

Critical Hope or Principled Infidelity? How an Urban Secondary School in an Area of Sustained Poverty in England Continues to Improve

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Published online: 28 July 2016

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Abstract This is the examination of how a secondary school in England, the Robert Clack High School, not only made the transition from failure to success “against the odds”, but sustained and enhanced that status despite changes in local demographics resulting in the school serving a significantly different ethnic community than was evident at the start of their improvement journey. The school is situated in an area of London that has consistently featured as one of poverty. Unlike some other schools which changed their student population in search of success, the school continues to serve its immediate local community which comprises almost mainly working class families. Although empirical research undertaken in the school demonstrates some evidence of ‘principled infidelity’ (seeming to follow external policy diktats whilst pursuing their own agenda) we conclude that the ethos underpinning the school’s sustained improvement is the concept of ‘critical hope’. This is an approach where the needs of young people in disadvantaged communities are recognised and addressed in order to provide them with the opportunity to control their destiny. The consequence is that the school has exceeded its prescribed expectations, continues to improve and has lifted both the students and the community’s aspirations exponentially.

Keywords Urban education · Public school · School leadership · Critical hope

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Introduction

This is the examination of how an urban secondary school in England not only made the transition from failure to success “against the odds” (Ofsted 2009), but sustained their outstanding status despite changes in local demographics which resulted in the school serving a significantly different ethnic community than was evident at the start of their journey of improvement in 1997.

The Robert Clack High School is a state maintained comprehensive school situated in the Becontree Estate based in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, an area of England’s capital city that has consistently featured as one of poverty. At the time of writing it ranked amongst the four lowest London boroughs in 10 of 21 social indicators and is considered to be getting ‘slightly worse’ according to the data presented by the National Policy Institute (2013). In other words the socio-economic indicators of the locality had not improved since the beginning of their journey and, unlike some other schools which changed their student population in search of success, the school continued to serve its immediate local community which comprised almost exclusively of working class families.

The Story of Success Begins

When Paul Grant was appointed as headteacher in 1997 he was taking on a school that was in extremely challenging circumstances. An adverse inspection report conducted by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the national inspection service, in 1995 was a fair reflection of how far the school had slipped in terms of reputation and student attainment in comparison to previous decades where it had been considered a ‘good’ school by the local authority and the community (Haydn 1998). The story of the school since his appointment has been one of constant improvement with widespread recognition of success, however, including the award of a knighthood to Paul in 2009. The school has moved from being one where 21 % of students left the school with no academic qualifications, and stories of student disruption and appalling behaviour were common, to a situation in 2013 where all students achieved a qualification, with over 80 % getting five good grade GCSEs at Key Stage 4 (including Mathematics and English) and 87 students in the sixth form having been offered places at university for year 2013–2014. This paper is not an account of that success, however, which has been and continues to be reported widely elsewhere (e.g. Haydn 1998, 2010; Woodhead 2002; Hopkins 2007; Ofsted 2009; Mongon and Chapman 2012). Instead this is an exploration of how and why the school has sustained that success and continued improvement since those early days despite changes in local demographics which have led to significant changes in the ethnicity of the student population. This exploration begins with a portrait of the local context before moving on to investigate how and why leadership behaviour in the school has managed to achieve and consistently sustain high levels of success.

The Local Context

The borough of Barking and Dagenham is to the east of London with a population of close to 200,000 and is most well known for being the ‘home’ of the Ford motor company in the UK which at one time in the early 1950s employed over 40,000 people. The principal reason for expansion of the borough, however, was the building of a huge council estate (Becontree) in the early 1920s in order to relocate skilled workers from the slums of Inner London after the First World War. Sashin (2011) reports that whilst many people still believe that the Becontree Estate was built to accommodate the huge numbers of Ford workers, the development was actually planned well before Ford shifted production to Dagenham from Manchester in 1931. Initially Ford workers were not allowed to rent property on the estate, but when the London County Council later struggled to keep East Enders in their new homes the rules were relaxed to accommodate car workers, a development which started the complementary relationship between the two monolithic cornerstones of the borough’s identity—Becontree and Ford.

This history is significant as the population of the borough was almost exclusively white working class, a situation that continued until the beginning of the new millennium in 2000. Consequently the school in which Paul had worked as a teacher since 1990 and took over as headteacher in 1997 was a reflection of that local population and he was often invited, as the school’s success became noticed more widely, to contribute to debates and initiatives about white working class young people. Typical of such invitations were the two seminars run jointly by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in 2008 and 2009 where he and others were asked to provide views and experiences of how to succeed with such groups of young people. Subsequently the reports from these seminars were reported to Parliament in 2010. Paul’s offerings to such events were interesting in that he did not draw attention to the ethnicity of the students for whom he was responsible, instead highlighting the impact of a legacy of poverty and inequality which was endemic to the borough by this time.

