Through Personal Values to Co-operative Leadership

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This paper is an autoethnography of a head teacher's influences, motivations and development from his early life to his leadership of a large comprehensive school and to helping shape co-operative ways of working across a community of 21 schools. As such it starts from a very reflective and personal perspective. It then progresses to look at how the writer's personal values influence aspects of his leadership, including intra-school organisation. Throughout, it draws out the positive influences of co-operative ways of working in educational settings that he has encountered or facilitated.

The paper works from the premise that institutional self-interest will not best serve the long term improvement of schools. It argues that this can be achieved through a model of co-operative working where networks of schools are seen as systems with a moral purpose.

Looking In

… the seed is the gateway through which the future possibility of the living tree emerges. (Senge, 2004)

None of us is born with values, morality or a sense of self worth. We acquire these human characteristics via the nurturing of others and the general socialisation of the environment around us.

Unremarkably the greatest influence on this process in our early formative years is our parents; they have the greatest hand in writing our life scripts and in determining whether our hardwiring for compassion thrives or is subsumed by our more primitive selfish instincts (Armstrong, 2011).

Personally, looking back from the vantage point of adulthood, it is clear that the forty or so years since leaving the family home have been years of considerable unraveling of the meaning and influence of childhood. They have been an attempt to re-script what had been written in large part by my mother but also by life in the shadow of my brothers and attendance at what I perceived as an inadequate school.

I believe that in common with everyone else, school leaders are constrained by the 'backward glance' and the lack of resistance found in habits of thought embedded during our past and this includes our own years of schooling. As head teachers these habits of thought manifest themselves as leadership proclivities.

There are numerous head teachers, and certainly many politicians, who feel that their own education was of such merit that they simply want to re-model it, with few changes, for a new century. Those of us who feel that we had far less than an optimal experience while at school might prefer a more radical perspective - one that has a greater moral emphasis which emphasises co-operative virtues rather than self-interest and aggressive competition.

The five male members of our household lived in a predominantly matriarchal environment. Four sons, with me constantly adapting and adjusting; appraising my place as the youngest and least wanted. Our father was the traditional breadwinner in a working class home and he had little to do with child rearing especially by the time his fourth son arrived on the scene. However, his hard work did enable us to have a childhood home that provided a stable base. This is something I have only really come to appreciate through working as a teacher and knowing so many children who would love to have the privileges of the type of home we grew up in.

Resentment always seemed to be present in our mother. She lived with a negative view of her own working class circumstances and a judgmental view of others. She had very clear ideas of what she liked and disliked, creating in her sons the potential for huge negativity and

defeatism. Despite this and perhaps due to my position as the last child I acquired more of a risk taking disposition than would have been deemed wise by either parent. I observed what was going on ahead of me. This included, by the time I was 10, my oldest brother already being in higher education; something my parents with their own limited formal education were rightly immensely proud of. Although not remembering the specifics I am sure that the idea for me of continuing with education after school came to be seen as a norm, especially when my other brothers entered higher education.

Over the course of my younger years, a social and ethical code developed. Without any doubt this impacts on my thinking to this day and has great significance on the way I choose to behave as a school leader and the values that I uphold in that role.

In the table below I show how I perceive influence from my mother shaped my approach as a school leader.

Elements of the social code professed by my mother	The start of a leadership script?
Self-interest is wrong.	Do not put yourself first - be aware of your impact on others and on the environment - there is a greater good.
Narrow perspectives are wrong.	There is a bigger picture - education is important - be eclectic - nature is the ultimate teacher - look for change - have vision.
Impatience is bad.	Adopt a longer term perspective - avoid reaction - gradualism - calm centre.
Risk taking is too dangerous.	Be measured - listen to as many others as you can - take others' views into account - always question - be cautious.
Showing off is disturbing.	Humility - awareness of impact on others - manage self-introspection and self-doubt - do not risk alienating others by appearing over-confident.
Aggression is damaging.	Rationality and reason lead to better outcomes - life is too short to spend healing unnecessary wounds.

As a child, I had a constant desire to be wanted, to be included by my apparently more able brothers and to be loved by my parents. Even as I write I can remember the sense of exclusion as if it was a physical pain and I believe this is a fundamental driver of my consistently inclusive approach to learning in schools.

The idea that some children are less worthy of attention and deserving of a good school experience whatever the reason is anathema to me; however, it was unfortunately a characteristic of my own schooling. Coupled with family upbringing there is no doubt that a secondary modern school experience as an educational also-ran, was very influential in sowing the seeds of my egalitarian and co-operative thinking.

