

CHAPTER 14 GLATTER, R. AND KYDD, L. (2003) “‘BEST PRACTICE” IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT: CAN WE IDENTIFY IT AND LEARN FROM IT ?’

Anything great is long in making. (Lao Tzu)

The term ‘best practice’ is now in common use within education and elsewhere. For example, it was included in the title of the first international conference of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in England in 2002: ‘An international future: learning from best practice worldwide’. Through this article we want to promote discussion about its usefulness. It is important that ideas which gain widespread currency are thoroughly analysed and debated. This applies particularly to notions like best practice which may seem to connote approved ways of doing things, in the context of a major new government-sponsored organization such as the NCSL. Proposals for a national staff college for school leaders have been around in the UK at least since 1967 (Michael, 1967) but were often received with considerable scepticism: ‘Underlying these doubts was a justified fear that a single orthodoxy about administrative practice would develop’ (Glatter, 1972: 52). So the college’s approach to ideas like best practice will be an important indicator of its general stance towards conceptual inclusiveness and pluralism.

We will seek to address the questions raised in the title by examining:

- significant aspects of *practice* in educational leadership and management (ELM);
- issues surrounding the concept of *best practice*;
- the scope for *learning* from best practice;
- implications for *professional development and research*.

Aspects of Practice in ELM

Before addressing ‘best practice’ it is worth considering issues relating to the nature of ‘practice’. Four general and closely inter-related features of practice in ELM seem to us of particular relevance to the topic of this article:

- the impact of context on practice;
- the 'multi-level' nature of practice;
- practice as either individual or corporate;
- complexity and ambiguity.

The significance of the *context* within which leadership and management is practised has become increasingly recognized (Glatter, 1989; Goldring, 1997), and is stressed by analysts from widely divergent traditions. For example, Gunter (1999), writing from a radical perspective, argues that producers operate within a complex institutional framework and a set of power structures which authorize and legitimize their work. Reviewing leadership studies across sectors including business, O'Neill concludes that

Most approaches to the study of leadership have been person-centred . . . They pay little heed to the impact of group dynamics or the effects of organisational context on the leader or the kind of leadership that is most appropriate in the larger context. (O'Neill, 2002b: 7)

Glatter (1997: 188) has drawn on published case-study evidence in the British further education sector to suggest that 'indifferent management can be good enough to secure survival in some contexts, while even talented leadership can fail to prevent closure or amalgamation in others'. One of Bolman and Deal's propositions towards a more realistic view of leadership in their outstanding US study concerned leadership and context: 'Traditional notions of the solitary, heroic leader have led us to focus too much on the actors and too little on the stage on which they play their parts' (Bolman and Deal, 1991: 408). They argued that for the adage 'Leaders make things happen' we should substitute 'Things make leaders happen'.

A question that arises from this discussion is: what and whose practice are we talking about? ELM practice occurs at many levels within educational organizations and beyond them. Within educational organizations it occurs at individual, group and organizational levels; beyond them at district and national education ministry level. However, a conventional tri-level model of educational systems—institution, local authority, national (or state) ministry—no longer seems adequate in contemporary globalized and centralized environments. Additional levels, encompassing national political leaderships (including national treasuries), and international bodies with executive powers such as the European Union, need to be recognized. It may be argued that these latter levels are essentially concerned with policy rather than with leadership and management practice. The conceptual and empirical arguments against such a distinction in kind between policy and management were first put more than 20 years ago (Glatter, 1979) and they are even stronger today, following more than a decade of structural transformation in many countries¹ and a growing emphasis, in the UK and elsewhere, on 'delivery' of educational outcomes. The 'macro' and 'micro' levels are increasingly intertwined and the provision experienced by students is the result of a complex mix of policy, leadership and management activity at all the levels we have identified. All of these levels need to be included within a conceptualization of practice, both in the sense that educational leadership and management occur in all of them and that each forms part of the context for all the others. Thus we take a *multi-level perspective* on practice.