Changed circumstances have led to Ford reducing its output to engines rather than car assembly, however, with a concomitant reduction in job availability (down to just 4000 employees by 2010) which means the company was no longer the main employer in the area. The locality had become to be recognised as one where there was poverty and a need for social welfare, but with a population that was largely white. It was easy at the time, therefore, to see Paul as a champion of improving the life chances of groups of disadvantaged young people and with limited insight assume that such students were only white. His approach was not ethnically focused, however, as will be discussed more fully later in this paper.

Changing the School: Part #1

Paul was and remains an unusual artefact of the state maintained system in that he moved directly to headship from the classroom, probably the last person to be able to do that in England as new professional qualifications for headship had just started to appear in 1997 when he was appointed. After 7 years in the school as Head of Humanities he and his team of teachers had achieved good very good results whilst the school was seemingly in terminal decline. The school at that time was judged as having serious problems, including low pupil attainment, poor pupil behaviour and motivation, weak staff morale, falling rolls, budgetary deficits and staff recruitment and retention problems (Haydn 1998). In an interview undertaken in 2012 with the Deputy Headteacher (who was himself a pupil of the school at the time of that inspection) he reported that the reputation of the school “was rock bottom, I mean, it was terrible, and the school went through its really bad phase in the 3 years before Paul was appointed as headteacher”. Whilst Paul was not the only teacher getting good results despite the environment, the results from his faculty were outstanding and came to the attention of the governors and the local authority, both of which encouraged him to make his application to take over as headteacher following the retirement of the previous postholder. He was appointed and took up post in May, 1997.

After a spirited talk on his first day to the staff on both buildings of the split-site school he set about the task of restoring order to the working environment. This was a combination of student discipline, school reputation management and a close focus on enhancing the learning environment, particularly through improving teaching. Central to this strategy was regaining adult control epitomised by the exclusion of 246 students in the first 2 weeks. The work associated with this dramatic gesture is legendary with Paul describing the action laconically as “being the only way I could get to talk to the parents”. After marathon sessions of discussions and appeals eventually 10 students were permanently excluded in November 1997, with a new atmosphere of discipline emerging that was unremitting in its resolve. In one respect Paul was fortunate with the timing of his appointment in that he had several weeks at the end of the school year to set expectations for the next academic year. The planned introduction of school uniform, for example, was eased by the astute use (an attribute later to be applied to many key decisions) of some of the more challenging students as walking models during the last weeks of their school life, thus popularising the new uniform which was to become obligatory in the next school year.

The reputation of the school was further enhanced through engaging and supporting parents and the local community. Paul and his staff made a point of being highly visible not only in and around the school, but also in the wider community. As Haydn (2010: 426) reports this included Paul getting on local public buses and apologising to drivers for past pupil atrocities and giving a number to contact in case of future misdemeanours, spelling out the new rules, and standing up to pupils and parents who were not aware of the ‘new rules’. The regaining of adult control was thus the first step that allowed teachers to focus on their teaching and

within 2 years success was noted by the Ofsted (1999) report which was almost unremittingly positive and complimentary. The percentage of lessons where teaching was satisfactory or better had risen from 73 to 95 %, and was adjudged to be ‘good to very good’ in 65 % of lessons. The school ethos was described as ‘excellent’ (and the behaviour and attitude to learning of students also evinced praise) with the report noting that the school provided ‘a calm and orderly learning environment’ (Haydn 2010: 423). At this point, therefore, the school had been turned around and a new regime established of teacher and student discipline to replace the chaos and disorder evidenced just a few years before.

I think it probably took possibly less than a year for the community to think ‘This is happening [...] kids are behaving, the lunatics aren’t in control of the asylum any more, there’s some order here, and fairness. (Parent Governor—in post from 1992)

We consider, however, creating the necessary change is not that difficult or complicated; it is sustaining that level of improvement that is the hard task. In many ways, we suggest, the intervention strategies employed in the first stage of Paul’s headship were not novel if judged solely on the intention to stabilise the school, ensure a safe working environment and to provide planned learning opportunities that at least matched basic expectations of government inspection agencies. They are myriad examples of headteachers who have effected ‘turn-round’ strategies, but very few examples where they have continued to build on that initial intervention to sustain and extend the improvement process. What has been seen since those early days suggest that a more focused effort was required to move the level of student attainment and achievement beyond ‘satisfactory’ to the high and still improving levels witnessed today.

