

## **What are the guiding principles and passions of my leadership?**

**Paul Falkus, Educational Enquiry March 2010**

**The rationale for the study: 'I am the educator that I am because of the life I have led and the life that I am currently leading'.**

Having been the headteacher of a primary school for nine years it would be helpful to reflect upon the educational influence of my leadership in the institution with the staff, pupils and parents. In order to do this I need to be able to understand for myself what my guiding principles and values are and why these principles and values are important to me. By understanding these more completely I would in future be able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of my current methods and approaches and then identify and adapt strategies that might help me become a more effective head.

What links are there between the activities of headship to that of activities that are already learnt and absorbed and have become central to whom we are? For me this is an important question as academic studies of leadership tend to focus on deconstructed qualities in which the character, personality, passions, life history and physical presence of the leader are only minor issues. I feel that in fact leadership and direction setting emanate from these very things. I would suggest that we all have a number of core concerns that affect and influence vision making as well as the thousand of minor decisions that cumulate to create an ethos and sense of place. Childhood and early adult experiences shape much of our outlook and certainly has influenced my vision of what school can be for children, and for this reason I feel that it is important in this essay that these personal experiences are referred to. McNiff and Whitehead (2010, p20) emphasise the importance of clarifying personal values before embarking on action research as these values form the basis of conceptual frameworks.

Williams (2010) argued that teachers should 'research their personal stories narratively in an attempt to "remember" themselves and come to new understandings or meanings for their story', and this is an attempt to do that.

My central point is that we bring who we are to our working practices and that this is an organic and natural process. Our leadership influence springs from a combination of character, personality and life experiences. As Huxtable (2009) expresses it, these values are 'at the core of my being and are unconsciously expressed in what I do and the way I am'. School leadership involves being a teacher, policeman, judge, counsellor, politician, sergeant major, salesman, gatekeeper, coach, architect, window dresser, banker, buyer, data analyst, policy maker, site manager, technician, vicar, prophet, story teller, administrator and visionary, and crucially, knowing which role to take at any one moment. As a head teacher one has responsibility for the pupils and parents, staff and visitors, for the learning and fun, for the drains and the strategic plan. Many decisions are made in seconds, so who one is counts for a lot. Even the most reasoned decisions are affected by internal personal considerations as well as the conflicting local and national pressures that we are subject to. As Riding (2008) phrases

it; 'I am the educator that I am because of the life I have led and the life that I am currently leading'.

Given that this essay is a reflection on my personal principles, values and experience the text is necessarily of a 'patchwork' nature (Winter, 2003). I am using this opportunity for critical reflexivity, and searching for coherence however I recognise that my understanding is provisional and personally constructed, and the ideas contained fragmented but argue that this is what is described as a model of learning which is an 'act of the imagination i.e. as an essentially creative process of discovering links between matters that may seem initially to be separate'. (Warnock, 1976, p. 28) It is 'not a quest for scientific truth, but a quest for meaning' Brown and Rhodes, (2005).

### **What are my central educational values and philosophy? Creating 'Perfect Worlds'.**

An initial understanding of my personal values and passions grew through undertaking a Kalaeo course in 2007. This course was developed in California, and involved reflecting on personal and professional values and passions, and teasing out dominant themes. This led me to a realisation that I had a consistent desire and tendency to try to create 'perfect worlds'. This was apparent in my passion for art; particularly landscape painting and drawing. My degree was in Art and English. I love the challenge of chancing upon a place and by rigorous observation finding an underlying composition, meaning, pattern, and beauty. The pictorial representation is an ordered, artificial thing but also an authentic response, and one that as well as being an art object in itself; enables others to see the original place differently. The same desire is apparently in a love of landscape gardening. I love using trees, shrubs and plants as well as hard landscaping to create a new place that is visually attractive and a pleasure to be in. I also love interior design, and originally planned to take up a career in 'point of sale advertising'. I love creating poems and writing songs. Each of these creative acts is for me an attempt to create a new miniature world.



Leithwood and Riehl (2003) describe leadership as 'providing direction and exercising influence', and note how 'Leaders mobilise and work with others to achieve shared goals'. One key element of Leithwood and Riehl's

definition is to 'establish the conditions that enable others to be effective'. I feel that one of my strengths is in establishing positive conditions; and creating a supportive and stimulating physical space and cultural climate, in other words an attempt to create a 'perfect world' in which children can feel at home, grow as people, develop character, skills and knowledge and in which the subtle constraint of physical restriction and enforced learning is reduced. A school that does not feel like a school, in which children can be happy, and learn as painlessly as possible. My ambitions and preferences are strongly influenced by my positive and negative experiences of school.

### **All Talk and No Vision**

My experience of school was strongly affected by from the primacy of teacher talk which dominated learning experiences. As a visual learner I found the emphasis on oral learning to be a real barrier to learning.

