LEADERSHIP AND TRUST IN EDUCATION —
THE OFTEN MISSING MAGIC GLUE

Abstract

This article examines the trend across the world to move towards centrally controlled education systems driven by a political desire that students might attain and schools be judged by a narrow range of measurable attainment targets with policing by inspections. It argues that this has emphasized management rather than leadership and that there is a need to refocus on more aspirational achievement aims for young people and schools. It defines and argues for integrity in both leadership and management and makes the case for the significance of the way in which leaders lead. A transactional approach leads to the erosion of trust and transformational leaders in contrast build this up.

The article explains why trust is so important and explains how trust can be developed in and by leaders and managers. It finishes by outlining the challenge of developing leaders and managers of high-trust school cultures.

Keywords: educational management, educational leadership, transformational leadership.

A global pandemic: the virus in our schools and society

An on-going debate in education is whether schools reflect society or whether they shape it. In truth it is probably a bit of both somewhat like the “which came first – the chicken or the egg” conundrum. Schools are or should be at least in part a model for society as it is and as it should be. If we have a selective, class-ridden, elitist education system (as in England), then the structures and systems in society (legal, financial, social) that generate the education system feed off and replicate it. Sometimes a few fortunate, resourceful individuals break the mould in such a culture but this is unusual. Similarly, a more inclusive system such as that in Norway may be said to help develop a more inclusive society for more individuals.

It could also be argued that this place of schools in shaping the future has become even more significant. Although other social agents influence the way children develop (families, peers, social workers and law enforcement agencies in some cases), school has become relatively more important in many societies as
changes in parenting and respect for authority have weakened. Most children go to schools, which are relatively stable environments, on most days. Schools may be characterized as “the last chance saloon” to solve societies’ ills. The “Every Child Matters” policy in England and “No Child Left Behind” one in the USA may be seen through such a critical lens.

Throughout many parts of the education world we are witnessing the spread of national standardized testing, a narrower curriculum with a focus on what we think we can measure (mainly in Mathematics, Science and English), increased public accountability frenzyed by inspection and performance management of individuals centred on measurable targets. Such an approach to education is based on local, national and international competition in relation to a narrow definition of attainment. Sahlberg [2012] calls this the “Global Education Reform Movement” (GERM) and he compares it to a virus that is spreading and has become the unofficial orthodoxy. Such competition, he claims, is eroding traditional public school systems. Over time this leads to a lack of trust and lowers morale and professionalism of teachers.

Chickens do come home to roost. What sort of society will those countries hell-bent on catching the GERM inherit in the future?

Leaders or managers of schools?

Accepting a link between schools and society raises important issues for those who are the leaders of our schools. Leaders decide on the direction in which an organization is moving having justified it and they continually check progress. In the light of this, managers move the organization forward. Are those in charge of schools today infected and affected by the GERM of centrally prescribed performativity not leaders at all but rather managers? Are they really civil servants, employees of the State, who are paid to do as they are told to replicate the established norms of the society in which they operate even if these are those of injustice and inequality? Or rather are those running our schools leaders with a sense of moral purpose, with the courage of their convictions – what Bottery calls “trusted gatekeepers” [Bottery 2007: 89]. For example are they driven by doing what is right for all children (not just those in their immediate care) in order to improve society based on moral tenets such as social justice and equity?

Integrity: the backbone of leaders and managers

Whether we are leaders or managers or a combination of the two, we need integrity. This means that there is a consistency between what we think, say and do. Leadership and management only exist if there is followership and committed followers need to believe in the thoughts, words and deeds of their leaders and managers.