Sustaining the New Levels of Success

The school continued to improve beyond what could be reasonably expected from the stabilisation achieved from the early interventions in the late 1990s with student outcomes on standard examinations continuing to rise and to a level far above performance normally anticipated from the student profile on entry to the school (see Fig. 1). When judging against GCSE results at the end of compulsory schooling (i.e. at age 16 years) it can be seen, for example, that all students had achieved at least one pass by the year 2000 and by 2011 there was universal success in five subjects. Ofsted inspections during the first decade of the century graded the school as outstanding and by 2009 the school was featured as one which was “chosen from the small number nationally that have been judged outstanding in two or more inspections, which serve disadvantaged communities and which have exceptionally good results” (Ofsted 2009).

What is intriguing, however, is that during the same decade the school population changed dramatically and by the national census of 2011 was no longer populated almost entirely by students from white working class backgrounds. With a catchment area of just 1.3 square miles the school has an intake of 300 per year and

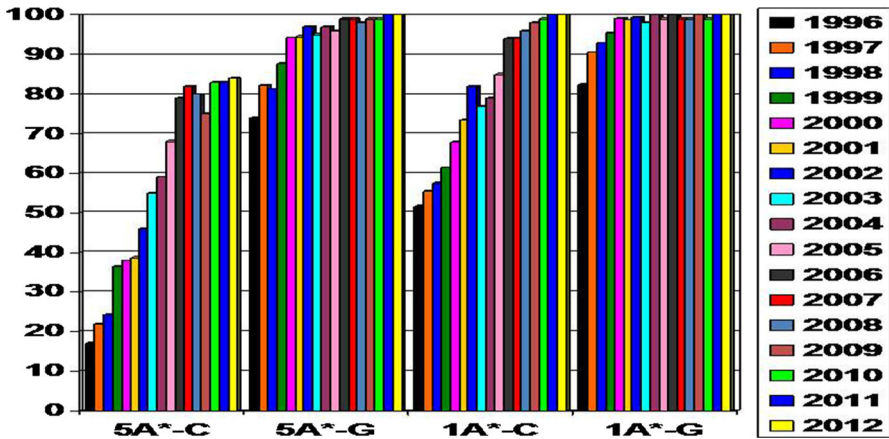


Fig. 1 Student outcomes for GCSE results 1996–2012

a sixth form of 380 students in 2012, giving a total population of 1852 students and making it one of the biggest schools in the country. The school has become extremely popular as a result of its success and has received over 900 statements of preference (combined first and second choices) from parents and guardians which compares dramatically with the popularity of the school in 1997 when they received only 109 such preferences. Admission criteria are so strict, however, that apart from having a sibling in the school the only other realistic chance of getting admitted is proximity. In other words the school has not recruited more widely and accepted students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, it has achieved its success through the actions that have been taken in concert with the local community. This is a key point of principle in that the school is inclusive and recognises success in many ways, not just through student attainment on national tests.

The student population is thus drawn from a community which has had and continues to have high levels of poverty, but is one which has changed significantly in terms of ethnicity during the current century. As can be seen from Table 1 the White British population fell from 81 % to less than 50 % during the period leading up to the national census of 2011, with large increases in the proportion of Other White (typically East European) and other ethnic groups. Interestingly the ethnic mix of the local population now brings it much more in line with the rest of London, but the difference is dramatic in terms of the local community.

In explaining the reasons for increased diversity in the local population one of the governors, also a local authority planning officer, describes how the borough has gone from having one of the highest proportions of people in their 80s to a much younger population. In many instances their council tenancy has disappeared into the buy-to-let market which, he calculates, means some 25–30 % of properties on the local council estate which serves the school are now privately owned leaseholds. This appears to be a growing market with many owners of previous council properties (which they were allowed to buy under a government policy of the 1980s) taking the opportunity to sell and make a healthy profit. As the area is one of the

Table 1 London Borough of Barking and Dagenham 2011 census key statistics

2011 census data	LBBDD % increase/ decrease	LBBDD % population 2011	LBBDD % population 2001	London % population 2011	England % population 2011
Ethnic Groups		2011	2001	2011	2011
White British	-30.64	49.46	80.86	44.89	79.75
White Other	234.06	7.81	2.65	12.65	4.58
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean	87.96	1.44	0.87	1.46	0.78
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: White and Black African	272.03	1.14	0.35	0.80	0.30
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: White and Asian	133.33	0.67	0.33	1.24	0.63
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Other mixed	233.64	0.99	0.34	1.45	0.53
Asian/Asian British: Indian	102.01	4.00	2.25	6.64	2.63
Asian/Asian British: Pakistani	162.09	4.31	1.86	2.74	2.10
Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi	1044.28	4.14	0.41	2.72	0.82
Asian/Asian British: Chinese	69.68	0.71	0.47	1.52	0.72
Asian/Asian British: Other Asian	485.52	2.76	0.53	4.88	1.55
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British: African	293.81	15.43	4.44	7.02	1.84
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British: Caribbean	52.21	2.81	2.09	4.22	1.11
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British: Other Black	347.09	1.74	0.44	2.08	0.52
Other Ethnic group: Arab		0.52	n/a	1.30	0.42
Other Ethnic Group: Any other ethnic group	177.14	1.04	0.43	2.14	0.62

cheapest places to live in London there has not only been a migration into the borough from Inner London, but there has also been much immigration into the country of refugees who have located into the area. The consequence, he states, is to see a startling change in the local population:

