

Inspiring leaders;
improving children's lives

Under the microscope

Leading in a climate of close
public scrutiny

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Introduction

Background to Academies

In 2002 the first City Academy opened and with it brought a new set of senior educational leadership challenges. As a Labour government creation, the Academies programme is based largely on the much documented success of the original 15 City Technology Colleges (CTCs) created by the Conservative government in the late 80's and early 90's to address the educational needs of young people in areas of social and economic deprivation in the inner cities in England. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Academies' web site claims that Academies 'bring a distinctive approach to school leadership drawing on the skills of sponsors and other supporters. They give principals and staff new opportunities to develop educational strategies to raise standards and contribute to diversity in areas of disadvantage.'

Academies are all ability schools established by sponsors from business, faith or voluntary groups working in highly innovative partnerships with central Government and local education partners. Sponsors and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) provide the capital costs for the Academy. Running costs are met in full by the DCSF. The Academies programme aims to challenge the culture of educational under-attainment and to deliver real improvements in standards. All Academies are located in areas of disadvantage. They either replace one or more existing schools facing challenging circumstances or are established where there is a need for additional school places. The DCSF expects Local Authorities (LAs) to consider the scope for the establishment of Academies as part of their strategic plans to increase diversity in secondary provision and improve educational opportunities. Initially, the then DfES announced plans to establish 200 academies by 2010. This figure has since been increased to 400.

Each Academy promises to provide an excellent environment for teaching and learning that is comparable with the best available in the maintained sector, whilst offering a broad and balanced curriculum to students of all abilities focusing especially on one or more subject areas. The aim from the outset has been that as an Academy becomes successfully established it will share its expertise and facilities with other schools and the wider community. Academies are, in reality at present, the last attempt at giving some of the poorest achieving and worst resourced schools a final radical boost in terms of buildings, resources, staffing and curriculum. As a highly political programme and arguably an expensive one at face value, Academies cannot be allowed to fail and the spotlight has remained on them since their inception.

As well as seeking to provide the best opportunities for their young people, Academies have a key part to play in the regeneration of communities. A new Academy is a significant focus for learning for its children, their families and other local people. Academies aim to help break the cycle of underachievement in areas of social and economic deprivation whether in inner cities, suburban or rural areas. Each Academy promises to offer local solutions for local needs. Each is different, drawing on the expertise of its sponsors who, in the original model, contributed up to £2 million of the capital costs to help develop its own distinctive ethos and mission. This requirement for £2 million contribution was removed in the Spring of 2007 to enable a broader range of organisations to act as sponsors, including universities. Whether they involve new buildings, refurbishment, or both, Academies are unarguably innovative in design and built to high environmental standards. The question to be asked then is what sort of leader is required to accept the challenges and complexities to successfully run these powerhouses of educational innovation? This has to be undertaken against a backdrop of high media profile and constant scrutiny by the inspection regimes.

This study examines and analyses the nature of successful leadership of Academies and investigates the leadership styles, qualities, skills and contextual dimensions which enable previously seriously underperforming schools to transform themselves whilst their leadership operates under the microscope of close public scrutiny.

While leaders of non-academies may be less likely to face such sustained national attention, this study and its recommendations may nevertheless be of value to school leaders in general and especially to those whose schools are in challenging circumstances.

Context and rationale for this study, and related literature

Rationale

The original City Academy policy was announced by David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, in March 2000 as 'a radical new approach to promote greater diversity and break the cycle of failing schools in inner cities' (DfES, statement to the Commons 17 March 2000). He said then that the first of the academies would open in 2000/2001 and would be set up 'where significant changes in the nature and management of schools were needed'. Schools would be expected to have innovative approaches to leadership, management, governance, teaching and learning. Sponsors would be needed to

initiate these academies. When the prospectus for City Academies was published by the Standards Unit of the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in May 2000, it said that sponsors could be 'businesses, individuals, churches and other faith groups, voluntary bodies, or partnerships within or across these categories'. There was, however, no public consultation over the prospectus before it was produced. This may be one of the aspects which has continued to fuel the argument of those against such schools ever since.

Structure and governance

Academies are independent schools receiving government grants on conditions agreed with the Secretary of State. The original prospectus said that they are to be 'owned and run' by sponsors who would 'normally' be expected to set up a charitable company for the purpose. The original guidance which remained in place until Summer 2007 stated that the then DfES expected academies to be set up as companies limited by guarantee with charitable status. Model articles and a memorandum of governance are made available by the DfES (now Department for Children, Schools and Families) and have been agreed with the Charity Commission. Essentially a trust is set up which is the company and the trust then appoints the sponsor governors on the governing body. In the draft model guidance, it is suggested that sponsors might want to ensure that sponsor governors have the majority on the governing body. The governance arrangements are clearly modelled on those voluntary schools which are run by an ancient trust, for example livery companies such as Haberdashers. The reality is that, in most cases, Academy principals are also the chief executives of the Academies they lead and have full, devolved powers to run the schools, whilst the role of the sponsor(s) is typically to offer support and expertise in areas pertaining to their personal field of specialism.

