**Accountability, Autonomy and Organisational Practice: How Principals of Successful Schools Enact Education Policy for Improvement**

**Abstract**
This chapter considers the ways in which recent English education policy has positioned autonomy as a concomitant of accountability. Following a critical examination of the conceptual relations between accountability, autonomy and leadership, the chapter investigates, from the perspective of senior and middle leaders, how secondary principals lead their schools to achieve sustainable performance despite policy shifts. Drawing upon longitudinal interview data from case study schools in England, the chapter discusses how successful secondary schools—in different socioeconomic contexts and led by principals with similar, strongly held moral purposes and principles of social justice, but with different histories and values—incorporate and use externally generated policies to support their own educational agendas, as they assert their right to apply their own educational values in practice for the improvement of teaching and learning and pupil progress and outcomes. The research suggests that what the principals were perceived to be doing successfully was to use policies as opportunities—purposefully, progressively, and strategically—to regenerate coherent cultures and conditions which support the staff to learn to renew their practice. Key in this regard is how principals broaden and deepen their organisational, social, and intellectual capacities for the improvement of quality and standards in teaching and learning, *despite* rather than *because of* externally generated reforms.

**Keywords:** successful school leadership, leadership accountability, leadership autonomy, policy enactment, school improvement, education reform

## The Leadership Challenge: Reform and Accountability

### Policy and reform

Over time the research community has explored, at depth, the nature of educational reforms and their impact on schools and teachers. Though rigorous in their approaches, much research tends to stress the negative consequences of reform on teacher morale, an increasing emphasis on the academic to the disadvantage of other humanistic areas of curriculum, and continuing problems of narrowing the achievement gap experienced by students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. We have worked with and researched many passionate and inspiring teachers and school leaders over the last two decades, and we do not disagree with these generalities. They resonate with more general concerns about the ability of externally mandated reforms at system level (Ainscow, 2015; Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2016) to provide a sustained impact upon the quality of teaching and learning and achievement without the active mediation of principals and teachers in the schools themselves (e.g. Johnson, 2019; Gu et al., 2020, 2021). But the key question remains: how do some school leaders manage to successfully mediate the influences of reform and lead their teachers and pupils to survive and thrive over time, whilst others falter?

### Accountability and autonomy

*The critical perspective*

We acknowledge that the accountability and autonomy debate is pertinent within a number of international settings including Australia (Niesche, 2021), China (Qian & Walker, 2019) and USA (Knapp & Feldman, 2012). In this chapter we will focus on the specific context of English schools.

De-regulation and de-centralisation (Greany & Higham, 2018, p. 23) of the school landscape have contributed to a wider 'policy agenda' in England (Greany & Higham, 2018, p.22), aimed to raise school standards through a school-led system (Hargreaves, 2010). Education reforms led by Labour (1997 – 2010), a Conservative/Liberal Democrats coalition (2010 – 2015), and three successive Conservative governments have encouraged the transference of all schools to academy status through either conversion or sponsorship. This encouragement towards academy status has been promoted by the

Government as part of a reform effort to build a highly autonomous education system – in which further responsibility is added for school leaders as the challenge of addressing social inequality through education becomes central to the notions of school improvement. While this places emphasis on school autonomy and school-level leadership to raise standards within and between schools, critiques argue that 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 increasingly intervene when and where it deems necessary' (Greany & Higham, 2018, p.11).

Indeed, the increase in autonomy is inextricably bound with a concomitant increase in accountability for schools – reinforced by an inspection and performativity regime that employs 'judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of control, attrition and change' (Ball, 2017, p.57). The references to this system as one of 'high autonomy' (Spielman, 2019) is therefore predicated on high levels of external accountability. This mantra of autonomy, accountability and responsibility (Colman, 2020) determines that schools are required to accept the responsibility for addressing inequality. Much recent data have evidenced the extent to which the UK is considerably less equal than most other countries in the world (Dorling, 2017; Levelling Up, 2022; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). The responsibility, therefore, of school leaders to address inequality by providing successful outcomes for all pupils is not one without considerable challenge, situated as it is within this national context of performativity agendas and external accountability.

