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How are English Secondary Schools Interpreting their Freedom to be Different?

David Loader

Former Principal of the Methodist Ladies College,
Victoria, Australia

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Defining the task

Context

It has recently been acknowledged that meeting the needs of young people requires more than schools taking what had been done in the past and doing it better. A different approach is needed, as a minimum, but it would be better still to try new ideas. Furthermore, the central authority has recognised the need for a 'new phase of reform' that includes building "a new relationship with schools, headteachers and governors where:

- schools have more freedom and flexibility...(but) are accountable for standards and performance
- schools ...lead transformation and government supports...
- the government recognises success and encourages (it)..." (DfES 2003:10)

This new support for local initiative (2003) is intended to lead to a move away from traditional hierarchical structures in and outside schools that have been seen as constraining and debilitating. Now the emphasis is on building leadership density within schools and developing new models of learning, not just within schools but also between schools. There is an explicit recognition that moderate change at local level is not only desirable but also essential. As leadership becomes empowered, it is hoped that there would be a new wave of creativity. Heather Du Quesnay, Chief Executive of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), catches something of this spirit when she describes "how the world moves forward through small changes at many points in a network where good ideas spread with the speed and unpredictability of a virus" (Tarleton and Williams 2003: 3).

The importance of strong leadership and effective management at school level has been recognised by the government and strategies to improve them have been introduced. In 2002, the National College for School Leadership was officially launched and in 2003 the Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) was introduced to strengthen leadership at all levels. Further support was offered through Networked Learning Communities and the establishment of the DfES Innovation Unit.

There has also been some managed de-regulation of the secondary system. The aim of this has been to help successful and well-led schools to pioneer innovative work through even greater flexibility. These schools have been the testing ground for flexibility right across the system.

But this new wave of opportunity for local initiatives has been accompanied by a framework of accountability and responsibility.

They (schools) will increasingly use the full range of tools within performance management to make the critical link between teacher performance, professional development and pupil standards" (DfES 2003: 15). Moreover, this new entitlement to manage creatively has only been on offer to "well led and well managed schools" (DfES 2003: 15). The incentive for schools to engage with this have been "the opportunity to apply for greater freedoms and flexibilities within certain aspects of the National Curriculum and teachers' pay and conditions. (DfES 2003: 34)

The government is keen for this new reform to be seen as a joint or shared endeavour, one that is not to be done *to* schools but equally one that schools cannot do on their own. Instead, secondary school improvement is to be driven through the creation of a system where schools have high aspirations, have their own specialisms and ethos, and consider it important to work in partnership with other schools.

Further general support is offered through the National Workforce Agreement (January 2003). This initiative is intended to enable teachers to concentrate on teaching and be released from other duties that detract from this. At the system level this is a major achievement and has provided some significant opportunities for reform of the school workforce.

While the government is committed to diversity, not all agree that it is delivering a better education for all. David Taylor, Ofsted's Director of Inspection said:

England's school inspectors have said there is no evidence that standards are improved by greater 'diversity' in secondary schools – the main plank of government reforms. ... I don't think we would have the evidence to say going for diversity in itself necessarily drives up standards more than a single system. (BBC, 27 November 2002)

Another perspective that adds significantly to the schooling debate is the government's Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* (2003). This paper aims to ensure that "every child has the chance to fulfil their potential by reducing levels of educational failure, ill health, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, abuse and neglect, crime and anti-social behaviour among children and young people". This report has led to the school being asked to add on more services and extend school hours; the notion of the 'extended school' being developed further as a 'full-service extended school'. But this report should not be seen as being simply about adding to existing schools. It is intended to address more fundamental re-thinking about a school's institutional role and to prompt debate about new community models that will extend learning to settings outside the scope of traditional schools.

