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**'How do teachers' articulate 'effective' with regard to leadership? An exploration of how contextual factors function and shape leadership within a Primary School.**

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## **Introduction**

This paper centres on exploring how do contextual factors function and shape leadership of Primary Schools. Methodologically the research is best described as 'involved' research and is informed by interpretivist principles, seeking to gain a deeper professional understanding. Social reality for the author is meaningfully understood by perceiving individuals as social actors, actors who are not always fully aware of the impact of the social stage on their actions. The social stage consists of the often implicit expectations of 'communities of practice'. This research is interested in how individual actors' interpretations of their actions are situated in such communities and where is their understanding about processes at play in the leadership they are experiencing.

The study investigated within this paper is a qualitative research project drawing on data originating from a small scale case study involving research of leadership in a Primary School within the North West of England. As the research project is qualitative it is interpretive in nature as it is concerned with the meanings teachers articulate with regards to 'effective primary school leadership'. As Saunders et al (2009:596) state it is '*naturalistic*' in the sense that the research 'is adopting an ethnographic strategy in which the researcher researches the phenomenon with the context in which it occurs', in this instance the research was carried out within the school'.

It is suggested that as the relationship was explored between, 'how do teachers' articulate effective with regard to leadership of a primary school', a meaningful process of development emerged from the data. The 'development' explained the meanings and experience of leadership from the perspective of the participants and thus provided a framework for discussion, this framework centres around four emerging claims of what constitutes 'effective leadership', which are: '*Contextual factors*'; '*Core Values*'; '*Guidance and Direction*' and '*Leading & Managing processes*':

## **Indicative Literature Review**

The field of educational leadership and management is important for government policies of school improvement because it is often used to explain differing outcomes and therefore is a measure of success. Since 1988 it has been regularly debated by both academics and policy-makers what the priorities of school leaders should be. Mainly over the last three decades owing to Educational reforms the role of headteachers and principals has changed dramatically. How a school is led and managed is regarded by both policy-makers and practitioners as a key factor in ensuring a school's success. According to a systematic review conducted by Bell et al (2003:1), "*there is a widespread, strongly held belief that school leadership makes a difference and that headteachers should be supported and trained to raise educational standards.*" In addition, "*the school as an organisational context for the work of leaders is complex*" (Southworth 2004). Leaders in a school have to deal with multiple variables that change constantly in a variety of ways and as a result have to be conscious of the contextual factors impinging on their behaviour.

Day et al (2010), building on the earlier work of Leithwood et al (2006), identified, 10 strong claims between the concepts of effectiveness and successful leadership. Their research was conducted over a three year period and involved a national sample of schools. Their research found that it was not in examination results that schools define success but rather in, *'terms of personal and social outcomes, pupil and staff motivation, engagement and wellbeing, the quality of teaching and learning and the school's contribution to the community.'*(Day et al 2010:2).

Within this study the focus is on the Primary sector, the reason being, is that they are the largest and most varied group of schools in the English education system and although context is recognised as important to leadership little has been paid to it in school leadership research. Leithwood et al in their study of '7 strong claims to successful leadership' note that although they recognise that 'some would go so far as to claim that *'context is everything'* they rather believe that this is a rather *'superficial view of what leaders do'* (Leithwood et al 2006:31). They acknowledge that successful leaders are *'sensitive'* to context but leaders as a result do not use differing practices in differing contexts but rather, contextually sensitive combinations of the basic leadership practices.' (ibid:31). This is echoed in the research conducted by Day et al (2010:9), *'whilst our evidence confirms that most successful heads draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices, the case studies confirm that the selection and combination of practices used depends on context.'*

Context is not a simple phenomenon, it is forever in a state of flux, *"it is multiple, blended and variable, because contexts also change over time."* (Southworth 2004:2). Although Levin et al (2007) advocate context as opportunity. Context in which a school works, comes in many forms and the role of headteacher in primary schools is one that is developing rapidly to reflect an educational landscape that is changing at a national and local level (NCLS 2009). In addition, the very fact that though schools' operate within a devolved system they are steered by central government policies and funding streams and the continuous development of educational policy. Thus any exploration of context needs to acknowledge that the label covers many things and it is how these contextual matters interrelate and interact which makes each school different from the rest. Levin et al (2007:4) believe context to be more *'complex'* and *'multi-layered'* and believe that although some researchers acknowledge that context is seen as important, *'our ideas about it often rest on limited evidence or anecdote.'*(ibid:6) Levin et al believe that, *'seeing beneath the surface of good practice means grasping the context in which it is showcased and perceiving the conditions that make it possible and transferable.'* (ibid:9).

