

# **How Successful Secondary School Principals in England Respond to Policy Reforms: The Influence of Biography**

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# **How Successful Secondary School Principals in England Respond to Policy Reforms: The Influence of Biography**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines how values embedded in the biographies of principals of successful schools influence their responses to systemic policy reforms. Drawing on examples from two secondary principals with similarly strong moral purposes but contrasting value positions, the research found that, despite differences in the cultures, practices, and students' learning experiences in their schools, they directed and shaped – in remarkably similar ways – how and to what extent external policies were incorporated in preferred, values-led cultures and practices; and that leadership and school improvement realities in their schools were different from those portrayed in 'policy enactment' research in so-called 'ordinary' schools.

**Keywords:** leadership biographies; leadership values; policy enactment; principal leadership

## Introduction

This paper examines how successful secondary principals manage the demands of multiple external policy reforms, and what drives them to respond in particular and different ways. The experiences of two secondary principals – leading schools with contrasting socioeconomic pupil intakes but with similar, sustained high academic performance over a nine-year period (measured by pupil progress and attainment outcomes between 2003 and 2012) – demonstrate that the strategies and practices to interpret, diagnose and purposefully incorporate policy demands into the improvement structures and processes of their schools are not only closely aligned with successful leadership practices that have been consistently reported in the research literature (e.g. Day & Leithwood, 2007; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2006), but are also influenced in significant ways by their biographies. For the principals in our research who had managed to lead their schools to thrive over time, enacting externally imposed policy demands had never been their primary goal. Rather, sustaining the quality of teaching and enriching the experience of student learning progress and performance had been an unshakeable, continuing goal and purpose. Their schools were driven by a combination of shared educational values, non-negotiable standards and clearly defined purposes. This confirms what we already know about successful school leadership. What has been inadequately researched to date, however, is: i) how these leadership values and practices are formed and profoundly influenced by their biographies; and ii) the challenges of divergence and convergence of values in relation to government policy faced by principals. Those whose values correspond less closely are likely to face greater challenges in achieving success as defined by government than those whose values correspond more closely. Nonetheless, irrespective of the differences in values in this particular sense, the principals in our research, in line with findings about successful

principals internationally (Day and Leithwood, 2007) shared similar strong moral purposes and demonstrated similar strategic and interpersonal qualities in terms of how they mediated, incorporated and embedded policies in ways that secured consistency and coherence with their standards and purposes.

The paper will first briefly examine the nature of government reforms in England and review the existing research literature on the connections between school leaders' biographies, values and practices. It will then introduce the contexts of two successful secondary schools with contrasting school populations, followed by a synthesis of the key differences between the values, expectations and teaching and learning practices in each school. The influence of biography will then be discussed as the key cause for these differences. Finally, tentative conclusions will be drawn which nuance and extend previous research on 'policy enactment' in 'ordinary' schools (Braun et al, 2012).

### **Policy Reforms in England: Redefining the Purposes of Education**

Over the last three decades, as national reforms have been applied to schools, much has been written about the 'neoliberal,' results driven, outcomes based, performativity (Ball, 2003), 'de-professionalism' of teachers (Whitty, 2006), school reform agendas in England and elsewhere (Day, 2007, 2017; Poppleton & Williamson, 2004), and their effects upon teacher motivation, morale, recruitment and retention (Breslin, 2002; Ingersoll et al., 2016). Ball (2003, 2008) has described this central drive for quality and improvement as being embedded in three technologies – the market, managerialism and performativity – and placed them in distinct contrast to the post-war, public welfarist state. Increased surveillance, from the outside, through inspection and the publication of student test results

at 16, and national tests for students at age 7, 11, 16 and 18, has become mirrored in internal monitoring, target setting and testing regimes in schools seeking to 'do well' in terms of academic achievement results (Hall & Noyes, 2009). Whilst student progress and their performance in national tests and examinations are key to the judgement of overall effectiveness made of schools by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), its inspectors have a wider brief. In addition to the academic achievement of students, they examine and grade on a four point scale the quality of teaching, behaviour and safety of students and leadership and management. Ball (2003) called this new age post-professionalism, in which teachers and other public service workers succeed only by satisfying others' definitions of their work. The ethical professional regimes that were dominant in schools are, he suggests, being replaced by entrepreneurial-competitive regimes (ibid.).

