the sheer volume and complexity of their work' (p5). The issue of workload is not limited to the United Kingdom. Livingstone's (1999) study of primary school headteachers in New Zealand reported similar findings to those of Loudon and Wildy's (1999) study in Australia and that of Jones' (1999) in the UK. A crucial effect that they report is that school leaders devote less time to teaching and learning because they have multiple calls on their time. Aspects of school administration which are deemed 'urgent' take precedence over those which require space and time for thought and reflection.

Related to heavy workloads is the issue of stress, particularly for schools where this leads to members of staff becoming ill and then absent. Stress is one of the strongest recurring themes in the literature, its source lying in constant and relentless changes which headteachers face. The strongest correlate of stress is the feeling of being out of control (Martin, 1997). He goes on to suggest that the lack of control, and even more significantly the



*perception* of being out of control, is correlated with chronic illness (physical and psychological) and even premature death.

Much of the stress in schools is explained in terms of headteachers having more responsibilities than power (Thomson *et al.*, 2003), feeling responsible for the success or failure of their schools.

‘Delivering success, in the currency of test scores, in a turbulent socio-economic context, where few things stand still enough to be measured, or measured with meaning, adds a layer of stress for heads who no longer feel in control of their schools.’ (MacBeath, 2006, p188)

Feelings of stress and workload are closely related to the third factor which is issues associated with accountability and bureaucracy. In the UK, accountability and attendant bureaucracy were identified by Draper and McMichael (2000) as significant disincentives to applying for headship. MacBeath (2006) reports that,

‘While headteachers widely recognised the importance of accountability it was the bureaucratic aspects that appeared to demotivate, aspects such as excessive form filling and paperwork, combined with a constant pressure to justify actions taken and the feeling of not being in control of one’s own destiny.’ (p189)

MacBeath’s (2006, p192) fourth factor is ‘intensification’. He describes this as a compound of factors including, ‘the changing social context, the revolving door of staffing, workload, stress, personal issues, and perceptions of unfair remuneration’ and he perceives that these, in combination, have led to the intensification of a headteacher’s role. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, an issue that will be returned to as part of a consideration of Complexity Theory in Chapters 8 and 9.

As existing research is limited, what are the implications of excessive workload on a headteacher’s role and the development capacity of a primary school, particularly those facing challenging circumstances?

### **3.1d Emotional Anxiety**

It could be suggested that related to the 'stress' referred to in the previous section discussing workload, is the issue of emotional anxiety. This could be the headteacher's own anxiety or the response by others to the head's leadership role. Leithwood *et al.* (2008) identify the links between teachers' performance, their emotions and leadership stating:

'This evidence indicates strong effects of teachers' emotions on their practices, and strong effects of leadership practices on those emotions. The recent four-year mixed-methods national study of variations in the work, lives and effectiveness of teachers in English schools confirms the importance of leadership – alongside other mediating influences – to teachers' commitment, resilience and effectiveness, and the key role of emotional understanding in successful leadership.' (p33)

In schools subject to Special Measures, teachers 'can become the prime focus of blame' (Harris *et al.*, 2006). Whilst apportioning blame is often not helpful, it could be suggested that some responsibility on the part of the teachers working within such a school should be acknowledged so that the school can move forward. Harris *et al.* (2006) suggest that such improvements can be achieved simply through 'investing in forms of professional development and collaboration that raise teachers' self-esteem' (p129).

So, can the influence of emotional anxiety be identified in primary schools facing challenging circumstances? If so, does it impact on the ability of that organisation to improve?

### **3.1e Communication and Relationships**

These two facets of the human condition are considered together as the effectiveness of one seems to rely on the presence of the other. In a school setting there are a number of different levels between which communication and relationships can be the source of problems and

conflict; between the headteacher and members of the leadership team as well as with the teaching and wider staff within a school, between the leadership team and the wider staff and between the staff members themselves. Communication and relationships between the school staff and external agencies could also cause conflict and all of these are potential 'flash-points', considered as part of the Complexity Theory chapters (8 and 9) to be 'pressure nodes'. Wallace and Pocklington (2002) identify the issues of communication and relationships when they state:

'The change process must involve interaction between individuals and groups based at different system levels where a change is initiated either centrally or at an intermediate system level for implementation at the periphery.' (p40)

Where change is being implemented it would seem that the relationship between those instigating it and those who are being required to alter their practice, and even their values and beliefs, is best served by at least a professional respect. Sergiovanni (1992), cited in Miller (2002) argues that, 'leadership flourishes when leaders and followers regard each other as credible' (p353). Rost and Smith (1992) expand on Sergiovanni's notion of credibility suggesting that it:

'is the basis of moral authority and is made up of five factors: character (honesty, trust, integrity), courage (willingness to change and stand up for beliefs), competence (technical and interpersonal), composure (displaying emotion appropriately) and caring' (p199).

For schools considered to be failing by Ofsted, 'there is a clear indication of how both working and personal relationships are tensed and, at times, unproductive and hurtful' (Nicolaidou, 2002, p238). It seems from the existing literature that the difficulties associated with communication, and the relationships that are forged and sustained through its effective use, can have a profound influence over a school's ability to affect purposeful change. Wallace and Pocklington (2002) recognise that, 'it is the people who make educational change complicated' (p44). Knowing how to

communicate information and views effectively with any individual or group would seem to be much easier where a relationship with those people already exists. Miller (2002) supports this view suggesting:

‘Those managing change processes need to recognise that the quality of the teachers’ relationship with the individual introducing the change could be a significant determinant of successful implementation.’ (p244)

This suggests that externally imposed initiatives from a remote central source have less potential for success than internally created changes that are generated from needs identified within an organisation.

While some existing literature focuses on schools in challenging circumstances this is limited to secondary contexts and ‘failing’ schools. How do communication and relationships influence the improvement potential within a primary school facing challenging circumstances?

Communication and relationships are also considered further as part of Chapter 8 examining Complexity Theory.

### **3.2 The Governing Body**

This section examines the potential influence that a governing body might exert on a school. It looks firstly at the roles and responsibilities which the body are required to undertake and then considers the relationship between the effectiveness of the governors and outcomes for children. Potential difficulties are also identified.

Governing bodies are made up of volunteers drawn from across a school’s stakeholders: teaching and support staff, parents, the local authority and the local community are all represented and the view of each representative is considered to be equal. This is important because, as Ranson (2011) identifies, education should not be left to ‘the interested decisions of a corporate club’ (p411) but should reflect practical wisdom alongside professional expertise. Dean *et al.* (2007) identified, however, that in disadvantaged areas sometimes as many as half of the governing

body members do not live within the school's catchment area so the representativeness of local communities might therefore be questioned.

Ofsted (1995) state that the main aim of the governing body is to 'maintain and improve its school's standards of achievement' (p4). It is important to note that following the Education Reform Act of 1988 the role of governing bodies radically changed. Ranson (2011) reports that, 'the local governance of education accorded school governing bodies new delegated powers for budgets and staff as well as responsibility for the strategic direction of the school in a quasi-market place of parental choice' (p398).

The 2009 Education White Paper 'Your Child, Your Schools, Our future: Building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century School System' (DCSF, 2009) expanded the Ofsted 'standards' definition of governing bodies, outlining their responsibilities as:

'holding the school's leadership to account for the performance of the school, making effective use of data and information to manage performance and ensuring value for money' (p13).

There is no doubt therefore that 'governing and governance are complex matters' (James, Brammer and Fertig, 2011a, p394).

One of the most significant developments for governing bodies seems to be the responsibility for the standards agenda placed with them since 1998 by the New Labour government. Not only do they have to develop the strategic direction of the school, hold the school to account in implementing what is agreed and evaluate the extent to which the school has done this effectively, they have to do this within the context of the school's statistical outcomes for its pupils.

It seems that the roles and responsibilities of governing bodies are only likely to increase in the current international economic climate. For example, with the extended devolution of funding direct to schools, accountability for the appropriate budget setting to support school improvement will increasingly be within the remit of a school's leadership, including the governing body. James *et al.* (2011a) identify that:

'Shrinking resources for public sector provision in many developed countries due to austerity drives place a premium on secure and high quality institutional governance.' (p396)

Good governance is viewed as important because, as the DCSF (2008) (<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk>) identified in a review of the available research literature, 'evidence suggests that there is a relationship between good governance and pupils' achievements, the quality of teaching, as well as the quality of leadership and management'. It did concede that effectiveness was variable in areas of disadvantage (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007). Balarin *et al.* (2008) recognised that the performance and socio-economic contexts were significant additional pressures for school governing bodies whilst James, Brammer, Connolly, Fertig, James and Jones (2011b) suggest that, 'governing bodies of schools in low SES [socio-economic status] settings are likely to have fewer potential members' (p419).

Over a decade ago Scanlon *et al.* (1999) reported, 'a clear association between effective schools and effective governing bodies' and they identified that there were 'considerable benefits to be derived to a school, and in particular its headteacher, from having an effective governing body' (p2). Ranson (2011) has also identified that 'research indicates there is a relationship between the organisational form of the governing body and its potential to improve school performance and standards' (p401). More effective governance leads to improved standards of attainment through what Ranson describes as a 'sharpened practice of management' (p401) as well as establishing processes and improving the effectiveness of the teaching and learning environment.

Converse to these views relating to the positive effects of good governance, governing bodies deemed to be less effective can have significant negative effects that are not always easy to identify let alone rectify. Balarin *et al.* (2008) reported that school governing was a complex and substantial undertaking that was largely hidden from public view.

There are difficulties associated with recruiting and training governors and also in retaining their commitment and service. James *et al.* (2011b) identify that:

‘the responsibilities of school governing bodies, which have grown over time and continue to do so, together with their onerous nature, complexity, and shifting nature, are significant pressures on governing bodies. These pressures in turn have implications for the recruitment of governing bodies, the capabilities required, the characteristics of school governors and governing processes.’ (p416).

It seems from the literature that the greatest difficulty where governing bodies are not fully involved in their role is the lack of input into the strategic direction of the school. Without this, the headteacher and leadership team become wholly responsible for this aspect of school life which is not only onerous but can create a largely unmediated situation. Earley, Evans, Gold, Collarbone and Halpin (2002) reported that:

‘The extent to which governors can be said to have a strategic role appears to be limited. Even in well led schools, it appears that one or two governors exercise a leadership role, rather than the governing body as a whole. The leadership capacity of the governing body although welcomed by most headteachers is circumscribed by the extent to which it depends on the head and leadership team for information; the restricted time governors can spend in the school; and their lack of ‘professional’ knowledge.’ (p43)

It is noteworthy, however, that it is not always governing bodies that are entirely responsible for this situation.

‘Headteachers seemed to have a limited concept of the role of governing bodies. Although 22 per cent agreed that they should play a major role in the strategic leadership of schools, far fewer (only 13%) judged that their governing

body actually did so. Over one-third of headteachers (35%) thought that their governing body actually played a 'minor role' or 'no role at all' in the strategic leadership of their school.' (Earley *et al.*, 2002, p36)

Scanlon, Earley and Evans (1999) identified that effective governing bodies 'have heads who want them to work well, chairs and governors who are skilled and committed, and efficient working relationships' (p2). In their independent study into school leadership, PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) also highlighted the headteacher/governor relationship as important concluding that, 'a positive attitude towards the governing body on the part of the headteacher was a crucial factor in its effective operation' (p12).

In conclusion, there is an existing body of research evidence identifying the influential role that a governing body can play in a school. Additional pressures for schools in challenging socio-economic settings have also been reported. Thus, what contribution does a governing body make to the improvement or decline of a primary school facing a range of challenging circumstances?

### **3.3 External Support**

This section examines external support provided for a school. It looks at the range of support that might be provided and some of the possible reasons for that need. The following sub-sections outline the possible support roles and consider the extent to which a school might be able to make effective use of this provision.

#### 3.3 (i) Types of external support

In a variety of forms, most schools facing challenging circumstances are supported by external agencies, whether through the local authority, national programmes, the diocese if the school is a church school or from other, sometimes commercial, sources. Schools have become familiar with people from outside spending time with them and providing guidance about a range of issues from behaviour management and subject-based input to finance and governor support. Schools achieving a good or outstanding



judgement from an Ofsted inspection seek their own external links whilst those placed in a category by Ofsted or without a substantive headteacher are more likely to be in receipt of higher levels of external support, often imposed on them.

External support can be well-received and effective. Crow (2007), reporting on a study of first-time headteachers, says:

‘The LEA provided a link advisor and a mentor (for the first year) to all new headteachers. The headteachers strongly praised both... The link advisor helped the new headteachers by providing the opportunity to discuss problems and solutions, to clarify thinking, to put them in touch with experts, and to share policies and practices. The mentor and new headteacher met regularly during the first year, visited each other’s schools and engaged in non-judgemental interactions. The headteachers said that these mentors provided practical support, helped them gain confidence in themselves as leaders and offered help in areas such as relationships with governors, performance management and personnel policies.’ (p60)

The National College for School Leadership (2006) report evaluating the impact of the Primary Strategy Consultant Leader programme concluded that:

‘A successful relationship was generally founded on clarity between all parties concerning the roles, purposes and protocols of the programme, ensuring effective joined-up working and communication between all parties.’ (p12)

The existing research literature suggests that schools facing challenging circumstances seem less able to utilise such support effectively. Reynolds *et al.* (2001, p4) suggest that schools facing difficulties often demonstrate ‘a persistent failure to improve’ which comes about because ‘school improvement processes are self-managed’. They go on to say, ‘by definition therefore schools in long-term, serious difficulty need major

programmes of intervention'. Myers (1995, p151) identified a 'competence line' below which it would be difficult to achieve improvement using normal approaches and strategies. The level at which this line exists will potentially vary over time and according to a school's particular circumstances.

Based on a school's current level of effectiveness, Harris *et al.* (2006) suggest a useful typology of school improvement strategies:

- 'Type I strategies: assisting failing schools to become moderately effective. Assuming that failing schools find it hard to improve by themselves, these involve a high level of external support, and strategies involve a clear and direct focus on a limited number of basic curriculum and organisational issues to build the confidence and competence to continue.
- Type II strategies: assisting moderately effective schools to become effective. These strategies do not rely as heavily on external support but tend to be more school initiated.
- Type III strategies: assisting effective schools to remain so. In these instances, external support, although often welcomed, is unnecessary as the school searches out and creates its own support networks. Exposure to new ideas and practices, collaboration through consortia, networking or 'pairing' type arrangements seem to be common in these situations.' (p140)

Reynolds *et al.* (2001) are clear that Type I schools are those in which, 'interveners are taking basic actions to establish minimum levels of effectiveness... involving high levels of external support and a clear and direct focus on a limited number of organisational and curricular issues' (p4). Causes for Type I school categorisation are numerous so it seems important that each set of circumstances receives a context-sensitive response. At the time of writing the ultimate responsibility for schools

causing concern lies with the local authority so it is most often from there that programmes of external support originate.

The principles of effective intervention (Fullan 1992, Hopkins and Harris 1997, Stringfield in Stoll and Myers 1998, Reynolds *et al.* 2001) can be summarised as:

- Early and focussed action
- Provision of resources (and strong management in place to deploy them)
- Simultaneous action at leadership, teacher and classroom levels
- An appropriate balance of support and pressure
- Coordination of internal and external processes, both top-down and bottom-up

It is recognised within educational change literature that external support can enhance the capacity of schools to move forward. MacBeath *et al.* (2007) state:

‘Familiar patterns of leadership in the school may need challenging and even reconstruction. To effect such change and enhance the leadership capabilities of a school may require the support of an external consultant or adviser.’ (p9)

It would be unrealistic to expect schools facing challenges to always be able to deal with them alone. Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2005), for example, report that, ‘a ‘knight in shining armour’ cannot be the sole trick of the trade and headteachers cannot make everything happen by themselves’ (p243). Fullan (2001b) suggests that, within an educational context at least, the need for external support is, ‘inversely proportionate to how well the school is progressing and in a case of persistent failure, dramatic, assertive leadership and external intervention appear to be necessary’ (p46).

It seems from the existing research evidence that the primary purpose of external support should be to develop the capacity in an organisation to

work independently in the future, so that control over and responsibility for improvements is internalised. That the support also affects change in the shorter-term should be viewed as a bonus rather than the main aim of the work. However, due to the nature of the challenging circumstances that some schools face, it is not always easy to maintain a focus on capacity building. If a school has been made subject to Special Measures or given a Notice to Improve by Ofsted then the looming HMI follow-up visits will be at the fore when setting objectives and planning work.

As is discussed within Section 3.1b, concerning a headteacher's lack of experience, leaders who appear to be struggling may have had little opportunity to have effective practice modelled for them in the past and thus they have a limited repertoire of skills on which to draw. It seems that it is therefore one of the external consultant's roles to provide this modelling. The work of an external consultant could, on this basis, vary hugely according to identified need. MacBeath (1998) suggests, following his work with primary schools in difficulty, that it is likely to fall, however, within one of four key areas:

- 'Promoting teaching and learning
- Encouraging monitoring and evaluation
- Supporting leadership and management
- Focusing on public relations.' (p139)

At the heart of what schools do is learning and teaching suggesting that it is this which should form the focus of any external support, the initial question being about what impact the work will have on outcomes for children. Research literature indicates that, particularly where schools are facing difficulties, decisions are made based on the adults rather than the children. MacBeath (1998) notes that, 'leaders of schools in difficulty often spend their time on issues related to long-running feuds and power struggles between individuals rather than on processes that will improve the achievement of pupils' (p139).

An important role for the external consultant is therefore to ensure that classroom practice is appropriate and this can be done by securing

monitoring and evaluation as an integral part of the school culture. This might be one of the aspects of support provided to the headteacher and senior team to help develop their leadership skills. The direct effect of strengthening leadership will be to enhance their capacity for further improvement but as MacBeath (1998) identifies, this is a sophisticated process:

‘Moving from crisis management to strategically planned ways of working requires more than just a change of approach. Helping senior staff to view the school objectively, to project, to identify a range of possibilities, to make links between cause and effect are just a few of the elements involved.’ (p141)

To what extent is external support necessary or appropriate for primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

As will be discussed in Chapter 8, the direct relationship between cause and effect might not be straightforward enough to identify and more holistic consideration of schools as complex systems might be appropriate.

### 3.3 (ii) The critical friend role

MacBeath (1998) explains the differences between critical friendship, coaching and mentoring thus:

‘While all three approaches share much of a common purpose, the distinguishing feature of critical friendship is to emphasize the capacity building and distributed character of leadership, rather than the more individualistic orientations of coaching and mentoring.’ (p197)

The role of the critical friend is one based on a relationship that develops over time, initially providing an opportunity for those receiving support to identify what they see as being problematic or difficult and moving towards a situation where the critical friend is able to ask searching questions about the practice and performance of a particular organisation in order that it

becomes a more reflective place. One of the key questions that a critical friend will ask is, 'How do you know?' which seeks to determine not only that a headteacher or member of a school leadership team has conviction in what they are saying but also that they are able to effectively substantiate claims being made. At the beginning of such a relationship, schools may view the critical friend with some hostility, seeing the questions asked as an implied criticism of their practices but as the relationship evolves and the school takes more responsibility for its own development, they should begin to ask the questions of themselves and thus the work of the critical friend is complete.

As this role has not been explored extensively in existing literature it is important to examine. What is the role and effectiveness of the critical friend in primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

### 3.3 (iii) The insider change leader

Miller (2002) describes the insider change leader as 'a long term member of the culture' who is in 'a privileged position where trust can be earned' (p351). One of the potential difficulties resulting from this long term relationship is the insider change leader's 'ability to detach themselves from the culture that they wish to change while still being part of it' (Elliott, 1992, p48). Miller (2002) is also aware of this issue, stating that they 'need to maintain a vision that stretches beyond the existing culture, while remaining a 'connected' member of it' (p353).

One of the advantages of acting as an insider change leader is identified by Deal and Kennedy (1990) when they suggest that:

'Change initiated by an insider takes place much more quickly and penetrates more deeply in the organisation than change urged on by an outsider'. (p45)

This raises the question: Is there a role for an insider change leader in primary schools facing challenging circumstances and if so, what form might that take?

### 3.3 (iv) Prioritisation of support

It seems from the available literature that schools need to be able to prioritise the support they are offered in terms of what will have the greatest impact on outcomes for their children and also the number and complexity of the initiatives in which they involve their staff. This requires the headteacher to be the 'gatekeeper' between their organisation and external agencies.

'Schools failing or close to failing have prescribed programmes and endlessly intrusive monitoring and inspection. They are in receipt of multiple innovations while the cruising schools with coasting teachers who ride in the slipstream of middle-class academic achievers get off scot-free.' (Hargreaves, 2004, p33)

Whether you consider this position to be equitable or not, it seems to be a reality of working within challenging circumstances. One of the issues associated with external support is the different sources and content which are provided simultaneously. At a time when schools are under pressure to change and/or improve, they are faced with what can be a myriad of support opportunities and one of the things that it seems schools in difficulty are not good at is being selective about what would help them most to develop; they often clutch at anything and everything offered hoping that it will be the panacea for all their ills. Even those agencies providing support find it challenging to coordinate the range of work being completed with an individual school, recognising the 'inherent diversity and variability across and within schools' (Harris *et al.*, 2006, p148). Bottery (2007) reports on a particular new headteacher working in a school identified for local authority support based on poor outcomes in terms of results. He says:

'His [headteacher] biggest problem, he felt, was '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'. He had

already had 22 of these in that particular term: 'and I know I'm owed about 8 or 10 that haven't come through'. Each one included a section designated 'action required by the school'. The result was 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.' (p105)

Harris *et al.* (2006) also recognise that the, 'demands of numerous initiatives can prove to be counter-productive in securing school improvement' but they go on to suggest that schools should be proactive in dealing with this, locating them 'strictly in the area of teaching and learning' (p129).

Effective external support, in any form, should include a clear exit strategy which is shared and understood by all parties from early on in the process. This means that the school will be less likely to develop what some children who are heavily supported by a teaching assistant do, referred to as 'learned helplessness'. Reynolds *et al.* (2001) suggest that, 'the intervention team withdraws in a planned way as the level of on-site competence rises' (p4).

What influence does the ability, within a primary school facing challenging circumstances, to prioritise the use made of external support have on the overall improvement or decline?

### 3.3 (v) Concluding comments

The UK Government's White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching' (DfE, 2010), proposed that schools be given greater 'freedom and autonomy' (p12) to determine their own improvement strategies with the central government role being 'to support the school system to become more effectively self-improving' (p13). For some organisations this is welcomed as they will continue to pursue other partnerships beyond their school. For less proactive schools there seems to be an increased danger of them becoming more introverted with the search for support coming only at the



point when crisis is upon them. Work with National Leaders of Education, Local Leaders of Education and Teaching Schools will only be effective when identification of need is appropriate. It seems that there could be much opportunity for headteachers, leadership teams and schools to remain hidden.

This comes back to the initial question raised in Section 3.3 (i): To what extent is external support necessary or appropriate for primary schools facing challenging circumstances? This links also to the question raised as part of the leadership literature review (Section 2.1 (i)): How effective is external support and is over-reliance detrimental to improvement?

### **3.4 Test Results**

‘... if effectiveness describes above-expectation pupil academic performance, improvement is a sustained upward trend in effectiveness. An improving school is thus one which increases its effectiveness over time – the value-added it generates for pupils rises for successive cohorts.’  
(Gray *et al.*, 1999, p5)

Statistical outcomes are a key measure used to judge a school’s success. The end of Key Stage 2 Standardised Assessment Test results are used not only to make judgements about a primary school’s effectiveness but also in order to compare its performance relative to other schools. Measures of the progress children make allows an overall ‘value-added’ score to be created and this is then related directly to the quality of teaching and learning and also to leadership and management within a school. Whilst the crude nature of this system causes anxiety for many, it has proved to be at least a starting point from which a school can make judgements about itself in order to identify potential areas for development. Evidence from research suggests that in schools that have overcome difficulties, the use of data has been a key element to their improvement strategies. Harris *et al.* (2006) report, following the Octet project (outlined in Section 2.2f (ii)), that:

'By using data, each school was able to identify potential under achievement and to address issues of inadequate progression on an individual pupil basis.' (p132)

This links to the question raised in the leadership literature review (Section 2.2f): Is the ability of a school's leadership to utilise data influential in primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

### **3.5 Ofsted**

According to Ofsted, failure is seen to exist:

'where there is substantial under-achievement. That is where standards are either well below the national averages for schools of that type, or consistently well below pupils' demonstrable capability, or both.' (Ofsted, 1993; Part 5, p94, para. II).

It is widely acknowledged within the teaching profession that for most schools, undergoing an Ofsted inspection is cause for increased levels of staff anxiety. The organisation and people working there are under scrutiny and judgements are being made about their practice. For schools that are already operating within challenging contexts, it is likely to be an added pressure. When the outcome of an inspection is not favourable, a school is likely to undergo a period of increased turmoil.

It seems that the difficulties linked to this set of challenging circumstances are twofold. Firstly the actual process of being inspected and then secondly, for those schools who fail, working within the context of an Ofsted category (being subject to Special Measures or given a Notice to Improve).

The September 2012 revised Ofsted Framework retained as three of its four core sections, leadership and management, achievement, and teaching. If Ofsted is making judgements in relation to these aspects, the schools where they are less effective are more likely to find the process difficult and the initial inspection will be just the beginning of an ongoing

relationship with Ofsted, Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) and the local authority.

What causes a school to be ineffective is different for each organisation. Myers (1995) suggests that, 'it is the degree, combination and accumulation of characteristics that causes the judgement that a school is failing' (p8). Researchers have suggested that the environment in which a school is operating influences its ability to achieve a positive inspection outcome. Gray (2000), for example, reports that, 'the most obvious contextual characteristic shared by schools in special measures is that they tend to be located in areas experiencing high levels of social deprivation' (p4), a factor already discussed in Section 2.1 relating to challenging circumstances. Harris (2001) describes a 'myriad of complex and socially related problems' (p17).

Other difficulties associated with an Ofsted inspection are the short notice period given before the inspectors arrive and, later on, the publication of the report which is often considered newsworthy and therefore reported on in the local press.

Once a school is made subject to an Ofsted category, a series of events and actions are set in motion. The school's leadership are required to prepare and submit to Ofsted an Action Plan to address the key issues identified in the report. This has to be agreed by Ofsted which takes place through attendance by the headteacher, chair or governors and local authority representative at a seminar hosted at Ofsted headquarters. The local authority is also required to prepare and submit its own Statement of Action and provide support for the school. This support is likely to focus on capacity building so that the school can move towards generating its own improvement. Guidelines and procedures for this process are laid out in the Department for Children, Schools and Families document 'Statutory Guidance on Schools Causing Concern' (DCSF, 2008b, p25-27).

Following agreement of the plans HMI conduct regular visits to monitor progress until the inspectors consider that the school is improving and providing an acceptable standard of education. If this is achieved the school is removed from the category and if it is not then there are further

statutory powers which can be invoked that could lead to the closure of the school. In many cases (90% nationally) the headteacher who takes a school into an Ofsted category is not the one who leads it out. This could be viewed as the 'Sword of Damocles' which hangs over headteachers throughout the process.

The monitoring visits conducted by HMI are milestones towards which schools in an Ofsted category are working. The actual visits are conducted in much the same way as an Ofsted inspection and therefore cause equal if not greater levels of anxiety amongst staff. Where aspects of school performance have been judged to be inadequate once, it is perhaps inevitable that there will be concerns over re-occurrence.

Following Nicolaidou and Ainscow's (2005) study of four inner-city primary schools in special measures they concluded that, 'a good leader in a school in special measures takes the most appropriate action in any situation and is constantly adaptive' (p240). They also recognised that approaches within 'failing' schools need to be different. Those approaches suggested relate to adopting a more directive and prescriptive leadership style when an Ofsted category is first imposed and gradually altering this to a more democratic one which empowers others once systems and procedures are established.

Quality of staff is another problematic area linked closely to a school being placed in an Ofsted category. Learmonth and Lowers (1998) suggest that a headteacher and governors should initiate competency procedures for teachers whose practice is judged to be poor as this will demonstrate effective leadership. They recognise that the impact of this can be negative, however, stating that, 'guilt, confusion about loyalties, feelings of being victims of a 'hit squad' and the unpleasantness that such procedures generate can work against progress being made in the school' (*ibid.*, p141).

Poor performance by some teachers is just one of the factors that can affect staff morale. Learmonth and Lowers (1998, p133) include in their list of other factors, staff feeling that the commitment they have given to education is not being properly recognised, society and the government not valuing education significantly, lack of resources, class sizes being too big,

a difficult catchment area, and senior managers not understanding the pressures of teaching all day. In many cases at least some of these factors are very real and Learmonth and Lowers suggest that they should be acknowledged.

Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2005) state that:

‘For many ... being placed in special measures is a traumatic experience with negative effects on their morale and self-esteem.’ (p232)

They found that personal attitudes towards ‘special measures’ and the difficulties arising from this categorisation were seen to be influencing working relationships as well as impacting on improvement efforts. They found also that, ‘staff relationships were fragmented and at times led to serious confrontations’ (*ibid.*, p241). Much of the individual response to change that relates to being placed in an Ofsted category can be identified within the review of more general change literature discussed in Section 4.3 of this thesis. For example, the desire of many people to maintain the status quo rather than take the perceived ‘risk’ associated with change.

There is existing research evidence attesting to the difficulties associated with Ofsted inspections. The question here, therefore, is: How does the ‘Ofsted factor’ combine with others affecting primary schools faced with challenging circumstances and what impact does this have?

### **3.6 Concluding Comments**

The literature suggests that for all schools it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain a headteacher. The issues associated with recruitment can be exacerbated by other factors such as lack of experience and workload. These internal factors might serve to de-stabilise a situation and can be influenced further by sources external to the school. This study could be vast but those factors highlighted here are ones that could potentially be influential in primary schools facing challenging circumstances. It seems that they, and their potential influence on a school’s ability to improve, have been considered in isolation and not

necessarily in primary school contexts. It is important therefore that this range of challenging circumstances is considered further in terms of individual and combined influences in primary contexts and this research seeks to do that in order to add to the existing body of knowledge.

#### **Summary of issues raised**

For primary schools facing challenging circumstances:

- Do multiple factors interact to influence the ability to recruit and retain a headteacher?
- To what extent are issues associated with recruitment and retention influential in improvement efforts?
- What is the impact, if any, of enforced first-time headship responsibility on a school's ability to improve?
- Do the relentless demands of the initial stages of headship influence a school's improvement capacity?
- What balance between pre-service training and on-the-job experience is appropriate for headteachers?
- To what extent is a school's headship history influential in determining its ability to improve?
- Is the role of a headteacher mentor useful and/or effective in supporting improvement?
- Does internal promotion to the position of headteacher influence subsequent improvement?
- Does a headteacher's ability to lead people through processes of change, particularly related to learning and teaching, influence the overall ability to improve?
- To what extent are professional development opportunities exploited by recently-appointed headteachers? Can links be identified between this and improvement or decline in their organisations?
- What is the influence of a headteacher's lack of experience compared to that of an individual with a successful track record?
- What are the implications of excessive workload on a headteacher's role and a school's development capacity?

- Can the influence of emotional anxiety be identified? Does it impact on the ability of that organisation to improve?
- How do communication and relationships influence improvement potential?
- What contribution does a governing body make to the improvement or decline of a school?
- To what extent is external support necessary or appropriate?
- What is the role and effectiveness of the critical friend?
- Is there a role for an insider change leader and if so, what form might that take?
- What influence does the ability to prioritise the use made of external support have on the overall improvement or decline of a school?
- Is the ability of a school's leadership to utilise data influential?
- How does the 'Ofsted factor' combine with others and what impact does this have?





**Chapter 4**  
**Literature Review 3:**  
***Merger and Change***

## **4.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter factors that could potentially destabilise a school's situation were discussed, particularly those relating to the headteacher's leadership role. What is not clear is the relative influence of the challenging circumstances and the headteacher's leadership. In order to test this, a situation involving a headteacher with proven effective practice working within a set of challenging circumstances will be examined. This could help to determine the extent to which a more effective leader influences a school's improvement or decline when the organisation is faced with a set of challenging circumstances. As will be discussed later on, one of the schools in this study provided such a situation, with the challenging circumstances relating to the amalgamation of two schools. The first part of this chapter therefore discusses school reorganisation and merger.

## **4.2 Merger**

### 4.2 (i) Circumstances leading to mergers

Alongside the range of initiatives which it seems that schools face in a dynamic education system, a number have to deal additionally with being reorganised. This reorganisation is generally imposed on schools by the local authority, which decides for a number of reasons, usually economic in their basis, to change the structure of schools under its jurisdiction and therefore makes proposals and seeks approval for these changes from central government. Reorganisation for schools may entail a change in age range of pupils, removal or addition of classrooms, closure, creation of an entirely new institution or merger. Once central government approval has been granted, the local authority and individual schools must make detailed arrangements for the changes. These include practical arrangements such as building work and resource redistribution and also staff allocations, including possible redeployment and redundancies.

'The merging of institutions represents one of the most radical externally imposed innovations that a school staff may have to manage.' (Wallace, 1996, p460)

From the existing literature it seems that school reorganisation is often unwelcome. For example, the closure of small rural primary schools can attract much coverage in the press with local communities uniting in their efforts to keep open schools that are not viable in economic terms.

Wallace and Pocklington (2002) reinforce this view saying:

‘Few planned changes in education can arouse such hostility, make such a radical and even terminal impact on the career of teachers and headteachers, and have such a long term impact on parents, students, and their communities as these reorganisation initiatives.’ (p8)

Apart from the impact on pupils, parents and the wider community, the effects on staff within the schools could be enormous. There is likely to be a period of uncertainty between the local authority announcement of its intentions and the actual reorganisation taking place. McHugh and Kyle (1993) describe, ‘traumatic change through the process of school merger’ and suggest that, ‘teachers in these particular schools are highly vulnerable to high levels of stress’ (p11).

McHugh and Brennan (1992) state that the stress is, ‘brought about by threats of job loss, skill obsolescence, changes in job holders’ responsibility and authority, shifts in the balance of power and general upheaval’ (p30). Wallace and Pocklington (2002) describe one particular aspect of this stress in more detail:

‘Staff in these schools might face years of job insecurity. Depending on individuals’ age and the content of proposals for reorganising particular schools, their prospects might include compulsory or voluntary redundancy, premature retirement or redeployment, bringing the experience of learning to work with a new group of colleagues and students in the institutions surviving reorganisation.’ (p12)

Kobasa, Maddi and Courington (1981) suggest that for teachers, coping with this level of change requires some resilience and for school headteachers and those concerned with education administration, it

presents a new management challenge. As schools are highly dependent upon their teachers to provide an effective and efficient service, it would seem imperative that teachers are sufficiently well equipped to cope with the unique brand of pressures which they face in the light of school merger, requiring, 'an extremely careful and well planned approach to change management so as to ensure that members of a profession which is already characterised by high levels of stress, are optimally placed to cope with the additional pressures which inevitably accompany school amalgamation' (McHugh and Kyle, 1993, p24).

Even when the changes have been made and the newly formed institution opens its doors, it seems that there could still be a significant period during which settling in occurs. There is likely to be a new set of relationships with associated roles and responsibilities which are contributing to a fresh regime.

As will be discussed below, for the person leading this change, usually the headteacher, supported by the school's senior leadership team, the challenges could be immense. Some might view this as an exciting opportunity to shape change and create a new institution. For others, however, 'taking the helm' of a newly formed institution or taking on the leadership of two institutions which are joining and seeing them through the merger and beyond, could present at best a thankless task and at worst a virtually impossible one.

Whilst the changes associated with reorganisation are taking place, the day-to-day and longer term developments within the schools concerned are likely to be under even more time-related pressure and those people involved could consider that they have more pressing matters to deal with both professionally and on a more personal level. This could lead to the stagnation of a school and create particularly challenging circumstances for its leaders. The expedient completion of the reorganisation would seem to be one way to limit these difficulties.

'Managing change seems unlikely to get much more complicated and emotionally demanding than this.'

(Wallace and Pocklington, 2002, p8)

#### 4.2 (ii) Pre-merger circumstances and difficulties

Pre-merger circumstances identified in existing literature as causing the most difficulty for those involved are communication, threats of job loss, and anxiety about significant changes in roles. In a qualitative study of two secondary schools which merged Kyriacou and Harriman (1993) highlighted the stress of school mergers, concluding that stress was highest during the period when posts in the newly merged school were being assigned and that uncertainty and lack of information coupled with the possibility of job losses and the likelihood of major changes in working practices resulted in acute stress. They studied ten members of staff across the two schools being merged and identified that, 'worries were exacerbated by unconfirmable rumours spreading concerning whether another person was better placed for the post and whether other criteria or factors were being applied in filling posts' (p300).

McHugh and Kyle (1993) identified that, 'job security is threatened by change initiatives such as school merger which attempt to rationalise education provision' (p14). They go on to identify an additional potential difficulty as being the level of encouragement the headteacher is able to provide during these sometimes 'turbulent periods of change' (p17). This would also seem to be related to the headteacher's capacity for a range of leadership functions.

Even when appointments have been made for a new school, there is still much additional work to be completed before the merger occurs. Kyriacou and Harriman (1993), following their study, reported that:

'Those staff appointed to the new school all now found themselves heavily burdened by their need to prepare for the opening of the new school whilst still dealing with the demands of their present school.' (p300)

What, if any, pre-merger circumstances are influential in primary schools being amalgamated?

#### 4.2 (iii) Early stages of merged schools

The amalgamation process does not end at the point when two schools join. Wallace (1996) recognises that, 'merger may happen overnight, but there is no short-cut to the cultural transition and forging of a corporate identity necessary to establish a successful new school' (p468).

When one school is created from the merger of two pre-existing organisations, it seems that there will almost certainly be issues of compatibility. Like any marriage, there are relationships to be forged and common ground to be found, which in all likelihood will mean that compromises will have to be arrived at from both sides. The combining of two potentially different professional cultures, as well as two sets of practical arrangements potentially requires sensitive leadership and management, whilst retaining sight of the school's ultimate goals. Wallace (1996) suggests that:

'Where staff from different institutions have incompatible cultures, somebody's cherished beliefs and values have to go if the unified culture necessary for effectiveness is to be established.' (p467)

Wallace (1996, p461) says, 'a school staff professional culture encompasses beliefs and values spanning education, management and relationships.' He goes on to discuss the 'subcultures' which may form where groups of people have different beliefs and values. Two schools merging may represent significantly different subcultures which need to be fused in order for the new organisation to flourish.

Hargreaves (1992) coined the term 'balkanisation' to refer to the staff culture common in secondary schools where strong loyalties form within departments, with indifference or even hostility to other groups. Even in smaller primary schools where staff professed commitment to being members of a 'whole school', Nias *et al.* (1992) found that only a certain degree of cultural unity was possible since staff shared a belief in retaining autonomy in the classroom. This could potentially create a tension between the independence desired by teachers in their own classrooms

and the need to work as a single unit in order to foster collective development for the school. Where merger occurs between primary phase schools, it seems possible that a third set of circumstances might be created whereby there is 'balkanisation' between the sets of pre-existing staff. Can 'balkanisation' be identified in primary schools that are merging? If so, what influence does this have on the school's subsequent improvement or decline?

When the headteacher is new to a situation, this potentially adds a further set of beliefs and values to incorporate. Carlson (1971) suggests, 'a change in administration, particularly when an outsider is appointed, usually heightens the expectation in teachers that a change initiative will shortly be announced' (p41).

Fullan (1991) suggests that, 'modification of belief generally follows a shift in practice, people coming to find meaning in an innovation only through implementing it' (p151). In relation to school merger specifically, Wallace (1996) states that, 'staff forsake identification with a pre-merger institution to allow identification with the new school' (p461). Kyriacou and Harriman (1993) reported a similar longer term issue of identity:

'The teachers pointed to the fact that the school ethos, the pupils and the staff were now different: the building might be the same, but it was a new school. Even a year after reorganisation many teachers felt that they had still not yet identified with their new school.' (p298)

In reality, staff faced with differences between their pre-merger culture and that of their new organisation may be able to see what they are expected to give up before they can appreciate what they will receive and some staff will 'perhaps go through the motions of new practices without commitment, or surreptitiously stick to old ways' (*ibid.* p461). In the study conducted by Kyriacou and Harriman (1993) they concluded, following a set of interviews which took place just over a term into the new school, that issues of stress were linked not only to the demands of the new school but also to 'concerns that a positive ethos in the new school was not developing successfully' (p301) and coping with new roles and working practices. This

relates to secondary contexts and raises the question: Are professional culture, beliefs and values identified as influential in the merger process for primary schools?

Existing literature suggests that the days and weeks immediately following the 'merger event' are likely themselves to present a set of particular circumstances which need to be addressed. Wallace (1996) describes this as starting with, 'enough coherent practice to get the post-merger institution up and running' (p467), and suggests that it includes day-to-day organisation, curriculum policies and setting of school aims before longer term developments are initiated. This seems to reverse the order in which these aspects of school development would be approached when effectively managing change in education. It does, however, provide a good example of leadership response to one of the characteristics that Wallace and Pocklington (2002) identify as making change complex, that of 'context specificity' (p38).

As discussed above, there are a number of aspects of school reorganisation that existing literature relating to secondary schools has suggested contribute to the creation of sets of challenging circumstances. What factors influence the merger process for primary schools? To what extent is it the effectiveness of the school's leader that is influential in taking primary schools successfully through that process?

### **4.3 Change**

The previous section suggests that change is a significant factor in the reorganisation of schools. A merger headteacher, for example, is facing a situation where the likelihood of change being required is high. Factors considered in the first two literature review chapters also indicated that elements of change would be needed in order for schools as organisations to improve. In this section educational change generally is therefore discussed, particularly as it relates to those aspects highlighted already in this and the previous two literature review chapters as potentially influential in a school's ability to improve.



Change is an inevitable part of achieving development in any system, including school improvement. Van Velzen *et al.*, (1985), drawing on an international study, define school improvement as:

‘A systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related conditions ... with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively.’

(p34)

As it seems that education by its very nature is complex, any process of change relating to it is also likely to be. The Chambers (1998) dictionary defines complex as, ‘composed of more than one, or of many parts; not simple or straightforward; intricate; difficult’ (p336). It is this complexity which causes much educational change to be difficult. Fullan (1993) suggests that the nature of education creates a ‘dynamic complexity’, which further complicates any processes of change. The Complexity Theory paradigm is discussed in greater detail in Chapters 8 and 9. In his later work, Fullan (2001b) states that, ‘change is a process, not an event’ and he identifies three phases in any sequence of change:

‘Initiation is the first stage of the process leading to a decision to proceed with a change. From then, the implementation stage covers the experience of attempting to put the change into practice. Finally, the institutionalisation stage refers to the way the change becomes built into normal practice and is no longer perceived as anything new.’ (p52)

Relating this to the merger situation discussed in the previous section, *initiation* is the domain of central and local government, *implementation* is carried out by the local authority and the schools themselves and *institutionalisation* is left to the school staff with support from their governing body.

Over time there has been an increasing recognition that change is a dynamic process with West-Burnham (1997) noting that ‘there is a growing awareness that the world is not linear, but is rather complex and chaotic’ (p233). Wallace and Pocklington (2002) suggest that, ‘as the complexity of

educational change increases, so does the range of parts that make it up and the amount of interaction between them' (p25). The dynamic rather than strictly linear nature of change seems to be the cause of some of the associated difficulties. MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (2004) suggest that for this reason change 'often happens in unpredictable and, sometimes, unlikely ways' (p40), 'prohibiting prediction, ever' (Wheatley, 1992, p127). McMillan's (2008) view of change is also not as discrete events but rather an 'ever flowing, every present reality that is constantly undergoing change' (p75). This existing literature all leads towards a consideration of complexity and raises the question: What are the links between complexity and change in education?

Wallace and Pocklington (2002, p38) list what they view as the key characteristics which make educational change complex. They suggest the large-scale nature of much change, its componential make-up involving often large numbers of interrelated and differentiated parts that can vary over time and the context specificity which influences each individual change situation. Coffield (2006) adds to this list 'the depth, breadth and pace of change and level of government activity in education' (p6).

Existing literature suggests that an important distinction to make is between first-order and second-order change. McMillan (2008) describes first-order change as involving single-loop learning which is often superficial, 'a paint job or rain dance' (Marion, 1999, p212) where a new skill may have been learnt by an individual but thinking and behaviour has not altered. For example, in a school, teachers might become proficient in the use of interactive white boards but this alone is unlikely to transform the learning experiences they provide. Second-order change, conversely, leads to 'deep-level change or transformation' (McMillan, 2008, p78) and involves double-loop learning where people learn not only to do things differently but to think and behave differently. Returning to the interactive white board example teachers might, through use of the equipment, come to understand the importance of models and images to support children's mathematical understanding better, thus changing the way they think about the subject and the learning opportunities they provide. Second-order change could also be considered to be irreversible. Morrison (2002, p22) suggests that, 'a butterfly is not simply 'more caterpillar' and a frog is not

simply more tadpole nor can it ever revert to being a tadpole'. The literature suggests that where change has resulted in different thinking and behaviour, a higher-level system has emerged. Although authors such as McMillan and Morrison provide examples, first- and second-order change within primary schools facing challenging circumstances have not been specifically considered. Can examples of first- and second-order change be identified in primary schools facing challenging circumstances? What does this add to our understanding of their improvement or decline?

If leaders of change within education are to be successful then it seems that they need to take account of many factors before embarking on Fullan's 'initiation' stage. Fullan (2001b) acknowledges that change is difficult:

'Understanding the change process is less about innovation and more about innovativeness. It is less about strategy and more about strategising. And it *is* rocket science, not least because we are inundated with complex, unclear, and often contradictory advice.' (p31)

The research literature (Fullan, 2001b; MacGilchrist *et al.*, 2004; Cameron and Green, 2004) suggests that there is a natural resistance to and fear of change and this is reflected in people's responses. The links between change and anxiety have also been made by researchers (Schön, 1971; Kotter, 1996; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998; MacMillan, 2000; Evans, 2001; Hall and Ford, 2001; Rogers, 2003; Lindahl, 2007). The response of some individuals is to welcome change as an opportunity to experiment and potentially develop but for others it seems to be an unwanted voyage into the unknown. The balance of people at these two extremes, and at points in between, would seem to be crucial to the potential for organisational change. Cockburn (2011) includes a headteacher's view of the propensity for his staff to change (likened to a bell curve distribution) when she reports on a recent study focussing on less successful teachers:

'You've got some (teachers) at each end and the majority are in the middle and it's being able to move the majority in the middle in the direction in which you want to go is ... is the difficult part... I think one of the keys to it is actually getting the balance in the staff between ... shifting the balance, shifting the core dynamic within the staff room away from the negative ... when you shift that balance that becomes a sort of critical point. (Bob, 23/05/11, brackets added)' (p328)

Land and Jarman's (1992) observation that, 'there is no organisational change without individuals changing' (p354) seems fundamental to change processes within schools. MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (2004, p44) identify the need for teachers to be the main agents of change within a school setting, recognising that each member of a staff group will have different skills, attitudes and past experiences which will impact on their view of proposed changes. Fullan (1991) views this similarly, stating that, 'educational change depends on what teachers do and think ... it's as simple and as complex as that' (p117). To what extent does the collective influence of these individual views and attitudes impact on improvement or decline in primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

For educational leaders, it would seem to follow that the starting point for initiating any change would be with the individuals making up the organisation. It would seem that motivating staff to change and then to sustain that change is central to the process. Cameron and Green (2004, p4) identify that managers focus on the outcomes and results of change but in order to become leaders of sustained and effective change, the response and participation of the people involved must also be considered. Successful leaders of change involve teachers and the school's community (Carlson, 1996; Leithwood, Steinbach and Ryan, 1997; Senge, 1990; MacMillan, 2000). To what extent is it necessary and/or influential to involve individuals in the decision-making process relating to change in primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

One of the potential difficulties for schools facing challenging circumstances is the high concentration of issues that need to be addressed; people are faced with the need for multiple change. This increases the difficulty for the

school's leadership in that they potentially need to identify the myriad of changes required and then to prioritise and initiate change at a pace which is realistic for those involved but fast enough to deliver the outcomes associated with improvement. To compound the difficulty further, many of the changes necessary are bound up with others in a system so complex that 'identifying patterns in complexity is one thing but managing complex educational change is another' (Wallace and Pocklington, 2002, p43). The links between complexity and change will be explored further in Chapter 8. Managing change does not necessarily mean controlling it. Some authors (Marion, 1999; Corwin, 1987) have suggested that it would be unrealistic and outdated to think that change can be controlled but rather that it is the role of leaders to make links between the 'concepts and practices of both leadership and change' (Hickman, 2010, pxii) in order to create new outcomes.

Before change can be initiated, schools as organisations need to possess the capacity and building this is extremely complex, as acknowledged by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and Ofsted (1995):

'In [some] cases, where all the elements for success appear to be present, there may be an indefinable characteristic which prevents improvement. The improvement of a school is more an organic process than a mechanical one, and consequently there is an element of unpredictability inherent in it.' (p19)

It is recognised by researchers that developing the capacity for change is difficult (Miles, 1987; Stoll and Fink, 1996; Stoll and Myers, 1998). They also identify that schools facing challenging circumstances are likely to have a lower internal capacity to cope with change but a greater need for that development, particularly with aspects of teaching and learning. For many organisations, and schools facing challenging circumstances are no exception, there is a feeling that change is being imposed on them from external sources, for example, through local authority pressure or government initiatives. Harris and Allen (2009) refer to this as a 'high external locus of control' and suggest that organisations view themselves as merely responding to external influence rather than managing change

from within. However, this is only one of the difficulties for schools and it seems that a more fundamental issue is what Mulford (2003) refers to as the 'endless stream of initiatives that flow across the principal's desk'. These requirements to change driven by external sources can 'undermine the power and discretion of school principals to exercise the leadership talents for which they were recruited' (Mulford, 2003, p19). It seems from the literature that leaders of change could benefit from being able to stand back and see how different initiatives or changes might be linked together to create a coherent and more effective programme of development. It is this aspect of change that will be returned to in the chapters relating to Complexity Theory later on in this thesis.

Whether the initiation of change is from an internal or external source, the existing literature (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004; Lindahl, 2007) identifies the importance of those individuals involved feeling they have some ownership of the process and being included in the overall design and implementation stages. The previous question is once again raised: To what extent is it necessary and/or influential to involve individuals in the decision-making process relating to change? The challenge for school leaders and schools is to affect change that will not only lead to improvement but will also be sustainable. The tension arises when change is necessary in the short-term and sustainable change takes longer. Dick (1992) uses the Chinese Bamboo analogy to exemplify the issue.

'When you plant it nothing happens in the first year, nor in the second or the third or the fourth years. You don't even see a single green shoot. And yet in the fifth year, in a space of just six weeks, the bamboo will grow 90 feet high. The question is, did it grow 90 feet in six weeks or in five years?' (p186)

Stoll and Fink (1996) are critical of short-term approaches to school improvement stating that, 'a superficial quick-fix approach to change may end up being no more than moving the deckchairs around on the *Titanic*' (p86). A number of researchers (Fullan, 1992; MacGilchrist *et al.*, 2004) have commented on the need for schools to get started with the process of change even if they are not entirely confident that the processes they are

initiating will ultimately be the best ones. Fullan (1992) suggests a process of 'ready, fire, aim' and MacGilchrist *et al.* (2004) suggest that this approach, 'reflects the reality facing schools' (p34). What is the impact of short-term change initiatives in primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

As leaders and managers, it might be necessary to take people to the limit of their ability to deal with change so that it happens quickly but not to push them beyond this as allowing people to recover could be time-expensive as well as potentially detrimental to their well-being. The difficulty with taking individuals and institutions to the 'edge' is that there is no formula for calculating how far this is and, as Fullan (2001b) acknowledges, 'anarchy lurks there too' (p6). The ability to thrive or merely to cope with change will be different for each individual and will potentially also alter over time. Therefore, it would seem that working with any group of individuals, who form a particular institution, will create a multiple set of abilities to deal with change. The seeming impossibility of judging this collective ability and maintaining an exact but altering level of challenge and support is what it seems that school leaders are being asked to do. What mechanism could support school leaders in capturing the potential change capacity of individuals (at a moment in time) and identifying from this where improvement might be initiated?

It seems that change is an inevitable part of any school improvement and it therefore manifests throughout the aspects discussed in the three literature review chapters. Across these themes this poses the question: How is change most effectively led and managed in primary schools facing challenging circumstances?

