

Leadership as shared practice in outstanding schools and colleges in England

This paper draws on leadership theory and empirical research in schools and colleges in England to analyse strategies for developing outstanding leadership as shared practice. Shared practice involves governors, principals, head teachers, assistant heads, other teacher leaders, students, pupils, parents and other stakeholders working collaboratively to lead and manage change in their schools, colleges and communities. Using theoretical perspectives from democratic and distributed leadership and data from interpretative research the paper will present illuminative case studies of outstanding schools and colleges. A novel method of presentation, a video case study of a college in a low socio-economic neighbourhood, will illustrate the journey to outstanding leadership and the passion for social justice and democratic values in leadership practice.

Leadership theory and theoretical perspective

Leadership theory distinguishes between varying approaches to leadership and seeks to identify characteristics of effective and successful leadership practice in different contexts, including schools and colleges located in poor neighbourhoods which may pose additional demands on leaders and leadership practices. This research draws on the body of literature and fieldwork in low socio-economic areas to analyse the strategies that enable leaders, leadership teams and their communities to develop outstanding schools and colleges, through shared practice. Theoretically, the notion of shared practice put forward in this paper builds on features of successful school leadership identified by researchers based in the United Kingdom (UK) and on two typologies of leadership: democratic and distributed leadership. It also has connections with the practice of partnership working and the development of a range of alliances, collaborations and partnerships between schools, colleges and other stakeholders aiming to improve educational achievement and opportunities (Dhillon 2013, Glatter 2003).

In relation to features of school leadership, Day *et al* (2010) offer eight dimensions of successful leadership and Barber *et al* (2010) provide a list of practices derived from a review of education systems across eight countries. The common features identified by this and other research (Bush 2008, NCSL 2007) are building a shared vision, establishing effective teams, enriching the curriculum, building trust and collaboration both within the school and with parents and the wider community. These features resonate with the fieldwork data presented in the results section of this paper and with characteristics of democratic leadership. Democratic leadership involves redistribution of power and authority amongst employees and managers and involvement of employees in decision making (Grimsley 2015). The key characteristics of democratic leadership are distribution of responsibility, empowering group members and aiding group decision-making processes which echo

some of the features of successful schools mentioned above and found by researchers in the field of school leadership in the UK.

This is also the case with respect to features of distributed leadership where leadership is seen as the property of a group or network of interacting individuals, the boundaries of leadership are open and expertise is distributed across many constituencies, e.g. parents, students, the local community as well as teachers and governors (Bennett *et al* 2003). In models of distributed leadership social capital as well as human capital is key to successful and outstanding leadership. In a review of the conceptual and empirical research on distributed leadership Bolden (2011) states that there has been a rapid growth of interest in this concept since 2000 'but research remains largely restricted to the field of school education and of proportionally more interest to UK than US-based academics' (Bolden 2001, p. 251).

Beyond the field of school education, research with high performing business and commercial organisations has identified three principles of outstanding leadership: 'they think and act systematically, they see people as the route to performance and they are self-confident without being arrogant' (Tamkin *et al* 2010 p.5-6). The emphasis on other people and social aspects of leadership rather than just the traits of the individual leader connects with the notion of outstanding leadership as shared practice developed through the empirical research for this study.

Policy context for empirical research

The empirical research reported in this paper is being undertaken in England and this section outlines key national and local policy issues for schools and colleges in this part of the UK. Educational policy in England is relentlessly focussed on high stakes assessment, comparison of performance and achievement levels, testing and accountability and enforced by a rigorous system of national inspection. The body responsible for undertaking inspections in schools and colleges, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), is a source of fear for leaders and teachers and loathed by many as it places them under intense pressure (Cullingford 2013) with some resorting to cheating and spending public money to boost their ranking in Ofsted inspection results (The Independent 2015). Ofsted uses a four point scale: outstanding (1), good (2), requires improvement (3) and inadequate (4) to grade state schools and colleges in England (Ofsted 2014). The overall grade is based on achievement and attainment of pupils/learners in external examination and national tests and inspection visits, during which teachers are observed teaching a range of classes and school policies and documents are scrutinised by nationally accredited inspectors. The inspection regime is driven by the government's ambition to perform well in international league tables, such as the

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and is reflective of other global trends in education, including the development of international league tables of universities and national league tables of schools. These national and global trends impact at a micro-level on the schools and colleges in this study as they are located in a region which is near the bottom of national league tables, with a high proportion of institutions judged by Ofsted to be '3 (requires improvement) or 4 (inadequate)'.

