

## BOOK REVIEW

**Leading schools in challenging circumstances: strategies for success**, Philip Smith and Les Bell, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2014, 171pp.

In examining studies of education leadership, Thrupp and Willmot (2003) divide those working in the field into four categories: problem-solvers, overt apologists, subtle apologists, and textual dissenters. Problem-solvers are social realists who assume the problems of schools and leadership are self-evidently organizational, and therefore largely offer practical guidance to school leaders. Overt apologists and subtle apologists have differing degrees of critical awareness of the knowledge claims of the leadership literature and the impact of the policy context on schools. Nevertheless, the apologists believe the mainstream leadership literature can make a positive contribution to school improvement. The pragmatism of the problem-solver and the apologists can be contrasted to the scepticism of the textual dissenter. Textual dissenters critique leadership's normativity and the role of the scholarly field itself. Often using a sociological lens, the dissenters reject the simplistic and often functionalist rendering of schools by teasing out the complex relations of power that constitute the spaces of schooling and the knowledge produced of it. Philip Smith and Les Bell's *Leading schools in challenging circumstances* best fits in the problem-solving category. Although the book is aware of some of the current socio-political influences and dynamics exerted on schools, it lacks a sound theoretical perspective to conceptualise and adequately respond to the institutional and political context of schools and education policy.

The book reports on research conducted into the transactional and transformational leadership approaches of five headteachers in northern England. In Phase One of the study, four headteachers of secondary comprehensive schools in the former mining area of 'Coalborough' were interviewed about their leadership. With high unemployment, low household income, and poor levels of education, 'Coalborough' is one of the most **economically** deprived areas in England and Wales. OFSTED reports indicate that 7 of the 17 schools governed by the local education authority had been placed either in special measures or issued with notices to improve. Schools in the borough have lower than average student achievement, poor rates of attendance, disruptive behaviour, and poor relationships between staff, students and parents. The four headteachers interviewed for Phase One had, according to OFSTED reports, overseen improvements in each of their schools. Smith and Bell examine the self-reported leadership approaches and strategies of these four principals, finding that while transactional leadership approaches were commonly used to implement the requirements of external authorities, the real benefit accrued to schools from the transformational leadership approaches the headteachers employed. **Phase Two of the study presents a case study of a range of strategies of transformational leadership that were derived from Phase One and subsequently applied to a 'failing' school in a different borough.**

The principal argument of the book is that transformational leadership approaches can improve disadvantaged schools. It attempts to prosecute this argument over 6 chapters, with a 7<sup>th</sup> concluding chapter. Chapter 1 sets the groundwork for the proceeding chapters. It defines 'schools in challenging circumstances' using government statistics and information collected through OFSTED inspections and reports. It **next** describes how education policy over many decades has often resulted in schools in challenging circumstances bearing a heavy burden of reforms, particularly with the use of accountability devices and school closures. Having **described** this political context, Smith and Bell assert the importance of leadership to school improvement because Headteachers, it is claimed, are the major contributing influence on the environment, direction and ethos of a school. The importance of organizational vision, culture, ethos, values and purpose is a theme that runs throughout the book. The chapter then describes each school in Phase One of the study, when we learn that 'Coalborough' has suffered economically and socially because of significant deprivation

resulting from pit closures, failing schools and changes in education policy. The chapter concludes with a description of the research methods.

Chapter 2 addresses the connection between leadership and school performance. The chapter outlines a number of key leadership styles, theories and their features, with a specific focus on transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Smith and Bell suggest these two theories have the greatest influence on headteacher leadership styles, and therefore these constitute the theoretical frame through which the interview data is analysed. In spite of the paucity of evidence, the chapter goes on to argue that leading a school through political and socio-economic change requires transformational rather than transactional leadership. While the latter task-oriented approach is best suited to responding to external political accountabilities and policy demands, the current uncertain and rapidly changing socio-political circumstances schools face requires a transformational leadership. Viewing these realities as known and absolute, the authors argue that school leaders need to be influential, visionary, optimistic, flexible, and motivated by moral purpose and values. These leaders must prosecute their vision by developing their staff's capacity, and by changing their attitudes and personal perceptions.

Chapter 3 reports on the four headteachers' use of transactional leadership. The chapter is organised according to the features of transactional leadership outlined in Chapter 2. It suggests that the current policy context induces the use of task-oriented transactional leadership as head teachers make compliance to external standards and pressures a priority. Leaders adopt a transactional role to embed externally driven policies, to deal with underperformance, and to respond to OFSTED inspections. The authors argue this approach is delimiting because it is narrowly focused and inflexible, it uses rigid criteria for the measurement of progress, it does not support staff development, and it diminishes staff autonomy. These findings are then contrasted in Chapters 4 to the use of transformational leadership by these headteachers. Smith and Bell describe the extent that the headteachers used transformational leadership, praising their person-centred approaches, their moral purpose, their commitment to a distributed form of leadership, their attempts to raise the aspirations of parents and students, and their commitment to the personal and professional development of students and staff.

Chapter 5 examines the deployment of transformational leadership strategies and their purported success. Transformational leadership practices are used to a variety of ends, from building relationships, developing staff and handling unpredictability. But the chapter fails to rise above the mainstream leadership discourse of vision, ethos, values and cultural change, and the entrenched conceptualisation of the problem of disadvantaged schools in terms of individual self-belief, aspiration, empowerment, and self-perception. This approach is captured by their claim that "To be truly transformed people must first alter their mindset to focus on positivity, which will in turn empower them to act upon this belief, enabling the creation of a new, more positive future" (p. 83). The second half of the chapter describes the purported success of transformational leadership. This evidence is derived mostly from the reports of the headteachers and some of their staff. It describes the positive impact on student achievement, student aspirations, the relationships within the school, staff and student motivation, the status of the school, and relationships with the wider community.