The extent to which the raft of government reforms in England (and elsewhere), and the associated pressures of increased transparency, contractual accountability, results-driven curricula and burgeoning bureaucracy have affected the nature of what teachers are expected to do in the classroom, how and what students learn, the governance and management of schools, and teachers' and school leaders' morale, professional identity and sense of agency continues to be a matter of debate among academics, and between academics, policy makers and those responsible for policy implementation. What is clear, though, is that for education and the public services what we continue to witness is that 'educational purposes have been redefined in terms of a narrower set of concerns about human capital development, and the role education must play to meet the needs of the global economy and to ensure the competitiveness of the national economy' (Rizvi &

Lingard, 2010: 3). What is less clear, however, is how schools respond to policy reform, and whether all schools respond in the same ways. Other research, for example, ( Elmore; 2003) has concluded that a common misconception of policymakers is ‘the belief that policies determine how individuals and organisations think and act – what problems they regard as important, how they organise themselves to work on those problems, what results they regard as evidence of their success’ (Elmore, 2003: 195). An important question in our research, therefore, was to what extent do these narrower sets of concerns influence successful school principals’ values and practices.

### **The Research Context: Connecting Biographies, Values and Leadership**

Much literature has long acknowledged the strong sense of vocation that the best leaders (and teachers) demonstrate through their presence and their work. The evidence is unambiguous – the most effective leaders have strong moral and ethical purposes and a strong sense of social justice. They care passionately about improving educational experiences for all groups of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research also tells us that moral/ethical purposes in action are evidenced by regular professional dialogue about teaching and learning, strong social support in problem solving (care), shared goals and collective responsibility, individual and collective efficacy, and norms of equity and justice (Day & Sammons, 2013: 21). It is clear from much research, however, that many school principals and their teachers (though not all) struggle to find a balance between their broad moral purposes, educational values, and the more directly ‘functional,’ academic results driven priorities as they enact government reforms. We found, however, that the schools in our research were able to show sustained organisational renewal and high performance over time despite external policy demands,

and that they were led by principals and leaders who are driven by unrelenting values and beliefs about education. Although the paths taken to achieve high performance varied, the leaders themselves shared core characteristics – one of which was that they were firm in their values (Matthews et al., 2014); and that, to achieve success, they *consistently* aligned their actions to their values:

Strategies, tactics, goals, and missions change; values are your core and remain steadfast despite new laws, new conditions, and new goals. They shape the culture of your organization and, when the complexity and immediacy of school system leadership seem overwhelming, your values should ground decisions and actions.

(Starr, 2016: 72)

Experiences of the successful principals in this research (as we will show in the remainder of the paper) suggest that the core values which they held and which shaped their decisions about transforming the structures, cultures and practices in their schools were influenced, powerfully and unshakeably, by their own, earlier educational experiences. Yet the influence of biographies of principals on their values in practice appears to be an important ‘missing link’ in the literature. Much of what exists is limited to single voice narratives of experience, beliefs and values (Day and Gurr, 2014; Thomson, 2009), and these do not explicitly seek to connect to how these influence them in the ways in which they shape structures, cultures, relationships and successful student experiences in the schools that they lead. Because current beliefs, values and identities are likely to be formed as a result of past experiences. Uncovering critical events from the past which inform present understandings is likely to

provide researchers with valuable insights (Becker, 1970). Moreover, within biographies it is likely that there will be one or a number of transformational experiences (Bennis and Thomas, 2002) or critical incidents (Day & Gu, 2010) which have played particularly important parts in shaping their values.

Biographies produce leaders not only in the sense that the leader's life experiences contribute to the development of his or her traits, beliefs and values, but also in the sense that they constitute a potentially important source of information about the leader's values, traits, and behaviors by which followers are influenced.

(Shamir and Eilam, 2005: 395)

What follows, therefore, highlights the effects of these two principals' biographies and their effects on the cultures, relationships and student experiences in the different, 'outstanding' schools.