Much of the misinformation or misinterpretation surrounding the governance, leadership and funding of Academies has, arguably, been perpetuated by the media. The opportunity to capitalize on the wave of political debate surrounding Academies mirrors that experienced more than ten years ago by the similarly publicly funded independent City Technology College (CTCs) which have proved themselves to be some of the most successful schools in the country today, as evidenced in the recently published 'City Technology Colleges – Conception and Legacy: Twenty Years of Success', (SSAT, September 2007).

Sponsorship

There is no 'one type fits all' in terms of the structure or governance of Academies. Some are sponsored by individual entrepreneurs, others form part of an organisation which may have sponsored up to seven academies all with a similar structure, ethos, set of policies and curriculum. Some are formed through a process of federation whereby an existing successful school takes under its umbrella a local school which is struggling, thus creating a federation through which the two schools can work together. This is often under the overarching leadership of an Executive Principal to raise standards in one school and broaden the scope of involvement of the other school. Some are sponsored by faith organisations, the local dioceses, and industrial conglomerates. Some were originally City Technology Colleges (CTCs) which have converted to Academies. What they all share is the commitment to provide high quality, innovative and technology rich education to local young people who have been deprived of those opportunities for many years and to share their excellent facilities with the local community. At the time of writing, three Academies cater for children from ages 3 – 19, the majority offering secondary phase places for young people aged 11 – 18.

The funding agreement, which sets out the basis upon which academies are to be run, has to be agreed with the Secretary of State. This is the crucial document, including such issues as the composition of the governing body, disposal of assets, financial and accounting requirements, and the admission of pupils.

Local authority links

Although outside the control of the local authorities (LAs) and reporting directly to the Academies Division at the DCSF most Academies have become part of the wider educational provision for LAs and work closely in many respects with the LA, particularly on Excellence in Cities (EiC), Education Action Zones (EAZ), exclusions, the 14-19 provision agenda and with primary to secondary transition work. Beyond that the degree to which Academies choose to involve themselves in the work of the LAs is variable and dependent on local needs and situation. Some London Boroughs have as many as five Academies whereas others may only have one. The nature of operation with the LA is always dependent on context and the willingness of both parties to establish constructive and productive working relationships to the benefit of their young people.

Raising standards in deprived areas

The policy on academies is a feature of the Government's search for ideas on how to raise standards by innovation in leadership, management, governance and

teaching and learning. Speaking at the opening of the West London Academy, Ealing in 2003, Stephen Twigg, then Junior Schools Minister said: "City Academies are leading the way in breaking down traditional ideological barriers in schools We don't expect Academies to be an overnight success, bearing in mind the legacy of underachievement that they may have to overcome, but we expect all Academies will make steady upwards progress." (DfES 8.9.2003)

The drive to raise standards in difficult or challenging contexts has also become a central and urgent issue in education policy in other countries. In the USA, the federal "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001 is comparable to the relentless drive for system wide improvement through increased accountability and the subsequent penalties imposed upon underperforming schools in England.

A substantial international field of research into the connection between poverty and education demonstrates that, whilst the attainment levels of poor children have increased over time, the gap between the majority of children from low-income families and their more affluent peers persists throughout schooling in the UK (Rutter, Mortimer and Maugham 1979; Smith and Noble 1995); in Australia (Henderson 1975, Tees and Polesal 2003) and in the USA (Apple 1982; Rainwater and Smeeding 2003). It is clear that schools in disadvantaged areas perform below the national norm and that these patterns of performance are long established. As Harris *et al.* (2006, p.5) note, 'the more socially disadvantaged the community served by the school, the more likely it is that the school will appear to underachieve'.

The Labour government's "Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances" initiative, launched in 2001, incorporated both additional funding and inspection visits as a means of improving schools in contexts of disadvantage and was a major part of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit's efforts to raise educational standards in schools in the most challenging contexts. Notably these schools, located in disadvantaged areas, suffered a myriad of socio-economic problems, including high levels of unemployment, physical and mental health issues, a movement out of the best qualified young people and low educational achievement. Many of the schools were typified by higher than average numbers of pupils with diverse ethnic backgrounds and low literacy levels on entry. The student population was often transient, thus presenting teachers and school leaders with the daily task of teaching pupils whom they have not taught before and have little if any prior knowledge of their learning abilities. Coupled with the challenges of teacher recruitment and retention and often poor or inadequate resourcing, it is these very 'challenging circumstances' which the Academies seek to address through taking over existing schools or closing and opening new schools, redefined and reborn as an Academy. As Power *et al.* (2003, p.26) conclude in their study, '[educational]

outcomes in deprived areas are worse than those in non-deprived areas, whether they are measured in terms of qualification, attendance, exclusions or “staying on” rates. Inner-city areas in particular feature as having low outcomes’. They also point to the need to reduce the ‘compositional effects that appear to result from high concentrations of disadvantaged students’ (p.65). This seeming lack of ‘cultural and social capital’ makes it significantly more difficult for schools in challenging circumstances to improve. Furthermore, it makes the task of leading schools in these circumstances all the more challenging too.