Furthermore, this research to date has tended to concentrate on what the leader does, in other words leader behaviour. It has concerned itself with the transformation in attitudes and motivations and therefore behaviour of followers . Leader behaviour is concerned with defining the future, making sure everyone is in alignment with that 'vision' and then inspiring them to make it happen no matter what and then ensuring that their own and their followers 'actions' achieve that vision. Do these 'actions' take into account the way contextual factors combine to create specific leadership challenges and opportunities?

The debate is a continuous process but there is a gap in the literature and one which addresses my review questions in that the acceptable working definition for the National College School Leadership (NCSL) and therefore the government bodies lies in the fact that leadership is seen as a process of influence and that leaders lead with a vision albeit a shared vision. This highlights the notion that it is a shared vision and this paper provides some insight into a shared vision however, 'where is the understanding about processes that are at play in the leadership they are experiencing'? The school effectiveness issue takes no account of differing aims and objectives of schools. The identification of schools which were successful i.e. produced better test results were then studied and the characteristics of these better performing schools were, and are referred to as the school effectiveness factors.

School leadership research in the main has centred on leaders. Researchers have studied leaders as persons and the individual roles they perform in an attempt to identify 'the secrets of their success'. Often too much emphasis has been put on the role of the headteacher and this therefore "implies a heroic and charismatic view of leadership". (Southworth 2004). This attention to the individual often ignores attention to the context in which they work. Headteachers are of course very important but so too are the situations in which they work, "*leadership is contingent upon environmental and contextual factors.*"(Southworth 2004:1) My research interest is to investigate whether and how contextual factors function and shape leadership and in relation to that, what is effective leadership and what is the best way to measure impact of headteachers as effective leaders? Furthermore does this effectiveness have a bearing on the size of organisation? OFSTED recognises three aspects that mark out successful leadership in schools, "monitoring; evaluating the quality of teaching and learning; and taking steps to improve the quality of teaching." (Southworth 2004). Does the mastery of these three aspects make a school an outstanding one? Much has been written and researched about monitoring and evaluation but my interest is in '*the steps to be taken to improve schools.*'

### **Recent crisis in education research**

As a research field Educational Leadership and Management is relatively new having been developed over the last 40 years (Bush 1999). It is only recently that it has developed in its own right having drawn upon theory and practice from the management field and from the social sciences.

In 1996 in the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) annual lecture David Hargreaves, a renowned educationalist, gave what was to become an infamous critique and turning point for educational research. He suggested at the time that research was poor value for money and that it 'inadequately served the teaching profession.' He believed it lacked relevance to the work of educational organisations. He advocated a commitment to 'evidence-based' practice. It caused great debate amongst both academics and professionals and was to greatly influence TTA policy and therefore practitioner research. (TTA, 1996). Other influential bodies raised questions concerning the quality and usefulness of educational research such as the Tooley Report (Tooley and Darby, 1998) funded by OfSTED and the Hillage Report (Hillage et al., 1998) funded by the DfES (Burton 2008:4). On the other hand could it be as Hammersley

(1997) argued that these critics took a '*simplistic*' view of research? He advocated that the critics oversimplified the cause and effect relationship of research which led to routes of action.

The crisis was borne out of the insistence that research should have an impact on professional or political practice. The problem was and still is to some extent, that there is no 'universal agreement' about what this involves. Hammersley believes the reality is far more complex and '*thus we should treat the whole research process as problematic by taking a more interpretivist approach to educational research.*' (ibid:141).