Too often accountability has been perceived as performativity-related mechanisms, measures and systems that are externally imposed on schools. Ball (2003), for example, argues that in essence external accountability produces "simple figures or categories" (2003, p.217) evidenced in grading judgements from school inspections. School inspections by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) which is responsible for inspecting a range of educational institutions in England have been criticised for perpetuating a high stakes accountability culture. The latest shifts in expectations about what constitutes a 'good' or 'outstanding' school as defined by Ofsted lack clarity, produce 'fuzzy norms' (Courtney, 2016, p.623) for schools to comply with, and cause destabilisation. Critiques such as Courtney (2016) argue that such 'fuzzy' reality requires school leaders to establish a way of working that is "more desired but less possible" (p.632). Taking this further leads Courtney (2016) to express deep concerns about the authority, rather than support, that Ofsted's inspections and expectations continue to exert on schools and especially those serving socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

Much has been written about the ways in which the performative culture of school inspection has produced both panoptic and post-panoptic effects (Perryman, 2006, 2009; Clapham, 2015; Colman, 2021) through on-site inspections and surveillance of school performance at a distance (e.g. Clarke, 2015; Grek & Lundgren, 2015; Page, 2017a, 2017b). While scholars have debated the extent to which a panoptic or post-panoptic landscape best describes the effect of the accountability system, there is much agreement that panoptic and post-panoptic effects emerge out of a climate of surveillance. Drawing on Foucault's theorisation, the panoptic metaphor based on Bentham's Inspection House design, or panopticon, describes "the ways in which power works to regulate and subjectify" (Colman, 2022, p. 4) through tools of surveillance. What has troubled panoptic scholars (e.g. Perryman et al., 2017a, 2017b; Page, 2017a, b; Colman, 2020, 2021) more recently however, has been the extent to which panoptic technology from the inspection system has been internalised into the daily practice of leaders and teachers, ensuring inspection readiness regardless of whether the school is about to be inspected, or not. Management and staff becoming "adept in disguising the real problems and issues which face the school" (Perryman, 2009, p.629) to divert attention away from inspection teams is problematic. While constant visibility and pressure to perform are in common with both panopticism and post-panopticism, post-panopticism also recognises shifting definitions, destabilised identities and feelings of anxiety and fear (Courtney, 2016; Colman, 2021).

Within such accountability structure and context, Foucault examines the issue of autonomy as constructed through power-knowledge. Foucault reminds us that the word 'auto' means the same, while "also (it) conveys the notion of identity" (Foucault, 1988, p. 25) or self. Importantly, however, autonomy "over individualises" (Olssen, 2018, p.196). While we might view autonomy as placing freedom and individuality at the centre, and this is perhaps notable in the conceptualisations of autonomy within the field of education, freedom and constraint, stemming from the system or culture we are situated in, exist (Olssen, 2010). The affordances of autonomy are therefore promoted as an opportunity "to see which flowers bloom brightest" (Gibb speech, 12 November 2015). This measure of comparison – "the real genius of school autonomy" (Gibb speech, 12 November 2015) – inextricably binds autonomy to accountability. Thus, while autonomy might promise an alignment of values with our sense of self and moral purpose to provide a congruent landscape for leaders to work in, external accountability as considered above entails conflict and tension – an incongruent landscape for school leaders.

*A school improvement perspective that capitalises on organisational capacity*

However, as we will see from the case study example later in this chapter, empirical research on successful school leadership and school improvement shows that formal, external accountability systems are only one among many factors that influence a school's internal conceptions of *who they are accountable to*, *for what*, and *how* (e.g. Day et al., 2011; Matthews, 2014; Gilbert, 2022). Essentially, this is because how schools construct the meaning of accountability and the systems, mechanisms and practices they develop to enact accountability in their organisations vary.

In their research on how education policy was used for improvement in 25 public and private schools in the USA, Carnoy et al. (2003) found that schools form their conceptions of accountability from a variety of sources, including school leaders' *beliefs* about teaching and learning, teachers' collective sense of *responsibility*, and the *expectations* of parents, students and teachers. This observation led Elmore (2003) to argue that it is a common misconception of policymakers that policies determine how individuals and organisations think and act in context, or directly "cause" schools to increase the quality and results of student learning. The reality is that *all* schools have deep-seated norms and predispositions that determine their conceptions of accountability, and it is the strength and focus of *internal accountability* in schools – i.e. "the shared norms, values, expectations, structures, and processes that determine the relationship between individual actions and collective results in schools" – that acts as a key determinant in how school leaders and teachers would respond to any external accountability system (Elmore, 2003, pp.197-8). By identifying the *inherent* and *complex* connection between *capacity* and the ways in which schools respond to external pressure for accountability in their theoretical framework, Elmore and his colleagues (Elmore et al., 2003) point to a conceptually more powerful and professionally more constructive approach to examining the relationship between accountability systems and the results they produce in schools:

> External accountability systems work not by exerting direction and control over schools, but by mobilizing and focusing the capacity of schools in particular ways. The people who work in schools, and the systems that surround them, are not just active agents in determining the effects of accountability systems. Their knowledge, skill, values, and commitments, as well as the nature of the organizations in which they work, *determine* how their schools will respond.
>
> (Elmore, 2003, p.196)

What follows, therefore, highlights that it is the internal accountability that answers the question of *what* people in a school consider themselves to be accountable for, and how (Carnoy et al., 2003). Our research on school leadership and school improvement shows that schools vary in the degree of

coherence in values, intellectual and human resources, and social relationships – all of which form the necessary conditions for schools to develop the organisational capacity required to mediate and respond to the influences of external accountability systems.

**Connecting Leadership with Policy Enactment**

An increasing body of research knowledge has identified improving and successful schools that do not compromise or sacrifice broader educational purposes, can beat the odds, and enable their teachers and students to achieve and thrive – both individually and collectively – in the face of considerable, continuing and at times, disruptive external policy demands (Elmore, 1995; Day et al., , 2016; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Day et al., 2011; Day & Gu, 2018; Elmore, 2004, 2011; Gu et al., 2016; Leithwood, 2018; Matthews et al., 2014). The insight from such knowledge is that schools continuing to thrive in the reform process are "active agents" (Hubbard et al., 2006, p.14) who reshape policy initiatives into actions that are culturally, organisationally and educationally meaningful to their teachers and students in their daily realities. Put differently, how these schools respond to and do policy is "an act of co-construction" (Hubbard et al., 2006, p.14) and *enactment* in context*,* rather than *implementation* with fidelity.

The critical sociological approach to examining how schools enact policy conceptualises policy as text (Ball, 1994) in that it is "complexly encoded in sets of texts and various documents and it is also decoded in complex ways" (Braun et al., 2011, p. 586). Such a conceptual lens has allowed for an understanding of policy enactment as a creative, sophisticated, and complex process (Braun et al., 2010) in which "policies are interpreted and 'translated' by diverse policy actors in the school environment" (Ball, 1994, p. 19). Ball et al. (2012) argue that the enactment of policies is "an iterative process of making institutional texts and putting those texts into action" (2012, p. 45), and that enactment of policies is "always more than just implementation" because "they bring together contextual, historic and psychosocial dynamics into a relation with texts and imperatives to produce action and activities that are policy" (2012, p. 71). In their seminal research on how four "ordinary" coeducational, nondenominational, and nonselective secondary schools enact policy, Ball and colleagues (2012) observed that:

> At the center of policy enactment is the school—but the school is neither a simple nor a coherent entity, there is a need to understand schools as far more differentiated and loosely assembled than is often the case. Schools are not of a piece. They are precarious networks of different and overlapping groups of people, artefacts and practices. (p. 144)

Indeed, the narrative accounts of how teachers and other adults from the four case-study schools interpreted, translated and implemented various external policies in their own contexts of work showed that these policy actors are not only producers and consumers of policy, but also readers and writers of policy (Ball et al., 2011). This evidence highlights the localised and situated nature of policy actions (Braun et al., 2011). It also reveals that enacting policies in schools is a process of recontextualisation in which policy actors work creatively in diverse ways to "fabricate and forge practices out of policy texts and policy ideas in the light of their situated realities" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 142).

Although writing from different theoretical perspectives to understand and explain how people in organisations and schools make sense of policies and implement them, Weick (1995; 2005) and Spillane (2004) have both emphasised the situated nature of sense-making in the policy enactment process and the importance of considering how people make sense of their environments in this process. Thus, making sense of policies is not a passive process of decoding the information in the policy texts (Von Glasersfeld, 1989). Rather, in this process, people as social agents "construct, rearrange, single out, demolish many objective features of their surroundings" (Weick, 1979, p. 164)

and ultimately transform their environments (Spillane et al., 2002). Using the sense-making frame to examine how school leaders enact district-level accountability policies, Spillane and his colleagues (2002) concluded that:

> Managing in the middle in an era of accountability can also have advantages. Skillful school leaders can use accountability policies to augment their authority with respect to instruction . . . Hence, school leaders can interpret district accountability policies in ways that support their own reform agendas and use them to augment their influence over staff. Because the stakes are high, they can use district accountability measures to add considerable clout to their own efforts to transform practice in particular ways.
>
> (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 760)

