'Positive Disruption': The Courage to Lead in times of Reform in England

Qing Gu – q.gu@ucl.ac.uk University College London
Monica Mincu – m.mincu@ucl.ac.uk University College London
Christopher Day – christopher.day@nottingham.ac.uk University of Nottingham

Abstract

This chapter proposes a fresh analytical perspective to investigate how a school principal, a leading social agent of change, has initiated and sustained the "positive disruption" of governance and structure in one organisation. Our findings draw upon a series of in-depth interviews with various key social actors and as represent as follow-up case study of an inner-city primary school, located in a socioeconomically highly deprived community. Turning policy tools into allies, i.e. the academisation wave and then the creation of MATs, this principal can transform external accountability into an internally assumed and then collegially shared value. Similarly, she enhances her managerial autonomy to develop successful leaders at different school system levels. One significant finding is that success in schools is an evolving, dynamic and resilient process of change and improvement. In this sense, relational capital, as necessary social foundations for change, leadership capital and the courage to enact values and disturb norms are essential ingredients. Another lesson relates to the possibility of identifying successful leaders through their passionate, risk-taking and system-oriented attitude. A portrait of a "positive disruptive" leader reveals the prevalence of the personal over the functional as an act of courage to tell vulnerability and create community.

Keywords

Principalship, change and improvement, positive disruption, accountability, values and vision

Part 1 Introduction

The leadership challenge: policy and reform

Schools in England have undergone considerable reform over the past two decades and their principals have had to learn to manage increased volumes of government educational-policy initiatives designed to raise standards of teaching, learning, and academic outcomes for all students. Among these, the effort to create a decentralized system – which is claimed to give schools more autonomy for better pupil performance – has been a key ingredient of the recent reform movement (e.g. Eyles, Hupkau & Machin, 2016).

Such effort is governed and regulated through contracting models which have seen the rise in school networks in the English school system. In a contracting model the government delegates responsibility for provision to "for-profit" or "not-for-profit" organizations that are required to deliver contractual outcomes in return for payments from government, whilst preserving the capacity for government to exert hierarchical and accountability control. At the same time, networks of schools and frontier professionals have been considered to be best placed to articulate the local needs and identify responsive solutions to improving school performance that are culturally and educationally meaningful and relevant to their students and communities. In essence, the English governance model is a three layered governance system, characterised by interactions between markets of: providers, hierarchical control from multiple centres (e.g. Department for Education, Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, a non-ministerial department that inspects services providing education for children of all ages in England), and schools as well as networks of schools (Mincu & Davies, 2019, Mincu & Liu, 2022). The introduction of academy schools by the Labour party in the 1990s and early 2000s marked a significant milestone in the UK Government's continued reform effort to establish a decentralised quasi autonomous, school-led education system – in which, initially, the challenge of addressing social inequality through education becomes central to the notions of school improvement (Gu & Colman, 2023).

Academies are state funded schools, operating outside the control of the local authorities. Governed by a governing body, academy schools enjoy the autonomy of school management and administration including the hiring and firing of staff, admissions, teacher salaries, school

2

budgets and curricular. In the 2000s converting some existing underperforming secondary schools to become sponsored academies was the Labour's response to the pressure of improving the quality provision of education for all children – especially those living in disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Following this initial programme and especially the legislation via the Academies Act of 2010, a Conservative/Liberal Democrats coalition (2010 – 2015) and three successive Conservative governments have broadened and deepened the transference of all schools to academy status through either conversion or sponsorship. By 2023, around 80% of secondary schools and 40% of primary schools in England are academies (DfE, 2023).

It is important to note that there is a marked difference in the types of schools converted to academies before and after the Academies Act in 2010. The mass academisation that occurred after the legislation had seen the conversion of not only poorly performing schools attended by students with disadvantaged backgrounds (as sponsored academies supported by high performing academies and schools, universities, businesses etc), but also high performing schools serving advantaged communities. As the academies programme further developed, multi-academy trusts (MATs)[1] were promoted by consecutive Conservative policies to enable academies to form not-for-profit companies that are accountable for raising standards in schools. Each MAT is governed by a Board of Trustees who focuses on three core functions of governance: ensuring clarity of vision and strategic direction; holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the MAT; and overseeing the financial performance of the MAT[2]. Such policy moves have seen the role of local (education) authorities as a mediating layer to improving education standards in the English system continue to diminish. The key question then is whether the policy intention to developing a localised, quasi autonomous, academy schools and trusts led system (Department for Education, 2022) has achieved its desired impact on transforming the educational experiences and outcomes for all students.

---

[1] Parliament UK (2022): Multi-academy trusts (MATs) are not-for-profit companies that run more than one academy. https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/education-multi-academy-trusts/#:~:text=Multi%2Dacademy%20trusts%20(MATs),termed%20a%20'converter%20school'.
[2] Multi-academy Trusts https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576240/Multi-academy_trusts_good_practice_guidance_and_expectations_for_growth.pdf

The evidence for this is inconsistent and inconclusive. Although sponsored pre-2010 academies had showed significant improvement in student outcomes from a much lower base overall, there is limited evidence on the sustainability of this success (Hutchings & Francis, 2016, 2018; UK Parliament, 2022). Analysis of pupil intake by the pre- and post-2010 academies programmes also suggests that, at least in the early stages, 'the initial model of trying to turn around badly performing schools serving disadvantaged students became one of a school reform catering for better performing schools serving advantaged pupils' (Eyles, Hupkau & Machin 2016, p.474). Moreover, Hutchings and Francis's (2018) investigation into the effects of academy chains3 and especially multi-academy trusts on low-income students points to a significant disparity within and between the chains, indicating that the same small group of chains consistently outperformed the national average for disadvantaged students, whilst a larger group of low-performing chains continued to struggle to improve and 'may be harming the prospects of their disadvantaged students' (2018, p.5). Importantly, those chains that were most successful with disadvantaged students also tended to be successful with their more affluent students, while less successful chains tended to have poor results for both groups. Such variation in academic performance has also been reported by the Department for Education's (DfE, 2022) own analysis which shows that on average, the poorest performing MATs do less well than the poorest performing local authority schools and that the higher performing MATs significantly outperform the better performing local authority-maintained schools.

It is perhaps no surprise that critical voices of the reform argue that, although academisation appears to have placed emphasis on school autonomy and school-level leadership to raise standards within and between schools, autonomy is 'more than balanced out by changes to the accountability framework, which have allowed the state to continue to steer the system from a distance and to increase its intervention when and where it deems necessary (Greany & Higham, 2018, p.11). Put differently, the reference to this system as one of 'high autonomy' (Spielman, 2019) is predicated on high levels of external accountability (Gu & Colman, 2023)

---

3 An academy chain is a partnership between a group of academies which may be based on informal, collaborative agreement or formalised shared governance and structures. Multi-academy trust is a form of academy chains.

in that the increase in autonomy is inextricably bound with a concomitant increase in performance for schools – reinforced by an external inspection regime that employs 'judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of control, attrition and change' (Ball, 2017, p.57).