## **The Research**

This paper draws upon empirical evidence from a UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Hong Kong Research Grants Council (RGC) funded two-year bilateral research project. The primary purpose of the research was to advance understandings of how mandated government reforms in England and Hong Kong were mediated by principals, senior and middle leaders and teachers in improved and effective schools which served communities of contrasting socio-economic advantage in furthering their own broad improvement agendas. The empirical evidence is based on case studies of four secondary



schools in England. All four schools showed significant improvement or higher than average in their value added scored in English and Maths at Key Stage 4 (Age 16) in public GCSE examinations over the nine-year period prior to the commencement of this research (including the three years prior to the beginning of a previous research project (Day et al., 2011)). These case studies represented schools in different levels of socioeconomic advantage as identified through the 'Free School Meal' proxy and disadvantage and ethnic diversity. Within each of the case study schools in England, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and a selection of middle leaders and teachers. The main criteria for participant selection for these sub-groups were to ensure a spread of expertise across different subject areas and to ensure a range of experience with regard to years served in the post.

This paper draws on the full case studies of two schools serving different socio-economic communities, rated by Ofsted as 'outstanding'. The two principals, Steve (Dale Street) and Robert (Stockdale), held similarly strong, unshakeable moral purposes, focusing on students as individual learners who were all able to achieve. Both had high expectations of themselves, their staff and the students, and both were focused upon ensuring the quality of learning and teaching in every classroom. However, their school contexts were different, as were their values and practices. Steve led an 11-16 'community' school serving a mainly white rural population, and Robert led an 11-18 inner city school serving a multi-ethnic community. Steve had been principal for 12 years and Robert for 5 years, so the school improvement focus was primarily about consolidating and renewing what had already achieved over the last decade for Steve, whilst for Robert, it was about reshaping the culture and conditions of the school for a new direction. As we will show, also, whilst both

were strongly influenced by their own learning experiences, these were significantly different, and had resulted in very different school cultures and student learning experiences. Moreover, the two principals held contrasting value positions in relation to the government policy: whilst Robert's values were closely aligned with those of government agendas, Steve's were not. We will argue in this paper that this resulted in greater challenges for Steve in maintaining the externally awarded grade of 'outstanding' than for Robert.

### **Research Findings: Enacting Leadership Biographies and Values in Context**

The analyses of two 'outstanding' secondary schools suggest a different reality from that portrayed in 'policy enactment' research in so-called 'ordinary' schools (Ball et al., 2012). The reasons are twofold. First and foremost, in these schools the enactment of external policies was purposefully incorporated and embedded in the broad school improvement structures and processes – such that it became a *whole-school activity* aligned with many other school improvement innovations, activities and practices in culturally and educationally meaningful ways. External policy demands were internalised (and sometimes transformed) to become '*our*' policy. Secondly, enacting policies was found to be a *value-laden* and *value-driven* process in which principals expressed their educational values and monitored standards through (re)designing leadership structures (see the paper by Armstrong, Ko & Bryant in this Special Issue), reshaping school improvement processes, and re-energising and further developing cultures, relationships and classroom practices. The alignment of these underpinned all diagnoses, decisions, strategies and actions in relation to how policies should be interpreted and enacted. In essence, it was about doing the right things at the right time, informed by the 'right' values.

## **Dale Street Community School: Policy divergence**

### ***The school***

Dale Street Community School was an average sized secondary school catering for 1000+ students aged 11-16 years of age, situated in a village in the south east of England. Most students were from White British backgrounds and spoke English as their first language. The proportion of students who were entitled to pupil premium funding, at about 12%, was well below the national average. (Pupil premium is additional funding provided by the government for some groups of students including those known to be eligible for free school meals and those in the care of the local authority). Under a fifth of students were disabled or had special educational needs, which was just under the national average. The school provided all of its students with mobile devices to use in lessons, for independent study and at home. The aim behind this was to create independent learners who were well prepared for life in today's technological society. The school had a specialist, self-referral resource-based unit, for students with special educational needs.

### ***The principal: from personal 'failure' of education to inspirer of learning***

In his 16 years at the school, Steve had worked to challenge and change the way pupils, teachers and parents thought about how learning took place and how education should be delivered, creating a 'school at the centre of the community'. Steve did not have happy memories of his learning experiences at school, where he had struggled with the highly academically driven culture. He did not pass the 11+ test and went to a comprehensive school as a result. The shadow of academic failure followed him throughout the rest of his schooling. The wake-up call happened when he started teacher training at a polytechnic

college. There he worked with people from diverse subject and professional backgrounds and realised that his own education experience had been negative because the system had failed to accommodate his educational needs as a young man.

... that was when I realised that education had a different purpose from the one I thought it had, and it took me a long time to work out that this stuff for adults could also work for young people ... that was part of my journey in the early years of being a teacher. But it began when I realised that my own failure in education wasn't entirely my own fault but to do with the system.

