Leading complementary schools: trials, tribulations and rewards.

Dr Anthony Thorpe,
Roehampton University,
London, UK.

Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference,
University of Warwick, 1-4 September 2010

This is a work in progress and comments are welcome. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss these topics further.

Corresponding presenter and author

Dr Anthony Thorpe,
Senior Lecturer in Leadership and Management,
School of Education,
Roehampton University (London), UK
Telephone: +44 (0)208 392 3895
Email: a.thorpe@roehampton.ac.uk
Web: http://www.roehampton.ac.uk
Leading complementary schools: trials, tribulations and rewards.

Anthony Thorpe,
Roehampton University, London, UK

‘Complementary’ schools now constitute a significant educational sector in the UK and yet little is known about those who lead these organizations. The schools (which are sometimes called ‘community’ or ‘supplementary’ schools) are operated on a part-time basis by voluntary organisations to meet the specific cultural and language needs of the different minority ethnic communities that they represent. Existing research has concluded that these schools are attempting to meet important social and cultural needs which have implications for education policy, social justice and community cohesion. However, the research has focused upon the place of these schools in the educational system and their impact upon students and their families, rather than those who lead and manage the schools. The paper explores some of the professional challenges that complementary school leaders face and how they deal with them along with plans for a research project.

Introduction

‘Complementary’ schools now constitute a significant educational sector in the UK and yet little is known about those who lead these organizations. The schools (which are sometimes called ‘community’ or ‘supplementary’ schools) are operated on a part-time basis by voluntary organisations to meet the specific cultural and language needs of the different minority ethnic communities that they represent. Existing research has concluded that these schools are attempting to meet important social and cultural needs which have implications for education policy, social justice and community cohesion. However, the research has focused upon the place of these schools in the educational system and their impact upon students and their families, rather than those who lead and manage the schools.
The paper explores some of the professional challenges that complementary school leaders face and how they deal with them as well as outlining a proposal for a small research project based around the following research questions:

1. How are complementary schools are organized and how they operate as organizations with a focus on leadership and management?

2. The identification of challenges, difficulties and also the advantages of how the schools operate.

3. What might be the strengths and weaknesses of leaders and managers from their own perceptions?

**Terminology**

Complementary schools are sometimes called ‘cultural’, ‘community’, ‘mother tongue’ or ‘supplementary’ schools. The term ‘supplementary’ (Cousins, 2005; Bristol, 2007) is often used to describe these organizations in local authority documentation where the schools are seen as supplementing the ‘mainstream’ state schooling and perhaps are judged to be subordinate to the mainstream. However, there is an alternative take on this term that sees such schools as being established by community groups in reaction to poor mainstream provision and so they are supplementing a lack in the educational opportunities for ethnic minorities (Abdelrazak, 2001; Li Wei, 2006).

In contrast, the term ‘complementary’ has been used by three ESRC funded research projects which have been completed in recent years (Martin et al., 2004; Cresse et al., 2007 and Francis et al., 2008). One argument for the use of the term rather than that of supplementary is that it stresses the value and importance of the schools and their contribution to people’s lives (Martin et al. 2004). However, Francis et al., (2009), see the term complementary as referring to a particular type of provision focused on language teaching.

**Existing research**

Existing research has concluded that these schools are attempting to meet important social and cultural needs (Li Wei, 2006; Maylor et al., 2010). However, research has been either on students in schools (see Francis et al., 2008) or looking at the interaction between language, identity and education within the context of the schools (Martin et al., 2004; Li Wei, 2006; Creese and Martin, 2006). Minty et al., (2008) looked at the aspirations of
teachers in the complementary sector. Where leaders were interviewed, it was for their views on the children, the staff and wider communities rather than themselves (Maylor et al., 2010).

In other words, research has focused upon the place of these schools in the educational system and their impact upon students and their families, rather than those who lead and manage the school. As mainstream school leaders can have a significant impact on student outcomes (Day et al., 2009) then complementary schools leaders may well have an equally important role, so who leads these organizations matters.

**Proposed Methodology**

Previous large scale research projects have involved the use of ethnography and case study employing methods such as observation, questionnaires and interviews (Martin et al., 2004 and Francis et al., 2008). There are many challenges including obtaining access to participants and ethical issues in balances of power and the appropriateness of researchers.

In this case, simple semi-structured interviews are conducted with senior leaders of a small number of complementary schools in the south east of England. The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews provide an appropriate way to allow the interviewees to express their perceptions around the particular aims of the research (Ribbens, 2007). This method was employed by Pratt-Adams and Maguire (2009) who conducted 11 interviews in their study, from an emotional perspective, of urban primary school leaders in England.