It is worth noting from the above that, as well as occurring at a variety of levels, ELM

practice can be either individual or corporate. The latter covers groups and teams within organizations but also 'when activities are sustained in an organisation by many different people who do not form a team and do not necessarily act together. These activities usually persist despite changes of personnel' (Eraut, 2000: 130). The corporate aspect of practice has led to a growing interest (in educational leadership and elsewhere) in 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998). As the previous quotation makes clear, however, it is not an essential feature of corporate practice that participants deliberately act in concert.

A final aspect of practice we want to mention here (and to which we will return) is the ambiguous nature of much ELM practice (Glatter, 1972), arising in part from complexity and uncertainty in the contemporary environment. Many writers, including management 'gurus' such as Stephen Covey (1998) and Charles Handy (1994, 1995) have drawn attention to this. Wallace (2002) has argued that an unintended consequence of UK central government education policy designed to reduce ambiguity (for example, through rational planning and performance management) has been to increase it through the complexity of the change process required for implementation. As a result of the pervasiveness of ambiguity, much ELM practice necessarily consists of attempts to resolve a series of intractable tensions and dilemmas—for example, over control and flexibility, innovation and stability—which present themselves in different combinations in specific decision situations (Cuban, 1992; Day et al., 2001; Glatter, 1996).

All these key features of ELM practice—its contextual, multi-level, and ambiguous nature and its individual or corporate character—need to be taken into account when considering the concept of 'best practice'. Unfortunately they tend to be seriously under-emphasized in much public and popular discussion and in official pronouncements, creating the potential for unrealistic expectations and misleading guidance.

Best Practice

Some of the implications for identifying 'best practice' will be evident from the preceding discussion, for example with regard to contextual differences. The dangers of cross-national prescription and assuming 'a false universalism' (Dimmock and Walker, 2000: 159) by disregarding fundamental cultural and structural differences are well known but not always fully understood or heeded (Glatter, 2002).

We need to be clear whether the claimed best practice refers to individual or corporate practice. It is also important to understand whether it focuses on specific techniques or methods, or on an overall view of what 'good' leadership and management is thought to be about. Some indications of this may be obtained from work conducted partly or wholly outside education, such as Michael Fullan's *Leading in a Culture of Change* (Fullan, 2001), which gives a number of insightful pointers, including:

- Moral purpose—or what Earley et al. (2002) refer to as 'values-driven leadership' in their case studies of 10 schools regarded as outstandingly well led—is critical to long-term organizational success.
- Change cannot be bull-dozed—it takes time and must be organic: develop capacity and secure internal commitment to solve complex problems.
- Check-lists are unhelpful in conditions of complexity—living systems cannot be directed along a linear path.

- 'The soft stuff is really the *hard* stuff, and no-one can really "engineer" it' (Pascale et al., 2000: 12).
- In a culture of frenetic change, there is a dangerous appeal in off-the-shelf solutions.
- Relationships and emotional development within the organization are of key importance.
- Visions need to be shared and emerge from experience rather than being imposed.
- The demand for charismatic leadership is a delusion born out of the confusion we feel in complex times.

On the last point, Fullan quotes the psychologist Anthony Storr: 'The charisma of certainty is a snare, which entraps the child which is latent in us all' (Storr, 1997: 233). Fullan's book was endorsed by the director of the NCSL and it presents in a highly engaging way a view about effective leadership practice with which we would concur from our reading of the literature, although the evidence trail is often uncertain or implicit. Like a great deal of other contemporary research and writing in the field it diverges sharply from some current official positions, for example, with regard to the assumed potency of the transformational model of leadership (Day et al., 2001; Gronn, 2000). Arguably it expounds a well-founded view of good leadership practice, especially as it offers a holistic approach to understanding and managing complexity, avoiding the reductionism which through simplification and fragmentation cannot meet the challenge (Chapman, 2002). Nevertheless, it should be recognized that even this perspective is partly based on 'contestable values' (Wallace, 2001: 31) and is culturally related, as will be any set of prescriptions for effective performance, however holistically framed.

