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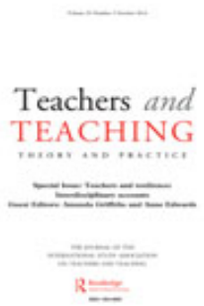

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Resilient principals in challenging schools: the courage and costs of conviction

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The work of leaders in schools takes place in shifting and sometimes conflicting reform contexts which tend to increase and intensify their professional work and personal lives as they seek to influence a range of stakeholder groups and individuals in processes of school improvement. Such diverse and sometimes competing demands of policy, local context and educational values not only challenge the breadth of qualities, knowledge and skills possessed by leaders, but also test their adaptivity, flexibility and intellectual, and emotional energy on an everyday basis. Although much of the literature on resilience suggests that it is a necessary quality in extreme adverse circumstances – for example, physical or emotional trauma as a result of conflict – it seems obvious that everyday resilience will be an essential quality and a necessary capacity for leaders to lead to their best. However, this may be sorely tested as the range of their roles and responsibilities expands and their space to exercise 'responsible agency' at work shrinks, together with personal space outside the workplace – traditionally viewed as a time to reflect, recover and renew. A recent survey showed that, in England, for example, only 7% of secondary heads perceived that they had any time to engage in interests outside their work; it is unlikely that much will have changed in the years since then, as more recent root-and-branch reforms in the governance and curricula of schools in England and Wales demonstrate. How leaders of schools, which serve high-challenge communities of socio-economic disadvantage, sustain their resilience and the costs of doing so in raising and sustaining their levels of success has received only scant attention in the research literature. This paper reports the outcomes of research into the work of 12 successful principals who work in schools in challenging environments in different countries and were asked to talk about their contexts and the challenges which they had overcome in order to achieve their success. It uses one of these as an illustration of the role courage and conviction plays in all their lives.

Keywords: resilience; successful principals; teachers' lives

Leadership contexts

> I would reckon I would work 15 or 16 h a day. The list of duties is frightening, meetings with staff, parents, builders, governors, psychologists, social workers and many others. Assemblies to run every day in two different schools, budget and targets to set and manage, furniture to choose, caterers to handle, staff to hire, fire and reviews. (Saturday *Guardian*, 16 June 2007, Work, p. 3 – cited in Thomson, 2009, p. 66)

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Paradoxically, the changes have also led to leadership, once the preserve of the few at the top, becoming a collective rather than an individual endeavour (Coleman, 2011). The increased numbers of people inside schools who participate in processes of culture reshaping and decision-making through distributed leadership provide strong evidence of this change. One implication of this is the need for principals to possess and exercise a greater range of strategic and interpersonal qualities and skills than ever before. In addition, the range and number of stakeholders with whom leaders must now interact externally on a regular basis has increased enormously – a by-product of the new age of public accountability.

> These diverse demands not only challenge the breadth of knowledge and skill possessed by a leader, but also test the adaptativity and flexibility of his/her very sense of self, how leaders conceptualise themselves in relation to the multiple social roles they must perform. (Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009, p. 169)

This highlights the addition and accumulation of responsibilities, accountabilities and a number of tasks which principals in every country have to manage and, in many cases, lead. Even those who live and work in rural communities far from the centres of policy-making must now consider change – such is the influence of communicating and information technology. To achieve and sustain success in these circumstances requires that principals possess and apply broader sets of political, intra- and inter-personal and organisational qualities, strategies and skills than ever before. More importantly, in terms of achieving success across a range of interests, they require that principals hold and are able to articulate and communicate and sustain during their many daily interactions, those agreed moral and ethical values, educational ideologies and purposes which drive their work and that of their colleagues. Because many of the social arenas in which principals lead and manage are often charged with emotion, they need to be emotionally resilient, to possess an inner strength which will enable them to lead. In other words, to discuss sustainability without a consideration of principals' capacity and continued willingness to 'transcend self' in their leadership of schools, to serve the best interests of children is to miss the point. To become and remain successful, to enact ones moral and intellectual self over time, principals need to be resilient.

Perspectives on the nature of resilience: the exercise of responsible agency

'Resilience' has its origins in child development research, where it is seen as a capacity to recover from adverse events. Outside education, there is still a focus on resilience, which is defined as the ability to overcome and 'bounce back' from the extremes of adversity, e.g. war, famine and serious physical or psychological damage. There is, however, a developing literature on resilience which, whilst bearing parallels with the stress management literature, is wider in its concerns, eschewing (though not ignoring) deficit models of stress prevention and reduction for more forward-looking and positive approaches. Support for this more positive perspective can be found in Fredrickson's (2004) theory of positive emotions. She suggests that 'throughout experiences of positive emotions … people transform themselves, becoming more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated and healthy' (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 1369); that 'the personal resources accrued during states of positive emotions are durable, [outlasting] the transient emotional states that led to

their acquisition' (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 1372). In other words, they serve as resources which assist people in managing adversity.