<b>Summary of issues raised</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What, if any, pre-merger circumstances are influential in primary schools being amalgamated?</li><li>• Can 'balkanisation' be identified in primary schools that are merging? If so, what influence does this have on subsequent improvement or decline?</li></ul>

- Are professional culture, beliefs and values identified as influential in the merger process for primary schools?
- What factors influence the merger process for primary schools?
- To what extent is the effectiveness of the school's leader influential in taking primary schools through the merger process?

For primary schools facing a range of challenging circumstances:

- What are the links between complexity and change?
- Can examples of first- and second-order change be identified in schools? What does this add to our understanding of their improvement or decline?
- To what extent does the collective influence of individual views and attitudes impact on improvement or decline?
- To what extent is it necessary and/or influential to involve individuals in the decision-making process relating to change?
- What is the impact of short-term change initiatives?
- What mechanism could support school leaders in capturing the potential change capacity of individuals (at a moment in time) and identifying from this where improvement might be initiated?
- How is change most effectively led and managed?



**Chapter 5**  
**Methodology**

## **5.1 Introduction**

The literature review chapters have established key research elements to be further examined in relation to primary schools facing challenging circumstances and their journey towards improvement or decline. This chapter focuses on a consideration of the most appropriate methodology for investigating aspects arising from the initial thesis and subsequent review of literature. It explores the different techniques available to undertake a systematic enquiry and the decisions made in relation to this study. The methods available for data collection, within the methodological approach identified as most appropriate, and subsequent data analysis are also considered. The sampling strategy and issues relating to ethics are also discussed.

## **5.2 The Basic Characteristics of Research**

Research is a means of discovering truth, defined by Kerlinger (1970) as the systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the presumed relations among natural phenomena.

Mouly (1978) states that:

‘Research is best conceived as the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretations of data.’

(p12)

Verma and Mallick (1999, p13) suggest that research is, ‘a process which consists of a series of linked activities’ and that it, ‘is essentially an intellectual and creative activity’. Key words occur in these statements; two use the term ‘systematic’, which implies that there needs to be a sense of order and structure to the process. All three suggest that research needs to be planned in terms of design, process and outcomes. It could be concluded therefore that a research study should be a systematic and transparent process, involving certain activities or actions, which may provide new information or ideas for the researcher, those involved in the study and a wider audience. It is the processes and activities of research that this chapter seeks to explore further in relation to this study.

The researcher brings to an inquiry a 'basic set of beliefs that guides action' (Guba, 1990, p17). Their values and beliefs (axiology) will influence not only what they seek to examine but the way in which they carry out that investigation. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p21) suggest that ontological assumptions (assumptions about the nature of reality and the nature of things) give rise to epistemological assumptions (ways of researching and enquiring into the nature of reality and the nature of things) and that these, in turn, govern methodological considerations.

As research within education is fundamentally concerned with the behaviour of human beings, a nominalist ontology, where reality is viewed as the result of individual cognition, seems to be more relevant than a realist one, where social reality is viewed as external to the individual. This subjectivist approach to social science suggests particular epistemological assumptions. The way in which a researcher is aligned within a debate will affect their approach to uncovering knowledge about social behaviour. Following a nominalist ontology, seeing knowledge as personal, subjective and unique, imposes on researchers an involvement with their subjects, rejecting methods more traditionally aligned with the natural sciences. This is an anti-positivist approach, concerned primarily with an understanding of the way in which individuals create, modify and interpret their worlds.

Much of the literature relating to approaches within educational research regards them as being underpinned by two distinct paradigms; 'quantitative' and 'qualitative'. Whilst the philosophical assumptions relating to each are distinct, this should not imply that research methods are exclusively for one or the other. This traditional divide between quantitative and qualitative is identified by Scott and Usher (1999, p10) while Bryman uses instead the terms 'deduction' and 'induction' and Morrison (2002, p23) suggests that the philosophical traditions that determine these two approaches are, respectively, 'positivism' and 'interpretivism' (also described as 'social constructivism'). As suggested above however, 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' are not merely labels for different research methods. Bryman (1988) identifies:

'Increasingly the terms quantitative research and qualitative research came to signify much more than ways of gathering data; they came to denote divergent assumptions about the nature and purpose of research in the social sciences.' (p3)

### **5.3 Qualitative Research**

The philosophical assumptions relating to the qualitative research paradigm are outlined here as they underpin this research. The ontology of qualitative research involves the researcher in considering the multiple realities that are believed to exist and to support this through the gathering of multiple forms of evidence, often using the actual words of different individuals. The epistemological assumption involves qualitative researchers getting as close as possible to the participants being studied, with the length of time 'in the field' potentially increasing primary data that can later be analysed and interpreted. The axiological assumption within qualitative studies acknowledges that all researchers bring values to a study. The inquirers admit the value-laden nature of the study and report their values and biases; they 'position themselves' (Creswell, 2013, p20) within the study. Finally, the techniques of qualitative research, are inductive and lead to emergence from the data collected and analysed. This allows for a development of increasingly detailed knowledge of the area being studied.

Qualitative research is about making aspects of the world visible that might otherwise remain hidden and unexplored. Qualitative researchers examine elements in their natural settings and Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggest that they are 'attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (p3). Creswell (2013) outlines the processes of qualitative research in the definition he provides:

'Qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report includes the

voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change.’ (p44)

Common characteristics of qualitative research, as they relate to this study, include the direct involvement of the researcher in the collection of data in the field and gathering information by talking directly to people and seeing them within their context. Qualitative research is context-specific and seeks to use what Patton (2002) describes as:

‘a real world setting [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest... [which] unfold naturally.’ (p39)

Qualitative researchers retain a focus on the interpretations that participants make of their particular context, using these to create a holistic account of the issue under study and recognising the need for reflexivity in terms of their own position within the research. The final account is enhanced for the researcher and reader through what Hoepfl (1997) describes as, ‘the ability of qualitative data to more fully describe a phenomenon’ (p49). Winter (2000) suggests that, unlike quantitative research:

‘Qualitative research attempts to ‘pick up the pieces’ of the unquantifiable, personal, in depth, descriptive, and social aspects of the world.’ (p604)

The detailed descriptions produced through qualitative approaches to research could be viewed as a weakness. As, ‘there is no statistical test of significance to determine if results ‘count’’ (Eisner, 1991, p39), it is left to the researcher, and eventually the reader, to make their own judgements about how valid and useful a study is. However, comparisons between a piece of research and other sets of similar circumstances might be made by either the researcher or the reader, provided that sufficient detail about the group studied has been included. If the analytical categories are also provided then translatability as well as comparability might be possible.

An advantage of qualitative research is that it allows for flexibility and responsiveness to the context being studied. As is recognised within the existing literature (Light *et al.*, 1990; Creswell, 2013), research questions within a qualitative study may initially be open-ended but gradually change. They may become 'more refined during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem' (Creswell, 2013, p52) through 'a more iterative process' (Light *et al.*, 1990, p19). The starting point for this research was a single focus, 'What happens in primary schools facing challenging circumstances that results in their improvement or decline?' This was refined during the literature review into consideration of the existence of common themes, leadership characteristics, combinations of factors leading to improvement or decline and the potential for prediction and control within challenging circumstances in primary schools. Further refinement occurred during the course of the research which allowed for incorporation of the complexity theory paradigm (discussed in Chapter 8).

#### **5.4 Qualitative Research Methodologies**

The appropriateness of qualitative methodologies is considered in the following sections. Denscombe (1998) states that, 'the social researcher is faced with a variety of options and alternatives and has to make strategic decisions about which to choose' (p3). He goes on to suggest that, 'the crucial thing for good research is that the choices are reasonable and that they are made explicit' (*ibid*, p3). Creswell (2013) identifies five qualitative approaches, each with strengths and weaknesses, that will be considered here: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study.

#### **5.5 Narrative Research**

The focus for narrative research is on exploring the life of one or two individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories and reporting individual experiences, often chronologically. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest a strength of narrative is that, 'it not only conveys information but brings information to life' (p553). However, whilst the stories of people's lives would be relevant to this study, the number of individuals involved prohibits narrative research as an approach here.

## **5.6 Phenomenology**

Whereas narrative research reports the stories of experiences of one or two individuals, in contrast, Creswell (2013) suggests that, 'a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon' (p76). Phenomenologists focus on what individuals have in common as they experience a particular phenomenon, such as migraine headaches, bereavement or capability procedures in their employment. Data are collected from people who have experienced the phenomenon and 'a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals' (Creswell, 2013, p76) is developed.

Whilst understanding the common experiences of people working within primary schools facing challenging circumstances as a phenomenon could add to the existing body of knowledge in this regard, it would not necessarily identify factors that influence the improvement or decline of the institutions as a whole. It is not, therefore, an appropriate approach for this research.

## **5.7 Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory intends a move beyond the description associated with both narrative and phenomenological research to the generation of theory for a particular process or action. The researcher seeks to generate a general explanation 'grounded' in the data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Creswell (2013) suggests as examples, 'developing a general education program or the process of supporting a faculty to become good researchers' (p85). The grounded theory approach stems from the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), and has continued to be developed by these and other authors in the intervening decades (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987; Struass and Corbin, 1990, 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Clarke (2005) and Charmaz (2006) have proposed a more constructivist approach to grounded theory, but all rely on research designs that involve gathering and coding rich data, memoing and using theoretical sampling. Whilst Struass and Corbin (1990,1998) advocate systematic procedures where the researcher moves

between data collection and analysis a number of times and uses the Constant Comparative method of data analysis, Charmaz (2005, 2006) places less emphasis on the methods of research and more on the views, values, ideologies and beliefs of individuals. This social constructivist approach emphasizes diverse local worlds and their complexities.

A potential weakness of Grounded Theory is the prescribed categories of information in the theory generated; a central phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, conditions and context, and consequences (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The inflexibility of this might be addressed through the 'piecing together of implicit meanings about a category' (Charmaz, 2006) in order to generate a theory. Both approaches require the researcher to determine when categories are saturated and when the theory is sufficiently detailed.

Grounded Theory is an appropriate approach for research in education contexts where individuals are part of a process. However, within this study a clear focus has already been identified and potential elements for further investigation have emerged from the literature review, prior to the period of time in the field beginning. Therefore, emergent categories, whilst not excluded, would not form the complete set being used.

## **5.8 Ethnography**

Ethnography is 'both a process and an outcome of research' (Agar, 1980); it is a way of studying a culture-sharing group as well as a final written product. Creswell (2013) suggests that 'ethnographers start with a theory – a broad explanation as to what they hope to find' (p92). The ethnographer then becomes immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people being studied, engaging in extended observations of the group, most often through participant observation. In ethnography the group being studied are located together and therefore develop shared patterns of behaviour, beliefs and language over time. The researcher looks for these patterns, expressed through language, or material activities, such as how they behave within the group, demonstrated through their actions (Fetterman, 2010).



Education institutions provide an appropriate setting for ethnography as a research approach but that does not make it straightforward. As school is familiar for all of us, unlike the task of anthropological research in culturally remote settings, the task of a school ethnographer is to make the familiar strange (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995; Spindler and Spindler, 1982).

In addition to providing an appropriate means to engage with research settings, ethnography has contributed to the terms used by qualitative researchers more widely. Geertz (1973, p412-53) developed the term 'thick description' for his ethnographic fieldwork in various locations, notably Bali where his acceptance into the village he was studying came through his escape from the police during a raid on a local cockfighting event. Thick descriptions are deliberately not focussed on simply collecting, organising and reporting on observations. Rather, they draw together detailed observations of events with information from, for example, natives' stories, religion and history. Their ability to potentially enhance research reports is not, however, limited to those based on ethnography, as will be discussed in the following section examining case study (Section 5.9).

An initial consideration of the research approach to be used for this study suggests that there are elements of ethnography that would be appropriate. For example, examination of people in interaction in ordinary settings, and the potential for discernment of pervasive patterns such as life cycles and events. Deficiency in the existing literature relating to this group (primary schools facing challenging circumstances in this case) because they are not in the mainstream, a group whose members have been together for an extended period, and the opportunity to be immersed within a culture-sharing group were additional factors.

However, there are significant aspects of ethnography that are not appropriate for this research. Fundamentally, the intention of this study is not to determine how the culture works but rather to explore a particular phenomenon using the 'case' (and possibly further cases) as a specific illustration. Retention of the potential to extend the research beyond the initial set of circumstances is also a requirement. In addition, an ethnographic approach suggests the pre-selection of cultural themes, issues or theories to study whereas the potential for emergence of

previously unidentified themes is required in this study in an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the particular circumstances.

## **5.9 Case Study**

Stake (2005) states that case study research is not a methodology but a choice of what is to be studied. This seems to be a very narrow definition. Case study is viewed by others, however, as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology, or a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin; 2009). Creswell (2013) suggests that case study can be viewed 'as a methodology; a type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry' (p97). He goes on to provide the following definition which is used here as a starting point.

'Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case themes.' (Creswell, 2013, p97)

A case study is concerned then with the complexity and particular nature (Stake, 1995) of a case that is 'studied holistically by one or more methods' (Thomas, 2011, p511). It provides a 'single instance' (Creswell, 1994, p12) that is bounded by context, time and group, such as, a single child, a group of teachers, a school or a whole community. There are those who disagree with this tight delineation, however. Yin (2009) argues that 'the boundary line between the phenomenon and its context is blurred, as a case study is a study of a case in a context and it is important to set the case within its context' (p18). Case studies can 'explain, describe, illustrate and enlighten' (Yin, 2009, p19-20). Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p317) suggest that they are able to do this through the richness provided by vivid description of relevant events in which the researcher is integrally involved. Geertz's (1973) 'thick description' (p412) would seem therefore to potentially strengthen a case study, which is considered to be effective if it creates in the reader a sense of what it was like to have been in the situation (Cohen

*et al.*, 2000, p181). Based on the desire to create vivid descriptions from in-depth data collection, multiple sources of information can be used, such as 'documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artefacts' (Yin, 2009, p31).

Stake (1995) suggests that a case study can be defined by intent; *intrinsic* if it is to illustrate a unique case or *instrumental* if it is to help understand a specific issue or problem. Instrumental case study can also involve more than one bounded case to illustrate the issue. These are termed collective case studies or multiple case studies. All case studies involve a description of the case and, in addition, the researcher might identify themes to study within each case. Analysis of themes across cases to identify similarities and differences is also appropriate with conclusions formed by the researcher presented at the end. These have been termed 'assertions' Stake (1995), 'explanations' Yin (2009), and 'general lessons learned' Creswell (2013).

Classification of case studies by type is also provided by authors other than Stake. Yin (1984) identifies three types in terms of their outcomes; exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. Merriam (1988) proposes a similar distinction between descriptive, interpretive and evaluative whilst Sturman (1999, p107) identifies four types: an ethnographic case study; action research case study; evaluative case study; and educational case study. This latter classification seems to be based more on the circumstances in which the study is carried out than the former which focus on the outcome. It might be considered then that case study research could be appropriately categorised using multiple descriptors. For example, 'interpretive, educational, collective case studies' would describe those where 'multiple-case design' (Yin, 2009, p46) is to be utilised to examine case studies within educational contexts that potentially allow for the inductive development of conceptual categories in order to examine initial assumptions.

Like all research approaches, the use of a case study has strengths and weaknesses. Nisbet and Watt (1984) suggest that strengths include, the ability of a case study to catch unique features that might hold the key to understanding a situation, that they are often easily understood by a wide

audience, and that they can be undertaken by a single researcher. They suggest that the latter however could lead to observer bias and identify a further weakness as the generalisability often being dependent on other researchers being able to identify the potential for this. Adelman *et al.* (1980) view case study data as potentially difficult to organise but 'strong on reality' (p59) because attention is paid to the subtleties and complexities of the particular case.

A further strength of case study might be considered to be the notion of significance. This suggests that it is less important to consider the frequency with which something happens and more important to focus on what happens in particular circumstances. Cohen *et al.* (2011) state that:

'Case studies, in not having to seek frequencies of occurrences, can replace quantity with quality and intensity, separating the *significant few* from the *insignificant many* instances of behaviour.' (p294)

It seems that for a study which involves clearly identifiable and bounded cases and where the research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon, a case study approach would be appropriate. The potential to expand the single case study to include multiple cases and to make comparisons between them are also strengths of this approach and it is therefore considered most appropriate for this research.

### **5.10 The Rationale for Case Study**

By their very nature, narrative research and phenomenology are not considered appropriate approaches for this study. Grounded theory seems to have greater potential because it allows for emergence from data collected that relate to a particular phenomenon, but it is limited for this particular study by its focus on theory creation. Ethnography, again includes appropriate elements, particularly for the initial research setting where immersion in the field for an extended period is planned. However, the examination of culture, fundamental to ethnography, and the possibility within this research of including further settings limits this approach.

Case study provides the most appropriate approach for this study as it has the flexibility to be extended to more than one case and the potential to allow for comparison between two or more cases. It also offers the opportunity to examine in depth the circumstances within a particular bounded system. The 'case' in this study is a primary school facing challenging circumstances.

Having established an appropriate approach for this research, associated elements are now considered. These include ethics, sampling, data collection methods and analysis of data.

### **5.11 Ethics**

Ethical issues require consideration for different phases of the research process. Creswell (2013) suggests these to be 'prior to conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, in data analysis, in reporting the data and in publishing a study' (p57). Underpinning all of these is the researcher's personal code of ethical practice, 'a set of rational principles appropriate to their own circumstances and based on personal, professional and societal values' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p102). Busher (2002) suggests that an ethical framework for the researcher 'must inform their moral judgements in carrying out their work' (p73). Qualitative research methods taught sessions and research opportunities, as part of a Masters Degree, provided an initial personal framework, augmented by further review of existing literature relevant to the methodology and methods selected for this study.

Prior to conducting a study, approval from the ethics committee or review board of the supporting academic institution should be sought. This, and the consents required in order to gain access to the settings and individuals involved requires an outline of the proposed research as well as a consideration of the ethical issues that might arise. Codes of practice for ethical conduct of research can be useful in guiding a researcher's approach and are produced by professional organisations such as the American Psychological Association, the International Communication Association, the Canadian Evaluation Society and the British Educational Research Association. The British Educational Research Association's

(2004) *Revised Ethical Guidelines*, used for this research, includes sections covering:

- responsibilities to the research profession;
- responsibility to the participants (including working with children, informed consent and rights to withdrawal);
- responsibility to the public;
- relationships with funding agencies;
- publication;
- intellectual ownership; and
- relationship with host institutions.

Seedhouse (1998) suggests that codes of practice are an example of the first of four layers of ethical decisions for researchers, the external layer. The remaining three, built on this, are consequential (for individuals, groups or society), deontological (what is one's duty to do) and, individual (the core rationale of respect for individual freedom and autonomy).

Ethics has been defined by Cavan (1977) as 'a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others' (p810). This seems to suggest that within the form of social research proposed for this study, the most significant consideration is therefore that of informed consent. Howe and Moses (1999) suggest that informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical behaviour because it respects the rights of individuals to make decisions about and exert control over their lives. Diener and Crandall (1978) define informed consent as:

'the procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decision.' (p57)

There are seven aspects to informed consent that seem important to incorporate and which guide this research. The first four are taken from the work of Diener and Crandall (1978):

- competence, implying that participants are able to make their own informed decisions;

- voluntarism, allowing participants to choose freely whether they take part;
- full information, ensuring that consent is fully informed; and
- comprehension, referring to participants' full understanding of the research.

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) identify risk and vulnerability as two additional issues to be considered. Vulnerability in this context refers to limitations of the participants' freedom to choose, such as age or limited mental capacity, which in this research is low. Equally, the research does not contain the elements of risk that, for example, medical research might. The researcher must ensure that no harm comes to the participants physically, psychologically, emotionally, professionally or personally (non-maleficence). The issue of embarrassment is the final consideration added to the list and identified by Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p54). It has been addressed in this study through confidentiality (see below). The gaining of informed consent is appropriate for a case study approach as it is possible to identify in advance those individuals who will potentially be involved.

What is considered to be 'harm' is subjective. A careful weighing of this will need to be 'situated' (Simons and Usher, 2000) (interpreted in specific, local situations) and could potentially include the question of whether the end justifies the means within a given study. Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest that 'researchers should never lose sight of the obligations they owe to those who are helping' (p86) and this view is incorporated in the principles proposed by the American Psychological Association (APA) (2002) which attempt to strike a balance between the rights of investigators to seek an understanding of human behaviour, and the rights and welfare of individuals who participate in the research. This represents one of the potential dilemmas facing researchers.

Other ethical issues potentially relating to this research are now considered, along with possible strategies that can be used in an attempt to overcome them. A participant's right to privacy is a fundamental ethical consideration within research. The greater the sensitivity of information, the more safeguards are required to protect participants' privacy. As an

issue, it can be addressed through informed consent, discussed previously, or through anonymity and/or confidentiality, outlined below. Cohen *et al.* (2011) state that, 'the essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity' (p91). This is possible where data collected contain no personal details, such as an anonymous questionnaire. However, Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest that, 'a subject agreeing to a face-to-face interview can in no way expect anonymity' (p91). Oliver (2003) identifies also that, 'there are no absolute guarantees of anonymity, particularly in the case of people who hold named posts' (p80). For qualitative research, particularly where a study is carried out in a single setting, or a very small number of settings, it is difficult to ensure that data are totally unattributable: interview transcripts and field notes inevitably record sufficient detail to make participants identifiable. Even where anonymity is preserved beyond the setting, the participants are likely to recognise themselves and one another (Ellis, 1995). This raises the possibility that publication will cause private (or community) shame or embarrassment, even where it does not lead to public humiliation (Ellis, 1995; Hopkins, 1993).

Confidentiality involves 'not disclosing information from a participant in any way that might identify that individual or might enable them to be traced' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p92). In order to protect those involved in qualitative research, assurance that confidentiality will be maintained through the deletion of identifiers, such as, changing of individual and institution names, can be provided. The informed consent process can be used to provide assurance that confidentiality will be maintained where this is a possibility. Howe and Moses (1999) argue however that in order to create the 'thick descriptions' that give strength to qualitative research a level of detail is needed 'that cannot be obtained if privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are required' (p44). The balancing of these potentially conflicting requirements in a 'costs/benefits ratio' is a further ethical dilemma that needs careful consideration.

Deception is another ethical dilemma. It has been suggested that it exists at some level within all sociological research (Aronson *et al.*, 1990; Bailey, 1994; Cohen *et al.*, 2011). At its most extreme, deception involves covert research where participants do not know they are being researched. It



can also involve not telling the truth, telling lies, or compromising the truth. Evidence suggests that there are no simple answers to the ethical issues of covert research (Bulmer, 1982) and it can do much harm (Erikson, 1967; Hornsby-Smith, 1993). Conversely, it might be considered that covert methods have advanced our understanding of society (Douglas, 1976; Bulmer, 1982).

This research is completely overt in nature but the less extreme aspects of deception are identified. It could be considered that deception was used by suggesting to participants that the focus was on investigation of ways that primary schools facing challenging circumstances improve, without acknowledgment that decline could equally be the outcome examined. Whilst not intentionally seeking to deceive, but rather to be positive with participants of the study, this view could be considered to potentially influence the responses and behaviour of those involved. However, it could be suggested that telling participants in detail what is being examined might equally bias the outcome (Plummer, 1983).

The ultimate decision with regards to deception for this study involves the costs/benefits ratio in combination with the issue of non-maleficence. While the omission of information shared with participants could be considered to be deception, harm was unlikely to result and this was also balanced against potential bias in outcomes being minimised.

Some ethical considerations are directly related to the nature of the research technique employed. These, as well as those relating to aspects of data analysis, will be discussed as part of later sections in this chapter.

#### 5.11 (i) The ethics of this research

Following identification of the research opportunity, and careful consideration of the potential ethical issues involved, an application to the Ethics Committee of the University of East Anglia was made. Once accepted, a formal proposal was made to the Local Authority (with overall responsibility for the County's schools) and then the Chair of Governors and headteacher of the initial school setting. Subsequent to that permission being granted, the process of identifying participants and

gaining informed consent was completed at the point of entry to the field. This included providing information about the aims and context of the study, the level of commitment involved, the form of data to be collected and the opportunity to withdraw all or part of this, and the ability to withdraw from the research at any point. Access and consent were carefully negotiated and permission to digitally record interviews also gained. The same process was used for the subsequently identified case study schools. Copies of the Ethics Application and the individual Consent Form are provided for reference in Appendices 2 and 3 respectively.

### **5.12 Sampling**

Sampling takes one of two main forms; probability (also known as random) sampling and non-probability (also known as purposive) sampling. In the latter, the researcher deliberately selects a particular section of the wider population. Examples of this could be schools facing challenging circumstances from the wider population that includes all schools, or a narrower focus on particular schools within that group identified as facing challenging circumstances. Non-probability sampling is the approach taken more often within qualitative research. Cohen *et al.* (2011) state that, 'each sample seeks only to represent itself or instances of itself in a similar population, rather than attempting to represent the whole, undifferentiated population' (p155). It is considered an appropriate strategy for this research.

Within qualitative research there are different levels of sampling. Researchers can sample at the site level, event or process level, and at the participant level. Within this study, site level sampling will be followed by participant level sampling. There are also different types of non-probability sampling, such as, quota sampling, convenience sampling, snowball sampling, purposive sampling and volunteer sampling. Purposive sampling, also referred to within the literature as 'purposeful' (Creswell, 2013, p156), is considered appropriate for this study because, as Cohen *et al.* (2011) state:

'In purposive sampling, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their

typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs.’ (p156)

This sampling therefore ‘enables the full scope of issues to be explored’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p39). Lincoln and Guba (1985) go on to suggest that, ‘the natural mode of reporting [following purposive sampling] is the case study’ (p43). Related to the collective case study approach identified as appropriate for this study, Creswell (2013) suggests that ‘often the inquirer purposefully selects multiple cases to show different perspectives on the issue’ (p99).

As suggested above, there are a number of sub-divisions within purposive sampling. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p174) provide a typology of those kinds of purposive sampling that are used to achieve representativeness or comparability, with which this study is concerned. They include within this list, typical case sampling, extreme or deviant case sampling, intensity sampling, maximum variation sampling, homogeneous sampling, and reputational case sampling. Of these, Miles and Huberman (1994, p28) identify ‘maximum variation sampling’ as being most often selected in qualitative studies. Sites or participants are selected because they possess characteristics that are quite different to one another in relation to identified overall criteria. An example of this could be a study examining the life experience brought by newly qualified teachers to their practice where young and more mature teachers in the early stages of their careers are selected. Maximum variation sampling is an appropriate sampling strategy for the later parts of this research as it allows for further case study schools to be identified that are facing challenging, but different, circumstances.

#### 5.12 (i) Sampling for this research

The school used initially within this study was not selected through a process of sampling; it presented through circumstances unrelated to research. The two subsequent schools were however selected using purposive, maximum variation sampling. The overall criteria related to primary schools facing challenging circumstances with the second and third schools each providing a different example to the initial school; one with an

Ofsted Notice to Improve (and an acting headteacher) and the other a new school that was being created through the amalgamation of two neighbouring but pre-existing schools and with a new headteacher of proven experience.

Sampling for the participants to interview within each school was considered during the initial stages of the research, forming part of the application to the Ethics Committee. Considerations included the number in the sample and the positions that they might hold within the school. A member of the senior leadership team, a class teacher and a local authority representative were chosen through maximum variation sampling to represent potentially diverse perspectives of the same set of challenging circumstances. In reality, more than one individual representing each of the posts held was identified initially to allow for individuals declining the invitation to be interviewed.

### **5.13 Research Tools: Data Collection**

Johnson (1994, p13) distinguishes between 'research approaches' defined as 'the main ways research can be tackled', and discussed earlier in this chapter, and 'research tools' described as 'the means by which different approaches to research are operationalised'. With regard to case study as an approach, she suggests that appropriate research tools include questionnaires, interviews, case studies, observation, the use of records and the use of diaries. Given the particular sets of circumstances in this case study research, observation, journal writing and interviews form the basic tools for data collection and are discussed in the following sections.

### **5.14 Participant Observation**

Observation is one of the key tools for collecting data in qualitative research. It is the act of noting a phenomenon in the field setting. Direct observation is faithful to the real-life *in situ* and holistic nature of a case study (Verschuren, 2003, p131). A researcher may watch physical settings, participants, activities, interactions, conversations and their own behaviours during the observation.

Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest that, 'the intention is to observe participants in their natural settings, their everyday social settings and their everyday behaviour in them' (p465). Participant observation could also be considered to have a wider embrace, including document analysis, interviewing, direct observation and introspection (Flick, 2009, p226). Flick (2009) goes on to state that it is a process, drilling down from '*descriptive observation*' (orientation to a field) to '*focused observation*' (narrowing one's field of observation to focus in on those problems and processes that are most germane to the research purpose and questions), and on to '*selective observation*' (to find further evidence for those items identified in the previous step) (p227).

The degree to which the researcher is observing or participating leads to four distinguishable types of engagement: complete participant; participant as observer; observer as participant/non-participant; and complete observer. Participant observation is 'the most subtly intrusive' (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p14) form because, as the label suggests, it requires the researcher to be a member of a group, contributing to activities, in order to gain access to insiders' behaviours and attitudes, whilst still acting as a researcher with a degree of detachment. This reflects the position in the initial setting where this research was to take place.

There are a number of ways in which participant observation supports an attempt to explain how elements of the social world are created and maintained. These are the strengths of the tool and are outlined here along with potential weaknesses. Following the work of Bailey (1994, p243-4) the strengths can be summarised as follows. Firstly, he suggests that it is easier to collect data on non-verbal behaviour through observation than other methods such as surveys. However, while this might be true, the mechanics of observing requires particular skills, identified by Creswell (2013) as including:

'remembering to take field notes, recording quotes accurately, determining the best timing for moving from non-participant to participant (if this role change is desired), keeping from being overwhelmed at the site with

information, and learning how to funnel the observations from the broad picture to a narrower one in time.' (p172)

It seems that the move between observer and participant is in itself a potential difficulty as the participant observer becomes somewhat 'schizophrenic' (Merriam, 1998, p103), seeking to balance participation in order to absorb the situation, with enough detachment to be able to observe and analyse in an objective way.

A second strength identified by Bailey (1994) is that ongoing behaviour patterns are identifiable as the observations take place over longer periods of time. This length of time also contributes to the third factor which is the development of relationships in the participants' own environment. While very time-consuming, staying in a situation for an extended period allows the researcher to see how events evolve over time, 'catching the dynamics of situations, the people, personalities, contexts, resources, roles, etc.' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p466). Morrison (1993, p88) argues that by 'being immersed in a particular context over time not only will the salient features of the situation emerge and present themselves but a more holistic view will be gathered of the interrelationships of factors'. Such immersion enables rich descriptions of 'backstage culture' (DeMunck and Sobo, 1998, p43), social processes and interaction. This seems to support the view that data derived from participant observation are 'strong on reality'.

A potential difficulty associated with immersion in a situation is that of 'going native', where the researcher can adopt the beliefs, values and behaviours of the group and cease to be a researcher or cease to be objective (Kawulich, 2005, p4). Proximity to the field, particularly for extended periods, can also raise ethical issues. For this study in particular 'going native' could have presented an issue as the initial setting was also my employment. However, it was a secondment rather than a permanent position and the keeping of field notes (discussed in the next section) helped to ensure that the role of researcher remained at the fore both day-to-day and over time. Ethics will be addressed through gaining relevant permission from the school to conduct the research and the informed consent of participants.

Bailey (1994) suggests that a fourth advantage of participant observations is that bias can be reduced because the observations are less reactive than other types of data-gathering techniques. The presence of the researcher reduces the reactivity effects (the effects of the researcher on the researched, changing the behaviour of the latter) (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

A potential difficulty associated with participant observation is that of validity. Whilst it seems clear that any observation-based research raises questions relating to subjectivity, the close involvement of the researcher and applicability to other situations are particular issues that potentially affect internal and external validity. Validity is discussed further in Section 5.18a. To overcome validity issues, Denzin (1970) suggests triangulation of data sources and research tools. Within this research, data collected through participant observation are supplemented with that derived from interviews and examination of records. In addition to this, reliability checks are used in order to strengthen the validity of any conclusions drawn. These are considered in the section discussing analysis of data (Section 5.17).

Following examination of the issues identified above, and prior to participant observation, a method for recording observation notes is required. These 'field notes' may record aspects such as portraits of informants, the physical setting, particular events and activities, and the researcher's own reactions (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Field notes are discussed further in the section below relating to journal writing. (Section 5.15).

Participant observation is an appropriate research tool for this study because of the secondment to a working role within the initial setting. This provides a unique opportunity to spend an extended period in the field, gathering data relevant to the initial thesis and elements identified for further examination.

## 5.15 Journal Writing

‘Writing is a form of permanent insurrection and qualitative researchers are often involved in permanent insurrection.’  
(Janesick, 1999, p511)

The sections below outline the writing that is considered to form journal writing, including consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of this research tool.

### 5.15 (i) What is a journal?

A journal is more than a diary. A diary records the ‘little experiences of everyday life that fill most of our working time and occupy the vast majority of our conscious attention’ (Wheeler & Reis, 1991, p340). Diaries are personal and often descriptive. Those descriptions are ‘often dictated by the writer’s thoughts and feelings about them and factual information is included in a way that supports the writer’s perspective at the time’ (Holly, 1997, p6). That is not to say that a journal does not also do this but, as will be discussed below, it provides the potential to do much more than describe a life lived.

Looking back through history, many famous individuals have kept a diary and the very fact that they kept such a document is what has led to them being well-known. Samuel Pepys (1893) and Anne Frank (1947) have vividly captured periods in history, Charles Darwin (1877) and Jean Piaget (1952) provided insights into child development and Abraham Maslow (1979) and Ira Progoff (1975) demonstrate an approach to the ‘growth’ of adults through journal writing. They used their writing not only as a way to record the events that were important in their lives at the time but also as a way of questioning commonly held values and beliefs. It could be suggested that this fact makes the records they kept journals rather than diaries. Although primarily a chronological record, they all fulfilled important secondary functions in that they focused on particular life events or areas of expertise, interest and/or experience.



Literary, scientific and historical figures might be well known to us but they are not the only individuals utilising journal writing. Journal writing is used as a therapeutic aid in the field of psychology. Janesick (1999, p509) describes psychologists' use of journal writing as, 'an attempt to bring order to one's experience and a sense of coherence to one's life'. They have been used as part of the therapy process to provide one way in which those seeking help can speak to their Self. Janesick (1999) adds that, 'the cathartic function of journal writing has been widely recommended by many schools of therapy' (p509).

Progoff (1975) has emphasised the difference between diary writing and what he has termed the 'Intensive Journal Method' thus:

'Diary writing usually involves the unstructured, chronological recording of the events of a person's life... the mere fact of continuously writing entries... is not sufficient in itself to bring about deep changes in a person's life.' (p87)

The implication here seems to be that the keeping of a journal is intended in some way to be instrumental in causing a person and, through that person's actions, circumstances to change.

Holly (1997) provides a useful description that captures the broader embrace of a journal:

'A journal is not merely a flow of impressions, it records impressions set in a context of descriptions of circumstances, others, the self, motives, thoughts, and feelings. Taken further, it can be used as a tool for analysis and introspection. It is a chronicle of events as they happen, a dialogue with the facts (objective) and interpretations (subjective), and perhaps most important, it provides a basis for developing an awareness of the difference between facts and interpretations. A journal becomes a dialogue with oneself over time. To review journal entries is to return to events and their interpretation with the perspective of time. Over time, patterns and relationships emerge that were previously

isolated events 'just lived'. Time provides perspective and momentum, and enables deeper levels of insight to take place.' (p5)

The view that a journal allows for the development of, and reflection on, personal thoughts over time is supported by other researchers. Hiemstra (2001, p19) says, 'journaling in its various forms is a means for recording personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights'. Progoff (1992) notes that, 'journal writing is ultimately a way of getting feedback from ourselves' (p68). A qualitative research journal will contain reflection that involves 'reviewing or reliving the experience to bring it into focus, and replaying from diverse points of view' (Boud, 2010, p.xix). Within a work environment, Moon (1999, p189) identifies one of the purposes of writing journals as, 'to enhance professional practice or the professional self in practice'.

As with most research methods there are ethical issues to be considered surrounding the use of journal writing as a tool. English (2001, p29-31) recognises that these arise mainly when journals are to be shared. Elbow and Clarke (1987) describe 'the fear of who will read the journal' (p23) and suggest that the writer ignores the 'audience'. It seems that, for a journal to truly capture what the author is thinking and feeling, it should remain a private document and therefore a tension is potentially created when the data are to be used for research purposes.

#### 5.15 (ii) What can a journal contain?

What is contained within a journal will depend on the purpose for which it is kept. Mallon (1995) categorises journal writers according to these different purposes into:

- Chroniclers, who keep their diary every day;
- Travellers, who keep a written record during a special time;
- Pilgrims, who are engaged in self-discovery;
- Creators, who record ideas or inventions;
- Apologists, who are justifying something they have done;
- Confessors, who conduct ritual and anonymous unburdenings; and

- Prisoners, who live their lives through keeping a journal.

Researchers are likely to come under one or more of the first four categories as they are recording for a particular purpose which may well also fall within a given time frame.

Holly (1997, p13-14) describes five of the different types of writing that might be included in a journal: journalistic, analytical, ethnographic, creative-therapeutic, and introspective. She goes on to say:

‘You might document your thoughts, feelings, questions, statements, plans, descriptions, analyses, and introspection as you explore your work and professional development.’  
(p45)

A journal can include field notes, discussed below (Section 5.15 (iii)). These can be written both *in situ* and away from the situation and they contain the records of observations.

#### 5.15 (iii) Field notes

The ‘thick descriptions’, which it seems from the methodological consideration so far are an integral part of qualitative research have ‘components that require recording’ (Carspecken, 1996, p47). These observed components are recorded in the form of field notes.

Field notes are ‘observations and reflections concerning “the field”’ (Atkinson, 1992, p5) that are produced in or in close proximity to the field. Proximity means that field notes are written more or less contemporaneously with the events, experiences and interactions they describe and recount (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2001, p353). They are a form of representation, (turning observed events and people into written accounts) that also allows ‘incidental highlights of the episode’ (Van Maanen, 1988, p117) to be recorded. Field notes can be reviewed, studied and thought about time and time again.

There is some disagreement among researchers over whether field notes can contain description and reflection. Emerson *et al.* (2001) suggest that:

‘Some field researchers consider field notes to be writings that record *both* what they learn and observe about the activities of others *and* their own actions, questions and reflections. But others insist on a sharp distinction between records of what others said and did – the ‘data’ of field work – and writings incorporating their own thoughts and reactions.’ (p354)

There is greater consensus, however, over the need to complete field notes in a timely fashion. Wolcott (1973), for example, suggests that the researcher:

‘should never resume observations until the notes from the preceding observation are complete ... there is little point in returning to the classroom or school and reducing the impact of one set of events by superimposing another and more recent set.’ (p142)

Although they are personal and by their very nature idiosyncratic, field notes contain careful records that can be easily and repeatedly reviewed by the researcher. Field notes, it could be suggested then, also provide a first opportunity to write down and develop initial interpretations and analysis. Lofland and Lofland (1995) note that in writing field notes, ‘analytic ideas and inferences will begin to occur to you’ (p94). This initial writing enables the field researcher to carry forward analysis contemporaneously with the collection of field data (Emerson *et al.*, 2001, p361).

As a research tool, the writing of field notes does have weaknesses, notably that they are inevitably selective. Atkinson (1992, p17) suggests that they never provide a complete record as the researcher writes about those things that he or she perceives to be significant. Field notes, like all descriptions, ‘are selective, purposed, angled and voiced, because they are authored’ (Emerson *et al.*, 1995, p106). They present a version of the events and people captured, filtering rather than reflecting the reality. This

could, however, be viewed as advantageous if insignificant details are thus filtered out of the record. Equally, it could be considered that, 'seemingly innocent details might prove to be key; seemingly vital details may be irrelevant' (Boud, 2010, p.xix).

Within this research, field notes are intended to include both description and reflection, in the form of 'a running log written at the end of each day' (Jackson, 1990, p6). While field notes inevitably provide selective and partial reductions of lived and observed realities, they fix those realities in an examinable form, that is, in written texts that can be read, considered and selected in order to support analyses. It could be suggested that, through the use of field notes, researchers choose how to organise the chaos of life on a linear page.

#### 5.15 (iv) Reflection

The way in which journals can help their authors to develop, professionally or otherwise, is often described in terms of how journals can enhance reflection and reflective practice. Reflection has been described by Boud (2001, p10) as, 'a process of turning experience into learning, that is, a way of exploring experience in order to learn new things from it'. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985, p19) have described reflection as 'those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations'.

'Reflection involves taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it as a way to make sense of what has occurred. It involves exploring often messy and confused events and focusing on the thoughts and emotions that accompany them.' (Boud, 2001, p10)

Donald Schön (1983) developed an approach to reflection which he termed *reflection-in-action*. He argued that all effective practitioners are able to reflect on their experiences and learn from that reflection. This type of reflection, as its title suggests, takes place during the events and experiences themselves. That is not to say that reflection after the event could not be equally valuable. It is what I have termed '*reflection-post-*

*action*' that could provide the journal writer with a useful addition to recorded data.

Reflection is not simply thinking, but a process that also involves feelings, emotions, and decision making. Boud (2001) says:

'We can regard it as having three elements: return to experience, attending to feelings, and re-evaluation of experience'. (p14)

#### 5.15 (v) What are the advantages and disadvantages of using a journal?

An important advantage of keeping a journal is that a record is made of the things which otherwise might need to be held in the researcher's head. For many people this provides 'space' for thought and engaging in the process of reflection discussed above.

Further than that, Holly (1997, p46) suggests, 'writing can be a cathartic process and it can also promote change'.

'A fundamental benefit of diary methods is that they permit the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context, providing information complementary to that obtainable by more traditional designs.' (Reis, 1994, p91)

Keeping a professional journal allows researchers to record not only events but their perceptions about those events at a particular time. Once they have a series of these records discernment of patterns might be possible and connections could be identified. Recurring problems might therefore be better understood and strategies to avoid these developed and refined.

A journal can, however, be a complicated document to keep as it combines what Holly (1997, p7) calls, 'the structured, descriptive, and objective notes of the log and the free-flowing impressionistic meanderings of the diary'. It is difficult to complete descriptions without including interpretations so the journal writer as a researcher needs to recognise that they are just that.

Suzuki (2004) argues that any subjectivity is to be viewed positively stating that, 'the unabashedly biased perspective of the diary might provide a more honest perspective on the messy truth than do numerical research findings' (Downloaded from [www.tesl-ej.org](http://www.tesl-ej.org)).

The very fact that a journal is a written document can be problematic. It takes time to write and the author has to consider the selection of words that will create a sense of what has been experienced without writing so much or so little that all meaning is lost. It might not always be appropriate to write in note form or to construct lists as this could detract from the 'thick descriptions' that form such a good source of data. All of these factors can contribute to the writing in a journal being difficult data to analyse.

Janesick (1999) suggests that, 'journal writing allows one to reflect, to dig deeper if you will, into the heart of the words, beliefs, and behaviours we describe in our journals' (p513). This seems to be about more than just recall of events. Berkowitz (1997) argues that:

'the replicability of qualitative analysis is maintained [through a journal] in so far as others can be 'walked through' the analyst's thought processes and assumptions.' (p1)

Review of earlier reflections means that, 'a progressive clarification of insights is possible' (Hiemstra, 2001, p20).

Carp and Carp (1981) propose a further advantage of journal writing as a research tool being that the data are, 'less subjective to retrospective bias than interview data' (p292). They support recall of our own thoughts in contrast to attempts at reconstructing meaning from the words of others.

From a researcher's point of view, the keeping of a professional journal can lead to a depth of data not anticipated. The creation of portraits and cameos can add significantly to the 'richness' of description provided in a final text. An additional advantage of journal writing is that it can be private which allows for a sense of freedom in being able to record whatever the author chooses, however controversial or personal it might be. Private does not necessarily mean confidential however and ethics concerning the

accessibility of the data should be considered by the researcher as the content could be sensitive and relate to specific and easily identifiable individuals. Within this research, the complete journal will not be made available and confidentiality will be maintained through the changing of identifiers in the main thesis.

#### 5.15 (vi) Conclusion

Commentators such as Bolger *et al.* (2003) recognise that journal writing as a research tool has not been used to the extent that it could, stating:

‘few diary studies have capitalised on major events and transitions to study psychological change. Examples are school and family transitions, and scheduled health and occupational events. Such studies are powerful because they target periods when people and their environments are in flux.’ (p587)

McDonough and McDonough (1997) also comment on the suitability of the tool:

‘The theme of change over time and the sense of writing about a process is one that resonates directly with the use of diaries in educational research.’ (p121)

Journal writing in its fullest form has not perhaps been used within educational research because it is only rarely that researchers find themselves in a position such as the one within this research where participant observation over an extended period of time is possible.

Holly (1997) acknowledges that:

‘We know more about our workplaces and our practice than anyone else does, and through reflective writing and collegial discussion, we have many opportunities to be architects of our own improvement’. (p56)



Reflective journals have also begun to be utilised within education research to examine complexity (discussed further in Chapters 8 and 9). Phelps (2005) documents her use within a classroom-based learning and teaching project, suggesting that the reflective journal might record bifurcation points and emergence. Their application to education research from a complexity theory perspective, which examines levels that extend beyond the classroom, could equally be considered.

It seems that journal writing has much to offer in support of the research process. It is appropriate as a research tool for this study because the participant observation opportunity requires a vehicle through which to record not only observations but potentially reflections and initial analyses.

### **5.16 Interviews**

Participant observation, leading to the recording of field notes and the keeping of a journal are appropriate research tools for the initial setting of this study. They do, however, provide only an individual view of circumstances and events. Triangulation with other sources of data would strengthen their validity and reliability. Interviews are therefore considered here as they have already been identified as an appropriate tool for case study research (Flick, 2009; Johnson, 1994). Their use might also be appropriate within this research for case studies beyond the initial set of circumstances and where immersion for an extended period is not possible.

#### **5.16 (i) Definition**

The research interview is a conversation 'with a purpose' (Robson, 1993, p228). Cannell and Kahn (1968) consider it to be, 'a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information' (p527). The individuals involved are attempting to gain 'an insight into the experiences, concerns, interests, beliefs, values, knowledge and ways of seeing, thinking and acting of the other' (Schostak, 2006, p10), reinforcing that they are 'dynamic and iterative' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p15).

Interviews differ in a number of ways which have been usefully set out by Kvale (1996, p126-7) along a series of continua associated with the openness of their purpose, their degree of structure, the extent to which they are exploratory or hypothesis-testing, whether they seek description or interpretation and whether they are largely cognitive-focused or emotion-focused. Specific types of interview are considered in the following section.

#### 5.16 (ii) Types of interview

Many authors have written about the different types of interview (Schostak, 2006; Cohen *et al.*, 2000, 2011; Wengraf, 2001; Drever, 1995). Robson (1993) offers the following description:

‘At one extreme we have the *fully structured interview*, with predetermined set questions asked, and the responses recorded on a standardised schedule (effectively a questionnaire where the interviewer fills in the responses), through *semi-structured interview*, where the interviewer has worked out a set of questions in advance, but is free to modify their order based upon her perception of what seems most appropriate in the context of the ‘conversation’, can change the way they are worded, give explanations, leave out or include additional ones, to the *unstructured (completely informal) interview*, where the interviewer has a general area of interest and concern, but lets the conversation develop within this area.’ (p230)

It seems that the particular needs of the research should guide the selection of an interview type. Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggest that:

‘the more one wishes to gain comparable data – across people, across sites – the more standardised and quantitative one’s interview tends to become; the more one wishes to acquire unique, non-standardised, personalised information about how individuals view the world, the more one veers towards qualitative, open-ended, unstructured interviewing.’ (p270)

This research requires a number of basic exploratory questions but the potential for supplementing these with further content should be retained. Semi-structured interviews are therefore most appropriate and it is to those that attention now turns.

#### 5.16 (iii) Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews contain a number of primary questions set in advance by the researcher. The primary questions used in all three schools within this research are provided in Appendix 1. During the interview these are supplemented with further questions created by the interviewer based on the directions that the interview takes 'on-the-day'. Cohen *et al.* (2000) state that:

'a schedule is prepared but it is sufficiently open-ended to enable the contents to be re-ordered, digressions and expansions made, new avenues to be included, and further probing to be undertaken.' (p146)

The further questions asked may be prompts, probes or for additional information gathering. The interviewee is fairly free to include whatever they feel appropriate about the general topic under discussion during the interview. This suggests the need for the interviewer to be skilled at creating and asking appropriate supplemental questions in order to direct the interview and gather data relevant to the area of study. Drever (1995, p13) says that during a semi-structured interview, 'the interviewer can assert control when necessary' but this does depend very much on skill and experience. Semi-structured interviews are more difficult for someone who is not the researcher to carry out without very detailed guidance on the nature and range of additional questions to be asked. Within this study, all interviews are to be carried out by the researcher.

In order to ensure that interview data are of the highest possible quality, being appropriate, relevant and representative of the range of people in the whole research population in terms of views, situations and roles, it is important to select informants carefully. Lincoln and Guba (1985) say that, 'the researcher must be careful to use informants rather than informers, the

latter possibly having 'an axe to grind' (p252). Cohen *et al.* (2000, p144) provide additional guidelines about selection including evaluating informants in terms of reliability, competency, their knowledge about the situation, their relationship to other informants and their centrality or marginality to the organisation or situation.

The selection of informants has the potential to provide an opportunity for triangulation of data. Each person interviewed will have a different view of that which is being researched and triangulation involves the process of taking multiple perspectives of the same thing. Schostak (2006) says that:

'triangulation can be performed during an interview and between interviews as each question provides a different view, a different angle, a different approach to the 'thing' in question.' (p29)

As with any research method, there are issues of ethics to be considered. Wengraf (2001, p4) suggests that, 'the ethics of the research interview are that, at minimum, the informant should not be changed for the worse'. The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee requires at least some consideration (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Nunkoosing, 2005; Weis and Fine, 2000). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), for example, highlight the power asymmetry which suggests that the research interview should not be regarded as a completely open and free dialogue between egalitarian partners. The nature of an interview sets up a potentially 'unequal power dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee in which the interview is 'ruled' by the interviewer' (Creswell, 2013, p173). The interview provides information for the researcher, is based on the researcher's agenda and leads to the researcher's interpretations.

The issues associated with the nature of the interviewer-interviewee relationship cannot be easily addressed. They do, however, sensitise us to important challenges in qualitative interviewing that need to be anticipated.

A further ethical dimension of interviewing concerns the interpersonal interactions and production of information about people. The informed consent of the interviewees in this research will be gained before the

interviews by providing participants in advance with an overview of the research, its intended purpose and the possible benefits to others in similar circumstances in the future. Clear information will be given about who will have access to the data and assurance of confidentiality will be provided. This gives the potential participants an opportunity to consider whether they wish to be involved. Participants will also have an opportunity to examine their own interview transcripts once completed and to remove any or all of the content.

#### 5.16 (iv) The interview schedule

The importance of the interview schedule cannot be underestimated. 'Nothing is more important to the success of an interview study than having a good interview schedule' (Drever, 1995, p18). It ensures coverage and consistency across interviews so that answers from different informants can be compared. Following a preamble that reminds interviewees what they have agreed to and what the research is about, the schedule is developed using the research questions as the starting point (Drever, 1995, p18).

Different parts can be created within the schedule as the information sought might be in distinct sections. Robson (1993, p228) identifies these as, 'seeking to find out what people know, what they do, and what they think or feel'. He goes on to say that, 'this leads, respectively, to questions concerned with *facts*, with *behaviour*, and with *beliefs* or *attitudes*.' The actual questions used in an interview schedule can also be categorised into three types: open, closed and scale questions. Open questions allow the interviewee to provide whatever quantity of data they choose in responding and have the potential to elicit more full answers. Closed questions require a yes/no or single word answer, often from a selection provided. Scale questions, which are often just statements, ask interviewees to say to what extent they agree or disagree with a given proposition.

