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Faith, Hope and Charity: setting out to create a new culture in merging schools

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FULL PRACTITIONER ENQUIRY REPORT

Contents

Introduction

In his book *Leadership for the Schoolhouse* (1996), Sergiovanni writes about building community in schools.

> How are communities different from organisations? Communities are organised around relationships and ideas. They create social structures that bond people together in a oneness, and that bind them to a set of shared values and ideas. Communities are defined by their centres of values, sentiments and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of "we" from the "I" of each individual.(p47)

This report is the story of the journey of two schools[1], regarded in the world as centres of professional failure, as they set out to come together and recapture or recreate the shared moral purpose that builds a community of values, a climate of self-worth and the prospect of empowerment and success for all members of the new community, for young people and adults together.

Through telling the story through the eyes of two teachers, the study looks at the possibility of effecting huge culture change in a relatively short time period in circumstances of enormous turbulence and uncertainty. The change is traced over a two-year period, so no assessment is made about consolidation. Through examining the story, the influential thinking of Leithwood, Sergiovanni and Fullan is tested, and matched against the perceptions of business merger specialists.

That culture change of such size and such speed is possible is confirmed in the story, and the key ingredients identified. Whether the change in culture is sufficient is for another part of the story to tell.

Background

In May 1999, the departmental management team of a large urban local authority met to decide what was to be done about the secondary provision for over 2000 secondary-age children living on an impoverished, large outer-ring estate. The estate was currently served by two medium-sized mixed 11–18 schools of about 1100 students each, one of which we will call the Alderman Vane School (AVS) and the other the Councillor Crosby School (CCS). They shared the same site, divided by a fence, served the same communities and faced the same difficulties. Since their establishment, there had existed a rivalry between the two, and something approaching a tribal allegiance to the schools had developed in families, whose move to the estate as it was built in the 1950s had coincided with the establishment of the schools.

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[1] The names of the schools and the teachers have been changed and the local authority and other eyewitnesses are not mentioned by name.

This rivalry took on a sharper edge after the introduction of parental choice in the early 1990s, the pressure of falling rolls from the mid-1980s, and the opening of the neighbouring City Technology College about the same time. Throughout the 1990s the fortunes of the two schools had declined. The changing nature of the intake created by the reforms of the early 1990s began to impact on examination results. The size of the sixth forms declined, forcing conversations about closure or co-operation. The economic crises and collapse of manufacturing industry exacerbated the problems on the estate, increasing levels of alienation to learning and bringing more challenging behaviour into the schools.

New expectations around accountability and performance as represented by the advent of Ofsted shone an unforgiving light on the two schools, and in October 1998 one of these schools – the Alderman Vane School – was placed in special measures. Resignation to the methods of Ofsted was not yet so well developed that this decision was quietly accepted. On the contrary, a vigorous opposition to the judgement was mounted, led by the authority. However, the decision was confirmed and this set off within the Alderman Vane School a series of events which led to a major leadership crisis and the destabilisation of the school.

Meanwhile, across the fence, the misfortune of the Alderman Vane School was met with the expected responses that the competitive climate had created in the 1990s. In 1996, the Councillor Crosby School had survived its first Ofsted, and the judgement on next door confirmed their belief in themselves as the better school, gave them confidence as to the market edge this would give them, and created a little complacency in their current performance. It also marked the beginning of their own decline, exacerbated by a serious incident involving a knife in 1999 and the subsequent departure of the headteacher.

By the spring of 2000 the LEA was seriously concerned about standards and behaviour at the school, and faced the prospect of a special measures judgment should Ofsted arrive within the expected four-year cycle. At Alderman Vane the situation had been stabilised by the appointment of an interim head who had taken firm and prompt action, but HMI were sceptical about the prospects of the school making the step change in improvement required to come out of special measures. The LEA knew something must be done, hence the meeting in May 2000, referred to above.

> So there was that initial October '98 flurry around are they right or are they wrong. At the same time, over the fence in the other one – (Councillor Crosby) – I was aware that there were continuing and growing tensions. So what you'd got was two schools next to each other with a fence in between, both of which had the problem that they were having to always compromise with the pupils to try and get through the day. The role of both organisations to me was that you managed it, in order to cope with the management of the school. You didn't actually try and achieve anything; you just tried to hold the school. So you got that [head] – who I felt was frightened of his own school …. what was obvious was you'd got one school that had done all right in Ofsted where there were tensions running at every time and seemed to be better than the one next door, Alderman Vane School, that had failed in Ofsted, and you got the usual sort of guff from the LEA which was: "Our observations tell us it's getting better". Ofsted had recently visited and said it was on the up. (The previous Ofsted report had said the school was making progress.) So the two heads were both running schools that to me were just about trying to get through. They weren't about anything else. (Senior LEA officer)

The decision was taken at this meeting to put the two schools together. And to do it fast. By September 2000 a new, combined Year 7 was to be sited in a separate annexe belonging to one of the schools. Significant capital funds were to be acquired to refurbish and improve the physical environment, new and committed staff[2] were to be drafted in from across the authority to lead new approaches in learning, and all the pedagogic experience of the advisory service was to be brought to bear on creating a new curriculum.