A particular problem with the concept of 'best practice' in relation to educational leadership is that the strongest empirical work such as that by Hallinger and Heck (1999) indicates that the influence of leadership on outcomes is indirect, so how do we judge what practice is 'best'? Adopting the rhetoric of best practice runs the risk of forcing practitioners to widen the gap between espoused theories and theories in use (Argyris and Schon, 1974), which can have severe consequences:

Apart from preserving the often mourned but rarely narrowed theory/practice gap . . . , espoused theories provide professionals with a 'professional conscience' which urges them to judge their work according to a form of idealised practice which is unachievable. Over time this leads either to scepticism or to frustration and burnout. (Eraut, 2000: 123)

In conditions of complexity and ambiguity, as Fullan argues, leadership styles are needed which focus on longer-term sustainable improvement. His study was based on work with commercial organizations as well as schools. A UK author who, writing with a view of organizations as complex adaptive systems, sought to apply lessons from the most successful companies to the public sector, came to a similar conclusion: 'Sustainable improvement can be achieved only over a long period by incremental progress' (Chapman, 2002: 47–8). Even Leithwood and his colleagues, who espouse a version of transformational leadership in schools, are clear that evolutionary, including marginal, change will be the way forward and should be celebrated: 'Incremental approaches . . . avoid the debilitating and, finally, destructive "rhetoric of excess" that has typically accompanied previous reform efforts' (Leithwood et al., 1999: 220).

The leadership correlates of sustainable, long-term success in the business sector have been identified in Jim Collins's widely quoted study of 11 companies that went from 'good to great', the sequel to his highly regarded co-authored work *Built to Last* (Collins and Porras, 1994). The characteristics of the leaders of these companies were the opposite of those associated with transformational and charismatic leadership: they were modest, self-effacing and understated. They listened well, creating 'a climate where truth is heard'. They were ambitious, but the ambition was for their companies rather than themselves. They were results-driven but their focus was on *sustained* results. They attributed success to factors other than themselves but blamed themselves when things went poorly. Collins comments:

Larger-than-life celebrity leaders who ride in from the outside are negatively correlated with going from good to great. Ten of eleven good-to-great CEOs came from *inside* the company, whereas the comparison companies tried outside CEOs six times more often. (Collins, 2001: 40)

Finally, Collins states that his data were unexpected and 'it is an empirical, not an ideological finding' (p. 40).

This study clearly relates to a very specific type of organizational context, even within the business sector. We would suggest that the significance of such work for education lies particularly in its focus on leadership for sustainability, a relatively recent interest in business and management studies. It would be worth considering whether research on this theme might usefully be undertaken in education.

Aspects of the form of leadership described by Collins are captured in Wallace's (2002) concept of *orchestration* (see also Wallace and Pocklington, 2002). Although Wallace applies this specifically to senior leaders of large education systems in the context of a study of school reorganization, we think it may have a broader relevance. We suspect many of us who hold or have held formal leadership positions may recognize the task as essentially one of orchestration. Wallace refers to a dictionary definition of the term: 'to organise a situation or event unobtrusively so that a desired effect or outcome is achieved'. He continues:

Orchestration is unobtrusive, characterised by behind-the-scenes 'string pulling', it is evolutionary, and it includes attention to detail. Orchestration contrasts starkly with the public, visionary and charismatic behaviour widely popularised as hallmarks of leadership. (Wallace, 2002: 14)

Orchestration therefore contains elements of both of what are conventionally regarded as leadership and management. Wallace identifies three specific themes or sets of activities which are framed by the concept of orchestration: flexible planning and coordination; culture-building and communication; and differentiated support (2002: 16–17).

Fullan pointed to the importance of generating internal commitment for securing sustained change and suggested that 'the soft stuff is really the hard stuff'. In management terms, Bottery (2000) distinguished between the 'cold' approaches of targets, outcomes and performance indicators, and the 'hot' ones focused on enhancing motivation and commitment. Studies in the business sector have shown that progressive human resource management policies designed to enhance employee commitment, job satisfaction, trust

and engagement produce results in terms of hard outcomes such as productivity, profits, staff retention and customer satisfaction (Goleman et al., 2002; Patterson et al., 1997; Topolsky, 2000). Fortunately there is now in the UK at last serious engagement with the issues of job satisfaction, working conditions and commitment in education, at least for teaching staff (Johnson and Hallgarten, 2002). This is likely to bring to the fore the question of what constitutes good practice in the management of people. As the Audit Commission noted in their recent study of recruitment and retention in the public services, recruitment and retention 'are issues that go to the heart of the way that organisations are managed and led' (Audit Commission, 2002: 4). The study also indicated that responsibility for effective management of people lay at the system as well as the institutional level. We will return to this question in a later section.