Cohen and Manion (1989) propose the advantages of open-ended questions to include that, 'they are flexible; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of a respondent's knowledge; and they can result in unexpected or unanticipated answers which may suggest hitherto unthought-of relationships or hypotheses' (p313). The disadvantages,

identified by Robson (1993) are, 'the possibilities for loss of control by the interviewer, and in particular in being more difficult to analyse than closed ones' (p234).

A majority of semi-structured interviews will include the use of prompting and/or probing questions or statements. Drever (1995) states, 'the purpose of prompts and probes is to help people say what they want to say' (p23). As with many aspects of qualitative research, however, 'the use of probes is something of an art-form and difficult to transmit to the novice interviewer' (Robson, 1993, p244).

#### 5.16 (v) Advantages and disadvantages of interviews

In addition to those identified in relation to power imbalance and types of questions, other advantages and disadvantages relating to semi-structured interviews are outlined below. Schostak (2006) identifies that, the interview is not a simple tool with which to mine information' (p1) and the complications are outlined by Wengraf (2001) as being that, 'they are high-preparation, high-risk, high-gain, and high-analysis operations' (p5).

It seems that any discussion between two people where there is an exchange of ideas and views has the potential to be problematic as they may misunderstand or not agree. There is also potential to make a very positive contribution to research as part of the human condition is to have one's own opinions and those may be strong when concerned with career and employment. This view is supported by Cohen *et al.* (2000, p267) when they suggest, in relation to education research, 'interviews enable participants – be they interviewers or interviewees – to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view'.

Although interviews allow for a greater depth than other methods of data collection, they are open to issues of bias and subjectivity. Schostak (2006) states that, 'each interview is a partial (both incomplete and biased) view of particular states of affairs or events' (p15) with each one providing a narrow and focussed view of a set of circumstances. This suggests that in order to gather a wider view, interviews with many individuals are

necessary which can be time-consuming and generate a vast amount of data that need to be analysed. Wengraf (2001) suggests that this issue is particularly difficult for semi-structured interviews when he says they, 'require more time for analysis and interpretation after the session' (p5).

The interview has advantages over other data collection methods, such as questionnaires, which relate to the flexibility afforded it by the presence of the interviewer. He or she is able to answer queries and deal with perceived misunderstandings immediately. Oppenheim (1992, p81-2) suggests that interviews also have a higher response rate than questionnaires because respondents become more involved and, hence, motivated.

Even though there are difficulties associated with interviewing as discussed above, these are outweighed by advantages and it still offers an appropriate and effective data collection method when research involves people and aspects of their lives. It seems to be about gathering rich and realistic data. Wengraf (2001) says that, 'to go into something in depth is to get a sense of how the apparently straight-forward is actually more complicated, of how the 'surface appearances' may be quite misleading about 'depth realities' (p6). The semi-structured interview is therefore an appropriate research tool for this study.

#### 5.16 (vi) Interviews for this research

Within this study, semi-structured interviews, rather than more or less structured, or other techniques such as questionnaires have been selected as there are a number of questions to explore with interviewees without limiting the opportunity to elicit further relevant information. Participants to interview will be selected through purposive sampling (discussed in Section 5.12) and interview transcripts will be given to interviewees to check for factual accuracy and permission to use the transcripts will at this point be gained. The interviews will be conducted in a private room at school, although not during the school day. As the researcher, I will conduct and digitally record all the interviews, with the prior consent of the interviewees, and later transcribe and save them as anonymised, uniquely identified files in a central database.

Some of the participants will be people with whom I am working as part of my employment and others will be from institutions where I have no contact other than through this research. Clarity about how and why they have been selected and what the purpose of the research is will be important, as will consideration of 'power relationships' as I will potentially be known to those involved as an employee of the local authority. In seeking to overcome this issue, the use of, for example, a semi-structured interview schedule to maintain consistency, and the creation of coding categories that focus on the participants' views (discussed in Section 5.17 relating to data analysis) will be employed. During all of the interviews, I will at least be sensitised to the potential challenges that may arise.

### **5.17 Analysis of Data**

Data analysis will be based on the set of transcribed interview and journal data. This process is discussed below.

#### 5.17 (i) Qualitative coding and data analysis

The purpose of data analysis for this study is to identify themes emerging that relate to the initial thesis and subsequent research questions. In support of that, data analysis will involve, 'organising, accounting for, and explaining the data ... noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p147) in order to move 'from unstructured and messy data to ideas about what is going on in the data' (Morse and Richards, 2002, p110). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) add to the list of processes, 'breaking it [data] into manageable units, synthesising it and, discovering what is important' (p145).

More formal analysis often starts with identification of themes emerging from the raw data and the creation of codes that will allow the data to be sorted into and across these themes. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to this as 'open coding' with the aim of this process being, 'to create descriptive, multi-dimensional categories which form a preliminary framework for analysis' (Hoepfl, 1997, p55). She goes on to suggest:



'Words, phrases or events that appear to be similar can be grouped into the same category. These categories may be gradually modified or replaced during the subsequent stages of analysis.' (p55).

Developing codes to facilitate data analysis can be difficult. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest this is because:

'it means putting aside preconceived notions about what the researcher expects to find in the research, and letting the data and interpretation of it guide analysis. Coding also means learning to think abstractly. It requires searching for the right word or two that best describe conceptually what the researcher believes is indicated by the data.' (p160)

The initial coding of data can be followed by secondary analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2008) call this 'axial coding' and describe it as, 'cross-cutting or relating concepts to each other' (p195). Secondary analysis can move the researcher towards the creation of a 'bigger picture' and help in the quest to acquire new understanding of the phenomenon being examined. It is intended to lead to the construction of a conceptual model which in turn allows the researcher to determine whether enough data exist to support the interpretations made.

The final stage of data analysis is the creation of the research report. This involves, 'deciding what you will tell others' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p145). Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that, 'the research report will be a rich, tightly woven account that closely approximates the reality it represents' (p57). This brings us back once again, to the 'thick descriptions', the 'deep, dense, detailed accounts' (Denzin, 1989, p83) that, 'create verisimilitude ... that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study' (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p129)

### 5.17 (ii) Coding and data analysis for this research

The review of literature suggested that inclusion of codes relating to leadership (Burns, 1978; Coleman and Earley, 2005; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999, 2002), the management of change (Cameron and Green, 2004; Fullan, 1993, 2000, 2005; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998; Reynolds, 1991, 1995, 1996; Stoll and Myers, 1998) and challenging circumstances within education settings (Chapman and Harris, 2004; Gray, 2000; Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2001) would potentially be relevant for this research. Interviews highlighted further factors such as vulnerability, language and multiple change, that were added. This provided an initial set of codes (Table 5.1).

<b>Description</b>	<b>Code</b>
Leadership Style	LS
Communication	COM
Staff / Leaders from outside the school	LOS
External support for school	EXS
Relationships / Group Dynamics	RGD
Humanity in headship	HH
Vulnerability	VUL
Multiple Change (more than one thing changing at same time)	MC
Teaching	T
Emotional Anxiety	EAX
Language	LANG
Change	CGE
Challenging Circumstances	
- Ofsted / Inspection	CC-O
- Instability in leadership	CC-I
- Workload	CC-W
- Experience / Lack of experience	CC-EX
- Results (measureable outcomes)	CC-R
Stages of the Change Cycle	CCS
Morale	MOR

**Table 5.1** Categories for coding data – September 2008

This set of codes was used initially to code a single interview which was then used as a reliability check (discussed in Section 5.18d). The reliability check, further data collection and the emergence of themes led to refinement of this set of codes with the final collection provided at the end of this chapter (Table 5.3). An extract of coded interview transcript is provided for exemplification in Appendix 9.

The creation and refinement of the codes used to describe the emerging themes in this study was developed using what could be considered to be a grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and followed those processes described by a number of authors (Patton, 1990; Hoepfl, 1997; Corbin and Struass, 2008). Themes and categories emerged out of the raw data and concepts were developed in terms of their properties and dimensions through 'axial coding'. The whole of the data analysis process was not linear as different themes became more prominent and were developed at different times, with a return to the initial data used in order to examine in greater depth the phenomenon identified.

Strengthening the interpretations of data from this research has been achieved partly through a process of returning repeatedly to the raw data to determine whether there are sufficient similarly coded entries to create a body of evidence relating to each theme. A move to consider the data collected through the complexity theory paradigm (discussed in Chapter 8) provides a further opportunity to re-examine the entire data set through a different lens. Measures to ensure validity, reliability and triangulation have also been used and are discussed further in the following sections.

In terms of reporting, extracts from the data collected during this research have been woven into the body of this thesis in an attempt to engender in the reader a sense that they have lived some of the experiences of those involved.

## 5.18 Research Authenticity

The following section discusses validity, reliability and triangulation, and outlines the strategies that will be implemented in an attempt to strengthen the basis of any findings of this research.

### 5.18a Validity

Validity describes the extent to which an account accurately 'represents those features that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise' (Winter, 2000, p597). There is a need for it to be addressed because, as Maxwell (1992) suggests 'it has long been a key issue in debates over the legitimacy of qualitative research' (p279). In quantitative research both internal and external validity are considered important. Strauss and Corbin (1990), however, highlight the need to deal with qualitative research differently saying:

'the usual canons of 'good science' ... require redefinition in order to fit the realities of qualitative research.' (p250)

External validity is considered by Winter (2000) to be, 'the extent to which the results can be generalised and thus applied to other populations' (p605). For qualitative studies external validity is often considered irrelevant (Winter, 2000; Cohen *et al.*, 2011) as the research does not seek to generalise but, rather, to represent accurately the phenomenon being investigated.

Generalisability to the wider population in quantitative research can be interpreted within qualitative research as comparability and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Eisenhart and Howe, 1992, p647). This can be described broadly as the potential for findings to translate from one research setting to other specific ones rather than a wider population. Schofield (1996) suggests that in order to do this the researcher should provide 'a clear, detailed and in-depth description' (p200) but Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that, 'it is not the researcher's task to provide an index of transferability' (p316) and that readers should judge this potential for themselves. Lincoln and Guba (1985) go on to suggest:

'researchers should provide sufficiently rich data for the readers and users of research to determine whether transferability is possible. In this respect transferability requires thick description.' (p316)

This position is reinforced by Denzin (1989) who states that:

'To use thick descriptions for establishing credibility, researchers employ a constructivist perspective to contextualise the people or sites studied. The process of writing using this procedure is to provide as much detail as possible.' (p151).

It could be considered that generalisability in the widest sense is less important in qualitative research than consideration of the 'particular situations to which findings might be generalisable' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p45).

Internal validity is important to the credibility of qualitative research. It 'seeks to demonstrate that the explanation of a particular event, issue or set of data which a piece of research provides can actually be sustained by the data' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p183).

'Internal validity relates to whether the findings or results of the research relate to and are caused by the phenomena under investigation and not other unaccounted for influences.' (Winter, 2000, p604)

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) suggest that internal validity, important in this qualitative research, can be addressed in a number of ways:

- 'Using low-inference descriptors;
- Using multiple researchers;
- Using participant researchers;
- Using peer examination of data;

- Using mechanical means to record, store and retrieve data.’  
(p338)

Bias can be viewed as influential within considerations of validity from two different perspectives; that of the researcher and that of the participants. In addition to the objectivity of the researcher, other aspects of their practice such as ‘depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached and the extent of triangulation’ (Winter, 2000, p2) might all be influential. In terms of the participants themselves, their opinions, attitudes and perspectives together can contribute to a degree of bias. Gronlund (1981) suggests that validity should be seen as ‘a matter of degree rather than as an absolute state’ (p48) and Cohen *et al.* (2011) recognise that, ‘at best researchers strive to minimise invalidity and maximise validity’ (p179).

Cohen *et al.* (2011) say of ensuring validity:

‘The attempt to build out invalidity is essential if the researcher is to be able to have confidence in the elements of the research plan, data acquisition, data processing analysis, interpretation and its ensuing judgement.’ (p198)

The above suggests that validity can be an issue at different stages of research. At the design stage, the inappropriate selection of a methodology and subsequent research tools or the biased selection of researchers are examples of the possible problems. During data collection reactivity effects (discussed in Section 5.14), inter-rater reliability and the withdrawal of participants can be issues. Data analysis is susceptible to invalidity through issues such as the selective use of data or the making of inferences that are not supported sufficiently by the data. Finally, at the stage of reporting data the lack of contextualisation or use of data either selectively or unrepresentatively could be problematic. It seems that consideration of each of the stages is necessary in order to maximise validity.

Validity within interviews is threatened by sources of bias, described already in terms of characteristics of the interviewer and participants but additionally relating to the substantive content of the questions.

Additionally, leading questions might be used inappropriately, although Kvale (1996, p158) argues that they can be necessary in some instances. Power imbalance is a further issue that potentially affects validity in interview situations, discussed already as part of the consideration of ethics (Section 5.11).

Observations are at risk of invalidity in the form of bias. The issues include the selective or deficient attention of the observer, interpersonal aspects such as what a researcher may like or dislike about particular participants, reactivity, recording decisions, and the potential problems associated with inference (Moyle, 2002, p179; Robson, 2002, p324-5; Flick, 2009, Chapter 17). The issue of validity in observation can also relate to the indicators selected to represent a particular phenomenon, for example, what might count as 'vulnerability' or 'emotional anxiety' and how this will be judged fairly by a number of different observers.

Minimisation of invalidity within this research will be achieved through selection of an appropriate methodology and research tools, use of a single researcher to conduct interviews and observations, participant observation, and peer examination of data, as will be discussed in Section 5.18d.

### **5.18b Reliability**

In terms of the relationship between reliability and validity, Brock-Utne (1996) states that, 'reliability is a precondition of validity' (p614) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) agree suggesting that:

'Since there can be no validity without reliability a demonstration of the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability].' (p316).

However, establishing reliability within qualitative research can still be considered to be an important process. A number of authors (Winter, 2000; Stenbacka, 2001; Golafshani, 2003) have suggested that within qualitative research there are more appropriate terms for reliability, such as, credibility, confirmability, dependability and trustworthiness. Whereas in quantitative research reliability suggests that replication of results should be possible if

the same methods and sample are used, within qualitative studies the individuality of situations that restricts replicability is what provides the approach with its strength. Each study therefore needs to be considered credible.

'In qualitative methodologies reliability includes fidelity to real life, context- and situation-specificity, authenticity, comprehensiveness, detail, honesty, depth of response and meaningfulness to the respondents.' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000 p119)

In qualitative research, therefore, reliability can be considered to be the match between what is recorded by the researcher and what actually happens in reality. This can be achieved through, 'a degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p48). The dependability of qualitative research can be strengthened in a number of ways (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p108-9; Anfara *et al.*, 2002; Golafshani, 2003, p601) including prolonged engagement in the field, the use of reflexive journals, triangulation, and independent audit of research methods.

Reliability in interviews can be strengthened through increased structure, by ensuring that there is consistency not only in the questions asked but in the wording used with each respondent (Silverman, 1993). The advantage of less structured interviews is, however, that respondents might potentially be better able to demonstrate their view of the phenomenon under consideration. Hence, it seems that increased reliability in this respect might lead to decreased validity and therefore, based on the proposition that the demonstration of validity is sufficient to establish reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p316), the less structured interview would be preferable for qualitative research.

Reliability of interview data can be compromised through the data analysis process because even detailed transcripts that record silences and non-verbal behaviour can later be taken out of context.



Maximising reliability in observation data can be achieved through 'habituation' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p474), where the researcher remains in a situation for so long that participants become used to their presence and behave in a natural way. Writing up field notes as soon as possible after events also strengthens reliability (Lofland, 1971, p104-6).

Reliability in observations can relate to the application of the 'indicators' such as 'vulnerability' or 'emotional anxiety' being applied consistently to all appropriate occurrences with no variation in interpretation. This can be problematic even for a single observer and to a greater extent between multiple observers. Statistical tests to measure the degree of agreement in inter-rater reliability can, however, be applied.

Reliability will be addressed in this study through the use of appropriate research tools such as a reflexive journal and semi-structured interviews. The latter will be conducted exclusively by the researcher, to minimise the decontextualisation effect of transcripts, and using consistently applied questions and language. An extended period in the field, including interviews and observation will support the collection of comprehensive and accurate data. Triangulation through the use of multiple research tools and also relating to the data analysis, as outlined in Sections 5.18c and 5.18d, will also be implemented.

### **5.18c Triangulation**

Triangulation is considered to be, 'a strategy (test) for improving the validity and reliability of research or evaluation of findings' (Golafshani, 2003, p603). Its importance in qualitative research is that it can, 'control bias and establish valid propositions because traditional scientific techniques are incompatible with this alternate epistemology' (Mathison, 1988, p13).

Two types of triangulation have been identified that bridge issues of validity and reliability. Denzin describes the 'within-method' type (1978, p301), checking reliability, and this is compared by Jick (1979, p602) to the 'between-method' kind, relating to validity. In short, 'within-method' triangulation essentially involves cross-checking for internal consistency or reliability while 'between-method' triangulation tests the degree of external

validity. Denzin (1970) also identifies types of triangulation that are different to the methodological type outlined above. Relevant to education research, he suggests additionally time triangulation (including longitudinal and cross-sectional studies), space triangulation (where a number of geographically separate settings are investigated) and investigator triangulation (when more than one researcher investigates the same phenomena).

As a validity procedure, it seems that qualitative researchers regularly use methodological triangulation, aiming to provide corroborating evidence collected through multiple methods, such as observations, interviews, and documents in order to identify themes. The findings generated are valid because researchers go through this process relying on multiple forms of evidence rather than a single set of data in the study. It is essentially a strategy that can aid in the elimination of bias and allow the dismissal of plausible rival explanations such that a truthful proposition about some social phenomenon can be made (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Denzin, 1978; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest, 1966).

However, in all the forms of triangulation, one basic flaw potentially exists. As Jick (1979) describes:

‘The effectiveness of triangulation rests on the premise that the weaknesses in each single method will be compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another.’ (p604)

Whilst each method used will have strengths and weaknesses, triangulation supposes that the strengths are exploited rather than the weaknesses being combined to create a negative effect. Rohner (1977) identifies this potential difficulty stating that, ‘it is assumed that multiple and independent measures do not share the same weaknesses or potential for bias’ (p134).

Denzin (1978) counters this opinion stating:

‘The rationale for this strategy is that the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another: and by

combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each while overcoming their unique deficiencies.' (p302)

For qualitative research there can be advantages to uncovering disparity between sources of data. Barbour (1998) suggests that:

'in using triangulation of several data sources in quantitative research, any exception may lead to a disconfirmation of the hypothesis whereas exceptions in qualitative research are dealt with to modify the theories and are fruitful.' (p353)

In this study elements of methodological within- and between-methods triangulation will be used. Multiple methods are incorporated in the research design including interviews and participant observation recorded in a reflexive journal. Within-methods triangulation will involve peer examination of data as outlined below.

#### **5.18d Validity and Reliability Checks for this Research**

While conducting interviews and observations exclusively by a single researcher potentially reduces the risk of bias and removes inter-rater reliability issues, it seems that an opportunity to measure the extent to which the research indicators (codes) are appropriately identified and applied would strengthen the reliability and validity of this research. Blind reliability checks relating to these issues are outlined below. The design and results of these checks are included together here for ease of reference.

One transcribed interview will be coded using the initial set of codes provided in Table 5.1. Once shared with my tutor to ensure that the presentation of the data will be appropriate for the purpose, it will be used to complete two different 'blind' reliability tests. Each will involve an experienced work colleague who is likely to have some understanding of aspects of this study without any direct involvement in the particular circumstances. The first blind reliability test will involve providing one colleague with an uncoded version of the interview and the list of coding categories and requesting completion of their own coding. The similarities

and differences will then be examined. The second test will involve providing a different colleague with the same interview but without a set of the coding categories. The test will request creation of a list of possible categories or themes. The results will then be discussed for clarification purposes.

A revision to the set of codes may then be completed and these will then be used to code the entire set of interview and journal data. Following this, coded interviews will be shared with the interviewees to check for accuracy and allow for amendments which could further promote reliability.

#### 5.18d (i) Blind reliability test one analysis

Comparison between the two coded interviews noted where:

- the same code had been used – 53 occurrences
- the blind reliability included an additional coding – 12 occurrences
- data had been coded differently (with a note of the two codes) – 4 occurrences
- the original coding included an extra code (with a note of what that code was) – 38 occurrences

Of the 12 additional coding occurrences in the blind reliability test, five were a double code where the original had used only one, five were added as they described the data more fully and two were disregarded as they coded what had happened rather than relating to a theme. For example, the extract:

‘When the call to tell us we were going to be inspected came, and the headteacher was off sick and I hadn’t had any office time, I went into an adrenalin rush and informed my second in command...’

was coded in the blind reliability test as ‘Communication’. This describes what the interviewee did, compared with the ‘Emotional Anxiety’ code that I had attributed as this seemed to categorise the reason for doing it. The

detail of the coding differences is summarised in a table provided in Appendix 6.

Of the 4 occasions when the interview data were coded differently three of the original codings were changed and one addition was made.

The 38 occasions when the original coded interview had entries and the blind reliability test did not seem to be related to a desire as a researcher to code the data as fully as possible. Sixteen of the instances, for example, were where two codes had been used to describe a piece of data and the blind reliability process involved the assignment of only one.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, p411) suggest that a figure in excess of 90% should be a minimum in measuring inter-rater reliability, so this figure is being applied to these tests as they could be considered to be similar in nature. The formula they provide, and which is applied, is thus:

$$\frac{\text{Number of times two observers agree}}{\text{Number of possible opportunities to agree}} \times 100$$

Shaughnessy and Slawson (2003) also suggest a figure in excess of 90%, saying:

‘Other measures of inter-rater reliability use correlations, and here coefficients of > 0.90 (i.e. over 90%) should be sought.’ (p111)

Overall alterations to the original coding in this blind reliability test were five additions and four changes which reflects a difference of nine out of an initial set of 115 codes (7.8%), providing a reliability figure of 92.2%.

#### 5.18d (ii) Blind reliability test two analysis

The table below (Table 5.2) relates to the second blind reliability test, involving the creation by a colleague of a potential set of codes or themes from the interview data. Attempts to match the themes and codes suggested through the test to those from the initial coding list have been

made and a commentary on that process provided in addition to details of any actions that resulted.

**Table 5.2** Coding categories / themes suggested by the blind reliability test and matched to the researcher's existing set

<b>Theme suggested by Blind Reliability Tester</b>	<b>My coding categories that would relate to the themes (Dec 08)</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Personal	LS/MOR/COM/RGD/HH/VUL/ EAX/CC-W/CC-EX (leadership style, morale, communication, relationships, humanity, vulnerability, emotional anxiety, workload, lack of experience)	'Personal' could be broken down further by the original codes.
Background – head, staff, management		Although anything significant coded under this heading would also be included elsewhere, based on the focus of this study, it would be interesting to draw all these references together to see if there are common factors. Add to coding categories.
Early indicators		This could include any 'critical incidents' which can be looked back on as the starting point for particular difficulties or challenging circumstances. Include in future coding categories.
Inspection –	CC-O	Codes similar

process	(Ofsted/inspection)	
Issues	MC (multiple change)	Each issue would be an aspect of change so 'issues' implies what my coding called multiple change.
Support	EXS/LOS (external support for school / leadership from outside the school)	'Support' separated into that given to the school on a long-term basis and that provided at intervals.
Category – Ofsted	CC-O (Ofsted/inspection)	Codes similar
Impact – on inspection outcome, of being in a category	CC-O (Ofsted/inspections)	Impact would be coded as part of the challenging circumstances caused by the inspection process.
Change – imposed	CGE (change)	The difference between imposed and self-imposed change is likely to be one of the considerations following the data analysis.
Change – self-imposed	CGE (change)	
Plan	LS/CC-O (leadership style, Ofsted/inspection)	All of the items which might be included under the 'plan' theme would also be coded with either LS, CGE or CC-O
Learning Environment	CGE/T/EXS (change, teaching, external support for school)	In original codes this would come under CGE or T or EXS
HMI	CC-O (Ofsted/inspection)	Codes similar
Evidence – data	CC-R (results – measureable outcomes)	Codes similar
Children and impact on them		This is a really important theme which up to now has not been included. Include

		in future coding categories.
	CCS (stages of the change cycle)	<i>These three coding categories not covered by the blind reliability themes although 'instability in leadership' could be included within the 'early indicators' theme suggested here. The 'language' category might become a secondary consideration. The Change Cycle category comes from literature review and would not necessarily expect a blind reliability test to suggest such a category.</i>
	LANG (language)	
	CC-L (changes in leadership)	

**Table 5.2** Coding categories / themes suggested by the blind reliability test and matched to the researcher's existing set

The three changes made to the original coding categories following this blind reliability test were all additions. Firstly a code relating to 'Early Indicators' was added in order to explore data relating to this aspect of primary schools facing challenging circumstances. Related to this, the second addition was that of a category for 'Previous Circumstances'. Although what is coded in this way might also be included under other categories, it could be worthwhile to draw all the related data together. The third addition was a category about children in these sets of challenging circumstances.

Three of the codes originally identified were not matched to the blind reliability set of codes/themes. 'Stages of the Change Cycle' related specifically to research literature and would be unlikely to have been identified from the interview data provided. Therefore two codes from an original set of 20 were not matched, providing a reliability figure of 90%.



The revised coding categories, with amendments shown in italics, are provided in Table 5.3. Examination of coded interviews by interviewees resulted in no amendments.

<b>Description</b>	<b>Code</b>
Leadership Style	LS
Communication	COM
Staff / Leaders from outside the school ( <i>temporary deployment from local authority</i> )	LOS
External support for school	EXS
Relationships / Group Dynamics	RGD
Humanity in headship	HH
Vulnerability	VUL
Multiple Change (more than one thing changing at same time)	MC
Teaching	T
Emotional Anxiety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Headteacher</i></li> <li>- <i>Teacher</i></li> <li>- <i>Other</i></li> </ul>	EAX-HT EAX-T EAX-O
Language	LANG
Change	CGE
Challenging Circumstances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ofsted / Inspection</li> <li>- <i>Changes</i> in leadership</li> <li>- Workload</li> <li>- Experience / Lack of experience</li> <li>- Results (measureable outcomes)</li> <li>- <i>Amalgamation</i></li> </ul>	CC-O CC-L CC-W CC-EX CC-R CC-A
Stages of the Change Cycle (might use later)	CCS
Morale	MOR
<i>Early Indicators</i>	<i>EI</i>
<i>Children and the impact on them</i>	<i>CI</i>
<i>Previous circumstances</i>	<i>PC</i>
<i>Impact</i> (positive, on the school holistically, on systems, on adults)	<i>IMP</i>

**Table 5.3** Revised coding categories - January 2009

### **5.19 Concluding Comments**

This chapter has established the most appropriate methodology and research tools to investigate the key elements of this study. In summary, the research is qualitative in philosophy and uses a case study approach. It will use purposive (as well as opportunistic) sampling and will involve the collection of data through semi-structured interviews, participant observation during an extended period in the field, and examination of records. Observation records will be recorded in the form of field notes as part of a reflexive journal. Coding will be used to explore the data collected and appropriate reliability and validity measures will be employed. Ethical considerations will be given throughout.

**Chapter 6**  
**The Schools**

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the context for each of the case studies prior to the findings and analysis chapter that weaves together data from all three in thematic analyses. This in turn leads into at least the beginnings of an 'overall picture of how the system works' (Fetterman, 2010, p10) presented through a complexity theory lens.

Acacia Junior School, the initial set of circumstances examined, provided a more extended research opportunity and is therefore a more detailed account within this chapter. This is included in order to assist the reader with creating 'a feel for' what it was like to be 'inside' a school facing challenging circumstances and it seeks to convey some of the aspects of practice that might cause institutions to be experiencing difficulties. It also provides a flavour of some of the themes that later emerged from the data collected at all three schools. The research opportunity arose from my secondment to the role of deputy headteacher and utilised participant observation in addition to interviews for data collection. The case study is exemplified using extracts from the journal kept during my time at the school. The second and third case study outlines provide an overview of each school but in less detail. Data were collected through interviews as my role within each school was only that of researcher. Following a summary of some key statistical information, relevant historical background to each school's particular circumstances and details about how the school came to be in difficulty are provided.

	Acacia	Willow	Elm
Phase of education	Junior	Primary	First and Middle
Number on roll	154	308	354
Free School Meal entitlement (%)	53.3	23.4	6.2
English as an Additional Language (EAL) (%)	17.6	32.1	6.7
Special Educational Needs (%)	27.6	19.2	17.5
Stability / Mobility (%)	81.2	75.6	82.5
Absence (2010-11 %)	7.9	6.5	4.9
<b>EducationACORN data (%) *</b>			
Group A – Contextually challenged	91.9	35.5	11.3
Group E – Educationally hesitant	4.3	46.4	24.6
Group F – Aspirational families	1.4	8.2	32.2
Group G – Affluent establishments	0.5	0.3	29.4

\* EducationACORN data is explained below

**Table 6.1** Statistical characteristics of the case study schools

EducationACORN data are produced by a company called CACI. The data provide an indicator of deprivation, more accurate than previous measures such as entitlement to Free School Meals because it focuses on homes with children rather than the broader range of residents within a particular postcode area. Four of the eight categorisations have been included in the table above as they provide a useful comparison between the catchment area demographic characteristics of the three schools where research was carried out and they are the four categories nationally that contain more than 90% of Britain's households where there are children living.

Categories B-D are labelled by CACI as representing deprived foundations, disconnected neighbourhoods and metropolitan aspirers. An eighth 'unclassified' category also exists.

## 6.2 Acacia Junior School

Alongside the daily work in school, interviews, observation and reflection as a researcher were taking place. The intention here, however, is to separate out an account of events in the form of a timeline and a more personal view of circumstances to provide background and contextual information.

By way of introduction, a cameo of an event at Acacia Junior School is provided. It took place during a visit from Her Majesty's Inspectorate and during the period of research at the school.

An irate father arrived with his son before school started, behaving in a very aggressive manner in the entrance lobby, which was isolated from the main school building by a locked door with an electronic release operated from the adjoining school office. The gentleman was over six feet tall and clad only in a vest and shorts which revealed his fairly impressive collection of tattoos, creating a somewhat intimidating presence. He was angry that his child, who had been excluded from another school based on unacceptable behaviour, was being bullied and this school was allowing it to happen. The father was raising his voice and swearing at the school's office administrator who would not release the lock to allow him to enter the school. Having witnessed the event unfolding, I made the decision to attempt to diffuse the situation. I therefore went through the locked door and joined him in the lobby, where I was then unable to regain entry to school without the lock being released. The space felt very small. I was empathetic in suggesting that I knew he only had his son's interests at heart but asked that he talk to me quietly so as not to upset his child further and then spent probably fifteen minutes, with an audience of other parents, some of the school's staff and one of the HMI inspectors, reassuring him that everyone was treated with the same regard in the school and the matter would be resolved. Fortunately in that instance the father became calm and we were able to arrange a more appropriate meeting.

This serves to demonstrate not only the difficult and sensitive nature of work within a troubled school but the potential relentlessness of operating in an environment where expecting the unexpected is always necessary. It also exemplifies the time-consuming nature of issues which can take the

school's leadership away from a focus on school improvement. That is not to suggest that in less challenged areas there are no problems to be addressed but when events such as these become the norm rather than the exception, a picture of the headteacher's potentially fragmented day begins to build up.

Acacia Junior School was situated within a residential estate experiencing high levels of social and economic deprivation. The school contained a Unit providing for children with Statements of Special Educational Needs and levels of Special Educational Need amongst the rest of the school population were also high compared with those nationally (almost 30% of children compared with a national average of less than 20% at the time of the research).

The school historically had been made subject to Special Measures twice up to the point where, in September 2006, it was inspected once again by Ofsted and made subject to Special Measures for a third time. Shortly after that, the deputy headteacher indicated that she would be leaving early in 2007 to take maternity leave. This left the school in a potentially vulnerable position and it was decided that external support would be provided through secondment from the local authority to the deputy headteacher's role. I was released to this position for six months commencing February 2007.

Just prior to taking up the post, the school had its first monitoring visit by HMI and was deemed to be making inadequate progress against all of the targets arising from the original inspection. These, and those identified additionally by HMI, are provided below.

Original targets:

- Ensure standards of achievement are raised in reading, writing, mathematics and science
- Adjust the curriculum so that it meets the needs and interests of all learners and promotes good progress
- Monitor teaching and learning rigorously to make sure that tasks are well matched to children's needs and abilities so that all groups achieve well

Priorities for further improvement identified during the January 2007 HMI visit:

- Improve the skills of all staff in checking the quality of teaching to give a clear focus on how well children of all abilities are learning within lessons
- Ensure that teachers' lesson plans say clearly what children of all different abilities will learn in a lesson and how they will learn it, based firmly upon an accurate assessment of what they have learned earlier
- Improve the understanding of all staff in interpreting assessment information and how this can inform their future teaching

At the time of the initial inspection the staff ranged from a number who had worked there in excess of twenty years to a recently appointed literacy subject leader. The table that follows provides details of the individuals involved with the school and referred to within this research, although their names have been changed. A table detailing all those involved in this research is provided in Appendix 8.



<b>Staff name</b>	<b>Role within school</b>	<b>Length of service at the school (Years)</b>
Annabelle	Headteacher	9 with 5 as Headteacher
Kathryn	Deputy Headteacher (on maternity leave from Spring 2007)	5
Maureen	Mathematics subject leader / class teacher / SMT member	20+
Lydia	Literacy subject leader / class teacher / SMT member	<1
Lorna	Class teacher	4
Audrey	Class teacher	20+
Lewis	Class teacher – until Easter 07	6
Helen	Class teacher	4
Neville	Second Deputy Headteacher – appointed temporarily from March 07	<1
Paula	Classroom Assistant	5
Kim	Temporary Deputy Headteacher – from Sept 07	0
James	Seconded teacher from Easter	<1
Cheryl	Administrator	12
Graham	Governor appointed from April	<1
Michael	Mentor Headteacher from another School	n/a
Fergus	Deputy Director of Education	n/a
Ivan	Her Majesty's Inspectorate Inspector	n/a
Julie	Local Authority literacy adviser	n/a

**Table 6.2** Individuals involved with Acacia Junior School at the time of this research

## 6.2 (i) Research timeline, my role and personal reflections

This section provides a timeline of events and a more personal view of the role undertaken within the school. Whilst potentially less objective, it does serve to illustrate some of the issues faced by the school.

It was under the shadow of the inadequate first HMI visit that I took up the part-time post of Deputy Headteacher. It was a time of turmoil for a staff who had their own individual development needs and were involved in what seemed to be some internal power struggles and conflicts. I joined the Senior Management Team (SMT) and was, at least initially, very much viewed as 'the local authority representative'. The following journal entry notes this.

'I need to make sure that the school understands that my loyalty lies with them whilst I am doing this job.' (MHH Journal, 103-107)<sup>1</sup>

The newly structured Senior Management Team, including the subject leaders for mathematics and literacy, who were also class teachers, met weekly. I noted, following the first of these meetings:

'The senior team are beginning to talk about the real issues although the two class teachers / subject leaders are distracted from the 'whole picture' focus by what happens in their rooms.' (MHH Journal, 112-116)

The first two weeks involved familiarisation with the school. This included classroom observations which allowed for assessment of the National Curriculum levels at which children across the school were working and skills the teachers demonstrated that helped the children to learn and make progress.

Following this initial period of evaluation it became clear that children were generally passive learners, lessons lacked practical models and

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<sup>1</sup> References for journal data include line numbers from the coded transcript

demonstrations, and children were rarely, if ever, asked to interact with each other. The teachers expressed concern about children's behaviour deteriorating when more active learning opportunities had previously been provided. The teaching assistants also had a very narrow view of their role and I noted:

'Learning Support Assistants in general are obsessed with 'controlling' the children and this partly gets in the way of their expression and stifles some creativity.' (MHH Journal, 477-480)

These were some of the initial issues identified to be addressed. It was clear at this stage that the workload was too great for a part-time deputy and the school was able to recruit a further person to assist. Neville had been a Literacy Adviser for the local authority and recently returned from working abroad so was in a position to take up the post immediately and therefore joined the school during March 2007.

Minutes from previous Senior Management Team meetings suggested that much time was spent dealing with the day-to-day issues associated with a school, such as, dates for events and visits. A refocusing on issues raised by Ofsted and HMI was a further area of work identified. A journal entry reflected this:

'Whilst the SMT are very open and seem to readily accept contributions we must maintain a focus on learning – which is facilitated through the teaching.' (MHH Journal, 362-368)

During this same period, staff began to share some of their own opinions and concerns about the school with me. An example of this followed a meeting with the recently-appointed literacy subject leader.

'Her view of the school is different as she has come from Scotland recently. She still feels a little unaccepted by some staff and worries that staff meetings are dominated by two long-standing members of staff. She sees that people are resistant to change.' (MHH Journal, 370-375)

The issues with staff were again highlighted the following day during a discussion with the headteacher when she reflected that many of the staff [teachers and teaching assistants] had low self-esteem in the same way as the children. This was an initial insight into her protectiveness towards them as well as their feelings about themselves. Her capacity for maintaining discipline and moving the school forward was raised as a leadership issue.

At this stage in my time at the school I began to do some teaching. I quickly found that my teaching came under close scrutiny and was glad to be able to enter into discussion about my own practice. Reflection on one occasion was:

‘Children need much more active learning experiences much more of the time. When I work next with them I need to consider this very carefully.’ (MHH Journal, 499-502)

Training and development needs within the school were also a priority. Initial thoughts relating to this were recorded in my journal:

‘Need to share positives with staff to ensure they know all the things that are good about what they do. Also time to work on ‘how to make lessons good or better’. Children need to be active not passive.’ (MHH Journal, 557-563)

‘I need to encourage the teachers to take more risks with what they do.’ (MHH Journal, 677-678)

Early in my time at Acacia, I proposed that each teacher have the opportunity to observe a Leading Teacher working in another school. I hoped this would provide an opportunity to see a skilled practitioner at work and also to visit a different school to see what ‘learning’ looked like elsewhere. These visits were made jointly with each member of staff during the first half term. Entries in my journal related to this work:

'Lorna feels that she has seen very little practice outside Acacia and is at the point where she feels that she could develop further. She is very open to support.' (MHH Journal, 595-598)

'I was very impressed with the way that Maureen was able to see ways of taking what Sandy [the leading teacher] did and apply it to her own classroom circumstances.' (MHH Journal, 622-624)

After half a term working at the school my role was still viewed as 'external'. From a research point-of-view this potentially helped to maintain objectivity.

'Difficult meeting [SMT] in some respects as the rest of the team still see me as an outsider and think my questioning and challenging is something personal rather than just part of the job.' (MHH Journal, 1128-1135)

At least one member of the Senior Management Team saw it as advantageous that I was viewed as an outsider as in her opinion it meant that I was much more likely to be considered as credible.

'... she listened to you because she thought you would know better and you had more authority ...' (LM, 207-208)<sup>2</sup>

#### 6.2 (ii) Her Majesty's Inspectorate visit

Information relating to this event is included as it related closely to the challenging circumstances faced by the school. This visit happened when I had been working at the school for three months. Although there were some individual issues leading up to the inspection days, the evening before it happened I reflected:

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<sup>2</sup> Interview data are referenced with initials for the anonymised interviewee and line numbers from the coded transcript

'Most people seem ready for the inspection and I certainly feel we are in a much better position. We have done as much as we can up to this point and although there is a way to go, we have moved forward considerably.' (MHH Journal, 1498-1502)

The first day seemed to go well and my major concern following the feedback was about how to move forward.

'Feedback session at end of day was fairly positive as lessons seen were satisfactory. They [HMI inspectors] made comments about other things e.g. our photo board isn't up-to-date! Where appropriate we tried to clarify or explain the situation. Ivan [HMI inspector] definitely doesn't like to be disagreed with! Left feeling that we would get 'satisfactory' progress. The worry about getting satisfactory will be how we keep people moving forward during the next half term.' (MHH Journal, 1512-1520)

I did not expect what I found the following day. The following are the entries I made in my journal.

'Arrived after meeting between HMIs and Annabelle and Neville had begun but tone of meeting was not good. Ivan [HMI inspector] was being aggressive to the point of overstepping the boundary of professionalism. It seems he was angry that we hadn't talked to him about a recent audit [that had been commissioned by the local authority and carried out by an HMI who worked outside the County]. Also, having thought about the previous afternoon's meeting with us he had decided we were not wanting to work with him.

Ivan asked to talk with me about the data. I suggested we move to the room they were using but he said the entrance hall would be fine. He then proceeded to lambaste me about how many children were making less than expected

progress. At no point did I suggest he was wrong; I merely tried to explain and contextualise the data set somewhat. He wouldn't even acknowledge the Fischer Family Trust Data.

The judgement could be nothing other than inadequate because although there was recognition of progress made in planning and teaching and building blocks being put in place, the progress made by the children could not be seen. I think that this is a fair assessment of where we are at but I found the way in which the inspection was carried out to be both unpleasant and unprofessional.

Neville was very angry about many of the comments made – in particular about literacy.

Annabelle was upset and asked me to talk to the staff. I told them the things that have been recognised as improved but said that even so we couldn't be considered overall to have made satisfactory progress.' (MHH Journal, 1521-1564)

#### 6.2 (iv) The final half term

During June 2007, and after a difficult situation with another member of the governing body (discussed in Section 7.4a (ii)), the Chair of Governors resigned and an Acting Chair was appointed.

Retaining a focus on the work that was required was not always easy.

'I am lacking some focus for the next six weeks and need now to consider exactly what I should and can be achieving. I think that there are so many things that I could fill my time with that I must be careful not to fritter time away. I need to do things that will have the most impact and also things that will develop capacity once I have finished.' (MHH Journal, 1728-1736)

Relationships and the culture of the school were increasingly noted in journal entries. For example:

'It is interesting that the four newest members of the staff have gravitated towards each other. I think that may be partly to do with the group of long-serving staff who are all smokers and disappear to one corner of the site to smoke.'  
(MHH Journal, 1805-1811)

At this time I was beginning to think about my exit strategy from the school. A journal entry was as follows:

'Continuity will be a problem in September as Kim [the replacement deputy headteacher] is only having two days with us for hand-over and in October Kathryn will be returning from maternity leave to a very different school. I am also concerned that the staff will only do as asked so far whilst we are monitoring closely. It has already been said that you just have to 'do a different dance' whilst in Special Measures and then you can go back to the way you always work – no wonder the school goes in and out (this is the third time).'

(MHH Journal, 1959-1969)

At this stage in the term, Neville and I began to complete a weekly planning and work scrutiny as a way of monitoring all the changes that had been made and work that had been completed with the staff. These were not popular with some of the staff.

'Planning and work scrutiny completed with Neville. Evidence of improvement was found in both marking and the teaching sequence in English which shows that the work completed has had some impact. As we half-expected, books were not available from Maureen and Audrey.'

(MHH Journal, 1978-1983)

'As has become what we expect, some staff had done exactly what they have been asked and others haven't. We



have really got to deal with this and may need to do something more formal in terms of discipline.’ (MHH Journal, 2079-2083)

The weekly SMT meetings continued, although I often viewed these as frustrating, partly due to the behaviour of the team members and partly because we seemed to be covering old ground. I tried hard to move the agenda on but this was not always easy as I did not want to undermine the authority of the headteacher. The extract below is fairly typical:

‘SMT meeting. I sometimes feel that we are just going over the same things each week and making another decision that is only slightly different to the last.’ (MHH Journal, 2008-2011)

At the point when work seemed to be overwhelming in both magnitude and intensity, a huge reminder of what is important in life presented itself.

‘One of the Learning Support Assistants has revealed to me today that she has breast cancer. I’m not sure how she has been coping with this and I said that she could go home or stay if she would rather be busy. I do feel a bit helpless.’ (MHH Journal, 2057-2066)

And, of course, school life continued:

‘Spent some time searching for a missing child. This side of school life at Acacia takes up so much time. There are so many children who have emotional issues and the teachers have to deal with the relentless nature of this whilst also dealing with all the changes we have made.’ (MHH Journal, 2084-2089)

The focus on learning and teaching remained throughout the secondment. Below is an example of this.

'Asked to talk to Audrey about her planning and lessons - they don't match because she is nearly always at her desk and not with the group she has suggested in her plans. Also told her that it is inappropriate for one of her Learning Support Assistants to be listening to individual readers during other lessons. She seemed to take this very well but I think there might be some fallout tomorrow. I hope that she doesn't go off sick but in the end we have got to deal with these fundamental issues in her teaching. I am still concerned about the way she speaks to her class although Annabelle has now met with her formally about calling a child 'stupid' during a lesson.' (MHH Journal, 2219-2231)

In all schools there are things over which you have no control but at Acacia they seemed to be more intensive.

'Neville wasn't at school today as on his way home he was involved in quite a serious car accident. He is at home now with nothing broken but it might take a while for him to get over it. I have rearranged my work for next Tuesday so that I can be at Acacia as the days can become tricky if Annabelle is left to deal with behaviour etc. on her own.'

(MHH Journal, 2318-2324)

The day ended with the Deputy Director of Education addressing the Extraordinary General Meeting of the governing body.

'We think this was to remove power from the Governors but Annabelle was anxious about it.' (MHH Journal, 2337-2338)

The entry for the following Monday read:

'Talked to Annabelle about the Governors' meeting and she was obviously upset by it. It seems that Fergus [Deputy Director of Education] announced in front of everyone that she is in a very precarious position as the headteacher.'

(MHH Journal, 2342-2361)

At this point the secondment was coming to an end and it seemed that neither the headteacher nor I would be there into the future.

### **6.3 Willow Primary School**

This school was selected as a case study through purposive sampling as it presented a set of challenging circumstances (outlined later in this section) that differed from those at Acacia Junior School. My role was limited to that of researcher and data were collected through interviews.

Willow Primary School was one of a number of schools situated within a large town. It had in excess of 300 pupils aged between five and eleven years. The school had a catchment area including two large predominantly local authority owned housing estates and socio-economic indicators were low compared to the national average. The school faced a range of challenging circumstances (see Table 6.1 at the beginning of this chapter for statistical characteristics) including deprivation, high levels of children with EAL and/or SEN, and difficulty in engaging parents. Stability figures also indicated that there were higher rates of mobility, with children moving in and out of the school, than was nationally experienced. Specific individual difficulties were also prevalent as exemplified in the following interview extract:

‘... there are issues, I mean, I have a child whose mum is on a methadone prescription so there are issues to do with that.’ (AM, 28-30)

During the twenty years leading up to the summer of 2002, the school had had the same headteacher, who was much-liked and well-respected by the children and local community. Following his retirement, the Governing Body appointed the school's deputy headteacher to the post. It had been her first deputy headship and was then her first headship and she had been at the school for less than three years. Within 18 months of her appointment, her husband, who worked in the armed forces, was posted and she gave in her notice. Following her departure, and that of her deputy, the local authority put in place a County Headteacher until a substantive replacement could be recruited. At this time it was felt by local

authority staff that the school lacked strategic direction and the temporary headteacher was finding it difficult to engage the staff as their morale was low. In January of 2005 the newly recruited headteacher, Jeremy, took up post and remained there until ill health meant that he finally had to resign in August of 2007. In the term following his appointment to headship he appointed a deputy headteacher, Matt, who still remained in post at the time of this research.

The following table provides details of the individuals involved with the school who are referred to in this thesis.

<b>Staff name</b>	<b>Role within school</b>	<b>Length of service at the school (Years)</b>
Jeremy	Headteacher	2
Matt	Deputy Headteacher (became Acting Headteacher)	2
Sue	Senior Teacher / Key Stage 1 leader (became Acting Deputy Headteacher)	25
Andy	Teacher	4
Alison	Local Authority Development Adviser	n/a
John	Local Authority Intensifying Support Programme Adviser	n/a

**Table 6.3** Individuals involved with Willow Primary School at the time of this research

During the time between the long-standing headteacher's departure and the appointment of Jeremy, it was the school's view that each successive school leader made changes and the school took on a number of Government initiatives. By the time Jeremy was appointed staff morale was seen by the staff as low and there were still some crucial issues that needed to be addressed in the school. The Local Authority recognised that the school was 'vulnerable' as their results were in decline, there was a significant difference between performance at Key Stages 1 and 2 and the new headteacher and deputy headteacher were both in their first posts in

these roles. The school was therefore invited to take part in the Primary National Strategy's Improving Schools Programme (ISP), accepted and began in September of 2005.

Whilst Jeremy was in post a Senior Management Team, comprising the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher and Key Stage 1 leader, was set up alongside a Senior Leadership Team which also included the Mathematics Subject Leader.

During the summer term of 2006 Jeremy began to experience some periods of illness in the form of flu and sickness. This continued into the Autumn Term and in December of 2006 he was signed off by the doctor suffering from stress and depression. When he had been absent from work for two weeks, the school received notification from Ofsted that they were to be inspected. The phone call came on the Thursday and the inspection was due the following Monday and Tuesday. Matt, the deputy headteacher was forced to take over although he was still teaching full time. The local authority was notified and the school's Development Adviser and Improving Schools Programme Consultant were called in to help the school prepare. As the school is a church school the Diocese were also informed and able to offer support.

Prior to the inspection teaching had been judged by members of the local authority to be satisfactory across the school, with the deputy headteacher and Key Stage 1 leader regularly delivering 'outstanding' lessons.

Matt began to look for the evidence that would be required by Ofsted and found that many of the folders in the headteacher's office were actually empty. He could not get into the electronic Self Evaluation Form (SEF) or the Raise Online data as he did not have the passwords and therefore the school went into the inspection poorly prepared. Although the room for the inspectors to use was ready and they were provided with timetables of teaching, little other information was available.

Matt and Sue, the Key Stage 1 leader, decided to attend all the interviews together as they had prepared together and felt that they had knowledge of separate issues affecting the school. Sue had also been working at the

school in excess of 20 years so was able to reflect on the past. Initially they were asked about the School Development Plan (SDP) but had to admit that they had not been involved in creating it and did not know what the content was. They were also asked about a three-year plan but had no knowledge of this. Many of the questions focussed on the data associated with children's performance and progress but neither Matt nor Sue was able to answer these fully. The questions they were able to answer were about the Improving Schools Programme as all the staff had been involved in its introduction and implementation in their classrooms.

The Ofsted inspectors observed nine lessons during their two-day visit. Out of these, one was judged to be outstanding, one very good, five satisfactory and two inadequate. These data alone would point towards the school being placed in an Ofsted category to improve. By the end of the first day the inspectors indicated that the school would be placed in a category and by lunch time of the second day they told Matt and Sue that this category would be Special Measures. This judgement was based on declining standards and the inadequate teaching they had seen. Matt shared this information with the staff when the school day was over on the second day of the inspection. However, the following morning the school was contacted by the inspectors and told that, following a long consideration during the train journey home, they had decided to reduce this judgement to Notice to Improve as they recognised that the school had the capacity to improve. Matt shared this information with the staff.

Following the inspection the report came to the school and the substantive headteacher provided no indication of when he might return, if at all. The school did not want a County Headteacher to be put into post because of their previous experiences so Matt agreed to become the Acting Headteacher. A number of local headteachers came forward to offer support to Matt and he used their knowledge and experience to help him make decisions.

In March of 2007 the school had its Religious Education inspection (which must take place within a limited time after a government inspection when a school is a church school). The inspection was delayed by several weeks as the Diocese recognised that the leadership team was new and had

much to deal with. The school was able to select those staff who would be observed and the focus for the inspection was much narrower than the full government process. The result of this was an outstanding judgement.

An Ofsted Action Plan was drawn up and re-drafted a number of times until the school and Ofsted were satisfied that the content would lead the school to make improvements. The Senior Leadership Team was made into one group and a Higher Level Teaching Assistant was invited to be part of this so that the teaching assistants could be informed about work taking place. A member of staff who often reacted in a negative way to the changes suggested was encouraged to leave the school to take up employment elsewhere. The school began to put systems in place including a regular monitoring schedule, a change to the school timetable, a new planning format and physical changes such as re-flooring and a new playground surface. The staff began to look to Matt for direction.

As the first HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate) visit approached the school began its preparations. Paperwork was in place, linked to the Ofsted Action Plan and the School Development Plan. The subject leaders had information about their individual areas of responsibility and for the first time had analysed their own performance data and used this to create their own subject development plans. The Self Evaluation Form was a working document, so although not complete, represented the current position of the school. Observation of teaching across the school had been completed regularly by Matt, Sue and the subject leaders, and moderated by local authority staff and overall was found to be satisfactory. The visit, in June of 2007, led to a satisfactory progress judgement and the acting headteacher was praised for his role.