Although we are not in disagreement with the critique's deep concern over the negative consequences of performativity-related mechanisms, measures and systems that are externally imposed on schools through policy and reform, together with many colleagues on the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP), we are more interested in understanding why some school leaders, regardless of the systems of governance, geographies, and the socio-economic state of the communities that they serve, successfully manage to mediate the influences of reform, and lead their teachers and students to survive and thrive over time, whilst others falter. The sustained success of those high performing local authority-maintained schools, academies and MATs – irrespective of their contexts – begs the question of whether it would be more productive to look into what happens inside those schools and understand how they are able to consistently provide a high-quality and inclusive education for children from advantaged as well as disadvantaged backgrounds over time, and the role of their principals in that achievement.

The case study upon which this chapter is based explains how a principal has led a highly disadvantaged primary school to sustained success in times of intensive and pervasive policy reforms. The analysis of this English case study is informed by the philosophy of disruption which is deeply concerned with social changes that enhance and transform the practice and experience of everyday life of individuals and their institution (Manu, 2022). The choice of this philosophical and analytical approach has been inspired by her own narratives of her leadership identity as a positive disruptor who embraces external policy reforms as "opportunities" for change by aligning resources in ways that has enabled her to harness knowledge, skills and capacity of the staff and create values-based landscapes of success for the children in her school over time.

Part 2 The Case Study

2.1 Research conceptualisation

Educational change and improvement have been conceptualised in different ways in different research traditions. In this chapter we engage with the philosophical lens of 'disruption' and use it to *make sense of* the world of the school principal in the case study and how she has led her school to sustained success over time. The conceptual strengths of using this philosophical lens to analyse how leadership matters in times of change are at least twofold.

First, the philosophy of disruption invites us to rethink disruptive change *not* as an instantaneous, accidental phenomenon that occurs in one moment and finishes very rapidly (Manu, 2022). Rather, as Manu (2022) argues, disruption is a flowing, dynamic and organic process which breaks the routine of how people think and behave and how they operate and interact with each other to accomplish tasks. Organisations such as schools also have routines which are often expressed by those involved as 'the ways that we do things here.' When disruption occurs, the extent to which individuals are able to take the challenge, survive and thrive in an entirely different setting depends on their ability to learn, adapt, and embrace the changes that are most likely to redefine not only their ways of living and working, but more fundamentally, their ways of reasoning and their *expectations*:

> Disruptive changes in the world – in the micro, the macro and at different levels of an organisation – only *occur through the disruption of reasoning and the reengagement of the structure of the way we know the world*. … Disruption disrupts our *understanding of what is*, what ought to be and of what is possible. Disruption spoils the models we operate from about how the world should be to accommodate the needs and desires of society and individuals.
>
> (Manu, 2022, p. 34)

Manu goes on to explain that the nature of disruption is a phenomenon that can be understood 'as the mending of the old structure of a previously established system into a new, more efficient structure' (2022, p.39). Thus, as disruption unfolds to reshape the lives of a school organisation, it disturbs its systems, structures, practices and relationships at different levels, and functions as a catalyst for profound transformation in *how* individuals and teams envision the difference they want to make and *how* the organisation creates new cultures and structures upon which they operate to realise the new vision. In schools that

have long struggled to raise the standards of teaching and learning, disrupting their existing routines, systems and deep-seated ideas about teaching and learning gives hope and promise to the learning and achievement of the students. The ISSPP research has provided ample evidence over the years that successful school organisations share many common characteristics including leadership practices, organisational cultures and conditions. However, although successful principals employ similar strategies, and hold similar values, how they engage in and respond to different forms of disruption on ordinary school days, and rebuild new routines, capacities and organisational systems in ways and at times that enable their schools to continue to thrive differs. A diverse range of context-specific factors influence this change process. Key in this regard is how school leaders understand the costs, challenges and impact of disruption for the future of the organisation, and how they harness the purpose, values and capabilities of individuals and teams to create cultures and structures that challenge their existing expectations and improve their practices and actions. And with that, we see the act, leadership and management of disruption as a core, transformative ingredient of successful leadership.

Second, and related to the first, is that disruption provides us with a philosophical and conceptual lens that defines the role of school leaders as *positive disruptors* who influence individuals and teams by challenging their current views and practices about education and by reshaping organisational structures, cultures and opportunities to enable them to thrive. Manu (2022) argues that change involves shifts in the nature of relationships, the organisational culture, self-concepts and communication. The trigger is the clear recognition of a status quo and the presence of a disruptor who adopts a new framework of thinking, doing, and being. Although in a disruption process the awareness of the status quo is key, it is not enough.

As the case study story in our chapter will show, the main social agent of change is the school principal who has the vision, values, knowledge, and capabilities to align the organisation's current strengths, and who knows how to capitalise on the staff's individual and collaborative efforts to envision and enable a new way of knowing, doing and achieving for children and young people in their schools which may be different from those that have become the norm. Disruption in this sense is likely about change of values, mindset, behaviour, processes and

structures, as well as social relations in organisational settings that will lead to collective effort to achieve what the organisation stands for. The disruptive leader begins with rebuilding a collective vision for the organisation and then energises and galvanises the internal and external community around new ways of doing and being. A profound disruptive transformation leads to a new infrastructure, new social relations inside and in the outer environment, and a redefinition of the settlement (Manu, 2022) – the organisation.

2.2 Research methodology

The case study methodology has followed the ISSPP's recently re-modelled research guidelines and protocols that are informed by complexity theory (Morrison, 2010) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and which view contemporary schools as complex adaptive systems and social institutions with layers of influence in a rapidly changing society (Day, Ylimaki & Gu, 2023). The underlying rationale for the new protocols is underpinned by ISSPP research-informed understanding that system change is best understood as a complex, non-linear, interdependent, dynamic and disruptive process at and between different levels within and beyond the school system.

Selecting the case: Identifying a successful case study school serving highly disadvantaged inner-city communities

This inner-city primary school serves a socioeconomically highly deprived community. When Christine was appointed 2011, more than half of the children (56%) were eligible for free school meals (cf 24% on average nationally) and 16% of children spoke English as an additional language. Its size was smaller than average with falling school roll and its performance was amongst the bottom 200 underperforming schools nationally.

As we have learned from previous research about this school (Gu et al., 2016 & 2021), despite external challenges and the prolonged underperformance of the school, Christine wanted to make a positive difference to the learning and life chances of the pupils. She approached a multi-academy trust (MAT) to seek leadership support and mentoring, and led her school to join the MAT as a 'sponsored' academy in the second year of her principalship. Becoming part

of the MAT (which also leads a Teaching School Hub[4]) had broadened her leadership horizon and Christine saw her leadership vision, confidence and capacity grow and mature within a short time period. In May 2014, four years after Christine became principal of the school, it was judged to be 'outstanding' by Ofsted inspectors. The academic results of the school had also grown from strength to strength, from being in the top quintile of performers for both *attainment* and *progress* (based on value added outcomes which consider pupils' prior attainment) when benchmarked against similar schools nationally in 2013 to being in the top 10 performers in 2014.

Christine is no longer the principal of the school. She took on an executive leadership role for two schools before becoming Director of School Improvement (primary) responsible for the provision of quality education in all 17 primary schools in the MAT (including the case study school). Nonetheless, ten years on the school has maintained its 'outstanding' status and because of its sustained success, has grown in size from a one-form entry to a two form-entry academy and become a larger than average school with pupils from different areas of the city in which the school is located.