The term ‘cultural and social capital’ derives from the work of Bourdieu (1987), who highlights the way that practices are infused (unequally) with social legitimation so that not all cultural practices are viewed as having equal value. Lamont and Lareau (1988, p. 156) define cultural capital as ‘widely shared high status cultural signals used for social and cultural exclusions’. Implicit in this definition is the notion of inherent disadvantage perpetuated by a class system. As Apple (2001, p.73) explains:

‘more affluent parents often have more flexible hours and can visit multiple schools. They have cars – often more than one – and can afford driving their children across town to attend a ‘better school’. They can as well provide the hidden cultural resources such as camps and after school programmes that give their children an ‘ease’, a ‘style’ that seems ‘natural’ and acts as a set of cultural resources.’

The converse of this position is that parents and families in poor and disadvantaged communities are less able to ‘work the system’, leaving an ever increasing number of students in high poverty areas grouped together in the same school, thus reducing the social mix that has been shown, even with the 1950’s grammar school system, to significantly influence a school’s ability to improve its performance. This endemic social and cultural divide is but part of the challenge for the leaders of Academies if the children attending them are to escape the cycle of social injustice and poverty and beyond that, their local communities are to rise from their current positions and become empowered in the workforce and economy, able to sustain their next generation of learners.

Leadership

Much of the initial work surrounding this project was borne out of my PhD, which focuses on the challenges which leadership of Academies has in transforming and sustaining schools.

In their extensive analysis of the breadth of leadership paradigms, Leithwood *et al.* (1999) start by noting the extent to which 'times change' and so does leadership in response to it with 'productive leadership [depending] heavily on its fit with the social and organisational context in which it is exercised' (p. 3). Leadership as a concept and a set of practices has been the subject of a vast quantity of academic and popular literature, most of which has been about particular approaches or models of leadership.

Senge (1996, p. 45) asserts how '... we are coming to believe that leaders are those people who 'walk ahead', people who are genuinely committed to deep change in themselves and in their organisations. They lead through developing new skills, capabilities, and understandings.' Whether these skills and capabilities are developed from the springboard of existing leadership practice and literature or something more innate in successful leaders is open to discussion. Handy (in Hesselbein *et al.*, 1996, p. 8) highlights three necessary leadership attributes: 'a belief in oneself... a passion for the job ... and a love of people'. These bring with them paradoxes and needs for almost opposing attributes such as a 'capacity for aloneness'. Certainly living with these requires great strength of character and as Handy rightly recognises, 'Great leaders are bred from great causes, but leaders, at their best, also breed great causes'. Leadership is defined by Bush and Glover (2003, p. 8) as:

'a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. It involves inspiring and supporting others towards the achievement of a vision for the school which is based on clear personal and professional values.'

A central element in many definitions of leadership is that there is a process of influence.

Most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation. (Yukl, 2002, p.3)

Cuban's (1988) definition shows that the process of influence is purposeful in that it is intended to lead to specific outcomes, 'Leadership, then refers to people who bend the motivations and actions of others to achieving certain goals; it implies taking initiatives and risks.' (ibid., 1988, p.193). In this research study, the power of influence can be assessed in terms of success in transforming and reengineering schooling and all its component parts against the backdrop of close public scrutiny and its impact on the leadership, staff, students and community which the Academy serves. Wasserberg (2000, p. 158) claims that, 'the primary

role of any leader [is] the unification of people around key values.' Greenfield and Ribbins (1993) add that leadership begins with the 'character' of leaders, expressed in terms of personal values, self-awareness and emotional and moral capability. Furthermore, Day, Harris and Hadfield's (2001) research in 12 'effective' schools in England and Wales concludes that 'good leaders are informed by and communicate clear sets of personal and educational values which represent their moral purpose for the school' (ibid., p. 53). It is arguably this moral purpose which helps to maintain the drive and commitment of leaders of Academies when the public comment and feeling of leading under the microscope becomes particularly intense.

Significance of the research

Historically, while considerable research has been undertaken into school effectiveness and school improvement linked to leadership inputs and outcomes, very little has focused on schools in high-poverty areas or schools with above average levels of deprivation. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Barth *et al.* 1999; Leithwood and Steinbach 2002; Borman *et al.* 2000 and Harris *et al.* 2006), the contemporary school improvement literature has not been overly concerned with schools facing difficult or challenging circumstances. Only relatively recently have researchers in England focused upon leadership in 'failing' or 'ineffective' schools; (Stoll and Myers 1998; Gray 2001; Harris and Chapman 2001). Furthermore, relatively few of these studies have focused exclusively upon leadership practices or forms of leadership and demands upon leadership in such contexts. Maden and Hillman (1993) found that schools that were improving in disadvantaged areas were characterised by improvement in their immediate environments with new buildings, landscaping and additional high quality facilities. However the overriding aspect which they highlight is that most improvement efforts were started and then driven by the Principal.

