

Successful Leadership of Schools in Urban and Challenging Contexts

Summary Report | Spring 2003



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National College for School Leadership

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this review is to provide an analysis of the issues surrounding leadership in schools facing urban and challenging circumstances, where leadership is taken to refer to headteachers in primary, secondary and special schools. The study is designed to explore definitions of such circumstances, the leadership issues associated with them and responses to them, in terms of both broad policy and practical interventions. The main findings of the review are set out below.

Key findings

Main challenges faced by schools in urban and challenging contexts

- The DfES defines secondary schools in challenging circumstances as those where 25 per cent or fewer of the pupils achieved five or more grades A*- C in the GCSE and equivalent examinations. This definition is sometimes extended to include all schools with 35 per cent or more pupils on free school meals.
- Schools in urban and challenging circumstances serve communities with high levels of economic and social deprivation and low levels of parental education.
- These schools also face a range of school-related (or partly school-related) challenges, such as:
 - poor management
 - budget deficit
 - unsatisfactory buildings
 - staffing problems
 - low levels of pupil attainment on entry
 - behaviour management problems
 - high rates of pupil exclusion and unauthorised absence
 - low levels of parental involvement
 - falling rolls and high pupil turnover
 - lack of public confidence in the school

The role of effective leadership in improving schools in urban and challenging contexts

- Effective leadership was identified as a common characteristic of improving schools in urban and challenging contexts.
- The leadership styles most frequently identified in the literature we reviewed were shared leadership, distributed leadership, instructional leadership, transformational or transactional leadership and charismatic leadership. These have been defined briefly in our report.
- It was suggested that, to be effective, a headteacher's leadership style needs to be attuned to the specific context experienced by a particular school. Several writers questioned the view that headteachers best suited to the task of turning around a failing school were likely to have an animated, dynamic, charismatic approach.
- It was suggested that the leadership skills found in the effective schools serving disadvantaged communities were not distinct from those found in every successful school, although it was pointed out that there have been no objective comparisons to confirm this. Further research in this area would seem to be essential.

Creating a shared vision

- Effective headteachers were able to create a shared vision for the school and to communicate that vision clearly and convincingly to others, so that it was shared by all members of the school community.
- Leadership strategies adopted by effective headteachers included choosing appropriate strategies, involving and consulting staff in developing the vision, raising and maintaining staff morale and having high expectations for staff and pupils.

Involving staff in the leadership process

- In order to maximize teacher involvement in the improvement process, it was essential to provide the necessary professional development and support.
- Shared leadership - the sharing of management responsibilities with deputy headteachers and other senior managers - was found to be an effective strategy for some headteachers.
- Distributed leadership - spreading responsibility school-wide by establishing teams amongst staff - was identified as effective in other studies.

Improving the curriculum, learning and teaching quality

- Headteachers of effective schools in challenging circumstances were found to focus on the curriculum (eg literacy), learning and teaching quality.
- It was noted that effective school leaders adopted various strategies to improve teaching, including setting high standards, providing time for professional development and monitoring teaching.

Raising achievement and improving pupils' attitudes and behaviour

- Several writers noted that effective headteachers focused on raising achievement. Monitoring and evaluation of pupil achievement were considered to be key strategies.
- Interestingly, we found few references to the importance of improving discipline and pupils' behaviour. Clearly, there is a need for more research into the strategies adopted by effective headteachers to improve pupils' attitudes and behaviour.

Involving others

- The importance of involving people other than pupils and teachers in improving schools in urban and challenging contexts was noted. Groups mentioned included parents, governors and members of the local community.

External support for improving schools in urban and challenging contexts

- It was acknowledged by several writers that a failing urban school may not be capable of designing its own improvement strategy.
- Types of external support mentioned in the publications we reviewed included professional development opportunities, peer learning strategies (including mentoring), external consultants, LEA support and access to resources and funding.

Conclusion

Research into the leadership of schools in urban and challenging circumstances has produced a number of pointers concerning leadership style and effective strategies. What is less clear is the extent to which these are different from, or the same as those adopted by successful leaders in other schools. Perhaps it is not so much the nature of their style or strategies that distinguishes effective leadership in these circumstances, but the leader's ability to prioritise, establish a direction for the school, motivate staff and build capacity by developing staff and harnessing resources. However, until there are more comparative studies to draw on, this remains a matter of speculation rather than a certainty.

About the study

The review entailed a systematic search of databases of literature (including books, published articles, reports and conference papers) published in the UK and other English speaking countries since 1990. Eleven educational/social science databases were searched for relevant studies, along with selective internet and hand searches. All retrieved texts were subject to a preliminary review, in order to establish more fully their degree of relevance to the aims of the study. Studies of the highest quality were then subjected to a full critical review. In total, 28 full reviews were undertaken, and critical summaries produced. All data from the critical summaries were analysed and the findings synthesised to address the questions identified at the outset of the review.