Researching the case: This case study is primarily based on interviews. The research team conducted three in-depth interviews with the principal and two in-person interviews with the current principal who started her teaching career at this school twenty years ago. Additionally, we also interviewed three teachers with middle and senior leadership responsibilities, a class teacher and a lead teaching assistant who had been working at this school for more than a decade. We distributed the ISSPP teacher survey questionnaire to all staff in the school. However, because of the small staff size (n=22) and the low response rate, we are unable to present the survey results in this chapter.

In the remaining part, we will present in detail what we have learned about Christine's biography, educational values, and leadership vision, and how she has enacted them to lead the school on a journey of continued change for improvement and success. To turn around a disadvantaged, underperforming school in times of change and reform, she did more than

---

[4] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/teaching-school-hubs

manage the external demands. Key to success has been the ways she deliberately disrupted the culture, structure and capacities of the school *internally* in promoting change for the good.

2.3 The biography and educational values of the principal: the passion to lead

Christine became principal of the school in the most challenging circumstances when the school was considered "a bottom 200, and nobody wanted to hear of it" (Principal). She had been deputy principal of a successful inner-city school but decided to take on new challenges which would enable her to make a difference at a different level. She describes herself as a "positive disruptor" who is creative and passionate about energising people and creating the space and opportunity to help them see what they can, rather than cannot achieve. Her passion and drive to be a disruptive school leader who is committed to expanding the vision and capacities of her staff can be understood in light of her biography, which reveals how her experience in harsh circumstances had shaped her subsequent behaviours, relationships, and practices.

Christine is the first in her family to become a university graduate, and her involvement with education started during her secondary schooling as a sixth form student volunteering in a primary school. Her degree in sports taught her the qualities of "being an effective team member and everybody playing their part". Shortly after, she led the physical education (PE) department in a large secondary school, where she remained for 19 years and became a vice-principal. Her passion for instilling energy in people is linked to being a sports professional and, later in her career, a professional coach, well-versed in influencing and mentoring people: "Creating energy and people attempting things they don't think they can do is…all that…kind of floats me" (Christine). In her leadership role, she draws upon her authentic self: "I am an authentic talker, and I am an authentic people person".

When Christine applied for the principal's position, she felt that the children at the school needed her. Such desire to serve and to improve the learning and life chances of the children was driven by her commitment for equity, openness, respect and honesty. Through supporting and inspiring "the underdogs" in the school who felt that they were "disempowered," Christine focused on harnessing social relations and modelling her commitment for equity and achievement in the daily lives of the school. The following quote

from Kim, the current principal of the school, clarifies why Christine's passion has been fundamental to what the school stands for today:

> What do the children need, what will excite them, what make them want to come to school, or make the parents think that's the school send my child to? … It was very much a case of you will go far if you do what you have to do for this school for our children. It was just that passion that was just ignited in everyone. (Principal of the school, Kim)

Seeing herself as a disruptive leader, Christine felt strongly that her role involved capitalising on collective expert and experiential knowledge amongst the staff to break down the barriers, mindsets and practices that were in the way of creating a different organisation where both the staff and the students could thrive. Since her school became a sponsored academy of the MAT, Christine had the opportunity to be "nurtured" by the CEO of the MAT, who challenged her to develop a systemic leadership vision and provided her with opportunities to work with like-minded school leaders in the Trust and overseas. Christine experienced a steep learning curve and brought back new ideas and increased confidence to turn around the insular culture of her school and rebuild a forward-looking and outward-facing school.

> So I think my authentic self is being a facilitator and a listener, more of a coaching space, but real clarity and simplicity of what we want, which was where the "GREAT"[5] word came in, because we felt that one word represented how we wanted to work, and what that looked like, enabled everybody to play a part, because we were never going to move that school unless everybody did something. (Christine)

Christine did not believe that her role was about rigidly following or pleasing the requirements of external policies and inspections. Rather, she saw herself as "gatekeeper" of external demands and wanted to know how other leaders had successfully managed to mediate the influences of reform, and lead their teachers and pupils to thrive over time. Seeing successful

---

[5] Each letter of the word GREAT represents one of the expectations at the school. It is part of their learning culture.

practices in other schools gave her space for reflection, creativity and imagination. Manu (2022) argues that "imagination is the strategy of visualising one's vision and then consciously engaging with the environment to act upon it" (2022, p.72). Christine's child-centred leadership value gave her the confidence and courage to take risks in deciding how to mediate external demands in ways that were educationally and culturally meaningful to her school, the school community and the learning needs of the students. She was proud that she did not fall into a complacency trap made of "boxes and milestones." Rather, she was inspired to find innovative ways to "reinvent relevant practices locally" which had the interests of the children at the centre of school life.

2.4 Disrupting the mindset of fear: Dismantling the *status quo* by nurturing values-led, high-trust cultural dynamics that enabled creativity, accountability, and risk-taking

Christine still remembers vividly her first visit to the school when the infant and junior sectors of the school "acted in silos." A corridor divided the school into two separate parts and there were no coherent displays throughout the school to explain its common purposes and vision. Nonetheless, Christine "fell in love" with the school, despite that it was in a state of disarray and lacked direction and vision. She spoke about her deep respect for the staff who worked hard to make a difference but struggled to see any impact.

> I kind of walked around it and fell in love with it. I fell in love with the environment, the energy, the people who were working really hard, but not necessarily the right things. But it had lost its way. It hadn't got any direction. (Christine)

Lack of vision and shared purpose is perhaps one of the most common symptoms of underperforming schools; and as we have learned from ISSPP research over the last 20 years, such symptom finds its cause in weak leadership. This school was no exception.

> These people needed someone to facilitate. They needed somebody to give them the space to talk, give them space to try things without the risk, but at the same time have very high standard and high expectations. (Christine)

To break through a culture of low expectations, poor communication and lack of trust, Christine insisted on the staff working collectively to share and delegate responsibilities. Although she believed in the potential of the staff, she recognised that their mindset of fearing failure and making mistakes needed to be reversed: "Able to make mistakes and learning from that experience was really important. … The staff was fearing that, and if the staff weren't going to model risk taking, there was no way a child was going to. I'm very aware of that as a leader." (Christine)

The new vision of the school, "working together to achieve personal greatness," was underpinned by a belief that "individual empowerment results from quality working" (school website). This vision was developed from five lessons that Christine and the staff learned from observing how geese work together as a team to support, nurture and encourage each other to reach their destinations: helping each other to achieve goals; staying in formation as a team to head where we want to go; respecting and sharing each other's unique arrangement of skills, capabilities and resources; standing by each other with empathy and understanding; and encouraging each other to aim high together. This vision placed *teamwork, empathy and understanding* at the heart of "the way we work" in the school (school website): The geese team knew how to take advantage of the lifting power of the birds in front and would stand by each other to take the lead in difficult times. As Louise who began her career here put it, everyone in the school had a "voice":

> Everyone is encouraged to have a voice and everyone's voice is valued as well. No matter if you're a teacher system, new teacher, part of middle leadership, we are encouraged to share how things that are impacting us. (Louise, middle leader)

Eleven geese represented 11 values that Christine and the staff thought their school should live and breathe by. Each month of an academic year the school would focus on one value (e.g., Love) and create various opportunities to bring the school community together to explore what this value looked like in the school, in the community and in the world. Ten years on, the flying geese are still living on the walls of the school and remain at the heart of what the staff and the students think about their school and their shared values:

13

The geese with the most feathers, that's how much values we've got. So we've chosen the geese to represent our school … because they stick together flying in clumps and stick together to care for each other. (Year 6 student).