Theoretical framework

The key premise of this research lies in the well-known and validated fact that a school's 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. This is reinforced in the research literature, which consistently emphasizes the powerful relationship between leadership and school development. Leithwood *et al* in their NCSL (2006) review of literature in '*Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*' serves as a starting point for robust empirical evidence and Hallinger and Heck (1998) report that heads have an indirect, but highly measurable effect on students' achievement. The overriding

message is clear – effective leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of students (Leithwood and Jantzi 2000). The research evidence consistently demonstrates that the quality of leadership determines the motivation of teachers and the quality of teaching in the classroom. Hallinger and Heck (1996) in their comprehensive and systematic reviews of the literature across all types of schools conclude that the effects of school leadership on pupil outcomes were educationally significant. In schools that are improving in difficult or challenging circumstances the quality of leadership has consistently been shown to be a major contributory factor (Hopkins 2001 and Reynolds *et al* 2005).

The challenge here is to identify and establish the leadership skills, attributes and ways in which they are exemplified within the context of an Academy, to ensure that leadership is successful. Furthermore, this needs to be undertaken at a pace to transform school outcomes and then sustained and even replicated within and beyond the Academy movement.

Methods

This study focuses on 12 Academies which have been open and in operation for three or more years at the time of writing. The sample reflects a breadth of geographical location, gender of principals, specialism of their particular Academy and type of sponsor. Each of the twelve principals interviewed had been in post for either two or three years and had previously been headteachers of maintained secondary schools. All respondents were provided with the interview questions in advance of the interview and each interview lasted approximately one hour and was digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. A copy of the transcription was then sent to each of the respondents to review its accuracy before being used for analysis.

The lack of published research on the leadership of Academies to date means that the initial work on this report is grounded in the literature of industrial and educational leadership *per se*. A key challenge to this work was to attempt to retain objectivity, despite the fact the researcher became principal of her own Academy mid-way through the research. In the case of this research, the excellent supervisory support of two supervisors appointed by the University of Hull from the start of the research and throughout the writing, linked to the PhD from which this report is derived, provided invaluable challenge and focus on each stage of the research process, its methods and writing up, and helped to promote rigour throughout.

Throughout this research, the participants were informed of the research methods, methodology and code of research ethics both of NCSL and the University of Hull. The writing up of the research findings has been undertaken so that the interpretation and presentation of the data both respects participants' right to privacy whilst sustaining the right of others to know about the research and its outcomes (Burgess, 1989; Cohen *et al.*, 2000).

Main findings

Amongst the twelve Academy principals interviewed there was a general consensus that they had all received, mostly unwelcome, media attention during their first three years in post. Furthermore they felt that this had added a further dimension to their existing challenge to **transform** a failing or seriously underperforming school and establishing **sustainability** for it long into the future.

The literature review identified three leadership dimensions as being key to leading the transformation of these schools in a sustainable way. These are strategies relating to the **distribution of leadership**, techniques relating to **political** leadership and a spirit of **entrepreneurial** leadership. In this respect, distributed leadership refers to that of capacity building by the principal as identified by MacBeath (1998) whose research shows it to have positive effects upon teachers' self-efficacy and levels of morale. Furthermore, as Bennett *et al.* (2003, p.3) note 'distributed leadership is not something 'done' by an individual 'to other' ... rather it is emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise' thus strengthening the capacity to deal with the challenges that are faced by the organisation.

The aspect of political leadership is borne out of the respondents' articulation of the need for political manoeuvring. This is all too often seen as manipulative, dishonest and subsequently destructive. However the meaning of political in this sense comes from the realistic lessons brought forth by Machiavelli years ago. Power and conflict are natural by-products of co-operative activity to secure improvement. Machiavelli concluded that 'in politics, whether an action is good or evil can only be decided in the light of what it is meant to achieve and whether it successfully achieves it' (Bull, 1995, p.20). This implies that politics always operates in a context of values and that the respondents expressed a common belief in such a values context as they worked towards securing success for their schools.

It can be argued that the environment from which Academies have emerged reflects a 'third way' commitment to combining private principles, values and ways

of working with those of the public sector, with the aims of making the traditional public sector more innovative and entrepreneurial (Giddens, 1998; Milner and Joyce, 2005, p. 51). It has been argued that educational organisations specifically need entrepreneurial leadership that reflects something of the innovative and risk-taking capacity of private business (Hentschke and Caldwell, 2005). In some respects, Academies can be seen as being hybrid organisations in which entrepreneurial imperatives can flourish. By combining characteristics of the private sector, such as being 'independently managed', 'promoted... by independent sponsors' (DfES, 2004, p.51) and free to innovate with public sector characteristics, such as dependence on Government funding and expectations to contribute to social goals by tackling educational inequalities and contributing to the regeneration of communities, a third typology is evolving and with it the need for leadership to respond to the model and challenges. This in itself is something new and arguably less familiar in the state education arena and which, as a result, has drawn a certain degree of media interest by way of being simply different from the majority or norm at the present time.