The sample will include female and male leaders of complementary schools drawn from a range of communities. The greatest concentration of complementary schools is in the capital. The leaders approached will be those already known to the researcher and those identified through contacts with the school federations. Whilst these schools often teach a language, it should be noted that the people who lead them are bi-lingual. However, it will not be assumed that the participants know or use the jargon of education leadership common to leaders of mainstream schools.

Grounded analysis offers a more ‘open’ approach involving the coding and categorizing of responses including the specificities of language and reoccurring themes as well as discrepancies (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). The English words the participants use to describe what they do are relevant because this is the language through which the schools interact with the broader education system and policy makers in England.

Procedures will be enacted to ensure informed consent, observe confidentiality and preserve anonymity (BERA, 2004). A particular ethical issue regarding the interviews themselves will be addressed through awareness of the interrelationships between educational leadership, context and culture that warn against trying to understand everything...
through a dominant Anglo-America view (BERA, 2004; Shah, 2004; Dimmock & Walker, 2005). It seems to me that complementary schools provide particularly rich and complex contexts where the application of a cultural framework to current expectations of leadership and management practices in order to avoid assumptions about good and appropriate practice. Shah (2007) point to this lack of understanding with specific reference to Islamic perspectives and she makes the point that such perspectives are not fixed entities. Francis et al. (2008) further note the dangers of stereotyping of cultures by members of staff themselves in complementary schools with regard to both ‘western’ culture and also the culture that the schools seeks to represent.

**Inclusion and marginalization**

As such these organizations are rooted in the community yet are often seem to be overlooked in discussions concerning the development of extended schools and the enhanced community ownership of local education. There has been a recent move to explore leadership as social justice rather than adherence to imposed reform agendas by a re-theorizing of educational leadership to emphasize the role of advocacy (Morrison, 2008; Anderson, 2009).

The marginalization of complementary schools has already been identified (Li Wei, 2006). There are, I would contend, at least two aspects of this marginalization which are those of exclusion and recognition. These two aspects relate to people being recognised as part of the wider community and fellow citizens, which links to the issue of complementary schools being recognised and how might they be recognised.

These two aspects relate to people being recognised as part of the wider community and fellow citizens, which links to the issue of complementary schools being recognised and how might they be recognised. These are schools operating in England educating members of the population. Are they English schools? Who is responsible for them? Whose ‘problem’ are they? Often the schools have the support of a foreign government embassies but what support from the British government? Note the role of the government in private education and the support and status it gives those organizations and the system as a whole. A recognition of diversity- of our own diversity as a country.

Many complementary schools face significant difficulties. As Francis et al., found with the Chinese schools they conducted their research in faced considerable problems with resources:

All schools were under-funded and under-resourced. Staff and pupils complained of the impact this made on the quality of service provided. Lack of funding for teacher salaries affected recruitment in terms both of supply, and the level of teaching
experience/qualification among recruits. Facilities were often limited. (Francis et al., 2008a p. 2).

Financial recognition is important though not the only form of recognition. Are the schools acknowledged by the system (yes Local Authorities take an interest)? This recognition links to status and being seen as having something to offer educationally not just in terms of content but teaching and learning. This requires an acknowledgment of the weaknesses of provision in mainstream schools especially for members of these communities (complementary schools as filling a big hole in the system) and that the way to address these weaknesses may not come through the existing mainstream channels. As Francis et al. (2008, p.16) suggest, if complementary schools ‘may have useful lessons for mainstream education...should they not enjoy greater mainstream support and recognition?’.

However, what do leaders and managers of complementary schools think about the position of the schools in terms of exclusion and recognition; and what might be done to ‘make things better’? Is there a possible way to integrate complementary schools within the educational system without harming their independence and the autonomy of their curriculum which they both prize and which might well be a contributing factor to their strengths (Martin et al., 2004 and Francis et al., 2008). What are the special challenges and difficulties for leadership and management that this possible integration has to address?

There are some anecdotal stories of tensions over use of the common premises and resources. Attempts to ‘mainstream’ complementary schools have been undertaken (Cousins, 2005) and research projects (Francis et al., 2008) have called for a greater articulation but how could this be done and is this desirable for the parties concerned? Cousins (2005) and Creese et al. (2007) are positive about the need for such ‘mainstreaming’, whilst Francis et al. (2008a) sound a note of caution when they say that complementary schools should consider the, ‘potential limitations on independence, autonomy of curriculum, pedagogy and so on if complementary schooling should become significantly supported by Government and/or amalgamated with mainstream schooling’. (Francis et al., 2008a p.17).

