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## Research Associate Report

**Alan Thomas**, Headteacher, Hetton Lyons Primary School, Sunderland

# Long lasting success

Creating strategic and sustainable primary schools

Summer 2007

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## The context

Primary schools today have to survive in a high-stakes accountability climate. The Government's drive to raise standards witnessed significant and impressive gains for five years in literacy and mathematics attainment at the end of Key Stage 2, but then experienced a stubborn levelling off. Despite small upturns in the last four years (2004-2007), results are still considerably short of government targets. Primary schools are constantly under pressure to 'raise the bar'. Short term actions to improve performance and raise standards are both necessary and valuable. However, by themselves, they are inadequate. They need to be supported by a more strategic, sustainable approach. To ensure sustainability of success, primary schools need a dual commitment to the short term and the long term (Davies, B, 2007).

Present day primary schools have to operate in a turbulent environment. They are bombarded with initiative after initiative, involving change which can be complex, messy, fast paced and relentless (Fullan, 2004). Some school staff, including headteachers, find the process painful and the pressure too great, and are unable or unwilling to adapt, resulting in a workforce tired or lost to the profession (Hargreaves, 2005). Government increasingly calls schools to account, expects immediate results and will close inadequate schools that cannot be turned around quickly (OFSTED, 2005). In such a climate, it is so easy for primary schools to get bogged down in short term reactions, to adopt quick fixes and to search for instantly transferable blueprints.

This research investigates how successful primary schools are making their success last. It is essentially about total leadership (Leithwood et al, 2006), that is, the vital contribution of both the headteacher and colleagues across the school at all levels. In particular, the research examines the quality of the strategic dimension of the headteacher's leadership, what strategic capacities he or she models and how these are developed in leaders at all levels. The purpose of the research is to explore how successful, strategic and sustainable primary schools can be created through the exercise of such leadership.

## Literature Review

In recent years, 'leadership' has superseded 'management' and 'administration' as the predominant activity required of headteachers and others in schools, although all need to complement each other. A substantial body of evidence about school leadership now exists, produced particularly by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and supplemented by knowledge gained from the business world, which can be used to analyse the leadership of strategic and sustainable schools.

It is found that the total leadership of both the headteacher and colleagues across the school (Leithwood et al, 2006) impacts on sustainable success. Such leadership can be conceptualised through a variety of theoretical models, for example 'instructional' (Blase and Blase, 1998), 'learning-centred' (Southworth, 2005), 'transformational' (Leithwood et al, 1999) and 'constructivist' (Lambert, 2003). Strategic leadership, as a dimension of leadership not a model of leadership, is however highlighted (for example in the selection criteria for National Leaders in Education) as a critical component of leading strategic and sustainable schools. Strategic leadership encompasses direction setting, takes a broader view of major dimensions of the organisation and deals with the medium to long term as well as the short term. Strategy is both a perspective to view the future and a template against which to evaluate current actions (Davies, 2003). Strategy and strategic planning are however not the same, and it is the strategic thinking of leaders in forming and articulating the strategy, which is important to sustainability. 'Strategic abandonment' (Drucker,

1999, Caldwell, 2004) in setting priorities, resisting initiatives and reducing workload is also a useful tool for ensuring sustainability.

Sustainability is shown in the ability of schools to continue to improve in a way that does not damage individuals or the wider community, but instead builds capacity to be successful in new, more demanding contexts and as such is an important goal for schools, with clear links to the quality of school leadership. Studies (Hargreaves, 2006; West-Burnham, 2004) have highlighted the importance of treating staff as professionals, investing in their professional development, building their leadership capacity and guarding against 'burnout' and demoralisation. They show that total leadership, deep learning, moral purpose, balancing the short term and the long term and collaboration, rather than competition, contribute to creating successful, sustainable schools. However, extensive research has not been carried out on sustainability at school level and so current analyses may not be exhaustive and other factors may exist.

## **The research method**

A case study approach, involving a sample of 14 serving headteachers of successful primary schools, including 3 from junior schools, was designed. Geographically, the schools were in 6 local authorities in the north east of England and could be categorised into city, town or village, large, medium or small and socially advantaged or socially disadvantaged contexts. The sample included 3 church schools. The primary schools were selected through recommendations from network groups, individual headteachers and local authority advisers after sifting through publicly available data about Key Stage 2 results, value added measures and OFSTED inspection reports. The headteachers of the schools selected had been in post for at least 4 years, ranging up to 22 years. This was the second headship for 4 heads and the third headship for one head. There were an equal number of male and female headteachers in the sample.

Headteachers were interviewed for an average of an hour, using an interview template which offered both structure and flexibility in capturing practitioner voice. All five research questions revolved around their leadership.

1. How do primary headteachers define their success?
2. What do primary headteachers understand by the term 'strategy'?
3. How do primary headteachers use strategic leadership to make their schools successful and sustainable?
4. How do they build leadership capacity and invest in people long term?
5. What use do they make of the concept of 'strategic abandonment'?

Rich and illuminative data was gathered, analysed and constructed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Pilot interviews, full transcriptions of interviews, peer reviews and some triangulation were steps that were taken to avoid and reduce bias and ensure reliability and validity. The research was necessarily small scale and constrained by limited resources and its findings need to be viewed in this context.

## The main findings

### Defining success

All schools in the research had been successful for at least the last four years in terms of official measures of achieving good Key Stage 2 results, value added scores and OFSTED inspection reports. However, that had not always been the case. Most headteachers were quick to point out that they had started from a much lower baseline and could demonstrate improved results when compared to it, while three schools at one time had been in the OFSTED category of “serious weaknesses”.

As measures of success in the conventional sense, headteachers in the study mentioned evidence such as:

- being in the top 10% nationally for KS2 results
- achieving value added scores well over 100
- achieving dramatic rises in KS2 threshold scores
- being in the top 100 for value added scores
- receiving a letter of congratulations from the Chief HMI on a very successful OFSTED inspection

While all the schools were clearly focused on achieving good test results and OFSTED reports, success to the leaders of these schools meant much more than this. Success was about a much broader perspective of achievement and about the all round development of children. “Excellence and Enjoyment” (DfES, 2003) were key words to these leaders as they developed the strengths and talents of the children and ensured they fulfilled their potential.

“..... to be doing the best for the children ..... you want them to leave the school having achieved as much as they are capable of achieving, but also not having a narrow curriculum, having a more creative curriculum, having a good general knowledge and having the ability to access learning for themselves.”

(Head of city primary school - large, socially advantaged)

Art, music, ICT and sport featured prominently in schools’ provision for enriching and extending children’s experience. Headteachers talked in this context about a brass band, musical productions, a visit to a London art gallery, a regional gymnastics team, “a fizzing website” and character and relationship building field trips.

The “Every Child Matters” agenda was championed by all headteachers. Success to them was in terms of the all round development of the children, treating them as individuals, making them feel valued and nurturing their well-being through whole school pastoral care systems. Headteachers were passionate about the impact their school had on children and the positive difference they made.

“I think we’re more successful in a wider context because of the area we serve ..... OFSTED did us the great honour of saying that we changed children’s lives.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

“The ‘Excellence and Enjoyment’ and ‘Every Child Matters’ just could be written

for this school ..... We were talking about this with the HMI and he said that it just shines through that the children know how important they are in the school, that they come first."

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

As evidence of success, one head highlighted "the wonderful feedback from the children", particularly in the guest book on the school's website.

The ethos of the school played an important part in success. Headteachers talked of creating a welcoming and calm atmosphere and a climate of trust where everyone was valued. For some children, this environment offered stability and contrasted sharply with their "chaotic home life."

Two of the schools had local authority resourced SEN provision, which was part of their inclusive ethos and their success story.