While at school the publicly vowed Catholic principles of teachers were too often put aside when classroom doors were shut. Poor teaching made good learning very difficult but there were some great individual teachers. They seemed to understand that enhancing the self-esteem and academic self-concept of children are of critical importance. Two teachers in particular seemed to be pained by the injustice of the type of schooling that so many of us 'failures' were receiving. Their advocacy and encouragement when I was about fifteen were I believe life-changing.

The immorality of the 1944 Education Act and its basic tenet of division has been a big factor in the formation of my inclusive values and the belief that through good schooling everyone can be guided towards rich, self-directed lives where there are no justified resentments.

Today, and not untypical of head teachers whose own schooling was largely inadequate, personal experience has been of great importance in forming within me what has been called a *reservoir of hope*. This metaphor refers to a place within us and my interpretation is that it is a place where values, morality, learning and spirituality combine and help to create the resilience needed for leadership in challenging circumstances. For me it is also a place where neurology,

personal history, religion and ethics have come together and created a compassionate view of the young people I work for. This in turn has led to a rationale for school leadership which, by outcome rather than by deliberate design, seems to exemplify many co-operative values.

Looking Around

We are all dependent on one another, every soul on earth (George Bernard Shaw).

School leaders are in a privileged and responsible position. Personally, I want to be an enabler. I want to use my influence to create environments where, unlike the childhood 'me', all learners feel valued, have high aspirations and are supported through quality teaching and outstanding welfare systems.

For seven years I have been head teacher at The John of Gaunt School; this is my second headship. It is a mixed comprehensive of 1,250 students, 200 of whom are in the sixth form. A significant proportion of our learners come from the most deprived areas of Wiltshire and these areas are in the most deprived 20% in England. In one ward 43% of under-16s live in poverty.

Over the period since I came to the school, welfare structures have been created based on the belief that every student's well-being is of paramount importance and that those with the privilege of school leadership have a moral purpose to create equality of opportunity for every child. It is a structure which acknowledges that co-operation with other agencies and institutions is imperative if deep support is to be a reality.

Vertical structures

To do our best to ensure that every student's well-being is catered for, our structures have both vertical and horizontal elements. Every student in years 7 to 11 (ages 11-16) has a tutor and is a member of a tutor group that is organised vertically and contains learners from each of the five years. Each vertical tutor group is part of a house and each house has its own identity entrusted to a teacher in the role of House Leader. Part of the rationale for this vertical tutoring is to increase the level of peer support and inter-year co-operation.

Horizontal structures

To maximise learner opportunities I believe all possible barriers to learning must be removed. To facilitate this at The John of Gaunt School, a Student Development Team has been created and this team functions horizontally across years 7 to 11. This means that every child has a non-teaching member of staff; a pastoral support manager, who is intensely focused on just one year group. They are an advocate for the children in their year.

Two other colleagues work as part of the team and across all years: a higher level teaching assistant whose priority is usually the most vulnerable students, and a pastoral support manager with responsibility for health and well-being. The latter spends a considerable amount of time working with other colleagues on student safeguarding issues. She is crucial in the success of our Multi-Agency Drop-in Clinic that over 900 students interacted with in the academic year 2010-11. We were pleased that an independent study into the impact of the clinic by Bath University concluded:

> The impact (of the clinic), in the case of extensive service users is often profound with potentially life changing consequences (Daniels, 2010).

The modus operandi of the Student Development Team is without doubt, co-operative. Every team member is acutely aware that they cannot operate in isolation and that the school and therefore the child is if necessary, at the centre of a co-operative web of potentially 100 external agencies/professionals. Individuals and agencies work together as an extended network in the interests of learners and their families. This is not an unusual perspective but the receptiveness created by having a dedicated Student Development Team has made this provision truly outstanding in my opinion.

Of course structures like those discussed here come at a financial cost to the school and

relatively poor government funding to rural authorities like Wiltshire means that the current school expenditure of around £150,000 is very significant. However, whatever the financial cost to the school the question to be asked is, what could be the emotional and social impact of a school not working in this way? Without a considerable amount of research that is a question that cannot be answered.

Looking Out

> The impact of co-operation on culture is huge and, for me, the central reason why life is so beguiling and beautiful (Nowak and Highfield, 2011).

The belief that the needs of every child can be met best if a school strategically adopts a co-operative approach is also a major driving force behind our community wide schools' initiative to create a social enterprise by April 2012. In the case of the Trowbridge schools this will be a charitable company with social and educational objectives. Personal interest in this initiative has grown out of the Extended Schools' agenda and my work as chair of the Trowbridge Extended Services Steering group.