Respect, kindness, honesty, forgiveness and creativity were among the 11 core values which promoted a mindset and a way of working in sharp contrast to that of fear, vulnerability and negativity. Christine knew well that the external accountability and policy demands, expressed through inspections and performance league tables, imposed a "fear base" for the education system. However, she believed, strongly, that she had to lead the staff to *dismantle* the old culture and mindset that underpinned the school's history of underachievement. Building a safe and disciplined school environment – where teachers and students shared high expectations and aspirations about learning and achievement and where they had the confidence to take risks and use their creative energy to reach the potential – held hope and promise for the future of the school.

Accountability was also introduced to the school community as a *value* rather than *a function* to because in essence it was not about filling data sheets, but about "what you're here to do and why you make the difference." As a school leader, Christine felt most passionately that "there's no point putting our energy into fighting it because we can't fight the system. So let's take that energy and put into something positive." Because the motivation to inspire children's learning and achievement came from within, accountability at the school was not portrayed *a stick* but celebrated as *an inner drive* that brought teachers and the community together to be creative in what they *could* do to make a difference:

We have to be creative… we have to find our own way because at the end of the day, we're accountable to the children. … When government agendas or the latest Ofsted framework change, that's okay. We can continue working with that set of values in our ecosystem. It's not a dogmatical diligence to external forces …but grown within inquiry mindedness. (Christine).

The value of "thinking about the children and then being accountable for their learning" (Mary, Class teacher) was shared by the staff to whom we spoke at the school. As a teaching assistant who had worked in the school for more than a decade put it, "as you grow up in working here, you spend more time with people's children than the parents do. So you realise actually, you are really important in their lives, and you are the ones that make a difference" (Michelle, teaching assistant). Whilst teachers were accountable for planning "amazing" lessons (Mary, Class teacher), providing constructive feedback in the books, and knowing the data of all their students and how to help those falling behind to catch up, students were themselves also expected to be accountable for their learning, behaviour and progress. In this sense, the value of values-led accountability meant:

"… preparing them [the students] for life after school. We teach them to be accountable to themselves, because if you don't, then you're not going to be successful. If they're not being accountable with this lesson, they're going to struggle tomorrow. So I think it links in with their independence and their responsibility as well." (Christine)

Using a common language, as exhibited on the school's walls and in the corridors and classrooms, to communicate, clarify and celebrate "the way we work" (school website), was critical to how Christine had managed to challenge the *status quo* and brought the staff together to rethink and uncover critical insights about new meanings of teaching and learning. She was convinced that everybody had to have "the big picture" of what was going on in the school and that the clarity of language would prevent second guessing. To this end, every member of the staff was encouraged to contribute ideas as weekly spontaneously inputs to the school improvement plan. Regular team conversations stemmed out from her philosophy of valuing people before asking them to engage in more actions. Success was about enabling and ensuring that every child had the desire, confidence, self-assurance and ability to learn, and was celebrated in connection with the values of the school to instil a collective sense of pride and achievement: "We celebrated every little win, every little success. And we created a culture where there would be a shoutout what people would like. … So it was that all the time, we were looking for what we were doing well, as opposed to constantly looking at what we still needed to do" (Christine).

2.5 Breaking boundaries to restructure relationships: strategies for building the social foundations of learning and improvement

The power of relationships in an organisation lies in the connectivity between people which creates the necessary social foundations that *enable* trusting and constructive collaborations to take root, and through these, new ideas to develop, to grow, and to flourish. Christine's sports background and 19 years of teaching and leadership experience in a large successful school led her to be believe that successful schools could only thrive on trust and collaboration. The following five strategies were amongst the most impactful leadership strategies that she had used to disrupt and reshape the relational connections within and outside the school.

(1) Breaking down the silo mentality in the school began with breaking down the walls that used to divide the school into infant and junior sections – because "the school was completely cluttered, not only in mind, but also in physical things as well" (Christine). A "progress corridor" was created to restructure a physical environment that encouraged and enabled a coherent flow of communication and the connection between people.

> Going back to we wanted them to be articulators of learning. And we need to make it really explicit. And the same with a teacher: I don't want to teach her to be fearful of "Can I remember all the bits?" What's a good structure of a lesson? Well, let's put it on the wall so everyone can see it, including the students. They'll understand why. And then we're going to get there quicker. So I'm very explicit in things in the environment. I mean, the corridor that linked the two siloed areas. I called it the progress corridor. (Christine)

The current principal of the school Kim explained that, even today, the corridor signified not only a physical connection within the school but more importantly, an exciting learning-focussed environment which brought alive the values of the school and became the centrepiece of the celebratory culture of the school:

We called it the progress corridor and on it, we tried to show progress. And the idea was that you start with the youngest children and show the development of their learning. So when they're walking, they can feel like we're actually progressive. (Kim)

(2) Rebuilding trust and mutual connections amongst the staff went hand-in-hand with the physical restructuring of the school. Christine took the time to speak with every member of the staff when she joined the school – with a "genuine" intention to listen to their experiences and values and understand how they would like to connect in the space to inspire the children. In this very process she came to realise that "I needed to lead from what was within because then I would come across the team I was leading as genuine" (Christine). Leading as "the authentic me" made her feel nervous and vulnerable in front of the team initially because she had not had the experience of leading a disadvantaged school and she was a stranger to the area. Nonetheless, she felt that she needed to show her "real self" to establish genuine human and professional connections with her staff so that they would "try new things and risk trying new things without fear of being sacked or told they were no good because that was all they had heard before" (Christine).

Christine's authenticity paid dividends. Connecting with the staff helped her understand the team she had, enabled the team to see they were valued, and gave people the spark and energy to believe that "we were absolutely going to turn that [school's history and poor reputation] on the head and create a great world together" (Christine). The following comment from Susanna, a middle leader in the school, provides a testament to the warm relational culture that people in the school had enjoyed and were proud of:

You go into other schools, and you don't get this X [name of school] feeling. It's like the children are just incredible. They love being at school. They love school, and the staff are so friendly. It's such a nice warm and welcoming culture now. You just feel at home straightaway. And you know, even when we have student teachers, or we have visitors, they always comment on how warm it feels here. And I think that's just everything that the school stands for. So everything that

we do is for the children. Everything is driven by the research. Everything that we

do has a purpose. (Susanna, a middle leader)

Much of her effort to rebuild relationships, trust and collaborations within the school was achieved through creating structured and disciplined opportunities and systems which challenged individuals to redefine what being a teacher in this school meant and enabled them to develop and take ownership within a collective group. We will explain this in more detail in the following section on growing capacities to inspire learning in the school community. In the remainder of this section, we will show Christine's effort to harness relationships, expertise, and energies to develop a child-focussed successful school goes beyond creating teams in the school. She had focussed on "bashing" the boundaries and divide between the school and its community and reforming the makeup of governors to "lead through powerful collaboration" (Christine).

(3) Bashing the school-community boundaries to create belonging through bringing parents into the school life and making them feel a sense of belonging to the place remained one of Christine's priorities, and since her departure, a priority of the school's current leadership team. Many parents in the school community did not have very positive personal experience with education, so "they'd be there on the playground, fearful of the whole thing, because they were scared to death of school" (Christine). However, as Michelle (Lead Teaching Assistant) put it, although some parents "might not have money to invest in children's experiences, they've got the time and experiences." The school welcomed parents in as volunteers to support the Breakfast Club, After School Clubs, displays in the progress corridor and other activities. They were given a fleece with the school's name on, and "they thought that was the best thing ever because they were belonging here" (Christine).