Reference

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1. The Challenges Faced by Schools in Urban and Challenging Contexts

1.1 DfES definition of schools facing challenging circumstances

In his Annual Report for 2000/01 (Ofsted, 2002), Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools refers to the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) definition of secondary schools facing challenging circumstances: all schools where 25 per cent or fewer of the pupils achieved five or more grades A*- C in the GCSE and equivalent examinations in 1999, 2000, or both years. This definition can also be extended to primary schools, by using results from Key Stage Assessments.

Further clarification of the DfES definition is implied in the descriptions of schools facing challenging circumstances given in HM Chief Inspector's report (Ofsted, 2002). Many schools in challenging contexts were said to serve communities with high levels of economic and social deprivation, very low levels of attainment by pupils on entry and, in some cases, high pupil mobility.

Another definition offered in the literature is based on the proportion of pupils in a school that are eligible for free school meals. Eligibility for free school meals has been used for many years as a surrogate measure for poverty and deprivation. The Ofsted report 'Improving City Schools' (Ofsted, 2000), defines disadvantaged schools as those having more than 35 per cent of their pupils on free school meals. It was noted in this report that 95 per cent of schools with high proportions of pupils on free school meals were in urban areas.

1.2 Challenges arising from the local neighbourhood

Evidence of challenges arising from the local neighbourhood is given in the Ofsted report (Ofsted, 2000). This described the results of a survey of primary and secondary schools in disadvantaged areas, focusing on more effective schools. The Ofsted report discussed what disadvantage meant in practice to the schools taking part in the survey. It identified a number of factors common to most of these schools. For example, many of the children were drawn from families on low incomes (with parents either in low-paid manual/service jobs or unemployed), in poor housing, and from families with little experience of education beyond compulsory schooling. In some cases, families were found to be exceptionally troubled. The communities served by the schools were often affected by elements of deprivation, such as bleak surroundings, poor facilities, poor health, dislocation and disaffection and high levels of drug and alcohol abuse. Crime rates in the areas were often high.

We were unable to find any other formal definitions of schools in urban and challenging circumstances. However, many of the studies carried out in the UK (for example: Cutler, 1998; Crawford, forthcoming; Englefield, 2001; Harris, 2001, 2002; DfEE, 1999), while not giving a formal definition of 'deprivation', provide evidence of the 'myriad of complex and socially related problems' (Harris, *op. cit.*) that typically face schools in urban and challenging contexts. Englefield (*op. cit.*), in his study of primary schools in challenging contexts, quoted the multiple factors associated with social disadvantage identified by Smith and Nobel (1995). These include ill health, financial pressures, family stress and breakdown - problems that were more likely to apply to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Evidence from some of the UK literature that provided an overview of the area (for example, Gray, 2000; Barber, 1996; DfEE, 1999) supports the findings of the research studies cited above. Barber (op. cit.) identified the distinctive features of urban education as a concentration of social challenges, including poor housing, poor health and other aspects of social deprivation. While Gray (op. cit.), referring to schools on special measures - which might be described as a special sub-set of all schools facing challenging contexts - stated: '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.' Research in the United States of America (for example, Johnson and Ledbetter, 1993), described the problems facing inner city schools in similar terms.

1.3 Challenges arising from within the school itself

Schools in urban and challenging circumstances frequently face challenges arising, at least in part, from within the school itself. These could include the way it is managed, resourced and how it interacts with the local community (Cutler, 1998; DfEE, 1999; Hopkins, 2001; Learmonth and Lowers, 1998; Englefield, 2001). It is these challenges that are most amenable to being addressed through effective leadership.

The writers listed above identified a whole range of school-related challenges faced by many — but obviously not all — schools in urban and challenging contexts. Internal factors included:

- unsatisfactory buildings
- budget deficit
- (previous) poor management
- high staff turnover and difficulty in recruiting good staff
- staff resentment of change
- behaviour management problems
- higher than average rates of exclusion and unauthorised absence
- low levels of parental involvement
- falling rolls
- high pupil turnover.

Other challenges may arise from the school's history of underachievement and the operation of 'market forces'. These include: low levels of pupil attainment on entry, high proportions of pupils excluded from other schools, the existence of other, more popular schools in the area, the threat of closure and a lack of public confidence in the school.

A combination of such circumstances can lead to a cycle of deprivation and low achievement, as Learmonth and Lowers (op. cit.) have argued, 'schools in difficulty are often trapped in feelings of powerlessness, of apparently having tried everything in vain, of being misunderstood by those outside, who have quite unrealistic expectations of their pupils' capacities for achievement.'

2. The Role of Effective Leadership in Improving Schools in Urban and Challenging Contexts

2.1 Key role of effective leadership

The key role of effective leadership in improving schools in urban and challenging contexts was identified in several of the publications reviewed (Ofsted, 2000; Gray, 2000; and Reynolds et al., 2001). For example, effective leadership was identified as a common characteristic of the improving schools described by Ofsted (2000). It was stressed that: 'The story of the [more effective] schools visited begins and ends with the quality of their leadership and management. The personalities, the management structures and the school contexts are different, but some common features emerge strongly.' An examination of these common features reveals that many relate to the leadership skills and attributes of the headteacher. Leadership in these more effective schools was described as inspirational, committed to the school and the local community, able to create belief in the possibility of success, consistent and fostering good teamwork amongst staff.