With people coming in from civil war conflicts in Africa and the Balkans together with the churn that started to occur on buy to let, there started to be a ready market of people who wanted rented property. The number of properties that have become buy-to-let has increased consistently year on year on and people just come here from a wider range of different places, a little rush here, a little rush there. Unlike most of the London boroughs where there tends to be one dominating group from an immigration point, either because they all came at one point or people who came in the first settlement and then other people joined them, here it is a bit more diversified. We have got people from all over the place. Obviously, more recently, people from Eastern Europe [due to

economic migration within the European Union], but there's a lot of people came here in 1990 from the Congo and Angola and lots of people from Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo who came around the time of the Balkan War. Consequently there isn't one dominating group, it is quite a mix of people from all over the place. (Local Authority Governor)

As can be seen from Tables 2 and 3 the changes in local population are reflected in the school with not only sharp increases in the ethnic mix, but also with a general rising trend of students who are eligible for free school meals (the most common indicator of poverty in compulsory education). There has also been a notable increase in the proportion of students for whom English is not their first language.

By the time we started our research on the school in 2012, therefore, the ethnicity of the school population was significantly different from the one evident at the start of their journey to success in 1997 and yet the school was even more successful. This we argue has been through a combination of principled leadership coupled with a determination to provide a success culture for children from challenging socio-economic circumstances. The school has thus transcended its anticipated station without devaluing the attributes of the local community. A careful balance has been maintained between the demands of the larger society (such as continued examination success) and an unmitigated desire to support the development of students who build on, rather than dispense with, their cultural heritage. This is not the story of school leadership in a white working class community, therefore, but a story of generating educational success irrespective of gender, ethnicity, creed or social status. It is an approach we will argue that can be replicated in alternative environments providing the underlying principle of equal opportunity is evident.

Changing the School: Pedagogical Leadership

From an examination of the data we collected from over 50 interviews between 2012 and 2014 in the school with Sir Paul, as headteacher, other senior leaders, governors, teaching staff, support staff, students, local authority officers and parents together with reviews of documentation such as Ofsted reports, internal documentation, press cuttings and correspondence between a parent governor and the previous headteacher we have identified leadership behaviours which have sustained and extended the impact made by the initial intervention strategies.

During that investigation the issue of ethnicity has only ever come up once when a parent governor, also employed as a student counsellor in the school and himself Black British, talked about the zero tolerance policy the school has to gangs (which in London are typically associated with Black youths). His description of the approach is:

One of my other roles is gang prevention, which is unusual. I don't know of any other school that does exactly what I do. Most schools don't have someone like me, but when kids get in trouble outside with the police we get told about it and if it's gang-related we'll isolate them, take out of the normal programme and they do their lessons with me. You can go to some of the

Table 2 Basic Characteristics by National Curriculum Year Group. *Source:* Ofsted (2013): RAISEonline 2013 Summary Report

NC year group	Number on roll	% Boy/girl	% Free school meals*	% Minority Ethnic Group	% 1st language not English	% Special education needs	Children looked after
7	301	48.5/51.15	44.9	59.3	36.9	15.3	3
8	298	50.0/50.0	47.7	45.9	29.2	17.1	3
9	296	51.7/48.3	43.6	44.9	29.3	17.9	2
10	295	54.6/45.4	40.0	38.1	24.5	24.1	0
11	282	55.7/44.3	33.3	33.0	25.3	23.8	1
Post-compulsory	380	50.8/49.2	–	30.8	22.4	23.2	0

* The categorisation of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) changed in 2012. Pupils are classed as FSM if they have been eligible for and claiming FSM at any time in the last 6 years

Table 3 Ethnic Groups and English as a first language. *Source:* Ofsted (2013): RAISEonline 2013 Summary Report

