

Schools as reservoirs of hope.

ECNAIS: The Hague 18.04.13

The new landscapes for Independent Schools: opportunities & boundaries

TITLE SLIDE

Landscapes are not given but formed.

Landscapes are not fixed but evolving.

Landscapes are not pre-destined but pro-active.

Politicians do not make the landscape (although they may like to think they do), they simply reflect what they see as the landscape & what they would like it to be.

Landscapes evolve and develop through the actions of the people within them.

As school leaders, we are part of the landscape, we make the landscape.

As we interact with our political and social environment,

as we use our autonomy to push against restrictive boundaries,

as we focus not only on developing skills & knowledge, but on values & attitudes,

as we grow the communities in our care,

we can influence and formulate new landscapes.

But within these shifting landscapes there remains a need for firm foundations: foundations of hope

It was Napoleon Bonaparte 2 centuries ago who said: '*A leader is a dealer in hope*'.

I want to suggest this morning that if we are to encourage and enthuse the young people in our care to be capable of dealing with the changing pressures of this world from a firm foundation of moral values, to stand on foundations of hope in the prospect of a better future, then schools are called to be dealers in hope: communicating hope within the shifting landscapes of our changing world.

And notice that hope is not the same as optimism: optimism is easy when life is easy; hope is what is required when the going gets tough and the way ahead appears very dark.

The education landscape in England is presently dark, bleak and challenging.

In England, as indeed elsewhere, we are living through an *Age of Austerity*.

Many of our communities face economic conditions not seen for nearly a century.

As a consequence, we are experiencing a *retreat into utilitarianism*, a prevailing sense that actions are deemed right only if they are useful and profitable, that the sole criterion of virtue is utility.

Thus the education system in England faces a *time of drought*.

Drained of financial support in such times of austerity, buffeted by winds of structural change, beset by ceaseless government ideological initiatives, its schools fear being pressurised to become solely instruments of utilitarianism, vehicles of production, engines of economic renewal.

This has created a culture where students move along an educational assembly line from lesson to lesson, from exam to exam, until released into the workplace (if there are jobs for them) as units of wealth production and economic growth.

Curricula are becoming more narrow-focussed, based on hierarchies of so-called 'facilitating' core subjects to be examined solely by terminal assessment. Teachers are increasingly suffering from what can be termed 'moral injury': damage to their deeply held beliefs as to the essential purposes of education. And our schools tend to be perceived as individual 'business units', which are to be judged against outcome data, league tables and narrow functional outcomes; to be led not by dedicated leaders but by efficient managers.

Within this landscape, schools, and particularly autonomous independent schools with their freedom of action as self-organised educational systems must stand as:

SLIDE

- *havens of history*: retaining the best of our past educational experience whilst moderating and modernising it appropriately for the 21st century
- *citadels of calm*: preserving a still centre at the heart of this turning world in which an individual's values and vision can be laid down, developed and come to personal and social maturation
- *bulwarks of belief*: demonstrating a faith above all in the holistic nature of education, and seeking to develop students who are whole, rounded, empathetic and spiritual human beings.

And all this requires schools and their leaders to be *Reservoirs of Hope* in these times of drought. The main challenge is constantly to demonstrate that *leadership is a values-based activity* and synthesising a values-driven vision for the future to give a sense of purpose, meaning & *hope* to their school community. For schools to be reservoirs of hope, their leaders must be reservoirs of hope. To achieve this, leaders must:

- secure their value systems by reflecting on and articulating what their core values are and where they came from
- ensure that these values translate into the habitual practices of the school
- sustain their values through a range of personal replenishment strategies.

SLIDE

My research has explored this concept of school leaders as 'reservoirs of hope'. As a school principal of 15 years experience myself, I interviewed 150 fellow school principals in a cross-section of schools, both state and independent, in the UK and Australia, using the metaphor to promote practitioner reflection on leadership. I would argue that the successful school leader must act as the *external reservoir of hope* for the school, preserving its collective vision, coherence of practice and fundamental values in the face of external pressures. To act as the external reservoir of hope demands an *internal reservoir of hope*, the calm centre at the heart of the individual from which their personal values and vision flows, a reservoir which must be replenished and sustained if there is not to be leadership burn-out or drop-out.

I would like to share my research findings across these 3 leadership facets of:

1. securing values, 2. translating values into practice, and 3. sustaining values.

1. SECURING VALUES

Values are what we live by. They are rooted in our upbringing and experience. They are the moral bedrock we fall back upon, the principles which secure our actions in *values-led leadership*. The ethos of the school, the collective values of the school community come above all from the core values of the headteacher, transmitted to the rest of the school. And people will judge the school and its values not on what is said but what is seen: **SLIDE**

“your values have to come through everything you do” (Pat Davies HT of year, 2011)

So I asked my sample of school principals to reflect on what their core values were and where they came from. I have never met a school leader who cannot at the drop of a hat and often with considerable passion articulate a personal value system and evidence its operation in the life and ethos of their school.