On the other hand, ineffective leadership was found to be a feature of schools with serious weaknesses. For example, the Annual Report of HM Chief inspector of schools (Ofsted, 2002), pointed out that such schools commonly had deficiencies in (amongst other factors) 'leadership, often of the headteacher'. On the other hand, schools removed from special measures, typically, showed improvements in leadership and management. Similarly, Gray, in his review of the experiences of schools in special measures, noted that leadership and staffing issues dominate accounts of the challenges faced by schools in the process of improving.

2.2 Does leadership style matter?

In examining the literature on leadership style, it may be helpful to distinguish between leadership style and leadership (or management) strategies (Sebring and Bryk, 2000). It is not always easy to distinguish clearly between leadership styles and leadership strategies. For example, while charismatic and transformational leadership appears to be related to the personality characteristics of the leader, shared and distributed leadership seem to refer to the leader's behaviour (eg involving staff in the leadership process). Similarly, instructional leadership could refer not only to the head's values and approach but also to the his or her actions in improving the curriculum, learning and teaching quality.

It may be thought that a charismatic leader is best suited to helping a school facing urban and challenging circumstances. However, several writers have argued that charismatic leadership may not be the only, or even the best, option for such schools. For example, Ofsted (2000) noted that inspirational leadership need not be charismatic and can equally come from a quiet headteacher. Stark (1998), in a review of the first three years of special measures, questioned the view that headteachers best suited to the task of turning around a failing school were likely to have an animated, dynamic, charismatic approach. In Stark's view, a calmer, organisational approach could work most successfully for both failing and successful schools.

Several writers pointed out that, to be effective, a headteacher's leadership style needs to be attuned to the specific context experienced by a particular school (Carter and Jackson, 2002) and/or to the stage in a school's development (Harris, 2002; Stark, 1998; Andrews and Morefield, 1991). For example, Crawford (forthcoming) argued that, while a charismatic leader may be effective in the early stages of turning a school round, as time goes on staff may begin to feel a lack of ownership of the school's development. At this stage, she argued, a more distributed or 'shared' style of management might be more effective in helping to implement the necessary changes.

3. Creating a Shared Vision for the School

Most of the publications we reviewed stressed, either explicitly or implicitly, the importance of creating a shared vision for the school (for example, Andrews and Morefield, 1991; Barber, 1996; Franey, 2002; Harris, 2002; and Ofsted, 2000). Andrews and Morefield, in their discussion paper, concluded that, in order to achieve a shared vision, it was necessary for the headteacher her/himself to develop a clear vision for the school and to communicate this clearly and convincingly to others in the school.

Harris (2002), in her study of leadership in secondary schools in challenging contexts, noted that headteachers communicated their personal vision and belief systems to staff, students, parents and governors by direction, word and deed. Several of the publications we reviewed provide examples of how this had been achieved.

3.1 Diagnosing the school's problems

Accurate diagnosis of the problems faced by the school and the causes of those problems is a key part of the leader's role. Harris (2001), writing about a secondment programme to schools in difficulty, noted the importance of making an accurate diagnosis of the problems facing the school and of dispelling inaccurate views about performance. Similarly, Sanders (1999), in a book on issues and strategies relating to urban school leadership, argued that the urban principal must develop a comprehensive understanding of the culture that exists in the urban community, identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school and district and focus on what needs to be accomplished. It was also considered important to consult others in the community in order to determine the school's priorities and precise needs (Barber, 1996; Englefield, 2001).

Several writers (for example, Franey, 2002; Barber, 1996; Harris, 2002) noted the importance of ensuring that all teaching and support staff shared the headteacher's vision for the school. A number of ways of achieving this were described in the publications we reviewed. These can, very roughly, be divided into two categories. The first category relates to the way in which the headteacher is perceived by others to behave from day to day. The

second relates to the strategies typically adopted by headteachers. It should be noted that there is some overlap between the two categories.

3.2 The headteacher's perceived behaviour

Many writers highlighted the importance of the way the headteacher was seen by others in the school - the headteacher's image. The head's behaviour was viewed as key to 'winning the hearts and minds of teachers' (Maden, 2001). Qualities evident in the head's behaviour and considered to be important are:

- accessibility (Sebring and Bryk, 2000; Andrews and Morefield, 1991)
- high visibility (Andrews and Morefield, 1991)
- consistency (Reynolds et al, 2001; Ofsted, 2000)
- integrity and an ability to engender trust (Hopkins, 2001; Sebring and Bryk, 2000)
- creating a common sense of purpose (Stark, 1998)
- setting an example - eg by working energetically towards a particular goal (Andrews and Morefield, 1991; Biott and Gulson, 1999)
- energising others (Maden, 2001)
- taking a personal interest in the well-being of others (Sebring and Bryk, 2000)

3.3 Effective strategies adopted by headteachers

The writers whose work we reviewed also identified a number of key features of strategies that had been successful in creating a shared vision for the school.