At the same time, closure of Alderman Vane School was announced (made possible by the special measures judgment) but this would not occur until August 2002. Technically, Councillor Crosby School – as the successful school – would expand and take over the whole site. A project manager was head-hunted, a joint committee of the governing bodies formed, a project group representing all the LEA departments and involving other stakeholders was summoned by the director. During the academic year 2000–2001, new staffing structures were agreed with the unions and appointments began to be made, beginning with a new principal (the substantive head of Councillor Crosby School). More funding for capital development was secured, and all was set to grow the new "school fit for the 21st century", as it was called in the public arena. It was a project which was driven by the energy and commitment of the authority's leaders.

The research

But jobs are easy; it's people who are hard.

Few studies exist in the literature about the experiences of schools and their communities facing reorganisation, and even fewer of these approach the study from the perspective of those living through the process, but in McHugh (1993) the reality of the experience is starkly described.

> The amalgamation of schools constitutes traumatic organisational change which carries with it threats of redundancy and skill obsolescence, changes in authority and responsibility, a new organisational culture and general upheaval. (p 24)

> The negative effects…may be seen in poor psychological well-being… reduced job performance… and increased labour turnover with loss of "good" teachers. (p12)

Mike Wallace (Wallace (1996)) argues:

> Reorganisation clearly saves money but at substantial cost in terms of teacher stress, disruption to school management and the education of pupils. (p471)

Unlike most school reorganisations, the reorganisation of Alderman Vane and Councillor Crosby schools was not dictated by financial imperatives, falling rolls or other resource issues (though Alderman Vane had run up a substantial budget deficit). It was not dictated by a shift in system-wide pedagogic or political principles that has recently led to

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[2] The word "staff" is used throughout to indicate all adults paid by the school: where only teachers are meant, this is clear in the text.

the demise of the middle school, or, years ago, the creation of the secondary comprehensive. It was the bureaucratic response to the prospect of massive school failure, or key people's responses to Ofsted and its determination of what constituted failure and success[3]. It nevertheless represented the opportunity to do something really different, to envisage and implement alternative ways of inviting young people in high-poverty communities to achieve success. The project was born with vision and ambition in a real and difficult world where judgments about failure were implacable, swift and absolute. The policy tension, between the political imperative to achieve success and the pedagogic imperative to create a learning culture, was to dog the project from the start. And at the level of the people who would have to implement the vision, the project suffered from no hope, blind faith born of necessity, and precious little charity.

Methodology

This report is part of a wider research project being undertaken as a PhD study at Warwick University, and part-funded by an NCSL research associate bursary. It is a single case study of a unique schooling experiment.

A series of semi-structured interviews were held with stakeholders. The research draws primarily on two long, in-depth, unstructured ethnographic-style interviews with teachers, in which they are invited to tell their story and through which they relive their "suffering from grief". (Kyriacou and Harriman, (1993) p23). Both wanted very much to participate in the research. In this study, the researcher has deliberately allowed the voice of the teachers to dominate and prescribe the study.

Telling the history

Both interviewees had been long-serving, respected and successful teachers in one of each of the contributing schools. Both held high-status, though not senior leader, posts in the new school. Both were mature, responsible and emotionally intelligent adults. Neither was particularly active in their trade union, both had represented their teaching colleagues on the governing body in the contributing schools, and both were passionately committed to the rights of young people in the community to a decent and challenging education.

At the start of the interviews they were invited to describe the attitudes prevailing in their staff rooms towards the other school in the years before 1998.

> **John (AVS):** Traditionally – going back a good few years, they were the poor school. Our results were better than theirs and we would say to the children, come on, we're going to keep well above those. As time went on their results actually became better than ours, but towards the end, what we heard about attitudes and behaviour in particular made us feel it's not so bad over here is it…made us feel the schools were not so different as Ofsted had made out.

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[3] This perspective was offered by a senior officer of the LEA.

There wasn't much contact between the schools. There wasn't at all. Staff didn't know each other on a personal level. They may have seen each other at meetings and so on and been on nodding acquaintance terms, but that was it. I mean we'd always been competitors. We'd been – I used to say to children – you're not going to let that lot on the other side of the fence do better than you, are you? And then we had to get together and say, well, we're going to work together and do it well – so it was a bit of a culture shock.

Mary (CCS): We'd gone down to three-form entry, and then a new head came with lots of new ideas. You had to work very hard to turn it round but we did turn it round…it went up to four forms of entry, then five-form entry…During this time there'd been quite a lot of bad feelings between AVS and our school – a lot of rivalry – and we all felt the LEA was trying to put the two schools together...Before the actual merger of the schools we were going to meetings with them and we were trying to work together so that we would have a sixth form between the two schools...after, I came out [of this meeting] thinking I could work with these people because up till then it was very much them and us…Then they were put in special measures and a new head came and [he] was – well I mean – well I didn't know the man but he seemed very aggressive towards us…it was very much two schools and their pride.