"We also host a support base for 10 statemented children who are in KS2. They're not our traditional children, they're bussed in from all round the Local Authority, children with learning difficulties. Some of our greatest successes are in those children and the achievements they make between KS1 and KS2 are phenomenal."

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

An integral part of a successful ethos was the relationship between the various people in the school community.

"The most important thing, I think, in a successful institution, not just a school, that's relationships ..... If people are happy and enjoying their work, then you're going to get loads back from them."

(Head of a village junior school – small, socially advantaged)

Success was "people working well together" and the proof of the school's success was that "it's a very happy place for everybody."

Part of staff happiness was high morale and job satisfaction. For teachers and teaching assistants, this was about enjoying the job and feeling valued but also about seeing the progress children made, a tremendous 'feel good factor'. Leadership was effective and fulfilled in 'getting the best out of people' and 'the buzz' of developing the leadership capacity of young teachers and transforming experienced teachers. Heads felt flattered that staff were happy in their job and were reluctant to leave. Two heads cited a huge response to job advertisements as evidence of the school's success.

Parental support featured highly in the headteachers' views of importance in achieving success. They wanted parents to feel welcome and valued, have confidence in their school and take pride in its success. Several headteachers reported excellent responses to parental questionnaires. It was also about the school's image in the community, extended services and community activities. Five schools were oversubscribed and one headteacher had successfully convinced parents that the school should be their first choice, rather than second choice, which had been the case at the start of the headship.

Another measure of success, highlighted by some headteachers, was good behaviour. This measure of success was appealing to staff, desired by parents, commented upon by OFSTED and contributed to a calm ethos and the stability needed by some children. In one school, behaviour at

break times had been targeted successfully. In a similar vein, attendance and lateness had been successfully improved by one school through early morning sports activities and a sponsored breakfast club. Awards – for attendance, Arts Mark, Sports Active Mark, Investors in People and Healthy Schools – were mentioned by many headteachers as measures of success. They demonstrated evidence of a broad, enriched curriculum and gave external judgements to complement the school's self-evaluation process.

## **Issues about success**

Although highly successful, all the headteachers nevertheless worried about dips in results and raised issues about the fragile nature of success. One headteacher of a primary school in a socially advantaged area, in what he called 'the no excuses group', was acutely aware of the consequences of the lack of success.

"I'm well aware that we have massive support from the community and the governing body, but it's conditional support. It's conditional on that success, and that's in the back of my mind all the time, that if we weren't successful, then I would soon know about it."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

At the other end of the spectrum, in deprived areas, successful headteachers admitted that achieving good results had been "a hard slog, really hard" and that "even if your results stand still, it's a tremendous effort".

"I liken it to rolling a boulder up a mountain: you might stop for a break but there's tremendous energy involved in stopping pushing that boulder up the mountain ..... static results here are a success."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

Three schools had experienced unexpected dips in Maths results and one school's value added score had fallen below 100 for the first time: they were concerned about downgrading in their OFSTED inspection if it took place in the following year. Two of the junior schools and one primary school expressed strong views about adding value to KS1 results achieved in a separate infant school which was not accountable for KS2 results.

"..... it's a system failure ..... Nobody seems to want to grasp the nettle and yes it's significantly difficult for junior schools."

(Head of a town junior school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

Cohort variability was given as a factor in a school's fluctuating success. Several headteachers were also conscious of the impact on results of changes in pupil population. For many years, one head had attracted up to 70% pupils from an estate three miles outside the village and recognised that it was a "big help that we've got as many middle class children from middle class backgrounds." Another head spoke of the success of inclusive practice of admitting a profoundly deaf pupil from outside the traditional area; however, strategically he was conscious of a 'magnet effect' which could impact on results. Having a resourced SEN provision, whose results were part of the school's results, caused tension.

"..... so in years when we have 4 or 5 children in there (Year 6 in the resourced SEN provision) ..... obviously you'll appreciate that sometimes we start off at 90% before

the others have begun, which doesn't seem fair to me, but they're an asset to the school. So ..... if you believe in inclusion, which I passionately do, the only time I ever resent them is when the league tables come out."

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

Other heads pointed to "a massively mobile population", "a significant small group of children with social problems" and the absorption of children from another school which had closed, which caused dips in their results.

A final issue emerged about success which has implications for the school system as a whole. Several headteachers, in talking about building leadership capacity, indicated that contented staff were reluctant to move on, even for promotion.

"..... in some respects I think it's too nice here, people stick their heads out, look at other schools and then come running back and say it's not like (name of school),"

(Head of a city primary school – large, socially advantaged)

At school level, this is gratifying and indicates high morale and job satisfaction, which have a reciprocal effect on success. In terms of growing future leaders for the system however, it paints a more worrying picture.

In summary, for this group of headteachers, success was necessary for survival in the short term and for sustainability in the long term. They strove to be successful, were delighted to be successful and wanted that success to last. At the same time, they were modest about their success and were constantly looking at ways to improve further. Their schools had achieved good test results over time which was very satisfying; however their concept of success was about much broader achievement and they were able to rise strategically above the day to day operations to ensure a balanced, enriched and differentiated curriculum which valued children's all round development, their thinking and understanding. Although very responsive to the accountability agenda of measuring success, they also achieved alternative, strategic measures of success, providing qualitative and quantitative evidence of children's enjoyment and happiness, staff commitment, morale and job satisfaction, the ethos of the school and the school's relationship with the community. During the process of 'telling their story', it seemed clear that each headteacher's leadership had been central to the school achieving and sustaining success. Five of these school leaders, including three of schools at one time in "serious weaknesses" had been directly responsible for turning them into successful schools.

"I find it quite strange that you're interviewing me about being successful when five years ago we had everybody baying at our door because we weren't. It's the same people, the same school, same children, it's quite strange."

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)



## Understanding strategy

In exploring headteachers' understanding of the term 'strategy', those interviewed found the term somewhat elusive and difficult both to grasp and to define and their articulation varied greatly. They were not at ease talking in abstract or philosophical terms and much preferred to focus on practical concepts and concrete examples. Direction setting is the most common definition of strategy (Davies, Davies and Ellison, 2005) and most headteachers confirmed this, using imagery of 'route' and 'way', and 'minefields' to be avoided. One head used both military and nautical imagery.

"..... strategy is realising your vision. A battle plan in order to realise a vision, or bridging the rhetoric reality gap. I take a different view of 'strategy' as I do to a school (development) plan, or a set of aims, or a particular improvement structure for one area or one subject. I take strategy to be how all these things link together ..... more a case of the direction the ship is sailing in as opposed to the cut of the jib ..... and how one thing will have the domino effect on another. That's what I view as strategy."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

'Strategy' was associated with national and local initiatives and somewhat overused in government literature. Most headteachers interpreted 'strategy' as a holistic concept involving direction setting and planning ahead, linking it to vision and seeing it as long term. Several school leaders emphasised that the plan was flexible and subject to change.

"As I understand it, or as the way I apply it, it's a considered flexible plan to manoeuvre yourself to your desired destination."

(Head of a village primary school – small, socially advantaged)

Although the plan was flexible and change expected, that change nevertheless was unpredictable which could lead to frustration.

"You can plan things well in advance, but because of circumstances beyond your control you have to change them, which is frustrating."

(Head of a village primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

'Strategy' was also about 'knowing where you want to be' and in this way linked with vision.

"..... things you want to achieve in the longer term. It's almost the opposite of the urgent and reactive stuff, the things you've got to deal with every day. The strategy is way beyond that in terms of where you want to be in..... it may be a number of years timescale."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

All headteachers were able to articulate their vision, covering several interrelated themes:

- high expectations
- self belief and 'a can-do culture'
- the all round development of the child
- wanting the best for the children
- developing young citizens
- providing opportunities and challenges

- creating a centre of excellence.

One head's vision was about removing barriers and challenging everyone in the school community to believe in themselves.