The latest idea which is exciting the field of school is that of 'distributed leadership' it has become the leadership idea of the moment (Gronn 2002; Harris 2002; Spillane 2005; Hammersley-Fletcher et al 2007; Leithwood et al 2006; Day et al 2010). However it is not a new idea it can be traced back to the mid 20s and possibly earlier. According to Spillane (2005), it is a term that is often used interchangeably with 'shared leadership', 'team leadership' and 'democratic leadership'. However according to Spillane (2005) it is dependent on the situation when a distributed perspective allows for shared leadership. And as Harris (2004:13) explains it is best to think of distributed leadership as '*a way of thinking about leadership*'. For her, distributed leadership concentrates on capitalising on expertise wherever it exists within the organisation rather than focusing on formal roles etc.

For Spillane '*a distributed perspective frames leadership practice in a particular way: leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation.*'(2005:1) It is not the actions of individuals that are paramount but the interactions among them. Spillane advocates that leaders 'act' in 'situations' that are defined by others' actions. It could be argued that this perspective on situation is not new but rather something from the Contingency school of thought. They advocate that situation works independently to influence a leader's behaviour. Spillane (ibid:4) however believes that, '*situation does not simply affect what school leaders do as an independent, external variable*' it is inextricably linked.

Distributed leadership differs in that it is a move away from theorizing and empirical enquiry focused on a single leader which has often been the norm to date in the field of school leadership. It is as a result of structural changes across school systems which have resulted in alternative models or forms of leadership practice. "*A contemporary distributed perspective on leadership, therefore, implies that the social context and the inter-relationships therein, is an integral part of the leadership activity.*" (Leithwood et al 2006:45) and Gronn (2002:424) argue for viewing the notion of distributed leadership as 'a unit of analysis which encompasses patterns or varieties of distributed leadership'. Harris (2004) concurs with this view point believing that much of the research literature has focused on the formal headship and has overlooked leadership that can be distributed across the various many roles and functions found in a school and can be sustainable. It was this focus on middle leadership and the distribution of leadership within a school that this study was concerned with.

## **Research aim and question**

The aim and purpose of the study is to understand how do leaders make a difference? The issue is not so much whether heads and other leaders make a difference as how they do so. To suggest meaningful explanations and insights concerning the findings, what links can be found? What for stakeholders' is 'effective' and will the insights be of value to the teaching profession? The author is aware of the fact that the social construction that is observed will be derived from the actions and meanings individuals have placed on them, an interpretive approach, and the meanings that she brings to it. However, the author also fully understands that the social structures of the school itself will produce meanings and will affect how the participants will behave, themes from the data so far has suggested this.

The overriding study set out to answer one main question: ***How do teachers' articulate 'effective' with regard to leadership?***

## **Methodology**

My intellectual puzzle was concerned with the 'effectiveness' of leadership in primary schools in understanding how contextual factors function and shape that leadership. Therefore in trying to understand the world in which educational researchers operate I, as a researcher worked within a range of beliefs about the ways in which education and research can be understood as practice, (Morrison 2006).

Social reality for me is one where social phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors and because of constant interaction these 'social phenomena' are in a constant state of revision. So my respondents will perceive different situations in many different ways as a consequence of their own view of the world. The different interpretations they have will therefore affect their actions and the nature of their social interactions with others. As social actors they will not only interact with 'their environment' but will make sense of it through their own interpretations of events and the meanings that they draw from these events. Within this research I did not see them as an objective reality but rather as a subjective reality I needed to understand the effects of their motives, actions and intentions in a meaningful way to fully appreciate this study.

My question stemmed from a wish to understand how do leaders make a difference? More often than not leadership in schools has been learnt by on-the-job experiential learning and my experience has taught me that leadership varies incredibly even within the same socioeconomic environments. My 'methodological strategy' (Mason 2007) was built around assembling data, evidence and argument which can be used to generate ideas and propositions 'unfinished resources' to be used for future exploration. The strategy in this small scale research study operationalized what teachers articulated 'effective' was with regard to what leadership looked like and how it can be observed, known and measured.

In this study my research did not lend itself to one method but rather a mixture of them, "*by having a cumulative view of data drawn from different contexts, we may be able to triangulate the 'true' state of affairs by examining where the different data intersect.*" (Silverman

2010:133). However Punch (2006) warns that a naïve view should not be adopted in thinking that 'an aggregation of data' will provide you with a clear complete picture. He advocates that it should be attempted as a dry run for further studies. My attempt in triangulating my data was to seek to corroborate one source and method with another. There was a need however in this instance to be aware of what the different sets of data were telling me about the same phenomena. I was continually conscious of how they linked at the differing levels of knowledge and explanation. Can these different data sources and methods contribute towards a convincing argument in my intellectual puzzle? Education, educational research, the social sciences are very complex set of interrelated issues and if I want to ask questions about these issues then it needs to be an ongoing process in thinking about how to answer them, I need to continually revisit what it is I am studying and about 'knowledge' and how am I coming by it.