For many years the 21 Trowbridge head teachers have worked constructively together. Since 2006 our alliance has been known as the Trowbridge Area Schools Collaborative (TASC) and successes have included our response to the Extended Schools' agenda and the creation of a multi-agency forum and multi-agency drop-in clinics.

The line that once divided Extended Schools' work and our usual collaborative working has become blurred and are now seen as functions under the umbrella of TASC. Having a coordinator for TASC, with a strong commitment and sense of purpose has been essential.

Success, the stability of having several head teachers in post for over five years, and a high level of trust have created the pre-requisites for the increase in co-operative working.

I also believe that at least two external factors have had significance in driving forward our co-operative vision. One is the thinking of some respected educationalists about the importance of systems leadership; the other is broadly political and an aspect of government policy.

Systems thinking
A considerable amount has been written in recent years about systems leadership in school settings. National College for School Leadership (NCSL) papers, together with the writings of influential thinkers like Michael Fullan (2004; 2005), David Hargreaves (2010) and John West Burnham (2009), present a powerful argument for schools working together co-operatively rather than ploughing individual furrows of self-interest at the hands of hero head teachers.

It is argued that school leaders should see themselves as system leaders who increase leadership capacity within their own schools while working with other schools on behalf of every child in their community.

There is a clear moral purpose to systems working because school leaders come to see themselves as educational leaders across a community. Working as part of a system with other like-minded head teachers and colleagues is energising. A powerful sense of solidarity grows knowing that you care about the children in other schools as you care for those in your own school. For many this is a huge leap, but the quality of analysis, respectability of the thinkers and sense in the argument is compelling for those like the Trowbridge heads, some of whom may seek a theoretical basis for their co-operative vision.

There is a correlation between the characteristics of systems working and the organisational

and ethical values of co-operation (International Co-operative Alliance 1995). The following are some examples:

- Morally-driven (caring for others, social responsibility).
- Striving for success of all schools (solidarity, equity).
- More interested in action than structure being a 'servant leader' for the benefit of a greater whole (self-responsibility, social responsibility).
- Learning from each other and developing others with similar characteristics (self-help, equality, openness).
- A belief that working with others as a system is transformational (self-help, solidarity).
- Long term and sustainable (social responsibility, democratic, solidarity).
- Individuals look to improve their areas of responsibility, to help themselves by working co-operatively with others in a win-win manner (self-help, honesty).
- A learning system with people who always look to create a better reality and understand how their behaviour, motivation and actions impact on the system (self-responsibility, equity).
- Leadership is pluralised, team created and team driven (democracy, openness).

Teaching schools

At a time when much of the current political agenda is focusing on independence and contrived collegiality the Government's Teaching Schools' initiative seems to offer hope of genuinely co-operative working.

For most school leaders a desire to continually find ways to improve the quality of learning and teaching in their schools is a prime motivator. Head teachers also recognise that the quality of learning and teaching is very closely linked to the quality of leadership in a school. These elements are at the centre of the Teaching Schools' initiative.

It was agreed by TASC that an application to become a Teaching School should be considered. The Department for Education specified that the lead school (the named teaching school), should be an outstanding school. For TASC this would be a primary school which has very successfully amalgamated with a village primary school within the Trowbridge town area. A crucial aspect of the application was the quality of collaboration between schools and the ability of that collaboration to make a difference across an area. In July 2011 the primary school which has led on this heard that we had been successful and were among the first 100 to be awarded Teaching School status.

It is of course possible that the Teaching School bid would have been successful had our plans to become a social enterprise not been in place. However, what we have found as a collaborative group in recent years is that being known to work co-operatively with others and being genuine and trustworthy has brought funding and support for initiatives that would otherwise not have been forthcoming.

So, it looks like bringing Teaching Schools work into the social enterprise will mean that a community of children and their teachers will reap great educational benefits and be able to build considerable lateral capacity. In Trowbridge the moral arc is curving steeply towards system-wide improvement for all children. Excitingly, we find ourselves as school leaders creating a new and truly co-operative model for a self-sustaining future in areas that lie closest to our hearts.

Conclusion

The seeds sown in childhood have germinated. Experiences in my formative years have, without doubt, driven an approach to leadership that recognises the considerable power of co-operative working at individual, institutional and community levels.

Today, by working with many fantastic colleagues, established and sapling initiatives carry the enticing promise of system-wide, morally motivated, transformation.

The Author

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