"..... getting the staff to believe that the children can achieve, getting the parents to believe that they can achieve as well, and having aspirations for their children. So long term goals when I came here, that was probably number one priority."

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

In general, vision and strategy tended not to be written down. One head had a Strategic Vision Statement, which "explained in a nutshell what the school was about", linked to nine Foundation Statements about ethos, standards, teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment, extra curricular activities, pupils, community, leadership and management and resources.

"To provide a positive, challenging, caring, high quality teaching and learning environment, where each child is encouraged and extended to achieve their academic and personal potential."

(Head of a village primary school – small, socially advantaged)

Some schools used Mission Statements to communicate their vision to all stakeholders, while a few had rejected them because they were 'full of clichés'.

"Our Mission: aim high, be honest, work together, enjoy what we do, look after what we have."

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

"Mission Statement: We provide an inspiring, caring environment, in which we are all challenged to maximise our potential."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

'Strategy' was 'knowing where you were going to' but for these headteachers it was also about understanding where you had come from. Many headteachers demonstrated both historical understanding (Garratt, 1995; Hargreaves, 2005) and contextual wisdom (Davies, B J, 2004). Leaders need the perspective of 'historical understanding' alongside futures operation, for strategic thinking. 'Historical understanding' is a pre-requisite for sustainable development, which respects, protects, preserves and renews all that is valuable in the past and learns from it in order to build a better future. 'Contextual wisdom' is the capacity to see the school in relationship to the wider community and the educational world in which it belongs. Some heads had inherited a legacy of ineffective leadership and in explaining 'where they had come from' demonstrated how a change of leadership was central to the school's success.

'Strategy' was also about knowing "how we're going to do it" and how to involve others in that process.

"It's about thinking well ahead ..... long term vision for the school. It's almost like prediction, knowing where you want to go, predicting when you'll get there and looking at how you'll do that, and it's not just me, it's a team."

(Head of a city junior school – large, socially advantaged)

“It’s about having a long term aim and goal, but knowing the steps along the way, and managing the people to take them with you.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

Strategy was seen by some headteachers as a long term means of reculturing the school to one of high expectations of the children and each other, to create a school that was never content with its standards.

“Nothing’s ever good enough, and yes we do a lot of celebrating success, but all the time we’re looking to see what we can do to improve this. All the staff know we’re not a school that stands still and that’s part of the culture in our school ..... it takes a long time to build up.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

All headteachers felt that their School Management Plans, School Development Plans and School Improvement Plans had strategic elements. However, the timescales for these plans varied greatly and did not fit neatly with the theoretical model of 1 to 2 years for short term action planning, 3 to 5 years for the strategic medium term and 5 to 10 years for the futures-thinking long term (Davies and Ellison, 2003). Amongst headteachers, there was a mixture of flexibility, confusion and frustration. Some headteachers wrote the second year, third year and other years of the plan in broad outline and accepted that the strategic elements would be changed, modified or refined over time. They could predict that new priorities might emerge and understood they could not predict what they were. Other headteachers seemed to think that years two, three and more had to be in detail and because this was unreasonable to predict and “things change so dramatically”, had made a clear decision to stop.

Written strategic plans, because of the misconception about detail, were seen as a problem for those headteachers, rather than a challenge or opportunity, and this had led to frustration. However, despite in many cases a lack of written strategic planning, strategic thinking and discussion clearly took place.

While having an overall or larger overarching strategy, headteachers also used specific or smaller focused strategies. These strategies could be reactive and proactive and linked the short term actions to the longer term strategy. Reactive strategies were interventions in response to an issue or problem identified in monitoring and evaluation systems, e.g. a dip in results, underperformance of a teacher. They were short term, urgent and necessary to achieve or protect success. It could also involve a change in leadership style in order to give more effective direction to staff.

One head had reacted quickly and decisively to a dip in Maths results.

“..... there were twelve or thirteen children who I thought ..... half of them should have got Level 4, and the reason they didn’t was because they didn’t have the mental arithmetic strategies. I felt that had been a bit of a weakness throughout KS2 ..... and (teachers) had thrown out a little bit of common sense. And so, I said to them that I wanted to reintroduce tables, mental arithmetic tests on a regular basis. And we talked around it, and some year groups wanted to set, some year groups wanted to do it over a fortnight and I said ‘Look, everybody’s doing it on a Friday’.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

This reactive strategy contrasted sharply with leadership response in unsuccessful schools, as witnessed by one head during his contribution to system leadership.

“I believe that some headteachers have a certain state of paralysis ..... through working in schools in ‘special measures’ where they actually know there’s a problem and don’t do anything about it.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

Although these strategies were reactive, the headteachers involved were proactive in keeping their strategic vision in mind at all times and linking short term reactions to long term strategy. They used strategy as a perspective to view the future but also as a template to direct, monitor and evaluate current actions (Davies, B. 2005). Another head used improvement in Science results as a specific, short term strategy which was linked to the overall strategy. The school put in extra resources, time and effort to achieve ‘a quick fix’ of much improved Science results; however it was more about ‘the bigger picture’ of self-belief, wanting the children (and other stakeholders) to realise they could do it and ‘the real knock-on effect’ of “Aiming High” in all subjects. Several heads seized the opportunity to promote the strategy in conversations at various times in the school day and some heads were constantly proactive in their strategic thinking and ensuring their success was sustainable.

“..... one of the things that makes us successful is that we keep an eye on what’s going on, we’re always looking to see what’s going to hit us next, in order that we’re prepared for it ..... Anything that the government throws at you ..... If you keep abreast of what’s going on ..... and you can read about it, you’re in a much better position.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

## **Strategic leadership in action**

It may be seen as stating the obvious but effective leadership was felt to be central to each school’s sustainable success and making a positive difference to children’s lives. The headteachers in the research were selected for fitting the criteria of being effective leaders of successful schools. They had a track record of success; for four heads this was their second headship and for one this was her third headship; another four heads had sustained success in excess of 12 years. For three heads in the sample, who took their schools out of “serious weaknesses”, leadership seemed quite literally to make the difference between success and failure. Two of them in particular were able to vary their leadership style to the context (Leithwood, 2003) and strategically link short term expedients to longer term strategy. Several heads on taking up appointment, discerned that staff wanted to be led and were “ripe for pointing in the right direction”. The research investigated how primary headteachers used strategic leadership to make their schools successful and sustainable. Their responses in interview have been shaped into the personal qualities and characteristics they exhibit, how they work strategically with key staff and with governors and what they believe are their strategies for success.

Although, from what they said, their tone of voice and facial expression, it was clear that these headteachers felt the turbulence, the relentlessness, the stress and the pressures of the job, they nevertheless remained positive and proud of their achievements and were passionate about leading and learning.

“Because I think a lot of Heads go around saying ‘You don’t want to do this job!’ Moan, moan, moan. I am completely the other way around saying ‘This is the best job in the world!’ I love every minute of being Head here. And I’m sure the staff

know that.”

(Head of town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

“I love what I do. And I love thinking about what we’re going to do next, and I love reading about it.”

(Head of town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

Not all the headteachers were as demonstrative as this, but they expressed a desire to do their best in all they did and seemed to find the job “exhilarating” (Caldwell, 2006). They had high expectations and wanted the best for children (Hill, 2006) putting them “first and foremost”. They had “a finger on the work of the school” and “a good picture of what’s happening in classrooms”.

Headteachers created a ‘can do culture’ where, whatever the problem, “there’s always a solution”. They had ‘self belief’, ‘faith’ or ‘conviction’ that they were ‘making a positive difference’ or ‘adding value’. They were able to exercise influence over others in the organisation (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003), directly and indirectly (Hallinger and Heck, 1999) and to motivate and inspire staff and children to higher levels of performance. They invested in people and built leadership capacity, promoting positive relationships of trust, giving people confidence and empowering them; they modelled the capacities they wanted others to exhibit and spotted talent, wanting to get the best out of non-teaching staff as well as teachers. A significant point is that they also showed rapport with the reality of the classroom and remembered to thank everyone and appreciate their efforts.