Into this already rather heady mix, the decision, in the May of 2000, to bring the two schools into one came as a bombshell, and with it a whole raft of other actions, reactions and passions that were set to exacerbate the feelings of the staff of the two schools, increase suspicion and eventually create considerable bitterness.

First there was the misunderstanding: or something *being* so doesn't *make* it so ("no hope"):

Mary (ACS): The next thing I remember...was the meeting about the school (which was a joint governing body meeting), and they said Vane was in special measures, and the director said that we could either stay as we were and they said – I can't remember what they actually said, they said, well he hinted that our examination results weren't very good and that the school wasn't – and, and I was shocked by it because although I knew that it wasn't excellent, I didn't realise that they viewed it so badly, because up till then we just thought that we were holding our own…because the head always compared us against schools in the area, and in the area we were, we certainly weren't the worst, so to a certain extent we all felt that we were still there and we were still turning it around and yes, there were problems, but you know that it was only certain departments, and yes, the behaviour wasn't as good as it used to be, but…we thought we were in control, and then he [the director] said… we can either… close Vane and then they would open it up again and throw all the money at it and that's where the pupils would want to go, they wouldn't want to come to Crosby and eventually we would close – that's how he sold it to us… Or he said what they would do – which is what he wanted, he said – was to change Crosby, so in other words Crosby as a school would grow and take in Vane...

Now that's how he said it to us and I believed him. I thought well, you know, and the governors went with it and I think and yes he was going on about it would be a school with x percentages – 95% L5's – we were going to be this and that and the other, so to a certain extent – the deputy director came up to me afterwards, she sort of said oh um don't worry, the staff won't blame <u>you,</u> and I thought why would they blame <u>me</u>? And she said people will sort of, people would find it very hard she said, but things will work out so I was a bit naïve really. I just really had this wonderful view of Crosby just expanding and we would be Crosby – except when we said about the <u>name</u> he said he wouldn't talk about the name, that we'd discuss that and I said when I thought about it, it was never going to happen like that, it just wasn't. It was obvious I think, when I look back, that there was no way that it was going to be Councillor Crosby or Alderman Vane, so I went back and a lot of the staff and then again of course you've got

weeks and months afterwards – people talking about what's going to happen – what's going to happen about jobs? Are we going to close? And the unions got involved and they basically said well – they seemed to suggest that we'd all keep our jobs and they'd find jobs for Vane staff, but the actual communication then stopped.

John (AVS): I recall going to a meeting of the governors and meeting the director at [another school], where it was said there was no move to merge the two schools, but it wasn't very long after that meeting that a proposal was put forward by the director that we should become one. We had a lot of notice of that change, whereas the staff at Councillor Crosby didn't have the same notice – they didn't – they weren't able to take it in as an inevitable consequence because it was explained to them in a rather different way to the way it was explained to us, in that technically their school was expanding and from that they assumed, OK I've got my job and we're taking over this poor school. It didn't work out like that, which is what caused a lot of difficulties.

Then there was the governing body problem…("precious little charity"):

(Governor CCS and joint CCS/AVS committee): Certainly I attended a governing body where the chair of Alderman Vane was attacked by the chair of Councillor Crosby, and that was appalling – there was no trust between them. He alleged that really they (CCS) could withdraw if they wanted to, and this was clearly still the agenda that prevailed at the governing body of Councillor Crosby school. Well, at the governing body meeting where we were doing planning of staffing, he was so rude and offensive and unprofessional. I challenged his conduct of the meeting and I said I was not prepared to sit in a meeting where he behaved towards other governors in a way that was totally inappropriate...And the next day he offered his resignation and the acting head said I'll contact him (the chair) and ask him to come back, and I said if you do I will resign: he has resigned and we don't go back on that. That was a breakthrough really because [the vice-chair] became the chair of governors and it moved forward. It had become very political and personal; the climate was not towards working together. It was always a power thing and a superiority – that we might decide to join you and we might take our ball away.

Then there were the different experiences of leadership ("blind faith"):

Mary (ACS): But the actual communication then stopped, because the acting head stopped communicating with Alderman Vane School – so we just didn't know what was going on; it was the start of the new school. Year 7 – …he sort of refused to have anything to do with that. You had to say if you wanted to teach there or if you didn't want to teach there, and it became very unpleasant. There was a horrible atmosphere. He kept saying – he kept maintaining to us that our school would be growing. We couldn't understand why, if that was the case, we were having no contact at all with the Year 7s and… we were told nothing, virtually nothing at all. So from that point of view there was... a lot of bad feeling really because we felt that we'd lost our Year 7s – we'd got I think double the intake that Vane had got, so it became very much like that – what we've got, what they'd got, and I'm sure they felt exactly the same and we didn't know what was happening in Vane. Apparently they were much more up to speed with the situation and totally aware of what was going to happen, ie the job situation that there would be jobs created, but we thought it was going to be like Head of Maths, Head of English – you know, the usual structure, but they were being – they were having practice interviews, they had people coming in and talking about this new way of teaching – about Gardiner and all this, and we knew nothing, absolutely nothing, we just carried on in our own little way trying to keep our heads above water and being totally unaware of, of, of the actual real situation, as we were not led – we weren't told – I talk now to the folk, people from Vane like A. and that, and

she was saying that they really were helped by their headteacher, that they were actually really led; he led them if you like, in what was happening to them.