Reports and reviews

Four publications have provided the context for this research. These are:

- *A New Specialist System: Transforming Secondary Education*, DfES February 2003
- *Every Child Matters*, government Green Paper 2003
- *Unique Creation: Possible Futures; Four scenarios for the 21st century schooling*, NCSL, 2002
- *Education Epidemic: Transforming secondary schools through innovative networks*, Hargreaves, 2003

Methodology

Defining the task

Like many who engage in research, what I actually did was different from what I set out to do.

My initial goal was to explore changes in schooling. To give focus to this research, I chose the topic 'the evolution of a new species of schooling'. To explore this, I proposed four questions about schools:

1. What real differences exist between schools today?
2. How much difference can we tolerate?
3. How much difference do we need for a new species to emerge?
4. Is a new model of 'schooling' emerging?

My framing of the questions assumed an evolutionary theory, which holds that all institutions change over time, adapting to new settings and that the successful adaptor is the one most likely to survive. What I did not understand when I drafted these questions, however, was how my personal background had helped form these preliminary questions. Indeed it was not until I arrived in England and immersed myself in schooling here that I appreciated my acceptance of a market forces mentality. Some of this was my non-government school background with responsibility to a governing body that included business people who demanded this way of thinking.

In Australia in 1999, non-government school students accounted for 30 per cent of all students, including 27 per cent of primary school students and 35 per cent of secondary school students. (If English headteachers think these figures are high, there are countries where they are much higher — for example in Korea, private school students account for 55 per cent of all high school students.)

In Australian schools, we are too often looking over our shoulders, competing with our neighbouring schools, just as we expect our students to compete academically for the highest score. It can be said of most Australian schools, not just the non-government schools, that they are competitive. Australians could learn from their English peers about co-operation.

As further context, it may help to note that an "Australian" system does not exist as such, because it is the states and territories, not the Commonwealth, that are responsible for delivering education. Consequently, there are disagreements and competition between states and territories as each claims to be the best.

What I found in England was a much more bureaucratic system of education than I had imagined. 'School improvement' was the name given to the movement that comprised the national strategies that schools had to implement and the targets they were to achieve. It was supported by the Ofsted inspection system, with results published for all to read. It seemed to me that, under this system, headteachers became managers of externally imposed policy. As David Hargreaves writes:

[Even if] the style of Ofsted inspections, accountability through league tables based on student test performance, and naming and shaming the weakest or 'failing schools', has made a positive contribution to school improvement — the issue is much disputed — ... (what remains) in schools (is) a school climate of blame characterised by playing it safe with resentful dependency. Innovation and the associated risk-taking is strangled. (Hargreaves 2003:33)

My preliminary observations suggested that Hargreaves' assertion was too hard. For instance, English schools were told by the government that, from February 2003, they had "...more freedom and flexibility in the way they use their resources, in the way they design the curriculum and in the teaching methods they use". This appeared in a report *A New Specialist System — Transforming Secondary Education* (DfES 2003: 5).

That same report promised those in schools that the government would be back again within 12 months to hear their views as part of an ongoing discussion (DfES 2003: 17). Specifically, the government would ask how the "transformation was beginning to take place both in individual schools and in groups of schools".

With the encouragement for schools to innovate, there were also some conditions. Schools were to "work within a framework in which they are accountable for their performance" and to understand that "the government has a duty to intervene where there is serious underperformance or chronic failure" (DfES 2003: 5).

So, while freedom to innovate was to draw in ambitious leaders, there was also a dire warning about failure. I was interested in how the profession was responding to this situation.

As a result, my modified research focus adopted a new question: how are English secondary schools interpreting their freedom to be different? I believed this to be a more revealing question than the one posed by government, which was: how is the transformation beginning to take place both in individual schools and in groups of schools? This is because the government's question assumed headteachers knew about and trusted the freedom that had been offered to them.

Approach

Essentially, my work has been a 'scoping' study to identify future areas for exploration. The method of investigation I adopted involved qualitative not quantitative data. Given that this opportunity for initiative was new, I felt it best to look at a few schools in depth rather than taking a broad-brush approach with a larger number of schools.

