

**LEAP Action Learning Report 2014**

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| Topic area  (What) | **PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP: TURNING CAPACITY INTO CAPABILITY**  Initially I intended to identify and explore strategies that principals might use as part of their leadership styles to assist staff to develop their capacities and turn them into demonstrable capabilities. This stemmed from my concerns around the concept of ‘charismatic’ leadership in that it may produce high staff morale but not improved student outcomes and increased staff capacity. If the focus of development lies in the charisma of the leader, and not in embedded improvement systems, then change becomes either transient or mottled, staff cannot realise their potential (that is develop capacity or confidence into demonstrable capabilities or competence) and the school may not continue to thrive with the departure of the charismatic leader. |
| Context  (Where and When) | My partner Eve (a PP2) and I travelled to Essex. I was fortunate to be able to discuss leadership with the principals of three Essex schools: The Helen Romanes School (Yrs 7-13), Writtle Junior School (Yrs K-6), and Tanglewood Nursery School, Chelmsford (160 students aged 3-5 years), as well as a one day conference at the National College for Teaching and Leadership.  The Helen Romanes School (HRS) (<http://www.helena-romanes.essex.sch.uk/> ) is much larger than the average sized secondary school. The majority of pupils are White British and only a small proportion is from minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium is below average, meaning that the school generally serves a middle to low-high SES community. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs who are supported at school action is well below the national average. The proportion at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is below average. Academically, the school meets the current floor standards, which are the government’s minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress. The school makes arrangements for a small group of students in Years 10 and 11 to access alternative provision or courses of a vocational nature on a part-time basis in other local institutions. Courses attended include hairdressing, vehicle maintenance and animal care.  The HRS converted to become an academy on 1 April 2012. When its predecessor school, of the same name, was last inspected by Ofsted, it was judged to be satisfactory overall (level 3) and the last Ofsted inspection rated it a good school (level 2). Much of this improvement is credited to the leadership of the Headteacher (ie Principal) Mr Simon Knight. Executive staff identified Mr Knight’s strong intellect, quick thinking, strong personal relationships with staff and students, and preparedness to make and explain the hard decisions as being critical factors in the reshaping of the school.  Mr Knight was educated in Chelmsford and South Africa and studied PE at University. In January 1987 he joined The Helena Romanes School as a teacher, and progressed through the school, before leaving in April 2000 to become Vice-Principal at the Colne Community School in Brightlingsea, Essex. After three and a half years, Mr Knight returned as Headteacher at HRS in January 2004.  Mr Knight states that when he returned he faced a number of challenges. The school roll had fallen, exam results were poor and there was a high turnover of staff. His initial task was to stabilise the school and regain the confidence of the community. In the last eight years, results have improved 30% on the 5+A\*-C figure, and has shown a steady upward trend, staff turnover is low, there is a high number of applicants per post and the school is again an integral part of the community. Having stabilised the school, the focus now is to continue to improve practice in the classroom and further develop a more personalised approach to the curriculum. In 2012 Mr Knight was part of the LEAP program and came to Australia for a stay in Mudgee. Mr Knight is very well regarded as an educational leader throughout the Essex community and has a number of inter-school roles.  In becoming an Academy the leadership role of the principal expanded greatly to include becoming a public charitable company limited by guarantee. In effect, the Headteacher has become the CEO of the public school organisation answerable to the Board of Governers who act as the company Board. The Headteacher was quite clear that the staff are employed by the Board of Governors and their tenure is determined by their performance against student value added critieria. Targets set for teachers are linked to whole-school priorities and ensure that teaching has a positive impact on students’ progress. Pay awards are linked closely to how well teachers are promoting students’ progress and achievement, and governors keep a close check on this.  The school’s last Ofsted report states that “A particularly strong feature of the leadership is the way in which the school’s work is checked, the information gathered analysed and then used to inform not only whole-school priorities but also priorities for development for individual teachers and students. This is done across the school and involves senior and middle leaders well. Consequently, teachers and students know the next steps needed to improve their work, and hence the work of the school. The consistent use of literacy in subjects and good-quality marking are recent successes of the systematic approach to school improvement. Training is wide-ranging and tailored very effectively to individual teachers’ to help them to achieve their targets and improve their skills.  At the National College for School Leadership ([www.nationalcollege.org.uk/](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/)) at Nottingham University we had the opportunity to connect with a LEAP study tour group and explore the Centre’s Leadership framework. The group worked on exploring the UK leadership standards contained in the document ’10 Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership’ (<http://www.almaharris.co.uk/files/10strongclaims.pdf> ). Interestingly the UK is developing academic qualifications that specifically equip potential leaders for executive positions ( <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/professional-development-for-school-leaders> ). |
| Research methods  (How) | Interviews Classroom observations Document Analysis  Research Management by Walkabout Workshop groups  Parent Meeting |