More recently, in education, interest has grown in the capacity of adults to be resilient over a career, in different contexts and in times of change. For example, research into resilience as a contributor to novice teacher success, commitment and retention in which principals have a major interest also suggests a relationship 'between resilience and … personal efficacy and emotional competence' (Tait, 2008, p. 57), and the author provides a useful summary table (Table 1).

However, the work of these researchers appears to be grounded still in predominantly psychological perspectives. A different view, which draws upon concepts of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Edwards, 2007), lends itself more readily to what we can observe in human action:

> The CHAT view … is that people are not passive recipients of a culture, they are shaped by their culture, but through the processes of externalisation they also act on and in turn shape it. (Edwards & Apostolov, 2007, p. 72)

Writing in the context of two studies in which professionals were working collaboratively to reduce social exclusion, Edwards (2007) argues that they exercise 'responsible agency' and that this can be seen as a feature of resilience:

> this agency, or capacity to act effectively in the world, is developed relationally and is evident in people's thoughtful actions in their worlds, but is also contingent on the affordances for such actions in any environment. (Edwards, 2007, p. 255)

Table 1. Indicators of resilience, personal efficacy, and emotional intelligence.

Resilience	Personal efficacy	Emotional intelligence
Able to show positive adaptation in the face of adversity	Sees tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than threats	Confronts failure with optimism
Able to rebound	Able to rebound	Able to handle stress
Flexible	Willing to try different methods	Adaptable
Able to make and maintain supportive relationships	Benefits from social persuasion and support	Builds bonds
Reflective	Reflective	Reflective
Has problem-solving skills	Open to new ideas/methods	Negotiates solutions
Able to plan	Able to plan	Shares plans
Seeks help	Asks for help when needed	Seeks feedback and support
Able to act independently	Self-monitoring/regulating	Self-regulating/ motivating
Has goals	Sets challenging goals	Sets goals
Persistent	Persistent	Persistent
Takes risks	Takes risks	Demonstrates initiative
Optimistic	Predicts capability	Optimistic
Grotberg (1997)	Bandura (1997)	Goleman (1995)
Reivich and Shatte (2002)	Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001)	Keirstead (1999)
Benard (2004)		Cherniss (2000)

Source: Tait (2008, p. 61).

Edwards goes on to propose that 'we are shaped by but also shape our worlds'. In terms of resilience, then, we should think about its development, 'simultaneously at the individual and systemic levels' (2007, p. 255). Recent international research on successful school principals (Moos, Johansson, & Day, 2011) supports this broader, sociocultural perspective, demonstrating that whilst the concept of resilience elaborated in the discipline of psychology helps clarify the personal characteristics of trait-resilient people, it seems not to have addressed in any substantive way how the capacity to be resilient in different sets of positive and negative circumstances can be enhanced or inhibited by the nature of the external and internal environments in which we work and our interactions with these and the people with whom we work, the strength of ethical purposes which are at the heart of principals' work.

Resilience in education, then, is not a quality that is innate. Rather, it is a construct that is relative, relational, developmental and dynamic (Rutter, 1990). Whilst it is both a product of personal and professional histories, exercised through professional dispositions and values, these will be influenced positively and negatively by organisational and personal factors and determined by individuals' capacities to manage these in a range of anticipated and unanticipated scenarios. Rather than asking 'How can we prevent stress and mental/emotional ill-health?', the questions raised by the research on successful school principals and reported in this paper are: Is everyday resilience a requirement for success? Does the need for resilience vary in different personal and workplace contexts? Are different degrees of resilience necessary? How do school principals act to sustain their resilience? What are the costs of resilience?

Everyday resilience

Whilst empirical and psychosocial research such as that referenced in Table 1 above has revealed that capacities for resilience are not only bound up in or determined by individual histories, within education, also, there is an increasing recognition that the nature of teaching and learning and the contexts in which they takes place demand what might be called 'everyday resilience', needed in the context of everyday risk and vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2011). Processes of teaching, learning and leading, then, require those who are engaged in them to have a resolute everyday persistence and commitment, which is much more than the ability to bounce back in adverse circumstances. The social environment is important, and resilience can be fostered or diminished through the environment (for example, leadership interventions in establishing and nurturing structures and cultures). Recent European research on the impact of psychosocial hazards on teachers at their workplace (ETUCE, 2011) found, also, that 'a higher job satisfaction is presumed to decrease the chances of stress' (ETUCE, 2011, 19) among teachers. Moreover, and perhaps not surprisingly, the same research found that the factors that had the strongest impact upon job satisfaction were 'trust and fairness' in the workplace, followed by 'sense of community', 'meaning of work', resources and 'work-privacy conflict' (i.e. the compatibilities or incompatibilities of working and private lives). Whilst this focused upon teachers, it is likely, also, to apply to school principals.