Ethnic Group	2011	School % 2012	2013	National % 2013
<i>White</i>				
British	69.1	64.3	56.9	72.7
Irish	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.3
Traveller of Irish heritage	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Romany or Gypsy	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.2
Any other white background	4.3	6.5	8.4	4.3
<i>Mixed</i>				
White and Black Caribbean	1.8	2.2	1.9	1.4
White and Black African	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.5
White and Asian	0.2	0.2	0.4	1.0
Any other mixed background	0.9	1.0	1.2	1.6
<i>Asian or Asian British</i>				
Indian	1.1	1.3	1.7	2.6
Pakistani	0.7	1.0	1.7	3.9
Bangladeshi	1.8	2.5	2.7	1.6
Any other Asian background	0.7	1.0	1.2	1.6
<i>Black or Black British</i>				
Caribbean	2.7	2.4	2.5	1.3
African	13.1	13.5	15.3	3.3
Any other Black background	1.8	2.0	2.0	0.6
<i>Chinese</i>				
Any other ethnic group	0.7	0.5	1.0	1.5
<i>Parent/Pupil preferred not to say</i>	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.5
<i>Ethnicity not known</i>	0.3	0.5	2.3	0.4
<i>First language</i>				
English	78.4	76.2	70.1	83.9
Other	21.0	23.3	26.9	16.9
Unclassified	0.5	0.5	3.0	0.2

schools and see evidence of gangs because even if they're in uniform they'll have the same haircut, or they'll have a tick shaved into their hair. In our school if there's any ticks we order them to cut it out and tell them "If you can't cut it out you're in isolation 'til it's done". It seems really extreme but it works. In some other some other schools they've all got a tick and it's intimidating. I've been to other schools and thought, "Don't you notice that?" and teachers don't know what I'm talking about. It's, "As long as it doesn't happen in school it's nothing to do with us". We take the view "Well actually we're a community and as long as you come to the school what you do outside

affects the school and the reputation of the school”, so we’re interested in everything. (Parent Governor and Student Support Officer)

This was the only evidence we saw, however, of the school seeking to disassociate the internal environment from the mores of the wider local community. In general the culture of the school was to value all members of the student population and to celebrate their success, regardless of gender, ethnicity, creed or social status. This is a key element of our subsequent analysis of how the school continues with its success, despite moving from a mono- to multi-cultural population. In other words their success was not based on their ability to communicate with and motivate a white working class population, their success appears to lie in the ability to raise the aspirations of the school population and the local community.

We consider the approach used within the school corresponds to the ideals of pedagogical leadership we outline below (and more fully in previous papers: Alameen et al. 2015; Male and Palaiologou 2015). Pedagogical leadership, we claim, is an extension of ideas pertaining to other constructs of educational leadership which focus on enhancing the learning environment, variously called *Instructional*, *Learning-Centred* and *Learner-Centred*. Where pedagogical leadership differs from other approaches is that we consider the process is more than just supporting teaching and learning in order to match external demands for improved test scores. We see pedagogical leaders as being responsive to the local community as well as to larger society, with their actions being relevant to both situation and context and with an expectation that actions should not be pre-determined, but adaptable and flexible. Such an approach to leadership thus extends the simplistic definition of pedagogy as the relationship between teacher and learner in order to recognise the needs of the learner within the environment which we labelled *internal* and *external* pedagogical (social) axes:

- Internal axes (values, beliefs, culture, religion, customs and local economy), and
- External axes (societal values, global economy, mass media, social networking, information communication technologies, national curriculum, the ‘academic press’ of student test scores).

Consequently we determined that pedagogical leadership sought to deal with these competing demands by exploring how:

... the centrality of interactions and relationships among learners, teachers, family and community (i.e. their values, beliefs, culture, religion, customs and economic circumstances) interact with external elements (such as the global economy, climate and social phenomena that additionally influence the life of the community) in order to jointly construct knowledge. (Male and Palaiologou 2015: 219)

From this perspective pedagogical leadership goes beyond the immediacy of the school buildings to recognise and deal with the tension between the needs and desires of larger society and those of the learner within their local community. In

such a context we would expect leaders to take decisions and actions that were informed by both sets of pedagogical axes and to exhibit behaviours that support those ambitions, particularly in regard to sustaining internal axes.

Sustaining the ‘Outstanding’ School

One of the key ways in which the leadership team of the Robert Clack High School has been able to sustain the levels of improvement already evident by 1999 has been consistency of purpose in relation to the effective implementation of core (and shared) values. The school can be considered as inclusive in the truest sense of the word, based on sound principles and practice that transcend issues solely related to white working class young people and with attributes that are transferable to other cultures and ethnicities.

Earlier research work where educational leadership had made a difference identified similar behaviours amongst some headteachers who were labelled ‘maverick’, yet nevertheless achieved results that were beyond expectations (Hay Group 2002). In a later work Mongon and Chapman (2012) extended their work on white working class young people to schools they considered as demonstrating ‘high leverage’ leadership and applied the three ‘intelligences’ they had identified in 2008 which were needed to enculture success: contextual, professional and social intelligence:

1. *Contextual intelligence* These leaders show a profound respect for the social context they are working in without ever patronising it. They have deliberately chosen to work in these places.
2. *Professional intelligence* These leaders are very good at their core business: leadership and management to nurture the teamwork on which the school’s excellent standards of teaching and learning are dependent.
3. *Social intelligence* These leaders appear to be sensitive to the emotional state of their pupils and colleagues and use that to guide their own thoughts and actions. In turn, they are deeply admired across their staff and student body (Mongon and Chapman 2008: 10).