Some writers noted the importance of identifying carefully the strategic targets that are likely to lead to the fulfilment of the shared vision (Stark, 1998), that were appropriate to the school's problems and consistent with the headteacher's own values (Andrews and Morefield, 1991; Biott and Gulson, 1999). Where possible - for example, in selecting new staff - it was considered desirable to select staff that were in sympathy with the headteacher's philosophy (Carlson et al, 1999).

Ofsted (2000) recommended taking great care in ensuring that the initiatives selected were those that were most relevant to the school's situation. Sebring and Bryk (2000), describing common strategies employed by principals of effective elementary schools in Chicago, reported that new principals sometimes began their tenure by tackling a highly visible problem that it was possible to solve quickly. They argued that by so doing the principals 'provide concrete signs of change, and develop a collective sense of agency'. Similarly, Cutler (1998) described some of the ways in which she, as a new headteacher, went about changing the school's culture - for example, by dismantling the last vestiges of the old house system, and adopting a new school badge, designed by a pupil.

Carter (1999), in a book describing the achievements of principals of high performing schools, noted that they typically set measurable goals and made every teacher personally responsible for their fulfilment. Finally, Sebring and Bryk warned of the danger of incoherence. They noted that it was particularly important to ensure that the 'package' of strategies had an impact in the classroom.

The ability to obtain resources for the school was also seen to be a key skill for heads of schools in urban and challenging circumstances (Andrews and Morefield, 1991; Sebring and Bryk, 2000). In their literature review Andrews and Morefield conclude that effective principals interact with school staff as a resource provider, marshalling resources available to the school as a means to achieve the established vision and goals.

Other writers (Stark, 1998; Carter, 1999) stressed the importance of resource management skills. Stark described such skills as being able to link the limited resources of the school to the strategic plans in place, ensuring correct resource control and that the priorities of the school are met in the right order. Carter (1999) noted that, in the United States, schools in challenging contexts were often poorly funded. For such schools, he argued, innovation and flexibility are the keys to success. In order to achieve this, good resource management skills are essential.

3.4 Involving and consulting staff in developing the vision

Several of the publications we reviewed noted that effective headteachers consult and involve staff in the early stages of developing the school vision (Barber, 1996; Biott and Gulson, 1999; Englefield, 2001; Harris, 2001; and Sebring and Bryk, 2000). For example, Barber (op. cit.), in his chapter on creating a framework for success in urban schools, argued that, in order to facilitate this shared vision, the school development plan should be formulated on the basis of widespread consultation across the school staff. In the words of the author, 'everyone should believe in it'. Englefield (2001) reported that headteachers in his qualitative research study ensured that school priorities were determined through detailed discussions of the school's precise needs with all staff. Ways of involving staff in school leadership are discussed in Section 4 below.

Several writers have emphasised the importance of raising and maintaining the morale of staff (and pupils). Harris (2002), in her 10 case studies of improving secondary schools, noted that a key concern for headteachers was one of maintaining staff morale and motivation. Staff self-development was vigorously promoted through in-service training, visits to other schools or peer support schemes. Development activities were selected and undertaken on the strength of the benefit to the individual staff member, not on the direct benefit the activity may have for the school as a whole. The same writer (Harris, 2001), in her article describing a training and secondment programme in Derbyshire, also stressed the importance of providing regular feedback about progress and achievement. She argued that this would provide a catalyst for further change, and influence teacher morale and self-esteem. Finally, Cutler (1998) reported holding celebratory and 'fun' events as a means to raise the profile and morale of the school.

3.5 High expectations

Several writers reported that a characteristic of successful or improving schools was high expectations for pupils (Carter, 1999; Englefield, 2001; Reed and Roberts, 1998; Reynolds et al, 2001). Similarly, Ofsted (2000), in their quantitative and qualitative study of improving urban schools, stressed the importance of leadership that creates belief in the possibility of success.

4. Involving Staff in the Leadership Process

Many of the publications we reviewed emphasised the importance of involving staff in the leadership process and increasing staff ownership of the processes of change (Maden, 2001; Franey, 2002; Cutler, 1998; Biott and Gulson, 1999; Sanders, 1999; Gower and Hagon, 1998; Englefield, 2001).

Maden reported a follow-up of case-studies schools that had been 'successful against the odds'. They noted that a common characteristic of the headteachers of these schools was an ability to nurture leadership opportunities for teachers (and pupils). Franey in an article describing her experiences as a headteacher of an urban school, highlighted the importance of "nurturing the leadership capabilities of all school staff, reinforcing the concept of leadership as 'distributed' throughout the school."