To lead at one's best over time requires everyday resilience. It is an essential everyday quality because of the variety, intensity and complexity of the worlds which principals inhabit. These require the ability to engage with individuals and groups of students, staff, governors and parents internally and a variety of external

stakeholders. Their educational values and teaching and learning practices are likely to be challenged both directly and indirectly through policy initiatives; and change and improvement, accountability and exhortations to raise standards will be their constant companions. While the concept of resilience elaborated in the discipline of psychology helps clarify the personal characteristics of trait-resilient people (the ability to bounce back in adverse circumstances), it fails to address how the capacity to be resilient can be enhanced or inhibited by the nature of the increasingly testing external and internal environments in which we work, the people with whom we work and the strength of our beliefs, aspirations and moral/ethical purposes (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006).

Research on the work and lives of teachers and principals suggests that the process of leading successfully requires more than the ability to bounce back in adverse circumstances. It requires them to have a 'hardiness', a resolute persistence, hope and commitment which is supported in these by strong core values over three or more decades.

The efforts to influence student learning, which teachers who are teaching to their best must make daily, are considerable, and in order for them to grow and sustain their passion, expertise and success, they themselves will need support. Like students, they may be in different phases of their professional learning lives and demonstrate different levels of competence, commitment and resilience (Day et al., 2007). A range of recent empirical research confirms that there is no magic formula for achieving success. It is difficult to gainsay the current (one could almost say relentless) policy focus upon so-called 'instructional leadership' or 'leadership for learning' (Hallinger, 2010). In successful leadership, this is always accompanied by an equally strong focus on people, as evidenced in 'transformational leadership' theory (e.g. Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006), which focuses on leading the quality of the teaching and learning environment, whole-school vision, setting directions, redesigning organisational structures, and developing and sustaining the capacities of teachers to teach to their best through comprehensive and differentiated professional learning and development opportunities. Yet, this research hardly touches upon an examination of the resources and sources of support upon which leaders of schools need to draw in sustaining the emotional energy needed to sustain their resilience:

> As a principal, you need to keep renewing your energy, to be one step ahead, to be proactive never reactive, so you need mental energy and resilience, while you can do that, people are happy with you and will come with you, otherwise dissatisfaction will set in and the school will run down, relationships will run down. People then start to question whether you have a role in this school or not. I have seen principals that stay in schools too long, energy levels go down, motivation, relations etc., go down. My wife is a fantastic help on that – asks if I need to go to that meeting, is there someone else who can go to that? Sustainable employment is more important, where you are constantly reviewing your energy levels – that is the most important thing you can do … If I start to run out of energy, I will respond appropriately and it will take time to repair a relationship. No energy = time to move on. (Doherty, 2008, p. 170)

At its heart, school leadership involves influencing others, not all of whom may wish to be influenced, on a regular basis, in order that they might strive to improve and thrive in different ways; and improvement involves change. Successful school leaders know and research confirms that there are associations between the well-being and commitment of teachers, the everyday quality of classroom teaching and

the quality of student learning and achievement (Day et al., 2007, 2011; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). They know, also, that classroom teachers work to influence a range of students who themselves may or may not wish to learn and may or may not wish to learn in the way their teachers wish them to learn.

If the capacity for resilience is indeed the outcome of a dynamic process of interaction within and between individual biographies and their past and present personal and work contexts, it follows that a key role of leaders is to foster individual and organisational resilience. For example, teachers may respond positively or negatively in the presence of challenging circumstances, and this will depend on the quality of leadership as well as the strength of their own commitment. Extended collaborations, for example, need to be managed in order to avoid their potential for 'collaborative inertia' (Huxham & Vangen, 2005, p. 13). Arguably, principals themselves need to model the resilience, which they promote amongst their teachers.

Leading schools which serve disadvantaged communities

A growing amount of research evidence suggests that whilst there are generic qualities, strategies and skills which are common to all, successful principals who lead schools serving disadvantaged communities face a greater range of more persistent, intensive cognitive and emotional challenges than others and so not only need to possess these to a greater degree but may also need different qualities and skills which are specific to the social/emotional contexts of their schools and their communities.

Many of the students in these schools, along with their parents or carers, are likely to have had a history of failure and be alienated from school-based education. For those educators for whom equity, care and social justice are central to their educational commitment, it is particularly important, therefore, to examine conditions which may work to improve this because many of these students are at greater risk of under-achieving in their personal, social and academic lives. A recent national research project on the impact of leadership on pupil outcomes in England, found that principals in improving schools serving disadvantaged communities: (i) face the most persistent levels of challenge; (ii) apply greater combinations or clusters of strategies with greater intensity; and (iii) use a broader range of personal and social skills than do those in other schools which serve more advantaged communities. Principals in these schools are often younger and less experienced than those in more advantaged schools and are responsible for leading and managing situations which are less physically and emotionally stable. For example, teacher and student mobility tend to be higher in disadvantaged schools and challenges of student and teacher motivation, student behaviour, engagement and attendance greater (Day et al., 2011). It is not that principals in more advantaged schools work less hard or are less committed, but rather that the sets of skills and attributes used by successful principals in more disadvantaged schools is different and, we found, more complex, than those in more advantaged schools.