Perhaps not surprisingly the Robert Clack High School was one of the study schools considered to be exhibiting ‘high leverage leadership’, an approach to school leadership which draws on the analogy offered by Archimedes that with a long enough lever, and a place to stand, he could move the earth. Mongon and Chapman (2012) argue that high-leverage leaders hypothetically might stand at a distance and apply a massive effort against an inert weight—in their case, ‘the school’—to not only address short term issues, but also to invest in long term capability. The school leaders they examined were uncommonly powerful in this respect and were frequently to be found in areas where there are a disproportionate number of socio-economically disadvantaged families.

The work of the Hay Group and of Mongon and Chapman thus highlight important features required of headteachers and senior leaders when contemplating

acting in a way that can be perceived as different from accepted norms in order to achieve an effective environment for a specific school context. Their work corresponds to the suggestion made by Hoyle and Wallace (2007) that there are some school leaders who fashion their commitment to policy while maintaining a steadfast focus on student interests. This, they argued, was a process of *principled infidelity* by which they adapt policy to the needs of students whilst appearing to be following policy to the letter. Whilst this may be true in part, we conclude that the main underlying factor that supports continued success in this school, irrespective of changing demographics, is an overwhelming desire to confront disadvantage. This approach bears more resemblance to the concept of *critical hope* (Duncan-Andrade 2009) where the needs of young people in disadvantaged communities are recognised and addressed in order to provide them with “control of destiny” whereby they learn “to deal with the forces that affect their lives, even if they decide not to deal with them” (Syme 2004: 3).

Confronting Disadvantage

Our research within this school provided the opportunity for us to explore the way in which members of the school’s leadership team, and in particular the headteacher, created an environment of success which has enabled the school to exceed expectations in relation to its social demographics. This school has resisted the “banking model” of education described by the work of Freire (1972). In such a system he argues students are treated as ‘receptacles’ that are to be ‘filled’ with the “content of the teachers narration” and who then are expected to regurgitate information given in class, on tests, quizzes, and anything that requires an answer that is “word for word” what the teacher says (Freire 1972: 1). Instead our data suggests there was “mutual humanization” whereby students and teachers became partners in critical thinking and engaged with “problems of human beings in their relations with the world” (Freire 1972: 5).

This approach, we argue, was based more on the notion of critical hope than on principled infidelity. We saw this in our first interview with Sir Paul makes when he said “if these children have been let down that’s a disgrace, it’s outrageous”. Coming from a very similar background himself he empathised with the local community and students’ reduced chances of life success because of their low socioeconomic status. In his case he did not even believe in his mother’s faith in him to one day become a headteacher “because from where I was it looked like a closed shop of middle class people who all knew each other”. The fact that he had overcome such a start to life himself to reach his current status resulted in him aiming to create more opportunities for young people in similar circumstances to the ones he faced in a part of Liverpool that was eerily similar to Barking and Dagenham in terms of its socio-economic indicators. His determination to change those circumstances is summed up in his desire to make himself available to the local people:

I'm working class and all these people are. I'll be the first working class person of a position of responsibility that they've probably ever seen in their lives. I won't have the door locked, like it's locked most of the time—you can't see the chief constable, you can't see the director of education, you can't see the chief medical officer—but I was going to make damn sure they could see the head teacher and they could have a piece of that head teacher, because that's very important for working class people. (Sir Paul Grant, Headteacher)

This driving force moved him beyond strategic management of the school to maximise learning outputs, which leads us to discount the notion of principled infidelity being the prime reason for sustained success. Like in most other schools the senior leaders and teachers in the Robert Clack High School are familiar with the notion of 'gaming' whereby you can maximise outcomes on student test scores through a number of practices that, whilst legitimate, are of doubtful moral turpitude. It was clear from our research that had never been the means by which the school was cultivating and sustaining success. Nor was there extensive evidence of principled infidelity as the culture of the school was openness with literally hundreds of visitors, including multiple inspections, many of whom were astute enough to see through any attempt to disguise motives. The policy of the school was transparent—it was a state maintained local authority school which sought to serve the needs of the local community. The prime motivation we conclude is critical hope.

A key feature of the concept of critical hope is to recognise the 'moral outrage' caused to young people in disadvantaged communities and not to either defer hope or to produce what Duncan-Andrade calls "hokey hope" (2009: 3). Too many people working in schools, he argues, project aspirations for students to "to set their sights on some temporally distant (and highly unlikely) future well-being", thus deferring hope (2009: 5). 'Hokey hope' he sees meanwhile as the false promise of some "multicultural, middle-class opportunity structure that is inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of working-class, urban youth of color". Neither approach is adequate to meet the needs of disadvantaged communities whereas critical hope is based on a genuine belief that students can not only transcend their local community, but help their community to also transcend their circumstances. In other words it is not a case of educating students out of disadvantage, but improving the circumstances for all members of that community.

