

Successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils

A report prepared by
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November 2008

SCHOOL LEADERS

Summary report

Successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils

The research project was led by Dr Denis Mongon, Senior Research Fellow and Dr Christopher Chapman, Reader in Educational Leadership, both from the University of Manchester's School of Education. The work was commissioned jointly by the National Union of Teachers and the National College for School Leadership.

The research team was asked:

- to summarise the key leadership characteristics required to promote the achievement of white working class pupils
- to describe the key challenges faced by school leaders in promoting the achievement of white working class pupils
- to report on the good practice that exists and what it tells us
- to outline the support and professional development needed to enable school leaders to develop the key characteristics and overcome the key challenges

The companion literature review confirms that after more than a century of free, compulsory education and sixty years of the welfare state, family income and status are by far the most significant correlates of success in the school system. Although gender is also an independent and significant factor, the social class attainment gap at Key Stage 4 is three times as wide as the gender gap. In broad terms, white British boys entitled to free school meals were the male group with lowest attainment and white British girls entitled to free school meals were the female group with lowest attainment.

Pupils from low income, white British backgrounds were significantly more successful at the end of Key Stage 2 and 4 in the schools chosen for the study than their comparable peers in schools on average.

The leaders in those schools appeared to follow the basic strategies, or very close variations, used by most successful school leaders:

- **Building vision and setting directions**
Staff and students at these schools knew where they were travelling and what was expected of them. There was a strong, shared sense of purpose, goals were specific and well understood, expectations were high for everyone.
- **Understanding and developing people**
Staff and students were provided with intellectual and emotional stimulation in which personalised support rather than criticism was predominant. Staff recruitment was a high priority often ingeniously pursued.
- **Designing the organisation**
The structure and culture of the organisations was engineered to match their purpose. Lines of authority, responsibility, accountability and autonomy were clear to everyone. Close attention was paid to the appearance of the built environment.
- **Managing and supporting the teaching and learning programme**
The leaders were relentless in their application to the highest standards of teaching and learning. Success was invariably celebrated; difficulties for staff or students were never ignored. Mistakes were acceptable, underperformance was not.

- **Collecting, monitoring, analysing and using information**

Attention to detail was a remarkable feature of these schools. Both student progress and teaching standards were regularly observed, recorded and analysed. Pupils and staff reported that this approach was comfortable and liberating.

“We take thoughtful risks. I think we are good at taking the bits that will work for us and just saying right we’re not doing the rest; we’re taking this part because this part is right for our children, right for our school and will impact. When we were told to raise reading levels, we didn’t do the national literacy hour. We did our analysis and designed our own approach which ensures children’s literacy learning is structured with key progression skills and the proof is in the outcomes.”

Headteacher, Harrow Gate

These leaders appeared to draw on three characteristics which, for lack of a better phrase, can be labelled as intelligences:

- **Contextual intelligence**

These leaders show a profound respect for the context they are working in without ever patronising it. They had deliberately chosen to work in these places.

- **Professional intelligence**

These leaders are very good at their core business: leadership and management to nurture the teamwork on which the school’s excellent standards of teaching and learning are dependent.

- **Social intelligence**

These leaders appear to be sensitive to the emotional state of their pupils and colleagues and to use that to guide their own thoughts and actions. In turn, they are deeply admired across their staff and student body.

“You gain an enormous amount of respect from the parents because you make sure that the students and the staff and all the stakeholders in this school know exactly where they stand and understand the consequences, and the implications of stepping outside those parameters. Those are the very things that do not exist on the estate although they would like them to.”

Headteacher, Redbridge

These leaders appeared to show four personality traits which we have labelled:

- **Self-efficacy**
This is a belief in your own capabilities and confidence of a kind makes you more likely to tackle a task and to persist in the face of initial failure.
- **Internal locus of control**
The personal responsibility we take for our behaviour and its consequences varies. People who have an internal locus of control have a tendency to attribute events in their life to their own control and not to blame anyone else.
- **Conscientiousness**
Conscientious individuals tend towards being self-disciplined, organised, careful and striving. They are generally hard working and reliable, sometimes even perfectionist.
- **Rapport**
Rapport requires a deep interest in other people with a tendency to be empathetic and helpful and to nurture a sense of team and community. It is associated with trust, openness, acceptance and shared understanding.

“He is strict, not very strict, strict enough... You can have a laugh with him but if you’ve done something wrong, he let’s you know who is boss...”

Year 6 pupil, Castilion

Implications

Drawing on the insight these school leaders have provided into what helps and hinders their ability to lead well, the report makes recommendations for leadership development and more wide ranging recommendations for every level of the education service. The authors have outlined the implications of the research for practice, policy and research summarised here.

For leadership practice

- For overall consistency, there has to be a core assumption that every headteacher is prepared and supported to apply the National Standard for Headteachers.
- For school leaders to challenge stereotypes and to understand the consequences and opportunities of poverty and community on outcomes for young people, their training and experience has to include systematic preparation to support them in achieving this.
- For earlier gains to be maintained, the importance of managed pastoral and curricular continuity across phases, and 14-19 consortia for students whose support is otherwise fragile, cannot be underestimated.
- For excellence with equity, school governors and leaders need to share responsibility and accountability for the quality of education beyond single institutions.
- For improved community cohesion, DCSF Guidance should identify approaches which value all communities and celebrate the background experiences of every child.
- For continuing improvement, 14-19 consortia, in particular, should be provided with the capacity and support to compile, evaluate and use robust evidence from their own and similar projects to inform their work.

For policy

- For the gap between the highest and lowest performing areas to be reduced, more of the best school leaders will need to be encouraged to work in challenging contexts.
- For improved local collegiality within and across phases, competitions for new school provision initiated by local authorities need to make specific reference to that aim.
- For an increased sense of shared responsibility between schools across an area, incentives and systems of accountability, both locally and nationally, need to encourage that approach. They should also encourage and reward school leaders who provide successful leadership in challenging circumstances over a sustained period.
- For improved contextual management, funding streams for schools need to recognise the challenges of poverty and low community achievements. Grant regulations need flexibility of implementation for successful school leaders in challenging contexts.

For research

- For improved practice, further development work with accompanying research should be commissioned in successful contexts, to generate and share knowledge about
 - i. the aspects of successful leadership practice
 - ii. the most successful interventions within schools and
 - iii. the activities between schools and communitieswhich are associated with higher levels of 'white working class' achievement.
- For future development, research should be commissioned to explore the impact of new and emerging structural arrangements, including, for example, academies, federations, consortia and other collaborations on 'narrowing the gap' for a range of underachieving students including those with a white working class background.

Publications and resources also available from NCSL:

NCSL programmes for school leaders at all levels. **www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes**

Publications and resources available to download and order. **www.ncsl.org.uk/publications**

The Leadership Network brings together the experience and ideas of school leaders across the country to create a powerful focus for change and development in school leadership. **www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershipnetwork**

The Leadership Library is a free unique resource bringing together some of the best leadership and management thinking from around the world. **www.ncsl.org.uk/leadershiplibrary**

The Learning Gateway is a single access point to all NCSL's online learning tools and resources. It provides access to talk2learn, a vibrant online community of over 120,000 members. **www.ncsl.org.uk/learninggateway**

The Tomorrow's leaders today campaign is about finding, developing and keeping great headteachers. **www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrowsleaderstoday**

ECM Leadership Direct is an online resource exploring the implications for Every Child Matters for schools and school leaders. **www.ncsl.org.uk/ecmleadershipdirect**

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