John (AVS): I was very impressed with the role the head played in keeping people on board and pushing them for jobs in the new school – and I think that is a very important difference probably between Crosby and Vane. In… the leadership that he gave to getting the right people into the right jobs. In giving the right advice, while at the same time keeping his own school going. Yes, I was impressed.

By the summer of 2001, in the term before the principal designate took up position, the appointments to the senior team and middle leaders had been completed. Out of the 22 appointments made, 5 had gone to teachers from Councillor Crosby (the expanding school) and 17 to teachers from Alderman Vane (the closing school). In the Councillor Crosby staffroom a Rejects Club was formed, and those few who had been successful were vilified. The staff who had been drafted in to work in the joint Year 7 project were isolated from their colleagues in the other schools and had no contact with them. They were regarded with suspicion. The staff at Alderman Vane, while successful in securing jobs in the new school, still had to deal with the emotional labour of the closure of their own place. Creating a climate full of moral purpose, shared meaning and values-driven decision-making for the new school was not going to be easy.

Setting out on the change journey

Identification with an institution or a faction within it is inextricably bound up with cultural allegiance. Successful merger implies that staff forsake identification with a pre-merger institution to allow identification with the new school. (Wallace (1996) p460)

The challenge

The strategies put in place by the new leadership team of the new school were based on a mixture of experience, intuition, empathy and some theoretical knowledge of the leadership research around culture-building. Because the models of change examined and described in the literature are, on the whole, if not rational, at least managed, and usually impersonal, there was virtually nothing to guide the team on the chaos and pain of this change. It wasn't until after the official opening of the school, when the author was attending AERA (the American Education Research Conference) as a research associate of NCSL, that she came across a book in the Chicago Borders Bookshop called *Charging Back up the Hill* by Mitchell Lee Marks (2003). Suddenly, it became clear just how normal the feelings, behaviours and despair of those involved in the reorganisation of the schools had been. The book was an American business book about "workplace recovery" after mergers, acquisitions and downsizings, and was written by an American consultant specialising in working with firms experiencing any of these. In it he describes the unintended effects of the process and the need to recognise and minimise them, the need to build a shared sense of direction and tolerate the pain of going from the old order to the new. He describes the psychological trauma of transition and the frustration and anger of those experiencing things beyond their control.

A dozen realities about workplace recovery (Marks (2003) pp109–111)

1. Transitions are difficult events to manage; the very way they are executed runs counter to common tools of organisational change management.

2. Transitions are difficult events for people to cope with – and employees in many firms are saturated after years of stress from organisational madness.

3. Mismanaged transitions have a negative, not a neutral, impact on people and organisations.

4. The way transitions are mismanaged weakens motivational forces.

5. People regress to primitive forms of behaviour both during and after transition, but also crave direction and control.

6. Executives[4] adopt crisis management orientations and rely on the tried and tested rather than risk innovative solutions.

7. Transitions have the potential to unfreeze people and organisations.

8. People need to let go of the old before they can accept the new, and in between they struggle with the neutral zone

9. Executives[5] typically ignore or deny the need to let go of the old before accepting the new.

10. The more consistent the forces for the new organisational order, the more readily people will accept it.

11. People want to identify with their workplace and want a fair chance at succeeding in the new organisational order.

12. A post-transition culture will emerge – either the status quo or a modified one – by design or default.

The experience

Schools are generally much more complex and demanding organisations than businesses, and are filled with much more complex and demanding people, but nevertheless all of these realities could be evidenced in the story of the two schools. The director of the EAZ described the process as "lunacy".

> We had to put the Year 7s...[together by]...September, but that was done; that was the foundation of what went wrong; everything went wrong from there in my view. It was done without proper thought, without proper planning, it was done too precipitously, it was not properly planned. (Director EAZ)

The teacher in Alderman Vane School maintained that the unbearable strain had been created by the special measures judgement and its consequences, and the merger was just another thing:

> …when we were put into special measures many staff I recall were in tears – that was probably the worst time...When I went to meetings I was reluctant to say what school I came from. Everybody was very sympathetic, but that wasn't quite the feeling you wanted.

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[4] He uses this term to refer to those responsible for leading the new organisation: in our case the headteachers and senior leaders, and key LEA figures too.
[5] ditto

He goes on to describe his indifference to the new project:

> The difficulty for me was being further away from the decision-making process which I'd been close to for a number of years…and I felt well I'll do what I'm told – I'll do my job and I'll go home because that hadn't been the attitude that I'd had. But I guess that was how I was feeling at the time…

At Councillor Crosby:

> I think the atmosphere at our school, well we all felt really, I suppose, totally disillusioned, and we weren't getting anything from [the acting head]…, virtually nothing from [him] and then…things just seemed to get worse 'cos still nobody told us.