That seems to us to be the fundamental driving force of the Robert Clack High School in that all manner of achievement was celebrated, not just success on measures of attainment generally represented by test scores. It seems akin to a philosophy based on the work of Tupac Shakur, the American actor and rapper, when he uses the analogy of growing roses in concrete. The results should be valued as highly as any measure of beauty as the opportunity to grow was so hard:

We wouldn't ask why a rose that grew from the concrete for having damaged petals, in turn, we would all celebrate its tenacity, we would all love its will to reach the sun, well, we are the roses, this is the concrete and these are my damaged petals, don't ask me why, thank god, and ask me how. (Shakur 2006)

The data suggest that there was little evidence of either ‘deferred’ or ‘hokey’ hope here, but instead a recognition by staff at the Robert Clack that it is a “false binary that suggests we must choose between an academically rigorous pedagogy and one geared toward social justice” and that the school was serious about hope by connecting “our pedagogy to the harsh realities of poor, urban communities” (Duncan-Andrade 2009: 6).

We consider that Sir Paul and his team were mainly exhibiting critical hope, although principled infidelity cannot be ruled out completely. These artefacts of success were manifested more by the use of ‘contextual’ intelligence, we suggest, rather than ‘professional’ or ‘social’ intelligence. Clearly whilst there was ample evidence to see the latter two intelligences in action within the school, in our view these two intelligences can be seen in almost any well-run school and to that extent the Robert Clack High School was not unusual. What makes it different is the way in which decisions are context specific and based on the notion of critical hope. This contextual intelligence can be seen in the early stages of change through the efforts to regain adult control and providing effective teaching. The ‘Robert Clack Good Lesson’, first introduced in the first days of Paul’s headship, was the basis of the school’s transition to success. This is the provision of what Duncan-Andrade calls ‘material hope’ for which the first step is for teachers understanding that “quality teaching is the most significant ‘material’ resource they have to offer youth” (2009: 6). From that position the ambitions of and for students at the school were limited only by imagination.

Consequently we found many examples of students being encouraged to value who they were rather than aspire to social values not associated with their community. One outstanding example was a former student, with a significant series of misdemeanours culminating in a subsequent confrontation with Sir Paul, returning to the school as a prospective teacher. Given a second chance in life she made sure of such an opportunity and became a subject leader within a short time of successfully completing her teaching qualification. Her words describe the way in which one of her school friends perceived her transition:

When I finally got my teaching qualification I spoke to my best friend who was here in the dark days. We’ve stayed very close ever since and she’s gone off and just had children and hasn’t really done anything with her life other than the children. I phoned her to tell her that I’d got the job and I was going to be working at Robert Clack and then I put the phone down. About 10 min later she phoned me back crying and she said, ‘I can’t believe it, I can’t believe that you, my friend, like, have become a teacher’. She couldn’t believe that actually someone from our background, our area, was actually... and she says she tells all of her friends and I think that’s what’s changed in the school for the young people now. (Subject Leader)

The Deputy Headteacher was keen to describe in his first interview with us how the school will celebrate individual success equally for any aspect of the individual student’s life irrespective of where that took place, a claim backed by a Year 12 student who said: “even if you’re not the best at the academic side of the school, you will get a chance to shine and they will recognise what you’ve done”. The

evolving scenario was, therefore, one of enhancing opportunity to transcend their community personally without dispensing with local culture and history. This perhaps best summed up by a final year student on his way to take up a place at a university in the USA in 2013:

The school instils a sense of sort of appreciation for the differences in society, but also shows you a way forward in order to be successful in wider society, not just academically, not just in traditional school ways. (Year 13 student)

Conclusions

We have demonstrated that there has been a multi-faceted change to the community in terms of economical, political and ethnic changes with movement from a mono- to multi-cultural society. The area has shifted from a simple and trading economy (Ford Motor Company) to a highly complex urban industrial order with a variety of economies transforming the population of the locality into single specialities, although the socio-economic indicators of poverty are still present. In recognising these features we have taken a postmodernist approach to examine how learning takes place in the school in order to be “democratic” and inclusive to all learners despite their socio-economic backgrounds.

The school has thus moved out of a relatively self-contained monocultural neighbourhood into a loosely aggregated multicultural society marked by differentiation of structure and function. This presented new challenges which required close integration of parts and an ever increasing measure of cooperation with the community, but above all a unified direction. The vision of the school was a simple one in principle: all children are learners who can achieve. In reality, however, this has been a complex vision to meet.