By September 2007 the local authority, and the Project Board set up to deal with their 'Notice to Improve' status, deemed the school to be in a much stronger position. The essentials of the management team were in place, a number of team-building events had taken place for the whole staff including a day at a local spa, the Improving Schools Programme was embedded in classroom and whole-school practice, including a much-developed tracking system, and subject leaders had greater devolved responsibility.

The research interviews at Willow were conducted during November of 2007 when the school was preparing for the second HMI visit, needing to demonstrate the impact of their work since the original inspection in the form of children's progress. The summer 2007 SAT (Standardised Assessment Tests) results were not what the school had hoped for and predicted with mathematics and science being above the national floor target of 65% of children achieving level 4 or above but writing at only 25% compared to 77% for reading. This led to an overall result for English below the 65% floor target and the staff were concerned that this would not help them to demonstrate progress for that particular year group.

#### **6.4 Elm Primary School**

This school was selected as a case study through purposive sampling as it presented a set of challenging circumstances (outlined later in this section) that differed from those at Acacia Junior School and Willow Primary School. My role was limited to that of researcher and data were collected through interviews and field notes kept in a journal.

Elm Primary School was one of a number situated in a fairly affluent area in the suburbs of a city. It catered for approximately 350 pupils between ages five and eleven. The socio-economic indicators for the catchment area were higher than the national averages with particularly low levels of entitlement to Free School Meals and proportions of children speaking English as an Additional Language (see Table 6.1 at the start of this chapter for a summary of statistical characteristics).



<b>Staff name</b>	<b>Role within school</b>	<b>Length of service at the school (Years)</b>
Natalie	Headteacher	2
John	Deputy Headteacher	2
Emma	Teacher – Literacy subject leader	6
Sarah	School Business Manager	8
Martin	Chair of Governors	3
Richard	Local Authority Development Adviser	n/a

**Table 6.4** Individuals involved with Elm Primary School at the time of this research

As part of the local authority reorganisation of schools in the geographical area which included Elm Primary School, it was decided that from September 2007 the separate first and middle schools that existed on the site would be merged to form a new primary school. It was known that from September 2006 the middle school would be without a headteacher and it was therefore decided to appoint an individual who would take up that post for one year and also be the head designate for the new primary school. At the point when recruitment was taking place, the first school headteacher gave notice of her intention to leave and the new post became headteacher for both pre-existing schools and the head designate for the new school. The original middle school had a deputy headteacher but the first school structure did not include such a post.

Each of the pre-existing schools had a number of issues with which they were dealing. The first school had significant financial difficulties and the middle school was struggling to demonstrate that children made good progress across the school although children's attainment was high compared to national averages. The middle school also needed to address some staff performance issues. There was considerable tension between the two schools based on the transition of children from one school to the other and the National Curriculum levels at which children were assessed to be working before and immediately after this move. Although the buildings were physically joined, the staff worked completely separately.

On taking up the post of headteacher for both schools (which she learned would be the case at interview as the advert details only included the middle school role) in September 2006, Natalie, an experienced head, started the process of preparing the two schools for merger the following year. She began to uncover the extent to which each school separately was experiencing difficulty and very quickly highlighted the issues and sought the advice and support of the local authority. A School Development Adviser was assigned to the school and he brokered support for subject areas and suggested that the school look at the Improving Schools Programme as a way of structuring necessary developments. A new deputy headteacher was appointed, following the departure of the middle school deputy who, it was reported to me anecdotally by the headteacher, had viewed his role over an extended period as being primarily the monitor for physical education equipment.

During the 2006-7 academic year a staffing structure for the new school had to be created and members of the pre-existing schools had to apply for jobs within this new structure. This served to exacerbate the division between the two schools and created much emotional anxiety both for the individuals who were creating the structure and those who were applying for what they perceived to be their own jobs. There were a number of casualties from this process but they were staff members who had already decided to pursue positions elsewhere. It was unfortunate that in some instances these were people who the school would have benefitted from retaining. As the posts were all ring-fenced, so that the existing staff had the first chance to be appointed, there were also individuals who were less likely to have been successful at interview under normal circumstances.

The new headteacher and deputy headteacher sorted the reorganisation as swiftly as possible but there were systems and procedures to be followed that hampered the process. This included some physical alterations to the buildings. One consequence of this was a lack of internet access for most of the summer holidays before the new school opened. Inevitably mistakes were made and this led to a considerable difficulty for the headteacher later on involving an unpleasant legal dispute (outlined in Section 7.6a (ii)) and the incitement of the school's governing body to behave inappropriately.

Once the two schools officially became Elm Primary School in September of 2007 the final stage of merger began with the staff working much more collectively, although the previous divisions were still evident for a considerable time. The early weeks and months within the newly formed school involved the leadership team in implementing organisational changes so that the day-to-day running of the school was smooth. It was some time before fundamental aspects of learning and teaching could be addressed which allowed some members of staff to continue with their previous less than good practice.

Interview data were gathered at the school for this research during June of 2008, almost a year after the merger.



**Chapter 7**  
**Research Findings and Analysis**

## 7.1 Introduction

During the initial review of literature, the conducting of this research and subsequently during the analysis of data, a number of themes relating to primary schools facing challenging circumstances began to emerge. Whilst some of these were initially identified but gained no further significant evidence relating to them, others became increasingly prominent based on the volume and depth of data gathered. Following the pattern of this emergence, the most prominent of these themes are discussed in this chapter. Consideration of challenging circumstances and change threads throughout as these are identified across the themes. The themes identified are:

- Leadership
- Origins, evolution, influences and potential threats : internal
- Influences and potential threats: external
- Merger

Within the themes consideration is given to each of the study schools, where relevant, and extracts from the data are woven into the discussion. The schools are considered in the order of prominence with which they emerged from the data and this therefore varies between themes. Findings relating to the questions raised in the literature review chapters are discussed within specific sections and also across themes where appropriate.

In reality, the emerging themes are inextricably intertwined and complex. This will be returned to in Chapters 8 and 9 examining Complexity Theory and its potential to contribute to this study. In this chapter, however, each of the themes listed above is considered in isolation in order to provide a deeper understanding of each aspect that potentially contributes, sometimes significantly, to a more holistic view of primary schools facing challenging circumstances.

Overwhelmingly leadership emerged as the dominant theme and a whole section is devoted to its consideration (Section 7.2). Following this a

number of other aspects relating to leadership were identified; the recruitment and retention of school leaders, the lack of experience which some headteachers bring to the role, workload, emotional anxiety and, communication and relationships. These internal factors are considered in Section 7.3. Those factors representing more external threats are then discussed in Section 7.4 and include the governing body, external sources of support, test results and Ofsted. The final section (7.5) deals with the merger of two schools as even though it related to only one of the study schools, significant data emerged in relation to this theme. The context provides a contrasting set of challenging circumstances, in which the headteacher was also more experienced. This allows for consideration of the relative influence of the headteacher and other factors in the improvement efforts of schools.

## **7.2 Theme 1: Leadership**

Leadership was the theme that emerged most prominently during the analysis of data pertaining to all three of the case study schools. The consideration that follows begins with a discussion relating to each of the individual schools and then final comments relate to common aspects identified. Types of leadership are considered as well as the attributes of those in senior positions, with a particular focus on the headteacher or person acting in that role.

### **7.2a Acacia Junior School**

When this study began the leadership at Acacia could be considered to have been in turmoil and data subsequently collected and analysed is used to exemplify this below. Strategic planning was limited and shared rarely with staff who had become unmotivated. A long history of poor results and a culture of not taking responsibility for their actions, coupled with quality of teaching issues that had remained unchallenged all contributed to individualised practice and rigidity in existing systems.

Annabelle, the headteacher at Acacia, demonstrated some very good personal skills such as empathy and an ability to listen, and her aspirations for the children themselves were admirable, but many of those skills

identified within the existing research literature as crucial to leading, particularly in challenging circumstances, seemed to be lacking. An early manifestation of this was seen in the lack of devolution of leadership across a wider team. Prior to the school being placed in Special Measures by Ofsted, the headteacher and deputy headteacher made all the strategic and administrative decisions and felt, perhaps somewhat naively, that in doing this they were protecting the staff from unnecessary work. At the suggestion of Ofsted, the literacy and mathematics subject leaders (Lydia and Maureen) were incorporated into a Senior Management Team but those individuals still did not consider themselves to be part of the decision-making process, rather that they only had what Day *et al.* (2007, p70) referred to as 'consultative distribution' with the authority for decision-making retained by the headteacher and deputy headteacher, as demonstrated in the following interview extract:

' ... Maureen and I were invited because she was asked to do it [by Ofsted] and Kathryn [original deputy head] and Annabelle still made all the decisions [about organisation, curriculum and pedagogy] and had lots of meetings when we weren't there and things were decided. I didn't feel that I was part of the management of the school or that anything I said would be... you know... particularly acted on any more than anyone else saying something ...' (LM, 164-178 – brackets added)

Even after two terms had elapsed, there was still a feeling within the wider leadership team (headteacher, two deputy headteachers and mathematics and literacy subject leaders) that responsibility was not devolved.

'I still feel that I don't know what people are like as teachers of literacy in this school... I sometimes feel I'm speaking in a vacuum ... and I'm also not privy to all the information because it goes to the head and deputies.'  
(LM, 524-538)

Significance could perhaps be attached to the decision by the headteacher to call the newly formed team the Senior Management Team rather than



the Senior Leadership Team, perhaps a manifestation of her lack of understanding of what it is to lead a school through significant change, 'delivering on current needs' rather than, 'inventing the future' (Green, 2004, p2). Roles seemed still to be based on a hierarchy rather than the tasks that needed to be completed. Effective practice identified within the literature (Lindahl, 2007; NCSL, 2009; Bush and Glover, 2012) suggests that a good leader will use the range of skills of his or her team to address the school's priorities most effectively, deploying people to particular activities, whereas a manager focuses on the individual roles first. Elements of situational leadership (see Section 2.2), varying with the ability of followers to perform specific tasks, would therefore have been appropriate in these circumstances but were not evident. It seems that a greater focus on management rather than leadership did not lead to improvement within these challenging circumstances.

A further leadership issue identified during the first HMI visit, a term after the school had been placed in Special Measures, was the lack of some of the necessary professional skills by the existing team. The inspectors reported in their follow-up letter that:

'Senior staff do not have the skills or experience to be able to make accurate judgements on the quality of teaching and learning ... particularly in evaluating the impact of teaching on the progress children do or do not make.' (Ofsted, Monitoring Inspection letter, Feb 07)

At the time when the school was made subject to Special Measures, a link can be identified between the headteacher's leadership ability and her relationships with some of the staff. The following interview extracts describe this situation:

'... there were some people who felt they had been good before and come out of Special Measures before ... they'd had good inspections and people were told their lessons were good and now suddenly everything was wrong, what was the difference... Annabelle [current headteacher]' (LM, 242-246 – brackets added).

‘... there was a lot of criticism of the management [in the Ofsted feedback] so there were lots of rumblings about you know... it’s not all about us, most of it’s them.’ (LM, 92-94 – brackets added)

‘I think it’s probably been quite difficult because of her [the headteacher] situation, being in school and being really a member of staff, you know, without being headteacher and I think it’s probably been quite difficult to change that relationship with people.’ (LD Aug, 75-79)<sup>3</sup>

The above extracts could suggest that the teachers did not respect the headteacher, compromising her position as a leader. The attitude of those staff was that Special Measures was something to be ‘got through’ and that then the status quo could be restored. This created a situation where the need for change was not accepted, staff were resistant, and the difficulty of leading them seemed to increase. One member of the teaching staff reflects:

‘Well I was actually told, when we first went into Special Measures that people will come in and they will tell you to dance this way so you dance this way and when they’ve gone you go back to what you were doing.’ (LD Jun, 231-235)

The extract above suggests that Annabelle was not able to, ‘mobilise people’s commitment’ (Fullan, 2001b, p9) to act differently.

Also referred to above (in extract LD Aug, 75-79) was the fact that Annabelle’s role as the headteacher had not developed from solid foundations in the eyes of some members of the staff as she had been internally promoted to the position from that of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator. This seems to have led to a lack of professional respect for her from some members of staff and perhaps contributed to her inability to

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews with ‘LD’ were conducted in June and August. Extracts indicate which month and are followed with line numbers from the coded transcripts.

take on some of the more challenging staff behaviour, including poor quality classroom practice, displayed within the school. This demonstrates the potent nature of relationships and group dynamics within an organisation and the impact these can have on the day-to-day interactions between staff and the school's leadership. For Annabelle, this was also her first headship so she had no other comparable experience on which to draw.

'I only know of a couple of occasions when people have said, you know, 'I've been into the office' [referring to being disciplined in some way].' (LD Aug, 73-75 – brackets added)

The situation is recognised as a difficult one within the literature, for example, by Hobson *et al.* (2003, p17) who comment that, 'this transition from teacher to school leader is a challenging one'.

Part of the difficulty for Acacia Junior as an organisation was that there was instability in leadership over time making the creation of sustainable leadership even more difficult. The existing deputy left after the initial inspection and the first HMI visit for maternity leave and was replaced initially by a part-time, temporary deputy to take on the leadership part of her role, with a particular focus on learning and teaching, and then very quickly the need for further support was identified and a second deputy was appointed, again on a temporary basis. The two newly appointed deputy headteachers had particular expertise in literacy and mathematics (through previous advisory roles) and so contributed to the subject leadership roles for those subjects too. As is exemplified below, this caused the literacy subject leader in particular to feel that her leadership role had been undermined:

'... he doesn't appreciate what it feels like to be me. He just thinks he's doing a good job and he's doing his job... but... he's deputy head and literacy at the same time. He does do a lot of my job, right, which on one level annoys the hell out of me and on another level I like it (laughter) because he's doing and I don't have any time to do it.' (LM, 429-435)

The deputy headteachers joined the Senior Management Team which changed the dynamics of this group considerably. The positive nature of this change was commented on by the literacy subject leader:

‘... it’s much more effective now. They [headteacher and deputy headteacher] were in charge and when you and Neville came you were suggesting things and she was listening much more but I think part of that is she listened to you because she thought you would know better and you had more authority ...’ (LM, 204-208 – brackets added)

‘... they [Senior Management Team meetings] changed again when Neville came and I feel now they are much more effective because there’s more different opinions going in ...’ (LM, 189-191 – brackets added)

A further positive development identified by a member of staff was the change made to staff meetings.

‘... we used to go in the staff room and we’d all sit round the table and Annabelle would set the agenda and hardly any time to do anything I [literacy subject leader] wanted to do... get the policies out and put in apostrophes and things and then the next week get another policy out and another ... and I just felt it was bizarre that when we were in Special Measures all the problems we had and all the things we needed to do, that’s what we spent staff meeting time doing.’ (LM, 289-296 – brackets added)

This seems to suggest that the headteacher was unable either to identify the actions necessary to lead the school forward or to prioritise them and probably a combination of both. The staff meetings were developed in the ways described below:

'... but he [acting deputy] changed it [staff meeting] you see so that he does it now and usually he would lead it and he does a learning focus like this is what we're going to do and he tells you and you do an activity and then he expects you to go away and do it. And it was much more about the teaching and learning and not just about... so it's totally different and the staff meeting is much more an opportunity now to learn something and to change your practice or to discuss things.' (LM, 301-308 – brackets added)

'But... they [the awkward staff] just get steamrollered now and they don't have the choice whereas they used to think they had a choice and they didn't have to...'  
(LM, 322-324 – brackets added)

'...and that's partly about not having authority because if you're the head or possibly the deputy, you can pull rank and say, 'well I'm sorry but you're doing this and it's tough' which is what Neville says to them really...'  
(LM, 331-334)

Alterations to staff meetings and senior management team meetings and the incorporation of professional development opportunities with a focus on teaching and learning were positive for the school and meant that change was beginning to happen. It could be suggested that the work completed by the deputy headteachers was a good example of the headteacher's ability to distribute leadership. It seems, however, that the staff saw it rather as confirmation that someone else was needed to make change happen; they saw the deputy headteachers as acting independently of the headteacher rather than under her direction. There were concerns that the developments would not be sustained without those individuals:

‘... and I don’t know if it [development of literacy] will continue in this way when he’s [acting deputy – Neville] not driving it...’ (LM, 399-400 – brackets added)

‘... and they [the staff] don’t see me in the same light [as the acting deputy].’ (LM, 402-403 – brackets added)

As the deputy headteachers became ‘insiders’ and were, ‘regarded with trust and credibility’ (Miller, 2002, p343) there was increasingly potential for their role to contribute to the processes of change but it seems that this was not capitalised upon.

As well as seeing multiple changes in leadership as being a difficulty to be overcome by the school, it could also be seen from a point of view of provision of high levels of support for the organisation. The two new deputy headteachers had experience of supporting schools facing change in difficult circumstances and had also led developments in literacy and mathematics so were familiar with the Renewed Frameworks (DCSF, 2006) for teaching those subjects that had recently been introduced. A less-experienced member of staff recognised that the position of the temporary deputy headteachers could be used in order to effect change before the substantive deputy returned. The interview extract below reflects that the headteacher did not make effective use of this opportunity and again raises a concern that the work being done would not be sustained once the headteacher no longer had that level of support.

‘There are lots of things that I think about the deputy headship role because Neville and you have come to do something specific and I’m worried for Kathryn because things will have changed so much and she hasn’t been part of that. But... the really tricky stuff that has had to be done when people have had to be stroppy, Kathryn didn’t have to do that so someone from outside who will walk away... actually you can take all the difficulty and be cursed and sworn about and walk away and Kathryn will be able to come in and pick it up and some of the difficult stuff will be done. But you do need strong

people and that in a way does worry me as well. I think people are saying we'll do all this, and then in September they know that you two are going.' (LD Jun, 210-224)

Because the headteacher did not appear to lead the senior team strongly, it seems from the data that they too were often left feeling that they had little direction. The culture and input (Marzano *et al.*, 2005) which are recognised as vital elements to school improvement within the research literature were not effectively cultivated within the school. The following extracts exemplify this.

'He [acting deputy] feels unsure about what his role actually is and what he should be aiming to achieve.'  
(MHH Journal, 1003-1004 – brackets added)

'Perhaps this is just symptomatic of a lack of direction in the school in general. Annabelle and Neville and I must talk regularly together and set goals for the next meeting each time if we are to move forward.' (MHH Journal, 1005-1008)

Communication from the headteacher, the development and promotion of which has been demonstrated within the literature to be key to effective leadership of change (Rost and Smith, 1992; Miller, 2002), was not strong within Acacia. The staff felt that they only had part of the information they needed:

'... just drip-feeding a bit [of information] and then we're left sort of not knowing what's happening.' (LD Jun, 156-157)

'I understand that the senior management team have to have discussions. But I don't think it's so much that... it's that we're told a quarter of something ...' (LD Jun, 166-168)

The view of Duke and Salmonowicz (2010, p52) that schools requiring significant improvement are likely to have within their staff some less effective individuals was mirrored at Acacia. However, Annabelle demonstrated on a number of occasions that she could not fulfil the essential role of challenging inappropriate or ineffective behaviour by members of staff.

‘Annabelle must take this on [inappropriate behaviour with children and ineffective teaching by Audrey] – I do wonder if she has the strength to do it.’ (MHH Journal, 2031-2032)

This could show that she lacked the strength to do it but equally it could be because she had been colleagues with some of the staff before she had become their headteacher so she knew about their lives and difficulties outside school which prevented her from maintaining enough professional distance to carry out her role effectively.

‘...he [Neville] just says, well it needs to change and that’s his attitude ... but you see in the past it was too much being nice to people and letting them have their own way and giving in to them and seeing their point of view and seeing everyone’s point of view and of course all that happens is nothing happens and nothing changes. So this is better really... for the school.’ (LM, 382-390)

For Acacia Junior School a crucial part of the work they needed to do was engage appropriately with the school’s performance data because, as HMI noted:

‘Children’s attainment on entry to the school is low and their progress in English, mathematics and science has been consistently inadequate over recent years. The 2006 Year 6 national test results place the school in the bottom one percent of all schools [nationally] in terms of how well



children achieved compared to their Year 2 tests.’ (Ofsted, Monitoring Inspection letter, Feb 07)

However, the headteacher did not demonstrate an understanding of either the data or the link between what it showed and the supporting evidence within teachers’ planning, lessons or children’s work. The ‘Securing Accountability’ aspect of the Standards for Headteachers (DfES, 2004b) had not been achieved when, following the first HMI visit, a term after the school had been placed in Special Measures, they reported that:

‘The school now has records from assessments that purport to show children making good progress. However, this finding was not supported by work seen in lessons, or in children’s books or by the quality of teaching and learning seen during the inspection.’ (Ofsted, Monitoring Inspection letter, Feb 07)

Even much later in the academic year, when more formal testing had been completed and the expectation was that Annabelle would ‘fall on’ these outcomes as they formed a significant part of the data on which the school would be judged during the next visit, this situation had not improved, exemplified through the following journal entry:

‘I would like to begin looking at the data from the recent QCA tests to see if there is any improvement – this would demonstrate impact of the work we have done and will be the data that is looked at by HMI in September. Annabelle hasn’t asked to look at any of this which surprises me as we will be judged by it hugely.’  
(MHH Journal, 1865-1871)

This provides an indication that the headteacher was unable, at least at that time, to see the ‘bigger picture’, choosing to ignore the data and instead focus, for example, on the stationery ordering for the following year.

Whilst on the surface leadership appeared to be more distributed as time passed at Acacia, the reality was that individuals were completing their own

pieces of work in isolation (see example relating to development of ICT in Section 7.3b (iv)). The 'bigger picture' view and the school's culture were not maintained and, as has been discussed above, other key features of effective leadership such as effective communication were inconsistently present at best. It seems that Annabelle's strengths were considerably greater in terms of management than leadership. Detailed planning for Sports' Day was given priority over aspects of leadership such as addressing poor classroom practice and implementing rigorous accountability measures. Effective leadership was not, it seems, provided through the extended management team either, even though the data suggest that their combined abilities could have led to a very different situation. Even with an experienced team, delegation was limited and collective views and ideas remained unharnessed. A key problem for Acacia was the communication and relationships between staff at all levels; it appears that the connectivity was weak. This issue will be explored further in Section 7.3e of this chapter and as part of the consideration of Complexity Theory within Chapters 8 and 9.

Examples of transactional leadership at Acacia took the form of staff members being offered time out of their classrooms in return for completion of specific tasks. The more transformational aspects of leadership such as the push for structural, cultural and systemic change were, however, less in evidence. Towards the end of the period of study, when the school was approaching a second HMI visit, galvanisation towards change through creative approaches was identifiable within a specific piece of whole-school work; the Four Weeks' Project (outlined and discussed in detail as part of Chapter 9). This could be considered to be the one example of invitational leadership where an 'imaginative act of hope' (Novak, 2005, p44) was encouraged. Perhaps this was the start of better things to come.

### **7.2b Willow Primary School**

It could be considered from an analysis of the data that the most effective leadership amongst the three schools examined, in terms of ultimate improvement, was at Willow Primary School. Elements of this are outlined below. At the time when the school was made subject to an Ofsted category, with an absent substantive headteacher, leadership within the

school was not distributed and whilst the instigation of the Improving Schools Programme had provided some structure and systems, the school's culture was not well-developed. It is clear that the wider leadership team and governors had not held the headteacher to account and difficulties had therefore remained undiscovered. Limitations of the previous headteacher's practices became clear through the initial inspection process and the new structure emerging following this critical point was created in an attempt to eliminate these potential threats.

Matt, the deputy headteacher, took over at this point as the Acting Headteacher. An advantage for him, in terms of his leadership role, was that he had already been working within the school as the deputy headteacher and therefore had detailed knowledge of many aspects of school life. For example, he knew where there were particular strengths and weaknesses in terms of teaching staff. His position could equally have been a disadvantage as promotion from within has been identified as potentially problematic (Daresh and Male, 2000; MacBeath, 2006; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006).

Difficulties initially arose because the leadership of the absent headteacher had not been distributed leading to significant gaps in aspects of the acting headteacher's knowledge. For example, the Senior Leadership Team, which had included Matt as the deputy, had not taken part in key aspects of leadership work such as the creation of the School Improvement and Development Plan (SIDP) and therefore they were not familiar with its contents. This is reflected in extracts from interviews with Matt (the acting headteacher) and Sue (who became the acting deputy):

'We couldn't find paperwork at all. I couldn't find a copy of the SEF (Self-Evaluation Form), I didn't know how to get onto the SEF, I didn't have a password, I couldn't get onto Raise Online and couldn't find anything. All I could find was like scribbles of past SEFs that I had been given when we were updating it. I looked in the tracking folders and there was nothing.' (MW, 93-99)

'But they [Ofsted] asked us about the School Development Plan. They asked us if we had been involved in it and we said no because we hadn't been involved in writing it at all. Then they said, have you got a three-year plan and we said no.' (MW, 132-136)

'... while we had been part of the Senior Management Team, we had not been involved in the School Development Plan, we didn't really know what was on the School Development Plan. ... we had had no input ... and we didn't know about collecting the data and analysing the data.. that just hadn't been part of our brief.' (SV, 71-81)

The above also suggest that the negative influence of the previous headteacher is significant in primary schools facing challenging circumstances, discussed further in Section 7.3b (ii).

Matt and Sue, as members of the leadership team could be considered to have abdicated responsibility in respect of the roles they had originally been appointed to. As the deputy headteacher and Key Stage 1 leader it could be suggested that they should have pursued these issues before these particular circumstances arose. Feedback from the blind reliability tests identified these issues, as exemplified in the following extracts:

'Old management structure ... just lip service and those involved didn't have to do anything ... symptomatic of the lack of focus of this group and the lack of leadership skills of the original headteacher ... early indicators of problems.'  
(JG, 7-12)

'The original headteacher held all the keys, for example the SEF, paperwork, passwords. It was top-down management and those who were lower down didn't ask for access or information.'  
(JG, 16-19)

'On Ofsted arrival ... they had 'not a clue' ... not just a bit unprepared. They said that they weren't ready for the

questions ... but they should have been asking themselves those questions long before Ofsted came.' (JG, 20-23)

It seems that the hierarchical structure and a lack of communication contributed to the school's initial decline.

One external view of the acting headteacher exemplified some of the skills and personal attributes he did however possess, which are consistent with the view from the literature about those necessary for effective leadership (e.g. NCSL, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2008; Glatter, 2009). A local authority adviser who had been working with the school, commented:

'The deputy is a very vibrant person, a very enthusiastic person, he's a people's person...' (AB, 70-72)

'Matt was, and still is, an outstanding teacher and I had always seen him teaching an outstanding lesson...' (AB, 138-140)

A class teacher from the school noted during an interview:

'Matt is passionate about the school and he kind of went through the inspection experience and is therefore more up for changing things...' (AM, 438-440)

This final comment, and what followed at the school, demonstrate that the acting headteacher identified the need for change and created a system that would support it, drawing on the skills of everyone within the organisation.

Day and Baioglu (1996) have found in their research on the career stages of headteachers in England, leaders in their first headship are likely to be more enthusiastic about change, but also more uncertain and unskilled about implementing it than in successive headships. Matt demonstrated these elements very clearly. His role as acting headteacher began with the organisational aspects of management:

'... the acting headteacher worked really hard to get things in place, to get the management things sorted out, he also treated them [the staff] to things like a day at a spa so they tried to have team-building events.' (AB, 239-242)

A class teacher from the school however viewed Matt's management of change as initially being less effective:

'... changing things completely to start with and then saying, hang on a minute, that can't possibly be right...'  
(AM, 208-209)

It seems from evidence in the data that his role developed over time to include aspects of effective leadership:

'... so they have put into place the systems that any good headteacher would naturally have in place and recently, and this was really towards the end of the summer term, Matt has now started to have a vision for the school as well. So he is fulfilling that criteria of leadership as well as management, whereas before it was just management.' (AB, 268-274)

Matt recognised his weaknesses and used the support available to him in order to strengthen aspects of his leadership, reflected in the following:

'I think finance has been one of the big issues. One of the secretaries has got bursar training and she was upgraded on a temporary basis as neither Matt or I had got experience and we both admitted it.' (SV, 563-566)

'... he's not afraid to pick up the telephone and phone any number of heads in his surrounding catchment area ... he knows exactly the situation he's in and he's called in all of the favours.' (AB, 327-329)

For Matt and his acting deputy, the leadership qualities they possessed included strong links with learning and teaching which is one of the attributes that features consistently in the lists of those necessary from across the range of literature (NCSL, 2009; DfES, 2007). This is reflected in the following extracts:

‘... they still were teaching so it wasn’t like they had removed themselves from the classroom either. Matt was still teaching his Year 6 commitment role because a lot of the results depended on what the Year 6 group got and he knows he’s a good teacher and he didn’t feel he could give up his Year 6 teaching.’ (AB, 281-294)

‘I think people have been more accepting of change again from someone who is potentially making the changes for themselves.’ (AM, 449-451)

There was recognition at the beginning of the school’s difficulties, when it was given an Ofsted Notice to Improve rather than being placed in Special Measures, that Matt and Sue had the capacity to lead the school forward.

‘... they recognised that Sue and I could do it and they kept talking about green shoots...’ (MW, 209-211)

The data suggest that Matt views leadership as something that keeps changing in response to the current circumstances. Even after the major turmoil the school had undergone, he was still looking to improve and streamline its leadership through improving the ‘connectivity’ and promoting deeper second-order change:

‘... the leadership has become much more distributed and we’ve refocused the Senior Leadership Team and the Subject Leader Team.’ (SV, 299-301)

‘... every Subject Leader is now much more fully involved in their subject. They are all now writing reports for governors,

you know, they are all leading staff meetings and they're having to say what their Action Plans are ...' (SV, 436-439)

'...again this year I've changed the Senior Leadership Team. I also include my Head of the Teaching Assistants so she feeds everything back to the Teaching Assistants to make sure they're on board and that's been really, really good.'  
(MW, 406-410)

Matt took on the role of headteacher for very clear reasons and, when later on he had the chance to apply for the permanent headship, he was equally clear about his reasons for not doing that. This seems to demonstrate that he is reflective, not only of his practice but of the circumstances in which he finds himself; the 'context specificity' (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001). It could equally serve to demonstrate that Matt recognised what was identified by Lawrence Peter, and what is referred to as 'The Peter Principle' (1969), which suggests that 'in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence' (p9). Each of these is exemplified in the following extracts:

'Stability, that's why I stepped into the role because they [the staff] needed stability. We weren't getting offered anybody else and we didn't want a useless County Headteacher which is what we had had before...' (MW, 227-230 – brackets added)

'... the idea of becoming a deputy was that I could learn from a really good head. I still have my teaching commitment which I love ... but I have my foot in the management door and I can see stuff going on and I've always been quite keen to move up. I've tried a rural school, suburb school, and now this one so that's always been my plan. I did NPQH [National Professional Qualification for Headship] with a view of becoming a head eventually. This has really opened my eyes. I think it's the best way to do it.' (MW, 332-345 – brackets added)



And through all that happened, Matt was still able to demonstrate that he had retained his sense of humour, a characteristic not specifically identified within the existing literature, but demonstrated in the following:

‘We had had a lot of incidences the previous week of things going on which I’d just woken up and they didn’t teach on NPQH... that had been interesting. There’s not a unit on flashers and how to deal with the police [laughing].’ (MW, 80-85)

In conclusion, if Matt and Sue’s combined abilities are compared to those found to be effective within the DfES ‘Making Great Progress’ (2007) document, it is clear that they had the potential to make an effective leadership team. They remained close to the learning, created a group of staff who wanted to follow them and were focussed in doing the jobs that needed to be done. They created a distributed leadership structure and a tight network of relationships using elements of transformational leadership in their approaches to whole-school development. The school was able to change swiftly even when faced with challenging circumstances.

‘I think he [the acting headteacher] really has been the key to the whole process. ... he wants to be able to move the school forward from his own personal perspective so it wasn’t like he was just caretaking the school, he has a vested interest ...’ (AB, 355-358)

### **7.2c Elm Primary School**

Much of the challenge associated with Elm Primary School related to the merger circumstances and analysis of this data is presented separately in Section 7.5. Whilst Natalie was a headteacher with a proven track record of success, issues specifically related to leadership of Elm Primary were identified and are outlined below.

At the beginning of this study the leadership at Elm was in the process of becoming established with a headteacher and deputy headteacher recently appointed at the school. Staff insecurity over future jobs and a history of

unchallenged classroom practice combined with high standards of pupil attainment but low rates of progress placed the school in a potentially vulnerable position. A poor relationship with governors and deficit budget seems to have compounded the difficulties further.

As will be outlined here, the leadership of the headteacher and wider team at Elm Primary School was stronger and ultimately more effective than that at Acacia. Some of the important leadership qualities are demonstrated by Natalie when she talks about the circumstances leading to her appointment as headteacher at the school. She says:

'I applied to the Franklin Middle School who was advertising for a head.. umm.. and the post was to be head designate of the new Primary School which was going to be made by the amalgamation of the first and the middle school. When I got to the interview, they actually informed me that it was to be head of both schools and I just thought right, I need to just go for it then.' (NE, 10-21)

This could exemplify not only her optimism and resilience but her open-mindedness and her ability to respond to the 'context specificity' referred to by Hopkins and Reynolds (2001). It could equally reflect aspects of her personality such as determination and her response to a challenge. In addition to her personal and professional qualities she was able to demonstrate her understanding of the process of change and the need for this to be led, both part of the 'Shaping the Future' strand of the Standards for Headteachers (DfES, 2004b), when she commented on the middle school's existing deputy headteacher:

'There was a deputy in the middle school who regarded his role as being the one who puts up the hall rotas and counts the hockey sticks and that was it, and had no concept, no concept whatsoever of the role of management and how to be analytical and how to effect change and how to plan for change in an effective way'. (NE, 43-48)

This lack of opportunity to employ more distributed leadership meant that Natalie initially felt she was leading on her own. A journal entry reflected this:

‘Before she appointed her own deputy Natalie felt very isolated and that she had no ally within the school.’ (MHH Elm Journal, 57-60)

Her own analytical and evaluative skills led her to comment:

‘... had I been head of the first school only, there would have been some concerns and quite a lot to do. Had I been head of the middle school only, there would have been huge concerns and a lot to do.’ (NE, 35-38)

A further journal entry also captured these concerns:

‘The first time we [Natalie and I] met was at the school and the School Development Adviser [local authority officer] and her Chair of Governors were present. She [the headteacher] was worried about the two schools she had taken over and feared that, from her initial work in the schools, that they were in danger of ‘failing’ should they be inspected. She reported that a Local Authority audit had confirmed this as the case.’ (MHH Elm Journal, 17-24)

Elements of effective transformational leadership were identifiable at Elm as the leadership team, and headteacher in particular, were ‘catalysts for change’ (Collins, 1999). The merger plans forced a situation where systemic and structural change was required, and in creating the programme that would deliver this, the leadership team could see the opportunity for a cultural shift.

‘... different ethos, staff who did not know each other’s names, who never crossed the corridor which divided the two

schools ... the leadership styles had been completely different in both schools...' (NE, 28-30)

The leadership and management issues for the leadership team (formed by the headteacher, the replacement deputy headteacher and the literacy subject leader) at Elm were potentially exacerbated by the fact that two of them were new appointments from outside the two pre-existing schools which were being forced to amalgamate under Local Authority reorganisation plans. This meant that initial leadership difficulties were concerned with building relationships with and between staff from the two schools. Both the headteacher and deputy talked about the teachers from each school remaining separate. 'They didn't mix in the staffrooms' (JJ, 58), and the divisions were perpetuated by, for example, organising social events in isolation from each other. The 'balkanisation' identified by Hargreaves (1992) in secondary schools was present in this newly created primary school suggesting the transferability of existing research literature in this respect.

At Elm the changes in leadership occurred at the same time as the other significant changes associated with the amalgamation of two schools. Sustainable leadership in these circumstances would be very difficult to achieve. Although the change of leadership could have been seen as an opportunity to create something new and better, for many members of staff it was a time of upheaval and uncertainty with those seemingly at the helm a new and unknown element. The deputy headteacher described the previous leadership styles thus:

'... their experience of a leader was very different... there is an extent to which the first school teachers had to toe the line and do as they were told and that was that and not have anything to say about it and not really allowed to take responsibility ... there was in the middle school a very relaxed attitude towards the leadership of the school but by the same token not really taking responsibility because they weren't accountable.' (JJ, 144-157)

Although the two previous headteachers had particular leadership styles which had reportedly restricted the devolution of responsibility and therefore 'power', the new headteacher was viewed with suspicion when she tried to distribute leadership roles and responsibilities beyond herself and the deputy. It seems from the data that for the staff in the school this change in style and devolution of responsibilities and increased accountability at all levels, was unnerving and, at least for some, unwelcome. The way the changes were communicated to the staff was key to determining levels of both engagement and anxiety. Communication and anxiety are discussed further in Sections 7.3e and 7.3d respectively as factors contributing to the overall level of difficulty experienced by schools facing challenging circumstances and the links between them are emerging from the data as significant.

If uncertainty was the major issue, the chance for this to be overcome by the headteacher was limited as much of what had to be decided was out of her control; she was dealing with 'tensions' rather than 'dilemmas' (Berlak and Berlak, 1981). Her role as mediator between the local authority and the staff was a difficult one whatever her skills and attributes; reassurance was difficult when so much was unknown.

As the headteacher and her leadership team became more established it became clear that the school's governing body was causing overall leadership to be weakened. It was not possible to create and sustain an effective and professional working relationship. A journal entry reflected one instance of difficulty:

'Deputy headteacher reported that the governors had been meeting at the pub without the headteacher to discuss school matters and trying to make decisions which they then bring to the governor's meeting. They are asking for 'Matters of a Confidential Nature' at the meeting so the DHT and HT have to leave but the governors are then making comments so that Natalie and John know what they will be talking about.' (MHH Elm Journal, 66-73)

This aspect of school leadership is explored further in Section 7.4a of this chapter.

During the period of this study, the annual Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) for the Year 6 children at Elm yielded good overall results. The staff and parents of the school have prided themselves on good attainment in the past but Natalie and John sought to challenge this in terms of the progress children make from an overall 'secure' starting point. As this is much more of a focus for government agencies and for Ofsted during an inspection, the leadership team recognised that the issue must be addressed and started the process of using data in a much more rigorous way 'to identify and support the progress of students who were not reaching their potential' (Day *et al.*, 2009, p119). The staff, parents and to a certain extent, governors, however, saw this issue as relating to the new leadership and interpreted it as a failure to improve the school on the parts particularly of Natalie and John. It provides an example of effective leadership practice being destabilised by other factors.

In conclusion, it seems that Natalie possessed many of the effective leadership characteristics described earlier such as a focus on improving standards, an assured style of leadership (DfES, 2007), being proactive (Covey, 1989) and personal qualities such as charisma (Weber, 1947) and resilience (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008). Crucially, the data suggest that she was able to apply these according to the specifics of a particular context. It seems that any limitations to change brought about by her and the leadership team have, at least in part, been caused by external influences beyond their control although it could be considered significant that Natalie was not able to move her relationship with the governing body on, suggesting a relative weakness in her ability to establish effective channels of communication. This 'troubled' relationship slowed the process of change in the school but was not influential enough to stop it completely.

## **7.2d Concluding Comments**

The consideration of leadership provided here suggests that it is the role of the headteacher, to a greater extent than the wider leadership team, that is particularly influential in determining the success of primary schools facing

challenging circumstances. This could be indicative of the less devolved nature of leadership in those organisations or of the significantly reduced set of leadership skills that it seems are available within schools that are experiencing difficulties, contributing to their weaker position.

Whilst many leaders would like to be able to describe themselves as 'visionary, creative and motivational' (Burgoyne and Williams, 2007, p3) in addition to possessing all those skills and attributes associated with West-Burnham's (1997, p232) 'omnicompetence', this would be a position that only a super-human could sustain over an extended period so it is a broad and effective network to which they turn. It seems from the data that distributed leadership provides schools with not only the ability to share the burden of leadership but for the school as an organisation it also shares the risk. Where any individual is less effective or has a period of absence, the remaining team could have the potential to carry on. The data suggest that leadership which is focussed on particular activities, linked to the school's priorities, potentially results in more positive outcomes than a structure which is hierarchical.

There are a broad array of other factors that impact directly on a school's ability to change and overcome any level of challenge (discussed in the following sections) but it seems that the headteacher's response to this 'context specificity' (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001) is key to their effectiveness. Analysis of the data suggests that headteachers need to retain a view of the 'bigger picture' in order to see the challenges within an overall context. This view of the school 'culture' is critical in cultivating the climate for improvement.

Leadership in these schools that ultimately led to change and improvements was more distributed in nature, for example, at Willow where the acting leadership team were in place when the school was removed from its Ofsted category. Transactional leadership, where it was identified, did result in task completion, for example, the entering of test data into a spreadsheet at Acacia, but the impact of such work was limited.

Transformational leadership, related to structural, cultural and systemic change was, however, directly related to success in these primary schools facing challenging circumstances. For example, in the Four Weeks' Project

at Acacia, in the creation of an effective School Improvement and Development Plan at Elm and in the inclusion of teaching assistants and office staff in development planning at Willow. Each of these examples also included distributed forms of leadership. The evidence from this research suggests that a combination of leadership types, in addition to management skills, would be an ideal position and that this would be dynamic, changing in response to particular circumstances (Blanchard and Hersey, 1996; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002a, 2002b) with the headteacher maintaining an overall view of roles and responsibilities.

Changes in leadership are a potential 'pressure point' for any organisation but, it seems, instability over time, especially for a school facing challenging circumstances, intensifies the difficulties. The provision of support from external sources (whether working periodically or more permanently within a school) also raises itself as a potential issue, as does the crucial nature of relationships and communication. These issues are considered later in this chapter.

It is clear from this small-scale study that there are a myriad of factors contributing to or associated with the effectiveness of leadership within schools. They are not only often complex individually but combine to create unique and sometimes extremely challenging circumstances. Leadership itself is just one of these factors, and it should not be viewed in isolation as it is interwoven to such an extent with other factors that it would be difficult to single out its effect. What was found in these schools to a large extent matches what existing literature suggests about effective leadership. However the links between aspects of leadership and other potentially destabilising factors have not been considered elsewhere for primary schools facing challenging circumstances and the evidence from this study suggests that it is within these networks that the propensity for improvement or decline lays. This coming together of factors is considered within Chapters 8 and 9 examining Complexity Theory. What is clear from this study, however, is that the impact of leadership can be significant.



### **7.3 Theme 2: Origins, Evolution, Influences and Potential Threats: Internal**

This theme is divided into five sub-sections, each examining a significant aspect that emerged from the research. The first two sub-sections look at aspects associated with the headteacher's role, firstly recruitment and retention and then the potential lack of experience of any individual appointed. The following sections examine workload, emotional anxiety and communication. This set of aspects has been collected together as they relate to potential internal influences and threats to a school's capacity to improve.

#### **7.3a Recruitment and Retention**

As recognised within the literature (Fidler and Atton, 2004; MacBeath, 2006; Brundrett *et al.*, 2006; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009; Howson, 2010) the recruitment and retention of an effective school leader are crucial to the organisation's future development. In all three of the schools within this study the issue has been influential, although for different reasons and not specifically at the time of the research. The stability over time in terms of this particular leadership role was raised as a concern by those interviewed at Willow Primary (see Section 6.3), whilst the circumstances leading to, as well as the ramifications of, an internal promotion at Acacia Junior were reflected on by the staff (discussed further in Section 7.2a). Some of the issues that presented themselves for the headteacher in terms of workload at Elm Primary related to the nature of her appointment and the perceived lack of a clear description of what the job would entail (see Section 7.2b).

While no consistency in the particular issues related to recruitment and retention can be discerned within this research, its influence is none-the-less present and seems in some cases to be a key determinant of future success. It does, however, seem that unplanned headteacher succession is particularly problematic for primary schools facing challenging circumstances. Succession planning more broadly within schools seems to be linked directly to the leadership ability of the headteacher in terms of providing appropriate development opportunities, demonstrating the interwoven nature of factors affecting school improvement.

### 7.3b Lack of Experience

This section examines aspects of a headteacher's lack of experience which have been identified as influential within this research. The data emerged predominantly from Willow Primary followed by Acacia Junior, and this is compared to Elm Primary where Natalie possessed a greater level of experience.

At Willow Primary, one of the issues for Matt, the acting headteacher, was that he had already gone through the organisational socialisation within the school for the deputy headteacher's role but had taken a conscious decision *not* to pursue the role of headteacher so had not been professionally socialised in this respect. The lack of professional socialisation was recognised by the local authority adviser working with the school:

‘... with a new headteacher and a new deputy, both who were new to those positions ...’ (AB, 83-83)

The immediate difficulty for Matt and the school he was suddenly required to lead following the unexpected absence of the substantive post-holder, was the combination of this new role and an Ofsted inspection. The teacher who took on the acting deputy headteacher role and another class teacher reflected:

‘... so we went into the last inspection with a deputy head who had only been in the school just over a year and myself as Key Stage 1 co-ordinator and no headteacher.’ (SV, 63-65)

‘And so it was all a bit of a panic really, where is everything, what do we need...’ (AM, 87-89)

The research evidence leads again towards consideration of combined factors influencing a school's ultimate ability to improve. This is considered in Chapters 8 and 9 examining Complexity Theory.

### 7.3b (i) Training and preparation for headship

The complexity of the role and the difficulty associated with being adequately prepared for headship are acknowledged by Matt at Willow Primary School:

‘But I didn’t realise how much was involved in the headteacher role although I had done NPQH.’ (MW, 284-285)

He goes on to reflect the view of Duke (1987), that on-the-job training is desirable:

‘I did NPQH with a view of becoming a head eventually. This [acting headteacher role] has really opened my eyes. I think it’s the best way to do it.’ (MW, 343-345)

At Willow it seems that there was a general realisation by the acting headteacher and deputy that they lacked the knowledge and skills necessary for their new roles. They had not had the range of appropriate previous experiences. This suggests that the enforced first-time headship responsibility had a negative impact on the school’s capacity for improvement, exemplified in the following interview extracts:

‘I didn’t even know what a PIB [Pre-Inspection Briefing] was, that’s how unprepared I was.’ (MW, 114-115)

‘But prepared for all the questions they [Ofsted] were going to ask us, no.’ (MW, 122-123)

‘There is no guidance on how to write an Ofsted Improvement Plan so I wrote one, but I wasn’t happy with it so I wrote another plan which we started going with and then it became clear it wasn’t quite the plan for our school so I then went home and wrote a third Ofsted Improvement Plan.’ (MW, 301-310)

‘A vertical learning curve. It has been, you know though, dealing with child protection issues, not just the day-to-day stuff ...’ (MW, 316-317)

‘... as neither Matt or I had got experience [with budgets] and we both admitted it.’ (SV, 565-566)

### 7.3b (ii) Influence of previous headteacher

In the schools forming this study, the previous headteachers had been influential in a number of different but generally negative ways. This was particularly the case at Willow where there had been a series of school leaders contributing to the existing circumstances. Following the retirement of a long-standing headteacher, an internal promotion provided a replacement but, due to personal circumstances, she only stayed in post for a relatively short period and was covered by an interim arrangement before a further replacement was found. He appointed a new deputy headteacher and then became ill and was absent, leaving behind a complicated legacy.

Following triangulation of interview data through a blind reliability test, the circumstances which existed due to the leadership style of the previous headteacher at Willow were commented on:

‘They wrote the plan several times – they needed support with this crucial document because they hadn’t written a plan before – the headteacher kept it all to himself, although actually he hadn’t done it. If they had all taken a part then they would have known it wasn’t being done...’ (JG, 44-49)

‘Circumstances were not good and the school was ‘doomed to failure’. They were in crisis before Ofsted walked through the door.’ (JG, 13-15)

This view of the previous headteacher’s leadership practices was affirmed by the local authority consultant who was working alongside the school and members of staff in the following interview extracts:

'He [deputy acting as headteacher] didn't have access to the Self-Evaluation Form or the last Ofsted report or the tracking and he was trying very hard to find this information ...' (AB, 161-163)

'... because Sue and Angela [a teacher in the school] hadn't really been involved in any data before and they had no idea what was going on in their subject because Jeremy [HT who was absent] was trying to do it all.' (MW, 366-368)

'Yes, we can do it now [answer Ofsted questions] and we've got ownership now but we didn't have.' (SV, 245-246)

What the previous headteacher had done was deny his deputy and senior teacher a full and rich development experience so when they were faced with their promoted leadership positions they did not have a broad enough range of skills on which to draw. This can also be viewed as a lack of effort on the part of the existing leadership team to involve themselves in aspects of the school's strategic work.

### 7.3b (iii) Headteacher mentors

At both Acacia and Willow a mentor headteacher from a local school was provided through the Local Authority for the headteachers who were new to this role. At Willow, the support was not felt by the new headteacher to be as beneficial as the literature suggests, for example, that conducted by Bolam *et al.* (1995) identifying provision as 'invaluable' (p37). However this is perhaps an indication of Matt's lack of experience in that he was not able to transfer what he was learning into his own set of circumstances.

'He was from a much smaller school... they had three classes, and his children were getting ninety or one hundred percent level fours in their SATs [Standardised Assessment Tests].' (MW, 289-290)

The acting deputy headteacher from Willow reflected that they needed some support from outside the school which could have been provided by the mentor if they had sought his advice.

'We needed someone to say to us, 'you have got the figures and this is what you should do' ...' (SV, 553-554)

At Acacia, during informal conversations with the headteacher's mentor, it was apparent that he felt her leadership skills were not strong enough to lead the school out of Special Measures without a considerable amount of support. A journal entry, following one of his visits, raised concerns about the relationship that was developing.

'It worries me that Annabelle will 'blow with the wind' with whoever she has been talking to most recently. She must have her own opinions and vision.' (MHH Journal, 888-890)

#### 7.3b (iv) Headteacher as the leader of learning

At Acacia Junior, the data suggest that Annabelle found it difficult to stand back from the situation she was faced with enough to identify clearly the developments in teaching and learning that were necessary to bring about accelerated rates of children's progress. Examples of this include the training provided by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) subject leaders in the use of the trolley of 20 laptops within the classroom which could have been more effective if linked to an area of subject knowledge development. Although teachers became familiar with the hardware, implementing first-order change, they were unable to apply this knowledge in a particular learning context, and the deeper second-order change did not therefore result. The data suggest that development work was focused on 'quick fixes' which did not lead to sustainable improvements.

'Agreed that the deputies will give three weeks support to each teacher for numeracy and three weeks for literacy. I am concerned that this will develop the capacity of each teacher in their classroom but won't develop the capacity of

the staff / subject leaders to support each other.’ (MHH Journal, 904-907)

Whilst the headteachers in the schools within this research all had skills, the two who were less experienced demonstrated gaps in their repertoire that seem to have hampered their ability to lead developments within their schools. For example, at Willow, Matt and Sue admitted that when they were initially inspected, their ability to use and interpret data was not strong, which impacted on the ability to identify pupils’ progress and set expectations which is the starting point for moving children’s learning forward. This also meant that they could not communicate that information to others. Interview extracts in support of this are provided below.

‘I don’t feel quite so secure on the data.’ (MW 329)

‘... we didn’t know about collecting the data and analysing the data... that just hadn’t been part of our brief.’ (SV 79-80)

‘... a little bit of naivety in terms of what was needed in terms of stats and that and the kind of thing Ofsted would want to see...’ (AM 118-120)

It seems that things identified by the new literacy subject leader at Acacia as significant issues within learning and teaching had not been identified previously by the headteacher who had served in the school for an extended period, first as the Special Educational Needs Coordinator and then the headteacher. This signalled that perhaps she lacked the ability to lead learning effectively as even if her own subject knowledge for literacy in particular was weaker, good practice would have led her to devolve the responsibility and ask for feedback. Equally, the identification of more generic deficiencies could still have taken place. It seems that an inability to lead this aspect of change, negatively influenced overall school improvement.

‘... and I felt it was a very old fashioned view of English that they [the teachers] were doing ...’ (LM, 268-269)

'... a lot of talking at them [the children] and it was all about passivity... all about control of behaviour and that's all.'  
(LM, 270-271)

'I think that's [lack of up-to-date subject knowledge] a big problem in this school.' (LM, 516-517)

Journal entries identified significant issues that had not been addressed with a particular long-serving member of staff.