Australian (state) schools (20% of sample were Australian school principals) have explicit values statements in a National Framework for Values Education. The Framework includes a defined set of values linked to agreed national goals which include the development of: **SLIDE**

- self-confidence
- optimism
- high self-esteem
- personal excellence
- capacity to exercise judgement in matters of morality/ethics/social justice
- make rational and informed decisions
- accept responsibility for own actions.

From pilot work in schools, the sharing of good practice and local and national debate, these goals generated Nine Values for Australian Schooling (note in alpha order and not rank importance)

Note also that these are a framework not a prescription, but school principals interviewed felt that their own personal values and individual school values were consonant with them....and I'm sure that will also be true for many of you here.

English schools and heads have no such detailed national values framework to work within. The English Department for Education gives a brief list (2011) **SLIDE** of aims, values and purposes, directly related to the curriculum, & simply states:

The curriculum should reflect values in our society that promote personal development, equality of opportunity, economic wellbeing, a healthy and just democracy, and a sustainable future. (note no precise specification of what these values actually are). These values should relate to:

- ourselves, as individuals capable of spiritual, moral, social, intellectual and physical growth and development
- our relationships, as fundamental to the development and fulfilment of happy and healthy lives, and to the good of the community
- our society, which is shaped by the contributions of a diverse range of people, cultures and heritages
- our environment, as the basis of life and a source of wonder and inspiration that needs to be protected.

Nor do English schools (unlike their Australian counterparts) often have explicit values statements, but rely on more implicit reference within mission statements or ethos statements (latter more common in schools of a religious character).

However, interviews and school visits revealed a consistency in language used to express values: frequently reoccurring words such as: **SLIDE**

- *Equality*: all are of equal worth and value
- *Social Justice*: every child is good at something and deserves the best we can offer irrespective of social or cultural background
- *Integrity*: personal values such as honesty, truthfulness, humility, fallibility
- *Community*: collective values such as mutual trust, respect, tolerance, forgiveness & reconciliation

Irrespective of precise wording and geographical context, all leaders felt values were revealed not in formal definitions but shown in their modelling through leadership actions, behaviours, commitments: *“the way we do things around here”*.

Genesis of values:

When asked where these expressed values came from, how formed & laid down, could identify 3 categories: generational, egalitarian, faith-based (not mutually exclusive).

Generational value systems, rooted in upbringing:

“I was the first from my (working class) family to reach higher education. That’s given me a sense of duty to give something back, to make a difference, like it made a difference to me.” (male sec head)

Doing it for my Dad: What would my Dad think of this? (female primary head)

Egalitarian value systems, rooted in a drive, often arising from a political imperative, to offer deprived children a better deal:

“Deprived children are going to have difficult lives when they grow up .Our job is to make their childhood as enjoyable as possible...so they can experience success now.” (male sec head, socially disadvantaged area)

Faith-based value systems, rooted in faith, even within a secular context:

“living out the message of the gospel to love one another” (female Christian primary head)

40% of sample were leading schools from a faith perspective, inspired by so-called ‘gospel values’ from the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself, or from the universal **Golden Rule** of all faiths to ‘Do as you would be done by’.

Or as nicely restated as an operational value by one leader: *‘If I wouldn’t want this done to my own children, why am I doing it to someone else’s children?’*

But it is how the rhetoric plays out in the reality of practice that really matters: sometimes the rhetoric of love and community described in interview appeared not to be triangulated by the reality of observations on a tour of school, [example] reflecting the wisdom of the words of the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson:

‘what you do thunders so loudly that I cannot hear what you say’.

2. TRANSLATING VALUES INTO PRACTICE

The implications of values demonstrated in practice were considered by seeking views on how it had influenced **leadership style**. School leaders described individualised approaches to learning, and the constant pastoral nurturing of staff and pupils in their school. A concern for *'people more than paperwork'*, *'a consultative and collegiate leadership style'* which *'walked the talk and set the example in relationships, listening and caring'*, compassion shown towards personal problems, which was valued by staff and an encouragement to them to be similarly person-centred in their dealings with others, was felt to have borne fruit in an *ethos of 'fairness, equality and upholding of respect for the individual', and the possibility of redemption and renewal through 'forgiveness of mistakes, so we can put them right together and move forward'*.