In an era of individualism in the economy, standardisation of teaching and learning and the ‘modelisation’ of leadership in schools to meet government agendas (Male and Palaiologou 2015) what this school has demonstrated is to operate in a collective way. Central to this was its dominating socio demographic reality. Whilst this did not shape the school in terms of core principles, it did lead to understanding the mechanical energy of the community and go beyond the standardised “schooling” of compulsory education and achieve what Derrida calls “the only possible invention, the impossible invention” (1992:41). The school challenged the unimagined potentialities of the community, not for the transformation of self, but to develop the transformation of that society to ensure survival. To a large extent this has been achieved by offering education that helped students to not only transform as individuals, but also collectively as a community.

Societies are not static and the history of the Robert Clack High School is an example of this, but what lessons can be learnt from the school that is making these choices? To retain the principles for education for all children, the school engaged in the performance of educational functions that inevitably shaped the community. While acknowledging formal government agenda driven targets, what Hallinger calls the “academic press” (2005: 3), they resisted narrow approaches to education.

Instead the school within its field of principles regarded education as a central tenet of the society in the process of change, as exemplified by one teacher who had been at the school for some 25 years and had witnessed the school before, during and after its transition:

All elements of achievement are recognised, but underlying all that is that unless you come out of here with decent academic qualifications you are going to have your life chances limited. So what we do is to encourage all young people to do as well as they can in all areas (Teacher since 1990)

Consequently the school exceeded its prescribed expected limits because they saw the purpose of the school through the eyes of the community rather than from the perspective of government targets. They transcended leaders, teachers and students from what Bernstein describes in the Code of Language from a 'middle class' delivery of the curriculum to one set within the specific code of community. To that extent the local community is mirrored in teaching and leadership in just the way it is mirrored in them. This was not an accidental anomaly, but was the result of a deep connection to the community. The school thus reflected and extended the laws and customs of the local social system and rejected the singularity of the national curriculum and the standards by offering education to that sustained the integrity of the community. Education can move human beings away from their own roots and anchor them more in the cosmos. By rooting itself in the community the Robert Clack High School anchored learners within their original social context, as indicated to us by Sir Paul when stating: "the best interests of the school was to continue to be tied in with the community, with the Council and with the Local Authority", a view echoed by a student from the School Council who pointed out that "we were voted like one of the worst places to live in the UK, it doesn't take away from how well this school does in trying to address those social issues".

In essence the school has created a formula based on archetypal roots, the concept being that we are part of a whole, but our actions depend not merely on what we do for ourselves, but also on what we do for the whole. This ideal that is embedded in the organisational ethos of the Robert Clack High School and has led the school as an institution to transmit to the students higher values than those encompassed within narrow confines of the academic press.

One of the things that has formed the basis of appreciation to the Robert Clack High School from the community is the way it has promoted self-understanding of its place in the micro-cosmos as well as the macro-cosmos and ultimately achieved the principles of "critical hope" for a renewal of community interest in the school and in education through the achievement of their children. This awareness endows the community with the capacity to support and believe in the school and is mirrored in the emergent pedagogy, summed up in 2012 by a member of the school leadership team who had started his teaching career at the school just a few years before:

There are high standards and I would call it 'supportive accountability'. Everybody knows as a teacher what's expected of them, they know they're expected to deliver for the pupils and so everybody is accountable for their

result. But that is done in a supportive way, it's not ruling with an iron fist like fear of somebody walking into your room and seeing what you're doing. So the ethos is incredibly supportive, incredibly high standard of the pupils and of the teaching staff. (Assistant Headteacher)

Closing Thoughts

In an era where politicians may claim that the basis of a “new world” is education of all children, despite their socioeconomic and ethnical background, this means nothing so long as this imperative does not derive from the actual individuals and the communities to which they belong. This means that it is only when a school values the right of the learners to be part of a community and participate in it rather than submit to an authority of order such as targets and external inspection that the school can transcend its prescribed expectations. This, in our view, is because creative cooperation, which is now at the heart of the Robert Clack High School, lies in the hearts of people rather than in politicians' statements, antipathies and sympathies. We do not suggest anarchy with schools breaking away from national agendas, but we do suggest a concept of *anarchoautonomy* of schools. In such a model of school government the immediate community would be valued and their right “to be” honoured, creating a path of coexistence that moves away from the banking education and hope that is deferred or ‘hokey’. In that sense we use the term *anarchoautonomous* school to describe any school that despite the odds transcend itself to an education for children and the community without distancing themselves completely from government agendas, as the Robert Clack High School has done, by filtering them with the lenses of valued education for students and the community. Whilst you do need a measure of principled infidelity to create such schools, to become the *impossible invention* it is the concept of “critical hope” which drives which them on.

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