'Audrey – still very basic discussion about the children in her class who are one or two sub-levels behind where they should be as she seems not to understand.' (MHH Journal, 61-62)

'Her [Audrey] worry is still about what to give the children to do as an activity rather than what they will learn.' (MHH Journal, 330-332)

Within the school there were staff who wanted to develop, but their particular needs had not been identified or met.

'Lorna feels that she has seen very little practice outside Acacia and is at the point where she feels that she could develop further.' (MHH Journal, 595-597)

The development of learning and teaching within a school is fundamental to improving the provision it offers. It seems, therefore, that for schools facing challenging circumstances a leader would need to possess some expertise in this area and an ability to make links between these development needs and other aspects of practice such as the use of data and devolution of subject responsibility to appropriate members of staff. This reinforces once again the need for a more holistic view.



### 7.3b (v) Leading change

Although being placed in an Ofsted category provided ‘an external mandate to change’ (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006, p337), the headteacher at Willow suggested that significant changes were being made without any real conviction that they were appropriate. An example of his use of short-term change initiatives is demonstrated when he said during interview:

‘I think it’s a paper exercise I really do. I did a big staff meeting before [the HMI monitoring visit] called ‘Playing the Game’. I’ve given every member of staff a ‘Playing the Game’ sheet so when an Ofsted inspector comes in you do der, der, der and that will get you through.’ (MW, 372-376)

This ‘paint job’ (Marion, 1999, p212) demonstrates a lack of ability to lead and embed ‘second-order change’ (McMillan, 2008, p77) and was also commented on as part of triangulation and the blind reliability test process.

‘Playing the game – this was a really worrying thing to say because it means stuff is not embedded. They are still doing things at a superficial level.’ (JG, 55-57)

‘Acting headteachers choice of language suggests that he has no conviction and isn’t sure of what he is doing and has done. For example, I hope, I think, I’ve got to get that up-to-date, we should, I worry...’ (JG, 69-72)

### 7.3b (vi) Leading people

The issue of internal promotion once again arose in relation to a headteacher’s ability to lead others in order to ‘manage change in the whole institution’ (James and Connolly, 2000, p88). At Acacia, one of the teachers during interview made the following observation about the headteacher:

‘... being in school and being really a member of staff, you know, without being headteacher and I think it’s probably been quite difficult to change that relationship with people.’  
[ref to headteacher being promoted from within] (LD Aug, 76-79)

The disciplining of staff in particular seems to be problematic in these circumstances. The following journal extracts demonstrate that more than one member of staff at Acacia presented these challenges.

‘Maureen really must be challenged by Annabelle and she could be a loose canon during the next couple of days [HMI visit].’ (MHH Journal, 1495-1496)

‘Neville is particularly annoyed by Audrey’s behaviour and feels that Annabelle does not really deal with the issue.’  
(MHH Journal, 1998-1999)

#### 7.3b (vii) Personal development needs

It is in this area that Natalie’s greater experience becomes apparent. She recognised the value of her own professional development both personally and as a way to move the organisation forward. She engaged with a leadership development programme through ‘RightPath Solutions’ ([www.rightpath.com](http://www.rightpath.com)). It seems that the headteachers at both Acacia and Willow did not make the most effective use of development opportunities they were offered through mentors and did not seek additional opportunities.

#### 7.3b (viii) Final reflections

At Acacia the situation appears to be more complicated as some of the issues surrounding Annabelle’s lack of experience are also bound up with the circumstances leading to her appointment from within the school. In addition, her lack of experience seemed to be impacting on those whom she led as she was not providing them with the opportunities necessary to allow them to develop their own leadership skills and knowledge. The

teachers, as leaders of learning in their own classrooms were equally not being developed; the situation with Audrey described earlier with her not knowing what to give the children to do demonstrates a lack of understanding about scaffolding children's learning resulting in going back to keeping children busy through task-based teaching. All of this could potentially perpetuate and accelerate a conical helix of decline and leadership at all levels could be hampered.

For Natalie, who had already been a headteacher, the issue at Elm was the lack of experience of the particular circumstances she found herself dealing with, preparation for which would have been very difficult given the relatively unique situation. The merger of two schools is discussed further in Section 7.5. However, this again demonstrates the emergence of a headteacher's ability to respond with a range of skills and attributes to any given context as important.

The lack of experience in the role of headteacher was a difficulty for both Annabelle at Acacia and Matt in his acting headship at Willow. As illustrated in the examples throughout this section they both struggled through not having undertaken the work previously. Exacerbating this position was an absence of opportunity in earlier roles to undertake leadership work that would have provided at least some experience. The fundamental issue for the schools being considered as part of this research was that they were facing challenging circumstances so the person with headship responsibility for each of the schools was already in a potentially more difficult position, intensified by having to deal with being new to the role.

Ultimately it seems that hands-on experience is the best way to develop as a headteacher so it ought to be in providing the right support, guidance and professional development opportunities to enable this to happen that efforts are concentrated in the future. Matt from Willow summarises some of what he has learnt in the following interview extract:

'Yes, by the end of it I will have been through two Ofsted, an HMI, an RE inspection, had three permanent exclusions, a governor complaint panel, various child protection issues, dealt with many, many angry parents...' (MW, 350-353)

### **7.3c Workload**

Data that emerged in relation to this theme suggest that individuals involved in each of the study schools had too much to do. They reported that their time was taken up in dealing with issues relating to, for example, personnel, premises, the governing body and administrative tasks. This has led to a consideration of the impact that workload might have on the ability of a headteacher in particular to remain focussed on the development needs of the school without becoming unnecessarily 'side-tracked' by aspects of school life that could have a less positive or even no influence on children's learning.

Interview extracts from each of the schools are provided below to give an indication of their specific issues and the extent to which workload could be problematic in a range of different challenging circumstances.

For the headteacher at Elm the problem was one of fulfilling multiple roles.

'Being head of two schools going in two separate directions, having completely different policies, approaches, different aspirations, different everything, where there were real serious problems... was a nightmare.' (NE, 38-41)

'Interviewer: So were you trying to lead two schools single-handedly?

Interviewee: Completely. I was doing the main part of four full-time roles ...' (NE, 50-51)

At Willow, there was evidence that the workload of the absent headteacher had overwhelmed him.

'We pulled files off the headteacher's shelf in the headteacher's room where we kind of had looked up and thought, 'Good, there's a file on tracking, on Governors...', and when we opened the files they were all empty.' (AB, 165-168)

Matt, the acting headteacher, had particular difficulties that were associated with his continuing role as class teacher. He referred to this a number of times during interview, suggesting that he saw it as a significant part of the circumstances he faced.

'I was still teaching at this point. I still had a full-time teaching commitment which I was just sort of trying to get by.' (MW, 72-73)

'I couldn't get out enough to do it because I was trying to keep my Year 6 going.' (MW, 267-258)

'I was completely split ... [acting headteacher referring to HT role and class teacher role with Year 6 children]' (MW, 280)

'... its difficult when you are teaching all the time and then you have to do an assembly and then you have to do a staff meeting and then someone is out poorly and you have to get supply.' (MW, 325-327)

A teacher who worked alongside Matt also recognised that he had a heavy workload.

'I could see Matt was under an enormous amount of pressure and my fear was that he was then going to go down the road that Jeremy [the absent headteacher] had gone down.' (AM, 291-293)

‘... and obviously not wanting to put too much extra on him... especially when he was doing Year 6 as well.’ (AM, 456-457)

Teaching commitment was also a concern for the acting deputy headteacher at Willow.

‘... I’ve got my parallel teacher [the other Reception year teacher] who has been off now for seven weeks with a broken foot and so I’m trying to lead fifty-two children in Reception and lead literacy and do everything else ...’ (SV, 496-498)

‘... my teaching assistant has had a hysterectomy so I haven’t got her ...’ (SV, 499-500)

The extracts above suggest that any advantage gained through school leaders remaining close to the classroom and learning could be outweighed by an inability to manage an increased workload. The comments could also indicate that the relentless demands of the initial stages of headship for Matt were hindering school improvement.

At Acacia, the extracts below demonstrate that the issue of workload is considered to be problematic for teachers as well as school leaders.

‘... the inspector had said that she [headteacher] had too much to do...’ (LM, 158-159)

‘... she [headteacher] was trying to do everything and that she had to delegate it out more.’ (LM, 159-160)

‘That they [teachers] have got so much to do ...’ (LM, 487)

‘... there is just so much to do and no time to do it as usual.’ (LM, 512)

‘Already it is becoming clear that someone else will be needed to take on much of the deputy headteacher’s work if I am to be free to focus on teaching and learning ...’

(MHH Journal, 108-110)

And there are some time-consuming activities that just cannot be planned for:

‘Spent some time searching for a missing child. This side of school life at Acacia takes up so much time.’ (MHH

Journal, 2084-2085)

The data from this study suggest that the contribution made by ‘workload’ to the overall ability of a school to function can be significant. In terms of allowing for a comparison between schools of the influence it might have there is greater difficulty as most schools would consider that their staff members have more to do than there is time available. Ultimately the consideration would seem to be the extent to which staff members can deal with the workload, their ability to prioritise and delegate and both their practical and emotional responses to it when also faced with challenging circumstances. It is clear from the data, however, that there is a greater workload associated with each of the challenging circumstances considered as part of this research and that this undoubtedly contributes to the ‘intensification’ identified by MacBeath (2006, p192) as significant in influencing a school’s ability to improve.

### **7.3d Emotional Anxiety**

The ‘emotional anxiety’ data that emerged from this study can be subdivided in terms of its identified influence into three broad sections. These relate firstly to teaching or classroom practice and the way teachers perceived their own ability, secondly to leadership and management, including at a system level with aspects such as Ofsted inspection and thirdly to relationships and aspects of a more personal nature.

At Acacia Junior, ‘professional development and collaboration that raises teachers’ self-esteem’ (Harris *et al.*, 2006, p129) was implemented through a combination of mentoring, coaching and peer review, in an attempt to

address issues associated with classroom practice. The data suggest that relationships between staff were generally poor (professionally and on a more personal level) so this was initiated through shared work in each teacher's own classroom. The staff members were in general very resistant to this seeing any attempt to help them develop as an implied criticism of their practice. There were staff within the school who had been through Special Measures there before and so were definitely prone to feeling 'de-valued and de-skilled' (Harris *et al.*, 2006, p129). There seemed to be, however, little or no recognition that what they had done before was what had caused the school to be placed in Special Measures twice previously. The extracts below relate to people's initial reactions to the categorisation.

'... then again everyone felt obviously very, very negative ... [talking about reaction to first HMI visit outcomes]' (LM, 234-235)

'I still think blame was apportioned because some members of staff had been in Special Measures before ... people trying to shift the blame ... ' (LM, 96-98)

'... people being off sick and people being very stressed didn't used to happen and now it does ...' (LM, 370-371)

Extreme reactions to basic leadership practices were identified in the data. Below, the headteacher from Elm Primary is quoting a teacher's response to a request to carry out a classroom observation.

'... she said 'How insulting, I've never been observed teaching in sixteen years and she thinks she can just come into my classroom. Isn't that insulting, she's trying to check up on us.' They really took it as an offence.' (NE, 76-80)

Reference within the data from Willow Primary even suggested that people were experiencing fear.



'While the inspection is going, you know, it's just that fear that goes through you.' (SV, 170-172)

'I got away without being observed, which helped me a little bit because I didn't have a very good experience the first time.' (AM, 316-319)

Some comments related to a perceived lack of subject knowledge.

'They are feeling a bit de-skilled because they don't have enough of the literacy subject knowledge.' (LM, 519-521)

'... a lot of people didn't know anything about phonics ... and people don't feel very confident with it ... and people don't feel that they know how to do it I suppose ... people don't feel that they're good enough to do it ...' (LM, 494-500)

'And then they've got the Edison [structured commercial curriculum] which of course is totally new and again that's the same, will I be able to do it, it's too hard, it's all new, I don't get it, I can't stand it, all this kind of stuff.' (LM, 503-506)

For some people any degree of change evokes an adverse reaction, as discussed previously in Section 4.3. A teacher from Acacia made reference to this.

'I think some people are just absolutely frightened of change because they don't think they're going to be able to cope with what's happening... ' (LD Jun, 175-178)

In conclusion, some examples of heightened emotional anxiety identified related to situations that could be recognised in all schools, such as teachers being observed by the headteacher. However, some related specifically to challenging circumstances, such as a school being placed in Special Measures (see Section 7.4d), suggesting that more extensive

anxiety-raising situations may arise here, contributing further to MacBeath's (2006, p192) overall 'intensification' in those institutions.

### **7.3e Communication and Relationships**

Like so much of the data emerging from this study, reference to communication and relationships was mostly made when there were difficulties and often linked with other potentially destabilising factors. The data from Acacia Junior in particular support the observations, relating to relationships being 'tense, unproductive and hurtful', made by Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2005, p238) in their study relating to Ofsted category schools.

The evidence from this research seems to suggest that it is the stressful nature of situations rather than the underlying causes of this stress that lead to somewhat strained relationships. The deputy headteacher from Elm, when asked what relationships had been like during the period of merger, reflects:

'Civil. There have been a few small problems... uhmm... the odd personality thing... uhmm... the teacher that had moved from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 1 didn't feel supported by her colleagues and felt a little bit isolated ... but mostly it's been very cordial.' (JJ, 120-122)

'... there were communication issues, there are always communication issues, but there were communication issues at this school ... a teacher organised a French trip for Year 6, went round and asked teachers if they wanted to go, and asked teaching assistants in the first school if they wanted to go because they were the people that she knew but she didn't ask the teaching assistant who is attached to Year 6 who was offended...' (JJ, 129-137)

The second extract above demonstrates that communication is intrinsically linked with the development and maintenance of effective relationships.

John, the deputy headteacher, identifies once again the issue of communication later in the interview.

'Interviewer: What have been the things, if any, that have affected change?

Interviewee: Communication. Because there are two different systems from two different schools and they are picking up pieces and filling in spaces of their own free will, and attempting to benefit everybody, actually sometimes people are doing things and you don't know they are doing them...' (JJ, 165-170)

One of the issues demonstrated through the data from Acacia is that the staff felt there was poor communication leaving them ill-informed about what was happening. For example, once the original inspection had happened, there was a delay of a week before the staff were told that the school had been made subject to Special Measures. This does not suggest that the school's leadership team were keen to respond swiftly and develop a sense of urgency both for themselves and with the staff. It seemed to cause unease in individual staff members; two made reference to it during interview.

'We knew fairly soon that something wasn't right but we weren't told for quite a while that we were in Special Measures. I think it must have been about a week or so.'  
(LD Jun, 27-28)

'We knew something was wrong because Annabelle came into the staff room and said in a morning briefing that everyone was to put the lesson plans from the inspection on her desk... now sort of thing, and I thought well, that's not good is it so I knew that it hadn't gone well from her reaction to that. I could tell that it had gone badly but we weren't told immediately... I can't even remember how long we waited but we had to wait quite a while to find out ...' (LM, 99-111)

It seems from the above that the staff members were not given sufficient information to be clear about circumstances but enough for them to feel that something was amiss and therefore speculate as to what the underlying issue was. Other references were made to the lack of communication of information.

‘Sometimes there is too much secrecy. We might get an inkling that something is going to happen but we don’t get the whole story and I think that does fuel people to ‘gossip’ if you like ...’ (LD Jun, 125-128)

‘... I understand that you know the senior management team have to have discussions ... but I don’t think it’s so much that ... it’s that we’re told a quarter of something as perhaps a whole staff ... it’s when you get that little drip ...’ (LD Jun, 166-172)

It seems that if there is a greater amount of information to be shared and discussed then communication will become increasingly influential. For primary schools facing any challenging circumstances an increase in communications is likely to be necessary and so this issue is exacerbated.

### **7.3f Concluding Comments**

Similarly to conclusions drawn at the end of the section examining the leadership theme, those aspects included here are intertwined, not only with each other but potentially with a multitude of others. Whilst separating out of individual factors for any given set of circumstances would be difficult, their influence can be detected as part of a more holistic view. For example, the lack of experience of the headteacher at Willow was interwoven with factors associated with his leadership style, the skill set of the administrative staff, the socio-economic context of the school and the quality of learning and teaching within the school to acknowledge just a few. Together these factors contributed to the overall position of the organisation and the ability to overcome the adverse judgement made with regard to its performance. The acting headteacher’s lack of experience did

not on its own cause the school to be given a Notice to Improve by Ofsted but it was one of the contributory factors.

#### **7.4 Theme 3 – Influences and Potential Threats: External**

Sub-sections within this theme examine the influence and potential threats within this research of aspects that are increasingly external to the school. The role of the governing body, part of a school's leadership but with a more external mandate to challenge, is first considered. External sources of support, test results and Ofsted are then discussed in the following sections.

##### **7.4a The Governing Body**

This section considers the influence that the governing body exerted within each of the schools that formed this study. The data from this research suggest that for governing bodies, as for so many aspects of school leadership, those facing challenging circumstances find their work more difficult. Elm Primary School is discussed first as this issue is considered to be the most significant. Acacia Junior and Willow Primary follow.

###### 7.4a (i) Elm Primary School

It is interesting to note within this research that even in the school outwardly displaying the greatest signs of being successful in terms of, for example, outcomes for children, levels of attendance and high levels of social and cultural capital, there were significant issues associated with the governing body.

At Elm, the positive relationships between governors and the school's leadership that research evidence identifies as important (Scanlon *et al.*, 1999; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2007; James *et al.*, 2010; Ranson, 2011) was not in place. The following interview and journal extracts are presented as evidence of this and also serve to exemplify the difficulties associated with lack of education expertise and time available to give to the role.

'They [governors] are not seen to be involved that much by staff necessarily but I think because of the way that governors work and the amount of time they can spend in school it takes a long time before that role and that sense of purpose and that impression is developed with staff.' (JJ, 215-219)

'But because ... they [governors] had no subject leadership experience at all they didn't know how to do that [work on policies, practices and aims for their subject].' (NE, 137-139)

'... they [governors] lack experience and I don't think they appreciated the position they had put me in ...' (NE, 326-327)

'... some of them [governors] actually do not understand the roles and what's going on in schools.' (NE, 344-345)

'... the governors think that maybe she's [business manager] overpaid and if we could get that job out it would be a good thing.' (NE, 350-351)

The following journal extracts demonstrate the potential for a weak or difficult relationship between the governing body and school leadership to become time-consuming and a potential threat for the school. The first and second are illustrative of unprofessional conduct and the third suggests the existence of mistrust between the headteacher and governing body.

'Deputy headteacher reported that the governors had been meeting at the pub without the headteacher to discuss school matters and trying to make decisions which they then bring to the governors' meeting.' (MHH Elm Journal, 66-70)

'Children left some notes on the school door which suggested that knowledge of confidential school matters

has moved more widely into the public domain. The notes also said that the HT has let two teachers continue although they 'failed their exams' – this comes from the review meeting held with the governors when we discussed two observations completed by the HT that were unsatisfactory lessons – not a good situation as it makes 'trust' a very difficult thing.' (MHH Elm Journal, 74-86)

'Although the legal matter [outlined in Section 7.5a (ii)] was settled before it went to court, the governors have asked the Local Authority for an enquiry. They have said it's to show that there was no case to answer and to clear the name of the school but Natalie feels that at least two of the governors want it to show that she is 'guilty' and they are refusing to do her Performance Management Review until the enquiry is over. As the HT targets are completely unrelated, the review should just go ahead but at every turn Natalie has to seek advice about whether what they say is correct. Governor Support Unit are sending someone to speak with the Chair of Governors about their conduct and to make clear what their role and responsibilities are – this all takes time and emotional energy.' (MHH Elm Journal, 94-111)

The data appear to suggest that the relationship between the headteacher and at least some members of the governing body has broken down to a point where the governors are undermining the headteacher's ability to effectively lead the school by questioning her professional conduct and creating a situation within the community where confidence in her would be eroded.

#### 7.4a (ii) Acacia Junior School

Although not quite so destructive in nature, the issues with the governing body at Acacia were none-the-less time-consuming and caused a degree of upset for the headteacher and wider leadership team. They also

demonstrate the 'hidden' nature of the workings of governing bodies, identified by Balarin *et al.* (2008) as difficult to address.

The governing body had been deemed by Ofsted to be in a position of weakness. The existing Chair was not effective in challenging the Senior Management Team because, whilst he potentially had the skills, it seemed that he did not understand the role of a governing body. This meant that the governors in general were not fulfilling their statutory duties and needed to be evaluated and re-organised. As with so many things in a school in Special Measures, it seems that there is not the time or perhaps even the inclination, to share information with everyone and as discussed in Section 7.3e, people can be left feeling that there is much 'whispering in corners' going on. This certainly seemed to be the case with the governing body.

The following extracts highlight unease felt as the deputy headteacher and also reinforce the need for positive working relationships to be created and sustained (another of the interconnections emerging as important) so that the school's leadership, including the governing body, are united and therefore able to remain focussed on school improvement and development. The number of entries alone in the data appears to suggest that issues and relationships with governors were an ill-afforded distraction.

'Before Cheryl [school administrator] became a governor Neville and I had lots of conversations in the room where she also works that we assumed were confidential but now I think some of that information may have been shared with Graham who is also a fairly recent addition to the governing body.' (MHH Journal, 1773-1781)

'Again today I felt that something was going on with the governors. Cheryl and Graham had had a meeting with others and were definitely being somewhat 'shifty' when they saw me outside. Cheryl had also made odd comments to Neville and I about whether staff had the capacity to move the school out of Special Measures and that we shouldn't worry about it as it was being dealt with. We didn't really know what she meant and discussed the



possibility that the governors are moving towards suggesting that Annabelle / the senior team / some staff shouldn't remain.' (MHH Journal, 1877-1890)

'Governors issue was about some appointment procedures being illegal. It was about the replacement deputy's appointment and the promotion of a teaching assistant to Instructor status. Apparently there should be a procedure policy in place and Graham had written a letter to the Chair of Governors, expressing his concerns. The tone of the letter was a little pompous in putting his views across and the Chair has responded saying that he feels Graham is missing the point in these challenging circumstances and obviously Graham (quite correctly) says that we must be following the law or we could be in trouble. The Chair is considering his position but my guess is that he will resign at some point in the near future and it will probably be Graham who is appointed as the new Chair. I don't think Graham will be sad about this! Graham would be a more effective Chair but I don't think I could ever quite trust him – just a feeling.' (MHH Journal, 1895-1915)

'As there are issues with the governing body, an Interim Executive Board will be established that will take over. Members of the Board will be partly taken from the existing body and I think this is what Fergus [Deputy Director of Education] will be setting up when he comes to meet with them.' (MHH Journal, 1944-1948)

'The Chair of Governors resigned today, which is not a surprise following recent events but it will leave Graham as the acting chair and I definitely don't trust him.' (MHH Journal, 2019-2022)

'Left school as Fergus [Deputy Director of Education] was about to address an Extraordinary General Meeting of the governing body. We think this was to remove power from

the governors but Annabelle was anxious about it.' (MHH Journal, 2335-2338)

The data above appear to suggest that the governing body did not collectively have the knowledge to carry out their statutory duties (certainly with regard to recruitment) and that between the original Ofsted inspection (September 2006) and the following June, they had not been able to improve to a point where the local authority had faith in their capacity to challenge the school appropriately. Their ability to support school improvement therefore seems limited.

#### 7.4a (iii) Willow Primary School

During the interviews conducted at Willow, little reference to the governing body was made. This could indicate that the relationship between the leadership team and governors was not problematic although it could equally suggest that those interviewed did not consider the governing body to be significant enough in leading the school to mention. The following extract does however demonstrate that there were issues associated with the governing body's ability.

'The governors needed a push because they had let us down big style and they were deemed inadequate [by Ofsted during the inspection] ...' (SV, 264-265)

#### 7.4a (iv) Concluding comments

The governing body of a school is another of those intangible aspects of its constituent parts that it is crucial to have firmly and appropriately embedded and which it appears from the data is easy to get wrong. Where effective, the governing body seems to go largely unnoticed but where ineffective or limited it can cause significant issues for a school and the potential ability of that organisation to move forward, what James *et al.* (2010) suggest is 'not a neutral absence'.

At a time when increasing responsibility and statutory duties are being placed with governing bodies (DCSF, 2009; James *et al.*, 2011b), it seems

that their importance as part of a school's leadership structure should not be under-emphasised. As with each of the factors affecting the capacity of an organisation to improve, it seems that the impact of the governing body can vary tremendously. In some cases they provide an effective role in holding the school to account through support and challenge. Elsewhere their relationship with the school is a drain on time and energy. The data from this study suggest that the influence of the governing body, either positive or negative, should not be under-estimated and that it is not just those schools facing the challenges associated with low socio-economic status that are potentially threatened.

#### **7.4b External Support**

The schools within this research can be categorised as requiring intervention strategies, following Harris *et al.*'s (2006) typology, of either Type I (Acacia and Willow) or Type II (Elm). Type I school improvement strategies assist failing schools through high levels of external support and Type II rely more on school initiated work where the organisation is already moderately effective. All three schools were identified by the local authority as being of concern and were therefore targeted with external support.

At Elm the role of the external support for the leadership team was more often critical friendship, providing challenge for an already moderately effective leadership team, whereas at Acacia and Willow the support provided was more directive and interventionist, at least in the initial stages, replicating what Fullan (2001b) suggests was levels of support 'inversely proportionate to how well the school is progressing' (p46).

At Acacia, the acting deputy headteacher role to which I was appointed, placed me within the school as a long term member of the culture and could be considered to have helped with the establishment of what Miller (2002) describes as 'credibility' (p355). The time-limited nature of this role (6 months), however, supported an 'ability to remain detached' (Elliot, 1992, p48), another important aspect of the insider change leader role identified within the literature. Within the leadership analysis section (7.2) the provision in terms of credibility, perceived authority and provision of extended development opportunities is discussed further.

‘... obviously having lots of people in to help us... you know ... the people that came in to help us, that was a change, the support on site as well...’ (LD Aug, 23-25)

An additional layer of support provided at Acacia Junior was the secondment of a class teacher from another school. He had been identified as an effective practitioner and was looking for a career development opportunity. Although not an overt insider change leader, through a process of modelling good practice he was in a position to potentially influence others. The difficulty of this role was a ‘them and us culture being initiated’ (Nicolaidou and Ainscow, 2005, p237) and certainly initial mistrust and a feeling amongst some staff that he was there to ‘spy’ on them and report back to the leadership team existed. It seems from this research that there are different but equally valuable roles for insider change leaders in schools facing challenging circumstances.

At Willow Primary, there was recognition by a teacher during interview that Matt was an insider change leader and therefore in a stronger position to influence the school than a headteacher appointed from elsewhere might have been.

‘Matt is passionate about the school and he kind of went through the inspection experience and is therefore more up for changing things whereas if you get someone else in they know that they are going to go somewhere else and however professional they are they know that they’re not necessarily going to be here and are not going to be as passionate.’ (AM, 438-443)

Where the schools in this study were involved in a specific programme, such as the National Strategy’s Improving Schools Programme (ISP), they recognised the role that this external support had played in helping them to develop. This would support the notion that any support provided should be ‘founded on clarity and structured’ (NCSL, 2006, p12) so that both those delivering and those receiving the support are clear about its content and intended outcomes. The following interview extracts exemplify this.

‘Interviewer: Are there things that have helped change?’

Interviewee: Uhmm... yes... being an ISP school has helped.’ (JJ, 192-193)

‘... because I think the year in ISP, because ISP is very directed in the first year, we were able to direct him to certain things...’ (AB, 120-121)

‘... we were an ISP school and we knew about the Raising Attainment Plan for that we felt secure on our part for that...’ (SV, 76-77)

‘We could answer lots of questions about the ISP programme because we had been heavily involved in that as a Senior Leadership Team.’ (MW, 142-143)

The following two extracts, from an interview with the headteacher at Elm, identify the same programme as being helpful but also demonstrate that the headteacher has a broader understanding of what is required in order to lead and manage change in an organisation. Firstly, her focus is on children and their outcomes which is key to school improvement (Harris *et al.*, 2006, p129) and secondly she alludes to more creative use of the external support to help the school move forward.

‘ISP has certainly helped because starting a new school and saying, right, we’re going to work on children’s targets has helped focus in on teaching and learning and what the school is about and signalling that this is our core purpose and it’s about the children and not the staff.’ (NE, 385-389)

‘It gives you some structure and someone else saying that the staff must do things and it doesn’t always come from the head. And because it is tried and tested so we expected it, well I certainly expected it to have positive impact and it has, it has.’ (NE, 392-395)

The deputy headteacher from Elm also reflects on the creative use of the external support provided, in much the same way as his headteacher did in the section above.

‘... it helps that someone from outside the school can come in sometimes and say, ‘Actually, I want this done’ and sometimes that enables you to be on the other side as it were. It gives a sense of unity amongst the staff. We’re less disunited by the fact that we’re on two different sides because actually it’s someone else saying something.’ (JJ, 198-206)

A potential difficulty of following a particular structured programme was identified by the headteacher at Willow:

‘... they [inspectors] didn’t seem to understand the ISP programme at all, even though Alison [local authority adviser] had gone in and really tried to explain it.’ (MW, 214-216)

Along with the quality and relevance of the support provided, it is the extent to which schools are willing or able to make effective use of that support that seems to be crucial. A comment made following the blind reliability tests using the interview with the headteacher from Willow reflects this:

‘The support headteacher who was linked to the school during this time was not appreciated. The school was not able to see the generic nature of the stuff he was talking about. Because his own school was different... smaller... they thought that his advice wasn’t applicable rather than looking for the things that would be generic.’ (JG, 34-40)

The following interview extract demonstrates that Natalie at Elm was proactive in seeking external support. This could be indicative of her greater experience in school leadership or perhaps her realisation that the circumstances she faced were difficult to deal with alone.

'I started off doing some [classroom observations] with a local authority School Development Adviser... because I wanted to check that I was... to moderate my opinions ...'  
(NE, 249-251)

The ability of a school's leadership to utilise support and intervention appropriately in order to avoid overload and remain focussed on the school's priorities, has emerged from this research as an important aspect of dealing with a 'high external locus of control' (Harris and Allen, 2009).  
The consultant working with Willow Primary notes:

'... obviously LA support had increased... uhmm... they were being monitored by the School Development Adviser, by myself, by the literacy adviser.' (AB, 206-207)

This could have been overwhelming if not managed appropriately.

In the data collected from Willow Primary, negative comments made with respect to external support were related either to a perceived lack of support or to the mis-match between what the school saw as its need and what was actually provided.

'We've had fantastic support from Alison and John has been in but we weren't given County Head support because we didn't know how long Jeremy was going to be off.' (SV, 287-290)

'We've had to really push to get that behaviour support.'  
(SV, 544)

'... County weren't really offering us anything because they couldn't because of Jeremy's situation [absent headteacher]...' (MW, 281-282)

'The project board were dragging their feet and although we were getting some good numeracy from Alison, literacy

advice was woefully inadequate in that we just weren't getting any.' (AM, 225-227)

'... the support was so slow... we didn't get anything until way after Christmas in terms of being finalised about what we needed to do in order to improve.' (AM, 241-244)

'... and I know that things don't happen immediately... but it would have been better if before Christmas we'd have had, right, this is now what you need to do rather than waiting...'  
(AM, 252-254)

Whilst the extracts above suggest that support was not swift, they also serve to highlight what could be considered to be high levels of dependence from the school on external sources of help. Data from this research suggest that this can be appropriate during the early stages of identified difficulties but can be detrimental to overall improvement should over-reliance develop. Even when it was provided, the leadership team were not necessarily able to derive value from it, as exemplified below:

'They sent in a consultant headteacher two days a week. He was from a much smaller school. He was a lovely bloke, very efficient but he was good to have there at the beginning just for moral support. ... He did put some paperwork in place which I haven't continued because I didn't think it was right.' (MW, 289-297)

Within this research it is clear that the external support that was valued most by schools and which had the greatest impact was that which came from someone with whom the school could build a relationship over time. Difficulties seemed to arise where the role was externally imposed and a relationship not built. Where the support provided at Elm took the form of critical friendship provided through a consultant with whom the school had built a relationship over time, this was valued by the leadership of the school. This is exemplified in the interview extracts below.



‘... it helps that someone from outside the school can come in sometimes and say to the staff, ‘Actually, I want this done’ and sometimes it enables you to be on the other side as it were...’ (JJ, 198-200)

‘It gives you some structure and someone else saying that the staff must do things and it doesn’t always come from the head.’ (NE, 392-394)

Analysis of data from this study suggests that regardless of the nature of the challenging circumstances faced, there is potential benefit to be gained from sources of external support. The effectiveness of this seems to be linked directly however to the ability of the headteacher in particular to utilise the input so that it builds development potential rather than being seen to add only to the bureaucratic load. It seems that for primary schools facing challenging circumstances, there is a ‘competence line’ (Myers, 1995, p151) below which external support is not effective because internal capacity is insufficient.

#### **7.4c Test Results**

Statistical outcomes are a further external factor. They are used as a key measure against which to judge a school’s success.

The issues of under-performance and under-achievement were similar at Acacia and Willow, as was the focus on statistical outcomes by Ofsted. The literacy subject leader from Acacia, when reflecting on the actual inspection, states:

‘... and what his [Ofsted inspector] big concern was ... the levels of the children who had come into my class ...’ (LM, 42-43)

‘... he [Ofsted inspector] was brandishing it [results grid] in his hand all the time and he was saying well these are terrible but of course they are from the infants [feeder school] ...’ (LM, 48-50)

Under-achievement at Acacia was also identified in the following journal extracts.

‘Issue – if Maureen has been teaching in the way she suggests consistently, then why don’t her children make the progress they should?’ (MHH Journal, 751-752)

‘It is clear that many of our children are making progress, although it isn’t always fast enough. When so many start at such a low level it is difficult for them to catch up.’ (MHH Journal, 2306-2308)

The second extract above suggests that even when there is clarity about what progress children are able to make from any given starting point, based on evidence from national rates of progress made over an extended period, it is very difficult not to be drawn into looking at the circumstances of each individual child and seeking to explain why they do not replicate this pattern. This could be indicative of objectivity as a researcher being compromised by an extended period in the field and is reflected on further in the concluding chapter.

For Willow the children had low levels of attainment but also struggled to make appropriate progress and this made it difficult to establish that the school was providing a ‘good’ quality education and contributed to the Notice to Improve that resulted from their Ofsted inspection.

‘... their results were in a decline, they had a downward trend over several years, there was a big discrepancy between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 ...’ (AB, 79-81)

The data seem to suggest that the acting headteacher and acting deputy headteacher were both aware that the statistical outcomes were key to the school being able to move on.

‘We knew that they [Ofsted] were going to come back a year later so our results had to be good ...’ (MW, 277-278)

‘The year 6 SATs results weren’t back and she [HMI inspector] did say that lots was riding on those and unfortunately we’ve had a blip with those. We only got 25% for our writing and that was devastating. We got 77% for the reading which was fantastic and they [the children] totally misinterpreted the task and wrote a leaflet.’ (SV, 454-458)

This outcome for Willow Primary was particularly important as Matt, the acting headteacher, was also one of the two Year 6 teachers which could suggest that he had spent so much time away from his class dealing with wider school issues that he was not able to focus on the children’s learning in the same way he would have done if the substantive headteacher had been present.

For Elm, the issue was rather different in kind as it did not relate to the attainment of the children but to the amount of progress they made over time, based on their very secure starting points. Natalie, the headteacher, reflected:

‘But standards obviously I knew were a serious thing. I had looked at the Performance and Assessment Data package before I came and thought ha ha, it can’t be that bad and it was.’ (NE, 150-152)

‘... compared to national averages our children are fine, compared to prior attainment, they do not make appropriate progress ...’ (NE, 154-156)

On their own, the influence of test results might seem limited but the data from this study suggest that they are often bound up with a multitude of other factors. These might include the ability of staff members at all levels to interpret and utilise data both summatively and formatively, judgements made by external agencies, parental perceptions and, teachers’ anxiety and classroom practice. Once again the potential influence of interrelated combinations of factors is demonstrated.

#### 7.4d Ofsted

It was unsurprising that this aspect emerged from the research as significant; what was perhaps surprising was that its prominence was not greater. Working within an Ofsted category can create the overarching challenging circumstances for a school but it seems to be the links between aspects of this and other areas that determines a school's improvement or decline. The following section examines the issues as they relate to this research, providing data from the schools that formed the study.

Even in schools that have historically been judged by Ofsted to be successful, the fear of an adverse inspection judgement is very real. Natalie, the headteacher at Elm, reflected:

‘I was actually in a situation that I realised we could end up having an Ofsted and if we had an Ofsted we would have been in Special Measures.’ (NE, 81-83)

Working within an Ofsted category has been identified in the existing literature as challenging in a number of ways. These have been mirrored in the findings of this research. For example, the two schools included in this research that were subject to an Ofsted category (one Special Measures and the other a Notice to Improve) were both operating within significantly deprived and disadvantaged socio-economic contexts, identified as a significant factor in the research literature (Gray, 2000; Harris, 2001). A further similarity identified was the problematic nature of a headteacher remaining in post following a failed inspection (Nicolaidou and Ainscow, 2005, p244). Loyalty towards less effective staff can mean that their practice is not addressed. This is exemplified at Acacia when the first HMI monitoring visit had reported inadequate progress against all the actions, including the improvement of teaching and learning and the headteacher was still defending staff who had been identified through the inspection process as ineffective.

'Her [headteacher] views are that Audrey has made so much progress in many areas and is really rising to the challenge ... and Maureen has developed greatly as the subject leader.' (MHH Journal, 380-386)

This could suggest that as a headteacher she was looking to identify positive things about her staff but equally it could suggest that she was not able to make appropriate judgements or be objective when making those judgements.

Analysis of data from this research demonstrates that it is the links with other areas of the school's practice that cause Ofsted categorisation to be particularly problematic. These are discussed following a consideration of the factor emerging most strongly from the data, that of emotional response. The following extracts are negative in nature, perhaps reflecting the response to failed inspection outcomes.

'The Ofsted team were very tough.' (AB, 170)

'They weren't the nicest Ofsted inspectors. They weren't warm.' (MW, 130)

'... um... didn't particularly get on with the inspectors which probably didn't help very much.' (LD Jun, 64-65)

'People were angry about the way the HMI visit was conducted by the people who came.' (LD Jun, 67-68)

'Arrived after meeting between HMIs and Annabelle and Neville had begun but tone of meeting was not good. Ivan was being aggressive to the point of overstepping the boundary of professionalism.' (MHH Journal, 1521-1524)

'... but I found the way in which the inspection was carried out to be both unpleasant and unprofessional.' (MHH Journal, 1556-1557)

There were also some more positive comments. These relate to a time when Willow Primary was judged to be making good progress.

'It wasn't quite the same approach [comparing the HMI inspector to the original Ofsted inspector].' (MW, 358)

'It wasn't all joking and they don't have a lot of time but at the same time they're not officious and got to find everything that's wrong. The one that we had didn't seem so power-crazy.' (AM, 330-332)

A further emotive time seems to be when the news is broken that the school will be placed in a category. Even months after the event recall of the situation is clear.

'End of the second day they came in and said Special Measures and we were all a bit gob-smacked.' (MW, 181-182)

'... they [Ofsted inspectors] rang us back at half past ten the next day ... they had gone back down on the train the night before and said they had talked long and hard and they had revised the category and put us in Notice to Improve. Because they thought we had the capacity to improve.' (SV, 156-160)

'... it was a bit of a shock when I found out that... you know... that we were going to be in Special Measures ...' (LM, 30-32)

The links with other areas identified within this research as significant in influencing the school's potential to move forward are outlined below.

Whilst the quality of staff has already been identified within the existing literature as an important contributory factor within the Ofsted inspection process, the analysis of data from this study suggests that if the poor performance is not addressed then it can have a damaging impact on the morale of other staff and overall performance of the school. As has already

been discussed within the leadership analysis section (7.2a) this was a particular issue at Acacia. Even at the end of April, almost eight months after the initial inspection, it seems that the headteacher still did not recognise the inadequacies of some of her staff. This is exemplified through data from a journal entry:

‘Meeting with local authority senior adviser, Neville, Annabelle and I to discuss whether the staff as it stands can bring the school out of Special Measures. Headteacher decided that probably one member of staff won’t be able to but the rest will be able to deliver at least satisfactory lessons.’ (MHH Journal, 1231-1235)

The following interview extract demonstrates that other members of staff were aware of this issue and could suggest that it is viewed as a significant factor affecting the school’s ability to improve.

‘Interviewer: What do you think would really help the school to get out of Special Measures?  
Interviewee: Honestly? I’d say a couple of the staff leaving.’  
(LD Jun, 145-147)

The ‘fragmented relationships’ leading to ‘serious confrontations’ (Nicolaidou and Ainscow, 2005, p241), were also identified through analysis of the data in this study relating to Acacia. They demonstrate a link with the communication and relationships aspects of the school’s context and are exemplified in the following extracts:

‘Staff are obviously still feeling fed-up over the audit visit and are beginning to fall out with each other. Maureen in particular does lots of door slamming and not speaking to anyone.’ (MHH Journal, 1286-1289)

‘Maureen is sulking because she has been told that she must plan and teach one literacy lesson during the HMI visit although it is SATs week. She is slamming doors and not speaking to anyone ... Annabelle has already spoken to her

twice this week and Maureen has been mumbling to the Learning Support Assistants during assembly.' (MHH Journal, 1487-1495)

'Yes, I think we [the staff] can be quite fractured at times and it can be quite uncomfortable at times as well.' (LD Jun, 194-195)

At Willow Primary the leadership team were ill-prepared for the initial inspection with the acting deputy commenting that they were, 'scurrying around looking for documents to offer the inspectors' (SV 93-94). This is perhaps indicative of their overall position and suggests a link between the already challenging circumstances relating to the practice of their absent headteacher.

It is interesting to note that data within this study which suggest that Ofsted and HMI had made fair assessments about the position of the schools, came from those who had a role external to the organisation. This could suggest that their view of the school was more realistic, possibly because they were removed from the day-to-day situation or possibly because their working roles required them to routinely be more evaluative and make objective judgements.

'Although it was harsh, they did deserve the judgement. [Notice to Improve judgement]' (AB, 214)

'I think that this [inadequate progress] is a fair assessment of where we are at ...' (MHH Journal, 1554-1555)

Perhaps surprisingly, positive aspects of being placed in an Ofsted category, in terms of support from the local authority to develop the school's capacity, have been identified from this study and suggest that some staff feel empowered by the whole process. The link between external support and Ofsted categorisation is also made, a further example of the interrelated nature of a school's situation.



'... I just looked on it as professional development in a way because I've only ever taught here and I trained here, ... then I've just sort of tried to take it all on board ...' (LD Jun, 100-104)

'In some ways, because I've only been qualified for four years, it's been developmental because it's given me a chance to look at things in a different way ... to me it was like an extra piece of training ...' (LD Aug, 127-132)

'I think it [an Ofsted category] has probably pushed things along quicker than I think they would normally go so in terms of that I think it's quite positive. I think my teaching has improved from it and I think the planning side of it, because we've really had to focus on things which schools would focus on anyway but over a longer period of time.' (AM, 478-483)

'I do think that inadequate progress has pushed us into being more radical in our plans for this half term and that wouldn't have happened if the progress had been satisfactory.' (MHH Journal, 1757-1762)

It is clear from this research that there are a number of different aspects which contribute to the overall effect that Ofsted inspections and being placed in a category might have, the most significant of which seems to be the emotional response of those involved. Links between Ofsted categorisation and other aspects of a school's practice have also been identified as significant contributors to the capacity for improvement. It is once again this more interconnected view that has been highlighted as important and will be examined further in the following chapters.

#### **7.4e Concluding Comments**

As discussion of the themes emerging from the data progresses, it is becoming increasingly clear that the collective influence of many factors interacting in primary schools facing challenging circumstances is an

important area for consideration. The approach to this will be discussed and exemplified in Chapter 8 examining Complexity Theory.

## **7.5 Theme 4: Merger**

The third case study in this research was selected through maximum variation purposive sampling as a school facing potentially challenging circumstances different in nature to the first two, but also because it was being led by a more experienced headteacher who had been successful elsewhere. This was to allow for investigation and comparison of the extent to which the level of experience of the headteacher might be influential in the improvement or decline of primary schools facing challenging circumstances.

The theme, in terms of the volume and depth of data generated, was only slightly less prominent than those aspects associated directly with school leadership. This section therefore looks specifically at amalgamation, drawing on research data from Elm Primary School. It looks at circumstances prior to, during and immediately following the actual merger and includes details of an issue arising within the school of a legal nature and the potential effect that such an event could have on any school, and in particular on any headteacher.

### **7.5a Elm Primary School**

#### **7.5a (i) Circumstances leading to merger**

The reorganisation circumstances at Elm Primary School were based on the merger of two pre-existing schools, a first school and a middle school, to create a primary school. The two schools were on the same site and were already joined physically by a corridor. The contact between the two schools, however, ended at that point and there had in the past been some tension between them relating to the reported academic levels at which children were performing on transfer between the schools.

As acknowledged within the literature (McHugh and Kyle, 1993; Wallace, 1996; Wallace and Pocklington, 2002) merger was a significant and

challenging set of circumstances for Elm Primary School. Whilst the school leadership team endeavoured to keep staff informed about progress towards the changes, communication between the local authority and the school's leadership made this more challenging. This was partly due to the number of different local authority departments that were involved in the changes; human resources, legal services, finance and the education advisory service all had contributions to make to the process. This did not lead to the 'extremely careful and well planned approach to change management' proposed by McHugh and Kyle (1993, p24). Within the new school itself issues surrounding communication arose. The deputy headteacher reflects:

'... there were communication issues, there are always communication issues, but there were communication issues at this school and some of those are to do with what people expect and know about their previous role in the school and what school was like.' (JJ, 129-133)

The difficulty in maintaining effective communications was one of the significant factors leading to the legal issue discussed later on in this section.

Even at an early stage in her work leading the schools Natalie, the headteacher, was anxious about their position in terms of potential inspection outcomes. This was discussed as part of the leadership analysis (Section 7.2b). Her anxiety was partly due to the statistical profile, particularly in terms of progress made by children between entry to and exit from each of the schools, an issue that it seems is common in schools facing any challenging circumstances.

The headteacher's perception of the level of support provided by the Local Authority is indicative of her relationship with them at that time and reflects, perhaps, the imposed nature of much of what was happening at the school and the lack of 'extra resources during the first year of merger' that Wilson and Hall (2002, p181) suggest would help. It also makes a link between the external support theme that emerged within this research and the different set of challenging circumstances posed by merger.

‘Natalie always feels that she is not being given a very good deal by the Local Authority and needs further support to be provided by them – both financial and in terms of advisory support. She has little respect for the SDA [School Development Adviser] and feels strongly that he doesn’t understand fully her position or the pressure she is under.’  
(MHH Elm Journal, 25-34)

#### 7.5a (ii) Pre-merger circumstances and difficulties

The circumstances that existed in the lead up to the merger at Elm Primary School showed high levels of correlation with the research evidence from secondary schools discussed within the literature review (Section 4.2). As described by Kyriacou and Harriman (1993) and McHugh and Kyle (1993), there was much anxiety about jobs for a considerable period of time. For example, the mathematics subject leaders from each school talked independently about who would have the role in the new school and both identified the strengths of the other and reasons why that person might be appointed. These included being younger, more experienced, at the school for longer, expensive to make redundant and being more difficult to find an alternative role for. The new deputy headteacher was aware of this, observing during an interview that, ‘there was a certain amount of ill feeling’ (JJ, 62-63).

It seems that this level of anxiety over jobs in the new school was exacerbated by the degree to which the two schools were separate beforehand. In an interview, the headteacher said:

‘Two very separate schools ... it was just chalk and cheese, just being thrust together.’ (NE, 27-32)

The new deputy headteacher also identified this issue.

‘Nobody ever went in the other school’s staff room apart from me and Natalie.’ (JJ, 55-56)

Even when the staff for the new school had been appointed, tensions remained, as the deputy headteacher explained.

‘Everybody was offered a job but not everybody took the jobs because they weren’t the jobs they wanted or on the terms they wanted.’ (JJ, 65-7)

‘There was obstruction towards change, especially before the two schools came together. There were groups of people who simply didn’t believe that change was necessary or that if change was going to happen, it should be someone else that changes not them.’ (JJ, 184-8)

It seems that, independent of the source, emotional anxiety is created by a range of challenging circumstances. As identified in the literature by McHugh and Kyle (1993), the stress resulting from school merger is not limited to the staff within an organisation. Leading and managing this undertaking is equally difficult and has a further set of pressures attached to it. For the newly appointed headteacher at Elm, she felt that there was a degree of suspicion within the staff about her. The following interview extract exemplifies this.

‘... existing staff were very distrustful. Some staff had made up their minds beforehand that I was not going to do what they wanted.’ (NE, 55-57)

Additionally, the circumstances in the two pre-existing schools were not straightforward.

‘Being head of two schools going in two separate directions, having completely different policies, approaches, different aspirations, different everything, where there were real serious problems... was a nightmare.’ (NE, 38-42)

‘I was doing the main part of four full-time roles and one school had the most enormous budget deficit imaginable...’ (NE, 51-53)

Coupled with this, the leadership were, 'heavily burdened by the need to prepare for the opening of the new school' (Kyriacou and Harriman, 1993, p300), as exemplified below:

'... and not only run two schools but I had to make staffing changes ... and staffing allocations for the new school ... and I had a lot of administration work to do to prepare for the merger ...' (NE, 101-3)

During a time when rapid change is required, and turbulent situations are being managed, the potential for mistakes to be made increases. The implications of this can be far-reaching. A significant situation arose thus during the merger that was to create Elm Primary School.

#### **The legal issue**

This issue involved an accusation made against the headteacher personally and the school corporately relating to the succession rights over a position in the newly created school. A number of factors contributed to the circumstances leading to this point but it exemplifies the fragile and often precarious position in which schools and their leaders can find themselves.

There had, for a number of years, been some after-school childcare provision which was managed at the time that the merger plans were announced by a particular individual. When jobs were being created for the new school, this position should have been 'ring-fenced' for the existing employee but was, instead, advertised and attracted both the existing employee and a further applicant, who ultimately was successful in being appointed. This appointment process happened in the usual way with applications assessed and an interview taking place. The existing employee, who was unsuccessful, then made an accusation of racism against the headteacher and the school.

The initial situation arose because the headteacher lacked knowledge about the circumstances surrounding succession rights and her actions

were not picked up on by other agencies involved. The problem was exacerbated by a lack of communication between the Human Resources Department within the Local Authority and the leadership of the school. When communications did occur, the headteacher did not at the time feel it necessary to retain a record or ask for confirmation of what had been said or agreed. A further difficulty, which finally led to the instigation of formal legal proceedings, was the replacement of the schools telecommunications system during part of the school summer holiday, leaving the school without email contact for an extended period. This meant that the school, through the headteacher or governing body, did not make a timely response to communication from the employee's legal representatives.

The process was unpleasant for the headteacher, exacerbated by discussions outside school that went on between the employee and other members of the local community. At one point some children left a number of hand-written 'notes' addressed to the headteacher on the gates to the school. The content of these suggested that the headteacher treated people unfairly and made direct reference to the circumstances surrounding the allegations being made.

More than a year had elapsed when resolution finally came. During this time the headteacher had been advised by the Local Authority to seek her own legal representation; this added enormously to the levels of stress she was under at a time when she was already attempting to manage multiple changes. Eventually, once she and the school had been cleared of the allegations, the governing body requested an investigation by the Local Authority. They suggested that this was in order to exonerate the school but the request served only to undermine the headteacher further and was another example of the fragile relationship that existed between the different levels of leadership within the school.

This example demonstrates the fragile nature of a headship position and the potential vulnerability of those individuals, and others, working in schools. It seems that such issues can cost a school dearly in terms of time, effort, financial and other resources, and reputation in addition to the personal and emotional impact on any individuals involved. In the situation

here the greater experience of the headteacher perhaps allowed her to cope with the issue alongside the others identified as influential in the school's circumstances.