Figure 1 below provides a number of tentative hypotheses which, together, indicate the special nature of the challenges which research in 36 schools in urban areas in nine European countries identified (Day & Johansson, 2008).

By any standards, being a principal is a tough job, then, in cognitive, emotional and physical terms. It is particularly so in schools in high-disadvantage communities.

Characteristics and Strategies of Successful principals in Schools serving Different Communities: Differences by degree (1)

Schools serving relatively advantaged communities	Strategies and Characteristics	Schools serving relatively disadvantaged communities
	Values	
Important	Open minded, flexible, ready to learn from others	Essential
Important	Leadership and management of whole school change and transition	Essential
Challenging	Combine logic and emotion	More Challenging
Important	Persistent, optimistic, resilient, leaders of hope	Essential
Important	Have strong core democratic values	Essential
	Setting Directions	
Important	Establish vision and set directions	Essential
Challenging	Valuesled responsiveness to context	More Challenging
Challenging	Raise teaching, learning and achievement expectations	More Challenging
Important	Develop a whole school behaviour for learning policy	Essential

Characteristics and Strategies of Successful principals in Schools serving Different Communities: Differences by degree (2)

	Improving the Teaching and Learning	
Challenging	Manage the teaching and learning programme	More Challenging
	Refining and Aligning the Organisation	
Important	Refine and align the organisation	Essential
Important	Delegate or distribute leadership	Important
Important	Be responsive to and manage diverse internal and external communities	Essential
N/A	Manage alienation	Challenging
	Developing People	
Important	Understand and develop people	Essential
Challenging	Build staff/student motivation, commitment, morale, engagement (relational trust)	More Challenging
Challenging	Sustain staff/student motivation, commitment, morale, engagement (relational trust)	More Challenging
N/A	Manage and reduce staff and student mobility	Challenging

Figure 1. Characteristics and strategies of successful principals.
Source: Author.

There is no space here for a detailed discussion of the strategies through which headteachers of successful schools achieve and sustain success (see Day et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2009 for research-informed reports on this). However, what reports by successful principals in a range of contexts (Day & Gurr, 2013) and countries have revealed, is the likely importance to their success of four qualities which are not always articulated in the plethora of 'turnaround' and 'narrowing the achievement gap' leadership texts now available: academic optimism, trust, hope and ethical purpose or conviction.

Academic optimism

Academic optimism in teachers has been defined as a teacher's individual and collective beliefs 'that they can teach effectively, their students can learn and parents will support them so that the teacher can press hard for learning' (Beard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2010). It includes 'cognitive, affective and behavioural components of optimism merging into a single integrated construct' (Beard et al., 2010, p. 1142) and is associated with relational and organisational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Seashore-Louis, 2007) nurtured, built and spread by successful principals. Whilst it follows that academic optimism is a necessary constituent for success for teachers, it is not unreasonable to argue that academic optimism is a characteristic that is common to all successful heads too. Indeed, Beard et al. (2010) also associate academic optimism with 'enabling' school cultures, defined by Hoy and Miskel (2005) as hierarchies that help rather than hinder, and systems of rules and regulations that guide problem-solving rather than punish failure.

Trust

The Oxford English Dictionary defines trust as 'confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing'. Trust is, then, associated also with 'the quality of being trustworthy, fidelity, reliability and loyalty' (www.oecd.com). In other words, trust and trustworthiness are in a reciprocal relationship. It is claimed that 'a presumption of trust rather than a presumption of mistrust helps individuals and organisations to flourish' (Seldon, 2009: preface):

> As role models, leaders across society must meet two key criteria of trustworthiness; behave ethically and be technically proficient. The power of leaders to build or destroy trust is vast. Without honesty and competence, suspicion will grow. (Seldon, 2009, p. 26)

Trust is an individual, relational and organisational concept, and its presence and repeated enactment are as vital to successful school improvement as any expression of values, attributes and the decisions that heads may make. Research has suggested that 'trust in leaders both determines organisational performance and is a product of organisational performance' (Seashore-Louis, 2007, p. 4). The growth of trust, therefore, is likely to be accompanied by an increase in participation and decision-making, characterised by the wider distribution of leadership among teachers.