Many headteachers emphasised ‘the people skills’, “having that nous of understanding people”, which helped translate the strategy into action and contributed to sustainability. For these headteachers, this ‘people wisdom’ – the capacity to understand what motivates people and how to work cooperatively with them (Davies, B.J., 2004) – seemed to triangulate with ‘contextual wisdom’ and ‘historical understanding’.

“I think that helped, that confidence and that knowledge. The staff needed somebody who was going to not only send them in the right direction, but look after them as well because they’d been bruised (after a disappointing OFSTED inspection with the headteacher) ..... that’s what I mean about the people things.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

The same head also discerned the crucial difference between giving staff autonomy and staff having leadership capacity (Fullan, 2005).

“..... people were given a lot of power, really. Allowed to do their own thing. So what I inherited were people who had quite a lot of ..... not leadership skills as such, but were used to acting on their own initiative. And getting on and doing, but very little cohesion. So everybody was going off in different directions.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

At various times, heads described themselves as “determined”, “single minded”, “resolute” and ‘focused’. They were certainly “not complacent” and exhibited “restlessness” (Davies, 2007) in their approach to success, committed to improving children’s lives. They were not frightened to have “difficult conversations” with staff, tackle within-school variation and challenge them to do their best. Relationships took much time to build up, but getting them right paid off in the long term.

“..... you can say things to staff that they’re not going to like, but they know why you said it. If you invest in relationships, at times when tough things have to be said,

you can say them.....”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

Headteachers also had the confidence to openly admit to staff that they were ‘human’ and got some things wrong.

“That’s important in being a leader as well, showing that you don’t get it right all the time and you do make mistakes.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

Some headteachers felt that staff and children could detect if they were not sincere and honest and expressed humility, putting the good of the school before their own needs (Collins, 2001).

“I don’t see distributing leadership as handing over power because my ego in that respect is not that big. I’m quite happy for someone else to get the credit for something because ultimately the school gets the credit and that’s enough for me.”

(Head of a village primary school – small, socially advantaged)

Heads needed high levels of energy and stamina, occasionally to the detriment of well-being; it was important to ‘set the right pace’ for the strategy and complete it. They were all personally productive and effective and as well as aligning the people to the strategy, they aligned the budget as well. Some headteachers referred to the “figurehead” role of leadership being visible, available and approachable and ‘leading from the front’. Also, headteachers seemed to be well respected in the community. A summary of the analysis of the personal qualities and characteristics of their strategic leadership is given in Figure 1.

<b>Personal qualities of strategic leaders</b>	<b>Characteristics strategic leaders exhibit</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ They are proud, passionate, committed and dedicated.</li><li>▪ They are personally effective and energised.</li><li>▪ They are focused and determined.</li><li>▪ They are honest, open, genuine and humble.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ They have high expectations, want the best for all children and are restless for improvement.</li><li>▪ They develop self-belief and ‘a can do culture’.</li><li>▪ They invest in people and develop leadership capacity.</li><li>▪ They demonstrate strategic wisdom and historical understanding.</li><li>▪ They are not frightened to have ‘difficult conversations’ and challenge performance.</li></ul>

**Figure 1: Personal qualities and characteristics of strategic leaders**

In working strategically with key staff and governors, schools had various structures with different roles and responsibilities to share leadership. These structures were important for getting people ‘on board’, translating the strategy into action and achieving and sustaining success. The strongest and most regular leadership collaboration was not surprisingly between headteacher and deputy head. Five Heads in particular talked about the complementary nature of the relationship and in

appointing a deputy head looked for skills, qualities and knowledge that were missing in themselves.

The next most influential structure was the Senior Management Team (SMT) or Leadership Team but there was no clear pattern as to how they functioned. Some teams met in school time, others in the evening; some had formal agendas, others met informally. One head met her SMT out of school to ensure strategic items were discussed. The larger schools tended to have more teams and to meet regularly. One head had a Leadership Team and a Strategy Team, while another often preferred to discuss strategy initially with the whole staff and get feedback before discussing it in detail with the SMT. In theory, the SMT was a key team for providing strategic leadership, but in practice some headteachers had encountered problems. In the early years of headship, one head had discovered that the SMT was 'a block' to strategy, using information gained to ensure the strategy was not translated into successful action. In a similar way, two other heads had inherited 'problems with the SMT' and so initially worked directly with the whole staff or created a new team.

Other leadership structures involving the rest of the staff tended to be more informal and varied greatly. Large schools were more likely to have further tiers of leadership (e.g. an inclusion team, a pastoral team) and several headteachers had used the government's staff restructuring into teaching and learning responsibilities (TLR structures) as an opportunity to create or extend leadership roles. Many schools had successfully developed the leadership dimension of curriculum co-ordinators and worked strategically with them. However, two heads had met resistance from staff, and unions, over subject leadership and responsibility if it was not part of the TLR structure. One head found it easier to work strategically with new and younger staff. Another head sometimes ensured the School Council participated in strategic thinking, particularly with the creation of extended services.

All headteachers worked closely with governors, which contributed to sustainability (Hill, 2006). However there was a sharp contrast in the levels of strategic thinking between the 'very strong, switched on' governing bodies and those that 'rubber stamped'. Some heads, particularly in socially advantaged areas, had governors who were 'intelligent', 'non-political', 'not afraid to challenge' and very involved in strategic thinking, often providing strategic leadership. In contrast, some heads had governing bodies who were very supportive, but it was left to the headteacher to provide the strategic thrust to help governors see 'the bigger picture' and prepare for future trends. One head was able to compare the governing bodies of her two headships and summed up the variation by acknowledging that "you have to work with what you get, you can't choose." Despite these differences, there was much evidence of innovative practice in attempting to engage governors in strategic processes:

- an 'Every Child Matters' committee composed mainly of parent governors
- the 'Governor of the Month' worked closely with the relevant curriculum co-ordinator on current and future plans
- the Link Governor was part of the feedback process the staff team made to each other after an OFSTED style lesson sweep each half term
- an annual get together between staff and governors where the strategic plan was discussed
- a Strategic Planning and Review Governors' Committee
- a working party on sustainable energy, initiated and driven by governors.

In working strategically with others, headteachers were astute at identifying the key players, amongst staff and governors, who could develop and implement the strategy. In the process, headteachers demonstrated strategic wisdom and clear historical understanding. The various teams – Head and Deputy, SMT or Leadership Team or other groups – had impact on translating the strategy into action and sustaining the school's success.

## Strategies for success

When asked to explain why their school was successful, no headteacher was immediately categorical. They were modest and somewhat hesitant as to the basis of their success. Achieving success was not simple nor straightforward, but rather indirect and difficult to distil. Conscious of the somewhat precarious nature of results, some headteachers felt success was fragile and conditional and 'could change overnight'. They worried about 'the high price of success' and were perplexed about unexpected dips in KS2 results or value added scores which could result in downgrading in the next OFSTED inspection. On the other hand, several headteachers pointed out that being successful in OFSTED terms put them in a strong and privileged position to control their destiny.

"..... we're fortunate in that we're successful and if you're successful and you can prove it, you don't have to take on board what external authorities might try and insist on. You can say 'Look, we're obviously doing what we're doing and it's working for us, our children are making as much progress as they're going to, therefore leave us alone'."

(Head of a village primary school – small, socially advantaged)

They all agreed that it had taken time and hard work to achieve success.

High quality staff seemed to be the key to success. They talked of having "cracking good teachers", "quality staff" or training them to be quality and getting "the best possible teachers."