In an atmosphere of disillusion and crisis, the temptation to focus on the immediate and the easy became irresistible:

> You got that whole thing about the acting head at Councillor Crosby having been on the staff for ever and he found it difficult to tell people anything unpopular. And the project director…very quickly he saw his job as staying in the Year 7 annexe and organising it...And when you've got these – it's a bit like we've got with building schools for the future – people very quickly get into doing things that seem do-able. So you make decisions about green wallpaper and plant tables at the front door because you can see that. But the really hard ones about negotiating someone to understand a new way of working or different concepts – that's too much. (Senior LEA officer)

Going forward

The principal designate was aware of the size and nature of the task facing the new leadership team in the summer of 2001. There was no going back; no way the perceived or real grievances associated with the process so far could be undone. The only possible way was forward, so the priority was given to building a shared vision of what this new school could and should be, and to giving people the opportunity to share in that process. The aim was to make sure that the values and the behaviours that emerged from this process would be seen to be uncompromising and consistently applied in all the interactions within the school: between staff and between staff and students. During this process it would be essential to celebrate the positive histories of the two schools, to build on them and give people a real chance to identify with the new school and sign up to its success.

Creating culture

What the pundits say

Schein (1985) maintains that probably the single most important thing leaders do is create and manage culture. Schein saw the process of cultural change as centrally managed and intentionally engineered. In the circumstances in which the new organisation found itself, it was certainly essential that a powerful vision of the meaning, values and behaviours of the new school was offered, consistently applied and frequently re-visited. However, vision on its own is not sufficient. It needs to be rooted in

values which empower colleagues, emphasise collegiality and invite shared ownership. For leadership to effect transformation in schools, the vision needs to be made attainable, explicit and public. It needs to be experienced. Leithwood and Jantzi (1990), in a study of 12 schools, described transformational leaders as those

> ...who build shared meaning among…staff regarding their purposes and create high levels of commitment to the accomplishments of these purposes…

And Deal (1990) asserts:

> Schools will become fundamentally different only when we quit correcting surface deficiencies and recognise transformation involves a collective renegotiation of historically anchored myths, metaphors and meanings. (p9)

The first encounter

In the summer of 2001 the EAZ funded a major joint development conference for all staff at the three schools being affected by the change: Alderman Vane, Councillor Crosby and the Year 7 centre. This was held at a major conference venue, and the first day was to be spent building pictures of what was meant by the familiar words e.g. "school", "success", "achievement"; beginning the process of building shared meaning and from that finding some shared sense of direction. The week before, the governors had agreed on a new name for the school, which was intended to encapsulate the ambition of the project. The conference provided an opportunity to introduce the name, begin building metaphors around it, and focus on the fresh start.

The notes of the principal designate from the introductory speech to the staff conference set out the task that faced them:

- Our future is built upon our past.

- Described in the language of our past.

- We leave our past behind us.

- We bring our past with us.

- We write our story from our hearts.

- We construct our future with our heads.

- We build a shared meaning.

> We are being asked to embrace change. To dream differently. To conceive the unconceivable. Sartre believed that it was the capacity to do that that was the defining characteristic of human beings.

> We are being asked to understand the past, both our past, the past of our children and their communities, and the past of the twentieth-century world. We have to step out from a past circumscribed by an industrial world and vision a future, post-information-age world that we can hardly imagine. We must bring from our past all the humanity, expertise and passion we have and have witnessed.

We are being asked to write a new story. A story that must appeal to our hearts and those of nearly 2000 children and their communities. We apply logic and reason and analysis to create organisations of the mind – pictures we can share, and from that sharing build a meaning that others can access in order to find their meaning in an inconceivable world.

It is worth reflecting on where we are in that description. It is important that we acknowledge the difficult process of change and our own ambiguity about it. But the certainty of change is with us. And the opportunities and experiences that change brings with it can re-energise and refocus us. It can renew our professional lives. We have to work out ways of adapting, of coping and more than coping; of changing in ways that will lead us into our story, because only in our story lies success – for ourselves as well as others.

…

All colleagues (and governors, parents and students) will have opportunities to work on building policies and practices that reflect the vision and place children at the heart of the school. We jointly build shared meaning.

We support each other by indulging in unwarranted optimism. A solutions-focused culture that does not brook the possibility of defeat. We become energy-givers. We work on the basis that all of us are of good intent. Good intent for creating the circumstances in which the children in our care can vision impossible futures and build an aeroplane[6] to take them there.

We develop a virtuous circle of self-belief. We challenge negativity and sarcasm and ill-conceived wit.

And we have uncompromisingly high standards. For parents and to parents. We welcome them as co-educators. They send us the best children they have. They are essential for the success of our enterprise. And of children we expect the very best. High standards of behaviour. A citizenship culture that respects them and expects them to respect others. We will not shout and scream . We will be implacable in pursuing the standards of a civilised community. And when we punish, it will be just and measured and reasonable and explained. We will not withdraw our commitment or our enthusiasm for each of them as individuals.