### **Cognitive Mapping & Interview process**

I chose concept mapping because relationships between concepts are demonstrated by propositions which are produced by the linking of two or more concepts by words written by the respondents which form a 'meaningful' statement. In this form it was used as an initial data gathering method to understand and represent the respondent's 'mental representation' of 'effective leadership'.

As Blumer advocates, '*human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them*', in other words other individuals, and '*that the meanings of such things is derived from or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows*' (Blumer 1986:2) therefore in order to understand leadership it is important to understand the actions that people expect of a leader. It is with this purpose in mind that concept mapping was used, not to gain a list of traits and attributes but more to gain an understanding of the respondents' expectations of their role and how this influences their meaning of leadership as a whole.

In addition I chose semi-structured interviewing as my epistemological position was to strive to gain meaningful ways to generate data. So with my ontological position I want to talk interactively with stakeholders, to ask them questions, to listen to them, 'to gain access to their accounts and articulations' (Mason 2007) and possibly to analyse their use of language and discourse.

According to Punch (2006), Mason (2007) and Basse (1999) qualitative studies vary greatly and the design and 'procedures' of them will develop during the research. This type of research is exploratory, and in Mason's words (1996:24), 'fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive.' The research methods decisions about design and strategy are ongoing and 'are grounded in the practice, process and context of the research itself'.

I was not intending to take the view point that 'one-size-fits all' but explored 'specific experiences'; 'ascertained their reasonings and judgements' in certain areas by focussing on events and situations and furthermore provided the means for what Mason (2007) refers to as 'free association.' My aim ontologically and epistemologically was to, '*ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus so that situated knowledge can be produced.*' (Mason

2007:62). My aim was to cover a set of starting points for discussion in order to gain a perspective on the respondents' meanings and understandings of what they consider to be an effective leader.

Validity, relates to the 'truthfulness' the accuracy of research data. If my data results are to be considered accurate then the research tool must measure what it claims to measure. "*An indicator is valid to the extent that it empirically represents the concept it purports to measure*". (Punch 2010:100) Positivists advocate the standardisation of data collection in their large samples, piloting in this method for accuracy is therefore vitally important. Interpretivists on the other hand place the emphasis on the 'final account' and how the researcher is able to defend their interpretations (Punch 2010). In the semi-structured interviews I aimed to explore 'specific experiences'; 'ascertain their reasonings and judgements' in certain areas by focussing on events and situations and explore 'free association,' validity in my interviewing, "*the degree to which findings correctly map the phenomenon in question*" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998:186), was therefore appropriately addressed.

In addition the main potential source of invalidity in interviews is bias. Cohen and Manion (1994) suggest 'careful formulation of questions and interview training' as possible solutions. Or as Bush (2006); Scott & Morrison (2006) advocate the risk of biasness may be reduced by obtaining 'respondents validation'. In other words return the transcripts to the interviewee for confirmation or amendment. In this respect the respondents validated the transcripts. However as a social constructivist, I am conscious that how do we know what we mean is true and that over time this may change. My interest lies in its relevance and resonance with other practitioners.

Silverman (2010) raises another issue, when he refers to the researcher avoiding the 'special temptation of anecdotalism', in other words where the researcher chooses a few special examples to illustrate the findings. He believes a way to overcome this is in triangulation. For this study two forms of data gathering was the intention however this could be an area for development for future research.

### **Selection of the School for Case Study and Semi-Structured interviews**

Case study research involves the careful examination of a particular issue or phenomenon such as the study of leadership and management.

After careful consideration of practical issues and theoretical stances the study adopted 'purposive sampling' as the criteria for selection of a case study. For Silverman, "*purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature of process in which we are interested.*" (Silverman 2010:141). He advocates that this requires careful consideration and a critical analysis about the '*parameters of the population we are studying*' (ibid:141).