Examples of individual academy sponsors engaging in social entrepreneurialism are evident in the Academies programme. They include Arpad Busson, founder of the charitable foundation ARK (Absolute Return for Kids) and Chairman of EIM, a hedge funds investment group. Busson (May 2005) states that 'If we can apply the entrepreneurial principles we have brought to business to charity, we have a shot at having a really strong impact, to be able to transform the lives of children'. The multiple emphases on community welfare, responsiveness to and involvement of local people, working to improve the environment, participation in local regeneration and co-operation with other agencies, resonate with a commitment to the public ethos. In fact, it might be more accurate to claim that sponsors and stakeholders through their principals are, arguably, taking the opportunity to develop a different kind of schooling with the greater good of the local community at its heart and thus acting in an entrepreneurial fashion which aspire to meeting some of the complex aims in advancing the public good through the Academies programme.

It is these leadership dimensions and the ability to employ them which, in the accounts of all twelve respondents, have helped to strengthen their position to move forward to successful outcomes as leaders of Academies, whilst enduring close public scrutiny on a number of fronts. As one respondent explained:

'You are always in the spotlight as an Academy Principal. I wasn't anywhere near as exposed when I was a head before, but it did make me aware of what I might have to deal with and how to shelter the school from it a bit Maybe it's because we are the first of the breed, but basically you're under the media spotlight all the time. If

something goes wrong or has attention drawn to it you can be sure it'll be in the press later in the week, and that's the national more than the local press. So I think Academy principals need to have a lot of political awareness about how their actions and the work of their schools never goes unnoticed and I think this pressure can rub off onto staff and the kids too – apart from if it's good news because the media only want it when it bleeds – you know when it bleeds it leads!

(Respondent 3)

Although school leaders have always been very much figures in the local community, the extent to which respondents reported both local and indeed national attention on their Academies and the representation of them was very marked:

'The one major time consuming aspect which I wasn't used to previously was that, although you're still very much leading a learning community as an Academy principal, you're dealing with it in a very public arena, both nationally and locally and the agendas are not the same for each so you have to be very sensitive to this context you're working in and this can be difficult for staff when things are misrepresented in the press. Now most just laugh at it and the media seem to be cooling their coverage.'

(Respondent 6)

This requires Academy leaders to be politically astute on both a macro and micro level. While important in any school, the need for such leadership skills in academies is particularly marked:

'This is a very politically active environment, particularly the unions. This borough has an agenda of its own which doesn't seem akin to anything on the national arena regarding Academies. They peddle their stuff and it needs to be addressed, otherwise people start to believe it and it's all inaccurate because they base it on rumour not reality, on lies but I have ears and eyes everywhere and spend a lot of time correcting the 'misunderstandings' which are manufactured by a few but which impact on many. It is the death knell of the unions really in the UK but they're taking a long time to grow up and see that the country is a different place and is better for what has happened. They probably wonder where on earth I hear things from but that is part of my job, to protect the progress of the Academy and its community and dispel myth, rumour and lies.'

(Respondent 7)

Ten of the principals who responded, reported the maturation of bodies such as the Academies Division at the DCSF, which published data that highlights the positive progress Academies have made and supports principals in their work. This has helped to address broader concerns in the media. Several of those Academy principals interviewed have used this data to support efforts to connect with parties that they identified as potentially threatening to the objectives of their school:

‘You certainly need a highly developed political sensitivity, even more than you know, which you need for a maintained school and a real awareness of national trends because you don’t have the local authority protecting you and the press just jump on you whenever they have a chance with or without any real information or facts.’
(Respondent 5)

‘Even when there are some minor issues inside the Academy which would never even be voiced in a local authority school it comes to Ministerial notice very quickly and you need to respond very quickly. This is something that I think all Academy principals are very astute about and take very seriously indeed. If the media get hold of it then the damage is colossal but it can be such a minor thing that, as I say, wouldn’t even get noticed in the school down the road.’
(Respondent 3)

‘Previously the parents felt that the Academy wasn’t accountable to anyone and so, rather than using the usual governance mechanisms that are in place, they used legal mechanisms including a judicial review. This was all reported in the local press and also found its way onto the internet which was quite damaging for us. There were a number of different constituencies amongst the parents who felt they were excluded from the Academy, so one of my first priorities was to get them in and give them an arena to air and resolve any conflicts they had and actually make them feel welcome. This prevented them from striking back behind the scenes and a much more positive culture has built up as a result’.
(Respondent 11)

A further factor which has developed during the period of this research is the change in local political party and national shadow leadership which has impacted directly on the way in which Academies are being viewed. The support of the Conservative Party under the leadership of David Cameron for an increase in Academies in line with that proposed by the Labour Government has changed the way many local authorities are viewing the Academies programme and their role in

it. Furthermore, Gordon Brown's early announcement as Prime Minister, of the removal of the previously conditional £2 million contribution by local authority and university sponsors in setting up an Academy, together with the Learning and Skills Council's requirement for all local authorities (LAs) to work in partnership with Academies in their LA as a condition in securing their funding from 2008, has brought forth a tide of operational change in the political dimensions for Academy leaders. This has certainly changed the focus for the media on Academies but, nonetheless, the principals interviewed reported that the attention of the media is still very much present in their experience.