(Principal)

At the college, he was deeply excited to feel a connection with learning, and thoroughly enjoyed the experience of spending time with people 'who had such a wealth of knowledge': 'it was just a different world from the world that I had lived in' (Principal). Such enlightening learning experiences had made him rethink and challenge a school system that seemed to assume that 'if you understand the world around you, you'll be successful and we can put a stamp on your success through these things called exams' (Principal). Instead, he came to a firm view that 'we need to change the way that we design our school so that it is the understanding of self that becomes the predominant role of the school. ... it is about learners developing a sense of awareness of self and comfortableness with self that should drive everything that we do.' Such a learner-centred view of education proved to be the catalyst for his development of a personalised, skills-based educational model that aimed to transfer autonomy for learning to students:

The idea is that there will no longer be this sense that learning is about something that I get which is like a package which has a stamp on it. Learning is me evolving for the rest of my life. Actually we need to produce these places where the reflection and the conversation and the debate around that is what continues to stimulate that learning. What we are then moving to with the youngsters is a school where learning will be through a series of designs which are about intriguing you in things and your learning day will be designed by you.

(Principal)

***Redesigning learning cultures: independence, inclusivity and lifelong learning***

The pervading ethos at Dale Street, the lens through which the school was led, embodied *independence* and *inclusivity* within a wider school culture of *lifelong learning* that sought to equip every student with the necessary skills and attributes to succeed in a future that, in Steve's view, was likely to encompass multiple careers and vocations and a subsequent requirement to retrain at various junctures along the way. It was widely accepted by other leaders in the school that the philosophy was very much focused on 'preparing the pupils for later on in life and not just to pass the exam' (middle leader – Subject Leader for Maths).

We expect our learners to become independent, mature and empowered, able to make excellent decisions about the lives they lead whilst at our school, as well as learning how to be happy and successful in the lives they will lead on leaving us.

(Principal)

As independent learners, students were taught the skills to organise, manage and take responsibility for their own learning; they were encouraged to self-reflect, consider how to solve problems and think about where they could improve but also understand when they needed to ask for support. They were also each provided with an Ipad to assist them. Staff were united in their desire for their students to be interested in their studies, eager to learn and motivated to succeed; to be resourceful and determined, creative and resilient. This was a whole-school commitment that permeated every department and subject area. Students were re-labelled as 'learners' and teachers as 'learning designers' whose role was to facilitate learning rather than teach in the more traditional, directly instructional sense: 'We want students, in essence, to become more self-aware. We want every individual to be able to look into themselves and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and why they might behave in a certain way or make certain choices' (middle leader – Advanced Skilled Teacher).

A second key aspect of the values underpinning the school's philosophy was its inclusion agenda that provided every student, regardless of ability or educational need, access to the same opportunities and support structures. Every student had their own individualised learning plan, personalised to their requirements, so that no individual was labelled or made to feel different.

[The principal's] view is that everyone coming to the school is given equal opportunity and treated as equal so, with that in mind, whether they've got a statement or not it shouldn't matter, should it? You are not prejudging them before they get here.

(Middle leader – Subject Leader for English)

Systems of student support through individualised learning plans for every student and the statements of special educational need were replaced by a system of self-selection that handed responsibility for learning support to students, in direct defiance of government policy.

The making of the new curriculum policy had begun with a ‘successful’ Ofsted inspection. Dale Street was recognised by Ofsted as ‘outstanding’, with 65% of students receiving A\*-C at GCSE. This was their second ‘outstanding’ Ofsted rating in seven years, a period of time during which the principal had led the school on an upward trajectory of improvement that had seen them achieve seven of the best eight sets of student results in their history. Yet, despite this success and the judgement of the school governing body, the negative emotional challenges he had experienced during the inspection gave him the energy to continue to reconstruct the mindset and culture of learning in the school: ‘When they [Ofsted inspectors] left and everyone had gone I sat down over there by the door crying my eyes out. ... I think that gave me a bit of energy though’ (Principal). He addressed his entire staff and questioned whether or not it was acceptable, despite having just achieved their ‘best ever’ results, that 35% of students would leave the school with results that were below the government benchmark for success. Reasoning that they could not try any harder or achieve a great deal more under their existing ways of working and also that they could not blame the failure of this 35% on the students themselves or their families, the principal had put forward a radical restructuring of the curriculum, believing this to be the key to unlocking the potential of every student: ‘The fundamental problem was that the curriculum

was wrong and it wouldn't matter how hard we tried as teachers because we were never going to get to the right place unless we sorted the curriculum.'