4.1 Nurturing the leadership capabilities of staff

Several writers suggested that leaders should nurture the leadership capabilities of school staff. For example, Carlson et al (1999), describing their two year qualitative study of principals whose schools had improved dramatically in reading, noted that effective school leaders sought to establish a culture that encouraged learning, thinking, reflection and self-analysis amongst teaching staff. In order to achieve a learning culture, the headteachers in Englefield's (2001) qualitative research study reported working collaboratively with staff, setting high standards and providing constructive criticism. Furthermore, both Maden (2001) and Englefield (2001) argued that, to maximize teacher involvement in the improvement process, it was essential to provide the necessary professional development and support.

Another strategy to encourage professionalism is for the leader to demonstrate his or her willingness to learn and to act on feedback. Franey (2002) and Sanders (1999) noted that it could be useful for colleagues to be provided with ways to evaluate the headteacher's performance as a leader. Franey argued that this could lead to a school-ethos built on self-evaluation and reflection.

4.2 Shared leadership: involving senior managers

Involving staff in leadership decisions is a common theme in the literature. Ofsted (2000) noted that effective headteachers in secondary schools serving disadvantaged areas made good use of deputy headteachers and senior management teams, ensuring that these staff were fully involved in the school planning and pursuit of objectives. Similarly, Ofsted argued that, in primary schools, there needed to be effective delegation to middle managers. Primary heads set coordinators clear tasks including setting annual targets for their subjects, monitoring teaching and learning, reporting to governors, arranging training and selecting resources.

4.3 Distributed leadership: establishing teams

Some writers (Franey, 2002; Carlson et al, 1999; Sanders, 1999) have noted that effective school leaders spread leadership responsibility school-wide by building teams throughout the staff of the school. Franey, describing her own experiences as a new headteacher of an urban school, reported that she had established small teams that included both teaching and support staff. These teams were supported by continuing professional development, and it was intended that they would provide opportunities for flexible, creative, project-specific working.

The idea of distributed leadership may, initially, feel threatening to a headteacher. Sanders (1999), in his book on urban school leadership, argued that "in order for the principal to be a team builder, there must be a commitment to change and reform the traditional role of the principal." For example, he suggested that, initially, a principal of an urban school might need to become part of the team building process. Whilst acknowledging that some principals might feel that this threatens the power normally associated with the role, he argued that subsequent delegation of power to team members could enhance the principal's role and effectiveness.

5. Improving the Curriculum, Learning and Teaching Quality

5.1 Improving the curriculum

A few writers described how headteachers of effective schools in challenging circumstances had focused on the curriculum (Cutler, 1998; Carlson et al, 1999; Englefield, 2001). Literacy was the area most frequently mentioned, followed by numeracy and special educational needs. Cutler described how she, as a new headteacher, set about raising standards in a London secondary school. She explained that she had established a new focus on literacy, through the development of a corrective reading scheme and tutor group book boxes. She added that an enthusiastic librarian and a newly appointed English teacher worked to promote literacy throughout the school. At the primary level, Englefield wrote that the curriculum priority for headteachers in his qualitative study was literacy and numeracy, although the need for a wide and balanced curriculum was also acknowledged.

5.2 Improving learning

Several writers noted that effective headteachers focused on learning (Carlson et al, 1999; Franey, 2002; Harris, 2001). Franey, for example, described the promotion of a learning culture across the school, for staff and students alike. She described how she, as headteacher, felt that a key part of transforming the school was moving from a widely held belief that it was a place of teaching to a belief that it was a place of learning.

In order to improve learning, some writers (Carter, 1999; Carlson et al., 1999) argued the importance of increasing the time pupils spend 'on task'. Carter wrote that time on task was seen as the key to achieving progress in his study of seven successful schools in the USA. He noted that principals of highly effective schools in challenging circumstances demanded that their pupils worked hard, through systems of extended days, extended years, after-school programmes, weekend programmes and summer school activity. They also expected their teachers to reject the notion that teaching was confined to the period between 8.00 am and 3.00 pm.

5.3 Improving teaching quality

The key role of good teaching in raising attainment was acknowledged in many of the publications we reviewed (for example, Hopkins, 2001; Harris, 2001). Harris (2001) wrote that the seconded leaders in her study were primarily concerned with improving the quality of teaching (and learning) in the school. In order to improve teaching, effective school leaders described in the studies we have reviewed made use of a number of strategies including: setting high standards, providing time for professional development and monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching.

5.3.1 Setting and demonstrating high standards

The importance of setting and demonstrating high standards of teaching was emphasised by several writers (Andrews and Morefield, 1991; Englefield, 2001; Harris, 2001). In their discussion paper, Andrews and Morefield pointed out that effective principals made themselves available to staff as an instructional resource, and in this way set expectations for the continual improvement of teaching and learning across the school. As Harris pointed out: 'in schools in difficulty few leading professionals or expert teachers may be in evidence.' She added that it was, therefore, considered important for the seconded leaders she studied to model what they expected of others and demonstrate behaviour associated with best practice.

