Northern Ireland Assembly

Research and Library Service
Briefing Paper

Caroline Perry

Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities

Part A: Qualities for effective school leadership

This briefing paper considers the key qualities and attributes of effective school principals, with a particular focus on those in schools serving disadvantaged areas. It finds that successful school leaders share a number of key personal qualities, including people-centred core values, emotional intelligence, resilience and conviction.

Key points

- The leadership of schools is second only to classroom teaching in terms of its influence on student learning, with the greatest impact found in schools where the learning needs are most significant;

- The role of school leaders is becoming increasingly complex and demanding, and principals require a broad range of skills and attributes in order to carry out their duties effectively;

- It is important to note that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to school leadership; leaders need to adapt their practice to the context of the school in which they work;

- There is a strong link between leaders' personal qualities and leadership success;

- The evidence indicates that the most effective school leaders share a number of key characteristics, including that they are open-minded; ready to learn from others; have strong values; and are emotionally resilient;

- Leaders of schools in disadvantaged contexts share many of the same traits as principals of other schools; being driven by core values that are people-centred, with a moral focus and an emphasis on equality and respect;

- Research suggests that effective principals of schools in challenging circumstances in particular share the following attributes:

    o Passion and risk-taking;

    o Personal humility;

    o Emotional intelligence;

    o Tenacity and resilience in advocacy;

    o Respect for others; and

    o Personal conviction.

- Effective distribution of leadership throughout the school is another key characteristic of effective school leaders and is linked to the improvement of educational outcomes for pupils.

Introduction

The leadership of schools is widely recognised as having crucial importance for pupil outcomes. Indeed, it is acknowledged as being second only to classroom teaching in terms of its influence on student learning, with the greatest impact found in schools where pupils' learning needs are the most acute.[1]

There is a wide range of issues relating to supporting and promoting the provision of effective leadership in schools, including those around recruitment, roles and responsibilities, retention, succession planning, governance, continuing professional development and reward. However, this section of the briefing paper deals primarily with the skills required by school leaders and the practices and qualities that lead to effective leadership. It also considers effective leaders in schools serving disadvantaged communities and the particular qualities shared among them.

Roles and responsibilities of school leaders

The role of school leaders has changed in recent years, becoming increasingly complex and demanding.[2] Schools are becoming more autonomous and are facing higher levels of accountability, while serving more diverse pupil populations and being confronted with a broad range of social issues.

Research into school leadership conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC)[3] identified a number of key roles and responsibilities of school leaders. These encompass a range of both strategic and operational areas, as follows:

- Strategic direction and ethos;

- Teaching and learning;

- Developing and managing people;

- Networking and collaboration;

- Operations; and

- Accountability.

It is evident therefore that school leaders will require a broad range of skills and qualities in order to effectively discharge these roles and responsibilities in leading the school. This is likely to be particularly important in the case of schools serving disadvantaged communities.

---

[1] Leithwood et al. (2004) *How leadership influences student learning* New York: The Wallace Foundation
[2] OECD (2008) *Improving School Leadership Volume 1: Policy and Practice* Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
[3] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: DfES

Practices of successful school leaders

In a three year national research project conducted on behalf of the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, Day et al.[4] found that almost all successful leaders draw on the same basic repertoire of leadership practices. These are linked to the roles and responsibilities outlined above and are illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 1: Key practices of successful school leaders
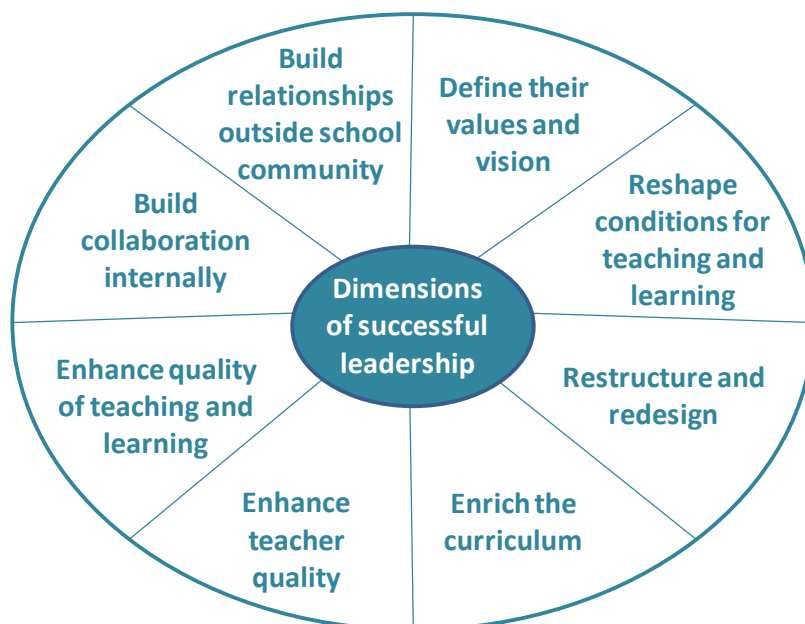
Source: Adapted from: Day et al (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

It is important to note, however, that there is single model for achieving success, with successful leadership being sensitive to the local context. Indeed, Leithwood et al.[5] emphasise that the way in which leaders apply these core practices demonstrates their capacity to respond to the context of the school in which they work.