If you look at the stuff around the inclusion I think what we are doing is so far ahead of the current inclusion debate that, actually, the people who are engaged in that at a policy level can't understand what we are doing because they still think that inclusion is about labelling everything you can touch and making sure you've covered your arse if it doesn't go right. ... I think we're cosmically ahead of the debate on special needs here not because we are ignoring children's needs but because we are actually addressing children's needs.

(Principal)

This was closely linked to the notion of independence and preparing students adult life with the skills to succeed beyond school rather than focusing entirely on exam results. All teaching and learning at this school was closely linked to his notion of independence and preparing students for adult life with the skills to succeed beyond school rather than focusing entirely on exam results.

***The courage to reconstruct policy: the challenges of change***

Through more than a decade of visionary leadership, Steve had successfully instilled a shared, deep-seated belief amongst the staff that 'as a school, we are quite unique in what we are doing ... and we believe we are giving the learners the best opportunities' (Middle Leader – Learning Group Leader/Physical Education). In the interviews, almost all teachers



and school leaders at different levels expressed their shared core understandings and strong support of the vision of their principal, that is,

I don't see my job as appeasing bureaucrats in central government or local government; I see my job as trying to do the right thing by young people ... I think government gets better by people acting with intelligence and with creativity and with a focus on the real end product.

(Principal)

Steve's vision underpinned a deep sense of collective 'courage' in the school that government policy was not going to change their vision or their approaches to learning:

We are not afraid of change. ... We're not doing it to create systems to conform to government policy. We are doing it for the right reason and we're together in it.

(Senior Leader – Assistant Principal)

The principal had faced some significant challenges in communicating and establishing his vision for education. In the beginning, many of the middle leaders and teachers were confused by the changes to the curriculum and unsure of how they were expected to initiate it in their departments and classrooms. In acknowledgement of these concerns, the principal had listened to his staff members and took on board their concerns leading to a period of self-reflection in which he reconceptualised his learning model:

Eventually one of my middle leaders said to me that she'd been going to these meetings and nobody understands what it is we are trying to do. It was a brilliant moment ... I saw that as a real success of the organisation that this young teacher had got to the point where she could come and sit in my office and say to me 'you need to stop this because it's not going anywhere'. So I sat down and thought about it again and came up with a new vision for the curriculum.

(Principal)

Such adaptation required time to adjust and build the confidence to operate within a 'Dale Street' model of learning. This new curriculum was a genuinely new concept for both staff and students to adapt to, and required a change of mind-set about how learning was understood:

I needed a lot of convincing because I've a personal interest in this because I've a son who is on the autistic spectrum. ... I was a little bit cross to start with and I was thinking if my son was there I would want the teachers to be aware of the strategies that were in place. But I have really mellowed on that because when such a big change comes into your professional life, it does not take quite a while to come to terms with it. .... Treat everyone equally but to recognise that individuality. There is no ceiling on their learning.

(Middle Leader – Family Learning Team)

As part of his communication strategy, the principal wrote between three and five thousand words to his staff every week where he set out his expectations surrounding the constancy

of change while reflecting on the core values of the school, how he was experiencing these values, his own discomfort in enacting the values in the classroom. This enabled him to engage his staff in an on- going debate surrounding learning and afforded them a platform in which to raise their own issues:

It's about that whole idea that we are all learning together and it never stops and we always need to ask questions in life and asking questions is a good thing and it's ok not to know what to do but you need to know where to go to find out what to do. That is what we are trying to instil.

(Assistant Principal)

At the time of this research, everything that happened in the school was synchronised, nothing occurred in isolation. This had created a strong sense of connectivity between then different facets of the learning model that they employed:

That word 'connected' is what we are about. That sums up what we do because we connect the learning and connecting across the Research and Development that is going on and the stuff that has worked before the new curriculum and the value learning teams, SEN, student voice – everything in the pot – and it's about how we connect that up. That is essentially what we are doing; we're an umbrella to connect learning.