5.3.2 Providing time for professional development

Harris (2002) noted that effective leaders ensured that their colleagues had time for professional activities. Describing her case studies of effective leadership in schools facing challenging contexts, she wrote that the headteachers provided time for teachers to discuss teaching and observe colleagues.

Many writers have highlighted the importance of focusing on professional development (for example, Hopkins, 2001; Carlson et al, 1999; Franey, 2002; Sebring and Bryk, 2000). Hopkins, in his handbook for schools facing challenging circumstances, identified staff development and planning as one of the key features of instructional leadership. The handbook summarises several staff development techniques designed to assist teachers to expand their range of teaching strategies.

5.3.3 Monitoring and evaluating teaching

In order to raise standards of teaching - and thus raise achievement - several writers stressed the importance of monitoring and evaluating teaching (Carlson et al, 1999; Carter, 1999; Franey, 2002; Harris, 2002; Sanders, 1999; Stark, 1998). For example, Harris, in her study of seconded leaders, indicated that poor teaching was not ignored or tolerated - individuals experiencing difficulty were monitored, supported and offered a development programme to address the problem.

6. Raising Achievement and Improving Pupils' Attitudes and Behaviour

6.1 Raising achievement

Several writers have noted that effective headteachers focused on raising pupil achievement (Ofsted, 2000; Carlson et al, 1999; Carter, 1999). For example, when summarising the common features of leadership in schools that were more effective than others in similarly disadvantaged areas, Ofsted noted the importance of identifying raising achievement as the school's central purpose in school plans.

Effective headteachers were also found to monitor and evaluate pupils' achievement effectively (Englefield, 2001; Carlson et al, 1999; Carter, 1999). Englefield noted that all 14 headteachers in his qualitative study of effective schools in challenging circumstances had put detailed systems in place to monitor the achievement of pupils as they worked towards individual targets. The collation of attainment data, and cross-referencing it with other school systems, was deemed to be a priority. Carter concluded from his qualitative study of principals in a similar group of schools that "rigorous and regular testing leads to continuous student achievement". Testing of student achievement is described as serving several functions, such as ensuring that the prescribed curriculum is being taught, preparing pupils for national examinations and enabling the monitoring of teaching staff.

6.2 Improving pupils' behaviour and attitudes

We noted above that behaviour management problems and dealing with pupils excluded from other schools were identified as two of the problems commonly facing schools in urban and challenging circumstances. Strategies to improve behaviour might therefore be expected to feature in the literature on leadership of such schools. However, contrary to expectations, we found few references to the importance of improving discipline and pupils' behaviour. Nevertheless, Englefield (2001), in his qualitative research study of 14 primary schools, reported that pupil behaviour was the first priority by about half of the headteachers taking part. He reported that headteachers felt that the potential for poor behaviour to impact on pupils' learning led to the issue being given precedence over all others in the school. Carter (1999), drawing upon his study of effective principals in low-income schools, noted that discipline and achievement were inextricably related. He wrote, "when a school clearly teaches by example that self-control, self-reliance, and self-esteem anchored in achievement are a means to success, that school's own success inspires confidence, order, and discipline in its students".

Clearly, there is a need for more research into the strategies adopted by effective headteachers to improve pupils' attitudes and behaviour.

7. Involving Others in School Improvement

Several of the publications we reviewed highlighted the importance of involving people other than pupils and teachers in improving schools in urban and challenging contexts. Groups mentioned included parents, governors, the local community and others who may be able to help the school.

7.1 Involving parents

Several writers (Carlson et al, 1999; Carter, 1999; Harris, 2002; Reed and Roberts, 1998; Sebring and Bryk, 2000) noted that effective headteachers sought to involve parents in their children's learning, although it was acknowledged by some that this was not always an easy task in schools in challenging contexts. For example, Carter, drawing upon his study of effective principals in low-income schools, wrote, "in high poverty schools, a lack of parental involvement is often the first excuse for poor performance. Effective principals overcome this excuse by extending the mission of the school into the home". The author went on to describe a system of contact with parents that sought to harness the benefits of parental support and motivation. It was noted that effective principals "taught parents to read to their children, check their homework and ask after their assignments". He acknowledged, however, that it was the students, not their parents, who were accountable for their own success.

7.2 Involving governors

It was also considered important to involve school governors in the process of improvement (Englefield, 2001; Harris, 2002; Ofsted, 2000). Ofsted highlighted the value of commitment and practical assistance from the governing body, and added that the influence and persistence of governing bodies could lead to improvements in funding and accommodation.

7.3 Involving the local community

The importance of involving the local community was highlighted by a number of writers (Englefield, 2001; Harris, 2002; Sanders, 1999; Sebring and Bryk, 2000). For example, Sebring and Bryk, in their article describing common strategies employed by principals of effective elementary schools in Chicago, noted that case study schools with a high level of local community involvement benefited from strong social support for fundamental change in the school. They added that principals could play a key role in developing community involvement and in becoming personally visible in their communities.