An attempt was made recently to identify best practice in leadership development in large companies, drawing on published case studies and interviews, for the UK government-sponsored Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership (James and Burgoyne, 2001). Satisfactory criteria proved elusive:

The definition of best practice is extremely difficult, and it may be said to rely in part on consensual judgements and the idea that corporations that have become household names are probably 'doing something right'. (James, 2001: 10)

The first publication reported in the literature review is a US study entitled 'Leadership: Lessons from the Best' (Fulmer and Wagner, 1999). From an initial long list of companies six 'best practice partners' were finally selected through a screening process: one of these was Arthur Andersen, a then 'household name' which became embroiled in corporate scandals and is now defunct.

We need to ask whether 'best practice' is simply an alternative term for 'improvement', but a less accurate and hence potentially a misleading one, deriving from the vocabulary of 'excellence' and idealized practice. Before considering this further we will explore the notion of learning from best practice.

Learning from Best Practice

It could be argued that an orientation to learning is logically incompatible with a concept of best practice: notions of continuous learning and improvement (Leithwood et al., 1999) imply that practice is never 'best'. They imply an approach to educational innovation which recognizes the tentative and experimental character of the great majority of educational changes, whether at institutional or system level. Such an orientation cautions against the easy acceptance of purported solutions because, as Levin indicates in his insightful study of the process of reforming education in four countries:

The reality is that we do not know how to solve the educational and social problems we face. Success is not a matter of simply implementing someone's nostrum. The problems are deep-seated and multi-faceted. In such a situation the only way forward is to focus on experimentation and learning. (Levin, 2001: 198)

This suggests the possibility of developing a 'learning system' model of governance in an attempt to foster a culture of experimentation and learning at every level of practice.

The indicative components of such a model and its defining characteristics have recently been set out elsewhere (Glatter, 2003). In summary the components are:

- 'reform by small steps'
- focus on evidence-informed policy and practice (EIPP)
- tolerance of divergent views—minimal blame/derision
- creation of test-beds for innovation
- genuine partnerships built on trust
- reduction of conflicting incentives

Such a formulation should not be taken to imply that the inevitable tensions in educational governance can be wished away nor, in particular, that the realities of power can be ignored (Fielding, 2001). For example, a number of UK studies have shown how policies based on partnership and promoting the concept of a local 'family' of schools have been frustrated by existing power structures or incentive systems (e.g. Jones and Bird, 2000; Ofsted, 2001). The process of identifying the elements of a learning system for promoting improvement and innovation in a turbulent world needs to take full account of these forces.

Once again the question of practice *at various levels* is critical. Thus Eraut's research suggests that workplace learning 'depends on confidence, motivation and capability (knowledge and skills previously acquired), which in turn depend on how [staff] are managed and on the microculture of their immediate work environment' (Eraut, 1999: 118). This point needs however to be extended to cover the *macroculture* of the wider environment and system. Key issues here relate to *failure* and *trust* in relation to developing the confidence and motivation for learning. Failure can be valued as a source of learning rather than an opportunity for blame or recrimination: '*While failure is unacceptable, learning is not possible – with the paradoxical result that failures will continue*' (Chapman, 2002: 58–9; italics in original). This suggests that the potential for learning from *unsuccessful* practice may be at least as great as that from practice which is perceived to have been successful.

Bottery (2002) has argued cogently that trust is an under-theorized concept and has attempted an analysis with reference to educational policy and management, distinguishing for example between calculative and existential bases of trust relationships. Trust was also a central theme of the philosopher Onora O'Neill's BBC Reith Lectures in 2002. In one of them she argued that the current accountability regime based on detailed performance indicators and targets ('cold' management approaches, in Bottery's [2000] terms) 'builds a culture of suspicion, low morale and may ultimately lead to professional cynicism' (O'Neill, 2002a: 57). She also argued that its overall effect was to direct professionals' attention *away* from the needs of their clients towards those of the funders and regulators. This led to a distortion of the proper aims of professional practice: 'the new culture of accountability provides incentives for arbitrary and unprofessional choices' (p. 56).