Pilot interviews included many open-ended questions to headteachers, governors and staff. These clarified and focused the study. Once this stage was completed, my focus moved exclusively to headteachers who are in the driving seat for schools.

A set of preferred questions, to be asked of each school in the study, was developed as a result of the pilot interviews and literature search. These questions were:

1. Do you feel free to lead and manage creatively?
2. What new possibilities exist for you as a leader under this new reform?
3. What are the constraints that you feel upon your leadership?
4. What has been your greatest creative achievement?

I made contact was made with the Specialist School Trust and the DfES Innovation Unit to gain further insight into what was happening and to seek advice in the selection of schools for this study.

While I was staying at the National College for School Leadership, breakfast and dinner conversations with a large number of headteachers, Ofsted inspectors and LEA advisors provided valuable insights into what was happening in English secondary schooling.

Nine schools were chosen on the recommendation of people who knew schools well and felt that these would provide an indication of the general trend. The schools come from a number of different geographic regions and in the sample there were schools from the following groups:

- extended schools
- specialist schools
- Fresh Start schools
- top-of-the-league-table schools
- research-based schools
- schools in special circumstances
- Leading Edge schools

During the period of the research, I had the opportunity to attend three important seminars/ conferences and one lecture as a participant.

Findings

This section summarises the views of the heads interviewed in response to the set of preferred questions:

1. Do you feel free to lead and manage creatively?
2. What new possibilities exist for you as a leader under this new reform?
3. What are the constraints that you feel upon your leadership?
4. What has been your greatest creative achievement?

Do you feel free to lead and manage creatively?

This was a question that evoked statements of strong feeling from headteachers. Examples include: “What flexibility?” and “Yes, it would be a brave person who tried to stop me!”

There was no universal agreement among headteachers about whether or not they had freedom to innovate. There was no resounding endorsement of the positive psyche of headteachers concerning their freedom to innovate or a feeling that they are trusted and supported.

Some headteachers were more confident than others of their authority because of personal conviction or evidence of support from quarters such as the governing body or the LEA. But even this was provisional; one headteacher noted: “I need the LEA to be on side.”

At the same time, there was an evident tension about the extent to which authority was given to headteachers. One saw the restrictions arising from government. One said: “They are not letting go of their authority,” while another referred to the GTC: “It has a stranglehold on us.” Ofsted was also mentioned: “They get their way mostly,” said one, while others saw the problem as lack of funds, National Curriculum and the accountability requirements. All were aware that as headteachers they were vulnerable to challenge.

Some headteachers talked about “doing the right thing by our students, even if it is expensive” and “defending a number of our initiatives”. Even given the many constraints upon them, headteachers seem to continue to find ways forward to meet what they perceive as the needs of their students.

What new possibilities exist for you as a leader under this new reform?

There was a strong commitment to change among all the headteachers. However it appears that the incentive for this may not be the explicit invitation to innovate described in *Transforming Secondary Schools*, but rather comes from within the school itself. These headteachers were changing the practices and policies of their schools because they believed the present ones were inadequate. However they also seemed to see themselves as dependent upon external forces and recognised that some changes could only happen when additional money was available, when new curriculum or curriculum changes allowed or when changes in workforce policy provided some flexibility in staffing.

While one respondent expressed cynicism about what support was given (“the government gives with one hand and takes away with the other”), another found some encouragement in the fact that “the DfES now listens to us better”.

Funding appears to be a particularly important issue in the change process. “It is not about new possibilities, it is about surviving,” said one head. Some schools have been more successful in attracting additional funds to the school as a Leading Edge school or an Academy or via a Leadership Incentive Grant. However, even from these schools, comes the comment: “[the amount of money] needs to be five times larger”.

While most headteachers said that there were now additional possibilities for them, there was no sense of significant new freedoms or evidence of the beginning of a new age of school transformation.

What are the constraints that you feel upon your leadership?

The headteachers interviewed indicated that they felt constrained by a number of powerful issues, most of which were shared by other headteachers. The biggest of these appeared to be the lack of funds to respond to challenges in the school and in some cases just to deliver everyday programmes. Four schools mentioned this constraint.