Data sources

The study is positioned within the interpretive paradigm (Crotty 1998) and uses case study research design (Yin 2009) to illuminate leadership as shared practice in schools and colleges rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted (Ofsted 2012). A range of data sources are used to interpret and synthesise characteristics of shared practice. These include secondary data: achievement and performance data, self assessment reports, documents produced for Ofsted inspection, and reports and papers for governing bodies. These data are complemented by qualitative data from participant observations of governing body meetings and semi-structured interviews with senior and middle leaders, teachers, governors, pupils and college students.

Results

The findings are presented as a composite list of the characteristics of outstanding leaders and of outstanding leadership as shared practice (Table 1 - *provided at the end of this document*). These characteristics are constructed from thematic coding of the data and position outstanding leadership as shared practice in relation to illuminative case studies of a college and a school, outlined below, and a video case study in which the principal of an outstanding college reflects on the journey to outstanding and beyond. The video will be part of the paper presentation at the conference.

1. Illuminative case study – College X

Overall effectiveness of the college: Outstanding (Grade 1)

Students make excellent progress and achieve extremely well. The vast majority of students successfully complete and achieve the qualifications on which they enrol and progress to higher levels of study or into employment. The standard of students' work is exceptionally high. Students are encouraged to take pride in their work and develop excellent practical skills well above the standard expected for the level of course.

Resources to support teaching and learning are of an exceptionally high standard. Classrooms are well equipped with interactive learning technology, and resources for practical teaching in all

curriculum areas are excellent. Teachers set very high standards, have very high expectations and use their vocational skills and expertise to make lessons motivating, interesting and memorable. Lessons are well planned, engaging and enable students to make rapid progress and achieve well.

Assessment practice is outstanding. Students are set challenging targets and their progress is frequently monitored and reviewed using a wide range of assessment strategies that enable teachers to provide detailed feedback that helps students improve.

Leaders, managers and governors have an ambitious vision for the college and its students. The college is rooted in its community and works in very strong partnership with key organisations for the benefit of students and to promote the regeneration and prosperity of the borough.

2. Illuminative case study 2 - School Y

Overall effectiveness of the school - Grade: 1 (Outstanding)

The overall effectiveness of the school is outstanding. In the short time since his appointment, the headteacher's drive and vision are having a significant impact on the life of the school. Standards, which are already very high, are continuing to rise as more students achieve the very highest grades. Although most students arrive at the school already having achieved very high levels of attainment by the end of Key Stage 2, they go on to make outstanding progress throughout their time in school so that by the time they leave, standards are exceptionally high.

One of the headteacher's early priorities has been to ensure that senior and subject leaders play a greater role in monitoring and evaluating the performance of subjects. He has successfully ensured that there is a greater shared responsibility among senior leaders in the school and with the governing body.

The school has made significant improvements since the last inspection and gives outstanding value for money. It has excellent capacity to improve further.

3. Video case study

(5 minutes of video)

In the video the principal and chief executive of a vocational college reflects on the challenges in the journey to becoming an outstanding college and the strategies and leadership practices of the people involved. His account of being 'a broken college' to becoming 'outstanding' (in Ofsted inspection) and now having the ambition to move 'beyond outstanding' conveys a passion for social

justice and the involvement of the whole leadership team and the wider college community in decision making.

Significance

The significance of this study for the theme of the conference is that it shows how public engagement in a diverse democracy (the UK) can enable outstanding education in schools and colleges, a necessary and essential condition for social justice, community cohesion and political and economic progress. The illuminative case studies exemplify how leadership as shared practice can enable the development of outstanding educational organisations despite the constraints of a national policy with a relentless focus on high stakes assessment, testing and accountability and the global pressures of international comparisons of educational standards. This research offers an interpretation of leadership as a social practice, as well as administrative practice, based on democratic values and distribution of power and responsibility, where spaces for debating differing and opposing strategies and visions of the purposes of education can effectively shape the work of educational organisations. The characteristics of outstanding leadership as shared practice presented in Table 1 can inform the development of leadership practice in other contexts and thus contribute to public scholarship of leadership in education.

Word count: 1925

Table 1: Characteristics of outstanding leaders and of outstanding leadership as shared practice

Outstanding leaders	Outstanding leadership as shared practice
<p>Inspirational Intelligent Capable Honest Fair Ambitious Inclusive Listening Collaborative Consultative Humble</p>	<p>Vision Shared values Moral purpose High levels of trust Passion There's no 'I' in team Some leaders focus on 'me, myself and I' 'It's my team...' Shared responsibility 'We are...' Communicating All on message Going the extra mile Our students deserve it High expectations Performance management Engagement and participation of all staff and pupils in decision making Sustained improvement Beyond outstanding Partnership Team building Focused on pupil outcomes High levels of achievement for all pupils</p>

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