And for ourselves we expect and demand the highest standards of professional performance and behaviour. Collegiality, competence and commitment. (Principal designate's PowerPoint notes: June 2001)

The vision

The work of the staff at the conference clearly demonstrated the shared and underpinning values system that many of the staff brought with them when they chose to work (or stay to work) in schools serving impoverished communities – communities impoverished in all sorts of ways, not just materially. By the end of the conference an agreed vision statement had been produced that acknowledged the ambition of the project and the vision of improvement:

By 2005 to have established a school and college, international in perspective and personal in ethos, in which students can achieve success and take up their roles as participating citizens.

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[6] The aeroplane was the school symbol.

Making the real difference

But words are easy, change is not. The group gathered at the conference centre contained those who had endured serious loss in the process of reorganisation, those who, even if successful, had little reason yet to trust in the new venture, those who had no idea at all whether they would secure jobs in the new venture or whether they should want to, and those who had already found an exit strategy and were delighted to be off. The situation was beautifully summarised in Machiavelli's observation in *The Prince* (1513):

> There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order. This lukewarmness arises partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the law in their favour, and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have actually experienced it.

The vital significance of building a new cultural hegemony if reorganisation is to succeed is emphasised by Wallace and Pocklington (2002) in their study of a county-wide reorganisation programme. As they put it, the promotion and wide communication of altruistic values can turn stakeholders from a path of resistance. Multiple communication strategies need to focus on creating a sense of being part of a moral endeavour for mutual benefit.

Thus the work begun in July 2001 needed to be continued urgently in the new school year. Three staff-wide development conferences were planned. The first, in September, focused on revisiting the vision and developing the key priorities of the school in relation to it[7]. This would be followed by a conference that would make explicit the values and behaviours[8] that would form the moral framework of the school, and in February 2002 a Joining Project Conference would be organised to mark the end of the "bureaucratic" phase of the reorganisation (all appointments in place) and the start of the planned moves to the new school, starting in September 2002.

This Joining Project was planned with the support of the LEA psychology service. Its focus was to be threefold: displays and exhibitions of the history and achievements of

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[7] Develop a culture of learning and self-improvement – set challenging goals for self and others.
Value people and build self-worth.
Practice outstanding teaching.
Promote tolerance and encourage diversity.
Give and receive respect and courtesy.
Create safe, stimulating and secure environments.

[8] Children come first.
We actively engage in improvement.
We find solutions.
We act in an accountable way.
We listen to each other and learn.
We treat everyone openly and honestly.
We involve our stakeholders.
We are an accessible organisation.
We practice equal opportunities.
We deliver best value.

the two schools were to be mounted, teams old and new celebrated and memorialised through, for example, group photographs, and the feelings, emotions and processes of coming together shared and learned about.

This latter project was conducted as a training exercise around the plans for the PSHE programmes that were developed for students and the Student Joining Project that would be held at the end of the summer term. The involvement of the psychology service brought a more profound and explicit set of strategies that supported the work of the leadership team in its work to regenerate confidence and optimism in the new school.

This programme did enable a significant shift of attitudes to take place as evidenced by our two teachers:

> **John: (AVS)**When the Joining Project started I quite got into that and thought – well – whatever it is I'm doing I want to do it well…I'm going to make a go of this – so I had the opportunity to be involved in the Joining Project and I did that presentation to the whole staff and that went down very well…I ended that period on a very optimistic note.

> **Mary (ACS):**The Joining Project came and I've got to say I didn't think that would work…and it totally surprised me…And suddenly I started meeting people from Alderman Vane who were really nice people… and you suddenly realised you worked together – we'd worked in these two schools all these years and were so alike because we teach the same type of kids…I felt I got a lot out of [the Joining Project]…I got a lot more confidence and my confidence started to ebb back.

As well as the conferences and projects organised with the specific intention of building the relationships, values and shared meanings of a successful school, these ideas were reinforced in a "one-school" newsletter, edited by John.

The evidence of successful culture change strengthens

The survey

In the summer of 2002, a 360-degree assessment of the strength of the school as a learning organisation was undertaken as part of a project supporting the development of middle leaders in the new school. A random stratified cross-section of 36 teaching staff was invited to complete a questionnaire, designed by an independent organisational psychologist. Three other schools participated in the project; one school (the project leader) was the most improved school in terms of pupil outcomes with the authority, one a school which had experienced a difficult leadership transition and had been in a supportive federation for two years, and one a highly successful, well-established but probably cruising school in a neighbouring authority.

The School Learning Organisation survey reported scores under five areas, two of which were "shared goals" and "shared culture". The scale of 1 to 6 measured the extent to which teacher responses indicated that shared goals and shared culture existed within the school. In these two categories, the new school scored 4.6 and 4.4, solidly within the "to a moderate extent" category. On shared goals this score was below that of the lead school but above that of the other participants. The score for shared culture was the

lowest of the four schools by a measure of 0.1. Across all five categories, the mean score for the new school was 4.675, the second-highest mean score. The quantitative evidence presented by this analysis suggests that the culture-building work had created a sense of shared purpose *at least equal* to well-established and significantly less turbulent schools.