(Advanced Skills Teacher)

These educational values stood in sharp contrast to the ideologies that underpinned government standards-driven policies. Although there was a pragmatic understanding that policy could not simply be ignored and that it ‘runs through in the background and it’s there and it has to be dealt with’ (Principal), the disconnect between much of the current government’s policy decisions and the educational values and practices at Dale Street ran deep.

### **Stockdale Academy: Policy convergence in thinking about educational values**

#### ***The school***

Stockdale was a secondary school and sixth form with Academy status, situated in the nation’s capital. The school had over 1400 students from a culturally diverse community enrolled. As the project progressed this grew to 2200, of which 584 were enrolled on a post-16 study programme in a purpose built centre. Half the academy’s population were eligible for free school meals (a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage), and over 80% of students were from minority ethnic groups. Over two thirds of students spoke English as an additional language. Over three times the number of students compared to the national average had special educational needs, with over 12% having a statement of special educational need. The Academy was judged to be “Outstanding” in all aspects by Ofsted in 2012 and 2018. The reports cited the ‘passionate’ leadership of the principal who provided ‘an amazingly effective vision’. It commended the outstanding progress of students, judged to be in the top one per cent of schools nationally.

#### ***The principal: ‘The sky is the limit.’***

The principal's own biography had fundamentally informed and shaped his educational philosophy and practices. The strong emphasis Robert placed on the resolve and fortitude required to succeed (and perform to high levels) was firmly rooted specifically in his experience of an underprivileged childhood in an adverse socio-economic environment:

I think it is rooted in my culture I've got to say. Well I'm of African origin: my early education was in Africa and education is highly valued and it is seen in my country as the only ticket to escape poverty and to open doors for you and teachers are held in high esteem. If I didn't do well in an exam at school my parents would ask my teacher and they would ask me.

(Principal)

This personally experienced 'no success without self-discipline and hard work' had shaped his philosophy and values; and these were seen in his leadership and his sympathetic response to current government policy initiatives. The disadvantaged socio-economic context within which Stockdale was situated allowed him to connect with his students and relate to their experiences, while instilling in them and the staff members his own learned values. These were strongly reflected in the school motto of 'Success through Effort and Determination':

I truly believe that every single child can learn and improve. I really believe it and I just can't accept that there is somebody who can't learn. I've come, myself, from a background of real poverty and I say to the students in assembly 'I don't know what I'm doing standing here talking to you in this country because when I

look back forty or so years there was no chance that I would be here but through hard work and effort and determination I am here’.

(Principal)

The principal’s professional background as a science specialist had also played a key part in his leadership practices. He had a passion for data and strong belief in tangible evidence-informed decision-making. So the promotion of data led decision-making fitted well with his values and practices. During his previous role as a deputy principal of a school in a neighbouring district the principal had taught sixth-form (16-19) students who had been recruited from his current district, noting their obvious talent and academic ability: ‘So I knew that {this district} had very able students, but the resources.... were generally very poor.’ As part of his preparation for his current role he had looked at the publically available school performance data in order to compare Stockdale with nearby schools in similar socio-economic circumstances and found that: ‘Some were getting exam results that were thirty per cent higher than Stockdale, so what is that school doing that we’re not doing?’ Having looked at this comparative data, the principal was convinced he could improve the academic achievement and life chances of the students at Stockdale and support them to develop the skills and motivation required to lift themselves out of poverty and succeed in life as he himself had done. Such insights into the principal’s persona provided indications of his values, his enquiring mind and thirst for knowledge and success but also of his drive and ambition:

He’s very sharp as well and he’s got a fantastic memory, and if he doesn’t know something or if something upsets him a little bit he’ll go and research it and he’ll

be the expert on it by the next time you see him ... he knows far more than his peers about every aspect of being a head and so he's impressive. You've got to be an expert in the curriculum and how much freedom you've got; you've got to be an expert on HR procedures and law; you've got to be an expert on the financial side of things. His peers don't understand a fraction of what he knows.

(Vice-principal)

***Instilling expectations to raise standards: clarifying accountability***

At Stockdale, the focus was on ensuring every student, regardless of their background and personal circumstances, achieved their potential. The school day was designed so that all pupils could take part in a wide range of clubs and activities alongside their curriculum studies. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development was claimed to be promoted across the curriculum, and integral to the ethos of the school, with its diverse pupil and staff population. This was a 'busy' school that emphasized strong discipline for staff and students. There was 'no ceiling to what students can achieve.' This was accompanied by high expectations for both staff and students relating to standards of performance and achievement:

As a whole school the drive is very much a personalised learning approach for pupils to ensure that every child matters and every child is given that opportunity to achieve. That has always been on the forefront of our mind as heads of departments and as teachers, and so I've always ensured that I've put things in place to ensure that pupils are able to achieve the best grades.