#### 7.5a (iii) Early stages of the merged school

At Elm, the fact that staff from the two schools chose not to mix or spend time in one another's staff rooms was one indication of the separateness of their cultures (Deal, 1985; Nias *et al.*, 1992; MacGilchrist *et al.*, 1995). There was still some 'blame culture' relating to the rates of progress children made in the individual schools and the use made of tracking data to determine this. For example, it was felt by the pre-existing middle school staff that the teacher assessments from the pre-existing first school were artificially high, based on new assessments of those children following transition between the two schools. The deputy headteacher acknowledged that these divided circumstances were problematic:

'It had only been going for a year with her [the new headteacher] with the two separate schools and of course everybody wants things to be done the way they've always done them.' (JJ, 49-51)

'There are power struggles. There are staff who want to continue to do things their own way...' (JJ, 177-9)

At Elm, the set of beliefs and values held by the new headteacher was different to either of those from the pre-existing schools which served to unite the two sets of staff to some degree but reinforced the feelings that a new 'culture' and change initiative was being imposed. The deputy headteacher, during an interview, reflected:

'... their experience of a leader was very different between the two schools because the previous headteachers had been very, very different characters with very different styles and very different ways of operating completely.' (JJ, 145-8)



‘Interviewer: Were either of them [the headteachers of the separate schools] anything like Natalie?’

Interviewee: Not really, there aren’t many people like Natalie [laughs].’ (JJ, 149-50)

The headteacher and leadership team at Elm Primary put in place measures which were aimed at addressing some of the issues associated with a lack of culture shift and demonstrate that they had an understanding of this aspect of school development. This could also suggest that it was the ability of the more experienced headteacher that supported the school’s capacity to move forward. The extracts below describe examples of this.

‘... I made everyone change rooms, not to be bloody-minded but because I wanted everything to come out of the woodwork.’ (NE, 227-8)

‘I very purposefully moved some key people from what was the first school domain into the middle school and vice versa.’ (NE, 269-70)

The following extracts, taken from an interview with the deputy headteacher, demonstrate that Elm followed a similar pattern post-merger to that identified in the literature for secondary schools merging (e.g. Wallace, 1996) relating to day-to-day procedures.

‘Routines... uhhh... a lot of it was working through what would need to be done to harmonise what the two different schools did. I wasn’t necessarily able to look at what needed to be changed about a school, it was about when the two schools became one school and we were all having to use harmonised systems, what kind of things were we going to have to do.’ (JJ, 23-28)

'That was what the first term was about. It was about what do we do at break times, what do we do on the playground, how do we do lunch time supervision, what are our systems going to be for staff meetings and handwriting books.' (JJ, 31-36)

A final reflection from the headteacher at Elm demonstrates that there was a positive side to the merger situation and perhaps that as a more experienced headteacher she was able to recognise this.

'I suppose coming into this school, facing reorganisation, although that made it hard, it did signal a complete change and that was probably helpful ...' (NE, 396-8).

#### 7.5a (iv) Implications

What seems to be significant about the situations that emerged specifically related to the merger at Elm is that they are not unique. An increasing number of schools have been through this process, managed by a number of different local authorities. It should be possible, therefore, to draw on these experiences in order to better inform those who are about to undergo something similar. Information and guidance for headteachers would be particularly useful when they are already in roles with heavy workloads and high levels of responsibility. The interweaving of other circumstances into the overall mix at Elm created a specific context but the impact of the amalgamation itself could perhaps have been reduced through support.

#### **7.5b Concluding Comments**

The data from this research suggest that the issues for primary schools merging are similar to those identified within existing literature relating to secondary schools and that there is therefore at least a degree of transferability. More significant, perhaps, for this research is that those issues and the links between them are also the same ones identified as influential within other challenging circumstances. For example, the link between staff anxiety and communication is evident in all three of the schools that formed this study, independent of the particular context.

In terms of leadership, as was demonstrated in Section 7.2, it seems that Natalie provided stronger direction which might in part have come from her more extensive headship experience. It seems from consideration of the particular challenging circumstances associated with merger that this strength helped to outweigh the negative influences such as staff attitude and relationship with the governing body but did not overcome them altogether. Leadership, particularly of the headteacher, is once again identified as a significant contributory factor to a school's capacity to improve but, as exemplified in this case study, it forms just one aspect of the complex system that a school presents. Whilst understanding individual factors might be useful, a wider and more holistic view is perhaps necessary to determine the potential for change and improvement.

## **7.6 Moving Forward**

As the analyses in this chapter have built, it has become increasingly apparent that each aspect emerging from the data has the potential to influence or threaten a particular set of circumstances. For example, the lack of experience of a headteacher could lead to the inappropriate selection of improvement strategies. It seems that these individual factors are, however, linked together in what is potentially a complex network and that it is these linked factors that contribute to the overall effectiveness of a school and its ability to improve. Within this network it seems that it would be difficult to gauge the influence of any individual factor in isolation. This leads to the conclusion that a way of viewing a primary school facing challenging circumstances more holistically should be sought. The following chapters therefore introduce Complexity Theory and then apply it as a lens through which to examine the particular case studies from this research.



**Chapter 8**  
**Literature Review 4:**  
***Complexity Theory***



Number 8  
Jackson Pollock (1949)

## 8.1 Introduction

It occurred to me recently in the corridor of my office building that when you carry several cups of tea on a tray, the surface of the hot liquid sometimes begins to move backwards and forwards in the cups to the point where you seem unable to prevent them from spilling without stopping and making them completely still before continuing. It does not always happen, and there seems not to be any particular set of circumstances which lead to this roiling movement but, nevertheless, it happens enough to make you notice. Any one or indeed any combination of factors could lead to each event; the number and position of cups on the tray, the speed at which you walk, the level to which each cup is filled, the shape of the particular cups, the temperature of the liquid, the height of the shoes you are wearing, the degree of friction between your feet and the floor surface, the list goes on. But somewhere in the particular mix on those particular occasions, the circumstances combine, not necessarily in the same way each time, to create this unmanageable, uncontrollable movement. This is, in essence, a very simple example of what complexity theory seeks to describe and unpick. Whilst all the contributory factors surrounding a particular event seem to be individual and often unrelated, potentially varying enormously, there is some degree of order to the outcome, some boundaries within which the system operates at the edge of chaos, and some instances when chaos takes over completely and the tea spills.

Following the findings and analyses reported in the previous chapter, it became apparent that a more holistic view of schools might further develop this research. Complexity theory is discussed in terms of both its potential for this and as a lens through which to re-examine the data collected. Consideration is given to whether complexity theory has the potential to enhance understanding of primary schools facing challenging circumstances. This chapter therefore provides an overview of the development, content and application of complexity theory, drawing on the work of key authors and contributors to the field. Where relevant, exemplification from scientific, commercial and education situations is included.

## **8.2 Background to Complexity Theory**

### 8.2 (i) From Chaos Theory to Complexity Theory

Complexity Theory emerged from earlier work on Chaos Theory, developed in the 1970s by scientists in the United States and Europe who began to consider those parts of the physical world that did not seem to follow scientific, cause and effect, linear principles. Aspects of disorder in the atmosphere, large bodies of water, the human heart and brain and other natural phenomena such as the variation in moth populations over time were too erratic to be explained by existing science which was still seeking to reduce all systems to their smallest constituent parts in order to better understand them (reductionism). Chaos Theory sought to examine systems more holistically.

Chaos Theory is outlined briefly within this thesis, in order to support understanding of Complexity Theory, but without providing details of the work of all the numerous researchers who have contributed to the field. Rather, the work of Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist and mathematician working at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in California, is used as a focus. In essence, during 1960 Lorenz created a computer model of a weather system using, by today's standards, a very limited computer that was large, noisy and often unreliable. He created a simulation that modelled, with each passing minute, a day's weather and recorded it numerically. He selected twelve 'laws' about the behaviour of weather relating to aspects such as temperature, pressure and wind direction, that could be represented using mathematical equations and which governed his meteorological system and he then set the simulation running.

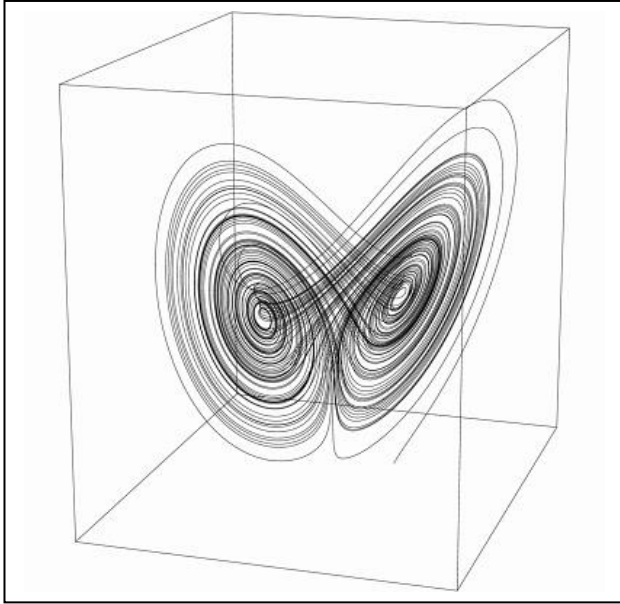
During a winter's day of 1961 Lorenz took a short-cut in order to examine a particular weather sequence in more detail. He set his simulation running not from the beginning but from part way through, reading the settings for each of his twelve 'laws' from an earlier printout. What this led to was the beginning of 'chaos theory'. Rather than being replicated, the pattern generated began to veer dramatically away from the previously recorded one and on closer examination Lorenz realised that his initial figures had been input to three decimal places of accuracy as this was what the

printout gave, rather than the six-figure accuracy of the actual computer. This very small change to the initial conditions had led to a dramatically different outcome.

Over the following decades, and with research from many other individuals (Thomas Kuhn, Mitchell Feigenbaum, Benoit Mandelbrot, Robert May, Joseph Ford and Michael Shlesinger to name a few) much was added to the work surrounding Chaos Theory. The notion developed, that changes to initial conditions can influence outcomes hugely, moving away from the more linear cause and effect relationships on which science had always relied. This move was what Thomas Kuhn (1962) described as a paradigm shift.

The endpoints were not, however, as random as they might initially have seemed. Lorenz developed an experiment to demonstrate this, which provided one of the most recognisable scientific diagrams of modern times, the Lorenz Attractor (Figure 8.1). His waterwheel experiment had only three variables and it was therefore possible to represent its changing position over time on a three-dimensional graph. A series of buckets, with holes in each of their bases to allow water to escape, were attached to the edge of a waterwheel. A continuous flow of water into the bucket in the topmost position eventually caused the whole waterwheel to turn. As the buckets were filled and subsequently leaked from their bases, at some points the direction of turn in the wheel was reversed. At any given rate of flow a predictable and regular pattern of movement in the wheel might be expected, with reversal between clockwise and anticlockwise turn as the buckets filled and emptied. What Lorenz discovered however was that regularity never occurred, but a pattern of sorts emerged from the seemingly chaotic behaviour, remaining within certain boundaries but never repeating itself. He plotted this pattern which created what resembles a butterfly's wings, with the crossover from one wing to the other representing a reversal in the direction of turn of the waterwheel.





**Figure 8.1** Graphical representation of the Lorenz Attractor.

Researchers began to see that simple initial conditions could lead to complex outcomes and equally that complex initial conditions could lead to simple outcomes. The Butterfly Effect, which referred to Lorenz's work on weather systems, famously suggested that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Peking today can transform storm systems in New York next month, and equally might have no effect at all, dissipating completely, but that prediction of the outcome seems impossible. Alhadeff-Jones (2008, p69) suggests that a system's behaviour depends so sensitively on precise initial conditions that 'it is unpredictable and cannot be distinguished from a random process'.

There are several key principles central to chaos theory (e.g. Gleick, 1987; Morrison, 1998)

- Small changes in initial conditions can produce enormous changes in outcomes (e.g. The Butterfly Effect)
- Changes in outcomes are unpredictable
- Very similar initial conditions can produce very different outcomes
- Effects are not necessarily linearly related to causes
- Determinism is replaced by indeterminism; deterministic, linear and stable systems are replaced by 'dynamical', changing, evolving

systems and non-linear explanations of phenomena (Morrison, 1998)

- Generalisations and large-scale explanations provide inadequate accounts of localised and specific circumstances
- Long-term prediction is impossible
- Order is not predetermined and fixed

Even at this early stage in the discussion, it seems possible to identify characteristics of educational institutions in the principles outlined above. It is from this background that the more recent theoretical developments relating to Complexity Theory have come.

### **8.3 The Development of Complexity Theory**

As described in the section above, Chaos Theory research was concerned with the natural world but during the 1980s thoughts turned to the social world and its equally chaotic nature. During this period the Santa Fe Institute, which produced (and still does) some particularly influential work in the field, was created in the United States, collecting together physical scientists from different disciplines, as well as mathematicians and social scientists to examine the concepts of chaos and complexity more closely. Complexity Theory has arisen out of Chaos Theory so encompasses its principles but it has moved beyond the pure physical world and into areas such as ecology, economics, business, world markets and organisations.

The discussion of chaos so far perhaps suggests that it is always problematic and something to be avoided or fought against. A review of relevant literature (Kauffman, 1995; Bak, 1996; Marion, 1999; Stacey, 2000; Mason, 2008a; McMillan, 2008) would suggest that this is not the case but that chaos is a necessary part of change and growth, allowing a higher-level structure or entity to emerge from lower-level initial conditions. It has been suggested that operating 'on the edge of chaos' (Waldrop, 1992, p222) is where the most creative and effective changes take place and it is in this nexus that complexity theory resides.

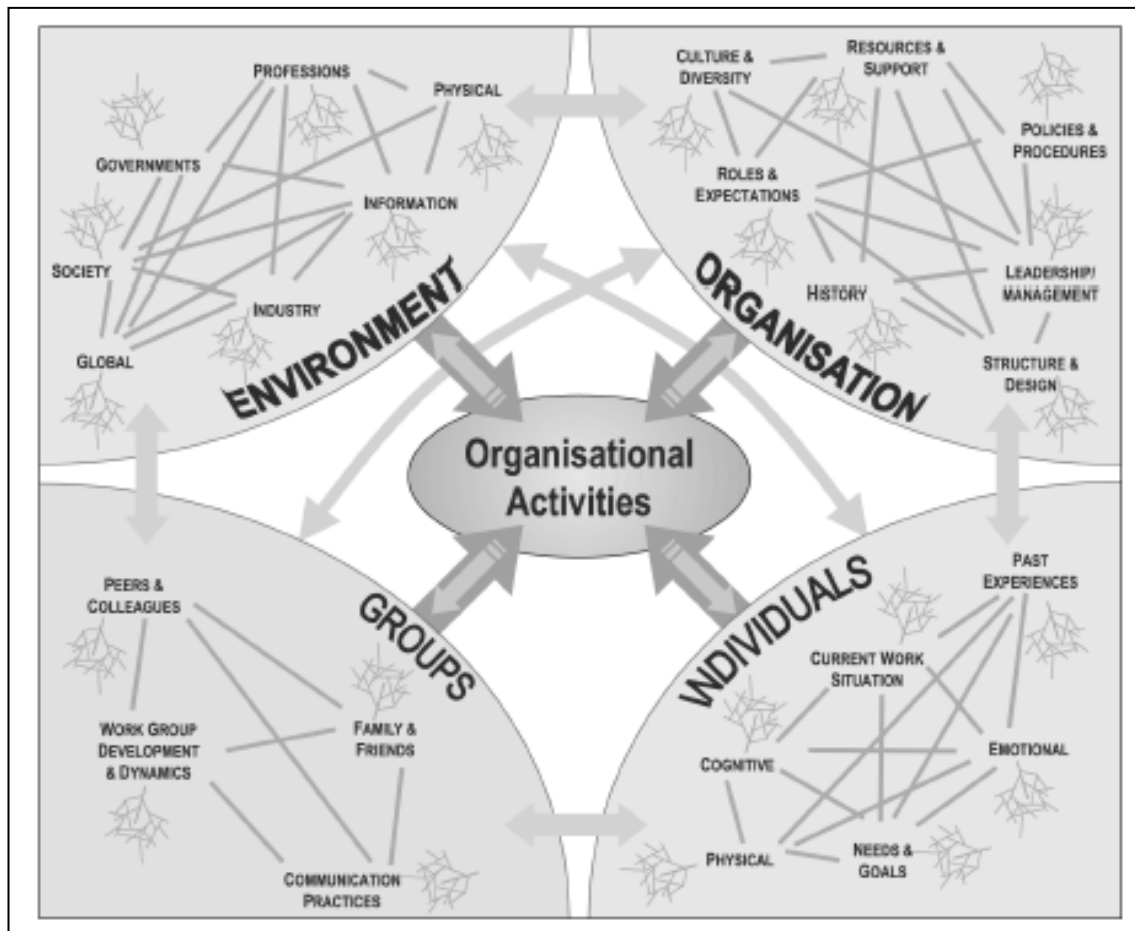
Complexity theory, sometimes referred to as complexity science, has been defined similarly by many authors. Coveney (2003, p1058), for example,

suggests that it is the 'study of the behaviour of large collections of interacting units'. Complex systems have the ability to adapt over time and complexity theory therefore investigates 'emergent, dynamic and self-organising systems that interact in ways that heavily influence later events' (Urry, 2005, p3). During the last half of the twentieth century the scientific community has accepted complexity into its thinking and practice but the non-scientific community, including business and management has been slower. Within education the move seems to have been even more delayed, with little literature emerging that relates to research carried out in this area. Consideration of complexity theory as a paradigm for examination of education contexts and circumstances therefore represents an area for further investigation as part of this research.

Complexity theory is built on a number of key ideas, each of which it is necessary to have an understanding of in order to comprehend the whole. What follows here therefore is a discussion of the key ideas and then a consideration of those in relation to education contexts.

The basic unit of study for complexity theory is the Complex Adaptive System (CAS). The term emerged with the creation of the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico in the early 1980s. They proposed that all organisations are dynamic systems, some of these are complex in nature and some of the complex systems are also complex adaptive systems. Complex adaptive systems are special cases of complex systems. They are complex in that they are diverse and made up of multiple interconnected elements and adaptive in that they have the capacity to change and learn from experience. To exemplify this Figure 8.2 (taken from Cooksey, 2003) provides a diagrammatic representation of a hypothetical system. This example system is complex, with multiple elements connected to each other at both micro and macro levels. It is structured to include what Cooksey (2003, p204) identified as 'the four dynamically interacting macro-bundles of contextual influence on organisational activities', represented at the four corners with webs of connections at the more micro-level represented within each section. Connection and interaction within and between the elements is a fundamentally important aspect of organisations when considering complexity theory, as will be discussed. What makes a system adaptive as

well as complex is its ability to respond to its environment and circumstances and modify.



**Figure 8.2** Example of a complex system (from Cooksey, 2003)

McMillan (2008) states that complex adaptive systems:

‘are able to learn and adapt to changes in their circumstances and their internal and external environments. They are able to modify their behaviours and to reconfigure their internal structures.’ (p60).

Complex adaptive systems can be labelled with what Holland (1995, p14) calls a ‘tag’. This is a physical or symbolic structure that separates a system from its undifferentiated background and might be major or minor in nature. A tag might be, for example, coloration to label gender among birds, logos or reputation to tag a business or clothes worn by youths to set them apart from adults. We might consider that a particular leader or the

'Special Measures' label are tags for some schools, providing a point around which to unite.

Fundamental to complexity theory, and shared with chaos theory, is the holistic view it takes of systems, organisations and environments, along with the relationships between their constituent elements (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Mason, 2008a). This view is directly opposed to the more scientific reduction of systems to their constituent parts in order to examine each individually. Cohen *et al.* (2011) recognise the difficulties associated with the reductionist perspective, stating:

'To atomize phenomena into measurable variables and then to focus only on certain of these is to miss synergy and the significance of the whole.' (p29)

It seems that a deeper understanding of the individual parts could potentially contribute, however, to a more considered view of their interrelationships. This is the point at which the previous analyses (Chapter 7) led to a search for a mechanism through which to examine a school more holistically. Whilst viewing systems in this way might allow us to capture the essence of each system and see that its capacity for action potentially exceeds the sum of individual parts, Marion (1999) identifies that, 'it is not easily analysed' (p64).

Again arising originally from chaos theory but important within complexity theory is the notion of The Butterfly Effect or 'sensitivity to initial conditions'. It is equally significant within human and social systems as in the physical ones examined early on by the chaos theorists. McMillan (2008) suggests this is because like physical systems:

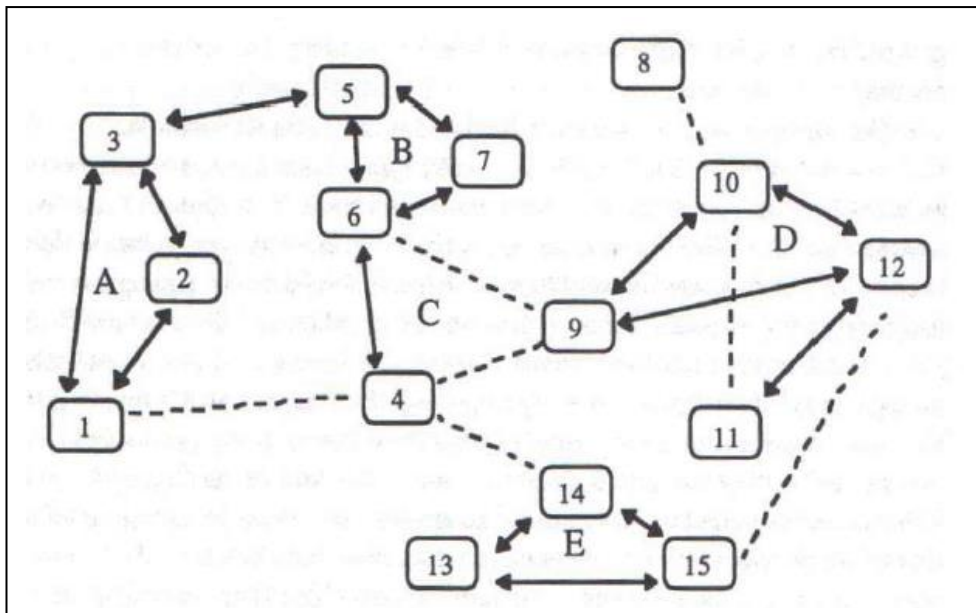
'societies and organisations are complex, highly interconnected dynamical webs such that one small vibration or change in the web will reverberate through it.'  
(p112).

She goes on to relate this connectedness to feedback loops within a system that allow for amplification of any initial changes, suggesting that

our lack of ability to capture the exact nature and structure of any web or network is what prevents us from being able to predict the outcome of such changes as we might in a linear relationship. Feedback is a necessary part of a system with interacting elements or agents. It can be negative, regulating situations (Marion, 1999, p75) that veer from the appropriate path as a thermostat regulates room temperature, or positive, increasing returns and allowing systems to change, grow and develop, and often amplifying small changes (Wheatley, 1999, p78; Stacey, 1992, p53). Not only can feedback be positive, it can also vary in richness. The greater the number of points in feedback, the greater the potential of learning from them. It would seem that feedback loops are closely related to the single- and double-loop learning that supports first- and second-order change and which was discussed in Section 4.3.

The extent of the influence of feedback within a system is governed partly by the structure of that system. This has been defined within complexity theory as loose, moderate or tight coupling. Tightly coupled systems have stronger connections between the elements or agents. Consider the system represented in Figure 8.3, below.

According to Marion (1999, p258) this system is identified as moderately coupled. He describes five small networks labelled A through E: A is composed of units 1, 2 and 3; B is 5, 6 and 7; C is 4, 6 and 9; D is 9, 10, 11 and 12; and E is 13, 14 and 15. Unit 8 is an isolate that is loosely coupled to D. Network C is more loosely coupled internally than are the other small networks, as indicated by the dotted lines. The small networks are coupled together into a larger network of networks by links that are generally weaker than are the links within individual networks, represented by the dotted lines between, for example, 4 and 14 (C and E), 15 and 12 (E and D) and, 1 and 4 (A and C).



**Figure 8.3** Diagram representing a system with loose and tightly coupled connections

In this example system, feedback between A and B is likely to be swifter and have more impact because the units, or agents, are more strongly linked (3 to 5). Feedback between A and E would be less likely to have impact as it will take longer to progress through the more loosely coupled connections (1 to 4 to 14).

We could consider this network to represent a system within education where C is a high school. The remaining four networks (A, B, D and E) could be primary schools whose pupils transfer to the centrally-located high school at age 11. The isolate labelled as '8' in the diagram could represent a Pupil Referral Unit with its pupils attending school D for part of their education. Schools A and E in this network would be loosely coupled to the high school, perhaps representing the transition activities organised for the children transferring to secondary education but no additional significant links between the schools. The stronger links between node 10, part of school D, and C could represent a group of gifted and talented students from the primary school working on a regular basis with staff from the high school, thus reinforcing a much stronger link between schools D and C.

Schools A and B within this network have a tighter coupling and could represent the growing number of partnership schools sharing one

headteacher where the size of the individual schools is becoming less viable. Equally, Schools B and C seem to be joined within this network, perhaps representing a federation between a primary and secondary school to create an 'all-through' school.

The connections within a system that allow for feedback will also be those along which the 'vibrations' created by The Butterfly Effect will travel. These changes, or perturbations as they are often referred to within complexity theory, might be positive or negative in nature. They can be innovations as well as something problematic. Where systems are loosely coupled, the structure will be more likely to absorb and control any disturbances whereas in a tightly coupled system any perturbation could migrate quickly throughout the system. Marion (1999) states that:

'If a perturbation hits the system just so, at just the right time, in just the right place, and if the system is in just the right state, the disturbance can work its way through much of the system ... if a change has gained momentum and reached a critical level, it can reverberate throughout the system.' (p270)

This demonstrates not only the importance of connectivity but also the potential sensitivity of systems to any perturbations. It is perturbation, however, that forces a system to self-organise and this leads in turn to emergence, also key within complexity theory.

Self-organisation is the ability of a system to respond to its environments and circumstances and change. It might be able to learn and react in a way that allows it to undergo development or in some cases just self-preservation. Entities have self-organising capability and can change spontaneously into other forms. Kauffman (1995) refers to this as 'order for free'. Stacey (2000) suggests that self-organisation is, 'agents interacting locally according to their own principles, or 'intentions', in the absence of an overall blueprint for the system' (p106).

Paul Tosey (2002), in his web-based summary of complexity theory suggests that complex adaptive systems are like the eco-systems of the



natural world in that they change and evolve but he also states they are 'too complex for human agents to control' (p2) and are unpredictable.

'Complexity is really a science of emergence.' (Waldrop, 1993, p88)

One of the most important aspects of complexity theory is the notion of emergence. The opposite of emergence would be complete collapse, where a system becomes so chaotic and turbulent that it is unable to self-organise and develop further. Where, however, systems are able to respond to perturbations and self-organise, the changes to and evolution of those systems result in emergence. It is the point at which a system becomes so complex that it reaches a critical mass, often referred to as the 'edge of chaos' or 'tipping point' and the force of this mass makes possible the occurrence of a 'phase transition' and a new entity emerges. It appears from the literature that the emergent system is better able to respond to the circumstances of its environments (both internal and external) (Marion, 1999); it has evolved. Mason (2008b, p37) suggests that 'a certain critical level of diversity and complexity must be reached for a system to achieve a sustainable autocatalytic state'. Autocatalysis refers to the ability of a system to evolve itself from within, bottom-up, lateral and top-down processes which is an important distinction when considering human and social systems, their often hierarchical structure and the agency of individuals within that system. It could be suggested that self-organisation, emergence and the edge of chaos are all identifiable within schools facing challenging circumstances and that this supports the appropriateness of complexity theory as a lens through which to examine such situations. This will therefore be further investigated as part of this study.

#### **8.4 Schools as Complex Adaptive Systems**

The following section examines schools specifically as Complex Adaptive Systems, drawing on existing literature and seeking to demonstrate that these organisations could be appropriately examined through the complexity theory lens.

'Schools can be regarded as complex adaptive systems'  
(Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p28).

Schools can be considered to be complex adaptive systems because each one demonstrates at least some of the following features, identified as typical of those systems by a number of authors (McMillan, 2008; Radford, 2008a; Cilliers, 2005; Morrison, 2002).

- They are open systems;
- They have ill-defined boundaries;
- They are complex, complicated and constantly changing; they are a human service and rely on people;
- They consist of many components interacting dynamically in a non-linear way creating higher and higher levels of complexity;
- Their components interact with many others;
- They have a range of methods of communication and rely on communication and effective networking;
- They display behaviour that results from the *interaction* between components and not from characteristics inherent to the components themselves;
- They learn to adapt to changing circumstances, constantly revising their structures;
- The environments (external and internal) in which they operate are largely unpredictable and mutable;
- They are self-organising;
- Small changes can have massive effects;
- They operate under conditions not at equilibrium, seeking to exist on the edge of chaos;
- They have emergent properties;
- The new variables that emerge could not have been predicted from circumstances prior to the interaction; and
- They display behaviour over a divergent range of timescales which is necessary in order for the system to cope with its environment. It must adapt to changes in the environment quickly, but it can only sustain itself if at least part of the system changes at a slower rate than changes in the environment.

Cohen *et al.* (2011, companion website) further support the collection of features listed above in suggesting that the dynamic, unpredictable and non-linear nature of schools means that they are constantly responding to, and interacting with, their environments through processes of reorganisation. The dependence of the system as a whole on the actions and interactions of all the constituent elements, rather than any single one, means that it is not possible to predict what will evolve (Stacey, 2000, p106). It could be suggested, however, that their evolution and behaviour does follow some common principles. Dooley (1996) identified three: that order is emergent rather than predetermined, that the system's history is irreversible so it cannot be returned to an earlier state, and that its future is unpredictable.

Complex adaptive systems are made up of 'interdependent agents who are bonded in a cooperative dynamic by common goal, outlook or need' (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007, p299), often captured in schools through the creation of a 'vision and aims' statement although this in many cases describes the ideal to which the organisation aspires and would require phase transition and emergence from the existing position. Each of the agents within a system pursues a set of strategies in response to their surroundings and in pursuit of their own goals. It is because complex adaptive systems in the social world are created from what McMillan (2008, p99) terms 'dynamical human learning systems' that the way they change and adapt can be considered differently, potentially offering the capacity for better strategic approaches and longer-term sustainability than has been achieved through the imposition of more detailed and linear practices. Lewin and Regine (1999, p49) take the idea of human relationships further, suggesting that 'the formation of teams and creativity within teams' is the way to support the evolution of solutions to problems.

As schools can be considered to be complex adaptive systems and the operation and structure of such systems benefits from being based on the principles of complexity theory, it could be suggested that schools would benefit from such organisation. The effectiveness of this in practice would need to be gauged. This could be supported by identifying the circumstances that enable the processes of self-organisation and emergence to occur. By doing so it might be possible to support phase

transition in schools even if it was not possible to predict what the final outcomes might be. Examination of existing sets of contexts and circumstances through a complexity theory lens would seem to be an important step in this direction. Whether this applies equally to primary schools facing challenging circumstances warrants further investigation and therefore forms part of this study.

### **8.5 Complexity Theory as a Research Paradigm**

Complexity theory has been described as an emerging paradigm in educational research (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Radford, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Morrison, 2002, 2008) with schools exhibiting many of the features of complex adaptive systems. Complex systems resist simple reductionist analyses, because interconnections and feedback loops preclude holding some subsystems constant in order to study others in isolation. So it seems that complexity theory would be appropriate for viewing education settings more holistically.

Radford (2008a) suggests that we have been able to, 'adopt complexity theory in our descriptions and explanations of how schools function' (p513). The question to consider is whether it also provides the potential to examine schools and their development differently or if complexity theory merely covers old ground. Does complexity theory have something to add?

There are difficulties associated with researching complex systems. Cilliers (1998) warns that, 'the obsession to find one essential truth blinds us to the relational nature of complexity, and especially to the continuous shifting of those relationships' (p112). There is a clear link here to the dynamic nature of complex adaptive systems such as schools. It seems that modelling such dynamic systems has not yet been effectively mastered. Lemke and Sabelli (2008, p112-123) in Mason (2008a) conclude from their consideration of the application of complex systems approaches to education that we do not yet have a way of modelling dynamic change in education and that there are difficulties with trying to do this. Morrison (2002) suggests this is because, 'complexity theory theorizes ephemerality' (p190), linking to the notion that change can be limited or unsustainable.

Complexity theory might however help us to describe carefully the 'before' and 'after' which are fleeting moments capturing circumstances as if they were being photographed even though this will not necessarily describe, explain or further our understanding of what happened in between. It could, however, prove useful in identifying alternative structures, potential problems and features of the change process that might be overlooked if simple cause and effect models are otherwise used.

One of the positive aspects of using complexity theory to examine educational contexts is that it reinforces the importance of capturing the seemingly insignificant details in order to better understand the system as a whole. As a research paradigm it emphasises the need to resist marginalising any agent or action. Mason (2008b, p38) cautions that, 'what may appear to be marginal may well be part of the complexity of a system, and may be a constituent of the critical level above which emergent properties and behaviours become possible'. This seems to link well with the 'thick descriptions' generated by qualitative research. A further important aspect of complexity theory as a research paradigm is the shift it causes the researcher of non-linear systems to make away from an attempt to delineate individual cases of cause and effect and increasingly towards examination of sets of causes and the resulting sets of effects. This more holistic view reflects more accurately the complex circumstances as they exist.

Take, for example, a school that identifies the need to improve its students' use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) across the curriculum. It addresses this need by purchasing additional computers and is disappointed that the impact is minimal. The school did not consider the multiple aspects of its organisation that contribute to its students' ability in this area, perhaps including the need for appropriate software and training for teaching and support staff, the students' need to see the potential use for the applications, timetabling and access arrangements and the attitudes of adults towards the technology based on their own experience and expertise. Had these issues been addressed, then the outcomes might have extended even more widely than the improvement of use made of ICT across the curriculum. There could, for example, be developments in the

use made by adults of the technology that would improve communication within the school and lead to the emergence of a more robust system.

Not everyone agrees about the usefulness of complexity theory as a way of examining sets of circumstances and whole systems. Kuhn (2008) suggests that complexity is redundant because discourses outside science and mathematics (such as those from arts, humanities and social sciences) already provide equivalent or even superior means of addressing similar ideas to 'insights claimed by complexity' (p175) such as the importance of non-linear relationships and operating at the 'edge of chaos' being a prerequisite to emergence. Snowden (2002) suggests that systems containing humans are more controllable than they are given credit for.

'Within known limits we can both predict and prescribe behaviour. Humans, acting collectively can make systems that might otherwise be complex or chaotic into known systems – we impose order through laws and practices that have sufficient universal acceptance to create predictable environments.' (Snowden, 2002, p15)

Snowden's views stem from his belief that complexity models began with those from the natural world such as ant colonies and that humans are capable of directly influencing systems to a far greater extent and this therefore makes them more predictable. However, even if human agency is taken into account, complex systems by their very nature are unlikely to become completely predictable. They could perhaps become slightly less unpredictable as where human behaviour is concerned account should be taken of what Mason (2008b) refers to as 'conscious intentionality' (p36). This is where individuals with different viewpoints seek to influence circumstances to their advantage through their actions and these are still unpredictable across a whole system. It could be considered that complexity theory is therefore still a valid research paradigm for schools.

## **8.6 Localised and Specific Contexts for Schools**

Complex Adaptive Systems vary hugely depending on factors such as the environment in which they operate, the elements connecting to make the

system, the internal and external connectedness and the nature of the system itself e.g. financial markets, education, manufacturing, the physical environment. Each of these larger systems (ecosystems or macro-systems) has very different characteristics. Financial markets and the change over time in both populations exhibit few similarities in terms of their physical manifestations, basic structures and operations. Even within a particular type of environment it has been argued that individual systems vary too greatly to make replication of successful reform possible (Lemke and Sabelli, 2008; Haggis, 2008; Byrne, 2005). That is not to say that examination of these contexts and mechanisms at work within systems will not provide us with an indication of how and under what conditions certain outcomes occur, but rather that the development of theoretical models will be strengthened through the accumulation of research data from numerous situations.

Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2007) suggest that examination of contexts will, 'pry back the cover on leadership' (p304) which could ultimately lead to identification of those factors or characteristics that are particularly influential in moving systems towards emergence. Guidance of a more heuristic nature, perhaps linked to the 'biggest' influencing factor for any system, could at least provide a first stage towards this. The potential for leadership to represent this factor would build on conclusions from the analyses completed so far within this study. Identification of influencing factors also emphasises the importance of context in consideration of any system, what Lemke and Sabelli (2008, p118) refer to as the 'localisation effect'.

Contexts are considered by Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2007) to be:

'structural, organisational, ideational, and behavioural features – the ambience of interactions among agents (people, ideas, etc.), hierarchical divisions, organisations, and environments – that influence the nature of mechanism dynamics' (p304).

Haggis (2008, p160) proposes that universally applicable principles would not be possible within a complexity theory approach as inherent in this is the notion that 'knowledge must be contextual' (Byrne, 2005a). A case study approach to qualitative research also follows this individualised view

of circumstances, suggesting the appropriateness of a link between this approach and complexity theory.

### **8.7 Educational Research and Complexity Theory**

Little has been written about education research using a complexity theory paradigm. Case studies and examples relate to commerce. McMillan (2008) includes numerous case studies of organisations that operate following the principles of a complexity approach to management but they are almost exclusively examples drawn from the business world, most from manufacturing enterprises, for example, a Scottish bakery, and the Estates and Building Division of the University of Glasgow.

In many cases, complexity theory has only been considered from a theoretical point of view. Haggis (2008), for example, has written about the potential for using a complexity theory perspective to examine complex systems, using aspects of larger system interactions to see how they function within particular, smaller cases, rather than the more conventional approach that seeks generalised aspects from examination of a number of smaller cases. However, she does not provide any exemplification of this herself, reinforcing the theoretical nature of much of what has been written regarding complexity theory and educational research. Morrison (2002) considered school leadership specifically but also from a theoretical viewpoint. This research seeks to add to the body of knowledge applying complexity theory to schools.

### **8.8 Leadership and Complexity Theory**

As in the initial literature review chapters, refinement to examine the most effective type of leadership required for a complex adaptive system seems to be appropriate and is therefore discussed in the following section. Similarities to the earlier discussion (Section 2.2) are noted, providing further links between complex adaptive systems and appropriate models for school organisation.

Jared Diamond (2005) has written extensively about communities and civilisations, their climb to prosperity and for some their demise. He



reported on a New Guinea' society of highlanders that existed for hundreds of years isolated from contact with the civilized world. In terms of leadership it evolved from bottom-up dynamics and achieved sustainability with the emergence of a very flat hierarchical structure and without external 'assistance'. Once discovered, however, those outside the society imposed changes for a new order that was considered to be more desirable by those imposers but which ultimately almost destroyed this viable society.

The tension here in terms of complexity was between the emergence that naturally occurred and the perceived desirability of a new order; for the outsiders who discovered the society the temptation was to impose structures, particularly those associated with leadership and governance, in an attempt to influence the outcomes, albeit with good intentions. The 'desirables' were not necessarily those that the people themselves would have chosen and therefore ultimately were not appropriate. For the highlanders, singular dependence upon bureaucrats almost destroyed them. High singular interdependence on a powerful external entity can be seen as a problem for complex adaptive systems because it yields an overemphasis on top-down processes and a limited view of desired order. An emphasis on top-down processes to achieve a restricted view of desired order may limit the influence attempts of leaders.

This situation can be equated to the circumstances in education where a local authority takes overall control of a school, through the enforcement of an Interim Executive Board. The desired outcomes for the organisation are then determined by the members of this board and are likely to be more generic and related to central government's requirements than those that would be created by the school for itself. This does not mean that they are less appropriate but it creates a situation where the school has desired order imposed and natural emergence is therefore constrained.

During an interview with Scott London on Capital Radio's Insight and Outlook programme in 1997, Margaret Wheatley discussed the content of her book, 'The New Science of Leadership'. She reflected that:

'leaders who have worked in autocratic corporations realise that it's not a model of leadership that you can link to issues of sustainability. If you're interested in creating sustainable growth, sustainable productivity, sustainable morale, you can't do that through autocracy. You can work the numbers for a quarter or a half a year, you can drive people to exhaustion for a few months or a couple of years. But if you haven't focused on creating capacity in the organisation, it will die through those efforts.'

Hierarchical leadership structures have the potential to be problematic because they take insufficient account of the possibility for change to occur *throughout* an organisation rather than merely in response to direction from above. Hierarchical structures often result in a command-and-control style leadership which can be difficult for a number of reasons including, the resentment and resistance that may be created within an organisation, even promoting mistrust, the absolution of individual responsibility from those required to respond and the assumption that the leader is completely competent and well-informed. Kelly and Allison (1999, p66) add to this that the structure 'pushes a more natural self-organisation underground, thereby making it harder to manage' and Lloyd and Trapp (1999, p332-3) suggest that it can, 'lead to blaming junior members when things go wrong and taking credit when things go right'. Other difficulties suggested by Morrison (2002, p57-8) are that hierarchical leadership does not represent the complexity of the internal and external environments and that it, 'misrepresents the actual nature of institutions, which are complex and peopled by informed participants who, themselves, change the organisation from within'.

The above references suggest that imposed, autocratic and hierarchical leadership are not effective in delivering desired outcomes and certainly not sustainable in the longer term in situations that involve complex adaptive systems. The need for transformational leadership in these circumstances has been suggested as an alternative, matching research evidence relating to school leadership (Section 2.2b). Aspects of transformational leadership supporting a self-organising and emergent organisation (Burns, 1978;

Bass, 1990, Kelly and Allison, 1999; Morrison, 2002) can be summarised as:

- Being a role model
- Creating and sharing a vision and moving the organisation towards this
- Recognising and building on existing expertise within the organisation
- Devolving decision making to groups and networks
- Recognising and rewarding innovative behaviours
- Placing learning and development at the heart of the organisation
- Creating a sense of urgency
- Promoting partnerships and working relationships internally and externally
- Encouraging new initiatives to be considered
- Increasing positive feedback and reducing negative feedback
- Increasing communication providing relevant and timely information

Duke and Leithwood (1994, p17) found that transformational leaders clearly articulated a vision for the future, although this can be seen as an 'enabling structure rather than simply a goal' (April, 1997, p38). Leaders whose style is transformational regard themselves as 'change agents who are courageous, lifelong learners, able to handle ambiguity and complexity' (Tichy and Devanna, 1986, p151). In order for these leaders to encourage their followers to participate they rely on charisma and many come to be viewed as 'heroic leaders'. Whilst Western society believes that change is brought about by charismatic leaders such as Churchill, Kennedy and King, who fought hard to bring about change in their societies, these leaders were also operating when the time was right and as part of a highly interconnected network. Martin Luther King would probably not have been so influential a century earlier and Winston Churchill could not have won the battle over Great Britain without the pilots and nationwide infrastructure supporting them. That transformational leadership relies on persuasion,

influence and possibly even indoctrination (Allix, 2000, p18) means its limits are not boundless. Whilst elements of transformational leadership would seem to support self-organisation and emergence, it might be considered to be manipulative because there remains leader determination of need and a control-and-command mentality. Allix (2000) has argued powerfully that transformational leadership 'is morally blind, unable to differentiate between the Ghandi-like leader and the Hitler-like leader' (p18).

If transformational leadership is not an entirely appropriate mechanism for successful complex adaptive systems, then consideration of other forms is needed. A flatter hierarchical structure would suggest that genuinely distributed leadership would be more effective. April *et al.* (2000, p100) suggest that 'servant leadership' fulfils this and that it would support complex organisations as the role of the leader is concerned with facilitating networks and developing the ideas of others within a community. One criticism of servant leadership that resonates particularly with schools as organisations, however, is that it may be 'hopelessly idealistic' (Berry and Cartwright, 2000, p344) and still assumes that leadership behaviour is fixed rather than varying over time in response to given situations.

A much more decentralised and distributed form a leadership means that these behaviours, rather than being viewed as particular positions, will be spread throughout an organisation. This view is supported by the University of Miami Department of Educational Leadership (2001) which states that leadership is about a 'quality of practice rather than organisational position' (p5). Fullan (2001b) suggests that 'there is a need for leaders at all levels of the organisation' (p122) and this has been recognised as important in schools by Ofsted in the 2012 Framework for Inspecting Schools. The positive aspects of distributed leadership have already been discussed in Section 2.2c. Morrison (2002) summarises distributed leadership thus:

'Leadership is not the preserve of the senior figure of the school; everyone everywhere can exercise leadership. The leader is simply the one who goes first and shows the way, not necessarily the boss! Leadership is no longer the

activity of gate-keeping and directing but of enabling and empowering.’ (p17).

Leaders at all levels are, in terms of complexity theory and the development of complex adaptive systems, creating the perturbations required for the organisation to evolve, building relationships and fostering connections in order to achieve this. Whilst perturbations do not always emanate from leaders, this is a focus of what they do in order to create the conditions for change. It seems that leadership is about creating relationships and being able to respond to unpredictable situations. If it could be demonstrated that for primary schools facing challenging circumstances this would be an appropriate and effective focus for school leadership, it might herald a change in approach to the initiatives associated with improvement for those organisations. This therefore presents an area for further investigation as part of this research.

A disadvantage of shared leadership in schools, highlighted by Silins *et al.* (1999), and relevant particularly in smaller primary schools, is the distraction it can provide from the learning and teaching work that is the core part of a teacher’s role. Marzano *et al.* (2005) suggest that the headteacher’s role is therefore one of what they call ‘discipline’ and they define this as ‘protecting teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their instructional time or focus’ (p48). Elmore (2000) calls this ‘buffering’ and suggests that it ‘consists of creating structures and procedures around the technical core of teaching’ (p6). Therefore, whilst distributed leadership can lead to increased responsibility and accountability of team members, it can also detract from the organisation’s ultimate aim.

Keith Morrison (2002) likens leadership in complex adaptive systems to riding white water through a series of rapids. The role of the leader, he suggests, is not to control the changing environments but to know what they are ‘in order to understand the major pressures and constraints’ (Beeson and Davis, 2000, p185). The focus for leadership is about removing the barriers as much as it is about creating development opportunities. It is about having what Marzano *et al.* (2005) describe as ‘situational awareness’ (p60). Deering, Dilts and Russell (2003) describe

this as anticipatory leadership and suggest that headteachers should look for 'clues of coming opportunities and hints about emerging threats' (p33). This suggests that leaders need to be well connected in terms of their internal and external environments if they are to keep abreast of factors that will potentially influence their own system.

Marion and Uhl-Bien (2001) suggest that rather than attempting to determine 'future desired states' (Plowman *et al.*, 2007, p353), leaders 'need to understand the patterns of complexity and learn to manipulate the *situations of complexity*' (p402). This research seeks to explore whether this is true for primary schools facing challenging circumstances and if this leads ultimately to the improvement they require.

It seems that leaders in complex adaptive systems need to be willing to challenge the status quo; they need to act as 'change agents' (Cotton, 2003; Marzano *et al.*, 2005). Silins, Mulford and Zarins (2002) suggest that this role should also encompass the ability to 'protect those who take risks' (p618). The notion of change agent fits well with transformational leadership, is a key feature of Total Quality Management and is a core behaviour for leadership of a complex adaptive system as it requires that leaders 'consistently attempt to operate at the edge versus the centre of the school's competence' (Marzano *et al.*, 2005, p49).

Some leaders respond to the challenges they face by doing differently. A good example of this is the work of Tim Smit, the man responsible for restoring the Lost Gardens of Heligan and creating the Eden Project. This series of enormous domes contains botanical samples from around the world and has attracted millions of visitors. Tim Smit's leadership philosophy (Smit, 2001; Chapman, 2002) is far from command-and-control with a focus instead on creating opportunities for his employees to behave creatively. His strategies include asking each employee to read at least two books a year that are outside their usual choices, using 'gang trials' for senior management to feed back to one another, creating cross-functional teams that everyone has the chance to work within and requiring all employees to cook a meal for their co-workers once a year. The suggestion of this final strategy to a group of thirty aspiring school leaders recently was met mostly with horror, suggesting perhaps that the

connectivity in their own organisations is not sufficiently developed. It seems that the role of a good leader would be to move an organisation from this point to a situation where such an opportunity would be welcomed.

#### 8.8 (i) Complexity Leadership Theory

Some authors have begun to consider the possibilities for leadership that would support and promote complex adaptive systems, even if these are not specifically education-related. For example, Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007) have proposed Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) which is a leadership framework that seeks to take advantage of the dynamic capabilities of complex adaptive systems. Complexity Leadership Theory assumes the enablement of complex adaptive system dynamics, using this basis to explore the strategies and behaviours that lead to micro- and macro-level creativity, learning and adaptability. Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2007) propose three types of leadership within their research. Firstly, administrative leadership which is concerned with notions of control and hierarchy and includes activities such as structuring tasks, allocating resources and managing conflicts. The second type is described as adaptive leadership which promotes the conditions under which emergent change activities become possible. Finally, enabling leadership provides the mediating link between the first two, allowing conditions for complex adaptive systems to engage in creative problem solving, adaptability and learning by facilitating the exchange of information and creating appropriate organisational environments. The authors' suggestion is not that any one of these types of leadership is preferable but rather that an appropriate combination is required. This relates back to the discussion within the first literature review chapter of this thesis (Chapter 2) which suggested that it is the ability to apply particular leadership skills at an appropriate time and in combination, rather than the skills themselves that is the fundamental quality of effective leaders. Enabling leadership is what allows administrative and adaptive elements to function alongside one another. Each of these styles of leadership should also be viewed as a function appropriate to any level within a hierarchy rather than the domain of a particular individual. Kontopoulos (1993) describes the woven nature of leadership styles as 'entanglement' (p248) which captures both the

complicated nature of leadership and the difficulty of separating out individual elements.

It seems clear from existing literature that effective leadership for schools and for complex adaptive systems is similar. Is there a link between this approach and the improvement or decline of schools, particularly those facing challenging circumstances?

### **8.9 The Edge of Chaos**

There is an inbuilt movement towards greater complexity in systems (Lewin, 1993, p132). Goodwin (2000, p46-7) suggests that they 'naturally and spontaneously evolve' towards a critical point. This point is sometimes referred to as the 'tipping point', a term introduced by Malcolm Gladwell (1996, p2) following his study of circumstances leading to a dramatic drop in crime rates in New York City in the 1990s.

It has been argued that systems can only develop when they reach a point of 'self-organised criticality' (Bak, 1996) and Kauffman (1995) suggests that the 'edge of chaos' is the place where this occurs and the effects of a single event are therefore likely to be largest. Cohen *et al.* (2011, companion website) state that behaviours and ideas become increasingly creative and diverse as this position is approached. In order for this to occur, more highly developed networks and connections are created, strengthening the potential for further emergence. It is at this point that a chaotic system can either self-organise into a higher level of complexity or it can disintegrate. Where the system under consideration is a failing school, the critical mass of interacting elements might come together so chaotically that self-organisation is no longer possible and the only option will be to close the school in order to restart the system.

Marion (1999) describes the edge of chaos very eloquently:

'Society balances itself on the brink of Chaos. It is poised such that the slightest event can, potentially, create havoc. Yet it walks this tightrope because it is here that society is



most robust, and only here could it survive calamities. The Edge of Chaos is indeed a strange place.' (p315)

As has been suggested above it is at this critical point, sometimes referred to as bifurcation (Byrne, 1998, p20), when something new is introduced, that complex adaptive systems are particularly sensitive and potentially fragile. Bifurcation in schools could be the introduction of a new curriculum or changes in pedagogical approach. A school undergoing a period of significant change for any number of different reasons is likely to come to this point. Radford (2008a, p517) has reported that initiatives that are outside a school's normal pattern can have swift and disproportionate impact on the organisation and that caution should therefore be used when evaluating in the early stages of implementation. The impact is likely to lessen over time. It would seem then that one of the potential dangers for schools that are not helping their children to achieve appropriately is the temptation to engage in a continual process of taking on new initiatives without anything becoming embedded. For the individuals involved there are often enormous workload implications. Any short-term gains that these initiatives may lead to are potentially not sustained over a longer period and their overall impact could therefore be minimal.

As was outlined earlier, emergence is the evolution of a system better able to operate within the environments in which it exists through the formation of greater levels of complexity. It is not possible to predict what an emergent system will be, based on its pre-existing constituent parts but authors such as Davis and Sumara (2006) have suggested that we can consider the 'conditions of emergence' (p129). If it is not possible to gain any control over emergence itself then trying to establish or influence the conditions conducive to these phase transitions could be an alternative strategy.