Christine's vision went beyond engaging parents in the school life so that the school became a hub of the local community. She had a vision that the experiences parents had gained through supporting the school should also benefit them and help them to be back in the job market:

> They [parents] would come and they would do all sorts of jobs for me. … But what they said for them is that I'll give you a reference for when they want a job – because my vision for parents was I wanted them to get a job. A lot of them just didn't dare. They didn't have the confidence. So I said, come into school and get your experience. And that will help you get on the ladder. So that created a resource supply [for society]. (Christine)

She cared for the school's image in the local community and dedicated resources to enrich the cultural capital of families at home. This was a deliberate strategy to bridge the social connection between the school and families and bring school life into the community to better support children's learning and development. Christine wanted to "educate the whole house" and saw it as a necessary step in combatting the dearth of learning resources that many children experienced at home.

> I use my Pupil Premium [funding from the government for students with special educational needs and disabilities] to resource the school effectively with iPads. And, we bought books when we were doing curriculum areas. … We bought every child a book, because there was no literature in the house. So going back to *what's our why*? Well, we wanted to educate the whole house. And by taking a book about what we were learning back to home, the children were starting to read to their siblings; they were starting to read to their parents. And that created for me a social mobility uplift. (Christine)

(4) *Developing classroom teaching assistants (TAs)* to be an integral part of the school was another deliberate strategy to connect with the community and enrich the school's intellectual and social resources. In recognition of the teacher recruitment crisis in England, Christine wanted to use her creativity to "disrupt the system and carry on saying we need to value TAs at the highest level." Many teaching assistants were parents and therefore had real connection with the community. Because they lived in the locality, they were also the ones who had behaviour management and language intervention that worked with the children.

Susanne, a middle leader who is responsible for curriculum development in the school, talked about an example of how a teaching assistant's expertise on speech and language was recognised and valued by the school who was then encouraged and supported to become a leader in this area. Susanne attributed this success story to the vision and values of the school where "there's always opportunities for everybody to progress and grow. And whether that is upwards or outlays, there is always something that you can do, and you are encouraged to do so." It is no surprise, then, that Michelle, the Lead Teaching Assistant from the community who had witnessed the school being turned around by Christine, described the school as "one big family": "It's almost like we were family … everyone here is passionate about learning, wanting to be the best. … I don't care what anyone says. This is the best school in the country."

2.6 Growing capacities to lead from "an empty vessel": Seeing the systems with inquiring minds

Christine's disruption to the vision of the school, and determination to lead this underperforming school to become outstanding in every area was not appreciated by all teachers. For some, she was a leader with "real drive and commitment" (Tania, senior leader and CPD lead in the Trust) who was an inspiration to the school that desperately needed "excitement" and "something fresh and new to inspire learning" (Kim, current Principal of the school). But for others, the impact of her disruption, especially the renewed focus on the child and the relentless effort to achieve the best for the children, resulted in them resigning from their positions.

The school experienced "a massive turnover" as a result. For Christine and those who stayed, these challenges also presented new opportunities for the school to inject "a different vibe", new energy and "excitement" to its future because "the school needed fresh people in here" who were child-focussed and who had "passion for the kids" (Michelle, Lead Teaching Assistant). The school appointed six newly qualified teachers (NQTs) who had all stayed and progressed to become middle and senior leaders in the school – mostly because they were able to develop through the opportunities that the school had brought for them. Looking back at what they had achieved in that transition year, Christine was pleased that she was able to grow a committed, collaborative, and passionate team from "an empty vessel":

It took a while to get the stabilised staff, … but growing our own was what helped us because we were an empty vessel, … we didn't have to undo anything. … we'd start to really define what we meant by GREAT teacher. We've kind of done a bit of evaluating where we're at and where we needed to get to. So they [six newly qualified teachers] joined us as a collective group, and they created quite a lot of healthy competition between them. And there was a lot of collaboration between them. … We had to heavily invest, but because our culture was about self-development, learning, and outward looking, that kind of lent itself nicely. (Christine)

On reflection, Christine's strategies to grow and rebuild capacities in the school were centred around (but not limited to) the following four areas. Central to these strategies had been her approach to challenging people's ways of thinking by enabling them to see the systems and understanding in concrete ways how to make a positive difference individually and collectively within the systems.

(1) *Developing leaders "constantly" in a creative and safe environment*
Christine felt that she "learned the art of delegating" during the transitional year when she needed to place existing and newly appointed staff in leadership positions and nurture and trust them to lead with creativity and confidence: "There's a lot of delegation; it's like, you can do this… not sort of, you're not allowed to do this. It's like you can do this, you know, let me help you and support you." (Christine). She believed that the everyone in the school was a potential leader and give them opportunities to pursue their areas of interest in a safe, no-blame environment where risk-taking and creative leadership was modelled, encouraged and supported: "I didn't want anyone to feel like they were being tested or it was a kind of you're wrong or you're right. So wherever we could, we would be explicit about *why* we were doing something. They [things we do] are always anchored in a *why* and it always comes back to pupils" (Christine).

Over the years the school had seen its NQTs grow to become middle and senior leaders and its senior leaders become school principals, executive principals, and senior leaders in the MAT – all of whom were given the platform to grow their leadership at different levels of the

social ecology of the school system. Melanie's reflection on her ten-year "journey" of learning and development in the school – growing from a class teacher to a Vice Principal – exemplifies this. Melanie described herself as a versatile person who liked taking on new challenges and tried a few jobs before she joined this school ten years ago. However, her experience here was different because "I'm not standing still":

I've been here for 10 years because I've been constantly doing an array of different things that I've been interested in as well. So yeah, it's been really exciting. It's how I describe I feel really grateful to be given lots of different opportunities from different leaders and then being able to spot different potential, maybe different doors as well that I might not have thought about on my own. (Melanie)

She felt trusted by the current principal Kim and enjoyed the autonomy to take risks and ownership of her initiatives: "She trusts us and she wants us to take risks. And if I've thought of something, and she's like, Yeah, go for it. Or if she might not quite agree with something, it might be like, just tell me the rationale behind that. And then she'll say like, yeah, okay, go for it, and then see what happens" (Melanie).

Kim also began her career as a class teacher in the school and in the eyes of the staff whom we spoke to at the interviews, she modelled her people-centred, visionary, and inspirational leadership on Christine; and had *broadened* and *deepened* the culture of shared respect, shared responsibility, and shared accountability in the school. The collaboration between teachers as leaders of education was perceived as a vital component of the success of this school: "Definitely we're very much a team. We are all leaders, we all work together, we all take ownership. … That's how we've sort of developed our pattern of working, because obviously, we've grown so many people" (Kim).

Louise, who joined the school as a newly qualified teacher under the leadership of Christine and then became a middle leader under Kim, was immensely proud of her journey of learning and development *within* and *with* this "successful school." What had kept her in the school was the leadership of the school that had continued to be driven by a relentless focus on

children. She knew it well that if she made a mistake, she did not need to try and hide it because Kim would be there to find solutions with her. Leadership was distributed but well connected in ways that it helped to embed an honest and open culture which, according to Louise, had enabled creativity to take root and flourish in the school.