'The problem I had with learning was that it felt like a punishment. To sit and listen to a teacher talking seemed physically painful. I can remember the view through the window of my classroom more vividly than anything I learnt inside the room. Classrooms seemed a ghost world where we became misty apparitions until released into the brightness outside.' (Falkus, 2009)

I was academically something of a late starter. Secondary reports were not flattering. Summer 1973 'A likeable clown'. Autumn 1973 'We have singularly failed to get him to take an interest in anything.' Williams (2010) describes how the Aristotelian tradition taught ... 'that objects and phenomena have essence or identity: they are things in their own right and free from contradiction in as much as they are either "this or that" ... Once a child has been classified as the gifted "this" or ungifted "that", the "self-defence" mechanism kicks in and they position themselves accordingly. I positioned myself accordingly. Expulsion was offered as a possible solution by the headteacher. Leaving school at the age of sixteen with two O levels and one CSE Grade One was not a great return for a moderately expensive education.

In fact I was hungry for visual stimulation and a learning style that suited me, and would certainly have learnt effectively had I been allowed to sit quietly and read a book about whatever subject was being studied. One maths teacher allowed me to sit at the back of the class and read a novel having decided that it was impossible to teach me mathematical concepts. Degree level learning with an emphasis on private study seemed relatively easy. As head teacher I am keen to make learning as rich and varied as possible. I do believe with James Britton that 'reading and writing float on a sea of talk' and that crucially that learning should be conversational, and not didactic. Making learning suit all learning styles is key. One of the most revolutionary changes in education for years has been the introduction of Internet linked IWBs into the school, which enable teachers to open up a visual feast for those children who need visual pictures and graphics in order to remember and understand.

## The Primacy of Colour

I believe that an atheistically pleasing environment affects learning as much as other more governmentally determined and politically valued factors. I think that rooms in a school should feel like real spaces, real places. At my current school I have a parent who was a designer. She spent time with each teacher using colour charts to help them to find pleasing combinations of colours for their classroom. In the public spaces children helped us to decide on colours. When visitors walk round the school they tend to feel comfortable, and inspired. I am sure that the use of colour helps create this feeling.



For me colour is very important and I find colour deprivation painful. Lacy, quoted in Henon (2009), believes that “when we introduce colour into our environment we change the electromagnetic fields around us ... Research has shown that...introducing certain colours in our environments can start to bring back a balance into our lives’. Rand also quoted in Henon (2009) claims that while ‘colours mean nothing in themselves, they can when put together in certain quantities/ when juxtaposed...effectively form a kind of visual music’ like an invisible power. An ‘invisible power’ that, in my opinion, can affect our ability to learn.

## The Outdoor World



I was able to attend at least two schools with historic buildings, acres of landscaped grounds, and interesting spaces to explore, and strongly want to offer pupils a taste of this experience.

‘Aldro was another story. It had larger grounds, a cobbled drive, and a gatehouse. Through a field we could reach the woods. On Sundays we would dress in wellingtons and dungarees and carrying spades head off to create tunnels, dens and traps. The field was home to butterflies which rose in

clouds as you strode through, although their ancestors lay dusty and pinned in Victorian cases in the library.’ (Falkus, 2009)



Creating the best possible environment for children is a driving passion for me, and I strongly feel that children deserve the best that we can offer. A barren playground for instance seems as unthinkingly neglectful as a concrete zoo. As well as developing the interior of the school we have spent thousands of pounds developing our playground and field, and have spaces that engaging and offer a good range of play opportunities. We are planning to open up the school woods for den making and exploration.

### **Offering Agape Love in an Imperfect World**

However creating a pleasing physical environment is only one aspect of trying to create a ‘perfect world’. As important for me is the need to create a setting in which personal interactions are harmonious and supportive. A personal core theme is peace making and justice. My personal values are affected by growing up as the eldest of six brothers and one sister. Keeping the peace was my responsibility. Losing a younger brother in a fire fight in Angola in 1980 confirmed the value of mediation and diplomacy over aggression. The influence of the Christian faith has given a rationale to the value of using love and friendship to overcome opposition and disharmony.

As a head teacher I believe that a central element to my role in creating a ‘perfect world’ is in promoting self-belief and where possible transforming children’s life chances. In a perfect world the individual is valued, appreciated and affirmed. For me the key is to allow children to know that you respect them, believe in their potential and to identify and develop their strengths. I instinctively feel that this is more significant than the ‘instrumental, semi-linear assumptions that underlie considerations of definitions, identification and provision’ (Hymer, Whitehead and Huxtable 2009) ‘This has been described as ‘a power-with or power through’ rather than power-over relationship between people- a relationship that is respectful of the differentness of the other’ and by Cripps (2009) as ‘an honouring recognition of who the children are as learners and what they can do, and want opportunities to do’.