The changing nature of some aspects of media coverage of Academies was also raised by many of the respondents. Generally at the time of interviewing most had established good relationships with their local press. Many felt that these newspapers had focused increasingly on students' successes, after having initially concentrated on negative aspects of the school in its early days. However, nationally a small number of tabloid newspapers were repeatedly seen to continue to concentrate on these negative stories associated with academies.

'The Evening Standard a week ago said '£25 million academy fails inspection'. If you let things like this get to you then you know you can become paranoid. Other principals ring you up to offer support and, even though they've all seen it we're all in the same boat – it could be me today, you tomorrow. What I try to do now is treat the press with the contempt they deserve. I actually wrote a letter in response – they'll never publish it because that's not what they want. After that I saw my biggest task as supporting the staff you know and to say this doesn't reflect upon you, we're being used as a political football here.... But it's really hard personally and impacts on recruitment and hangs around for a long time because everything is taken out of context.'

(Respondent 4)

'I don't think I appreciated or anticipated the hostility that would come with being principal of an Academy. I knew there was hostility to independent schools, and as an independent state school there was a lot of poor information around at the start which meant people didn't understand, so when I started here some of my staff had a really hostile reception when they went to conferences or to local meetings and I had to look at how to train them to deal with that. It has all gone quiet lately because of the expansion of the programme nationally I think – people know it isn't going to go away and these schools are making a huge improvement on the predecessor schools and so the

national press in particular, the unions and the local councils have no ammunition – we have it!
(Respondent 1)

The creation of the post of Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Schools and Learners) in the DCSF held by Lord Adonis, coupled with the DfES' (now DCSF) commissioning of a five year longitudinal study into the impact of Academies, has significantly reduced the amount of negative media coverage on Academies. Their trend towards oversubscription now indicates parental confidence and the move for both selective and also fee-paying independent schools to become Academies is also changing the focus of some media coverage. Elsewhere the Conservative Party's backing of the Academies expansion programme, has also served to shift the focus from individual Academy leaders to the programme nationally, thereby accelerating the demand for Academy places in some areas and maintaining a steady state demand in the rest.

The public scrutiny does not, however, rest only with the media but also with the DCSF, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

'When you take over the leadership of a school like this which has had several generations of endemic failure it is quite a challenge to maintain the positive feeling amongst the staff and also the students when you know that the place has to be inspected by HMI then Ofsted in a relatively short space of time. It is certainly very necessary but has to also be very carefully managed and it certainly doesn't help when you have the unions telling staff that they shouldn't prepare written lesson plans or take part in any briefing meetings which might in fact help them be better prepared for the inspection. Battling against what seems like a minority who want the children and the school to continue to fail is wearing, but we have to fight it and now the unions have backed off. We had a good inspection report and the staff seem far less inclined to listen to what the unions or the papers have to say about us anymore, particularly because they can see that it is not accurate or indeed true most of the time.'
(Respondent 2)

An interesting dimension which four of the respondents interviewed raised concerned the international interest in the Academies programme. They talked of the frequency of requests for visits from leaders and educationalists from other countries including Australia, the United Arab Emirates and Spain to see the organisation and leadership plus curriculum delivery which their Academies offered:

'I know we are often asked by the DCSF and also the SSAT [Specialist Schools and Academies Trust] to accommodate visitors from schools in England but I didn't expect the level of interest in Academies to be as world wide as it has become. I know the Charter Schools in America have had lots of interest and many have been phenomenally successful but I guess we are actually different in that we are funded by public money but are also independent. One of them even came with a press cutting from one of their national newspapers which reported the Academies in a very positive light so they wanted to come and see it for themselves. This is certainly turning the tide – and ironically so – we are a hit in Australia but in our own country the media and even local people have been much slower and even reluctant to see the progress we have made in such a short time for their children.'

(Respondent 9)

The incorporation and formal recognition of Academies into the Special Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) has had a significant impact on their national profile amongst secondary schools. Respondents reported the benefits to their staff and their school:

'In a way, being part of the SSAT now means that we are seen less as something totally different but, rather, as another type of specialist school and this means that prospective staff are less threatened by the title of Academy. Our staff go on the same training as staff from other specialist schools and the creation of these SSAT Leadership Exchanges where we host up to twelve senior staff from other specialist schools here twice a year to look at what we excel in has really helped to open their eyes to what we do and show them that we really are quite cutting edge in some things and they can learn from us. We hosted one just a couple of weeks ago and a couple of days later I had a call from another school saying they had been speaking to someone who came to see us and could they also arrange a visit!'