> We don't get micro-managed, so we are given the autonomy of like, you are a leader, and we're respected in that sense. Whether you're a new leader, or you've been a leader for five plus years, you're still given the same level of respect and autonomy. Obviously, you're given training where appropriate, and there are people that support you if needed, but you're not micromanaged into basically doing what someone else wants to do that is your role. (Louise)

(2) *Zero tolerance for compliance or complacency*

Seeing herself as disruptive leader, Christine ensured that there was no room or opportunity for compliance or complacency in the school. The starting point, in line with what the ISSPP research tells us, was to establish a shared vision of high expectations and a shared drive for high performance for the children. Melanie, Kim and Louise's stories all show that they stayed in the school because of the excitement of learning and the trust that leadership offered to enable them to continue to find new challenges and take new risks in their journeys of professional development as they strived to "be the best you can be" (Melanie).

But Christine did more than establishing a child-centred, trusting culture to lead her school to sustained success. She embraced policy opportunities to disrupt the governance and structure of the school. Driven by a clear desire to learn from other successful leaders, she resisted the criticism from the local authority and led her school to become one of the first sponsored academies in the city. She believed in this system because on the one hand, academisation gave her freedom and autonomy to manage finances, curriculum and human resources. On the other hand, being part of a Trust broadened the opportunities and possibilities for her and her staff to develop into successful leaders at different levels of the school system.

As she grew to become Director of Education responsible for the success of 17 primary schools in the MAT, Christine realised that she "had to … keep being disruptive because I knew that if we were fully compliant, we were going back into the danger zone of just all being simple thinking, quite narrow" (Christine). In the Trust, her disruption of the system was more about finding different ways to channel communication with schools to bring about renewed collaboration and connection amongst them: "this is my way of doing it. … I kept an eye on values of relationships and create a belonging group of primary heads." In the hierarchy of the MAT, Christine saw herself as a "mediator" and "translator." Because she was working across different hierarchical and cultural borders within and between schools, she made sure that communication was delivered "in the right way" which encompassed diverse perspectives of primary communities in the Trust. As a result, collaboration between primary schools in the MAT was defined in very different ways from the past.

(3) *Seeing the systems*

Tania's reflection on her leadership journey in the school and in the MAT represents in itself another success story of Christine's "real, strong strength around growing and nurturing people leadership" (Tania). The line of success lies in her ability to see the systems – not simply in terms of understanding how one system might impact on another system positively or negatively, but more importantly, knowing how she could join different dots together to design and create coherence and consistency in the complex and dynamic systems of education. In her own words, "I've grown up in this Trust. I really have been born and evolved into that, and I'm so protective of it and I believe in it."

Tania joined the school as a senior leader responsible for curriculum development. Within a short frame of time, she went through a steep learning curve by taking on leadership roles in the school, the MAT and then the Teaching School Hub working with many like-minded school leaders to shape teacher and leadership development in the region. In 2023 Ofsted judged the quality of school-based initial teacher education provided by the Teaching School Hub as "outstanding" – which was a real testament to Tania's successful leadership in this area. However, when she first joined Christine's school, she was a "box ticking" person (Tania). She still remembered clearly when she first sat together with Christine to map out her improvement plans for the school, how Christine challenged her to think beyond her to-do

lists and see the systems: "I was able to sit back and reflect about my way of thinking. It is about thinking differently to see the systems and the structures, and about the clarity of how people interact, how they connect the flow of information, and how things work in tandem within a system" (Tania). This experience helped her to understand the power of connectivity between people and how such connectivity brought about possibilities for collective learning and growth.

Being a disruptive leader in the system also meant that Christine was always looking out to "bring the best of the old and keep that and embrace the new." However, she acknowledged that "it can be very frustrating because I don't feel as a leader of a system. I'm able to influence that – as much as we should be able to" (Christine). She described the "government stuff" as "noise": "we have to listen to it, but we don't let it influence us to the point of changing what our belief is" (Christine). Using the latest Ofsted framework as an example, Christine explained that because "our school had a really good foundation of leadership, … what we had to do is adapt and tweak."

> It's only a tweak based on really good foundations of leadership reflections. We're not going to throw it all in the air. … If you've got a school that has a strong foundation, government policy can come and go. It doesn't affect the culture in the school. It might affect them the *what* [they do], but it doesn't always affect the *how* [they do things in school to enact their values]. (Christine)

(4) *Instilling inquiring minds in the staff to make learning and impact visible*
Like many successful principals that the ISSPP research has reported, Christine believed that "everyone had a power to make a difference," but that it was her job to disrupt the status quo and enable them to *see* the "visible" and "invisible" impacts that they were making on children's learning. In Christine's words, it was about "looking at where the best practices are" and then "holding a mirror up to challenge yourself."

Instilling *an inquiry-driven culture* – in which the staff were constantly engaged in evaluations of the impacts of their practices on children's learning – enabled Christine to rapidly turn around and transform the mindsets and capabilities of the staff. She modelled "the

confidence to be vulnerable", the confidence to admit "I've made a mistake," and "the confidence to lean on each other to say 'I am really struck and I need help'" (Christine). Everyone in the school, including herself, was encouraged to respond to challenges and mistakes with honesty and openness and with creativity to work collaboratively to see "how I can do that better.' Looking back at the improvement journey of the school, Christine felt that what had worked most effectively in the turnaround phase of the school was a collaborative effort to focus constantly and relentlessly on evaluating the impacts of their practices – which "meant people saw that they were making a difference." In essence, it was about being able to "*see* that visible impact" and this had made them feel empowered (Christine).

> If you're inquiry driven, you're going to make every moment count because you want to move with pace towards this goal. So there's a kind of fluid and dynamic approach to this working: Let's reflect. Let's look at each of these practices and look at ourselves, but keeping the child in mind. So I keep coming back to it [inquiry model]. It's about embedding evaluation and monitoring and reflecting on impact continuously with this inquiry model that is outwardly looking. (Christine)

This "inquiring minds" and evidence-informed approach to improvement that Christine had embedded deeply in the life of the school sowed the seeds for it to become one of the (then) 16 Research Schools in the country[6]. Becoming a Research School enabled the staff to create a shared language about their inquiry-driven culture and inspired them to read more widely about research reports and guidance. The progress corridor was made to look like a "research-derived toolkit." It is no surprise that Tania, who was mentored by Christine to grow to become a senior leader in the Trust and in the Trust-led Teaching School Hub, told us at the interview that she was a firm believer of the "power of the reflective culture." As Director of the Research School, she wanted to show other schools *why* an inquiry-driven culture was able to bring about sustained improvement in practice, rather than "quick fixes."

---

[6] Launched by the Education Endowment Foundation in 2016, the Research Schools Network currently has 38 schools: 28 Research Schools and 10 Associate Research Schools. https://researchschool.org.uk/

I think that comes back to that *inquiry mindedness* that you've [Christine] instilled in people. If you are inquiring minded, you will always come back to these biggest levers that [you know] make the biggest difference. You are not being externally told about them. It's not a dogmatic diligence to external forces. It's grown from within – through your experience, through that inquiry mindedness, through asking… *Is this working? Is this not working? Why is it not working? That continuous reflective model continuously?* (Tania)

Indeed, for Christine, the success of becoming a Research School transcended being able to "stand back and package some of our work to help the next school that might have felt like us in 2011." Being a Research School placed the school on a national platform, working in partnership with a diverse network of schools in the region and beyond to advocate evidence-informed teaching and learning in the country. It also brought in additional funding, resources and professional development opportunities which Christine purposefully orchestrated to enable the staff to thrive on new stages of the systems and through this, continue to nurture and strengthen leadership capacities in the school and the Trust. As Christine had put it, "it thrills me that someone's growing to be better than me."