Financial markets offer a good example of this process in that they are created by the actions, mostly deliberate and based on sets of guiding profit-related principles, of numerous individuals and companies. Whilst these are not co-ordinated in any way the overall behaviour of the market emerges from the 'combined impact of their actions' (Battram, 1998, p33). There are ways however of influencing this market. The quantitative easing

measures put in place by the United Kingdom's Government during 2012, where vast quantities of money were injected into the economy to boost it, exemplified an attempt to cause a more robust system to emerge by influencing the underlying conditions in which the system existed.

Emergence can occur on a large scale such as a country's economy or on a very small scale when, for example, two individuals with differing starting views reach a common way forward in solving a shared problem. The solution is either a combination of their pre-existing perspectives or a completely new idea. Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2007, p307) refer to this as 'an 'aha' moment'. That these could be occurring simultaneously throughout an organisation and between elements at different scales gives an indication of why systems can be viewed as so complex and why outcomes are so unpredictable. Lemke and Sabelli (2008, p115) also add to this the further complicating factor of a potential multitude of timescales over which emergent phenomena occur.

A school example of emergence might be the change from individuals having responsibility for leading a particular subject within the curriculum to small teams leading on developments that are cross-curricular. A school might decide that individual subject leader roles have reached the limit of their potential and replace them with improvement teams focussing on aspects such as development of community, problem solving, communication or creativity.

Snowden (2002, p16) suggests that the identification of patterns forming as part of emergence would allow us to disrupt any that are undesirable and stabilise those we wish to encourage. He also suggests the need to 'seed the space to encourage the formation of patterns that we can control'. Whilst Snowden recognises that emergence is not predictable he asserts that by increasing information flow and 'connectiveness' (p16) conditions for new patterns can be created. What the emerging patterns within education settings might be and how their initiation might be recognised or indeed created have not been considered and therefore form an area for further investigation as part of this research. The notion of connections is considered further in the next section.

Returning to the school example where improvement teams are created, the strategies developed by each could be carefully monitored by the leadership team, not to intervene but in order to determine which were more effective and might be replicated later on and what support might be provided to further the development work. There is, however, a potential problem with this strategy in what O'Day (2002, p7) terms 'competency traps' where organisations become limited in their choice of strategy to what they have already found to be successful without considering that there may also be other effective approaches.

Morrison (2002) has considered schools specifically from a complexity theory perspective. His work led to the formation of a number of questions that schools might consider if they are operating according to the principles of complexity, although no research data were added in support of solutions for these. For example, he urges school leaders to consider how existing structures can be utilised to facilitate emergence, what new structures might be needed and what the role of leadership might be in developing this. It seems from the literature available that this consideration will also need to include an examination of the conditions that support effective communication, interaction and Snowden's 'connectiveness' (2002, p16).

### 8.9 (i) Change

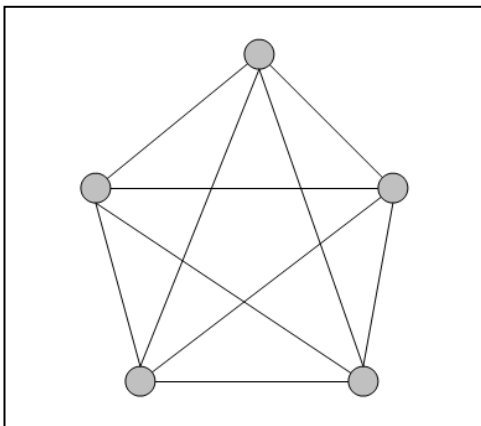
It seems that change as a process threads through many aspects of complexity theory. Changes made to initial conditions are what potentially lead to the Butterfly Effect. Change is a fundamental part of self-organisation and emergence with negotiation achieved through competition and communication. Change leads a complex adaptive system towards the edge of chaos and then further change follows this tipping point. But these changes are not the controllable and predictable types that some leaders are hoping for. It seems that these changes are much more irrepressible and often unexpected. Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest that complexity theory, 'offers considerable leverage into understanding societal, community, individual and institutional change' (p30).

## 8.10 Connections

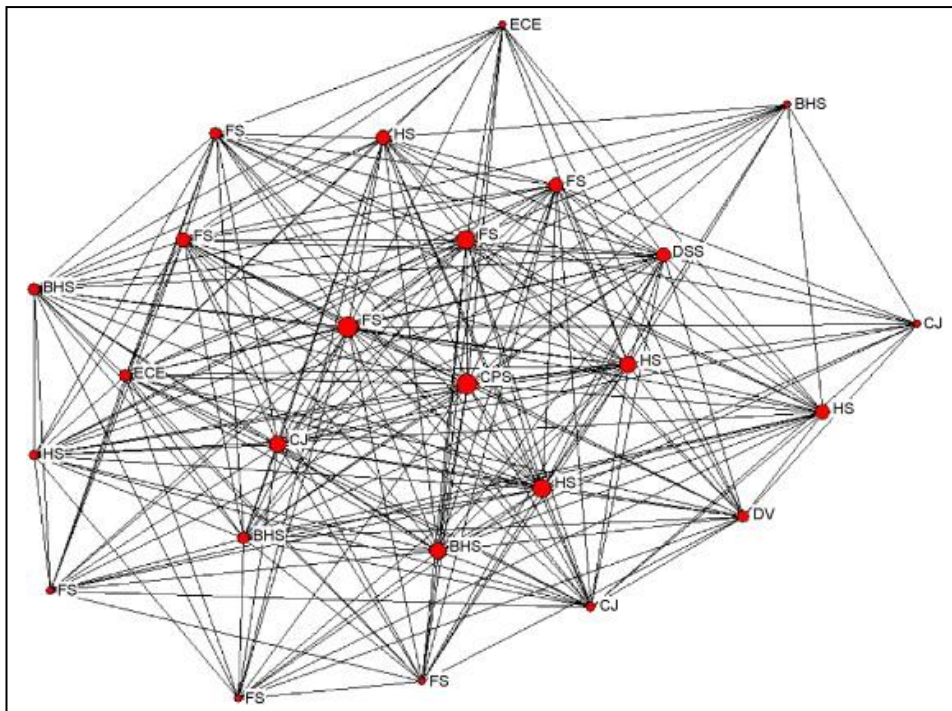
Connections between individual elements in a complex adaptive system are critical to its ability to support emergence. The relationship between the number of elements and the number of connections between them is exponential. Between two elements there can only be one connection; among three, three; among four, six; rising rapidly to twenty one among seven and fifty four among eleven. The number of connections can be expressed thus:

$$ny = \frac{1}{2} (n^2 - n)$$

where  $y$  is the number of connections between the given number of agents  $n$ . In the diagrams below the connections between the five elements can be counted easily whereas when the number of elements or nodes increases to twenty five in the second diagram, and these are not even all connected to one another in this example, the web of relationships becomes much more dense and difficult to even count.



**Figure 8.4** A network diagram with five nodes



**Figure 8.5** A network diagram with twenty five nodes (from Friedman *et al.*, 2007)

As each additional element is added to a system, the number of connections increases exponentially, demonstrating some of the potential strength in encouraging individuals and groups within an organisation to make internal and external links. Using a school as an example, the potential for developing connectiveness internally is less than where organisations also look for links to other systems externally. Subject leaders joining local and regional networks and clusters of schools making links based on assessment activities or shared continuing professional development opportunities will develop what Stacey (1996) describes as a 'richness of connectivity' (p99).

As has been discussed earlier the reduction of a system to separate examination of its constituent parts does not allow it to be fully understood. Complexity theory recognises the importance of the connections between elements as well as the elements themselves. Stacey (1996), as well as identifying the 'richness of connectivity between agents in the system', recognises two other vital parameters within complex adaptive systems. These are 'the rate of information flow through the system and the level of

diversity within and between the schemas of the agents' (p99). The issue of information and its exchange is returned to later on.

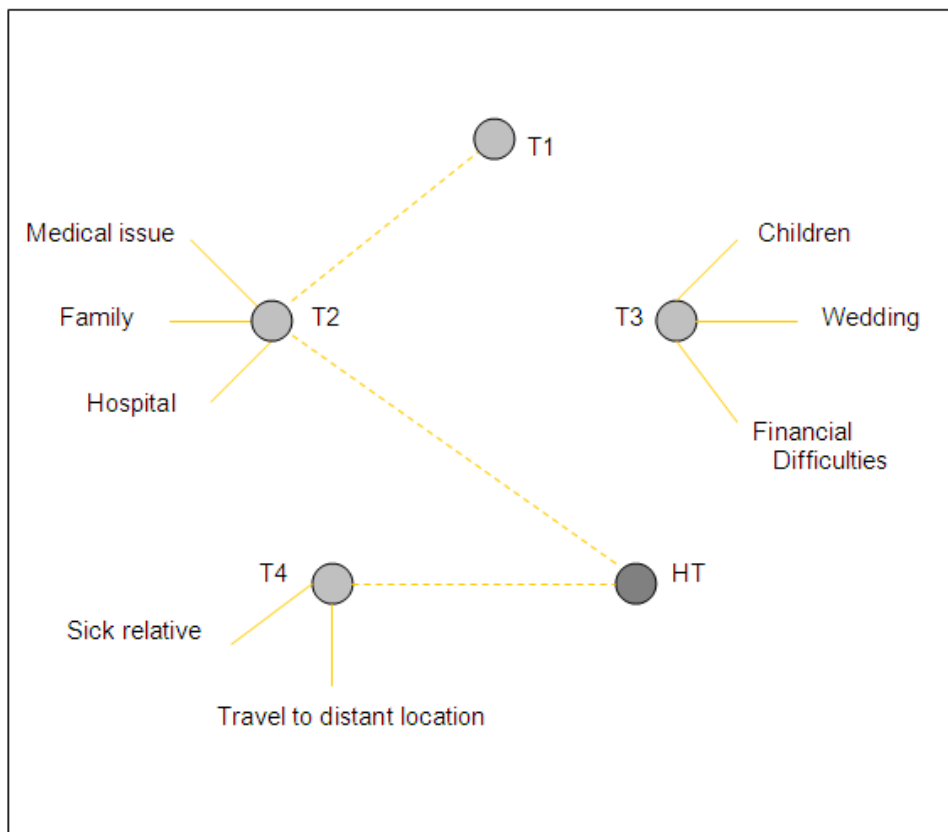
Connectedness exists throughout a complex adaptive system between individuals and groups. For example, the stakeholders and participants associated with a school system might include pupils, parents, governors, faith groups, community organisations, volunteer organisations, businesses, the local education authority, police and court services and those connected with employment. At the more macro-level, environments such as legal constraints, cultural practices, economic factors and societal considerations have influence on and are being influenced by the operation of a school. Connections are a two-way relationship, even when one party is passive. Schools affect children, who affect families, who affect the community and likewise the community affects families, who affect children, who affect schools. The elements within a system shape each other in processes of co-evolution. Cohen *et al.* (2011) suggest that this co-evolution, 'requires connection, cooperation and competition: competition to force development and cooperation for mutual survival' (companion website).

If we consider a school represented as linked nodes on a network diagram, it could be suggested that the position of teachers and school leaders within this structure are potential pressure points in terms of their levels of connectedness. They assume a central role and are key in terms of links with not only children and parents but internal staff, governors, developmental links and external links with agencies, networks and the additional engagement required by centralised initiatives. Cohen *et al.* (2011, companion website) recognise that schools may 'sink under internal communication and connectedness' without the additional pressure of external links.

As it seems that the issue of connectivity within networks is so crucial to a consideration of schools from a complexity theory perspective, a hypothetical example to demonstrate some of the strengths and weaknesses of such structures is built up below. If the connections within a network were to be represented by strands of elastic, the sudden removal, or even the gradual deterioration of any particular node or agent would lead

to the disappearance of all the links that they have with other nodes. In order for the connectivity to be maintained within a system there needs to be a degree of interconnectivity such that the severing of connections with one node is balanced by connections elsewhere. This would support the notion of distributed leadership where an individual is not crucial to the functioning of a majority of the systems but rather a network of others is also linked.

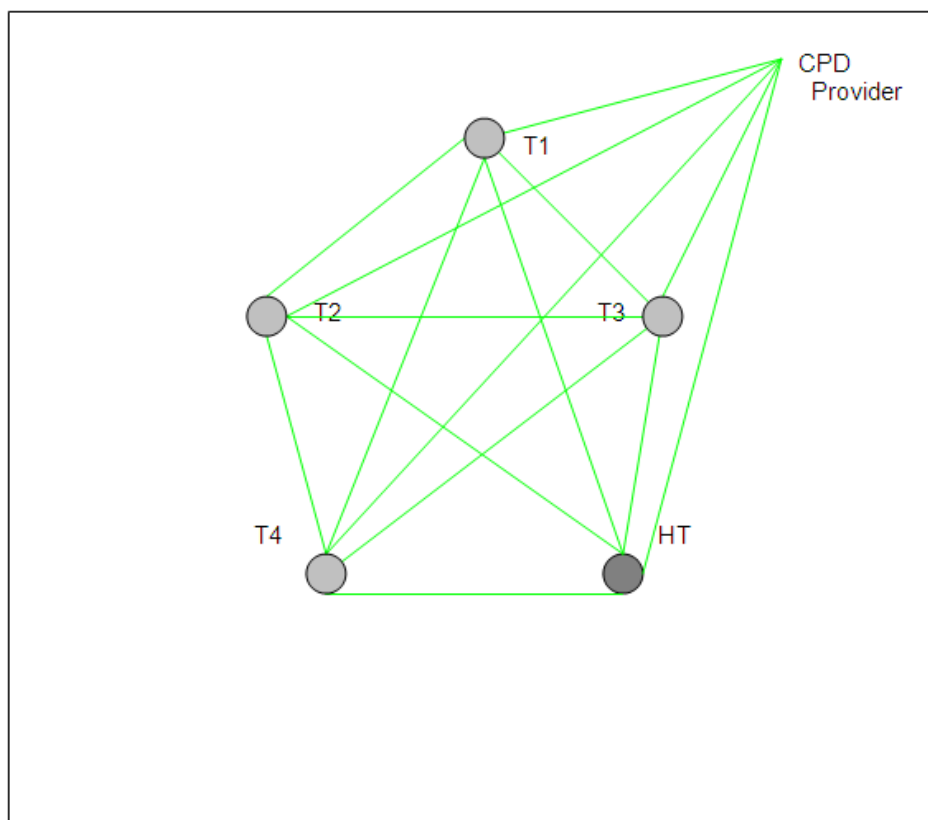
Different types of connection or relationship within a network or complex adaptive system could be represented by different coloured elastic, thus allowing the relative importance of particular connections to be seen at any one time. For example, should three teachers in a four-teacher school have significant personal or family issues to cope with at a particular time, then those mostly external connections would be prominent. In the series of diagrams used below, T1, T2, T3 and T4 represent the school's teachers and HT represents the headteacher. Bold lines are strong connections and dashed lines represent looser couplings.



**Figure 8.6** Network diagram showing external demands on staff members in a fictional school

Where the staff within a school are also supporting each other, connections between them exist, although they might be more loosely coupled (represented in Figure 8.6 by dashed lines).

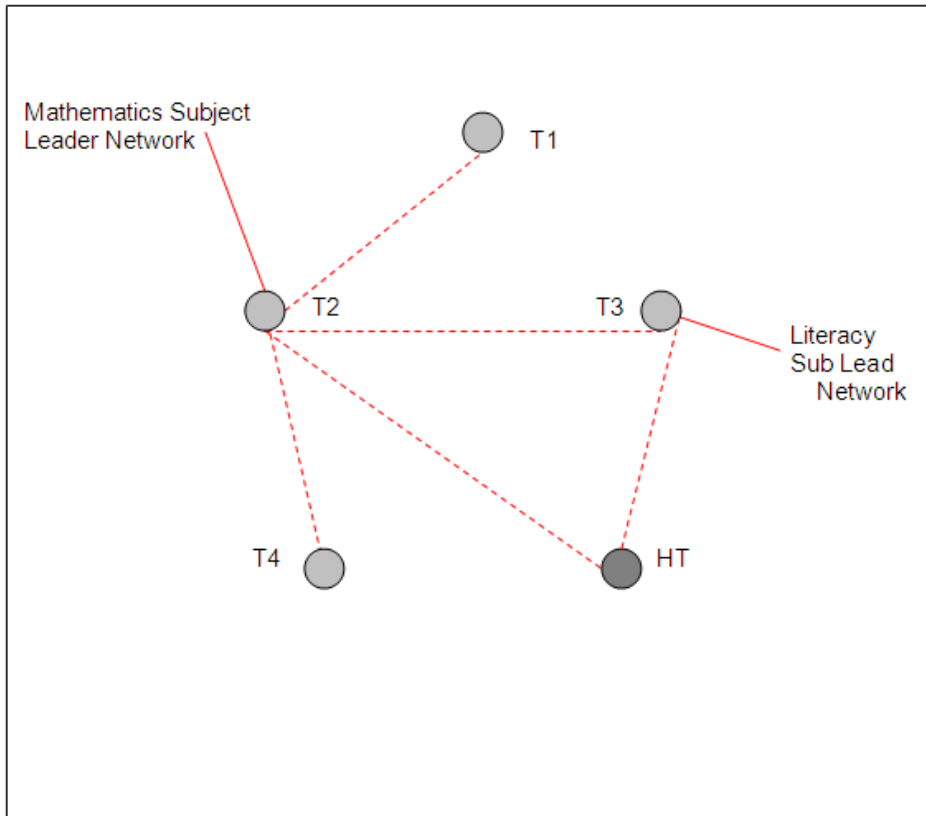
At the same time, the example school as an organisation might be focussed on, for example, the development of its curriculum with related internal connections gaining prominence, as well as those links with external sources such as a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provider.



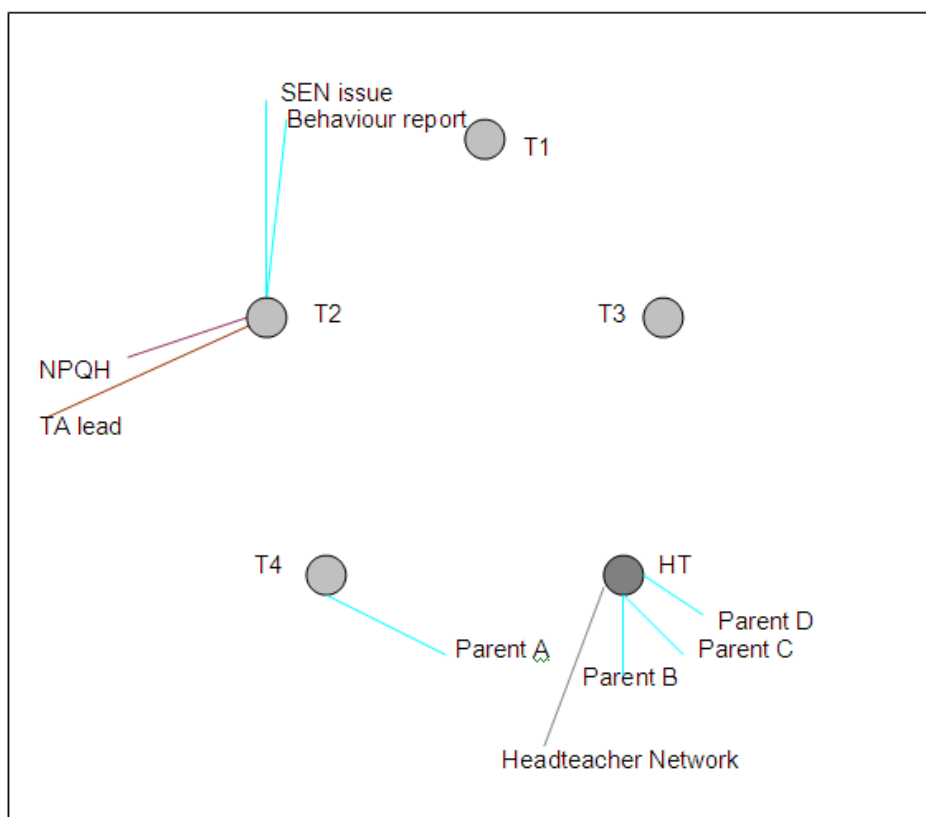
**Figure 8.7** Network diagram representing internal and external development connections

Much of the day-to-day work of a school involves a dense network of connections that have already been discussed but which include for example the relationships between staff and parents, subject leader associations, performance management responsibilities, administration and the gaining of further professional qualifications. Some of these examples are represented in Figures 8.8 and 8.9.



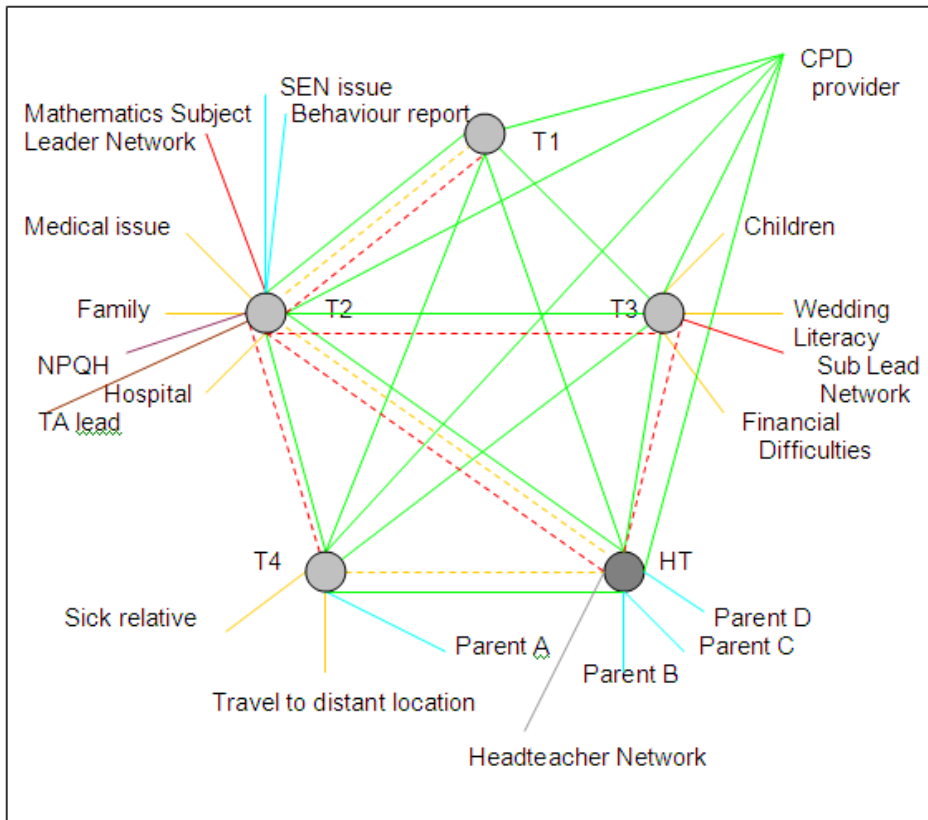


**Figure 8.8** Network diagram showing links to external subject leader networks and the associated internal connections created



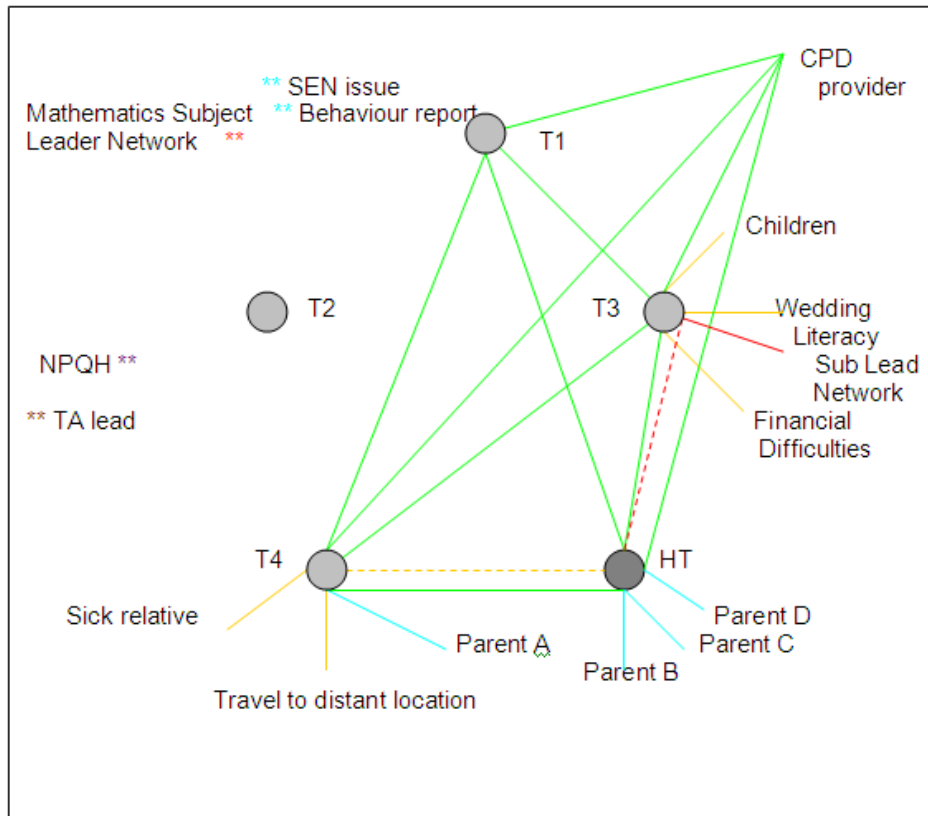
**Figure 8.9** Network diagram representing links with specific parents, leadership responsibilities and other school staff connections

When we consider the connections individually they seem to be fairly evenly dispersed but when they are layered together the potential overload for Teacher 2 becomes apparent. For the school, if Teacher 2 was to be removed from the system then there are implications for some, although not all, of the connections to him or her. The school's link with the mathematics subject leader network would be broken but the curriculum development across the school might have sufficient connectivity to continue.



**Figure 8.10** Network diagram representing the combined links from Figures 8.6 to 8.9

The connections between Teacher 2 and the headteacher, whilst loosely coupled in this example, could have provided support for the headteacher and it might be significant that those disappear. In addition, the relationship with particular parents and the lead role with teaching assistants would need to be maintained and this additional work could fall to the headteacher, thus increasing that workload.



**Figure 8.11** Network diagram representing the removal from the system of Teacher 2

The removal of Teacher 2 from the system, even for a relatively short time, could have significant implications for the school as an organisation.

Whilst the creation of a complete network diagram to represent a particular complex adaptive system might be virtually impossible and only result in a very dense collection of lines, ultimately looking more like Jackson Pollock's 'Number 8' shown on the title page of this chapter, the exercise does serve to demonstrate diagrammatically how complex the systems potentially are. The separation into particular types of relationships or those with a particular focus might provide a way to begin the unravelling process, revealing some of the layers and identifying those nodes that could potentially be under greater pressure.

As the individual networks of connections begin to be built up, a potential for the representation is to identify any nodes, whether they are individuals or groups or activities within the system, that are becoming inundated with

connections, one interpretation of what will be termed in this research as 'pressure nodes'. Pressure nodes could equally exist where very few connections are made with a particular node.

As it almost invariably takes more than one individual to make changes, it would seem that connections and relationships are vital to the development of an organisation. Mason (2008b, p42) describes the efforts of an idealistic teacher to turn around a weak school as 'shouting in the wind'. If, however, this teacher was to be linked with others, internally and externally, whose energy and drive were similar, their combined force could prove to be greater than the sum of their individual influences. In this instance, the node would be what will be termed in this study a 'building node' as identification could lead ultimately to a strengthening of the system. For school leadership it could be about creating opportunities for links to be forged, thus promoting the conditions that would lead to emergence.

Tosey (2002) suggests that connectivity is not just about the connections between agents in a system but also about the quality of relationships. It seems that the connectedness of a school system is highly dependent on the relationships within it and that the survival or demise of the system could hang on the propensity to forge and develop effective links both internally and externally. 'Connectedness implies relationships' (Morrison, 2002, p19) and Lewin and Regine (2000) suggest that these might be 'between individuals and teams; between teams; between subsystems; between the institution and its environment' (p19). During the interview with Scott London in 1997, Margaret Wheatley stated that there is a need, 'to think about organisations as webs of relationships.' This theme was identified as important through the initial data analysis process and has been discussed in Sections 3.1e and 7.3e.

It could be contended, however, that within any social system there are some connections and relationships that are critical to the survival and evolution of the system. Some of these will have a positive effect and will need to be encouraged whilst others will be detrimental to the development of the system and will need to be changed or possibly even severed altogether. Take, for example, a teacher and teaching assistant working together in a classroom who decide not to follow the agreed procedures for

recording assessments of children's reading. Both adults will also be linked to the group with a similar role to their own in the school and could potentially influence others to follow this pattern of behaviour but if the teaching assistant is moved to work alongside a different teacher then the relationship has been influenced, even if not completely severed, and the potential for influencing practice negatively has been decreased.

Connectedness happens through communication. A system cannot maintain its levels of robustness where information is held centrally or limited to a small number of elements within that system. Morrison (2002) suggests that 'information is the food of relationships and connections' (p118). However, the balance in terms of communicating enough of the right information throughout an organisation and overwhelming individuals and groups by sharing everything, whether relevant or not, could be difficult to achieve. The perception of each individual relating to the information they receive, the amount and its relevance, will vary and is therefore even more challenging to gauge.

Networks and the connections they represent within primary schools facing challenging circumstances will form a further aspect of complexity theory to be examined as part of this research.

### **8.11 Communication**

Effective communication is not a recently recognised aspect of effective organisations and has already been discussed in Section 3.1e. It was identified as a key variable in a school's success long before the turn of the century (Peters, 1989; Cilliers, 1998). Communication is central to complexity theory (Bryman, 1992; Mendez-Morse, 1999, p15; Morrison, 2002, p20). Some of the key aspects of communication, related to complex adaptive systems, can be summarised as follows:

- Communication must include positive feedback if a system is to self-organise and adapt. (Waldrop, 1993, p34)
- Communication concerns intentions and purposes and it must strip out of the discussion issues of status and power; the unforced force of the argument alone should hold sway. (Morrison, 2002, p148)

- The impact of communication is partly dependent on the authority and reputation of the agents generating it. (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007, p307)
- Communicated information is the lifeblood of an organisation and ignorance has to be managed just as knowledge has to be managed. (Marsick, 2000, p14)
- Communication must take multiple forms, be through multiple channels and be open in nature. (Morrison, 2002, p20)
- Communication is a social encounter, not merely information exchange. Communications may contain cognitive content (understanding), emotional and expressive content, and non-verbal action, all of which impact on the message. (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p278)
- For communication to be effective there has to be active 'listening', accurate and perceptive interpretation and appropriate responsiveness – when this constantly takes place then there is connectivity. (McMillan, 2008, p200)

An examination of communication and connections within complex adaptive systems leads to a consideration of the agents involved. Alongside the formal structures there are 'shadow organisations' which are present to a greater or lesser extent within every social system and have the potential to influence throughout an organisation. It is the informal groupings that occur, often more naturally than the imposed formal groups. Snowden (2002) describes the shadow organisation as a 'complex network of obligations, experiences and mutual commitments without which an organisation could not survive' (p104). He suggests that those involved have shared experiences, values and beliefs. The shadow organisation can exert significant influence over the micropolitics of an organisation and whilst, as West (1999, p193) suggests, they can 'inhibit, frustrate or resist', they may also be necessary sources of 'antithesis' (Morrison, 2002, p37) that will lead to change, perturbation, 'self-organisation and emergence' (Fullan, 2001b, p108). Within complex adaptive systems it seems that some informal groupings should be encouraged as they work in parallel with the micropolitics of the organisation rather than against them. As

Wheatley (1999, p45) suggests, 'critical mass is less important than critical connections'.

Within a school, shadow organisations could take any number of forms. An example might be the group of teachers who visit the pub during Friday lunchtime. They might use this opportunity to discuss school issues and this could help to clarify circumstances for the members of that group and could equally help them to decide on a potential response strategy that will then be collectively applied. Their overall influence might then be greater than their collective individual responses would have been without this opportunity. Another potentially powerful shadow organisation associated with schools is what headteachers refer to as 'the school gate gang'. This is the group of parents who are regularly together when they drop off or collect their children and who might discuss school-related issues. They are usually heavily influenced by their own child's circumstances and can therefore provide a less than balanced opinion. The existence and influence of shadow organisations within primary schools facing challenging circumstances represents an area for further investigation as part of this research.

### **8.13 Conclusions**

'Chaos and complexity theories argue against the linear, deterministic, patterned, universalisable, stable, atomised, modernistic, objective, mechanist, controlled, closed systems of law-like behaviour which may be operating in the laboratory but which do not operate in the social world of education. Complexity theory replaces these with an emphasis on networks, linkages, holism, feedback, relationships and interactivity in context (Cohen and Stewart, 1995), emergence, dynamical systems, self-organisation and an open system.' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p29)

Review of existing literature suggests that complexity theory and the study of complex adaptive systems have the potential to make a useful contribution to the examination of primary schools facing challenging



circumstances. They provide potential for the development of a greater understanding of schools as systems and for consideration of those factors that lead to particular outcomes. This is done from a non-linear perspective, with systems seen holistically rather than being examined broken down into their constituent parts.

Complexity theory may have a significant contribution to make to education research but it seems that it will require further real-life examples in order to demonstrate this. A potential limitation of complexity theory in relation to educational research is that it lacks a track record. Griffiths (1997; 376) states that complexity theory may need 'evidence to support its extravagant claims'. Radford (2008b), in Mason (2008a, p148), suggests that complexity theory should make us cautious about offering explanations because the relationships between evidence and practice are not linear. He proposes that the researcher's role is 'to offer tentative identification and critical analysis' of possible interpretations. Morrison (2002) also recognises the need for further empirical research into the effects of organising schools on a deliberately complexity theory-driven principle. He says that, 'it is a theory awaiting testing in schools' (p189) and that its claims should be validated through research evidence. The work contained within this thesis seeks to offer some new real-life insights based on original research, identifying links between a number of school circumstances and elements of complexity theory in order to determine potential strengths and weaknesses of such an approach and by doing so to add to the body of evidence that would strengthen some of the claims made.



## **Chapter 9**

### **Complexity Theory Findings and Analysis**

## **9.1 Introduction**

Within this chapter matches are first made between elements common to complex adaptive systems and aspects of Acacia Junior School in order to demonstrate that as a primary school facing challenging circumstances it could be considered to be such a system. Events that occurred during the period of research in this school are then compared with the more dynamic aspects of complex adaptive systems discussed in the previous chapter, including emergence and networks. Consideration is then given to the extent to which there is a match between leadership identified within the previous chapter as appropriate for complex adaptive systems and aspects of leadership within Acacia Junior School. These sections are supported by extracts from the research data. Finally, consideration is given to whether the evidence supports the notion that this school in particular would have benefitted from being led as a complex adaptive system based on the principles of complexity theory.

Following consideration of Acacia Junior School through a complexity theory lens, the conclusions drawn are then tested against the other two case study schools to determine whether there is any evidence to support wider applicability within schools facing challenging circumstances.

Data generated from this research have been examined through a complexity theory lens in an attempt to identify any aspects of the theory that lead ultimately to success or improvement in the schools as organisations and that might be applied to other sets of circumstances, particularly those that are deemed to be challenging, in order to support development work. A summary of these is provided in the concluding section, alongside potential next steps following this research.

## **9.2 Acacia Junior School as a Complex Adaptive System**

Acacia Junior was a school in a multiply-deprived area where crime and vandalism were high, one-parent families formed a significant proportion of the community, high levels of unemployment existed and increasing numbers of European immigrants were moving to the area to fill the need for cheap sources of labour, changing the overall local and school

population dynamics; a world West-Burnham (1997) would describe as 'complex and chaotic' (p233). Standards of attainment at the school were among the lowest in the Country and an inspection led to it being deemed in need of 'special measures', with poor teaching and leadership identified as contributory factors in the inspection report. At this point staff morale was considered to be low, the school was highlighted by the press as 'failing' and the capacity of the leadership team was diminished by the deputy headteacher's maternity leave. Even within this brief outline of the school, elements of complex adaptive systems are highlighted. The environments in which it operated were largely unpredictable and it was forced to exist under dynamic conditions not at equilibrium, pushing it towards the edge of chaos. As will be discussed in detail below, it was an open system with ill-defined boundaries linked to multiple external agencies such as pupil support services, the local Excellence Partnership, the Improving Schools Programme, Behaviour and Attendance Support services and the Governor Support Unit. This created a complex network of relationships and interactions which relied heavily on communication to facilitate effective operation. The school was a human service with the reliance on people creating both strengths and weaknesses in the system.

The more dynamic elements of complex adaptive systems are discussed further in the section below through exemplification from the research data. It was the extent to which each of these elements existed that created the conditions leading initially to the school's unsuccessful Ofsted inspection and to its changing circumstances from that point.

A small-scale example of the change over time of an individual agent within the school is provided first. This then broadens out to examples that affected the whole school and finally consideration is given to a significant piece of development work, the extent and impact of which was felt more widely and which demonstrates that Acacia Junior School behaved as a complex adaptive system responding to leadership that followed the principles of complexity theory.

### 9.2 (i) Lorna

One of the fundamental tenets of complexity theory is that complex adaptive systems are by their very nature complicated, each agent within them contributing to the overall system. Lorna is used here to exemplify the positive contribution this can make.

‘I came here as a classroom assistant and worked one-to-one with a child with special needs. I was already doing my Open University Degree with a view to becoming a teacher. I was asked to stay on here and do my Graduate Teacher Programme and I became a teacher here and I’ve been here altogether about six years ... four years teaching.’ (LD Jun, 3-9)

Lorna’s lack of experience elsewhere could have left her feeling ill-prepared for the challenges of working within a school facing Special Measures. She demonstrated repeatedly, however, that this was not the case and that she was able to adapt in response to the changing circumstances and demands made.

‘So when the staff found out it was Special Measures, I thought, oh, this is going to be ... you know ... things are going to happen and it’s going to be quite good in a way...’ (LD Jun, 51-53)

‘Interviewer: So do you think change has been difficult?’

Interviewee: Me personally, no, actually. I just looked on it as professional development in a way because I’ve only ever taught here and I trained here, which was an initial worry for me ... then I’ve just sort of tried to take it all on board and do what has been necessary.’ (LD Jun, 96-104)

‘If we’re going to get out of Special Measures we’ve got to change. That’s the bottom line really.’ (LD Jun, 119-120)

Lorna appeared to use every opportunity to develop her practice and remained positive even in the face of professional adversity.

'Lorna's observation did not go well but she talked positively about why and what she has taken from it.' (MHH Journal, 1083-1084)

She was able to adapt in order to meet the needs of the changing internal and external environments and her ability to self-organise led to an ongoing process of personal emergence. She did not lose sight of her ultimate goals and she continued to respond following her own set of guiding principles, as is typical of agents within a complex adaptive system, but the range of development work in which she engaged contributed to the eventual emergence of the whole school. She created connections with others that were mutually beneficial. Her actions resulted in both first-order and, ultimately, second-order change. The literacy subject leader reflected thus:

'I did some team teaching with Lorna for the writing course about the forest setting which is what it was about and I went in with Lorna and we did that together and then we took our work to the second training session.' (LM, 132-135)

'I have found that Lorna has been the person I have been able to work best with as she is very open to suggestions and likes to try new things.' (LM, 138-140)

When circumstances became personally challenging Lorna was proactive in her approach, supporting her self-organisation and in particular her ability to respond in a way that would support self-preservation, as the following two extracts demonstrate.

'I think if you're not coping you have to go and say something ... you've got to have that courage ... to say ... you know ... I went to Annabelle [headteacher] and said, 'I'm struggling'. It's not easy ... but it took ten or fifteen

minutes to sort something out and it was as simple as that really.’ (LD Jun, 178-185 – brackets added)

‘I talked to Lorna about the study on Special Educational Needs that she is doing. She has been given a day off on Friday as she is behind with this and feeling overwhelmed by all the other work we have to do at school.’ (MHH Journal, 1835-1838)

Lorna also contributed to the wider development of the school as an organisation. For example, in order to develop provision for the teaching of Information and Communications Technology within the school Lorna made effective links with other agents internally and outside the system. She worked alongside teachers as their technician to support their knowledge and understanding without undermining their confidence and she engaged the help of a local authority adviser to provide whole-school training.

This connectedness supported the ‘snowballing’ of her efforts to improve the classroom practice of teachers across the school and was recognised by HMI during their January monitoring visit when they reported that, ‘the use of new interactive whiteboards is growing and is helping teachers to explain ideas more fully and in capturing children’s attention’ (Ofsted, Monitoring Inspection letter, Feb 2007). By combining her efforts with those of others through the networks she forged, the total seemed to have become greater than the sum of the parts.

### 9.2 (ii) Music in the dining hall

The following example is used to demonstrate that cause and effect in complex systems are not necessarily linear and that the Butterfly Effect is an identifiable phenomenon.

During the first HMI inspection at Acacia Junior School during January of 2007, the children’s standard of behaviour in the dining hall was criticised. Not sure how to address what the school viewed as some fundamental issues associated with children’s lack of opportunity at home to eat a meal at a table, with cutlery, whilst engaging in conversation with other people,



the decision was made to try playing music. It was felt that this might create a more conducive ambiance whilst advice regarding further measures could be sought. The outcome could not have been more dramatic.

The children chose their own music which was interspersed with staff choices. Interest was taken by children in each other's choices as well as those of the staff. Almost immediately the atmosphere became calmer with fewer incidents of poor behaviour reported by the midday supervisors in their log. The kitchen staff reported that less food was wasted and teachers and teaching assistants were able to begin teaching in the afternoon with less time spent sorting out issues arising from lunchtime.

This seems to provide good evidence of the Butterfly Effect where a very small change in initial conditions led to broad and unexpected changes in outcomes. The lack of ability to attribute effect to cause is also typical of emergence within a complex adaptive system. To what extent the changes identified were due to the introduction of music cannot be ascertained. It might have been that the children were calmed by the influence of the music or perhaps that they felt a greater ownership of the dining hall environment. The midday supervisors may have been less confrontational with the children or it could merely have been that the music masked the noise of some of these exchanges. A consideration of what other effects the playing of music might have had could include an increase in the children's musical appreciation, a desire to play an instrument and a greater knowledge of a range of classical and popular tunes. The influence could have spread to their home circumstances, perhaps encouraging families to sit together at a table for meals; the speculation could go on but as with all non-linear systems, it is not possible to accurately attribute effects to particular causes.

It seems that identification of detailed causal mechanisms that produce particular effects is very difficult. The identification of some of the possibilities to move closer to 'knowing' through further experimentation would seem to be the next research stage. Common factors amongst the possibilities might begin to emerge. The synergy between combinations of causal factors might also then be identified as influential. In the music

example, it may have been the sharing of a common interest between adults and children, combined with the physical acts of eating and listening that created a greater influence.

### 9.2 (iii) Edison curriculum

The third example used here to exemplify aspects of complex adaptive systems within Acacia Junior School relates to the decision regarding a new curriculum and its introduction. The existing curriculum had been described by Ofsted as 'inadequate' in terms of being able to appropriately equip children for the future and the school staff were aware that there had been little revision to the planned provision for a number of years. These circumstances caused the perturbations that pushed the school gradually closer to the 'edge of chaos' with attempts made within individual subject areas to update but no overall strategy and little evidence of success or change that was deeper than first-order. The school's leadership team therefore sought an external partner to link with in order to address the issue. The local Excellence Partnership was advocating, and partly funding, a link with Edison (a commercial company) that was offering a set of plans for a whole curriculum.

Training input was provided by Edison, creating communications links within a new network of relationships. The introduction, which included both curriculum and pedagogical changes, initially led the school as a system closer to the edge of chaos as is reflected by the responses below taken from interview data.

'And then the staff have got Edison which of course is totally new and again that's the same, will I be able to do it, it's too hard, it's all new, I don't get it, I can't stand it, all this kind of stuff.' (LM, 503-506)

'We had Edison to get on board with as well. I had four weeks in which to do some Edison work with my new class so that really wasn't enough time to base any evaluation of the scheme on.' (LD Aug, 103-109)

As illustrated above, it was individuals who self-organised, as opposed to the staff as a whole group, in response to the imposed curriculum and this led initially to higher levels of 'chaos' prior to the emergence of a system that could be considered to have a greater degree of 'fitness for purpose' and therefore potentially be more robust and sustainable in nature.

The criticality of relationships is highlighted once again through this example. The development of the curriculum had not happened and, as complexity theory suggests, this could have been for any number of reasons in an even greater number of combinations. Relationships between the headteacher and staff were identified by the literacy subject leader and another teacher as a contributory factor, as demonstrated in the interview extracts below.

'... it was too much [of the headteacher] being nice to people and letting them have their own way and giving in to them and seeing their point of view and seeing everyone's point of view and of course all that happens is nothing happens and nothing changes.' (LM, 385-389 – brackets added)

'I think she [the headteacher] was feeling quite disappointed in a way with some members of staff who it seemed then that we weren't really working together ... it's often said that we work as a team [the school staff] but I'm not sure that we do very much...' (LD Aug, 62-63 – brackets added)

#### 9.2 (iv) The development of literacy

In contrast to individually initiated developments, emergence can result in changed structures within an organisation. For example, at Acacia the composition of the senior leadership changed which created what was viewed by the newly appointed literacy subject leader as a more effective group in terms of the development work she herself wanted to complete. She commented:

'I feel more involved now than I did then ... you and Neville came in and changed the dynamics of that meeting ... quite significantly. I feel now they are much more effective because there's more different opinions going in and there's more equality in the way people get their point across.' (LM, 180-192)

The development of literacy as a curriculum area followed this revised leadership structure and emergence was once again demonstrated at Acacia Junior School. The subject leader reflects below on the starting point and some of the work that was completed.

'... when I first came we had conversations in the staff room about literacy and I was absolutely appalled that some people didn't have a clue what to do and they didn't even know how to structure it, they didn't know what word work was, they didn't know what text work was... they didn't really know anything and it ... you think... how can they not, what has happened before ... how can they be so clueless. The input they had had, either they didn't understand it or they hadn't had any... and it was a very old-fashioned view of English.' (LM, 253-269)

'Julie [local authority literacy adviser] came into school and did the whole writing module at the staff meeting twilight and then everyone taught that bit to get them to think about the sequence of teaching and how to make writing interesting...'  
(LM, 137-141 – brackets added)

'I had re-organised the children's reading books into levelled book bands.' (LM, 150-151)

She goes on to identify the outcomes which seem to be evidence of emergence of a system better able to provide appropriately.

'Since September there has been a complete sea change. Part of that was Julie coming in and doing stuff and of

course Neville has done loads ... and me talking to people and saying this is how you do it.' (LM, 280-283)

'They [the staff] wanted to do good lessons and people tried harder but people had more information about what a good lesson looked like and that helped. So they had moved on and people were much more secure in what they were doing.' (LM, 463-471 – brackets added)

A class teacher also reflected on literacy developments.

'The most obvious change is the literacy ... the changes of books, the reading scheme ... the guided reading and the workshops.' (LD Aug, 17-21)

A journal entry also reflected on the emergence of aspects of practice in literacy.

'Planning and work scrutiny completed. Evidence of improvement was found in both marking and the teaching sequence in literacy which shows that the work completed has had some impact.' (MHH Journal, 1978-1981)

The ongoing nature of development and preparation to support further emergence was exemplified through a comment made by the literacy subject leader relating to work later in the academic year.

'A lot of people didn't know anything about phonics and that's been done in a staff meeting and people don't feel very confident with it. People don't feel that they know how to do it so there's a lot of information to assimilate.' (LM, 494-501)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the timescales over which self-organisation and emergence occurs vary. The development of literacy at Acacia exemplified this with work such as the re-classification of children's reading books having a fairly instant impact in terms of providing a more

robust system but development in teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical understanding taking much longer to become embedded. The imposition of Special Measures seemed to have the effect of creating a sense of urgency and pushing the school regularly towards the edge of chaos. The literacy subject leader reflected:

'That's why it's such a gallop.' (LM, 405)

### 9.2 (v) Staff meeting changes

This aspect of change within Acacia Junior School seems to demonstrate a number of aspects of complexity theory. The influence of human agency and 'conscious intentionality', the Butterfly Effect and the existence and influence of the 'shadow organisation' are particularly noted here.

Changes to the nature of staff meetings and the difficulties associated with relationships between the headteacher and some of the staff at Acacia have already been discussed and exemplified through research data as part of the analysis chapter (Section 7.2a). In summary, at the time when the school was made subject to Special Measures, the staff meetings regularly consisted of review of policy documents and day-to-day organisational issues. When the lead for these meetings moved from the headteacher to the temporary deputy headteacher the focus changed from being administrative in nature to being based on Continuing Professional Development opportunities. Previous to this, any attempts to provide such opportunities were met by the staff with resistance and sometimes hostility.

'Whenever I did have the chance to talk about literacy at some points they [some of the staff] were always very, very negative. They always barracked you ... they always disagreed with you over any change.' (LM, 312-315 – brackets added)

The following interview extract suggests that a shadow organisation existed at Acacia Junior School, the influence of which was sufficient to silence the opinions of others in staff meeting situations.

‘Two members of staff never used to say anything, Lewis and Lorna never spoke.’ (LM, 315-317)

Lorna, mentioned above, was the member of staff discussed at the beginning of this section in relation to her significant contribution to the development work of the school. Yet, during staff meetings it seems that she was not prepared to contribute. She reflected herself that:

‘... I think we [the staff] can be quite fractured at times...’  
(LD Jun, 194 – brackets added)

By changing the leadership and focus of the staff meetings, it seems that it was possible to affect the influence of some individuals’ conscious intentionality so that it no longer impacted to such a degree on others. Those individuals who formed part of what could be considered to be the shadow organisation had influence that seemed embedded across the school, possibly exacerbated by their long-standing service. It might not have been possible to influence their practice but their influence on others was at least reduced. In terms of complexity theory, the unproductive connection was disrupted following the identification of this ‘pressure node’. A journal entry reflected:

‘Planning and work scrutiny completed and written feedback prepared for individuals. Again there are people like Lorna and Lydia who are doing all that is asked and others like Maureen and Audrey are not.’ (MHH Journal, 2214-2217)

This identification of what might be considered to be a ‘pressure node’ led to actions that reduced its potential impact.

A small change, in this case to the structure and content of a weekly meeting, led to significant impact in terms of staff development and the evolution of individual capacities and relationships that supported further emergence. This could be considered to be an example of the Butterfly Effect and reinforces the potential effectiveness of causing perturbations, in this case removing barriers to development, as a leadership strategy even

where it is not possible to directly influence changes in the practices of others.

### **9.3 The Four Weeks' Project**

This final example shows the movement of Acacia Junior School towards the edge of chaos, the creative and radical response and the emergence of a new and more robust system, better able to deal with its environment. It also serves to demonstrate that where appropriate leadership for complex adaptive systems was implemented, this led to improvements in the organisation.

A set of challenging circumstances that existed at the school led to the creation of a completely un-tested and innovative approach to solving a particular problem, what Heifetz and Linsky (2002a) referred to as a Type III situation, requiring a shift in values and beliefs. For a number of years the children moving from year group to year group within the school, and those transferring into the school from the main feeder infant school, underwent a period of settling in during which their academic achievement rates decreased. This was identified through performance and tracking data, as well as through information from parents and teachers. It was felt by the teachers in particular that impetus was lost during the final half term in the summer as formal assessment had been completed and a greater emphasis was placed on engaging in activities with a less rigorous link to learning. As the school was due to receive an HMI visit during the initial period early in the Autumn Term of 2007, and the outcomes of the two previous visits were 'inadequate progress' judgements, it was crucial that the issue be addressed.

From early on in the academic year (2006-7), when the school was first made subject to Special Measures, there was an awareness of this underperformance issue and it became one of the key driving factors in the school's decision to undertake the changes it did which led ultimately to the Four Weeks' Project. The Year 3 class teacher reflected:

'... his [the Ofsted inspector's] big concern was the levels of reading for the children who had come in ... he was



brandishing the data grids all the time and he was saying well these are terrible but of course they are from the infants ...' (LM, 42-50 – brackets added)

Based on the performance data and the staff and parental perceptions, it was decided collectively by the school's staff to attempt to move children to their new classes for a period of four weeks before the Summer Term of 2007 ended. This included moving children from the infant school. A number of environments were involved in the decision and the actual implementation of this change including pupils, teachers, leadership, the feeder infant school, the local authority in terms of legal issues and human resources, parents and the community, the education advisory service, HMI (as they were due to conduct a monitoring visit), the organisation providing input regarding a new curriculum (that would be used as the basis for this four week block of learning and teaching) and the school's catering service. There were also macro-level considerations such as economic, philosophical, political and physical factors. For one fairly time-limited project, the network created was extremely complex.