"But underlying all of that, all the things I've described, from academic to social, to sporting and music, it's all due to having good staff, and that's the reason, I mean really that's the underpinning reason. People who are great in the classroom, who will give their time to other activities as well."

(Head of a village junior school – small, socially advantaged)

One head declared that 'staffing is paramount', and that, despite falling rolls, he invested financially in 'staffing to the hilt' as a strategy for success so that staffing had grown even though pupil population had decreased.

The careful deployment of effective teaching assistants, not just teachers, was part of that strategy and several heads concurred:

"..... putting a supportive teaching assistant with somebody who's finding the job a bit challenging has been an enormous benefit, because it's often just an extra pair of hands in the classroom or another person who can talk to a child who's having difficulties that makes a difference."

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

Another head highlighted the combination of like minded staff and a clear mission statement as a powerful strategy.

"If you can get the mission statement right and you get people who think along the same lines that you do, then it's easy, or easier to manoeuvre the school in the direction you want it to go."

(Head of a village primary school – small, socially advantaged)



One head also seized the opportunity of appointing 'like minded people' over a period of time.

".....the longer you're in post, the more opportunity you've got to appoint people yourself, hopefully, people who see things the same way as you. So you've got people working towards the same goal, vision, targets ..... and I think that's vitally important."

(Head of a village junior school – small, socially advantaged)

For some headteachers, getting 'the right person' at appointment was crucial. Often it was "younger staff who've got this enthusiasm that's infectious and training them up". One head arranged to observe candidates teaching and was prepared to go to great lengths to recruit the kind of teacher he wanted.

"What I'm looking for is what we now call a 'flair teacher', someone who just has that natural giftedness if you like ..... and who's on the same wavelength, has the same ethos as the rest of us."

(Head of a village primary school – small, socially advantaged)

Personalities and "the blend of people to make a team" were also considered. The most strategic appointment, after that of headteacher, was the deputy head.

"Recruitment of staff I think is the key one. We've got the right players, an extremely able Deputy Headteacher who's also the best classroom practitioner that I've seen. But committed staff throughout – a very strong KS1 co-ordinator, the Senior Management Team."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

As well as excellent teaching, headteachers looked for headship potential in appointing the deputy head.

"..... this is my third Deputy Head. Two went on to Headships. I wouldn't appoint anyone who I didn't think would stick at Deputy Headship ..... we need big development leaders for the future ..... he's very raw but he's got potential and it's how you manage that ..... I know he'll make it, but he's certainly not ready yet and needs a lot of support."

(Head of a city primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

"Perhaps even more important than appointment of staff is appointing the right Deputy. I've been very fortunate with the Deputies that I've appointed. Three of them are Heads and another one is being interviewed. So that's a part of the strategy, appointing staff."

(Head of a village junior school – small, socially advantaged)

The head of a small school pinpointed the strategy of retaining the same teacher, expert in National Tests preparation, in the mixed Year 5/6 class.

"..... she has a way of doing it and it works well, because she's a flair teacher first off, but she's well organised and structured so that when those kids go in for their SATs they've got absolutely everything they need year in, year out. It's been refined and changed but only slightly because now we've got it near perfection."

(Head of a village primary school – small, socially advantaged)

At the same time, he realised it could be a high risk strategy and it would have a ‘knock-on effect’ should she ever be on long term absence. Getting the right people at appointment was important but one head highlighted recruitment problems in socially disadvantaged areas.

“Because we’re in a challenging area it’s sometimes very difficult to attract good quality staff. It annoys me when the government says look for good quality staff but it’s not easy if you’re in a difficult area because people know if they come to (name of school) they’re going to have to work very hard with behaviour. It’s not easy.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged).

Of course only a proportion of a school’s staff would have been appointed by each headteacher. For existing staff, inherited on the head’s appointment, the strategy was a long term reculturing process through training, professional dialogue, participation and empowerment, to help them conceptualise the bigger picture and move the school to greater success. One head had managed the reculturing process without any staff leaving other than through normal circumstances such as retirement, promotion and relocation.

“What I think I managed to do is additionality rather than change of staff. And the huge difference was being able to offer support to them.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

Most schools in the research had teachers who were all assessed as ‘good’ and often ‘outstanding’ by OFSTED, but in terms of performance, headteachers required at least adequacy. Heads were not frightened to have ‘difficult conversations’ with staff and were prepared to take them through capability procedures but only as a last resort. In describing the process of reculturing the ethos of the school to high expectations, one had made use of Collin’s (2001) bus analogy to show how she managed and aligned staff.

“..... you get the bus and there are people on the bus and they’re in the wrong seats, some of them need to get off the (name of the school) bus. I gave everybody the chance to move seats, but at the end of the day there were some people who could not stay on the bus and needed to get off as soon as possible for the sake of the children .....

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

Of course, part of ‘getting the right people’ is getting the right headteacher and what became apparent clearly through the interviewing process was that headteacher’s effective leadership was vital to each school’s sustainable success. They were drivers of the strategies to provide a broad curriculum, to promote self-belief and a ‘can do culture’ and foster the relationships, the ethos and the conditions for success to thrive.

Whole school systems, e.g. for monitoring, assessment, target setting and evaluation of learning (Southworth, 2005) which had been agreed with staff and followed, were powerful strategies for success. These whole school systems were closely allied to clear school structures for roles and responsibilities, discussed earlier, and linked to building leadership capacity.

The headteachers never lost sight of their vision; the systems had to improve learning and enhance the school’s success, or they were abandoned.

“..... systems which allow people to get on with what’s important, and that they’re not just doing things for the sake of it.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

“What I do is set in place systems which if followed should ensure success. And, remembering what it’s like in the classroom, I try to make it easier to follow the system, than to buck against it. So an awful lot of spadework goes into getting the system right, getting the paperwork right.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

One head had spent “significant time and energy” on an individualised tracking system which enabled teachers to set personalised targets.

“..... we look at what the children can do, where they need to go, what we can do ..... these are specifically the tactics to use with this child, at this point in time, and so we’ve got different levels of how we’re moving the children on.”

(Head of a town junior school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

Another head described a marking and feedback system which had improved writing and encouraged the children to learn how to learn.

“..... analysing children’s work, it’s about the marking process, it’s about the system of marking children’s work ..... discussing children’s work with them ..... what they need to be doing and giving them targets.”

(Head of a town junior school – small, socially advantaged)

Headteachers supported staff and ‘provided the resources and finance’ for monitoring systems. Lesson observations and talking to children needed classroom release time as they had to be done during the school day while work scrutiny and monitoring teachers’ planning could be carried out more flexibly.

Three heads indicated that monitoring of staff was proportionate, “different strokes for different folks”, while one head hinted at how she had to be careful not to make a member of staff feel singled out.

“I don’t think the monitoring is that heavy handed but people know it will happen and it’s kind of that thing here ..... the inverse proportion to success. For sure those people I know where everything’s working fine get a pretty light touch on monitoring.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

In contrast to this OFSTED pattern of monitoring, another head’s proportionate monitoring was informal and supportive.

“I try to differentiate how I handle them, according to their needs. So, I don’t treat them all the same: if somebody’s got a tendency to be negative, I go into their classroom more often and say positive things, than somebody who’s motoring.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

While whole school systems were powerful strategies for success, they nevertheless needed to be complemented by good relationships between all members of the school community and a positive trusting ethos where everyone was valued.

### **Investing in people for sustainability: building leadership capacity**

It was clear that the headteachers in the investigation successfully built leadership capacity and invested in people. In defining success in terms of creating a positive ethos, developing good relationships and promoting staff morale and happiness, headteachers nurtured the well-being of staff (Hargreaves, 2005), involving, valuing and praising them and wanting to earn their respect. Believing staff to be a key to success, they recognised their sustained contribution to raising standards. They fostered relationships of trust, giving people confidence and empowering them with a 'voice' and they spotted potential, wanting to get the best out of this expensive and valuable resource.