The conceptual and empirical connections that Spillane and his colleagues have established between school leadership and policy enactment are important because schools' responses to external policies are the result of the "function not only of leaders' identities but also the multiple contexts in which their sense-making is situated" (2002, p. 755). They remind us that in schools, enacting policies is an organisational behaviour which is crafted and shaped by school leaders, and principals especially, who set the directions of the school and can act to redesign the organisation. How these leaders interpret and make sense, rationally and emotionally, of what a particular policy means to their schools and then decide "whether and how to ignore, adapt, or adopt" this policy locally (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 733) influences not only how the policy is interpreted by their teachers and how effectively it is implemented in the school, but importantly, the extent to which the actions of "enactment" are likely to disrupt, constrain, or advance further improvement of the school. In this sense, enactment links closely with the principal's role in their diagnosis of the school's needs and challenges and the focus on particular priorities in consequence. As our empirical research in this article shows, principals who do well know how to use policies as opportunities to create organisational conditions and regenerate school capacities for enhanced progress and performance which are not restricted only to academic attainment results.

In their analysis of how schools strategically manage multiple external demands, Honig and Hatch (2004) found that although some researchers argue that multiple policy demands in such environments strain schools' "ability to operate in coordinated and productive ways," others maintain that they may "add up to important new opportunities for school improvement" (p. 16). By conceptualising policy coherence as a dynamic and ongoing process, as opposed to an objective reality, they argue that schools are a central agent in crafting coherence between external demands and internal goals and strategies: "multiple external demands do not present a problem to be solved but an ongoing challenge to be managed, a potential opportunity for schools to increase necessary resources, and an important arena of organizational activity" (2004, pp. 26–7). By extension, we argue that to create and embed coherence between policy and practice within the particular context of a school's organisation requires effective leadership. We ascribe to the view of the superintendent in Hubbard et al.'s (2006) research on how schools learn from reforms that "coherence making at the end is what leadership is about" (p. 157).

**Using Policy as Impetus for Change: Building Capacity and Creating Professional Autonomy in Schools**

The research upon which this chapter is based is about how successful principals lead their schools in times of intensive and pervasive policy reforms. This mixed-methods study was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which involved in-depth case studies of four successful secondary schools in England that served communities of contrasting socioeconomic disadvantage and were led by principals with different years of experience in the school. Despite differences in context and leadership history, what shone through the interviews with senior

and middle leaders in all four schools was a strong, collective sense of positive leadership which embraced external policies and innovations as the catalyst for further growth and higher performance.

For the purpose of this chapter, we have selected a story of a secondary school from our research (Gu et al., 2018) to provide an example of how the principal led an already successful school to even higher performance. This principal had the shortest tenure of all the principals in the research, having only been in post for three years when the first data were collected. Her values and vision for excellence were perceived by senior and middle leadership as the key drivers for change. Shaw Lane School was inspected within a term of her appointment and was judged to be a "Good" school. Since then, she had made considerable progress in addressing the areas of weakness the inspection had highlighted, most notably the teaching and learning agenda which had been radically overhauled via a range of strategies to foster more collaboration and creativity amongst teachers. We interviewed seven senior and middle leaders in the school and most were interviewed twice over this two-year project. This example is used to illustrate that for principals in our case studies, the key to success in enacting external policy demands is to use them as opportunities to develop and transform people—such that they share the same values and passion for further growth and development, and that they become change actors (as opposed to receptors) who possess enhanced knowledge, qualities, and capacity to regenerate the social and intellectual culture of the school, and importantly, to manage new changes, collectively and collaboratively, for unified goals and core purposes. What shone through the interviews with senior and middle leaders in the school was a strong, collective sense of positive leadership which embraced external policies and innovations as the catalyst for further growth and higher performance.

**The Shaw Lane Girls Academy: From Good to Outstanding**

*The contexts*

Shaw Lane, a single-sex school situated on the outskirts of a large urban area within the Midlands region of England, was a relatively small secondary school and sixth form that provided an education for approximately 800 students between the ages of 11–19. The school served a culturally homogenous population with the majority of students from a non-White heritage background and many speaking English as an additional language. The number of students eligible for free school meals was higher than the national average (46% versus 13%), as was the proportion with a special educational need (75.9% versus 16.2%) at the time the study was conducted.