Such analyses suggest that 'hot' leadership and management practice at all levels is likely to be most conducive to stimulating learning and continuous improvement.

A learning system also requires effective processes for learning at policy level. As Chapman (2002) argues, at this level lack of time often inhibits the development of a feedback loop linking policy design to outcomes, leading to failure and unintended consequences.

Finally, a learning orientation emphasizes, as we did in the previous section, the significance of context. The company best practice study referred to previously recognized this: 'The transfer of best practice [is] a complex issue because what is done in one place may not suit another . . . There is no single "one size fits all" solution possible when the requirements may be very diverse' (James, 2001: 4, 6).

The idea of 'learning from best practice' implies bottling a prescription formula. Learning in a social context is a more dynamic process and 'building a learning system for improvement' may provide a better focus for sustainable development. In the next section we consider how professional development and research might contribute to building such a system.

Professional Development and Research

Different types of institution are involved in professional development and research activity but, given our own background and also limitations of space, we will consider here specifically the implications of the preceding discussion for the contribution from higher education (HE). We stressed above the complexity and ambiguity which are central to contemporary leadership and management practice, and the resulting tensions and dilemmas which practitioners are called upon to try to resolve. Paradox and contradiction are pervasive features of organizational life. How then can HE contribute to the enhancement of practice at all levels and the development of a culture of learning and continuous improvement? We can only touch on this large question here.

We would support the view that 'in today's complex organisations, models based on linear and rational problem-solving do managers a tremendous disservice. Managers need to recognise, become comfortable with, and even profit from tensions and the anxieties they provoke' (Lewis, 2000: 765) and this process can lead to creative insight and change. HE has both strengths and weaknesses in this regard. Its mission commits it to open debate and intellectual questioning, unconstrained by current orthodoxy or conventional assumptions. This stance is arguably increasingly difficult to sustain 'in an era of high centralisation and a dominant rationalistic paradigm' (Glatter, 1999: 263) and within a growing contract culture. Resource-dependency exerts pressures on institutions to play a more technical role in both teaching and research, placing academic integrity and independence in jeopardy. Nevertheless the commitment to pluralism of thought and a degree of distance from structures of power provide an important focus for their distinctive contribution to the kind of 'learning system' outlined earlier.

However, a context of complexity, uncertainty and paradox also highlights a weakness which is perhaps especially evident in relation to professional development. Such a context crucially requires the development of leaders' practical and creative intelligence and not just their analytical intelligence (Sternberg, 1985). It requires the development of capability, not simply 'knowing that' (Jarvis, 1997). Eraut (2000) distinguishes between *codified knowledge* and *personal knowledge*. Codified knowledge is subject to quality control, for example by peer review and academic debate, appears in educational programmes and is explicit by definition. Personal knowledge includes codified knowledge in a personalized form but also process and experiential knowledge and impressions in memory, and it may be either explicit or tacit.

The expertise of universities is of course predominantly related to codified knowledge. This knowledge is extremely important for developing our understanding over the longer

term, but on its own it has limitations for current professional development. A government-sponsored survey of school 'middle managers' reported that higher education institutions were viewed 'as better at "pushing back the frontiers of knowledge" rather than providing training and development which focused on the needs of school leaders' (Earley et al., 2002: 58). Eraut (1999) has argued that virtually no teaching decisions can be made on the basis of 'gold standard' evidence, and the situation is similar in ELM, where Bolam has commented that 'we have a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives, which at best provide illumination and insight but which provide few guidelines for action' (Bolam, 1997: 275–6). In the context of 'high stakes' decision-making, Eraut suggests that school leaders aspire to a maturity of judgement sometimes referred to as wisdom, which is neither purely analytical nor purely intuitive but conveys 'an ability to deliberate about issues and problems, to see how different people might be affected and to put them into longer-term perspective' (Eraut, 1999: 122). A key challenge for HE institutions is the extent to which they can legitimately extend their expertise beyond codified knowledge to offer professional development that, through developing a wider range of capabilities, more fully prepares school leaders to operate in a complex world.