In all schools, the heads developed in staff 'absorptive capacity' which is the ability to absorb new knowledge and understanding (Boal and Hooijberg, 2001) and learn smartly (Perkins, 2003) and 'adaptive capacity' which is the ability to adapt to change (Fullan, 2004). This was particularly true of schools in 'serious weaknesses' or with identified problems. Through motivation and inspiring confidence, newly appointed heads were able to change attitudes and lead staff to higher levels of knowledge and understanding. One head on appointment had encountered a disaffected pupil, who was convinced of his perpetual failure, and staff with complacent expectations. She realised these attitudes were "an immense problem" and used training and building leadership capacity as "the key to achievement", changing the mindset to self-belief and high expectations.

Within a week of becoming Acting Headteacher, OFSTED put one head's school into the category of 'serious weaknesses'. New leadership at the top and a very critical, although not unexpected, OFSTED report were motivational triggers.

"..... to start with we were beaten with so many sticks there was only one way to go  
..... we just became so focused and determined to prove everybody wrong."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

After "some sticking plaster stuff straightaway", this head invested long term in staff as people and in their professional development, providing "a massive budget". He instilled in them a sense of self-belief and overcame a fear of how external bodies would judge them.

"..... the strategy I adopted was 'Blame me. Whatever anybody says when they come to this school, you blame me. If you're doing exactly what I want you to do, what we discussed or what's in the School Development Plan, there is no-one else to blame but me'. And it took a long time to get that culture (of self-belief), but eventually we got it."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

On appointment, another head immediately invested in people and established trust through honest and open communication.

"I interviewed all the staff on my appointment before I came and asked them three questions: firstly about themselves, secondly about their ambitions for the future for themselves, and if they were sitting in my chair what they would do to improve the school ..... because of the mistrust of the previous regime, it got everybody more on board with me and actually relating to me from the start. The other thing I did

was at interview they asked me what I would actually do if I was appointed and I gave the staff a copy of that as a mandate.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

Using a distributive style of leadership and believing that “staff are the crucial factor”, she empowered staff “to feel good about themselves, which was then passed on to the children” and over four years “made our average teachers good and our good teachers outstanding.”

All headteachers were able to describe a range of on-site learning opportunities which demonstrated how they built leadership capacity at all levels and invested in developing future leaders for sustainability. They set a positive role model for children, staff and the community they served. In creating a calm ethos, which supported good behaviour and optimum learning conditions, one head felt she was modelling her calm leadership style for everyone to copy. In the context of performance management, another head was the team leader for the leadership group and saw modelling as the third strand of building capacity, linked to training and discussion.

“I think the best way of doing it is for me to model the way that they need to with other people.”

(Head of a city primary school – large, socially advantaged)

One head wanted others to imitate her qualities as a leader and be infected by her positive and passionate attitude.

“As a leader you’ve got to show the qualities you want them to exhibit; you’ve got to exhibit in abundance yourself and so you’re modelling .....to inspire people who want to share in your vision ..... this is a good thing to be with this person, because this person knows what they’re doing, is confident, and if we go with them then life’s going to be good, the school’s going to improve.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

Coaching was seen as another flexible way of building leadership capacity, with several heads mentioning the positive impact of ‘Leading from the Middle’ courses on both coached and coach.

“When my staff did ‘Leading from the Middle’, with having no deputy, I had to be the coach and did the coach training ..... Coaching’s about listening, it is about talking and helping people reach their own conclusions.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

Some staff were trained mentors for NQTs or trainee teachers, which made them reflect and analyse their practice and performance.

“..... that helps as well to develop capacity of teachers. I’m a great believer in, you’ve really got to articulate your practice, you’ve really got to think about it.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

Two heads felt coaching had become part of their culture and had identified several potential deputies and heads of the future.

“..... all the time people are coaching each other for various things ..... very very

supportive teaching, we all get coached by other people on bits that we're not good on."

(Head of a city junior school – large, socially advantaged)

Talk and conversations, what one head referred to as "informally thousands of interactions", contributed to building leadership capacity where headteachers could "get things in" or "sow seeds". Around school, staff including teaching assistants, were observed by headteachers to have many conversations about teaching, learning and leadership. In particular one-to-one strategic conversations (Davies, B., 2003), both formally and informally, and often with the deputy head, were effective in both sharing and developing leadership. One head had "the talking times", which involved a one-to-one appraisal, in addition to performance management, with each member of staff, where they had a guaranteed hour of individual attention on an annual basis. Team structures, e.g. year groups, inclusion team, where there were comfortable relationships, were further opportunities for focused smart talk, as were personalised targets and leadership targets in performance management.

Other specific, effective on-site learning opportunities given to staff were:

- making a programme on inclusion for Teachers' TV
- leading a major school development
- attending key meetings on budget setting
- joint observations with local authority advisers in a mini inspection of the school
- an OFSTED style lesson sweep with middle leaders thought to be "the sharpest piece of observation we've done".
- a whole school ICT strategy.

In comparison to on-site learning opportunities, off-site opportunities for building leadership capacity seemed fewer and somewhat predictable – courses and training days, some residential and some with a cluster of schools. Of significance were the long, high profile courses of National Professional Qualification for Headship [NPQH] and Leading from the Middle [LftM] developed by the NCSL. One head questioned the quality of off-site courses, while another had found conferences by 'world leaders' in education very beneficial. One head organised visits to other schools for staff and encouraged them to join local authority initiatives and working groups.

Leadership continuity and succession were mentioned by several headteachers. One head pointed out that the school had leadership depth, which had been a criterion to enable him to carry out his work as a National Leader of Education (NLE). Another head had been asked by the local authority to lead other schools in difficulty for a term and he had confidence in his leadership team.

"..... when I'm not here, it has to run smoothly. It would be pointless trying to support other colleagues if things were going to pieces in your own school."

(Head of a village junior school – small, socially advantaged)

This confidence in total leadership in their schools was reiterated by several heads in case of absence and on promotion. One head was preparing for the succession of the deputy; while two heads were preparing governors and staff for succession on their retirement at the normal expected time.

Several headteachers got a "buzz" from bringing teachers on to be leaders and were proud of their successes.

"..... you give them the opportunities, all the chances, but some haven't got the confidence ..... this teacher has the potential but not the confidence ..... she's started to work with people, she's mixed more, gone on more courses ..... she

came to me and said she'd really enjoyed this year and now wants to go on to deputy headship. It gives you such a buzz."

(Head of a city primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

The motivation of the headteacher for building leadership capacity is enhanced by its success.

"It's lovely seeing new members of staff really blossom when they've taken something on board, especially when you've given them a lot of success in front of their peers."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

"We've certainly got one member of staff who's come on a ton in leadership ..... from being able to manage things very well, to seeing how she stands up in a staff meeting and leads that staff meeting."

(Head of a city junior school – large, socially advantaged)

One head was delighted with the leadership progress of a young teacher in her third year who was leading Modern Foreign Languages and ICT throughout the school and had earned the respect of experienced colleagues. Some heads also advocated building the leadership capacity of support staff who show potential.

"One support assistant only does Literacy throughout the school. She didn't originally, but because I saw how good she was, seeing her success in booster classes, she got the 'wobbly' three's/ four's of the way through up there, she's got a lot more say in planning Literacy. She comes to evaluation sessions when we look at targets. She has real accountability for those children and you can see how passionate she is about it. She's the first one there when the envelopes (test results) come. It's good to see it."

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

In contrast to this, a few headteachers were disappointed that some staff were resistant to a leadership dimension to their job. One difficulty had been caused by the introduction of the government's Teaching and Learning Responsibilities (TLRs) and teacher unions insisting on no 'unpaid responsibilities'. Some schools had gone back to calling 'subject leaders' 'curriculum coordinators' to circumvent this. One head, in a wider system leadership role, was concerned how future TLRs could be prepared for a leadership role.