> Teachers are not passive actors in the school, but co-constructors of trust. As active professionals, teachers who feel left out of important decisions will react by withdrawing trust, which then undermines change. (Seashore-Louis, 2007, p. 18)

Such distribution cannot, however, be unconditional:

> Discerning the proper level of trust requires wisdom and discernment on the part of the educational leader. Optimal trust is prudent, measured, and conditional. (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 57)

Hope

Successful leadership is, by definition, a journey of hope based upon a set of ideals. Arguably, it is our ideals that sustain us through difficult times and changing personnel and professional environments. They are an essential part of resilience:

> Having hope means that one will not give in to overwhelming anxiety … Indeed, people who are hopeful evidence less depression than others as they manoeuvre through life in pursuit of their goals, are less anxious in general, and have fewer emotional distresses. (Goleman, 1995, p. 87)

The evidence from research is that resilient leaders who sustain success in student learning and achievement are always beacons of hope in their schools and communities.

Vision is an expression of hope, 'an affirmation that despite the heartbreak and trials that we face daily … we can see that our actions can be purposeful and significant' (p. 85). For school principals and other leaders, vision and hope need to be revisited regularly through daily acts of aspiration and trust and not just the end- or beginning-of-year staff meeting or workshop. The expression of hope through visioning is a dynamic process. It involves:

> a complex blend of evolving themes of the change programme. Visioning is a dynamic process, no more a one-time-event that has a beginning and an end than is planning. Visions are developed and reinforced from action, although they may have a seed that is based simply on hope. (Seashore, Louis & Miles, 1992, p. 237)

The evidence from research is not only that successful leaders, especially heads, are always beacons of hope in their schools and communities, but that hope is revised, renewed and reinvigorated through the quality of interactions of teachers with a range of stakeholders.

Good leadership, like good teaching is, by definition, a journey of hope based upon a set of ideals. To take such a journey and to continue over a career requires resilience. Arguably, it is our ideals, our ethical and moral purposes that sustain us through difficult times and changing personnel and professional environments. They are an essential part of resilience.

However, whilst resilience is an essential attribute, in itself it is not enough. Poor leaders (and teachers) may be resilient. They may survive without changing, without improving. Resilience without the conviction of moral purpose, without a willingness to be self-reflective and learn in order to change in order to continue to improve is not enough. Resilience, then, cannot be considered in isolation from this and academic optimism, trust, hope and moral purpose. Moreover, the principal's responsibility is to ensure that the nature, environment and management of teachers' (and students') work is, as far as possible, designed to reduce negative experiences of stress and increase capacities for resilience. Resilience, from this perspective, describes 'what arises in a dynamic or dialectic between person and practices that reflects the evidence that the person is acting on and reshaping challenging

circumstances in their lives so that they can propel themselves forward' (Edwards, 2010). Yet such forward propulsion must, in educational leadership, be driven by a core set of ethical purposes.

Ethical purpose

Starratt has long argued that the professional ethics of educational leadership has been a relatively neglected dimension of research (Starratt, 2005) and for authentic learning as that which is for the intrinsic moral good of the learner and he argues persuasively, as we heard this morning, for the practice of general ethics, involving 'issues around fairness, truth telling, respect, equity, conflict, misunderstandings and loyalties' (Starratt, 1991) and professional ethics which promote 'the "good": involved in the practice of educating' (Starratt, 2005). It is much easier for individual teachers to express their 'moral purpose' when their school principals espouse, articulate and practise a set of coherent educational values.

An illustrative case of successful leadership in testing times: courage, vulnerability and fatigue

International research has shown repeatedly that successful principals share core ethical and moral purposes and have a range of qualities, strategies and competences; and that the ways in which they apply these relate to their context sensitive judgements about social and policy contexts in which they work. However, much less has been written within this literature about the courage of conviction which helps them to sustain their resilience, despite their sense of vulnerability and sheer fatigue. Below are extracts from the story of one successful principal. Data were collected through a series of interviews and sustained meetings over the first three-year period of his leadership.

David has been at this 11–18 school for three years and it is his second headship. Previously, he was principal of a secondary school, which he had developed into an all-through school (for pupils aged 5–18). His present school is one of a growing number of 'Academies' in England. These are schools which are funded directly by central government and given more financial and curriculum autonomy than schools which are funded through the local authority (district). Academies are also more directly accountable to central government for the progress and attainment of their pupils. In David's case, the Academy was the first to be jointly sponsored by business and the local university. During his three years as principal, the school roll had grown from 300 to 800 pupils.

When it had first opened more than 50 years previously, its focus had been for pupils 'to plan their lives and prepare themselves to make a positive contribution to family, neighbourhood and society'. According to David, this emphasis on welfare, as against academic achievement, had led to 'a diminishing cycle of external involvement' and the school had 'slipped into an unproductive, almost caustic relationship with the local authority' (school district). As well as decline in the physical environment (grime, burnt light fittings, peeling paint), the school now was the lowest quintile for percentage of girls on role; the highest quintile for Free School Meals (a proxy poverty indicator) and Special Educational Needs; the highest quintile for school deprivation and set in a community with significantly low literacy levels.