Next came the pressure for students to perform and the reality of accountability. National Curriculum, the local community and LEAs were all perceived to limit the headteachers’ leadership opportunities.

While it was only mentioned explicitly once in these answers, with one head commenting: “It is hard to find good qualified teachers in all subjects,” this problem was worrying many headteachers.

It was evident that there was a dedicated professional group of headteachers who saw themselves ‘pushing uphill’ with restricted resources and affected by external expectations and accountabilities. Despite this, they appeared to be putting students’ interests (as they saw them) first, ahead of accountability and other external measures. (“We will not be redirected from our commitments to the local community by a bad Ofsted report.”) The headteachers interviewed knew what they wanted to achieve. It was not so much verbal encouragement they sought but practical help such as money and freedom to do their own thing.

What has been your greatest creative achievement?

High aspirations, together with significant achievements, characterised these headteachers. They listed with pride “a high performing school”, “a clear focus on students’ thinking”, “important professional development achievements”, “three National Achievement Awards”, “full school rolls”, “new buildings”, “improved view of the school by the community”, “restructured leadership team” and “new curriculum”.

The achievements reflected the headteachers’ commitment to both national goals and local challenges. Only two linked their greatest achievements with students’ academic results. In general, headteachers had a broad educational agenda.

To some external observers, headteachers may seem powerful people but my discussions suggest that their idealism and dedication to their students and school make them vulnerable in role.

Is there any initiative that you wanted to take that has been impossible?

These headteachers seemed to be forward-thinking and inclined to push the limits of what could be achieved. Consequently, all but two had unmet goals that ranged from an ambitious £1.5 million community arts centre to the everyday concern of

delivering a relevant curriculum, from a broad community focus to the specific search for £50,000. For the remaining two headteachers, there was “enough happening in the school” to challenge them!

Being a specialist school was clearly important to these heads. Two headteachers said that their greatest disappointment had been failing to achieve this status, while another listed this as a great achievement when they got this status on their first attempt.

Emerging themes

Analysing my work led me to identify a number of consistent themes and issues. These are considered in more depth below.

Powerful or powerless headteachers?

There is clear central encouragement for limited in-school innovation, as described in the document *Transforming Secondary Education*. There appears to be practical encouragement through incentive grants, the establishment of a DfES Innovation Unit, networks focused on encouraging innovation and a commitment to delivering a future rather than replicating the past.

But at the school level, headteachers who were surveyed experienced this differently; in general they did not feel encouraged to innovate. Headteachers identified limiting factors such as lack of money to do anything extra, restrictions with curriculum, inspections, league tables and other accountability measurements. There was some cynicism and denial expressed by headteachers in relation to supposed freedom, eg: "What flexibility?" and "No, I am not free."

It has been suggested that this lack of freedom might exist only in the headteachers' minds but this was not the reality. The concept of the 'institution in the mind' has some relevance to this discussion as it gives some perspective on how an individual relates to an organisation. In this case it is argued that headteachers and others in education, may unintentionally be giving more negative power to the broader schools system than would seem to exist. Although it may be in the mind, it is based in a large number of minds. Indeed this view was advocated by 200 headteachers, members of NCSL's Leadership Network, in an open letter to the Minister for Education, sent in November 2003. In this they state that a risk-adverse culture has developed because of the accountability requirements on schools:

Professor David Hopkins' commitment to 'more intelligent forms of accountability' resonated with many, with an emerging view that schools should have more local forms of accountability to their communities through measures which reflect both high standards and broader educational values. Headteachers in turn emphasised the need for trust and described a risk adverse culture where accountability still stood in the way of radical change. (Tarleton and Williams 2003: 6)

These headteachers took the view that a more favourable climate is essential before we will see significant innovations in schools.