Another difficulty was that of motivation. One head had used a variety of strategies to develop leadership capacity and had "seen significant movement" but felt overall success was limited and had not "gone much beyond managing, as opposed to leadership."

As previously discussed, a further issue emerged about building leadership capacity and investing in people long term. Although all schools were helping to grow tomorrow's potential leaders, there was a reluctance amongst staff in many schools to apply for leadership promotion in another school. This was compounded by some successful heads seeing this reluctance of staff to move on as a compliment to themselves and their school and were personally flattered. This provided stability, and promoted sustainability for the school, but not for the system.

Part of investing in people long term and building leadership capacity also applies quite obviously to the headteacher as well. The heads clearly felt the turbulence and relentlessness of the pressures of the job but had various personal and professional sustainability strategies to renew

themselves (Hill, 2006), although workload and well-being remained issues. One headteacher worried about sustaining “this level of enthusiasm” and another confided in being periodically “worn out” and “exceptionally tired.” One head was able to keep home life and school life largely separate while another head possessed “a huge capacity for switching off.” Two heads were sustained because the job was rarely boring. Two heads were close to retirement at the normal time and one head planned to take early retirement in five years time. All but two of the headteachers contributed greatly to system leadership. This helped to sustain them professionally, as well as in some cases, providing additional finance for the school. Several heads were involved in NPQH tutoring and Primary Strategy Consultant Leader (PSCL) work. In the past, some had been Workforce Remodelling Consultants, external advisers for Performance Management and supported or led other schools at the request of the local authority. One head was a NLE and four had undergone School Improvement Partner (SIP) training. Two heads mentioned reading widely and many heads belonged to a variety of headteacher networks which kept them up to date and sustained them professionally. One head suggested a term's sabbatical every few years for headteachers to reflect and renew.

## **Setting leadership priorities for sustainability**

Of particular interest from the review of research and literature on strategy and sustainability was the concept of ‘strategic abandonment’, often associated with ‘strategic timing’ and meaning “giving up some activities to accommodate the new ones” (Davies, B., 2004). It was felt that the use of strategic abandonment had potential in offering an innovative and unique contribution to conquering workload, being in control of external demands and exercising “informed professional judgement” (Barber, 2002). It seemed that schools had reached saturation point, expressed in comments such as “we can’t work any harder” and “something’s got to go”.

‘Strategic abandonment’ is a capacity which requires intuition and discernment to choose the optimum time to give up successful activities in favour of more promising, potentially better approaches (Drucker, 1999, Caldwell, 2004), whereas ‘strategic timing’ is about having ‘the finger on the pulse’. It is the capacity to take the right action at the right time and seize the opportunity when it arises (Boal and Hooijberg, 2001). Four kinds of strategic abandonment may be identified as follows:

- ‘Selective abandonment’ or intelligent neglect (Lovely, 2006) is about setting leadership priorities. It is where activities and programmes judged to have the least impact on learning are abandoned to achieve balance and stability.
- ‘Rejection’ is saying ‘no’ to new initiatives and ‘big opportunities’ without feeling guilty.
- ‘Irresponsible abandonment’ or ‘opting out’ is where leaders in the school know they will be retiring in a few years and so do not invest in the planning and preparation nor gain the personal commitment of staff to make the initiative a success.
- ‘Enforced abandonment’ is where successful programmes have to be abandoned because of factors largely out of the school’s control.

These concepts and the use made of strategic abandonment as a leadership practice were explored with the headteachers that were interviewed. Headteachers responded cautiously to the question about strategic abandonment and some heads gave the impression that the idea of giving something up that was going well was morally wrong. Most heads disliked the term ‘abandonment’; it seemed to be emotive and too clear-cut and final. Similarly ‘neglect’ received a somewhat negative reaction.

On the other hand, some heads were comfortable using the terms “ditch”, “dump” or “get rid of”. Most heads preferred to ‘adapt’, ‘build on’ or ‘modify’ while others used terms such as “deferred” and “shelved”. Many of the examples of programmes and activities being abandoned were prompted by the need to save time, to relinquish outdated practices and to reduce paperwork.



In being selective, the guiding principle was how the abandonment would benefit the children and school. Abandonment of activities had to be managed and justified carefully. In some cases, staff had invested “all this time and energy” and felt “slightly aggrieved” at its abandonment. Parents needed to be fully informed of the reasons for abandoning certain school activities.

Several headteachers cited the Literacy and Numeracy strategies and how they had adapted or abandoned parts of it. Much of this was about realising the limitations of programmes and instead using professional judgement in assessing and personalising learning.

“Nobody follows a programme from beginning to end, they do the bits that they need to do, as shown by assessment ..... it’s aimed at the area they need to improve in. And the results are astonishing.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially disadvantaged)

Of the four kinds of abandonment, ‘rejection’ was the one that resonated most strongly with headteachers. It took “a certain bravery”, “strength” and “bottle” to say ‘no’ to initiatives (Collins, 2001). Several heads had rejected suggestions from the local authority to get involved in certain initiatives, for example a pupil tracking system and ICT software. One head had rejected involvement in the Intensive Support Programme (ISP), feeling from working with schools who had done ISP that “it dragged the staff down further than it raised them up.”

“They (the local authority) wanted to put us into the Intensive Support Programme because our results, though better than they were, were still under ..... the magic 65. And I said ‘That’s absolutely ridiculous. You’re using me as a Primary Consultant Leader, and you know that our strategies are right, we just haven’t reaped the rewards yet.’ So I stood my ground and said ‘Do I have to have it?’ ‘No.’ ‘I’m not having it then.’ I think in terms of leadership I’m very strong on that. If something comes in that I think will benefit the school, I’ll do it.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially disadvantaged)

Another head declined to continue the ISP with the local authority; however he had continued with his own version of ISP, retaining the best features, abandoning certain parts and relinquishing funding from the local authority but also accountability to them.

A modern foreign language (MFL) and full extended services were common examples given in response to the specific interview question; this was not outright rejection, but more a case of “intelligent neglect”, putting them ‘on hold’ or to be implemented ‘in their own time’ or ‘when the time is appropriate’.

“To be honest the priority a couple of years ago was not Modern Foreign Languages. It’s going to have to be a priority soon and for sure it will become one, so that’s one we’ve certainly shelved.”

(Head of a town primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

One head was very decisive about rejection, for example of the extended schools agenda, if she felt the school’s core purpose was under threat.

“I thought it was getting too much ..... I didn’t want to be involved in the neighbourhood nurseries. If I have to deliver these things, I’ll do it in my own time and in my own way ..... you have to be careful as a head. Our core service is delivering high quality education and I feel you’ve got to keep your finger on the button ..... At the end of the day, if the quality of education is affected, at

this school we would get our knuckles rapped.”

(Head of a village primary school – medium, socially advantaged)

It was easier to say ‘no’ with experience and some heads, through their NPQH work, expressed concern for inexperienced heads.

“..... you have to not feel guilty. But I think the longer you get into your headship, the less you’re worried about guilt, really.”

(Head of a town primary school – large, socially advantaged)

Several heads pointed out that being successful in OFSTED terms put them in a strong and privileged position to control their destiny; it seemed that they could be assertive, confident in the knowledge they had the ‘outstanding’ label. At the same time, they had empathy for schools not achieving satisfactory results “because it must be very difficult to escape this straitjacket” and thought that heads of unsuccessful schools must find it hard to say ‘no’. One head believed that “we’ve got more autonomy than we think we have.”