Apart from the sheer physical and intellectual energy needed to turn the school around, David had also invested an immense amount of emotional energy in re-establishing the long lost sense of pride, both internally among staff and students, and externally in the community:

> … in general, they're very positive about what we're doing and about how we've made things happen and the kids most definitely are, I mean when the kids speak to visitors you can actually see them puff their chests out as they talk about it, and they WEREN'T proud of going to the previous school but they are VERY proud of going to this one, and they've told Ofsted and a variety of other people that they feel much safer and much happier and it's where they want to be.

He also spoke of 'discernable pride' of the staff about being part of a positive change, and his own part in fashioning that, initially from the front, but, as time went by, more from the back as staff had become more confident in their own abilities to lead change further:

> … to empower others to believe they'd rather change is how real meaningful long-term change can be made. The person who's been doing that driving and creating the pace has to slowly disappear into the background because the pace has to be driven by themselves. It's a far better long-term strategy to have the staff all driven internally and really wanting to be part of it and really proud of what they're doing than it is to be forcing them down a route, whether contractually or with fear.

At the core of David's way of leading are three words which represent his professional identity: courage, vulnerability and fatigue.

> Leadership means not only having answers (to problems of the changing curriculum, staffing structures, building management, pastoral systems) but also having the courage to stand by them when they are questioned. It also means being prepared to hear these questions and change your mind if you need to, without losing the strength of those original convictions or confidence in yourself. It's a fine line, like everything else in leadership. The brave leader must show a positive face, an unstinting outward belief that not only is the battle eminently winnable but that it is practically won.

Like many successful principals, this statement reveals the depth of strength that David had in his own educational beliefs and professional identity. This strength had enabled him to remain resilient in the face of sustained challenges, not only at the beginning of his leadership in the school but also now, in his leadership three years later. Every day still felt like a battle, every aspect of the job was an ordeal, despite having produced the most improved GCSE (15 + national examination) results in the UK and a good Ofsted inspection report:

> I felt that each step I took was being scrutinised by so many people who were all expecting me to do what, in their minds at least, they thought I should be doing … I can't look my pay cheque in the eye, let alone the children, staff and my own family, if I do things that I know, deep down, are fundamentally … the wrong things to do, even if everyone is telling me to do them … It is about being constantly vigilant to the fact that it is easy to let your internal well-being slip as you start the slide down towards negativity … I believe the quickest route to meeting the government's imposed targets of 50% for pupil examination attainment is not to tell them they need to, and to put them in a classroom where you try to force them to behave and learn … you've actually got to do things that actually change the way they approach their learning so you have be brave enough sometimes to do the slightly 'off-piste' thing to enable you to focus the kids back on to their learning.

He found it 'hard to remain calm' when explaining to government officials that the 'can do' attitude of staff and pupils, their willingness to make learning fun, their focus on 'wonder' and their relentless efforts to increase the self-belief of pupils and teachers and the school's imaginative links to the university were all part of the improvement picture:

> Bravery isn't the absence of fear, it's actually knowing fear and coping with it. It takes a certain amount of bravery to say to the government and other officials, yeah we fully agree that these kids need literacy, but giving them 22 h of literacy each week, is not the answer to switching their lives around … I just think there's some fundamental areas of education that governments really don't understand. They use KPIs, key performance indicators, to try and drive change, and that's what I believe is totally and utterly ineffectual in causing the changes they want.

I asked David how much of his professional and perhaps personal identity was wrapped up in his work and how much that had been challenged. He spoke first of his sense of vulnerability:

> I recognised very early on that vulnerability is actually quite an interesting tool to be used, and I think some leaders use this in quite an unpleasant way. It's interesting because vulnerability is part of the armour and certainly when I started as a principal in my first school … when I had to amalgamate an infants', juniors' and secondary school together … I remember one of the strongest things I was able to do was to stand there and to say, I haven't a clue how we're going to do this, I really don't know … can we do this together? In other words, I said I am not offering you an expert view of where we're going, I am actually merely going to try and channel your ideas. I think that vulnerable is something that I'm telling my leadership team to be. I'm saying, don't blame the Head of House, blame yourself. Take responsibility that you've not got it right, that you're fallible … that you haven't got everything under control, because people come and they look to leaders to provide them with the answers.
>
> The work by Alan Flintham in 'Reservoirs of Hope', finding out why so many head teachers left the profession or died of stress, and his follow-up work 'When Reservoirs Run Dry', he argued every day you get people draining your reservoir. That has never happened to me faster than when I first started this job because everybody is taking out of the reservoir, everybody wants immediate results, everybody wants success at a snap of the finger. There's a kind of mass hysteria that suddenly these kids with immense problems, suddenly … the kind of disadvantage they have by a little bit of good teaching and everything, can suddenly transform their lives.