It needs to be acknowledged that bureaucracies, regardless of their rhetoric, have never been too keen to hand over their authority. However, clarifying the exact extent to which a specific bureaucracy truly wants free-thinking individuals is more problematic. The headteachers interviewed seemed to think that at present there is an unsatisfactory compromise, with headteachers required to follow specific directions but with limited scope for autonomous action.

The contradictory messages reaching headteachers need to be acknowledged. As Hargreaves argues: "Innovation is a delicate plant, which thrives in a favourable climate" (2003: 33). Innovation involves risk-taking and that is not easily achieved when headteachers are feeling under close scrutiny with fearful accountability consequences such as public criticism and the possible loss of employment. Hargreaves talks about a blame culture that strangles innovation, characterised by leaders playing it safe (Hargreaves 2003: 33).

Hargreaves reminds also us that it is not one headteacher acting alone. While each headteacher to some degree works alone, s/he is part of a chaotic collective and it is this collective that will in the end produce results. For Hargreaves, the way forward is “constructed at an incredible pace by a community resembling a babbling bazaar of different agendas and approaches and consisting of many users who were recruited as fellow builders” (Hargreaves 2003: 55).

Hargreaves’ ideas are supported and developed by Bentley, who believes governments must learn to forsake their preferred mode of intervention, command and control, which he believes has damaged trust. “The central idea should not be to select one form of organisation and impose and replicate it. It should be to create systems that challenge and motivate a critical mass of participants ... ‘permanent revolution’ should be accepted as the norm... (Hargreaves 2003: 14,5). “

In contrast to Bentley’s idea, some headteachers I interviewed expressed a certain cynicism in the way they “played the system”, using tactics to help them “play the game”, “score points” and “press the right buttons with inspectors”. In my opinion, this does not indicate the level of co-operation required for renewal is to follow.

Finance

Nearly half the heads interviewed saw insufficient funds as a major constraint on their leadership. Only one enterprising top-of-the-league-table school head agreed that they had had enough for what they were doing.

The government has sought to address this issue by modifying workforce pay and conditions and introducing new flexibilities as to how funds can be used in the school.

Interestingly, when I talked to people outside schools, they were impatient and critical of headteachers’ complaints about insufficient funds. They argued that there was never enough money for anything but headteachers had more at their disposal than ever before. Those who were not headteachers claimed that headteachers were not willing to make the hard decisions, always wanting to add to the programme but not prepared to make any cuts. They pointed out that headteachers had control of their budgets, that the government had made it easier by offering headteachers greater financial flexibilities, etc.

Whether or not there is a case for more money, in the minds of headteachers a lack of funds is a major problem. My view would be that it is all very well for those not experiencing the strictures of accountability to talk of making the hard decisions. Risk-taking needs a supportive environment rather than a conditional one.

Blame culture

Prior to my study, I had read about “a school climate of blame characterised by playing it safe with resentful dependency” (Hargreaves 2003: 33), but was inclined to reject it. But I have come to the conclusion on the basis of my interviews that ‘blame’ is indeed embedded in the system. It is in the language: ‘schools with serious weaknesses’ and ‘underachieving schools’ and in the euphemism for failing schools, ‘schools requiring special measures’. Blame is clear in the measures that follow when schools fail; the Secretary of State and/or the LEA has powers to intervene in such schools to replace the governing body or the headteacher or the staff.

Ironically, all this is happening despite the finding that within-school variation in academic achievement is often more marked than between schools (DfES 2003:10).

But how is this trend to be interpreted? Is the system not delivering for those in schools who are 'failing'? David Miliband, Minister for School Standards, commenting on the statistic "four times as much variation in pupil attainment *within* schools as there is *between* schools", has argued that we must "raise the standards of teaching within each school to the standards of the best (teacher)" and "the drive for excellence is principally a question of what leaders do in their schools: how they build a culture and belief system across the organisation ... and finally how they hold staff to account for the quality of the work they do" (NCSL's Annual Leadership Lecture, October 2003).

To ensure that my criticism is not misread, let me reassure readers that I believe accountability is important. But even more important is the building of a supportive culture and the encouragement to look for new solutions.

