

Developing Sustainable Leadership

edited by
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Introduction

Brent Davies

Context

The drive to raise educational standards in many countries has, over the last decade, concentrated on more tightly focused curricular frameworks and testing regimes. This has resulted in improved standards as measured by test scores (Fullan, 2005). However, this raises two questions: are these results sustainable and are there other objectives that we should be pursuing? Providing answers to these questions involves moving from a short-term to a longer-term view. Achieving success for children, in terms of how they develop academically, socially, physically, emotionally and spiritually, is the aim of all schools. How do we achieve that success both in the short and long term and how do we ensure that success is sustainable?

In leadership terms, what are the challenges and pressures that individuals in schools have to cope with? How do they meet short-term accountability demands and at the same time build longer-term learning communities based on clear moral and educational values? How do individual leaders build frameworks of care and compassion so that all who work in the school (students and adults) enhance their personal and professional health? Most importantly, how can leaders support themselves both to survive and to develop as creative educationalists in an increasingly results-driven accountability climate? In brief, how do we sustain leaders and their schools to achieve that longer-term educational success without exhausting themselves and their organizations in a search for ever-increasing short-term results? It is important to understand sustainability not as a continuation of the status quo but as sustainable improvement.

Sustainability might be considered as the ability of individuals and schools to continue to adapt and improve to meet new challenges and complexity, and to be successful in new and demanding contexts. Most significantly, this should be seen in the context of improving, not depleting, individual and organizational health and well-being.

The purpose of this book is to make a contribution to the embryonic literature on sustainability and, in particular, on sustaining leaders in the complex and challenging environment in which they work. There are two existing works in the field. Michael Fullan's (2004) *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action* takes a broad educational system view at national and state level with a perceptive section at the individual leader level. Second, Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink (2005) have published *Sustaining Leadership*. These authors develop their thinking further and contribute significant chapters with new ideas in this 2007 book. This book brings together some of the leading educational thinkers and writers to offer unique perspectives that will add to a field which is receiving increasing attention. The book aims to provide a diverse but coherent account written for the reflective practitioner.

The chapters in the book

In Chapter 1 I build on my research work in strategic leadership and expound the view that if strategic leadership is to be successful it has, almost by definition, to be sustainable. In this chapter I define sustainable leadership as follows:

Sustainable leadership is made up of the key factors that underpin the longer-term development of the school. It builds a leadership culture based on moral purpose which provides success that is accessible to all.

The challenge for leaders in schools is how to deal with the immediate running of the school and the demands of the current year while at the same time building longer-term capacity. The danger of imposed simplistic external targets, such as test scores and inspection outcomes, is that they are one-dimensional, measuring the school on tests that value shallow rather than deep learning and failing to appreciate the complexity of the school. It is both desirable and feasible to look at longer-term development and shorter-term targets as complementary rather than conflicting strategies. To examine the key features of building

longer-term sustainability, I outline nine key factors. These are: (1) measuring outcomes and not just outputs, (2) balancing short- and long-term objectives, (3) thinking in terms of processes not plans – the way that leaders involve their colleagues is more important than the documents that they write – (4) having a passion for continued improvement and development, (5) developing personal humility and professional will as a means of building long-term leadership capacity, (6) practising strategic timing and strategic abandonment, (7) building capacity and creating involvement, (8) developing strategic measures of success and (9) building in sustainability.

I hope that these factors will start a dialogue and develop perspectives on how we can, in the educational community, support schools as they try to build sustainable learning organizations. Core moral values and a discussion of the purpose of education cannot be separated from the ‘how’ of operating the school; they must underpin it. The deep values of success for all and being members of a caring community are ideals that need sustaining just as much as the fabric of the school.

In Chapter 2 Brian Caldwell writes about sustaining exhilarating leadership. Although I had read and admired his work before then, I first met Brian 16 years ago in San Francisco at an American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference. Since then I have been able to draw on his ideas and insights to underpin much of my own work and this support has been very significant in my professional development. It is an honour to be a Professorial Fellow with Brian at the University of Melbourne. Brian draws on research with headteachers to ask three key questions:

1. What aspects of your work as leader are exhilarating?
2. What aspects of your work as leader are boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting?
3. What actions by you or others would make your work as leader more exhilarating and less boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting?

For each of the first two questions, Brian draws out the key factors that either make work exhilarating for headteachers or those that make work discouraging or dispiriting. He then takes the significant step in building sustainable leadership by what he calls ‘shifting the balance to exhilaration’ where he takes the ‘leadership voices’ of headteachers in his research to establish six factors that would build in sustainable success.

These focus around personal factors, professional factors, resource factors, autonomy, community, recognition and networking. To add to his own analysis of the situation, Brian draws on the expert views of three leading educationalists to unpack the importance of exhilarating leadership. In the final section Brian develops a critique of the implications for policy and practice in education.

Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink have become a significant writing team that challenges current orthodoxies. I have had the privilege of working with both of them for over a decade and have drawn on their ideas as a key element in my professional life. In Chapter 3 Andy and Dean develop their earlier work on sustainable leadership by using three new concepts of energy restraint, energy renewal and energy release. With energy restraint they consider five factors that are working against sustainable leadership and four factors that could alleviate the problem. In considering energy renewal the authors argue passionately for the building of trust, confidence and happiness as a combination that is the source of human resourcefulness. The final part of their framework is that of energy release. They see that releasing the energy for productive educational change can only be achieved through the 'teacher as the igniting force' which is able to 'unlock students' energy'. However, it is necessary to release the vast potential energy of our teachers as a precursor of the process. They conclude: *'Improved achievement needs to renew the energy of the people responsible for securing it through high-trust, confidence-building change principles that are undertaken by schools, with schools in transparent processes of committed improvement, that connect short-term success in immediate action to long-term transformations in teaching and learning.'*

Chris Day has developed an enviable reputation as a researcher and I was delighted to work with him as a Visiting Professor at the University of Nottingham. Chris and Michèle Schmidt report on a research project that they have undertaken on successful and sustainable leadership in UK schools. Early in Chapter 4 they quote Michael Fullan, a quotation that is worth replication: *'You cannot move substantially towards sustainability in the absence of widely shared moral purpose.* The reason is that sustainability depends on the distributed effort of people at all levels of the system, and meeting the goals of moral purpose produces commitment throughout the system' (Fullan, 2005: 87). In building resilient leaders that are driven by moral purpose Chris and Michèle outline five major categories for their research:

1. Care, consultation and responsibility.
2. Justice and advocacy: the courage of conviction.
3. Being learning- and learner-focused.
4. Activist leadership.
5. Sustaining resilience.

They consider that their research,

although small scale, suggests that despite pressures from multiple policy implementation accountabilities, social disadvantage and changing expectations, successful headteachers who demonstrate resilient leadership are those whose values cause them to place as much emphasis upon people and processes as they do upon product ... Improvement for headteachers in this research was broadly rather than narrowly defined. It included the academic achievement of the pupils against quantitative measures (for example, results of national tests and examinations) and qualitative indicators (esteem, relationships, expectations, behaviour, participation, engagement with learning). These heads demonstrated a clear and abiding concern for learning, care, justice.

In Chapter 5 Terry Deal provides a thought provoking commentary on the 'sustainability of the status quo'. Terry is a remarkable writer, consultant and practitioner in the education and the business world in the field of organizational culture. His reflections on organizational culture are unique and compelling. Spending some time with him in his home overlooking a vineyard and the mountains in San Luis Obispo in California does allow detached reflection! Terry argues that most educational reform imposed from outside fails to use the talents and skills of the staff in organizations and fails to be fully effective because of this. As a result, he looks at the remarkable staying power of the established way of doing things and alternative approaches to sustaining organizational change. He concludes with an interesting analysis:

There are some interesting explanations for this remarkable staying power which this chapter attempted to highlight. To the extent that we can accept plausible reasons for maintaining things as they are we can capture the craft knowledge of those who labour in the trenches year after year. They know a lot more than we think they do.

Chapter 3

Energizing leadership for sustainability

Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink

The leadership shortfall

Headlines in the *Times Educational Supplement* in the United Kingdom (UK) have announced 'Stressed heads admit to making mistakes' (TES, 2005); 'Heads driven out by OFSTED' (Paton and Stewart, 2005); 'Governors want Superman or Wonderwoman' (TES, 2005). One anguished school head declared that 'stress of job and unrealistic targets have made the job unbearable', and another, who had opted for early retirement, asserted that 'the paper work mountain has grown to the extent that it now ruins the real work of a head' (TES, 2005). In Canada, under the headline 'Being a Principal Can Be Punishing Work', the President of the Ontario Principals' Council proclaimed that, 'principals are finding it very stressful to balance all the needs and concerns of parents, kids, taxpayers and the province' because of struggles with life-work balance, students' anti-social behaviour, and increasingly unrealistic expectations of what schools should and can do (Healey, 2006: A6).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, when we interviewed Ontario secondary principals working in what was then a highly accelerated and extremely pressured reform environment, they were exhausted and exasperated by unrealistic accountability requirements, unbearably all-consuming workloads, and increasingly overwhelmed and embittered teaching staffs (Goodson, 2003; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). These principals felt they were 'carrying the whole world', in a policy climate where 'the rules change, day by day in terms of what we can

and can't do' and 'implementing policies I do not agree with'. Within just three years of completing our study, most of the principals we interviewed had clearly had enough and had moved up into the district office, across to the private sector, out into graduate studies and early retirement, or away to mental health care facilities!

Even in more optimistic climates of educational reform, where accountability regimes are less punitive and hierarchical, and improvement processes are more professionally inclusive, engaging and even exciting, the sheer pace and urgency of efforts to raise student achievement can be overwhelming for educational leaders. This has been evident in an evaluation one of us has conducted of a network of more than 300 underperforming schools striving for improvement (Hargreaves et al., 2006). The good news is that two-thirds of the schools improved within two years as a result of networking with each other, accessing expertise from mentor schools, and circulating practical strategies for short-, medium- and long-term change among each other. But the difficulty is that although very many of these short-term strategies were praised by leaders and their teachers when they saw them in action, because they were so 'gimmicky and great', the energy demanded from engaging in networking, innovation and implementation under considerable time pressures was so intensive, that headteachers and assistant heads ran severe risks of burning out.

It's been the hardest year I've ever had, this year, because I've just been pulled in so many directions. I've really enjoyed doing the job, but you get a little bit of overload, because you go to conferences and you hear all of this stuff that's being done. And you think 'oh, we're not doing that! And how do we do? We need to go back and perhaps need to do some things.' So you get that pressure, that you think 'Oh, wow – are we as good as we really are? Should we really be here?' ... The other schools are really, really high-flying schools. And then I have the dreadful pressures from the head of department. And guilt ... And so I feel I've been very torn this year ... And I'm rushing – just rushing from place to place.

These examples are not unusual or isolated. There is a disturbing international crisis in leadership succession in the schools of many western countries. Leadership roles in education and particularly the job of the principal have become 'greedy work' because schools, school districts and educational reform expectations now make 'total claims on their members and