The rationale for the selection of the school for this study was based on Ofsted's standardised criteria against which they evaluate a school: overall effectiveness; achievements and



standards; personal development and well-being; quality of provision and leadership and management. So therefore the school was chosen because:

- The school is considered by Ofsted as 'effective' in regard to leadership, as clearly stated in the Ofsted report for that organisation.
- The school has a non-teaching Head who therefore devotes most of their time to leadership and management.
- The Head has been in the school long enough for school procedures and leadership processes to be well established.

With the above as the criteria a particular primary school in the North West was identified and selected for singularity of study with six respondents taking part. For Merriam (1998), the reasoning of a case study is a 'thick description' that illustrates the reader's understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore the choice of a single study to gain 'thick description' is further endorsed by Southworth's (1995) study of a primary school headteacher, who demonstrated how case studies could enable the researcher to study school leadership in context and in sufficient depth, to illustrate the understanding of its complex and embedded nature.

Bassey (1999:62) believes, *'singularity is chosen because it is expected in some way to be typical of something more general.'* He believes that a case study, *'conducted within a localised boundary of space and time'* should be used to *'explore significant' features of the case; to create 'plausible' interpretations; to be trustworthy in the interpretations; to provide a 'worthwhile' story; to relate it to any 'relevant research' and above all to provide an audit trail.'* Bassey (1999:65)

### **The information gathering process**

Concept mapping was introduced to the respondents and a clear explanation of what was expected was given. In this instance the interviewees were familiar with the procedure. The respondents were then given a large piece of paper with the question, 'how do you articulate 'effective' with regard to leadership? They were then asked to think about, and write on 'post-its', the words that they believed are central to being an effective leader of a primary school. As the process was being recorded they were asked to think aloud, this was important as I was seeking what the respondents thought along with their meanings and understandings. This proved invaluable as the respondents spoke more around the concepts than they wrote on the map as they were describing their associations, their inferences and what was behind their reasoning. After the respondents were happy with the map they were asked to link the concepts as they saw fit and add any words/phrases to describe the relationships between the concepts in their opinion. All of this process was later transcribed and uploaded to NVivo.

The aim of the concept map is to gain an understanding and representation of what the respondents 'mental representation' of 'effective leadership' is and by recording and asking them to 'think-aloud' gain an insight into how their interactions have influenced the development of these concepts. By using an interview guide based on the themes developed

in the concept mapping, a thematic approach was attempted putting forward a set of starting points for discussion. The intention was for it to be 'fluid' (Mason 2007) so that unexpected themes may be developed. By using my 'fieldnotes' (Mason 2007) my intention was to provide an account of my interpretation of the interaction of what was happening at the time.

## **Findings**

My intention was then to develop an 'interpretive reading' of my information and try to construe what I thought the data meant or represented and what I thought I could infer from it. On loading the information onto NIVO common themes and keywords became apparent, so I decided to use the concept headings that were devised by the respondents: ***Contextual factors; Core Values; Guidance and Direction and Leading and Managing processes.***

### Theme One

The first emerging theme was identified by the fact that the respondents identified 'effective leadership' to be driven by contextual factors that interrelated with the school. What was important to me was that all six respondents referred to these contextual factors:

- i. Culture and communities the school is operating within; the socioeconomic environment; the variable aspects of a teacher's own 'professional stance', the professional practice they belong to; developmental & personal needs; the school's performance levels; government policies and funding streams; the continuous development of local and national education policy; Ofsted; local and governmental initiatives;

### Theme Two

The second emerging theme was identified by the fact that the respondents identified 'effective leadership' to be driven by four core values:

- i. Family & Community atmosphere – which was reflected through a commitment to caring for others, making them feel safe and secure, wanting them to be content in their school and not threatened through the development and manifestation of a culture of trust.
- ii. Valuing the individual – which was reflected in an open door policy where everyone was considered worthwhile and of value. What was evident to me was that valuing the individual was also exemplified by the fact that the Head is conscious that his staff have a life outside of school and that in order to be effective in school they he recognised this fact:

*"They just let me know if they think something needs to be done, they are not backwards at coming forwards and they can speak to me in that way because although sometimes I have to take difficult decisions my door is always open and I am open to anyone."*