The evidence suggests that the school's context influences the selection and combination of practices used, with disadvantaged schools requiring a greater number of leadership practices in order to effect change. It has been found that successful heads working in schools facing disadvantage make greater efforts to drive improvement across a range of areas. [6]

The way in which successful leaders apply these practices will be influenced by a number of factors, including their judgements about the conditions for teaching and

---

[4] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

[5] Leithwood, K. et al. (2006) *Seven strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for School Leadership

[6] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

learning in the school; the confidence and experience of their staff; and the behaviour, aspirations and attainment levels of the pupils.[7]

Qualities of successful school leaders

Research suggests that there is a strong association between leaders' personal qualities and leadership success.[8] For example, a study by Day et al.[9] finds that headteachers' values are key components in their success.

"Successful heads improve pupil outcomes through who they are - their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences – as well as what they do in terms of the strategies they select and the ways in which they adapt their leadership practices to their unique context."

This study suggests that the most successful school leaders are open-minded; ready to learn from others; flexible; have a system of core values and high expectations of others; and are emotionally resilient and optimistic. It asserts that it is these traits that enable successful leaders to make progress in schools facing challenging circumstances. The study in particular finds that successful school leaders share certain attributes, as follows:

- **A strong sense of moral responsibility** and a belief in equal opportunities;

- **A belief that every pupil deserves the same opportunities** to succeed;

- **Respect and value for all people** in and connected with the school;

- **A passion for learning** and achievement; and

- **A commitment** to pupils and staff.

These key attributes are common to almost all effective school leaders. In addition, further qualities and characteristics have been highlighted pertaining to leaders of schools serving disadvantaged areas.

Qualities of leaders of schools in disadvantaged contexts

Research with leaders of schools in disadvantaged areas[10] indicates that they share many of the same traits as successful leaders of other schools. In addition, it finds that they are particularly energised by challenge of leading a school in challenging circumstances and by the drive to make a difference to both their schools and their communities.

---

[7] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

[8] Day, C. & Leithwood, K. (2007) *Successful school principal leadership in times of change: International Perspectives* Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer

[9] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

[10] National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010) *What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?* Nottingham: National College

In line with the findings previously discussed, leaders of schools in disadvantaged contexts were similarly found to be driven by core values that are people-centred and combine moral purpose with the promotion of collaboration. A focus on equality and respect and concern for other individuals were other important characteristics. The key characteristics identified among effective leaders of schools in disadvantaged contexts are illustrated in the following figure.[11]

Figure 2: Key characteristics of headteachers of schools in challenging circumstances

Source: Adapted from: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010) *What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?* Nottingham: National College

Distributed leadership

A report by OECD states that the increased responsibilities and accountability facing school leaders create a need for the distribution of leadership throughout the school. [12] With regard to true distributed leadership, the importance of engaging and empowering others in the organisation, rather than simply distributing leadership tasks to them, has been highlighted.

"Distributed leadership is about much more than just sharing out tasks. Rather, it also encompasses a shared approach to strategic leadership, in which professionals throughout the organisation are genuinely engaged and can influence its culture, ethos and strategic direction."[13]

Some authors[14] assert that there is a link between the increased distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities and the improvement of outcomes for pupils.

---

[11] National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2010) *What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?* Nottingham: National College

[12] OECD (2008) *Improving School Leadership Volume 1: Policy and Practice* Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

[13] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: DfES

[14] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services; and Louis, K. (2010) *Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning* University of Minnesota

---

Indeed, the distribution of leadership is found to be a key characteristic of effective school leaders.[15]

Linked to this, effective leaders will recognise the importance of developing staff and supporting and encouraging talent across the organisation. The traditional idea of a 'hero-head,' or an indispensable individual leader, is therefore not thought to be a sustainable approach for schools.[16]

Conclusion

The importance of effective school leadership for schools serving disadvantaged communities should not be underestimated. The increasingly demanding and complex role of school leaders requires a broad range of skills and attributes among principals to enable them to lead the school effectively and improve educational outcomes for children in deprived contexts.

Effective school principals in schools serving disadvantaged communities have core values that are people-centred, with a moral focus and an emphasis on equality and respect. They combine the key attributes of emotional intelligence, resilience and conviction with passion and personal humility, and are not averse to taking risks with the constant goal of driving school improvement.

For further information on the series *Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities* please refer to:

Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities: Overall Summary

Part B: School engagement with parents and the wider community

---

[15] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: DfES
[16] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: DfES