

5 August 2014

Dear Education Secretary

Towards More Democratic Forms of School Leadership

I would like to raise with you the problem of what the standards agenda is doing to school leaders and leadership. Successive Secretaries of State have pursued policies which have encouraged 'relentless leadership' in schools. Head teachers are told to pursue relentlessly their ambitious visions for change; this language is everywhere, from the Ofsted inspection framework to what Heads say when I interview them for my research. On the face of it, you might argue that this is a good thing, but my research is showing that it is having a damaging effect on school leadership in England and importantly, on the school workforce. I remember when scholars of leadership were reasonably content to understand it as a relational process of influence and persuasion. The school vision was seen to be better if it belonged to, and as far as possible came from members of the school community. Now, visions are the property of the Head teacher or Principal, who is authorised and encouraged to ensure that everyone contributes to it. These visions are almost always about raising standards. We are seeing many instances of teachers being sacked, or re-structured out of schools because they don't agree, or because their practice demonstrates the truism that teachers cannot overcome the structural problems of poverty that mean that their students don't attain as 'expected'. This problem is made all the worse by the ability of academy-type schools to set their own pay and conditions for staff. In other words, we are seeing the end of school leadership as we have understood it, and the rise of autocracy. This is damaging morale in schools; damaging children through disrupting their relationships with teachers who understood them and their wonderful complexity, but who have been dismissed; and damaging leadership in England. Who, after all, would want to apply for a job that requires you to be relentless all day? This is a culture which has been created by the pressure that the DfE has put schools and their leaders under over many years to succeed, where what counts as success doesn't predict future economic success whatever policy-makers think, but only predicts children's level of skill in taking tests. My advice? Focus on reducing poverty instead of strengthening school leadership. You'll find that outcomes improve and equalise. This is a tough one, I know, and will require you to collaborate with colleagues elsewhere in government, but research shows that tackling the structural cause of inequality/poverty is more effective than tackling its symptom - unequal educational outcomes, especially through strengthening the 'quality' of school leadership. And linked to this: Promote more democratic forms of leadership through your policies. Strong leadership doesn't have to be/shouldn't be autocratic. Surely we want our children to be taught in schools where people are not generally miserable, stressed and in fear? Good luck!

Yours faithfully

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