(Head of Sociology)

According to the principal, the previous leadership structure had lacked cohesion. An absence of clarity surrounding roles and responsibilities meant there ‘wasn’t a shared vision: people did not agree about where they wanted to go.’ To address this, he ensured that all teachers and students operated under high levels of expectation and accountability. He line managed every member of his Senior Leadership Team, holding them to account for the areas of the school for which they were responsible and modelling the kind of line management he expected of them. In turn, they repeated the same process with the middle leaders who would repeat the process with the classroom teachers. This enabled the principal to embed his accountability agenda with his staff, while simultaneously entrenching his key message that their individual and shared focus should be entirely on ‘teaching and learning. In this sense, we can see how the principal utilised the leadership structure as a vehicle for the enactment of his educational values surrounding discipline, accountability and the prioritisation of teaching and learning. Student data were closely monitored and central to decision-making:

He holds senior leaders to account for the year groups and departments that they line manage: so the target setting; requiring one to one meetings to find out what is happening in the departments and the evidence to support all of that. So you have to be able to back up any statements you make and you can’t get away with vague comments. So he’ll be catching us out. I’m line managing art and other areas and there were things that [the principal] knew that I didn’t.

(Vice-principal)



### ***Results, results, results***

Results were very important to the principal. His competitive and ambitious nature, coupled with his belief in tangible and measurable evidence, was closely aligned to the current educational policy landscape in which increasingly sophisticated levels of school- and pupil-level performance data have been made publically available for measurement and comparison. Thus, unlike Steve, this principal was comfortable with the culture of high stakes accountability that pervades the education system in England, believing that it engendered healthy competition. For him 'league tables are fantastic ... how can you become better if everyone wins a prize?' As with Steve, though, instilling the principal's expectations had required a shift in attitudes at whole-school level:

There was a culture change there: he's a scientist who had a very, very successful career before coming here and when he arrived here in 2008, to be honest, I found it uncomfortable. I'd been a deputy here for a long time already and this younger guy comes in and he's definitely a guy who was very conscious of the league tables and competition from other schools and very ambitious about making this a great school and very quick to look at the curriculum and make changes in order to improve the results. So results were very important.

(Vice-principal)

While his own ambitions and the corresponding practices and overarching ethos of the school were closely aligned with the government educational reform agenda, the principal nevertheless followed his own course, set according to the needs of his students rather than the directives of policy makers. He insisted: 'There is nothing that any government has said

that has troubled us. If it doesn't align with our values it goes out of the window. As a senior leader pointed out: 'A lot of the things that (Secretary of State for Education) has brought in are about good teaching and the impact that will have, and so we haven't been a million miles away with our thinking.' Yet, there was a clear sense that the school has always been primarily directed by its leadership values rather than government policy:

We are influenced heavily by the leadership and the direction that the school is going in so, in many cases, with regards to policy, they cement things that are already in place and because we are quite a forward thinking school, a lot of the time policy implements things we already know about and are doing.

(Assistant Principal)

## **Discussion**

Taken together, the research findings lead to four key observations. First, both principals shared strong moral values and purposes, firmly placing their leadership focus on providing the students with the best learning experiences that they believed they deserved. Such moral values and purposes ran deep and underpinned a strong sense of collective commitment to change by staff across both schools. There was strong evidence in the case studies that it was through creating consistent and coherent cultures and conditions that the principals had successfully built and deepened the intellectual, social and emotional foundations for reaching higher academic performance in their schools. Thus, despite the differences in student intake and school contexts and histories, the performance of both schools demonstrated clear upward trajectory over time.

This observation confirms what we already know from the literature about how successful school leaders make a sustained and sustainable difference to the learning and development of children and adults in their schools. For example, findings from Day et al.'s (2000) multi-perspective case study research revealed that all the ten successful principals leading in a range of primary and secondary schools in England focused their efforts on: achievement, care, collaboration, commitment, trust and inclusivity. Similarly, Gold et al. (2001) reported the importance of successful principals' values in informing and infiltrating their leadership practices and how they became shared amongst staff members. Like Steve and Robert, the principals in Gold et al.'s research made sure that their values were clearly communicated to the staff – through managing information within their school (and keeping staff updated); through working closely with their leadership teams; through developing capacity and responsibility across their schools; and through working with, managing and actively seeking change.