The headteacher (for example) has to link between the mainstream and the cultural school. This negotiation might include the physical of sharing premises with a mainstream school which prescribes room layouts and proscribes signs of the work of the complementary school. An example I know of is where the complementary school were told that they must empty all the rubbish bins before leaving the premises on a Saturday and leave ‘no trace’ of them having been there though many of the children attending the
complementary school returned to the same premises on the Monday. This has been characterised in other research as ‘passively hosting’ (Maylor et al., 2010 p. 135).

Links between mainstream and complementary schools: extended schools
As such these organizations are rooted in the community yet are often seem to be overlooked in discussions concerning and the enhanced community ownership of local education such as with the development of extended schools policy initiative (Thorpe, 2010). There are dilemmas faced by leaders of complementary schools face in seeking links and working with mainstream schools and the other players in the extended school policy agenda. A recent review of complementary schools identified 64% of surveyed complementary schools surveyed had links with a mainstream school (Maylor et al., 2010 p.133)

Extended schools are encourage by government to use ‘cluster working to promote the sharing of provision and expertise between schools (including between special and mainstream schools)’ (DCSF, 2007 p.10), and links with complementary schools are identified under community cohesion agenda of the Ajegbo Report on ‘Diversity and Citizenship in the Curriculum’ (DfES, 2007). However, the report noted that:

Not all school leaders have bought in fully to the imperative of education for diversity for all schools, in every location, and its priority is too low to be effective…links with the community- a rich resource for education for diversity- are often tenuous or non-existent (DfES, 2007:25)

Whilst many complementary school teachers also work in mainstream, Barradas has written of the ‘invisibility of complementary school teachers in mainstream schools’ (Barradas, 2010 p.141). This general problem and the causes of it has been summed up by a Local Authority co-ordinator who said:

The suspicion is that from the mainstream schools point of view this is a kind of a voluntary agency, it’s run by people who are not entirely professionally trained and so on, so the value of that education isn’t taken or deemed as appropriate (LA Coordinator). (Maylor et al., 2010 p.141)

Dilemmas in links with the mainstream
Complementary schools should consider the, ‘potential limitations on independence, autonomy of curriculum, pedagogy and so on if complementary schooling should become significantly supported by Government and/or amalgamated with mainstream schooling’. (Francis et al., 2008a p.17). Maylor et al., (2010) found concern amongst parents about state
funding and mainstream links leading to unwelcome increases in ‘testing, targets and accountability’ that would work against what the complementary schools were trying to achieve, for example one parent said:

Yes, they can give us the money...You know if they start laying down their rules and making it the same as a school then it won't be different and the key is that it is different to mainstream. (African-Caribbean Parent) (Maylor et al., 2010 p.141)

CIVITAS have also indentified this tension inherent within greater links with the mainstream especially as government have a particular wish to impose burdensome bureaucracy upon the organizations.

Such a regulated environment could stifle the freedom and independence that we have already established is one of the hallmarks and greatest assets of the sector. The danger, as voluntary agencies grow and change to look more and more like statutory departments whose function they hope to inherit, is that they end up becoming co-conspirators with government in destroying the very attributes of the sector which were precisely the reasons for embarking on this collaborative course in the first place. (Seddon et al., p.11)

For Barradas, with her particular focus on Portuguese speaking complementary schools, the challenge for complementary schools to find a way to maintain their individuality whilst developing their management to the benefit of the school and developing links with the mainstream schools and the funding opportunities they might bring. However, as she warns that:

Unless schools stand firm in their objectives, in their eagerness to improve what exists and make the most of limited resources, they may succumb to bureaucratic pressures to conform to a particular vision of education and loose the close links with the communities they serve’. (Barradas, 2010 p.147)

**Conclusion**

Complementary schools are rooted in the community yet are often seem to be overlooked in discussions concerning the development of extended schools and the enhanced community ownership of local education. It is contended that however, the agenda of extended schools raises new possibilities and challenges for leaders of mainstream schools and complementary schools. It is also suggested that there are important issues for the future of educational leadership that arise from the leadership of complementary schools for matters that include promoting education of all UK citizens, social justice and the improvement of
mainstream education. A research perspective informed by a conception of leadership as social advocacy rather than the technical implementation of external government reforms would also yield interesting results.

References
contribute to educational improvements, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 8 September 2010