Circumscribed innovation

While it can be argued that specialist schools offer more diversity than the comprehensive schools, it is diversity within a narrow framework.

When the government talks of diversity, it lists together with specialist schools, the academies, Beacon schools, training schools, Leading Edge partnership programmes and federations. There is no radically new model of schooling here; all are variations on the school that has been with us for some time. The diversity permitted allows schools to distinguish themselves according to an individual ethos, or special character or areas of specialist expertise. They remain schools with a primary focus on the usual cognitive and pedagogical tasks.

There is no evidence that this diversity is a response to the criticisms in *Unique Creation* to some of the failings of today's schools. As Miller and Bentley note:

... the current approaches to specifying curriculum content and teaching it through fixed routines to standard-sized groups of students places clear limits on the scope for developing the skills of learning'; schools are not doing enough to socialise the young; present credentialing is not providing accurate information on a person's or team's capacities. (Miller and Bentley 2002: 45)

These are fundamental criticisms of the way existing schools operate and call for some radical new thinking.

The fact that there are tight guidelines controlling what can be changed is not missed by headteachers. It is worth noting that there is provision to apply for exemptions, the 'Power to Innovate', as provided by the Education Act 2002. It was introduced so that those with 'innovative new ideas for raising standards' would not be thwarted by detailed regulations and legislation. A school or LEA has the right to apply to the Secretary of State for exemptions under any regulatory requirements in education law. However, as at 26 November 2003, only 50 enquiries had been recorded and these were for items such as an early start to Key Stage 4, new framework for the teaching of a subject, assuming control of a pre-school and local variations of pay and conditions. There were three successful applications for Power to Innovate, all relating to variations to the school day to accommodate teachers' planning time and extracurricular activities for students.

None of this is evidence of substantial lateral new thinking. Are headteachers not asking because they are not 'thinking outside the box' or are they guessing that new ideas will not get far? Is there real encouragement to take big steps outside the system?

There is a further problem in that the freedom offered is not equally available to all. Leading Edge schools have more freedom than schools in or coming out of special measures. Could it not be argued that the schools not doing well may have a greater need to do things differently than the successful ones?

Despite these reservations, within the allowed guidelines headteachers are introducing innovations in teaching and learning, new curriculum, the embedding of ICT into the curriculum, school specialisms, more financial control, initiatives with the community including extended care, modifications to the roles of teachers, greater roles for non-teachers assuming and more devolution of authority to senior staff. For the headteachers that I interviewed, change was part of their daily life.

The changes listed above represent significant changes in thinking but they remain within the existing paradigm. There are comfortable schools with carpet and modern equipment and there are old buildings with narrow draughty corridors, but to this outsider they are seen as essentially similar. Schools are tinkering within the framework but there is little evidence any are stepping outside it and thinking differently about the delivery of schooling. Federations are emerging, for instance, and in the schools I visited there was some exciting professional work using ICT. But in the system, no-one appears to be trying to deliver schooling dispersed into the community using the 'learning networks' made possible by the growth of the Internet and the opportunities it has brought.

Informed or reformed professionalism

There is talk in the system of informed (by evidence-based practice) professionalism (eg Tarleton and Williams 2003:4) and this is being seen as the answer to central control. But is it informed or reformed professionalism that is required? Tom Bentley writes:

Professionals, just like organisations, are likely to resort to self protection in the face of disruptive change, as they are to embrace new and better practices. The challenge is to build professional identities and learning communities that are orientated towards adaptation and radical innovation. (Hargreaves 2003: 13)

It is hard for us in schools to accept that there are students that we have never successfully served. Yet this is the reality and we need to be addressing their needs as well as providing for those whom we have successfully served. My view is that to do this we need a system that challenges the status quo, that invites new and radical initiatives and yet does not lose the substantial gains made in so many areas. We need a reformed professionalism that is supported by the system, which can manage ambiguity and is not afraid of making mistakes.

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