*"It is a very nice place to work, I never feel threatened."*

*"It is a balance really between leading people and taking their ideas on board and making them feel worthwhile and valued."*

- iii. Throughout this research there was a commitment to learning for all, based on a balanced curriculum with a special focus on literacy and numeracy coupled with a strong commitment to learning for the staff:

*"There is a strong focus on the learning side here, the ethos that this is a lovely place to be and a good place to learn, a good atmosphere to learn."*

*"We did this 'learning to learn creatively' initiative, a lot of that was going in and working with other teachers and doing co-coaching, team-teaching, sharing good practice throughout the school."*

*"It is important that other people have responsibilities for their own personal development. (The Head) has had the foresight to bring in people who are sort of learners for the future and want to move on and I think that is important for the school....you need to move forward and he gives you the confidence to do that....he has given (a member of staff) him as much opportunity here to develop himself and I think that's honourable...as a result they then pass that on".*

- iv. What became evident to me throughout this study was that inspiring others, which was reflected in an expectation of high performance for the pupils and the staff and a genuine interest in the strive for on-going and sustainable improvement, was of importance to all of the respondents.

*"We expect a lot from our children and we expect a lot from our staff."*

*"I think someone strong at the top encourages you to do a good job, inspires you to do it."*

*"I think the expectations are absolutely perfect...I do think (the Head) has got it absolutely perfect, I do think his and our expectations are so very high but it is also fair, everything is fair and realistic."*

*"They need to be inspirational because if you can't bring all your colleagues, teaching staff and non teaching staff on board then you are not going to get anywhere, you need to have a team and leaders of teams need to be inspirational by example."*

*"You lead by example, you take them along but you need the people skills to deal with your governors, parents and community as a whole."*

### Theme Three

The third emerging theme that was developed in relation to the research question describes the strategies involved in providing guidance and direction for effective leadership and can be seen through the following strategies:

- i. Attributes as expected to be seen in a leader such as; diplomatic, calm, strength & steel, common sense, personable, knowledge, dealing with opposition, well organised and honesty.

Although the Head can at times be autocratic he does share leadership depending on the situation as articulated by one of the respondents:

*"I would say (decision making) is shared. If there are issues that come up then we will meet as the Senior Leadership Team and he will run by everything that is going on in the school...some times he has had to make decisions as they have to be made quickly, but he will discuss it. We are well informed and also the staff as well, staff meetings, decisions made about the curriculum will be shared with staff and staff get a lot of input into what is happening within the school."*

Furthermore in the School employing and demonstrating different leadership strategies dependent on the situation is the norm:

*"Mr H., has got it in bucket loads...and that is largely down to his personality...The reason why our school has made so many leaps and bounds in the last few years is because of this one, Strength and Steel. Because he has the strength and steel to say to people you know this is what you need to do and you know if you aren't doing it you will have to go. That is why we are here now....It instils something in them that you know, this is my job and I have to do it the best I can."*

- ii. Modelling and communicating best practice:

*"Mr H has absolutely taken this school by the scruff of its neck and brought it whoosh right up."*

*"It is a balance really between leading people and taking their ideas on board and making them feel worthwhile and valued."*

*"He has a clear picture of where he wants us to go and how he wants the school to be and then we talk....and then we put ideas forward and we know our staff very well."*

*"I know that I have only been teaching for four years but I am thankful to have had leaders who have given be opportunities, lots of them, to challenge myself and get this wide experience of the wide roles of leading that I am doing in school, for me personally it is learning to learn creatively. I have been given opportunities to go and develop my*

*own skills first, if I didn't have that opportunity then I don't think I would be an effective leader in that role."*

iii. Goal setting and raising the standards.