Cartwright (2008) reflects on how Cho (2005) explores the concept of love within the context of a pedagogy and describes how it can include the aim to incite the student's desire to learn and pursue knowledge, not for knowledge's sake, but because that knowledge will be transformative for the student. As a head teacher I am concerned to create a school in which friendship even love is primary. The power of the head should be expressed in service and empowering others, a distributive gifting and developing of talents.

### **The Transformational Potential of Relationships**



I have a strong belief in the transformational potential of relationships. I had two or three mentors who gave me self-belief and who influenced my life including a well respected and inspirational Prep school teacher Barry Gardiner; (see above)

'...who had a humane manner. He was ex Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Barry taught English and shooting. He would offer the choice of a detention or a quick kick on the backside, which was always the preferred option. He would bring a portable tape recorder into the classroom after prep and play Goons tapes. He seemed to believe in us'. (Falkus, 09)

Having an artistic background and looking at 'the world through the lens of an artist' (Henon 2009 p.103) affects many aspects of leadership. As an artist I personally value core underlying disciplines such as rigorous observational and drawing skills developed through life drawing, an understanding of colour theory, awareness of the work of other artists, but also the ability, once these are developed, to respond emotionally, subjectively and instinctively in a creative flow. It is this disciplined but creative response that I try to bring to my work as head teacher.

I feel that the spontaneous relationship and friendship based exchanges that occur in the school corridors with children and parents are as important in communicating and developing the positive life affirming ethos of the school as any formal speech making. This emphasis links with what Whitehead described to me as 'expressing influence through an 'embodied expression

of your life-affirming energy and your relationally dynamic values of being receptive and responsive to others’

### **Communicating Vision in a Post Modern World**

As a person I do not see myself as being verbally articulate in a traditional form. This seemed to be a real problem to me with an initial concept of successful headship and leadership which I had characterised as being primarily verbal. The questions arises is it possible to be a successful head teacher without being comfortable verbally articulating a compelling vision for the school?

I now feel that it is legitimate to communicate vision in a more idiosyncratic and personal way through my strengths, and that much influence is asserted in non-verbal ways. This seems fitting in a twenty-first century setting in which most people are accustomed; through adverts, film, post-modern art and music, to quickly interpreting visual references and messages. It is also consistent with Elliott Eisner’s 1993 Presidential Address to AERA where he argues for an extension in the forms of representation we use (Eisner, 1993).



For instance the widescreen in the school entrance hall displaying key pictures and messages, the touchscreen showing photographs of classroom learning and educational visits together with video clips help ‘turn the school inside out’ and make what happens in it accessible for parents and visitors as well as enabling children to reflect on what they have done, learnt and experienced.

The newsletters I create are also rich in photographs and visual images and help interpret what happens in the school for parents and outsiders. I am conscious that my tendency to create ‘perfect worlds’ also means that there is an element of the artificial in these representations. They tend to be overwhelming positive pictures. It could be argued that this is advertising as

much as communicating a realistic picture of school life. I would argue that a school community benefits from having a positive self-image and that a school is also a business and requires positive publicity.

### **An Achilles heel with transforming effects?**

My personal values and headship style are also affected by having rich personal experiences of failure. As well as being academically a slow starter I also experienced failure in the world of work. After leaving school at the age of sixteen and inspired by echoes of 'Flower Power' I dropped out of a 'Design for Print' course after five months and had an extended 'gap year' that lasted for four years. It took me a long time to find my vocation. I worked in a concrete factory, a carnation nursery; a Curry's and those were just the c's.. I lacked most elements of the protestant work ethic and consequently my work experiences were not successful; and rarely lasted more than a month or two before either I or the manager decided enough was enough.

I grew to adulthood in the seventies and working on a Kibbutz was a rite of passage for many young people at the time, anticipating the contemporary gap year 'experience'. I spent seven months working on a kibbutz in Northern Israel and gradually developed an appreciation of the value of hard work, and on return to England restarted my education.

Having experienced academic failure and worked in 'dead end' jobs brings a different viewpoint. At time an awareness of this 'patchwork' past sits uncomfortably next to my notion of 'the successful head teacher'. It encourages the 'sense of being a fraud' referred to by Rayner (2009, pp 6-7). However it is also possible that these experiences are part source of the 'creativity, compassion and healing power' also referred to by Rayner. An Achilles heel with transforming power?

My next steps will be to develop an understanding of the nature and influence of my leadership in a more systematic way. I would like to undertake action research as described by Whitehead and McNiff (2006) and through this method identify ways in which I can be more effective in supporting and transforming the life opportunities of children, and in creating a more perfect 'miniature world'.

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