I love the fact that they can all do different things. I think that's why X [school name] got successfully quickly. We called it a squiggle school. … What the Research School did for X [school name] was that it took me out of the equation. Because of good leaders, you should be able to step away and the school carries on. (Christine)

Part 3: Discussion

Positive Disruption: The Courage to Lead Successfully in Times of Change

Over the last twenty years, we have learned a great deal from the ISSPP research about what successful school principals do to turn around underperforming schools and enable their staff to continue to make a difference to the life chances of the children in these schools. We have also learned a great deal about the values, qualities and capabilities that successful leaders embrace to enable them to bring about success. We could perhaps argue that *how* Christine

has led her school to thrive is no exception. However, by using the philosophy of disruption as a framework to *make sense of* who she is, what she did, and what new experiences, activities and impacts that she had created in the evolving contexts of her leadership, we have learned three new overriding insights.

The **first** is related to how we *see* success and successful leadership. Success in schools is often measured by quantified performance outcomes such as students' attainment and progress results and/or increased school rolls. For qualitative researchers, success may also be described in relation to transformed schools' cultures, conditions, and capacities – which contribute to improved student outcomes. However, what we have learned from Christine's leadership journey is that sustained success in schools is an evolving, dynamic (because it can fluctuate) and resilient *process* of change and improvement that is always subject to threats and challenges imposed by social, cultural, economic and policy environments.

The root to *sustaining* success in a school organisation does not necessarily lie in the impactful leadership practices and actions. Rather, it lies in the values, purposes and inquiry-focussed mindsets that drive members of the staff to challenge themselves – individually and collectively – through reflection, learning and development and to be excited about the difference that they are *able* to make to the achievement of their students – irrespective of external challenges. Within this, the school principal plays a pivotal role in (re)constructing such values and purposes and nurturing *relentless curiosity to innovate* in the organisation because, as we have learned from Christine's school, they are fundamental to building the organisation's capabilities to re-energise social relationships, regenerate creative and risk-taking cultures, and renew innovative practices and actions that have "visible impact." In line with Manu's (2022, p.45) philosophical proposition, disruption in this context of organisational change is not "a mere matter of modifying the change itself but as something that requires a shift in our thinking frameworks towards constructing a more dynamic and thriving society" and in our case, school.

Long ago, Kotter (1996) argued that although managing change is challenging, the much better challenge for most organisations is "leading change" (p. 30). In the process to create

and sustain success, the following building blocks that Christine had embedded in the school provide the necessary foundations for her leadership of change.

The local knowledge When Christine "fell in love" with this highly disadvantaged and underperforming primary school, she had a clear vision and passion for the children. Although she saw the urgency to disrupt the dysfunctional processes and systems to pave the way for the future of a thriving school, the journey to achieve this was not set in stone. Rather, it evolved organically as she better understood the team and the school community, as she saw the opportunity to build her own "vessel" from scratch because of staff resignations, and as she self-concept as a mediator, a facilitator, a leader and a team player began to emerge.

> I remember the very first day there was then a "Right well, how are you going to make us better than what we were doing?" And it was like they were expecting me to have the answers. I think that's where we started the real work from day one, because it was like, "We are going to find the answers. We're going to be successful together." (Christine)

Relational capital   Schools are made up of relationships. Breaking down the physical and relational boundaries within the school signified the start of the journey to success. Restructuring the school organisation enabled Christine to bring different teams and different parts of the organisation, as well as the school community, together and create one coherent learning community to achieve a shared purpose. The ISSPP research sees schools as dynamic, social adaptive systems which connect individuals, teams, networks, and communities, under the influence of a wide array of external socioeconomic and sociocultural forces. Relationships within and between each layer of the social ecology in which schools are located, function as the social glue which provide the necessary *social foundations* for change.

Christine's story contributes to and reaffirms knowledge about successful leadership that trusting and creative relationships in a school organisation do not occur organically. Authentic, value-driven leadership that believes in and understands how relationships can work to energise creativity, hope and promise in the organization is key to success.

Leadership capital   Christine did more than growing and harnessing the intellectual capacity of the school. To achieve sustained success, she invested continuous efforts to grow systems leaders who shared her passion and courage and who were challenged and nurtured by her to grow and thrive on different leadership platforms in an increasingly diverse school system, ranging from the classroom, the school, to the MAT and the Teaching School Hub. As Tania put it,

> I do think people drove you absolutely, and the connectivity between people can empower people… That powerful system is a phenomenal thing. But I think for me, where I am now is only possible because of that journey, because of that culture that'd been created. Christine was saying about empowering others, and allowing people to grow and learn and demonstrate what they can and what they bring to the table. I think when you've got a culture like that, everyone brings their expertise and specialists, their passions, and we maximise on that. (Tania)

The courage to enact values and disturb norms   Success breeds success. The journey of continued and sustained success for this case study school has been to rise from one of the bottom 200 underperforming schools nationally to become a National Support School and a Research School – leading educational change and improvement on a national platform. Deep cultural and structural change in this journey constantly disturbed the perceived organisational norms – creating a reality of teaching that was profoundly unpredictable and uncertain. What shines through her leadership journey are the ways in which Christine purposefully used externally generated policies to reinforce her own educational agendas through transforming the mindsets of teachers and deepening the organisational, social, and intellectual capacities for the improvement of quality in teaching and learning, *despite* rather than *because of* externally generated reforms.

Empirical research on successful school leadership and school improvement also shows that formal, external reform and accountability systems are only one among many factors that influence a school's internal conceptions of *who* they are, to whom they are accountable, *for what*, and *how* (e.g. Day et al., 2011; Matthews, 2014; Gilbert, 2022). Essentially, this is because how schools construct the meaning of reform and accountability and the systems,

mechanisms and practices that they develop to enact reform in their organisations vary. Christine's story reinforces the message that successful leadership is key.

The **second** is related to how we *see* successful leaders. Christine's leadership journey shows three essential qualities that have enabled her to be a "positive disruptor" in leading change: passion and commitment to achieve for the future of the children; curiosity to learn and the courage to take risks; and systems-oriented vision that builds and harnesses the intellectual as well as social capital within and across different layers of the social ecology of the school.

> In a school system that you know it's not working, you learn as a head to have the confidence to disrupt, and then rebuild. … If there's a barrier, we look to bash it. We don't argue about it. We don't moan. We don't stop. We look to find a way to bash it. (Christine)

Christine's commitment was expressed, through her leadership, in a form of internal accountability (Elmore, 2003) which saw her mobilising the knowledge, expertise and capacity in the school to broaden and deepen shared commitment to serve the purposes and pursuits that place children's interests, learning and achievement at the centre of the school's life. Her dispositions as a disruptive leader were centred around the "the personal" rather than the "functional" sphere (Fielding, 2012) in that she had the courage to reveal vulnerability in a continued effort to bring the school community together.