| Findings  (So what) | According to MacNeill and Silcox “The literature on educational change is replete with references to the charismatic leader who brings about change, but the change dies in its tracks when the principal leaves the school (Hargreaves, 2002; Hinde, 2003). Successful change requires a principal working for improvement collaboratively with teacher leaders.” Some key ‘takewaways’ from the UK for me include:   * ***Distributed Leadership*** - UK schools seem to be successfully implementing strategies to support Distributed Leadership. Hattie’s work clearly identifies teachers as the most influential factor in successful student learning, and McBeth (2008) recognises the importance of developing all teachers as leaders in the school, not just through ‘teacher voice’ (although that’s an important component) but also through the understanding and use of leadership strategies by all. Joshua Owens, former CEO of the Australian Graduate School of Management described leaders as those staff, at any level of the organisation, who demonstrate that they **know** the way forward for the organisation to improve, are able to **show** the way forward to others by modelling improved practice, and are able to **go** the way forward with others by leading from the front, the side and the rear as needed. In the UK the work of Alma Harris is forming a strong foundation for these ideas, in the US James Spillane at North Western University has done some good work around this, and in Australia Norm McCulla from Macquarie University and Patrick Duignan from the Australian Catholic University have produced research worth reviewing. This idea is certainly worth exploring in the context of Callaghan College in 2015. * ***Knowing the students*** – the vast number of staff are able to talk about where each of their students is at against the curriculum levels, and keep both quantitative and qualitative data to support their judgements. Students were able to articulate where they were currently at against key concepts of the unit and the course. This was true in every classroom and every school I visited, including the Nursery school and a primary school in Chelmsford. The levels gave both students and staff the opportunity to identify where to from here, and set clear goals and strategies for getting there, all directly linked to the syllabus. Student workbooks, both print and electronic were reviewed fortnightly and feedback provided regularly. The downside though was a lot of time spent on testing that takes time away from teaching and learning, or as my host jokingly put it, “we spend a lot of time weighing the pig, and maybe not enough time fattening the pig”. From observation I noted that many assessments were clearly summative in nature, ie assessing where students are now, rather than formative, ie how are students progressing? * Central to the notion of progress was a system of cumulative ***Value Added*** for each student in each class based on levels in each syllabus. Student common assessments were regularly logged (fortnightly) and a value added progress determined. Two less than expected growth figures for students meant that they might be re-assigned to extra classes in English, Mathematics or Science at the expense of their elective class time. While it sounds good that no child is left behind, I did not get to interrogate their system of value adding – either the calculation or the monitoring, which is a shame because I’m a big fan of this method of evaluating progress! Unless … * ***Student value added scores are aggregated*** ***for each class and assigned to teachers as part of their teacher performance assessment (PA).*** The emphasis is on measuring how teachers are making a difference in student achievement, and while I believe this idea is important in providing feedback to students and staff, I am not convinced at all that the way this is being done in the UK is good practice. This is not the fault of the concept of value added – the problem rests with the difficulty of measuring teacher effectiveness in an environment where the variables (pedagogy, student readiness and receptiveness, relationships, homework, breakfast, classroom management, socio-economic status, etc to name a few) are so large. While the value added idea has great merit, directly connecting student outcomes to teacher effectiveness, the connection to teacher performance appraisal in that form was difficult for me to accept. In a meeting with the Principal and a regional Industrial Relations / Human Resources consultant they discussed connections between ‘successful’ teachers and rates of pay. * ***Ofsted*** isthe UK system of school evaluations and public ranking. In every setting where I spoke to a Principal or their staff the prospect of an Ofsted inspection earned a response based wholly on fear. I experienced the system first hand when our host had her school inspected during our stay. The Ofsted team rang at midday to inform the Head they would be at school the next day. The Head has been a Head for 10 years, 5 years in this school and the previous inspections rated this school as Excellent, the highest rating. After witnessing the immediate demoralisation of an experienced principal and her staff, I left with the firm belief that while we do need to have a system where the performance of schools is evaluated by first hand evidence such as review teams assessing schools against known, viable and credible performance standards, we must resist any Ofsted style system with fierce determination. The Ofsted regime is based on ‘encouraging’ improvement by fear of failure and humiliation through the publication of results. * ***The ‘Leadership Disposition’.*** At the National College for School Leadership a preliminary activity on identifying the characteristics of successful leaders identified thing like Honest, Competent, Resilient, Determined, Forward-looking, Inspiring, Intelligent, Fair-minded, Broad-minded, Courageous, Straightforward, and Imaginative. While this list is not exhaustive (or accurate?) by any means this sort of activity signals that the issue is that these qualities are precursors to leadership – they need to be present before principals can become effective leaders. Principal Leadership Frameworks can guide Principals, their peers, their supervisors and the community in improving school performance by raising the standard of leadership, but aspiring leaders need to be guided in the development of the set of skills that are precursors to success, the Leadership Disposition. * ***Leadership for School Improvement.*** At HRS the Deputy Principal and I discussed the following table that I had compiled from a variety of international sources in the context of school improvement and her masters degree studies. |
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| In conclusion, while my research time was cut short at HRS, the opportunity to see leadership in the total context of the Essex education system from Nursery to Year 13 was invaluable. While my research topic was strategies for building leadership capability I am encouraged that the research around distributive leadership coming from Harris in the UK, Spillane in the US, and Duignan and McCulla in NSW, confirms the need for school and system wide strategies to develop and prepare teachers as leaders and for leadership roles.  Additionally, there exists a need to further develop succession strategies at school and system level to enable teacher leaders to learn how to articulate, select, quantify, systematise and embed successful school improvement strategies. This might include the need for principals who have achieved significant change to be part of succession planning merit selection processes. | |
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