7.4 Others who may be able to help the school

Maden (2001) noted that all the headteachers in her study of schools that had improved against the odds had actively cultivated and exploited networks of people and organisations that might be able to help their schools. She went on to say that such links could be established via the internet, through visits to the school by those with a contribution to make, through liaisons with representatives of the local community, or at local and national meetings of headteachers. Similarly, Stark (1998), reviewing the first three years of the special measures regime, argued that effective headteachers in urban and challenging circumstances needed good ambassadorial skills in order to represent the school's interests to the LEA and other bodies, and to engage with parents and the local community in order to rebuild public confidence in the school. Sanders (1999), noted the importance of US schools securing political and policy support from the superintendent and seeking out universities and colleges for collaborative endeavours.

8. External Support

About half of the publications we reviewed provided information on external support for schools in urban and challenging circumstances. However, those that did so made some useful points.

For example, Barber (1996), in his chapter on creating a framework for success in urban areas, pointed out that a failing urban school may not be capable of designing its own improvement strategy. Such a school may well need external help.

This view was echoed by Thomas et al (1998), in their study of best practice amongst special schools in special measures. They found that the most improving schools had been able to draw upon a wider range of relevant advice assistance, support and consultancy than those that had made more limited progress. Similarly, Franey (2002) noted that external support had made a significant contribution to the new leadership model in her school. However, Gray (2000), discussing the appointment of 'consultant-headteachers' or 'caretaker-managers' (see below), cautioned that it was important to match interventions to stages of development.

Types of external support mentioned in the publications we reviewed included: professional development programmes and / or courses; peer-learning strategies, including mentoring; external consultants; physical resources and funding and support from LEAs. The final part of this section focuses on an article describing the support needs of special schools in difficulties.

8.1 Professional development programmes and/or courses

Four of the publications we reviewed (Fink and Resnick, 2001; Hopkins, 2001; Ofsted, 2000, Englefield, 2001) emphasised the importance of professional development programmes and courses.

Fink and Resnick described a professional development programme set up for principals of schools in a district of New York City where standards were improving. The programme was designed to develop and maintain instructional leadership skills for all principals.

Ofsted (2000), discussing possible answers to the question 'what more help do schools (in challenging circumstances) need?' suggested that a regional training programme would prove beneficial, by providing opportunities for headteachers, middle managers and governors to share good practice in raising standards. It was suggested that such a programme should be linked to existing training arrangements and include dissemination of research on successful initiatives, provision for visits and exchanges, and creation of a pool of staff and governors in successful schools serving disadvantaged areas on whose experience others could draw.

8.2 Peer learning and mentoring strategies

Peer learning strategies may form part of professional development programmes (Fink and Resnick, 2001; Ofsted, 2000). The programme described by Fink and Resnick included:

- monthly support groups for new principals
- a support group focusing on a new reading programme that the district had designed, called 'Focus Literacy'
- principals' study groups on self-selected issues
- visits to each others schools
- 'buddying' (in which two new principals share problems and support each other)
- individualised coaching focusing on such topics as establishing goals and objectives budget meetings
- a 'supervisory walk-through' on the school site

If a particular issue arose through the walk-through, the district might establish a mentoring relationship between the new principal and a more experienced peer.

8.3 External consultants and 'caretaker headteachers'

Several writers (Barber, 1996; Franey, 2002; Gower and Hagon, 1998; Learmonth and Lowers, 1998) stressed the value of using an external consultant although, Barber cautioned that the focus of the relationship between the consultant and the school should be on creating the capacity for sustainable improvement, rather than creating dependency.

It should be noted that two of the four publications reviewed in this sub-section were personal accounts of consultancy in practice. Gower and Hagon were, respectively, headteacher and external consultant in a school, and Learmonth and Lowers were both external consultants describing their own practices. It is possible, therefore, that their accounts could be less objective than those of external observers.

Gower and Hagon (1998) noted that the school in question had decided to work with a consultant with experience in the areas of organisational development, curriculum leadership, the development of leadership and management skills and the management of change. The headteacher and consultant agreed that the consultant's brief should be flexible and designed to address the needs of the middle managers as they evolved during the initial stages of the project.

The authors identified several specific advantages to using a consultant to work with staff: it was possible to cover a huge amount of ground, the consultant was able to convert theory into practice for the staff and it was possible to regularly review and amend the brief for the consultant's work in line with the emerging needs of the school.

Learmonth and Lowers (1998) worked with secondary schools in difficulty. They highlighted the ways in which a consultant could help the school leadership to build an alternative vision for the school, within which improvement is possible. The authors emphasised that this was likely to be a complex and time-consuming process, as there are inherent risks in a hasty or insensitive intervention.

Gray (2000) referred to a different form of consultant: the consultant headteacher. He described the use of experienced headteachers, whom LEAs could deploy to schools for varying lengths of time, to address the specific needs of the school management. This might include the use of such a consultant as a 'caretaker manager' during a period of crisis for the school. The experiences of 'caretaker managers', or seconded headteachers, are described elsewhere in this report (see for example, Harris, 2001).