> So I think my authentic self is being a facilitator and a listener, more of a coaching space, but with real clarity and simplicity of what we want, which was where the "great" word came in, because we felt that one word represented how we wanted to work, and what that looked like. This enabled everybody to play a part, because we were never going to move that school forward unless everybody did something. (Christine)

The **third** insight we have learned from Christine's leadership is related to how the philosophy of disruption offers a productive and constructive lens to make sense of successful leadership as a *social phenomenon* – seeking not only to understand the social processes that define the

ways that teachers and pupils live their lives in the school organisation, but more fundamentally, to *explain* how successful principals – as primary agents of change *of* the school organisation – design, create and renew structures, systems, and capacities in ways that enable them to harness the social and intellectual connections in the school and, through this, enact the processes that lead their teachers and pupils to fulfil shared values and achieve shared goals over time. A deeper understanding of the anatomy of disruption in this regard requires us to keep in mind that disruption in successful schools is not an accidental process that embraces the hallmarks of chaos and destruction. Rather, this philosophical lens invites us to look deeper into *who* the successful principals are, *what* they value, and *how* they challenge existing norms of thinking and behaviour of the individuals and shake up the expectations, relationships and cultures that can drive learning and collaboration and enable sustained and sustainable growth and development.

In sum, the processes of leading change and transition inevitably create uncertainties and at times, resistance, because they disturb not only what people do, but most profoundly, how individuals see themselves, their personal and professional identities, and how they relate to each other to accomplish tasks and fulfil their roles in the organisation. However, disruption of school cultures creates *uncertainties*, *not chaos*. This is because, as we have showed through Christine's leadership endeavour to turn around her school, when successful principals disrupt dysfunctional cultures, their vision, values and high expectations for the future of the organisation create clear directions for the journey of success and are fundamental to the *sustainability* of success.

References

Ball, S. J. (2017). *The Education Debate (3rd ed.)*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design.* Harvard University Press.

Department for Education (2022). *The Case for A Fully Trust-led System*. London: Department for Education.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1076862/The_case_for_a_fully_trust-led_system.pdf

Day, C., Sammons, P., Leithwood, K., Hopkins, D., Gu, Q. & Brown, E., with Ahtaridou, E., (2011). *Successful School Leadership: Linking with Learning and Achievement*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill Open University Press.

Day, C., Ylimaki & Gu, Q. (2023) Research on successful educational leadership: new conceptualisation and analytical framework. Discussion Paper for ISSPP Workshop, June 2023.

Department for Education (2023). *Academic year 2022/23: Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics

Elmore, R. F. (2003). *Knowing the right thing to do: School improvement and performance-based accountability.* Washington, DC: NGA Center for Best Practices.

Eyles, A., Kupkau, C., & Machin, S. (2016). Academies, charter and free schools: do new school types deliver better outcomes? *Economic Policy*, 453-501.

Fielding, M. (2012). Personalisation, Education, Democracy and the Market, In M. Mincu (ed). *Personalisation of Education in Contexts: Policy Critique and Theories of Personal Improvement*. Sense Publishers, pp.75-88.

Gilbert, C. (2023). Reclaiming accountability. In: Tierney, R.J., Rizvi, F., Erkican, K. (Eds.), International Encyclopaedia of Education, vol. 4. Elsevier, pp.293-303.

Gu, Q., & Colman, A. (2023). Accountability, autonomy and organisational practice: how principals of successful schools enact education policy for improvement. In Ph. A. Woods, A. Roberts, M. Tian, & H. Youngs (eds.) *Handbook of Leadership in Education*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Greany, T. & Higham, R. (2018). *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks: analysing the 'self-improving school-led system' agenda in England and the implications for schools.* UCL Institute of Education Press: London.

Gu, Q., Rea, S., Smethem, L., Dunford, J., Varley, M., Sammons, P., & Powerl, L. (2016). *Teaching Schools evaluation: Final report*. Department for Education, London.

Gu, Q., Seymour, K., Rea, S., Knight, R., Ahn, M., Sammons, P., Kameshwara, K., Hodgen, J. (2021). *The Research Schools programme in Opportunity Areas: Investigating the impact of Research Schools in promoting better outcomes in schools*. Evaluation Report. Education Endowment Foundation, London.

Hutchings, M., Francis, B., & Kirby, P. (2016). *Chain effects 2016: The impact of academy chains on low-income students*. Sutton Trust.

Hutchings, M. & Francis, B. (2018). *The impact of academy chains on low-income pupils*. The Sutton Trust.

Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Manu, A. (2022). *The Philosophy of Disruption*. Bingley, Emerald Publishing.

Matthews, P., Rea, S., Hill, R., & Gu, Q. (2014). *Freedom to lead: a study of outstanding primary school leadership in England*. National College for Teaching and Leadership.

Mincu, M. & Davies, P. (2019). The governance of a school network and implications for Initial Teacher Education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 1-18.

Mincu, M. & Liu, M. (2002). The Policy Context in Teacher Education: Hierarchies, Networks and Markets in Four Countries. In D. Mayer (Ed). *International Encyclopaedia on Education*, Elsevier.

Morrison, K. (2010). Complexity Theory, School Leadership and Management: Questions for Theory and Practice, *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *38*(3) 374–393

Spielman, A. (2019). *HMCI commentary: the roles of inspection and autonomy*, 21 June 2019: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmci-commentary-the-roles-of-accountability-and-autonomy (last accessed 25/11/2022)

Turner, J. R., & Baker, M. R., (2019) – Complexity Theory: An Overview with Potential Applications for the Social Sciences, *Systems*, *7*(1), 1-22.

UK Parliament (2022). *Education: Multi-Academy Trusts*. Published 31st March, 2022. https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/education-multi-academy-trusts/#:~:text=Multi%2Dacademy%20trusts%20(MATs),termed%20a%20'converter%20school

Bios

Qing Gu is Director of the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership and Professor of Leadership in Education. She is the Past Chair of the British Association of Comparative and International Education (BAICE), a member of the Research Standing Committee of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), and a member of the Research Evidence and Impact Panel for the Leadership College for UK Government. She has served as Editor and a member of the Editorial Board of many high impact journals in education. She was conferred the Award of Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (FAcSS) for her contribution to social science in 2022. Some of her books have been translated into Chinese, Japanese and Spanish.

Dr Monica Mincu is an associate professor in comparative education with the Department of Philosophy and Education, University of Turin, and a lecturer in educational leadership with the Institute of Education, University College, London. She has acted as a consultant with UNESCO and other major Italian NGOs. She engages with education politics and governance from a social change and equity perspective.

Christopher Day is the founder of the twenty five strong country International Successful School Principalship (ISSPP) research network (2001-). He is Professor of Education in the School of Education, University of Nottingham, Professor of Educational Leadership and Management in the University of Sydney, Australia, and Chair Professor, Beijing Normal University, China, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (FAcSS). He has worked as a teacher, lecturer, and Schools' Adviser. His interests, research and publications focus upon teacher professionalism, teachers' work, lives and effectiveness; successful school leadership in high needs communities; school-university partnerships; and system change. His current research projects focus on: i) Successful school leadership; ii) System Leadership: policy making and management in disruptive times; and iii) Chair-principal relationships in new public governance. Recent book publications include: Teacher Professionalism during the Pandemic: care, courage and resilience (2024); School-University Partnerships in Action: the promise of Change (2021) Routledge; Successful School Leadership (2020) Education Development Trust; and Teachers' Worlds and Work: understanding complexity, building quality (2017).