The staff

In September 2002 the new school became a reality. Instead of three separate real schools – Alderman Vane and Councillor Crosby operating as Y9–Y11 schools, and the centre operating in Y8 and Y7 with a sixth form, and one "virtual" school, the new school, operating in people's heads and hearts – the whole site was now occupied by the school the LEA had visioned two years before, a school which they planned to be a school fit for the 21st century. For the newly-merged part of the school in particular (Years 10 and 11, based in the Vane building), this was a very difficult year. But even for those working in this area there was a growing sense of optimism and identity with the school and its expectations.

> **Mary: (ex-CCS)** I think it was the initial, it was September – the first term, I think [the students] they found it very hard and we lost a few, I think that as a school – the second term, some of them have mellowed – you see, you've got quite a lot of friendship groups now between Vane and Crosby – you see – you know these kiddies are sort – of – and perhaps of the present Year 11, were 10 and had got another year to go, Crosby probably wouldn't be mentioned – but I think they've had a rough deal – <u>had</u> a rough deal at the start.

> I think we've moved forward – I think with regard to team building of staff, I think we've moved forward. I think, I think as a unit, I think – I can talk of Vane because that's where I am based – and I think as an actual school – as a staff there, I think we have moved forward. I think we work together very well and you don't get – well occasionally you'll get comparisons, but very very few now, whereas at the start I thought – I felt there was an awful lot of comparisons. You very rarely get anybody now – oh, in Crosby we did it this way, in Vane we did it that way. The only thing you'll probably get is if like, I don't know a kiddie's name – that's a Vane kiddie – that stuff, but I think as a staff, we have moved forward.

On the Year 9 site, too, there was a sense of things coming together and an end to old divisions.

> **John (ex-AVS):** Another thought is – are the Crosby/Vane divisions still in existence in the staff? I don't think so...The Year 9 – where I spend all my time – there are a few Crosby – I'm not even sure – there are some Vane, a few Crosby and quite a few new ones, and I think that's a very healthy mix, and we really don't think of people as ex-Vanes any longer. And of course the children don't really think in that sense either because they are in a new school.[9]

The second survey

A repeat of the 360-degree survey at the end of 2003 indicated pockets of positive movement within shared goals and shared culture, with particular improvements on two areas: the school avoids sacrificing long-term goals for short-term gains (up 5.8 points), and the school remains focused despite external challenges, criticisms and setbacks (up

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[9] The Year 9 students had been the reconstituted Year 7 that had started the process.

2.9 points), though the overall scores remained very much the same. There was some indication that a sense of teamliness had diminished around the school, and this may be reinforced by one of John's anxieties in the spring of 2003.

> **John (ex-AVS):** I think the size of the school is one of the problems [c.1830 students across five sites]. This whole-school concept is quite difficult within the centres. I think there is a lot of teamwork and team spirit…but it's hard to feel a sense of direction across the whole school.

Perhaps the separate cultures of Alderman Vane and Councillor Crosby schools were being replaced by sub-cultures within each of the centres in the new school. This view, however was not confirmed by the observations of a visit by HMI in October 2003, which reported on:

> the very hard work that has been put in to establish a new school with a clear and positive ethos in very challenging circumstances…the very strong sense of coherence, cohesion and team ethos, and the very high levels of commitment, across all teaching and non-teaching staff.[10]

Reflections on the process

In his book *Changing Leadership for Changing Times,* Leithwood summarises his findings from a range of research projects conducted through the early 1990s on the behaviours of transformational leadership in strengthening school culture. In the table overleaf, these behaviours are matched against the activities of the school between 2001 and 2003.

Leithwood's typology	Examples of new school practices
Clarifying the school vision and the care and respect with which students were to be treated.	In the summer of 2002 a New School group led by a consultant head formulated the behaviour policy, directly rooted in the values statement (footnote 6).[11]
Reinforcing with staff the norms of excellence for their own work and the work of students.	The school worked on the principle of "personal bests" for students, publicly celebrated and Star boards on which staff named colleagues and described excellent work.
Using every opportunity...to communicate the school's vision and goals.	Assemblies, publications, internal message systems etc, and external encounters used to communicate the vision and goals.
Using symbols and rituals to express cultural values.	The school symbol was an aeroplane, which was widely used as a metaphor for learning, the learning journey and the school's ambition.
Confronting conflict openly and acting to	A particularly damaging leaked report to

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[10] Letter from HMI October 2003.
[11] The policy reflected Sergiovanni's (1996) view that schools should develop normative codes rather than explicit, consequence-based rules. (p55)

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resolve it through the use of shared values.	the press was responded to through email and shared moments where "the way we do things around here" was powerfully reinforced.
Using slogans and motivational phrases repeatedly.	A member of the teaching staff took on the role (voluntarily) of Mr Motivator, and regularly sent staff emails reinforcing values with humour and optimism.
Using bureaucratic measures to support cultural values.	There were no meetings; there were development groups. All staff appointments explicitly tested commitment to the values.
Acting in a manner consistent with those beliefs and values shared within the school.	The senior team had a saying : "not a playing card between us".
Assisting staff to clarify shared beliefs and values and acting in accordance with them.	The specific use of the staff bulletin.
Sharing power and responsibility with others.	Power and responsibility was widely spread in terms of age and role, but not embedded in the structures by 2003.
Working to eliminate boundaries between administrators, teachers and others within the school.	All adults in the school were similarly badged, all trained in and practised the implementation of the behaviour policy, and all used the same social areas at the same time.
Providing opportunities and resources for collaborative staff work.	The CPD programme was self-led.