Second, as well as similarities, there were also profound differences in leadership values and practices between the two principals – especially in relation to responses to government policy agendas and demands. The principal of Stockdale shared a very similar view of education to the government and had been able to readily align his values and practices to the government reform agenda. Conversely, the principal at Dale Street was opposed to the current government ideology and had established systems and structures that were inconsistent with the directions and practices of reform mandates. The difference in divergence and convergence of values in relation to external policy demands had meant that the journey to achieve and sustain successful outcomes was more challenging for Steve and Dale Street than for Robert and Stockdale Academy. When Steve attempted to promote

a more progressive view of learning, the experience was not only intellectually intense, but also emotionally demanding.

The third observation, related to those above, is that external policy demands were never the primary goals for these two principals. Their moral values and purposes to make a positive difference to the learning experiences of the children were their driving force. The on-going explicit conversations among all staff about values in both schools was in contrast to the observation in so-called 'ordinary' schools:

Policy enactment is inflected by competing sets of values and ethics, but perhaps surprisingly, there is a dearth of values-talk in our data. Social values and principles of social justice are less than obvious components of the policy process ... It is often the case that ethical-democratic concerns come into play only weakly over and against and within the interpretation and enactment of policy.

(Ball et al, 2012: 10)

Our research, then, suggests a more nuanced, different picture of the complex interplay in which principals of schools rated as 'outstanding' engage as they navigate the inherent tensions between the enactment of their deep-seated educational values and adherence to government-mandated policies. Although it might be argued that both principals had complied with the government accountability agenda, in fact the evidence in this study indicates that they had used this only as a baseline to give themselves more freedom and power to mediate government reform. The claim that educational policy can compel

principals to compromise their own values in order to function (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015), did not apply to these principals.

The fourth and final observation is the significant role that principals' biographies played in shaping the cultures, policy making processes, and educational practices within their schools and in causing them to reshape external policy demands in different ways. Each school had a different culture, reflected in the different structures, relationships, and view of what would be the 'best' educational experiences for students: independent learning (Dale Street); and targeted success in academic attainment, supported by a strong monitoring and pastoral system (Stockdale). Steve in Dale Street had created a school that would provide learning experiences that were in contrast to those he had experienced, whilst Robert had an unrelenting focus to build a school that endorsed the same educational ethos that had benefited him in childhood.

## **Conclusions**

In recent years 'enactment' has become used to describe the ways in which policies are translated and interpreted in schools (Braun et al, 2010). In the context of reform initiatives from outside the school, policy enactment has been defined also as a form of contextualised sense-making (Spillane et al., 2002). In these researches, although the way data are used varied between schools, context and external pressures often determined the extent to which such they were used instrumentally to manage results; and there was often a tension between 'teaching to the test' and using student data to raise school achievement results. Spillane *et al.* (2002) concluded that:

... schools' responses to district policies must be understood as a function not only of leaders' identities but also the multiple contexts in which their sense-making is situated. Answering to or enacting accountability policy meant something different, depending on the school.

(2002: 755)

Our research nuances the work of Ball and Spillane and their colleagues by suggesting that, at least in successful schools, school principals are not only driven by a strong and enduring set of moral purposes, but that these can be directly located in their personal and professional biographies, and that they remain constant. The research raises issues, also, about the kind and quality of student experience. To what extent does it matter that students in one school experience independent learning, when in another they do not? Does it matter that a rating of 'outstanding' may reflect differences as well as similarities? Moreover, in times of continuing policy reforms that demand compliance, principals with similar moral purposes may face different challenges of divergence or convergence of values and practices, and these may affect the ability of their schools to conform and comply with policy directives. Our albeit small scale research in schools judged to be 'outstanding' tentatively suggests that principals whose values are not aligned with policy are likely to face greater challenges in achieving success as defined by government than those whose values correspond more closely, and, in the longer term, their school may be judged to be less than outstanding. It suggests, also, that processes of school improvement must be understood both in contexts of policy enactment, contexts of use *and* in connection with the values and biographies of the principals and actors at all levels of the system.

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