Was articulated in the respondents belief that:

*"(The school should) be welcoming and happy and be a secure and safe atmosphere for the children to learn in. And that we put our children first and we do what we can to inspire them to be the best that they can be and to provide them with the best start."*

iv. Using symbols to reinforce ethos of the schools:

When asking the respondents to name a metaphor that illustrated for them what the school stood for, there were different answers but all portraying a sense of togetherness, achievement, potential:

*"The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe – when the White Witch was in charge, everywhere was kind of miserable, there was hardly any movement, there were no plants, no light. Now very quickly, everything is green and growing, the sun is coming out and the flowers are starting to grow. In terms of assessment and data before the red is when the children are not making progress and then it goes to orange and green when they are making progress. Yesterday Mr H. showed me the data on line, in the past it was blue and there were significant areas for improvement and now it is going towards green which is well above were it was, growing and getting better."*

#### Theme Four

The fourth and final theme to emerge from the data was that of Leading and Managing Processes, which when articulated by the respondents was epitomized by:

i. Developing teams and structures - It was the accepted norm that staff underwent continuing professional development:

*"It is important that we have someone like Mr H. to look up to and guide us as a mentor in my role and my leadership skills. I then feed that down to the staff, things like the coaching, I am hopefully reflecting the good practice that he is putting down to me and I am sharing that with our staff as well. Hopefully that is making me an effective leader in school."*

ii. Managing change, time and communication:

*"Good time management skills, because with school leaders if you have a lot of responsibilities you have got people coming to you more than what the normal teacher's role would be, so you need to manage your time well and prioritize your work load."*

*"I think they need to be well organized"*

*"They need to have a good knowledge of everything that is up-to-date which takes organization and...they obviously need to be a good time manager."*

- iii. Managing staff appointments and Democracy was articulated by the respondents within this study as being an important element of an 'effective' leader:

*'Staff trusting the leader and believing in them. They wouldn't perform as you would expect them to without it.'*

*'Sometimes you have to be autocratic and you have to...when we had the issues with capability issues, obviously there is no time to collaborate then you have to make the judgements and you have to make the decisions in that type of situation'*

### **Conclusion and discussion**

The purpose of this research was to understand how do leaders make a difference? To suggest meaningful explanations and insights concerning the findings, what links can be found? What for stakeholders' is 'effective'?

What I believe began to emerge from this small scale study was that according to the second theme, respondents articulated 'effective' school leadership as portrayed in a family atmosphere; 'happy welcoming school'; 'friendly atmosphere'; family culture as in concern for others; making sure that they feel safe and secure, it is often referred to as the 'human' aspect of leadership (Telford 1996). Or as Day and Leithwood (2007:172) refer to it as, '*emotional understanding: empathy; trust....creating safe teaching and learning environments*', which is linked very closely to what they also refer to as, '*emphasising the individual*', '*building person-centred communities*'. (ibid:172). Schools where care is predominantly evident are 'family' in orientation and often refer to working in teams (Cardno 2002) (Hall and Wallace 1996). In this study central to the School was a concern for others and to achieving 'effective leadership there was a definite focus on valuing the individual.

A further theme from this research that was developing was in line with Stoll et al (2002:41) who believe that in the ever changing life of a school, leaders need to promote '*on going and sustainable learning at all levels*'. This was echoed in practice by the respondents in the School.

Furthermore within the School the mission statement encompasses words such as 'provide high quality educational opportunities', 'fulfill their potential', 'develop valued and responsible citizens' goal setting and raising high standards which echoed the respondents articulations and was the acceptable norm throughout the School.

Throughout this study, it was interesting to see that in the ever changing life of a school, leaders at all levels need to promote on going and sustainable learning at all levels.

Ribbins (2003) believes that it is possible for teachers to feel involved and contributing to the development of the school whilst operating in a hierarchical structure where the Head is seen and acts as a 'strong' leader. An autocratic stance need not be threatening and can be positive when situations require. *'Shared leadership, team leadership are not synonyms for distributed leadership,'* according to Spillane, (2005:4), it depends on the situation whether a distributed perspective allows for shared leadership. Similarly as Spillane believes, *'a distributed perspective allows for leadership that can be democratic or autocratic,'* (ibid). This links with the research by the fact that in the School employing and demonstrating different leadership strategies dependent on the situation was the norm.

Sustainable leadership means embedding the leadership at all levels throughout an organisation as Leithwood & Jantzi (1999) found when investigating direct effects on school conditions that, *'developing structures to foster participation in school decisions'* was an important element in effective leadership'

Throughout this research the articulations of the respondents were in my belief for that particular moment in time, honest and true as Bell (1984:199) indicates, *'these observations are the key to understanding those forces of power and influence, both inside and outside schools, which control and regulate them. Only in this way can the internal organisation of schools be fully understood.'*

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