(Respondent 12)

'Having a whole team at the SSAT devoted to the support and promotion of the work of Academies has been quite helpful in many ways for us. Not only can we network with other Academies in both a formal and less formal way, but we have a channel to communicate through and the growth of the communication and sharing has been very rapid indeed. You feel far less on your own as a head now that there are more and more Academies opening and I like the fact that I

have been able to mentor some new principals and guide them through some of the things which are specific to leading Academies which I had to sort of learn about on my own in the early days. It certainly means that even though you are watched by everyone all the time at the minute as a new principal you are less likely to make a mistake and have it all over the papers unlike the experience of some of us who have been in it from the start.'

(Respondent 8)

As a very publicly high profile programme the government has made use of several of the new Academies as centres from which to launch the announcement of major new national initiatives. This has brought with it extensive national media coverage, including television and three respondents talked of the very positive impact such media exposure has had for their Academy:

'We heard that Tony Blair was going to come and both open this Academy and also make an important national announcement about literacy only the day before he came. It was all over the television that night and the timing was perfect as we had our new intake Open Evening the following week. Parents were ringing up the school wanting to know when they could come and look around and then the national papers had us in it and the local press got on the back of it with a front page piece with the PM on it. We had 2,000 brochures printed which we thought would last us three years but we had got rid of them all within two weeks and had over 800 applications for Year 7 when there are 180 places. It was a fantastic piece of positive advertising for us and all the negative press we had previously suddenly seemed to go into reverse and we are called up quite a lot for comment on things by the national papers. I do know that one day they are your best friend and the next they can turn but we manage them carefully and have benefited all the way so far in the past 7 months or so.'

(Respondent 10)

'Dame Kelly Holmes came to do a piece on her work with the Youth Sports Trust and they chose us because of our sports specialism. They've used all the pictures for those huge national posters and bill boards and it has our logo on all the students' kit in them. The SSAT have also used us in their promotional materials, again with our very distinctive logo and name so we've become a bit of a brand in some circles and parents and children like to be associated with a brand that is aligned with high achieving people and national initiatives so we have had some really positive responses and people wanting to join

due partly to that visit. When you've been a school which had a stigma of failure it is quite incredible how just one major visit can turn local people's perceptions of the place around almost overnight even if you have been getting better results for the two years previously. I can't underestimate the power of the press as the saying goes.'

(Respondent 4)

In many respects the entrepreneurial dimension which the model presents can best be seen in the way in which such principals have been able to capitalise on the positive media coverage of their Academies, coupled with the high level of political awareness of the impact it can have at both a local and national level. In many ways, through doing so, they have been able to translate the work of the government to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Academies programme into the work they are doing at a local level and challenge the perceptions of the community they serve.

The majority of the respondents interviewed talked of the importance of involving the local community in the work of the Academy and winning their confidence. Since the majority of those Academies in the sample replaced schools which had been severely underperforming for many years, they also had a particular reputation in the local area. As a result, many parents who themselves attended the predecessor school had views on the school which were not always positive. Working to welcome these parents into the Academy and also show them that it was providing opportunities for their children has been a challenge for the principals but one which they saw as being of paramount importance in increasing student enrolment and sustaining the improvements their Academy had made so far. These principals felt that it was the parents from the local community who more than any other group, were watching their Academy and their leadership the closest and were the main source of the close public scrutiny.

'This is a very old established community, a bit like the East End mafia, and they work in groups of families and big extended families in everything they do. If there is a problem with one of their children you get about five families all up at the school in the middle of the day demanding to see me. We got to the stage where we thought – right, we need to make them see that there is a right way of behaving and making representation and that they would be taken seriously so we ask them to put their complaint in writing and it is heard formally and they really like this because they can see that we take it seriously and investigate it and invite them in to hear what we have found. They have their status then and we do it properly and they know they are not just fobbed off. They are keen to send their kids here now because they know we do things professionally and we listen to them properly.'

(Respondent 1)

'In many ways, the parents are wary of us still because many of them had a bad experience of school and even though this is a different building because it's on the same site where they went they are reluctant to come in. They think we are going to be the same to them as when they were at school but of course it's a completely different place. We are the only local school for their children so they have no choice but to send them here. They seem happy with the deal their children get and the fathers and men generally are far more open to coming in to use our sports facilities, so now that we have things for the mothers including during the daytime, there is a positive feel about the place from them and they have even been quite forthcoming in setting up a Parents Association to help the resources in the school for their children. I go along to the race nights and things they run so that they can see the human side of the Academy. They are definitely much less suspicious and wary of us now and I feel far less under their beady eye all the time. They are also happy to tell me what they think I'm doing wrong and how I could do things better for their kids and that's a huge step forward from the silence I had for the first couple of years!'