Relationships between people: adult/adult, adult/child, child/child were seen to be paramount: *The way I relate and communicate with people even when it is difficult...Challenges being picked up and supported together...How would you know about my value system in practice? Ask the people I work with. Shake my hand and look into my eyes: I live it!*

One focus of my research was on leaders of schools facing challenging circumstances. Such leaders showed key behaviours arising from their beliefs:

SLIDE

BELIEFS & ATTRIBUTES	BEHAVIOURS
Primacy of relationships	Displaying high levels of Emotional Intelligence
Inclusive individualism	Demonstrating respect for each individual & needs
Equality	Commitment to equal opportunities for all
Aspiration	High aspirations...setting the bar high, no excuses
Convictions	Not being pushed around by every wind of change
Tenacity	Resilience no matter what the personal cost
Courage	Calculated or instinctive risk-taking to drive forward
Humility	Prepared to admit that haven't got all the answers
Positivity	Projecting the positives and nagging at the negatives
Passion for improvement	Consistent passion and enthusiasm for the role
Collaboration	Building supportive teams, with mutual trust & belief
<i>Can make a difference</i>	Identifying and celebrating small tastes of success

Key amongst this is

- the need for **modelling**: being true to the personal value system. **Integrity is fundamental: model the behaviour you want; do what you say you will.**
- the recognition by such leaders that they 'cannot go it alone'. The concept of the 'heroic' super-head, singlehandedly turning the school around was not recognised. Rather it was necessary to build up collaborative **teams**: **Find the people who share the same values.** • **Build your own team: talk about relationships, reflect and evaluate together.** • **Develop your team as a leadership group, not a management group, privy to**

your thinking, supportive of you and each other ... and watch them grow.

3. SUSTAINING VALUES

All leaders interviewed described a range of sustainability strategies to maintain their values, their reservoir of hope, in the deserts of leadership demands.

Categorise as belief, support, & external **networks**:

SLIDE

belief networks, sustained by high levels of self-belief in the rightness of their value system and drawing support from others on the same wavelength (*jockeying for position at conferences*) Above all, affirmative feedback from what is felt to be the core of the job, the pupils. A number of those running large schools specifically cited the value of this:

"I escape (sic) to the classroom; being with kids reaffirms my faith in the job" (male sec head)

support networks of families (particularly partners), friends and colleagues. Some used their partner as a 'sounding board', as a catharsis to verbalise the problems and offload the events of the day; others were adamant that they would not do this but knew nevertheless that the support was there. One leader was prepared to go as far as to avow that without such support:

"I don't see how you can go home on your own at night & come back the next day sane."

THE DOG on early morning walks (WHO ALWAYS SEEMS TO AGREE)

Others cited the support of colleagues within the school as sustaining mechanisms. Senior staff played a key role in this on a day to day basis as did convivial contact with fellow leaders within formal and informal networks in giving a sense of much needed perspective: *"so that trivia (that had been burdening you in your own school) becomes trivia again"* (male secondary head, 19 years headship experience)

But such caring support is not restricted to senior colleagues. One leader quoted

"the day to day support of the office staff providing tea, sympathy and laughter" (female primary)

external networks of engagement with interests and experiences beyond the world of education, what could be called *'the hinterland of headship'*. (Denis Healey) Renewal came from this *opportunity to 'switch off'* from the immediate demands of headship, *to become immersed* in something else (Coriolanus world elsewhere). This **'capacity to compartmentalise'**, to switch off from immediate professional problems and thus *prevent 'cross-contamination' between work and home*, was felt to be an important sustaining strategy.

Above all, leaders were sustained by opportunities to **retreat and reflect**, to withdraw even for a brief time from the busy demands of the role in order

- to step back and see the horizon and not just the edge of the rut
- to revisit and re-connect with fundamental values and vision
- to find time and space to focus on 'being' and not 'doing'.

Such opportunities may be through formal retreat events (> common in faith schools) or informal self-generated reflection opportunities (commuting/early arrival at meetings)

donothingfor2minutes.com resets if touch mouse or key). *How* it is done is less important than that it *should* be done.

CONCLUSIONS

Key messages to strengthen the school leader as the reservoir of hope for the school and thus ensure the school can become in turn a reservoir of hope for the community in which it is set and which it serves: **SLIDE**

1. the need to **secure your values**: by reflecting on and articulating what they are and where they came from
2. the need to **embed your values**: by ensuring they are reflected in your day-to-day practice and that of your colleagues and your school
3. the need to **sustain your values**: by seeking out opportunities for *retreat and reflection*, and engaging in mutual *networks of support*.

All this should not be left to chance encounter or individual effort.

If our schools are to become reservoirs of hope, led by leaders of hope, then even in straightened times of economic austerity, access to time and space for this should be part of the leadership entitlement package, for the cost of school leader burn-out, underfunctioning, or simply value-less leadership is too severe. At a time in England where 75% of secondary school headteachers are aged over 50 and drop-out and re-advertisement rates are at record levels (33% of UK primary headships, and 20% secondary headships had to be advertised more than once in 2011), the need for personal reflection and sustainability strategies has become even more pressing if the quality of effective values-driven leadership for future generations is to be maintained, and the collective 'reservoirs of hope' that are schools and their leaders are not to run dry.

,

© Alan Flintham 18.04.13