‘Irresponsible abandonment’ or ‘opting out’ resonated with some heads, with two heads believing that was what happened at their schools before their appointment and another recognising evidence of this on starting her new school. During the course of the interview, two heads described situations in other schools, from their system leadership work, which suggested ‘irresponsible abandonment’. One head believed that “bad schools didn’t necessarily make bad decisions, they just didn’t make decisions”, while another referred to some heads having “a certain state of paralysis”, aware of a problem but doing nothing about it. In the case of two heads nearing retirement, selflessness was evident, not ‘opting out’. One head was preparing the Deputy Head, particularly on budget and data, and the governors on extended services, pointing out that it would be so easy to say “nothing to do with me”. The other head had not appointed a deputy headteacher and put in place a temporary structure so that the new head “would have the opportunity to appoint a deputy who would share their vision.”

‘Enforced abandonment’ of successful programmes had taken place because of factors such as staffing changes, falling rolls, finance or external constraints. One head was adamant she would always find the finance from other sources if the activity was beneficial, although she admitted that a high profile activity, integral to her vision, was ‘on hold’ for some time. Another head felt that the introduction of performance management, more formal and constrained by pressure from teacher unions, had forced him to abandon a very successful system of professional development dialogue. Falling rolls had caused one head to have ‘mixed age’ classes, to change the structure of planning teams and to squeeze finance for monitoring and evaluation time.

At different points during the interview, most headteachers referred to filtering systems (Lovely, 2006) to cope with the volume of information bombarding schools. Headteachers, deputy heads and leadership or senior management teams were the key people in filtering information. The purpose of filtering systems seemed to be two fold; firstly information was rejected or selected to ‘take pressure off staff’ and so ‘they don’t panic’; and secondly key information, important to the success of the school, was filtered through to staff and had a greater chance of ‘sticking’ (Hadfield, 2005). In setting leadership priorities, headteachers in the investigation used aspects of strategic abandonment to sustain the success of the school. However, their use of strategic abandonment was not systematic and not an integral part of self-evaluation systems.

## **Main findings – key points**

### **Defining success**

Primary schools in the study:

- were successful over time in official measures of KS2 results and inspection reports
- had made significant progress from a much lower base
- were successful in strategic measures such as ethos, inclusion, relationships, good behaviour and parental support
- raised issues about value added measures from KS1 to KS2, the quality of marking in English tests and cohort variability
- understood that subtle changes in pupil population could impact on results
- felt success was hard to achieve and not easy to explain
- felt official success was fragile and could change from year to year
- worried about unexpected dips in KS2 results and downgrading in the next OFSTED inspection
- realised the 'outstanding' label from OFSTED put them in a strong and privileged position to control their destiny
- reported that happy, successful staff with good leadership capacity were reluctant to leave for promotion in another school
- demonstrated that success was necessary in the short term for survival and in the long term for sustainability

### **Understanding strategy**

Headteachers in the study:

- found the term 'strategy' difficult to grasp and to define and often associated it with specific national strategies
- viewed strategy as direction setting and a holistic process, clearly linked to the vision and dealing with the short and long term
- demonstrated that several leaders in the school used strategic thinking to ensure the school's success
- used different timescales for written strategic plans, varying considerably in flexibility and detail
- used strategy as a perspective to view the future but also as a template to direct, monitor and evaluate current actions
- were both proactive, linking short term actions to the long term strategy, and reactive, employing intervention strategies to tackle identified problems
- translated strategy into action through a reculturing process, knowing, 'where they were going', 'where they had come from' and 'how to get there'.

### **Strategic leadership in action**

Headteachers in the study:

- exerted considerable influence, directly and indirectly, over others in the organisation
- were focused on pupils' learning
- were proud, passionate and determined
- invested in people and developed leadership capacity
- challenged low expectations and were not frightened to tackle within school variation
- displayed strategic wisdom about the people they worked with and the context in which they operated
- were astute at identifying key players for translating strategy into action

- worked strategically with individuals, several teams and governors
  - felt high quality staff was a strategy for success, getting the 'right people', particularly teachers who were 'like minded' or had 'flair', at appointment
  - saw the appointment of the deputy head as a key strategic decision
  - acknowledged the positive impact of teaching assistants on success
  - felt whole school systems, (e.g. monitoring, target setting, assessment and evaluation), which had been agreed and followed by staff, were powerful strategies for success
- fostered good relationships between all members of the school community and a positive, trusting ethos where everyone was valued.

## **Investing in people for sustainability**

Headteachers in the study:

- nurtured staff well-being through a positive ethos, good relationships and recognising their contribution to sustained success
- kept staff morale up and supported them to achieve job satisfaction
- used a variety of on-site learning opportunities such as modelling, coaching and conversations to build leadership capacity
- got a 'buzz' from bringing teachers on to be leaders
- were flattered by the reluctance of successful staff to apply for leadership promotion in another school
- had various personal and professional strategies for renewing themselves.

## **Setting leadership priorities for sustainability**

The key points were:

- several heads disliked the words 'abandonment' and 'neglect' and frowned upon the idea of giving up something successful
- there was some evidence of using the 3Rs of sustainability – relinquish, reject and reduce – to focus on priorities
- these experienced heads were 'brave' enough to say 'no' to initiatives, but they were concerned for inexperienced heads or heads of schools in difficulty who may not have the 'strength' to say 'no'.
- many heads operated 'filtering systems' to protect staff from information overload
- there was no evidence of 'irresponsible abandonment' any more in these successful schools
- succession planning was high on the agenda
- the use of 'strategic abandonment' was not systematic and not an integral part of school self evaluation.

## **Implications for national and local policy makers**

The research indicates that effective leadership is central to each school's sustainable success and making a positive difference to children's lives. Of particular importance seems to be the following:

- Getting the 'right headteacher' is vital. Whilst recognising that this is a local strategic decision for governors in collaboration with the relevant authority, there is a strategic need for national government to ensure that recruitment and retention procedures remain attractive, and positively encourage headteachers to commit to the community and stay in post long enough to achieve sustainable success.
- The OFSTED framework should give more credit than it does at present to strategic, albeit less readily quantifiable measures of success, such as the happiness of children; staff morale and job satisfaction; leadership throughout the school; the school's ethos; parental involvement and the school's standing in the community.
- The tension in the system over leadership development needs to be resolved nationally. On the one hand, primary schools are successful in building leadership capacity at all levels. On the other hand, teachers in some schools and teacher unions, with the introduction of the TLR structure, are insisting that non-TLR posts do not have a leadership dimension.
- In response to the reluctance of staff to move schools, consideration should be given to a system of financial incentives to departure schools, which may stimulate successful schools to encourage potential leaders to go on to leadership promotion at another school.

In terms of training, local and national providers should organise more courses on strategy, strategic leadership and sustainability.

## **Creating successful, strategic and sustainable primary schools**

- Effective leadership is crucial. This is “the leadership of many” at all levels, not just of a single leader. However, the contribution of the headteacher, particularly the quality of his or her strategic leadership, is vital to primary schools being successful and sustainable.
- Successful, strategic, sustainable primary schools achieve good results in the short term and show upward trends over time. Headteachers intervene strategically if and when results unexpectedly dip.
- These schools also provide a broad, balanced, enriched and differentiated curriculum, which encourages deep and lifelong learning, valuing thinking and understanding. They demonstrate that every child matters and consider children’s interest and motivation, engage them in their learning and sustain positive attitudes.
- Headteachers recognise the importance of the sustained contribution of staff in raising standards and nurture their well-being and professional development. They invest in people and develop leadership capacity at all levels. They need to demonstrate further evidence of selflessness by encouraging and persuading potential leaders to be career minded and move on to leadership posts in other schools.
- Schools should make greater use of strategic abandonment and timing as part of their self evaluation system to reject initiatives, to reduce workload and to achieve work/life balance.
- Successful, strategic, sustainable primary schools have a dual commitment to the short term and the long term and focus on strategic thinking which involves other stakeholders in the strategic journey to sustainable success.

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