Many institutions have sought to grapple with this key issue since ELM was first established as a field of study in universities in the UK (Bolam 1997; Glatter, 1972), though it has rarely been the subject of research (Bennett and Marr, 2002). It is potentially significant that in the UK the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has explicitly included capabilities of the kind we have been discussing alongside skills related to codified knowledge in its qualification descriptors for masters level programmes. For example, these state *inter alia* that holders of a masters degree will be able to

- deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems . . .

They will also have 'the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring: the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility; decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations' (QAA, 2001a, 2001b). It is not clear how far and by what means HE institutions are seeking to fulfil these demanding but, in our view, entirely appropriate requirements and how their performance in this regard will be monitored.

The use of research for practice at all levels, including policy levels, raises similar issues. The exercise of judgement is central to practice, especially in complex and ambiguous conditions. Personal, including codified, knowledge is applied to a unique set of circumstances taking into account a range of implications and conflicting perspectives. Hence the distinction between *evidence-informed policy and practice* (EIPP) and the earlier *evidence-based* policy and practice is fundamental—the latter is incompatible with a framework which places judgement at the centre. EIPP requires researchers to communicate more effectively and clearly with practitioners than has generally been the case in the past. Structural and institutional forces, notably in the UK the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the growing professionalization of research, have militated against this (Levačić and Glatter, 2001).

We can only give here one or two indications towards a research agenda based on this analysis. First, ELM research should take full account of the four key features of practice

we identified at the beginning—the impact of context, the multi-level nature of practice, its individual and corporate character, and complexity and ambiguity. The latter is particularly significant in relation to leadership development, and research on this, which needs to be greatly expanded, should consider how the kinds of capabilities and transferable skills in the quotations above from the QAA qualifications framework can be developed.

A largely neglected area of ELM research, although it is a topic of growing importance nationally, both within and outside education, may be summarized by the heading 'quality of working life issues' (Sturman, 2002). These are questions of human resource management and development concerned with factors such as motivation, morale, commitment, trust, job satisfaction and workload relating to all categories of staff in schools. They are critical to levels of staff recruitment and retention, and also, if the findings of research in the business sector quoted above are applicable to education, to productivity and user satisfaction as well. Much more research attention should be given to these issues, and the impact of the performance management culture upon the factors identified should be examined (Gleeson and Husbands, 2001).

Conclusions

We do not suggest that the idea of 'best practice' should never be used, simply that it is often employed far too casually with the potential to mislead. It needs to be applied more rigorously and the criteria for assessing what practice is considered 'best' should be clearly specified.

More broadly, in England the NCSL has been charged by the government with the task of providing 'a single national focus for school leadership development and research' (Blunkett, 2000: 2). The implications of this phrase are profound and in some degree disturbing. We would hope that, in interpreting this brief, the college shuns over-prescription and that, where it does prescribe, it ensures it can demonstrate convincingly the rationale and evidence for the prescriptions. Also, we urge that, while seeking to become a 'single national focus', it nevertheless celebrates and promotes genuine debate and pluralism, because this is the stance that is most likely to bring well-founded advance in leadership development and research.

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Notes

1. In England, for example, this has had at least four elements, which interact with one another: (a) a sharp process of centralization and attendant detailed prescription, turning the English system from one of the least to one of the most centralized in the world; (b) a concomitant process of 'devolution' to institutions involving, in the schools sector, the exchange of powers over the curriculum (which schools largely lost to the centre) for powers over resources (where they made significant gains); or in Simkins's (1997) terms, the exchange of criteria power, concerned

with the 'what' and 'why' of service delivery, for operational power, concerned with the 'how' of service delivery; (c) the introduction of incentives to institutions to compete for students, and the encouragement of choice for 'consumers', thus creating a quasi- or public-market (Glatter et al., 1997; Woods et al., 1998); (d) the establishment of strong accountability regimes based on technical-rational, performance management principles.

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