In addition to moving children to their new classes, with their new teacher, it was decided that the four week block would be a good opportunity to complete work from the newly purchased curriculum (Edison) in order to begin the process of evaluation. This seems to suggest that the processes of self-evaluation among groups of staff rather than just for individuals were becoming more evident, demonstrating that the school as an organisation was functioning effectively as a complex adaptive system.

The organisational issues associated with the Four Weeks' Project were multiple and chaotic but creative ways to overcome each were found and the system that emerged was more richly connected and more densely networked than the pre-existing one. Initially the permission of the local authority, the infant school and the parents of the infant children was sought. Once agreed, the practical arrangements were negotiated. These included accommodation for an increased number of children (as Year 6 children were still part of the junior school), staffing, resources, lunchtime supervision and registration requirements. The pair of teachers and their teaching assistants who would be working with each year group planned

together to ensure that the curriculum aspects of their work were appropriately covered and any issues arising were raised with the leadership team. This represented a much more bottom-up approach to development within the school, with the leadership team working to remove barriers rather than imposing structures and systems.

There was still a degree of anxiety associated with the project before it began, as is demonstrated in the interview extract below.

‘Interviewer: How are people feeling about going into this period of having next year’s classes?’

Interviewee: That’s a stressful thing for everyone. Everyone is very stressed about that. They have got so much to do and the time of year obviously it’s different to what you would normally do and it’s a change and it’s a lot to get your head round it and people keep saying to me that there’s so much to think about.’ (LM, 480-492)

This was abated by the end of the project however and advantages identified.

‘Interviewer: So do you think it was a good thing having the four weeks at the end of term?’

Interviewee: I think it was good to have them ... and I think the time of year was ok actually.’ (LD Aug, 93-99)

‘... it’s better to be going back to children you already know.’  
(LD Aug, 117)

This project provides an example of the school re-organising itself in response to information it received. Emergence within this system is also identifiable as the planning and preparation resulted in the project taking place. Whilst rates of progress still showed some decrease in the first weeks of the following Autumn term, these were not so marked and did not continue for as long as in previous years and the HMI visit resulted for the first time in satisfactory progress being identified.

It seems from the evidence that the school had reached what Gladwell referred to as the 'tipping point' (The New Yorker, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1996, p2). A third inadequate progress judgement from HMI could have meant that the school faced closure and the timing of this visit led to creative approaches towards development being sought. The resulting decision relating to the Four Weeks' Project created a more tightly coupled network, reinforcing the links with external environments as well as strengthening the internal links. For example, the infant school and junior school staff worked more closely together, enhancing understanding of each others' work and creating a smoother transition process for the children.

Communication was a key factor within the complex adaptive systems that existed and emerged. Within Acacia, the pre-existing communications structure had the headteacher at the centre and all channels passed through her which limited the opportunity for individuals around the periphery to communicate directly with one another, probably reducing the rate of flow of information too. Communication has already been identified as problematic within Acacia Junior in Section 7.3e. Perceptions did, however, change in relation to the Four Weeks' Project, exemplified below.

'... she [the headteacher] spoke quite openly with the staff which is something that she hadn't really done before ...'  
(LD Aug, 66-67 – brackets added)

Whilst the development work that happened at Acacia Junior had positive effects, there were potential costs to the school as an organisation. Where time, resource and development were concentrated on the Four Weeks' Project, they could not also be used elsewhere. Innovation in one area has 'knock-on' (Morrison, 2002, p126) effects in others that are not necessarily positive. This is one of the issues associated with complex adaptive systems and the Butterfly Effect; influence might be multiplied but not necessarily in the most desirable direction. In this example, Acacia became a more robust organisation, demonstrating that it was at least able to provide an adequate standard of education in Ofsted terms but this might have been at the expense of other development work. The principles of complexity theory suggest that it is a naturally unpredictable situation and

therefore the role of leadership is to manage the processes of change through encouraging creativity and directing resources in response to it.

Up until the Four Weeks' Project work, much of what Acacia Junior School had done was directed, supported and to a certain extent funded by external agencies, for example the Edison curriculum by the Excellence Partnership and the deputy headteachers by the local authority through the imposed post-Ofsted Project Board. Finally, however, through the Four Weeks' Project, the school seems to have taken control of what it wanted to do for itself. The project was internally conceived and directed and as a piece of development work it seems to have been the most 'shared' across the school with least direction from the headteacher and leadership team. The leadership team was involved but the driving forces were bottom-up. The teachers and teaching assistants created the structure and content and the leadership team became responsible instead for removing any barriers. Double-loop learning and second-order change were evident in these processes.

In terms of her leadership role it could be considered that this work provided an indication that the headteacher of Acacia Junior would be able to lead the school forward. As part of the Four Weeks' Project, Annabelle herself had undergone self-organisation and emergence in finally seeming to 'let go' of the reins and demonstrate adaptive leadership rather than being heavily focussed on the administrative aspects of the role within the previously hierarchical structure.

Through the project, Annabelle had allowed staff to create and deliver their own development initiative, demonstrating elements of transformational leadership. These included devolution of decision-making to groups and networks, placing learning at the heart of the organisation and promoting internal and external partnerships. What led to this position, as is the case for so much of the non-linear processes that are part of complexity theory, is unclear. It might have been reached through a process of personal development and growth or perhaps a realisation that her leadership role would not continue and therefore a sort of 'giving up' of the existing role but the result was never-the-less self-organisation and emergence.

The Four Weeks' Project was effective in reducing the impact of transition on children's rates of achievement and in creating a more robust system that was better equipped to respond to its internal and external environments. The evidence from this whole-school initiative seems to suggest therefore that the work of the leadership team, and in particular the role of the headteacher, would have better supported the development of the school as an organisation if it had followed the principles of complexity theory, viewing the school as a complex adaptive system. When it did function in this way the evidence suggests that the outcomes were more positive.

#### **9.4 Concluding Comments: Acacia Junior School**

Acacia Junior, as an example of a primary school facing challenging circumstances, has been demonstrated to be a complex adaptive system through matching of features identified by the literature review. This was further reinforced through the identification of dynamic aspects of complex adaptive systems in the form of self-organisation, perturbations, emergence, the Butterfly Effect, the non-linear nature of developments, the creation of new networks and the successful disruption of unproductive connections. It can also be suggested from the analyses above that where leadership practices began to match those suggested in the existing literature as appropriate for complex adaptive systems, the outcome was successful and led to school improvement. Aspects of transformational and distributed leadership emerged in relation to the Four Weeks' Project and this led to some of the first real evidence that the school could improve. Recognising and building on existing expertise, devolving decision making and encouraging new initiatives all contributed to this process. This situation at Acacia also serves to reinforce the influential nature of school leadership.

Overall, the picture being built is one of an organisation that would have benefitted from being led as a complex adaptive system following the principles of complexity theory. In order to determine whether primary schools facing challenging circumstances more generally can be considered to be complex adaptive systems, benefiting from organisation following the principles of complexity theory, an attempt to match the

second and third case studies is made in the following sections. Whilst this will not be conclusive, it will strengthen the claim made.

## **9.5 Two further schools**

Having demonstrated that one set of school circumstances fits the complex adaptive systems model, the proposition that schools may benefit from being organised based on complexity theory is tested against the other two examples from this research.

### **9.5a Willow Primary School**

#### 9.5a (i) Attendance

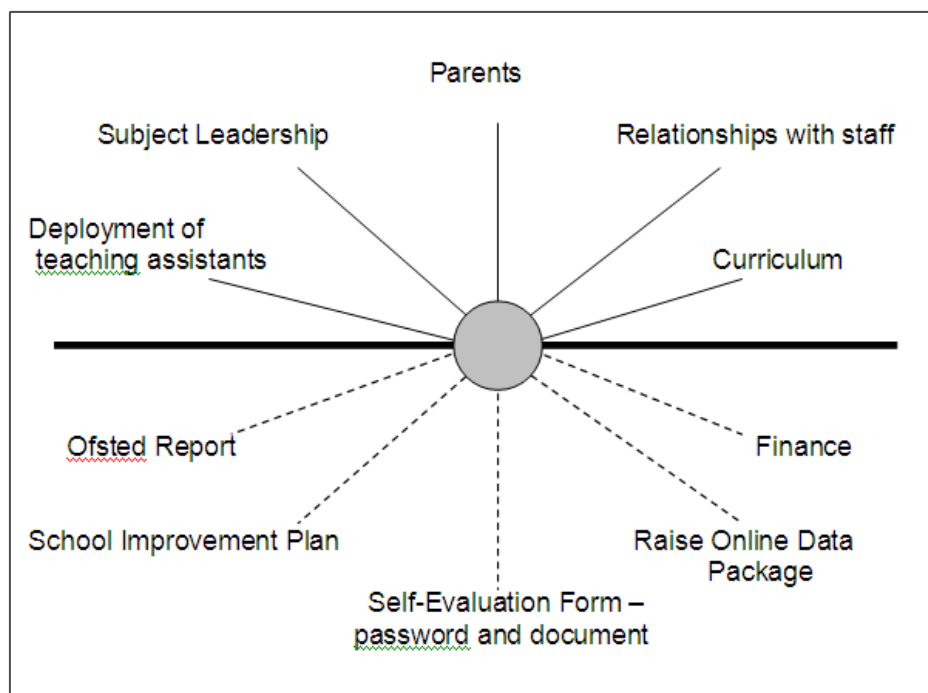
Again, it is possible to identify aspects of complexity theory and complex adaptive systems including the Butterfly Effect leading to self-organisation and emergence, for Willow Primary School. One example of this is the response by the school to the issue of poor attendance, identified by Ofsted during the school's inspection. This issue contributed to the overall 'inadequate' judgement for the quality of care provided by the school. The acting deputy headteacher describes the school's response thus:

'... we set up a late register and the office were asked to do first day 'phoning to parents and we got text messages in different languages for the EAL [English as an Additional Language] parents... and the attendance officer came in and did 'greetings gates' and we've given out a reward for classes that meet their attendance ... Classes were made aware, parents were given a letter with the percentages and they even had it worked out if they were 10 minutes late what it equated to in a week and how much time they missed. All things like that were put in place and it got better very quickly.' (SV, 275-284 – brackets added)

It seems that the first-order changes implemented by the school led to second-order changes within the wider school community.

### 9.5a (ii) Networks

An example of the effectiveness of networks with high levels of connectivity can be demonstrated through the circumstances that existed at Willow Primary. The representation of connections using elastic that was introduced in Chapter 8 is returned to here. When the substantive headteacher was suddenly absent from the school, the network of connections was revealed to be too limited to enable certain aspects of the school's work to continue. For example, the senior leadership team had no access to data systems or the school's evaluation documents. Additionally, they had not been part of the review of the school or the creation of its improvement plan. The headteacher had operated in an isolated way and the connectivity was therefore limited. This operation in a vacuum was a significant factor in the school's subsequent Ofsted inspection failure as key parts of the cycle of improvement could not be effectively demonstrated.



**Figure 9.1** Diagram representing the significant connections for the substantive headteacher at Willow Primary School at the time of his departure from the school

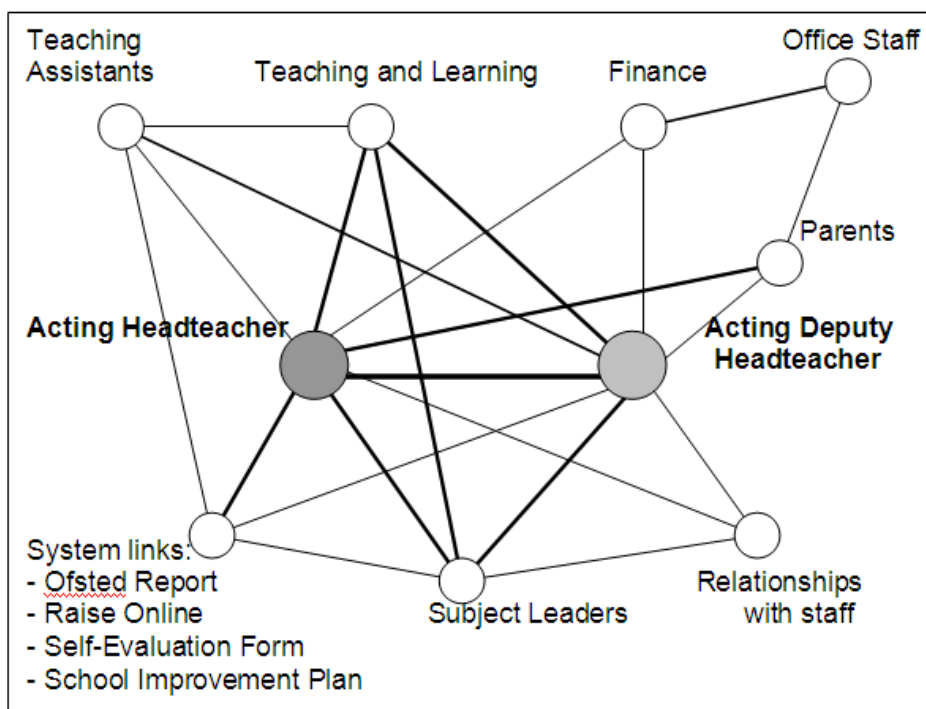
A more positive set of connections existed, however, between the wider leadership team and the rest of the staff. This high degree of connectivity

was an important factor in helping the school move forward from the point of what could be considered 'collapse' in complexity theory terms. The school was operating at the edge of chaos but emerged into a stronger and more developed system due to the existence of strong middle leadership networks.

Figure 9.1 represents the significant links that existed with the substantive headteacher at the point when he did not return to the school. Those above the thicker horizontal line, and represented with solid lines, are aspects or nodes also linked with other members of the school's leadership team as it existed at that time. When the links with the substantive headteacher were severed, connectivity for these aspects within the overall school network was maintained. The links shown below the thicker horizontal line, and represented with dashed lines, are aspects that were dealt with only by the headteacher and it was therefore not possible to maintain them at the point when he left the school. His departure left the school vulnerable in terms of the strength of its overall network. The weak connectivity contributed to the school's inability to operate at a satisfactory level and this was recognised not only by Ofsted when they were inspected but by the remaining members of the school's leadership team.

The weakened position the school had faced encouraged the new leadership team to create a much stronger network following their failed inspection. For example, a member of the office staff as well as the senior leadership team, received training in aspects of school finance so that the day-to-day management of this aspect could be shared and should one person be absent then others could continue with the work. The newly formed senior leadership team were also clear that subject leaders should take more responsibility for their subjects in terms of the data management; this led to a much more robust system and provides a good example of 'emergence'.





**Figure 9.2** Diagram representing the connections network for significant aspects of Willow Primary School's work following the appointment of the acting leadership team (bold lines represent stronger connections)

### 9.5a (iii) Distributed leadership

In terms of leadership strategies that supported the school as a complex adaptive system, the acting headteacher, acting deputy headteacher and the leadership team they created demonstrated several. For example, the leadership of the school was distributed with responsibility and accountability given to the subject leaders and the teaching assistants.

'I also include my head of the teaching assistants in the senior leadership team meetings so she feeds everything from and back to the teaching assistants to make sure they're on board.' (MW, 407-410)

'... the leadership team has become much more distributed and we've refocused the senior leadership team and the subject leader team. Maths and English subject leaders now have all the data and do the data analysis ...' (SV, 299-303)

All of the changes discussed above seem to have strengthened the 'connectivity' of the school's networks and communications channels. The effectiveness of these strategies suggests that Willow Primary School would also have benefitted from leadership that was based on the principles of complexity theory. Following the departure of the substantive headteacher it seems that, albeit unwittingly, it was led according to these principles and improvement resulted.

## **9.5b Elm Primary School**

### 9.5b (i) System-level change

Elm Primary School was part of a system-level change that can be examined through the lens of complexity theory. The need for change involved a much wider environment than an individual school. It formed part of a County-wide reorganisation of schools to eliminate the 'first and middle school' system and replace this with 'primary and high' schools. Interactions, self-organisation and emergence operated within and between different levels as the development work involved the school staff, parents, children and community as well as the local authority and central government agencies.

In terms of outcomes, this system-level change was effective in achieving a more streamlined school with one headteacher rather than two and children transferring between schools only once and at a Key Stage change point. The overall effect on children's attainment and achievement would be a much longer term consideration, not within the scope of this study.

### 9.5b (ii) Shadow organisations

In addition to this large-scale change, there are elements relating to complex adaptive systems that can be identified within Elm Primary School. For example, the existence of more than one shadow organisation in the form of sub-groups of the governing body and teaching staff contributed to the more loosely coupled network. Relationships and communication within these networks were less positive and led to conditions less conducive to self-organisation and emergence. The headteacher

demonstrated 'situational awareness' (Marzano *et al.*, 2005, p60) of these 'informal groups and relationships' (p60), and described the situation with some of the staff as follows:

'... some people have had a negative impact because everything that we talked about or any change, they were very resistant to and have been very blocking and they formed a group and it was very difficult to get round.' (NE, 409-413)

The situation with the governing body has been discussed in detail in Section 5.3c involving amongst other things their meeting separately at the pub to discuss school matters, a clear indication that they were operating as a shadow organisation. This suggests that the collective influence of these individual views impacted negatively on the school's ability to improve but was not sufficient to reverse it.

#### 9.5b (iii) Adaptive leadership

At Elm, the newly appointed headteacher wanted to follow principles that would be associated with complex adaptive systems but the staff had so little experience of anything akin to this that it was initially problematic, as exemplified in the extract below from an interview with her.

'... when I actually scheduled a weekly meeting with an agenda to look at an issue they [the staff] didn't know how to take it and they sat back and just waited for me to give them directives. And that's exactly how I didn't want to be ...'  
(NE, 96-99)

The networks that were enabled by the headteacher, demonstrating an adaptive leadership style, supported the school's development. For example, the Business Manager's role, recognised as potentially effective in supporting the leadership within a school (Woods, Armstrong and Pearson, 2012, p141) was broader than might be expected and contributed to affecting change within the organisation.

'The Business Manager is on the senior leadership team and she helps affect change... she is also on the School Council alongside another member of staff and with the children, getting their ideas ...' (NE, 377-380)

The headteacher's adaptive leadership was one of the factors that could be considered to have supported the newly formed school's emergence as a stronger organisation, more 'fit for purpose' than either of those that pre-existed.

### **9.5c Concluding Comments: Willow and Elm**

While Willow and Elm each faced different sets of challenging circumstances, they have both been shown to be complex adaptive systems. They demonstrate features such as existing under conditions not at equilibrium, being open systems linked to multiple external agencies and consisting of complicated networks of relationships. Dynamic aspects such as the evolution of networks, emergence, system-level change and the influence of shadow organisations have also been identified through the above analysis. Although aspects of transformational leadership at Willow and Elm were sometimes different to those identified at Acacia, they can none-the-less be identified; charisma and courage of the leadership, placing learning at the heart of the organisation and creating a shared vision are all examples. That the schools can be considered to have been more successful in their ability to improve is testament to the existence and implementation of appropriate leadership for complex adaptive systems and it seems that this is irrespective of the level of the headteacher's previous successful practice. These indicators all lead to the conclusion that Willow and Elm would also have responded to organisation and leadership based on the principles of complexity theory.

### **9.6 Conclusions and Next Steps**

All three of the schools that formed part of this research behaved as complex adaptive systems, demonstrated through the range of attributes they possessed and their sometimes dynamic responses to the challenging circumstances they faced. Whilst this research is small-scale, it suggests

that other schools in difficult situations would also benefit from being structured and behaving in this way. Each of the schools here responded to examples of leadership that could be considered to be based on the principles of complexity theory. This suggests that primary schools facing challenging circumstances would benefit from leadership of this nature, supporting processes of self-organisation and emergence into systems better able to operate at greater levels of complexity. Further research is needed in this area but there are elements from the data collected as part of this study that demonstrate success. For example, the Four Weeks' Project at Acacia Junior School provided evidence that when the headteacher began to relinquish direct control, the system became more robust and better able to support self-organisation and emergence. At Willow Primary School it seems that when the leadership became more distributed and individuals were given greater responsibility, strengthening the network of connections, the system became more robust and improvement gathered momentum.

For schools facing a range of challenging circumstances then, the evidence seems to suggest that they can improve and that in their efforts to do so they would benefit from being led as complex adaptive systems following the principles of complexity theory. The natural progression within this research would seem to be the consideration of schools that are already able to demonstrate successful operation and outcomes. If existence at the 'edge of chaos' is what creates the conditions conducive to emergence, how would a school not in that position fare? It would be particularly interesting to determine whether successful schools create their own perturbations, thus enabling the creative responses that lead to self-organisation and emergence; are they operating unwittingly according to the principles of complexity theory?

Whilst the research evidence from each of the schools supports their existence as complex adaptive systems and their positive response to leadership following the principles of complexity theory, they were not intentionally led in this way. Should this have been the case, judgements about the effectiveness of this approach in terms of developing their overall capacity would perhaps have been possible. The data collected within this study merely suggest that this might be the case. Individual examples of

emergence within a particular system could not be interpreted as overall effectiveness. For example, the positive outcome for the Four Weeks' Project at Acacia Junior School did not contribute to the ultimate overall success of the system but rather formed one example within what could perhaps be considered to be a 'complex maladaptive system', unable to emerge from the edge of chaos but instead eventually experiencing complete collapse.

As complex adaptive systems are networks, their representation through network diagrams seems to have something to offer in the process of affecting change within these organisations. It seems that it would be desirable to encourage headteachers to replace what Argyris and Schön (1974) termed their 'mental maps', which tell them how to react in given situations based on first-order change and strategies that have previously been successful, with what I term here 'network maps'. These could be representations of parts or the whole of a particular aspect of a school's work and might provide the potential for headteachers to identify opportunities to enable much more dramatic and far-reaching second-order change through identification of 'building nodes' within specific networks. They might also provide a mechanism through which to capture the potential change capacity of individuals at a given moment in time in order to identify where improvement could be initiated.

The limitation of such network maps in terms of becoming too complex to represent diagrammatically might be overcome through consideration of sections of a network rather than the system in its entirety. The possibilities for these representations seem to be greatest in terms of identifying the biggest influencing factors, potential 'pressure nodes' and 'building nodes' within a system. These nodes might present potential blockages or enabling structures within the system. The use of network maps supports the notion that the links within a system are as important, if not more important, than the individual agents or groups it contains. It seems that it is interaction that leads to change. For example, at Elm Primary School the most influential factor at the time of study was the amalgamation of two schools whilst at Willow Primary School it was the issues associated with leadership (and the absence of the substantive headteacher) that emerged as significant from the data. It seems that these factors would be the ones

to concentrate on addressing in order to strengthen the complex adaptive system which they formed part of and in order to support the emergence of the system into a more robust one. They form the potential 'pressure nodes' and 'building nodes' and understanding these individual factors becomes increasingly important once they have been identified as significant.

Finally, the ultimate test might be taking a primary school faced with challenging circumstances and leading it based on a combination of the 'maverick' approach suggested by Michael Wilshaw, the work of successful leaders such as Tim Smit at the Eden Project and some of the principles of effective leadership associated with complexity theory such as courage, change agency, promotion of connectivity and the encouragement of new initiatives. The outcomes could not be predicted but the evidence from this research suggests that improvement would be achieved.





**Chapter 10**  
**Conclusions**

This research sought to consider what happens in primary schools facing challenging circumstances that leads to their improvement or decline. A review of literature identified a number of potential influencing factors to explore further and analysis of data collected from three case studies led to development of key themes. The initial questions identified for further investigation were:

- What common themes exist within and across a range of challenging circumstances?
- What leadership characteristics are linked to schools that improve or decline?
- What combinations of factors lead to improvement or decline?
- What is the potential for prediction and/or control pertaining to improving or declining situations?

The major original contribution made by this thesis is to establish that complexity theory offers a useful approach to the examination of schools holistically as systems in order to enhance understanding of them. Additionally, this research focuses on primary schools facing challenging circumstances, the existing research for which is limited, providing empirical evidence relating to the individual factors influencing those organisations. Existing theoretical propositions relating to complexity theory and school leadership are also supported through provision of further empirical evidence.

Evidence from this research demonstrates that improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances can be identified as originating from behaviour as complex adaptive systems and being led according to the principles of complexity theory. What leads to each school's improvement or decline is not a single identifiable factor but a combination of the influences of numerous aspects of the organisation's structure and work. The fact that a school exists within challenging circumstances seems to intensify the overall influence of these combining factors. This research concludes that complexity theory offers an appropriate framework through which to examine particular sets of circumstances. This has the potential to support the early identification of pressure nodes and building nodes as

part of a network map. These nodes can then be capitalised upon through implementation of appropriate strategies, promoting not only first-order but second-order change. As demonstrated in this research, effective leadership is crucial to the development potential of primary schools facing challenging circumstances. It is clear that such leadership needs to be sensitive to each specific context, and dynamic, moving for example between transformational, distributed and adaptive but leading to the potential for removing barriers or creating enabling structures and systems. These enabling structures can in turn push an organisation, although not in a highly predictable way, to self-organise and emerge into a more robust system, capable of coping increasingly effectively with the surrounding environments. There are occasions when moving towards and beyond the edge of chaos results in complete collapse of a system but through careful examination and action it appears that the propensity for this can at least be reduced. It seems clear that the conical helix of decline can be inverted to become one of improvement.



*What are the nodes and connections?*

The findings from this research suggest that for primary schools facing challenging circumstances common themes exist in terms of influences or threats to overall capacity for improvement. Each of these is represented by a node or connection within an often complex and dense network. For

example, the degree of experience of a headteacher, the strength of a governing body and the communication networks within a school all have the potential to affect a school's ability to improve. The identification of early indicators that a school is being negatively influenced by these factors seems also to be crucial. This is returned to later on.

*Is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?*

It is clear from this research that the themes identified as influential in primary schools facing challenging circumstances might have an individual positive or negative impact on a school's propensity for improvement. However, it is their combined influence that seems to be most significant. Whilst individual factors can be identified as influential in each set of circumstances, it seems that the extent of that influence cannot be separated out. The whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts and it is the interconnections that seem to cause this 'intensification' of factors.

That the factors relating to primary schools facing challenging circumstances are so interrelated is one of the characteristics supporting their identification as Complex Adaptive Systems that can be appropriately and usefully examined through a complexity theory lens. The schools seem to operate at the edge of chaos which acts as a lever for change but challenges leadership further, resulting ultimately in either complete collapse or emergence into more robust and sustainable systems better able to cope with their environments.

The complexity theory lens allows for consideration of the complex and often chaotic nature of these organisations, the dense networks of links and communications channels representing an exponentially increasing number of relationships that all needs to be led and managed to the point of effective emergence into stronger, more robust systems. Whilst examination of the individual elements that contribute to these structures is crucial in helping to identify the detail of the causal mechanisms in play, the more holistic view provided through complexity theory adds to an understanding of how those systems operate and what supports or threatens to destabilise the processes of change within them. It is in the combination of elements and through examination of the links between

them that the greatest opportunities for school improvement efforts seem to present themselves.

The data from this research strongly indicate that primary schools facing challenging circumstances respond positively to being led as complex adaptive systems. The form that such leadership might take has been examined theoretically in existing literature but this research contributes to that body of knowledge by linking empirical evidence from testing in the field to that theory.

*What makes leadership more or less effective?*

There is no doubt that leadership is significant in terms of its potential to support or threaten a school's ability to improve. This is not new and has been discussed extensively in existing literature. For primary schools facing challenging circumstances it is also leadership that seems to make a significant contribution to the overall capacity for improvement. This research demonstrates that it is through examination of the interconnections between factors, including leadership, that potential 'pressure points', where improvement or destabilisation might originate within a system, can be identified.

This study concludes that for primary schools facing challenging circumstances, effective leadership is similar in structure and skills-base to that which existing literature suggests is appropriate for less challenged institutions. Transformational leadership, encompassing the devolution of decision making to groups and networks, as well as encouraging new initiatives and increasing communication, is identified through this research as complementary to other forms. Distributed leadership and its 'enabling and empowering' (Morrison, 2002, p17) have been promoted strongly as appropriate for education settings and the empirical evidence from this investigation supports that proposition. The understanding and manipulation of 'situations of complexity' (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001, p402) do indeed appear from this study to have emerged as effective leadership strategies.

What seems to be different for primary schools facing challenging circumstances, as opposed to those operating in less difficult contexts, is the intensity of factors combining to impact on leadership. It seems that the ability of a school's headteacher in particular to respond with different types of leadership at different times is crucial. This response relates to both the context specificity associated with the particular challenging circumstances and the multitude of other interacting factors. Identification by a school's leader of what have been termed in this research as potential 'pressure nodes' and 'building nodes' within any network seems to have the potential to support improvement efforts.

*Can the unpredictable be controlled?*

'Network maps' (proposed in Section 9.6) could provide a useful tool to represent the connections between aspects of a school's work such as individuals, groups, roles and specific activities. From these diagrammatic representations school leaders, and others working with those organisations, might be supported in identifying potential 'pressure nodes' and 'building nodes' that may enable barriers to be removed or situations created to support improvement, or at least to decelerate or halt decline. Network maps are not about attempting to represent the whole education system with a single image or structure. They are concerned with taking a small part of that system and representing the connections between different elements within it so as to better understand it. They might also offer a mechanism through which to identify predictors of difficulty, discussed further in the Early Indicators section below. It seems that the use of network map representations is not limited to primary schools facing challenging circumstances but could be applied to those operating within a wide range of other contexts.

Distributed forms of leadership can be used to exemplify this possibility. Subject leadership roles can be viewed as a 'building node' within a school's network. Through extension and development of these roles, guided by a school's leadership, they could be used effectively to promote connectivity, distribute responsibilities and tasks, and ultimately could lead to improvement in the organisation.

The identification of particular factors as either building or pressure nodes is supported, it seems, through a more holistic view of any system. For example, a headteacher with classroom teaching responsibility in one set of circumstances might be viewed as a building node because the individual is close to learning and teaching. Equally, the position could represent a pressure node in a different situation as the workload associated with the dual roles might contribute to the destabilisation of the school's position.

### Early Indicators

It seems that for all of the factors associated with the improvement capacity of a school facing challenging circumstances, one thing is crucial to the potential for arresting and reversing decline or promoting improvement; early identification of difficulties. If schools themselves had a mechanism through which to recognise that there may be issues, or if external identification were possible, then a greater awareness of problems emerging could be gained and appropriate remedial action might be taken. In order to do that, however, a better understanding of early indicators is required. It seems from this research that the 'early indicators' are associated with situations that differ from what would generally be expected. This view of the norm presents an area for further research, mapping schools, or parts of their systems, which are effective, in order to identify differences and potentially to propose more successful models.

Problems associated with any of the individual factors identified within this research would not necessarily be significant enough to cause a school to decline but a combination could be indicative of future difficulties. Once again, it is the multiplicity and interwoven nature of circumstances that gives rise to potential challenge. Whilst early indicators were identifiable in all three of the case study schools, each in isolation did not give cause for concern to those with access to the information. They perhaps did not know that there were other additional concerns. Collecting together relevant information from a range of sources such as finance, human resources, Ofsted, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), school staff, and the local authority might provide an indication of a school's continuing capacity to address challenge even when problems associated with any one of these areas individually would have to be significant to

raise alarm. This comes back once again to communication, the influence of combined factors, and the large-scale nature of the environments in which schools operate.

It seems that the use of network maps might support the identification of early indicators, drawing attention to the presence of pressure nodes while highlighting the building nodes which could represent a means of supporting the particular difficulty. For example, issues identified with completion by the headteacher of self-evaluation work could be an early indication that he or she has more significant difficulties but might be supported by identifying surrounding building nodes within the network that could be strengthened. These nodes might be members of the senior leadership team or subject leaders who could be enabled to complete aspects of self-evaluation themselves and provide feedback to the headteacher. This might serve to support the headteacher and, additionally, cause the system to self-organise and emerge into a more robust one by strengthening communication channels, sharing information and distributing leadership responsibilities more widely.

The external monitoring of all primary schools' practice that has been part of the School Improvement Partner's role has now been discontinued by the current Government, perhaps leaving greater potential for schools and headteachers to 'fall through the cracks'. It seems, therefore, increasingly important that schools have a mechanism that provides them with information internally or supports external work between linked organisations.

In the ever-changing educational landscape that is currently promoting more extensive school-to-school support through the creation of Teaching Schools (DFE, 2010), those effective schools understanding themselves as complex adaptive systems might provide an appropriate framework to support others in doing likewise. The 'collaborative, school-led approach' with 'a focus on the quality of teaching and leadership' (*ibid.*, p19) could be enhanced by schools having an appropriate understanding of their organisation and those factors that might support or threaten improvement efforts. The network maps and nodes proposed in response to this research might represent a step in this direction.



## The Research Opportunity

The relatively unique position, as an externally-appointed member of a school leadership team, provided the opportunity to observe first-hand what the experience of challenging circumstances (Special Measures in this case) was like for those involved and how, over time, this situation evolved. The research opportunity at Acacia Junior is not one that could be easily replicated. It provided the chance to compare 'looking from the inside' with 'looking from the outside' at the other two case study schools. It offers a potential opportunity for further research to do likewise, extending the empirical data relating to the themes identified as part of this study.

As a participant observer within the first case study school, I was continually aware of potential compromises to objectivity, particularly as time in the field increased, but carefully selected research methods and triangulation have been employed in order to maximise validity and reliability of the data collected and findings. Comparisons with data from the second and third case studies served to strengthen conclusions drawn, although the addition of further empirical evidence from future research would undoubtedly add to this.

In addition to those already mentioned, it seems that appropriate next steps would be to conduct research in schools that are already deemed to be successful, but not led intentionally according to the principles of complexity theory, to determine whether elements of the theory are identifiable. Comparisons could then be made with those schools that are successful and intentionally led in this way. Ultimately, examination of schools facing challenging circumstances and led intentionally following complexity theory principles would determine whether this approach is more widely applicable.

## Final Reflections

As with all research, it has to end somewhere and as a researcher there has to be an acceptance that there is more that could potentially be done and further knowledge that could be gained. This study is no exception and I recognise that given more time the aspects identified could potentially

have been examined in greater depth and further factors considered. However, this research represents a significant contribution to the existing body of theory related to primary schools facing challenging circumstances, the leadership of those organisations and the potential to influence positively the outcomes in these complex and dynamic systems.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Questions

These questions are the basic ones I would like to ask but there will be supplemental questions along the way that will vary depending on your responses.

Before we start with the questions, perhaps you could tell me about your career in education to date.

1. Tell me how you came to be a member of staff in this school and how long you have been here.
2. What was it like when you were inspected? (undergoing merger)
3. How do you think the staff felt after the inspection... and then when you found that the result would be an Ofsted category? (when they knew the schools would be merged)
4. What happened at the first HMI visit? (before, during and after the merger)
5. How did the staff feel then?
6. What do you think has changed in the school since the original inspection? (merger)
7. Do you think the change has been easy or difficult? Why?
8. What are the things that you think support or hinder change?
9. What other things do you think need to happen now?
10. What would help them to happen?
11. What do you think the role of a headteacher should be in circumstances such as these?
12. How much impact does each individual in an organisation have in circumstances such as these?
13. What changes and developments have you personally undergone, if any, since the inspection?
14. What has supported or hindered this change?

Finally, is there anything you would like to add based on the questions I have asked or is there anything you would like to ask me?

## Appendix 2

### University of East Anglia

#### Application to University Ethics Committee

##### Researcher

Michèle Harcourt-Heath  
Part-time PhD student  
School of Education and Lifelong Learning  
Supervisor: Anne Cockburn

##### Contact details

Address: xx  
Telephone: 01263 xxxxxx  
Email: mickymaths@btinternet.com

##### Working Title of Research

An investigation into the ways in which primary schools are able to improve, including professional development of school staff, when working within a range of different challenging sets of circumstances.

##### Location of Research

Acacia Junior School, Thetford  
Willow Primary School, Kings Lynn  
Elm Primary School, Norwich  
Other primary schools located within Norfolk may be recruited during the course of the research

##### Duration of the Fieldwork

Spring 2007 to Autumn 2009

##### Research Objectives

##### ***Background***

**I will be spending six months seconded to an Acting Deputy Headship in a school placed in Special Measures by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). The focus for this work will be to develop teaching and learning across the school. The Ofsted categorisation, socio-economic characteristics of the catchment area and regular visits by both Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) and Local Authority staff create a challenging set of circumstances are leading to a consideration of whether this development work could be carried out in a more effective way. In my substantive role as a Local Authority Adviser I have also been granted access to a school which has an Ofsted Notice to Improve, but has responded well to the challenge and had a successful HMI monitoring visit and also to a school formed from two pre-existing ones, where the transition process is proving difficult. The three schools offer quite different, but none-the-**

less challenging circumstances for the teachers, leadership and support staff working within them.

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this work is to understand more fully schools operating within challenging circumstances including the processes involved in transforming them and encompassing a consideration of the professional development needs of staff. Alongside this is a desire to examine the range of challenging circumstances, how they are created (both from internal and external forces), what reactions people have to them and how the outcomes are determined (by what is considered to be 'forced on' people or by the way they react).

### ***Possible benefits***

This research could lead to a better understanding of the processes which teachers and school leaders go through during periods of change and within challenging circumstances. It could lead to a better understanding of the nature of change within different challenging circumstances, with recommendations as to how this might be transferred to different situations and might also be more sustainable. This study could lead to a better-informed way of working with schools which are undergoing significant change, including implications for policy change by organisations such as the National College for School Leadership, the Local Authority, Ofsted and Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Schools themselves could be better informed about managing change through reflection on the experiences of others.

### **Nature of Participants**

Number: A sample of adults from each school, including at least a senior leader and a class teacher.

Gender of volunteers: Mixed

Recruitment method: Participation in the study will be by request. My aim in having more than one member of staff who would fit each of these selection criteria is to provide an opportunity for anyone who does not wish to be involved to decline the invitation or to withdraw at any point.

Some of the participants will be people with whom I am working as part of my secondment and others will be from institutions where I have no contact other than this research. I will be very clear with people about how and why they have been selected and what the purpose of my research is. They will be given the opportunity to withdraw at any point. I feel that the potential for 'conflict' between my role as adviser and that of researcher will be minimal as the latter is very much a reflective role rather than a practical one.

### **Consents to be sought**

The consent form I will be using is attached.

**Methodology**

Design – A range of methods are being considered, including case study and ethnography. A majority of data will be collected through semi-structured interview and personal recording and reflection in the form of field notes.

Techniques – I will conduct interviews with staff at intervals during and following periods of change for each institution. I will keep field notes in a research journal.

**Expected Outcomes**

A better understanding of the leadership of change and of the development needs of staff who are working in challenging circumstances. A contribution to the body of knowledge about the structure, operation and improvement of primary schools, including effective ways to support and monitor their practice, within challenging circumstances.

**Participants' concerns**

**Section in consent form suggesting who people should contact should they have any concerns.**

**Researcher's Experience**

**Experience of interviewing from Masters Degree research.**

**Declaration**

I have read the University's Research Ethics Policy and have completed this application accordingly.

Michèle J Harcourt-Heath

## Consent Form

**Working title for research: An investigation into the ways in which primary schools are able to improve, including professional development of school staff, when working within a range of different challenging sets of circumstances.**

**Researcher: Michèle Harcourt-Heath**

**As part of some research I am undertaking with the University of East Anglia towards a PhD, I am looking at the ways in which primary schools are able to improve, including professional development of school staff, but working in a range of different challenging circumstances. My reason for wanting to examine this area is so that in the future those supporting schools might be better informed and therefore support school staff through these circumstances in a more effective way. Also, bodies such as Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) and HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate) might have a greater understanding about the effects which inspection and monitoring have on the process of change within a school. From the viewpoint of school staff, the research might in the future provide information about the experiences of others and help schools to manage the processes of change in a more effective way.**

**In particular, I would like to complete some tape-recorded interviews with individuals at intervals during and following the changes your organisation is undergoing. The questions will be based on your personal view of what is happening and I am seeking your permission to do this. You will be able to withdraw from the research at any time and I will share with you any transcripts made from these interviews. The content of these interviews will be completely confidential. The raw data (transcripts) will only be seen by me and my supervisors and in my final writing I will preserve anonymity as much as possible by using pseudonyms for both school and individuals' names.**

**The interviews should take no more than 30 minutes and will give you an opportunity to give the view of someone in your current role about the changes that have happened and are currently going on within your school.**

**In some instances I may be working within your school as a Primary Strategy Adviser. This work would not be linked directly to my research, although obviously there may be some overlap between what I am asking about in the interviews and the work I have completed with the school. Should any conflict arise between these two roles then my research would cease.**

Should you have any concerns as the research progresses, please talk to me in the first instance. Should you feel unable to do so, please contact Dr Lyndon Martin, who is the Chair of the School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia (Tel: 01603 592626, [lyndon.martin@uea.ac.uk](mailto:lyndon.martin@uea.ac.uk) ).



**Consent Form**

I ..... give permission for  
Michèle Harcourt-Heath to use data collected during interviews for the  
purposes of her research.

Signed:.....

Date:.....

## Appendix 4

### Categories for coding data – September 2008

Description	Code
Leadership Style	LS
Communication	COM
Staff / Leaders from outside the school	LOS
External support for school	EXS
Relationships / Group Dynamics	RGD
Humanity in headship	HH
Vulnerability	VUL
Multiple Change (more than one thing changing at same time)	MC
Teaching	T
Emotional Anxiety	EAX
Language	LANG
Change	CGE
Challenging Circumstances <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Ofsted / Inspection</li><li>- Instability in leadership</li><li>- Workload</li><li>- Experience / Lack of experience</li><li>- Results (measureable outcomes)</li></ul>	CC-O CC-I CC-W CC-EX CC-R
Stages of the Change Cycle	CCS
Morale	MOR

## Appendix 5

### Revised coding categories – January 2009

Description	Code
Leadership Style	LS
Communication	COM
Staff / Leaders from outside the school ( <i>temporary deployment from local authority</i> )	LOS
External support for school	EXS
Relationships / Group Dynamics	RGD
Humanity in headship	HH
Vulnerability	VUL
Multiple Change (more than one thing changing at same time)	MC
Teaching	T
Emotional Anxiety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Headteacher</i></li> <li>– <i>Teacher</i></li> <li>– <i>Other</i></li> </ul>	EAX-HT EAX-T EAX-O
Language	LANG
Change	CGE
Challenging Circumstances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ofsted / Inspection</li> <li>- <i>Changes</i> in leadership</li> <li>- Workload</li> <li>- Experience / Lack of experience</li> <li>- Results (measureable outcomes)</li> <li>- <i>Amalgamation</i></li> </ul>	CC-O CC-L CC-W CC-EX CC-R CC-A
Stages of the Change Cycle (might use later)	CCS
Morale	MOR
<i>Early Indicators</i>	<i>EI</i>
<i>Children and the impact on them</i>	<i>CI</i>
<i>Previous circumstances</i>	<i>PC</i>
<i>Impact</i> (positive, on the school holistically, on systems, on adults)	<i>IMP</i>

## Appendix 6

### Blind reliability test coding difference outcomes

Blind reliability code	My code	Explanation of context
CC-W	EAX/MOR	The context here was a staff who were overloaded with initiatives. They had a heavy workload and therefore their morale had become low and they were anxious about their circumstances.
LOS/EXS	CC-I	Instability in leadership had led the school to be externally supported.
RGD	LS	Occurred three times. In these cases the relationship was between the leadership team and the staff so could be seen either as an aspect of 'leadership style' or 'relationships and group dynamics'.
CC-W	EXS	When the workload became greater the acting headteacher sought external support.
CC-W	CC-I	Because of the nature of the acting headship (instability in leadership), there was no dedicated release time (workload issues).
HH	EAX	The acting headteacher talks about dealing with a 'flasher' incident. The blind reliability has coded this as a demonstration of humanity in headship whilst I coded it as an indication of emotional anxiety. This could be due to the difference in reading words on a page and hearing the data first hand and then again on audio tape.
HH/EAX	CC-W	Here the blind reliability test codes the emotional side of what is said whilst I coded the reason given for the emotional anxiety caused. <b>Change my code.</b>
EAX	LS	Again, the blind reliability test codes what is written and I have coded the underlying reason. <b>Change my code.</b>
CC-EX	EAX	Blind reliability has coded the underlying reason whilst I have coded what is actually spoken. 'Completely unprepared, not a clue.'
HH	VUL	Humanity in headship is demonstrated here through vulnerability, the acting headteacher laughing at his own thoughts and actions. Use both codes.
EAX	CC-O/VUL	I coded for the reference to Ofsted which

		caused the acting headteacher to feel vulnerable, which the blind reliability coded as emotional anxiety.
CC-I/VUL	LS/COM	This coding related to the lack of involvement by the leadership team in creating the school development plan. The instability in leadership was not an issue at the time the plan was written but rather the leadership style of the headteacher who was then in post. Coding stands. The staff were left feeling vulnerable because there had been a lack of communication over this key document.
EAX	MOR	The acting headteacher describes the staff reaction to a change in the Ofsted grading. The blind reliability has coded the head's feelings and I have coded that of the staff.
LS	COM	This aspect of leadership style was to do with communicating with the staff.
HH	COM	Use of humour to demonstrate humanity is a better code that communication which was a repeat of an earlier code for the same section. Change my code.
EXS	LOS	I have coded the reference to a County Headteacher as leadership from outside the school as external support for the school is that group of people who would work with the school but not be part of the staff.
RGD	MOR/CCS	The reference here is to the staff being passionate about the school and wanting it to succeed. The blind reliability has coded this as relating to relationships and group dynamics whereas I have coded this as relating to morale and one of the stages of the change cycle. Coding stands.
CC-EX	CC-W	Reversal in coding between challenging circumstances caused through heavy workload and through a lack of experience. These two categories could well be seen as linked, particularly in any one set of circumstances.
CC-W	CC-EX	
VUL	HH	A revelation of vulnerability demonstrates the acting headteachers humanity.
COM	CC-O	The acting headteacher describes communicating with the staff about the Ofsted visit.
CC-I	CGE	The acting headteacher talks about not knowing what to change first – not an issue of instability in leadership. Coding

		stands.
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██████████ Coding stands – my original code will override the blind reliability testing one – explanation provided

██████████ Change my code – the blind reliability test code is more appropriate and my code will therefore change.

..... Either code would be appropriate (often a slightly different interpretation of the same thing). The original code will remain.

## Appendix 7

### Table of acronyms commonly used within this thesis

CAS	Complex Adaptive System
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DHT	Deputy Headteacher
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECM	Every Child Matters
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate
HT	Headteacher
ISP	Improving Schools Programme
NPQH	National Professional Qualification for Headship
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SDP	School Development Plan
SEF	Self Evaluation Form
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SIDP	School Improvement and Development Plan
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SMT	Senior Management Team
TTA	Teacher Training Agency

## Appendix 8

### School staff names and details

#### Acacia Junior School

Staff name	Initials (where used in interview)	Role within school	Length of service at the school (Years)
Annabelle	AL	Headteacher	9 with 5 as Headteacher
Kathryn	KS	Deputy Headteacher (on maternity leave from Spring 2007)	5
	MHH	Seconded Deputy Headteacher – Feb – July 07	
Maureen	MC	Mathematics subject leader / class teacher / SMT member	20+
Lydia	LM	Literacy subject leader / class teacher / SMT member	1
Lorna	LD	Class teacher	4
Audrey	AD	Class teacher	20+
Lewis		Class teacher – until Easter 07	6
Helen		Class teacher	4
Neville		Second Deputy Headteacher – appointed temporarily from March 07	<1
Paula		Classroom Assistant	5
Kim		Temporary Deputy Headteacher – from Sept 07	0
James		Seconded teacher from Easter	<1
Cheryl		Administrator	12
Graham		Governor appointed from April	<1
Michael		Mentor Headteacher from another School	n/a
Fergus		Deputy Director of Education	n/a
Ivan		Her Majesty's Inspectorate inspector	n/a
Julie		Local Authority literacy adviser	n/a



### Willow Primary School

<b>Staff name</b>	<b>Initials (where used in interview)</b>	<b>Role within school</b>	<b>Length of service at the school (Years)</b>
Jeremy	JJ	Headteacher	2
Matt	MW	Deputy Headteacher (became Acting Headteacher)	2
Sue	SV	Senior Teacher / Key Stage 1 leader (became Acting Deputy Headteacher)	25
Andy	AM	Teacher	4
Alison	AB	Local Authority Development Adviser	n/a
John	JS	Local Authority Improving Schools' Programme Adviser	n/a

### Elm Primary School

<b>Staff name</b>	<b>Initials (where used in interview)</b>	<b>Role within school</b>	<b>Length of service at the school (Years)</b>
Natalie	NE	Headteacher	2
John	JJ	Deputy Headteacher	2
Emma	EF	Teacher – Literacy subject leader	6
Sarah	SB	School Business Manager	8
Martin	MS	Chair of Governors	3
Richard	RP	Local Authority Development Adviser	n/a

## Appendix 9

### Coded interview transcript extract

MHH	78	What changed before and since the first visit?	
L	79 80 81 82	I think it would be fair to say that between the original inspection and January people thought that it would be ok so things didn't really change and once things weren't ok in January, the process began to speed up.	LS/CC-EX/EI
MHH	83 84 85 86	So, you've said lots of changes in literacy... so that's change that would have happened but just happened quicker... um.. what about in terms of how the staff are? How did the staff feel then?	CGE
L	87 88 89 90 91 92	Um... I don't think they are different. I think once you say something is going to happen, you'll get those that say, 'I'm not doing that' and some will go away and think about it and come back and do it and others will keep the wall up as long as possible really. And others will just go ahead and do what is needed.	RGD COM EAX-T
MHH	93 94	And are they the same people who react in the same way all the time?	
L	95	Yes!	RGD/C OM
MHH	96	Ok, do you think the change has been difficult?	
L	97 98 99 100 101 102 103 104	<u>Me personally... um...no, actually.</u> Putting things into place the planning side of things sometimes I found a bit difficult but actually just to make the changes hasn't been difficult because <u>I just looked on it as professional development</u> in a way because I've only ever taught here and I trained here, which was an initial worry for me... um... then <u>I've just sort of tried to take it all on board and do what has been necessary.</u>	EAX-T
MHH	105	So do you think other people have found it difficult?	
L	106 107 108 109 110	From the people that have spoken to me, yes some people have found it difficult. Again, you've got some that have just gone away and said right let's do it and get on with it but some people just find change very difficult. <u>I though I would but I haven't.</u>	EAX-T CGE EAX-T
MHH	111	What about the classroom assistants?	
L	112 113	Um.. again some do and some don't. I think it depends where they see themselves in the hierarchy.	CC-L
MHH	114	Can you explain that a bit further?	

L	115	Yes, there's definitely an element of politics.	RGD
MHH	116 117	Ok, so what are the things that you think support or hinder change? In this school?	
L	118 119 120 121 122	Um... I think just people really not accepting that things have got to change. <u>If we're going to get out of Special Measures, we've got to change.</u> That's the bottom line really and if people keep saying well I'm not going to do that, then we're going to stay where we are.	RGD EAX-T CGE RGD
MHH	123 124	Are there things that annoy you about the way change is organised?	
L	125 126 127 128	Sometimes there is too much secrecy. We might get an inkling that something is going to happen but we don't get the whole story and I think that does fuel people to 'gossip' if you like and ...	LS/RGD COM
MHH	129 130 131	Let's just talk a bit about the last HMI. We're now talking about the May HMI. Going into that, did you think you'd be ok?	
L	132 133	I thought we would be better than what they said we were in a way.	EAX-T VUL
MHH	134 135	So do you think that some of the things they said were unfair things or unreflective?	
L	136	That's difficult because I don't really know what they...	
MHH	137	Ok,	
L	138 139 140	...what they said... obviously only what people have told us... um ... I know the report's in and its been looked at but we don't really know any more than that	COM RGD
MHH	141	So.. I'll need to talk to you again about that then	
L	142	Yes	
MHH	143	What other things do you think need to happen now?	
L	144	(laughter) Um...	
MHH	145 146	What do you think would really help the school to get out of Special Measures?	
L	147	Honestly? I'd say a couple of the staff leaving.	RGD/C GE
MHH	148 149	So, although people are being moved into different year groups, you think something more radical?	
L	150 151	Yes, like at least two of the ineffective people not being here.	CC-L CGE



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