8.4 Physical resources and funding

Budget deficit and unsatisfactory buildings are often among the problems faced by schools in challenging circumstances. In addition, a new leader is likely to need access to funding for new initiatives or staff development. Only a few writers (Stark, 1998; Cutler, 1998; Carlson et al, 1999) mentioned physical resources and funding. Carlson et al described the use of US government funds to extend the school day by principals participating in their study. Cutler mentioned a fruitful relationship between her school and a scheme run by an oil company and noted several short-term centrally funded projects with the overall aim of establishing a whole school anti-bullying policy. With regard to the latter, she raised concerns about securing continued funding for this work.

8.5 Support from LEAs

Stark (1998), in his review of the first three years of the special measures regime, briefly discussed the role of the LEA in supporting failing schools. He described the two-fold role of the LEA as the provision of support for setting standards, and intensively supporting the school in the early stages after the inspection verdict. In terms of setting standards, he noted that LEAs could help schools to take responsibility for their own performance by establishing benchmarking systems using performance data, and setting challenging targets. The core purpose of the intensive support offered by LEAs in the initial stages of special measures was described as renewing leadership and supporting the preparation of an action plan.

8.6 The support needs of special schools in challenging circumstances

We found only one article relating specifically to the needs of special schools in challenging circumstances (Thomas et al, 1998). It seems likely though that some of the implications from this research are also relevant to mainstream schools.

The authors noted that improving schools had been able to draw upon a wider range of relevant advice, assistance, support and consultancy than those that had made more limited progress. They listed six types of support and advice needed by special schools in special measures: curriculum and teaching advice, technical advice, help in mobilising resources, specialist advice, moral support and advice on finance and personnel. They went on to list the range of sources of support and provided information on the perceived effectiveness of some of them (see below). Sources of external support included:

- LEA advisers (variable quality of support)
- Directors and Assistant Directors of Education (judged to be beneficial by authors)
- specialist consultants (advice usually highly valued by staff)
- HMI (well regarded by schools)
- mentor headteachers
- accountant-technicians (considered very effective by schools)
- experts from universities and other higher education institutions
- educational psychologists (appreciated when available)
- advisory teachers
- visits to other schools

The authors argued that support was crucial to improvement and that schools should be proactive in seeking support, whether inside a local authority framework or outside it. Consultants should be used where there are gaps in provision of specialist expertise.

As noted above, support to schools from LEAs varied widely in perceived quality. The authors pointed out that small LEAs sometimes had difficulties providing necessary levels of expertise in certain areas of special education and suggested that they should buy in consultants or collaborate with other LEAs for support and advice in these areas.

Finally, the authors highlighted the fact that schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, especially those with a residential component, have special difficulties in implementing an action plan and need even more support than others.

9. Conclusions

This study has focused on leadership of schools in urban and challenging circumstances. It was interesting to find that, although there was a body of literature on the subject, definitions were rarely offered. One definition focuses on student performance (secondary schools where 25 per cent or less of pupils achieve five or more good GCSE grades). It is clearly of operational value, because it provides a cut-off point for directing attention at low-performing schools, but it is of less value in considering the nature of the circumstances that some schools face (or indeed of acknowledging that there are schools facing urban and challenging circumstances that have relatively high levels of student achievement). A second definition, referring to the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (35 per cent or more), uses a proxy for social and economic deprivation. Nevertheless, heads would argue that there is a considerable difference in circumstances of a school in which 35 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals, and one in which 50 per cent or more are eligible.

The nature of the challenges faced by certain schools is documented in the literature. In addition to low achievement, these schools may be characterised by problems of social deprivation, such as low aspirations, high turnover of pupils and staff, ill health and crime. Good leadership has been identified as the key to improving such schools.

Leading such a school is clearly a complex and difficult enterprise. The job requires the ability to deal with constant and competing demands in a context of low capacity (within the school and the local community).

Research into the leadership of schools in urban and challenging circumstances has produced a number of pointers concerning leadership style and effective strategies. What is less clear is the extent to which these are different from, or the same as those adopted by successful leaders in other schools. Perhaps it is not so much the nature of their style or strategies that distinguishes effective leadership in these circumstances, but the leader's ability to prioritise, establish a direction for the school, motivate staff and build capacity by developing staff and harnessing resources. However, until we have more comparative studies to draw on, this remains a matter of speculation rather than certainty.

There is a need for more research and for theoretical development in order to guide policy and practice. Research could, for example, follow a 'cohort' of new leaders of schools in challenging circumstances in order to find out how they operate and to identify the factors that appear to be related to success. A longitudinal study could document the stages of development that a school passes through and consider the ways in which leadership decisions and style change over time. Studies could also usefully compare leadership in schools in urban and challenging circumstances with that of leadership in other schools, in order to find out what is distinctive about leading a 'challenging' school. This kind of work would help inform policy (eg recruitment and support strategies) as well as practice, to the benefit of schools, their pupils and communities.

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