David spoke passionately of his commitment to the education of all the pupils in this high need community. It was a key part of his sense of professional identity:

> I'm the first to think they have the right to good teaching, more than other kids, and I believe totally that we have to achieve to be believed in, but the problem is it's a kind of either or thing in society, it's a kind of, if you don't believe that every kid can succeed irrespective of their background, then somehow that's a negative. You're not actually saying these kids can't achieve because of their background. Those are two things that are nowhere near connected, and the problem is that I think governments … and a variety of other people, there is a lack of understanding of how difficult it is to make a relevant and exciting education for kids from very deprived areas; because the reality is they don't want it, their families don't aspire to it, so this is not something that can easily be done. We're very proud we've only permanently excluded one child. We've worked with so many to keep them in education. I've always said this is a long-term change. If we're truly serious about changing this community in the way that everyone seems to want us to, you need to take 5, 10 years look at a minimum, at how you're going to do it.

He spoke, also, of the energy, long-term commitment and resilience needed as a leader of change, together with some of his frustrations with the lack of understandings by some of those outside schools:

> You don't make changes to a community that's scarred overnight, and their lack of reality that some people have really challenges, it challenges you, makes you feel whether it's worthwhile what you're doing and I think I go through massive times when I guess my reservoir's empty, I go through times when I doubt whether it's worth it all, I go through times when I think that I would stop it all at a drop of a hat. I sometimes get frustrated that some others don't recognise the job we're doing because they don't understand the job itself. And people don't understand the amount of effort that's been to get us to a position where we've got hundreds of kids, from a tough area, who are in school and wanting to go to school in most cases, who are learning in their lessons and who are advancing. But even in achieving that, we are always going to be behind the middle-class and middle-upper-class kids that they have to compete with together in examinations.
>
> And there's times when you just feel tired, that you feel that you've banged your head against a brick wall for long enough and you actually say why am I doing this? And that's when I think I question what I'm in it for and why am I doing it. Then other times, when I'm with the kids, you just bounce back in and it's a bit like being a gardener and you just go 'hey yeah I'm doing this again' but I think if you're a gardener, it's when you take the long-term view that it can become very silly … because you know if as a head gardener, if I walk away, 200 years from now, there'll be no evidence of my gardening at all, there may be an odd tree, there may be … but there's very little clear evidence of what I did. That's the reality here, I'm fascinated by archaeology, and I see echoes in the sand of people from generations ago in my own garden. I've got rows of stuff in my garden, that's the fragment we leave and … I think that nobody understands how lonely being a principal is and how much weight there is.

I asked David what motivated him to carry on tending the garden in different ways and nurturing it when there were so many barriers to success. He spoke with feeling about what Stephen Ball once described as the 'terrors of performativity' (Ball, 2003):

> I suppose you could say that I see the kind of changes that government make and the long-term proposals just fill me full of horror. The plans for key stage 4 testing, just scare me, doing away with coursework and making it all final test. The reality is that all of the things that disadvantage the kind of kids that I've always served are always there. So to go back to the garden, it's a bit like somebody suddenly saying, yeah ok, that's very nice but over the next five years we're going to phase out fertilisers we're going to phase out this stock plant that you've always used. So it's not as if I can feel we're getting to the top of the glorious mountain where I can see the plane on the other side … all I just see is another mountain just behind it. Most people see me as the driving force of the energy; and that's what I am. I need to be out there. I'm in at half past seven every morning, and I rarely leave here before half past five. Then I always do a couple of hours at home. It's very much that you've got to produce the results. I don't believe that for one minute that education is doomed, but …

At this point, David, himself an author, read these words from Edward Tring, the head teacher of a school in the nineteenth century and Parkin, a Canadian who researched his life:

> Sometimes the ways an atmosphere of responsibility works seems almost more than I can bear, I feel like a bird in a cage beating against the bars, longing to be free, a battle everywhere.

> He dreamed of breaking through the monotony and grind of teachers lives the treadmill of constant preparation and ceaseless evaluation, which is so apt to dry up and narrow mind and spirit.

He described education as always being 'a political football, always one of those things that politicians think they can change in a 4/5-year cycle':

> The battle is just ceaseless. I've always done the hardest I can, I've always worked as hard as I can I always did the best I can for the kids … we set up the academy to change young people's lives, and to make a difference in long term in the community, anybody who doesn't see that now is really blind as to what we're actually doing. Governors asked me to do a job, I've delivered it in the way I said I would, with even better results than I thought we'd get in the timescale we've done, and yet … there is that kind of feeling that the government and others are changing the goal posts as you're playing the match. They're actually changing the game we're playing and the method by which that game is rewarded, and it just means that your own personal identity becomes questioned, and to me, the one thing I do need, just occasionally, is a feeling that I am being valued … you need somebody who's there muttering in your ear in a positive way and when you need it, putting their hand on your shoulder, not putting their hand on your shoulder when your kids just happen to have done well.