Using these self-reports of success, Chapter 6 describes the use of these transformational approaches in the case study school (Phase 2). That school, 'Packwood', is similarly situated in a former mining area, and was created in 2004 when two underachieving schools were merged and a new school built. All schools in the area are identified by OFSTED as under-performing although Packwood is the only one to be placed into special measures, just prior to the new Head. As with the schools in 'Coalborough', it has struggled with issues of underachievement, truancy, vandalism, disruptive behaviour and poor relationships with parents. The chapter describes the use of

transformational leadership, including how the headteacher turned transactional leadership into transformational opportunities for his staff and students. This chapter reiterates much of what was covered in the previous two chapters. There is a final chapter to conclude the book.

Despite the advocacy for leaders to develop and prosecute a 'vision', the mainstream educational leadership literature is afflicted with a myopic vision that hinders its capacity to comprehend the social and political dimensions of education. Often operating as a practical guide to the pragmatic concerns of headteachers, this literature lacks rigorous theoretical perspectives to enable it to grapple with the impact of the current social and political context of schools. Wedded to a leader-centric account of the school organization and school improvement, *Leading schools in challenging circumstances* promotes what Gronn identifies in mainstream leadership literature as "an exaggerated understanding of the agency of leaders and their scope for autonomous action" (Gronn, 2010, p. 853). The book fails to develop a sound understanding of the wider causal field of influences on schools (Evers & Lakomski, 2013), such as the processes, practices and effects of New Public Management and the governance changes associated with neoliberalism, such as increased market competition. While Smith and Bell acknowledge the imposition of central standards and accountability, they do not substantially unpack the effects of these or other policy developments on their case study schools, and schools more generally. This reader was left asking: how do the study's headteachers lead in relation to the intensification of teachers' work (Gronn, 2010), the narrowing of the curriculum (Whitty, 1998), the blaming and shaming of underperforming schools (Thrupp, 2003), the use of selective enrolment practices (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), and the residualisation of schools catering to the most impoverished (Lamb, 2007)? Only a context-sensitive and rigorous conceptualisation of these issues is likely to produce the knowledge and practices headteachers need to successfully negotiate this education policy landscape.

The wider problem of course is the theoretical limitations of the field of education leadership itself. For Anderson and Grinberg (1998), the field of administration "is generally incapable of asking critical questions, not because to do so challenges dominant interests, as critical theorists would argue, but because it is trapped within a discourse of efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness that make problematization and critical reflection difficult" (1998, p. 344). It is unsurprising therefore that commonsensical views and generalised descriptions of education, schools and the work of teachers and headteachers abound in the mainstream literature. This is most evident in *Leading schools in challenging circumstances* when Smith and Bell repeatedly describe how headteachers effectively respond to official policies using transformational leadership approaches. The question is not asked whether the official policy and its practices and language of markets, competition, choice, efficiency, outputs, standards, accountability, and management are useful or beneficial to schools in challenging circumstances. Indeed, there are serious questions to be raised about how government policy often hinders the good intentions of headteachers seeking to improve their schools. Instead of asking such questions, this book instead construes headteachers as mostly uncritical receptacles of official government policy who are celebrated when they respond to policies using transformational approaches that secure staff 'buy in'. By accepting external policies, standards and pressures as unquestionable realities that must shape the form leadership takes in schools, the book unwittingly reveals the extent to which programmes and agencies of government define the discursive field of leadership.

Perhaps the reticence to ask critical questions about education and the expertise of leadership is because engaging with social theory might problematize the existence of the discipline of education leadership. Rather than being an independent expertise with neutral and politically benign ends, leadership, scholars in the field would need to confront the reality that it is a technique of governmentality, or more specifically, a discourse being deployed as a strategy in liberal and neoliberal programmes of government (Niesche, 2011). Put simply, leadership is a political practice

and the head teacher a political construct (Gobby 2013). From this perspective, a theoretically rigorous leadership literature must contend with its own constructedness as a discourse deployed within political discourse as a means to govern schools according to objectives and knowledges developed largely outside of the field itself (Gunter, 2011). There is evidence of this deployment in Smith and Bell's largely individualistic conceptualisation of social and economic disadvantage. The authors argue that leaders must use transformational leadership approaches to empower communities by changing their perceptions and raising their aspirations. From a critical pair of eyes, this discourse bears a remarkable resemblance to the forms of intelligibility and ethical ideals promoted by neoliberalism. Rather than attribute social and economic disadvantage (and therefore underachievement) to the manifold structures and practices that produce disadvantage, these are construed as problems primarily of the individual. These problems are therefore to be remedied by inducing individual self-responsibility, aspiration, self-esteem and independence. These attempt to render the individual the responsible governor of himself or herself. In short, transformational leadership is not only congruent with neoliberalism, but is deployed in these regimes of government in an attempt to realise a certain ethical ideal. I suggest that a politically and socially uninformed leadership literature enables the political lexicon and practices of neoliberalism to run roughshod over the domain of education at a time when schools need headteachers who are courageous advocates rather than policy conformers.

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