(Respondent 7)

Although all twelve respondents experienced a genuine feeling of being held to account to a level which they had never felt as heads in previous schools, all reflected that in order to undertake the task of transforming a school such as the ones they led, required a commitment and a realisation prior to accepting the post of principal that there would, by necessity, be a requirement for high levels of accountability and scrutiny, at least from the educational and inspection authorities such as the DCSF and HMI/Ofsted. What none of them anticipated was the degree to which their role and its outcomes would take centre stage in a national political battle between the government, the opposition, the teaching unions and fuelled by both the local and national press and media. In addition, parents being mindful of their child's education and opportunities were a further dimension in the public scrutiny and lay comment and observation, the degree to which could not have been predicted.

Leading an Academy is clearly not an exact science, although with the expansion of the programme there are more tested methods to lean upon to secure positive outcomes for the children and the schools. All twelve Academy principals indicated that leading in a climate of such diverse close public scrutiny has been one of the single biggest challenges in their professional careers but this in turn has fuelled them with a determination to succeed.

Conclusions

Several key conclusions can be drawn from the interviews with the twelve Academy principals.

1. Political/political awareness

When faced with a highly demanding job of raising standards from an extremely low base, maintaining awareness of political developments is critical. Attempting to inform the emerging 'educational stories' which appear in the press and elsewhere places an Academy principal in a strong position to prepare responses and to demonstrate reality for their organisation. Academy principals are frequently requested to comment in the press and on television. This pressure to respond to questions posed by a variety of sources and the decision and judgement to do so can only be secure with a thorough awareness of the political and political landscape.

2. Prepare your staff and listen to them

Given the relative newness of the Academies programme there has as yet been little opportunity for staff working in Academies to move between the organisations. Rather, most staff join Academies from local authority maintained schools with little if any experience of the reaction or pressure they may face from others outside the Academies programme. Academy principals, experienced, resilient and confident about their own motivations for taking the job, need to be mindful of the experiences of their staff who may experience a degree of hostility and challenge over issues which may have little if any truth but be perpetuated by the local environment and the media. Preparing staff to deal with these situations and ensuring they are well informed and supported is necessary to secure an Academy in the wider community and profession.

3. Take the lead: involve and invite

By proactively inviting the community and parents into their Academy, principals felt able to gain greater control of their domain and establish relationships with these groups on a more positive footing. Much of the myth and suspicion can be alleviated by people seeing the reality of the school and by having the opportunity

to ask questions and test ideas first hand which they may have only heard from secondary sources. The long-term effect of them spreading the word outside the school will have a far greater impact than keeping them at the gate and just telling them what is happening – they have to see to believe.

4. Make the local press work for you - develop a bigger, stronger voice

All local newspapers are under pressure to sell copy and most know that photographs and positive pieces on schools sell more copies than items that arguably alienate prospective readers. By purposefully building relationships with the local press and providing them with items to run which focus on the achievements of the students rather than somewhat drier political issues which arguably engage a lesser number of readers, the local press are assured a way in to the Academy. Furthermore developing such a positive relationship with the media can be important in attempting to minimise the potential impact of genuine, negative stories when they arise. In this way, schools are in a stronger position to deal with unforeseen negative stories when they arise and may be able to secure a more sympathetic ear.

5. Engage professionally and open the door

Although other schools have often seen Academies as some form of threat or subversive element in a local area, opening the door professionally for the benefit of the children and indeed the staff has been an effective way for some of the principals in the sample to break down any actual or perceived hostility. Programmes such as those run by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) which provide a formal or official opportunity for staff from non-Academy schools to visit Academies and experience first hand their work further contributes to the development of an understanding of Academies. In the same way, the inclusion of many Academies in Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiatives and the Leading Edge Partnership Programme aids better appreciation of the work undertaken by Academies. Even running training on some of the areas of excellence in an Academy for other schools can be an eye-opening positive experience for those previously reluctant, suspicious or wary of Academies.

7. Network professionally

In many respects, as the Academies programme has grown, respondents reported feeling a strength in numbers and support for one another at principal level. Rather than facing competition and opposition there is a genuine feeling of togetherness

in the mission which Academy principals have committed themselves to. Although working often in different contexts and with differing challenges at varying times in their leadership, the opportunity for Academy principals to forge both formal and informal links to support one another and develop and share positive strategies to secure successful outcomes often amidst local or national opposition cannot be underestimated.

The Academies programme is still relatively new when considered in the context of the great history of educational reform in England, but the attention it has attracted from its inception has been enormous. Leading in a climate of close public scrutiny has arguably placed new demands on Academy leaders as they attempt to manage a wealth of media and public sources which did not exist even twenty years ago. The power of the internet and instant communication requires a high level of political awareness, entrepreneurial skill and personal resilience. Leading in such a climate is perhaps less a job then and rather a way of life. However, it is one which those principals interviewed have embraced and in doing so have determined to move the microscope into their own spotlight in a very positive way to the benefit of their Academy.

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