I reminded David that, although he had been knocked, he did not appear to have changed his values, to have compromised his principles or his practices:

> I think I've got wise, I think I just see the world and the people in it with a greater clarity, which in some ways means I've got more to offer now than I've ever had, but, I still believe more strongly than ever in what we're doing, and I am very proud of what we've done. I've enjoyed that process when I look at it back in time. It's just that the kind of daily energy needed to create it is sometimes not appreciated. I felt with both the schools where I have been principal that they fitted me, yet I still did feel there were times when my beliefs have been utterly challenged. If I was in an environment where I actually felt my ethos and my heart were in a different direction, I would have been incredibly unhappy. Because the reality is you can't do it alone. So I think you have to get that match as a new principal.
>
> You've got to always have that passion for making a difference and, whatever decision you make, always bring it back to the kids, how does what are we doing benefit the kids. Where possible don't follow the instructions that you feel are expected of you by government, take your decisions because you believe it is best for the kids, and the community. Be brave that you can do it in another way. But doing it in another way is phenomenally hard work. But also don't be frightened to make mistakes. Somebody once said to me, 'Don't you worry that if people are following you like lemmings that you're going to lead them off the edge of a cliff?', and I said: 'If you live your life assuming your walking off the edge of a cliff, well what does that say about yourself? You have to have the confidence to say, this is my route and your heart and your gut feeling is something you should really rely on.' If you feel strongly about something, if something is churning your guts up that this is wrong, then it probably is wrong, and you just have to find ways you can, and one of the best ways to achieve targets is not to aim directly at them, because the moment you aim directly at a specific target is the moment you lose the ability to see anything but that. That's where I think some heads go wrong. They look at what their targets are and their whole life becomes about meeting that target, as if that's the only thing that matters, I think that's where you've got to, to be successful in the job, you have to work to make a much bigger change than that.

Conclusion

It is clear from this and other researches that successful school principals are those who are risk-takers and who actively seek out new opportunities, experiences and challenges for their schools to learn and achieve. To do so, they need to be resilient themselves in order to build and support in others the capacity and capabilities to be resilient. Vulnerability and risk, academic optimism, trust, and hope and ethical purpose – as David's case shows – are the key resilience qualities and responsibilities of successful principals.

> Leaders are the stewards of organizational energy [resilience] … they inspire or demoralize others, first by how effectively they manage their own energy and next by how well they manage, focus, invest and renew the collective energy [resilience] of those they lead. (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003, p. 5)

The story of this successful principal is illustrative of many who work in different contexts in different cultures and in different countries. It provides powerful and consistent testimony of the increasingly complex and diverse social, emotional and performance-oriented demands on schools which have created pressures upon heads to be more overtly successful in demonstrating a greater range of value-added achievements among all their students and, in particular, those that relate to measurable outcomes and those that relate to well-being, social harmony and democracy (defined differently in different countries). Their work has become more demanding internally and externally in working with an increasing number of diverse communities of interest. Whilst the combinations of these demands are not all new, they are certainly more intensively driven in through the complex policy agendas created by 'New Public Management' performativity agendas and fuelled by international league tables (PISA, TIMMS). In order to meet, mediate and enact these demands, these principals must work successfully in a number of arenas and some – those who work in schools in especially challenging communities – need to possess not only more, but also in some cases, additional sets of qualities and skills than those who do not work in those contexts, but also the resources to sustain the courage of conviction and, in some case, bear the costs.

The evidence suggests that David's space – and those of leaders in schools in similar circumstances – to exercise 'responsible agency', to shape the world of their schools, has been progressively reduced through an ongoing series of national government interventions which have, for example, increased contractual accountabilities of leaders and teachers for improving students' measurable outcomes in particular areas of curriculum, regardless of socio-economic contexts. As is clearly illustrated in David's case, the ability of heads and teachers to sustain resilience throughout their careers will be influenced by the interaction between the strength of the vocation of the individual, those whom they meet as part of their daily work and the quality of the internal and external environments in which they work. Their capacities, capabilities and emotional energy to manage unanticipated, as well as anticipated, everyday events effectively will be mediated by these. In times when organisational and professional change are inevitable, in order to meet new social and economic challenges, it is those who are supported in managing connections between their educational values, beliefs and practices and those of their colleagues and organisations, through the exercise of individual, relation and organisational resilience, who are most likely to lead and successfully manage the everyday uncertainties of learning and teaching. If this is so, then all of those in the business

of preparing, training and supporting school leaders must take note, for, arguably, it is resilience allied with moral purpose which is the key to the sustainability of authentic education and school improvement.

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