Table 1: from Leithwood et al. (1990) pp83–84

So the practices being implemented in the school would appear to be those which might have been recognised by Leithwood and his team as practices that actively contribute to building shared culture.

Marks (2003) offers a four-quadrant matrix tracking the relationship between the requirements and levels of workplace recovery.

Two tasks

		Weakening the old	Strengthening the new
Two levels	Emotional realities	Empathy	Energy
	Business imperatives	Engagement	Enforcement

Table 2: after Marks (2003) p115

Marks describes a process where there is clear acknowledgement for leaders that the experience of colleagues has been difficult, is difficult and will be difficult for some time. This opens up and creates a safe space for people's emotions and offers the prospect of healing. Hand in hand with this goes engagement. People need to understand why the old order must go and the new one be embraced, **and** helped to understand what's going on and feel involved with the process. Both these elements weaken those resisting the change, but it is also really critical to connect people to the new way. Energy, Marks argues, is the means of getting people excited about the new order and supportive of realising it. Enforcement – meaning literally carrying it out – brings the new vision to life and aligns systems with the new way of doing things.

In the stories told by John and Mary and the evidence from the archive, all these elements are present to a greater or lesser extent at different times in the story. Like Fullan (2001), Marks emphasises the haphazard, non-linear and irrational nature of organisational change, and recognises this chaotic experience needs to be openly acknowledged so that mistakes and disappointments – of which there were many in the story of the new school – do not derail the transformation.

Vital in all of this is leadership working to create an environment – as much as leadership itself has the power to do so – which enhances the agency of those required to move to the new arrangements, their sense of being in command of themselves and able to influence or modify the circumstances in which they find themselves. People can use their power not only to express their agency but to channel and limit that of others. The testimony of John and Mary clearly shows a growing sense of agency as the new

school develops. Mary in particular, operating in the more fragmented and problematic environment, uses her power increasingly to propose the possibility of successful outcomes, creating a space where people can commit to the new enterprise. Both journey from the perspective of helpless victim to one whose voice may be heard and valued and who, while offering a clear critique of the situation the new school was in in Spring 2003, nevertheless felt it a place worth identifying with and committed to success.

Conclusion

Most research into educational change assumes an environment of no greater turbulence than that experienced by most schools. Most research is predicated on the assumption that an organisation exists with its defined structures, systems, hierarchies and relationships, and it is within this recognisable organisation that change is occurring. In this case study these circumstances do not apply, and the participants in the change were engaged in making meaning in a context where nothing existed – literally building meaning in the mind. However, as evidenced above, even in these extreme circumstances the research conclusions of other reflective and longitudinal studies stand up well. Some specific outcomes of the work, however deserve emphasis.

Culture can be built explicitly. Some of the research literature argues that successful leaders work on culture implicitly, as it is notoriously difficult to shift. Where, however, embracing change is not an option (as in the new school, or perhaps in schools facing system change or Ofsted criticism) it may well be that a frontal assault on culture is not only effective but desirable. What proved important, however, in the new school, is illustrated in Sergiovanni's concept of followership. The new school set out to follow a principle (not a principal). Professional communities serving high-poverty communities have a particular and strongly developed values set. These can be seen as "sacred" norms, not easily susceptible to change (Blenkin et al.(1992)). Reconnecting colleagues with these can legitimise the growth of new cultures and create strong communities, using emotion as a positive force to accelerate change.

Models of change and the emotional experience of change need to be explicitly acknowledged and openly taught. Crematoria routinely give the close relatives of the dead a pamphlet which outlines the changes of mood and intensity (or lack) of feeling through the mourning cycle. Schools rarely, if ever, pay equivalent attention to the similar cycle of the emotional response to change. Professor Andy Hargreaves notes in his article *The Emotions of Teaching and Educational Change (*Hargreaves 1998*)* that rarely are emotions mentioned in the literature and advocacy of educational change. Everything is seen to be cerebral and the task of leaders to manage mood and motivation – never to acknowledge and work with emotions such as love, hate, worry or despair.

Of the four elements of Marks's matrix, enforcement proved the most challenging, and in terms of the timescales available to the school to effect transformational change, the problems of establishing robust systems left the school vulnerable. This reinforces the widely-held view that while transforming culture may be necessary for successful educational change, it is not sufficient.

By the summer of 2003, however, the new school had moved from a position of despair to one where its community members had quite a lot of hope, faith rooted in a fairly realistic assessment of how far the school had yet to go, and a great deal more charity for all involved in the enterprise. This was no little achievement.

Acknowledgements

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