The school was judged to be a Good school by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) shortly after the principal's appointment in 2011. The inspection report drew attention to the good progress made by all students and the high-quality teaching and learning that took place across the school. It also highlighted the positive impact of the recently appointed principal within the context of the "legacy of underperformance" she inherited from her predecessor. By 2014, the school achieved an overall grade of Outstanding.

During this critical period of school improvement and renewal (2011–2014), four major new government initiatives were introduced to schools in England, reflecting a change of government in 2010—all of which demanded deep structural, financial, and cultural changes: performance-related pay and appraisal (Department for Education, 2013); a new Ofsted inspection framework; a review of the National Curriculum and change in the way school performance was measured; and pressure for the academisation of all schools (which are funded by the Department for Education but independent of local-authority control). The principal's aspiration for Outstanding was proudly shared by her staff as a "powerful" aim and morally just vision for the school (Assistant Principal). Driven by such an aspiration, she used the enactment of these various external policies as an

opportunity to raise expectations and anchor core values; to consolidate consultation and enhance ownership of change; and, above all, to build, broaden, and deepen the capacity required to lead further change and improvement.

*Opportunity of purpose: Anchoring core values*

Deal and Peterson (2009) argue that "Central to successful schools is a powerful sense of purpose that is focused on students and learning" (2009, p. 250). Shaw Lane was no exception. All the senior and middle leaders reported that the school positioned itself ahead of educational policy and that they were cautious of being too reactive toward government reform. Managing change was seen pragmatically as the nature of the job: "When a policy comes in—if it's statutory—then it's got to be done" (Head of Mathematics). Because government policy initiatives were, more often than not, unpredictable and potentially transient in nature (seen as likely to shift with a change of government), it was believed that the priorities of the school had to be centred on moral purpose, upon doing:

> what is right for the students because if you do what is right for the students then you must be doing the right thing. … At the end of the day, if you look at government policy it comes and it goes, doesn't it? But the needs of the students don't change that much; they might change in terms of the contexts they have but, fundamentally, what you're trying to do is to prepare them for a future in which they can be useful citizens.
>
> (Senior Deputy Principal)

Such a moral compass defined a shared direction for the school and a strong commitment in the staff
who wanted to move the school forward "to be more than Outstanding: making sure that whatever we are doing is for the benefit of the students" (Middle Leader—Humanities). What also came across consistently and powerfully here was how the shared purpose and direction had run deep to shape a confident attitude toward change and policy demands. Student needs rather than government priorities informed the way that the school was organised and operated:

> I don't feel shackled by policy because I've got a lot of experience behind me and [the principal] wants Outstanding and so she is putting structures into place to achieve that; and that is why I don't feel shackled by it because if you are doing your job right then you have nothing to worry about. And we share a similar ethos which is about producing well-formed individuals and it's about us finding the best way for these girls in Shaw Lane to achieve and to be well-formed individuals. So [the principal] will do that her way.
>
> (Assistant Principal)

Associated with this positive mindset of change was a sense of positive, assertive and responsible professionalism in the school. The ethical principles and standards that acted as drivers for improvement were to "do your best every time a student comes through" because "every student who comes to this school has only one chance" (Senior Deputy Principal). Importantly, these standards were defined, believed in, and pursued by the staff, manifesting themselves in the form of what Elmore (2003) calls "internal accountability":

> At the end of the day, what you are trying to achieve for the students is the best possible exam results and qualifications that are going to enable them to go on and be successful in the future; and you want the students to have the qualities and the characteristics which will enable them to be productive citizens when they leave

> here. If you can do all of that then whatever accountability framework comes along it should meet it, shouldn't it? If you're doing what is right for the student, then it should meet whatever framework does come along.
>
> (Senior Deputy Principal)

*Opportunity of ownership: Communication and consultation*

The principal and her senior leadership team created clear lines of communication to ensure that staff members were thoroughly consulted and well informed about the policymaking process at school. They were given ample opportunity to air their views on the ways in which the latest policy initiative would affect them and their work. This process, driven by the principal's insistence on communication and transparency, also ensured that staff members fully understood the policy in question and that they were given time to negotiate how it would be enacted on the ground in their departments and classrooms:

> Mostly the senior team is very good and they will consult with middle management and we have a group set up where we will meet up at lunchtimes or after-school sessions where, if the senior team have got certain policies that they are going to implement, they will take our views on board before they implement the policy. So, there is that going on and we, as heads of department, meet regularly with the senior team and, of course, those issues are discussed there as well and heads of department will get a chance to have their say as well. So that level of communication will go on before that policy is actually put into practice, so it's not something that has just been sprung on us and there is a certain amount of discussion and communication that goes on beforehand.
>
> (Head of Mathematics Department)

There was also a forum for departmental heads to discuss the implications of policy changes through their monthly curriculum meetings before returning to their respective faculties to feedback these discussions to their teaching staff and consult them on any changes that might have been proposed. The following senior leader explained how the organisational structure had facilitated communication and the sharing of information, which helped them to manage change in practice:

> ICT is no longer a topic in itself—it's changed to computer science—and we were looking at that yesterday and whether we can do an ICT audit across our curriculum because every subject is responsible for teaching ICT. This is what the government is saying and we need to adjust to these changes. So, it's in curriculum meetings and it's in faculty meetings as well because when we go back we discuss it as a faculty on the necessary changes that are taking place. Even the changes in the courses for GCSE now are fed down from senior management and then passed through so that everyone is aware of what is going on across the school.
>
> (Acting Deputy Principal)

It is perhaps, then, no surprise that a strong sense of ownership and collective loyalty was shared in the school. This was seen as a sign of an open, cohesive, and trusting culture that the principal and her senior leadership team had regenerated. Shaw Lane was described by middle leaders in particular as a "happy place" where staff were treated well (Head of Humanities) and "a listening school" where "I've got a voice": "You've got the freedom to say what you are happy with and what you feel might need to be improved" (Head of English). Making policies was regarded as "a whole-school thing" (Head of Humanities), as the decision-making process involved open discussions with staff members at every level in a very democratic way. As a result, there was a high level of consistency in behaviour across the school: "Policies we have integrated are whole school policies.

It's almost like nobody deviates from the norm and we are all doing the same thing: the marking policy is the same; the data collection is the same; behaviour policy is the same" (Head of Humanities). Such consistency in behaviour and vision helped to deepen the coherent and cohesive culture in the school, which made further growth and improvement possible.

*Opportunity for capacity building: Focusing on the basics*

Improving teaching and learning was seen as "the bread and butter of what we do" (Assistant Principal). Many things mattered in the school's endeavour to improve the quality of education for the students; amongst these, ensuring that teaching and learning in every classroom was of high quality was believed to be the foundation of a good school. Such belief was regarded as "a positive drive" (Head of Music) that had turned the school around:

> That is all about capacity building and it's all about developing the staff to have the skills and knowledge that they need and that is obviously going to feed through to the students and lead to them getting a better experience.
>
> (Senior Deputy Principal)

Put differently, to embrace change effectively in the school required capacity building. Key in this regard was quality professional development. This was because, at least in part, the policy "is actually saying that this is the direction that we think you ought to go, and this is the sort of path we want you to take. But how you walk along the path—'how the garden grows'—is actually up to you" (Senior Deputy Principal). Thus, knowing how to make sense of external policy and recontextualise it in ways that were fit for purpose required sustained attention to improve the knowledge, skills, and practices of the staff on the ground.

The newly introduced Ofsted inspection framework, for example, was used as a vehicle to raise the standards of provision of teaching and learning in the school. This was achieved through the provision of a series of in-house training events designed to ensure that the staff had a thorough grasp of this framework. At the same time, there was an "Open Door Community" (Assistant Principal) in the school where the staff felt "safe" to share practice and discuss what outstanding teaching and learning looked like. After some initial worries, the Head of Humanities realised that the new framework had not really had much impact on her "because our lessons are well-planned and we are well-resourced anyway."

Similarly, when enacting the new performance-related pay and appraisal policy in the school, efforts had been focused on how this policy could be used to join up with support for learning and development, and through this, foster a professional culture of high expectations.

> We've also looked at the idea that performance management is something that underpins what happens throughout the whole school. So your performance management should be tied to your CPD and your school development plan, and so every department, having identified what the department needs are to fit in with the whole school development plan, is able to create a training plan for the department and, therefore, the CPD will actually support individual staff in specific CPD that will help them meet department needs, their own needs, and whole-school needs.
>
> (Senior Deputy Principal)

The leadership intention was well-received by their middle leaders: "they've [Senior Leadership Team] really pushed the idea that performance management is not a whip for us to be beaten with and it's meant to be about self-development" (Assistant Principal). The similar view from the Head of

Mathematics below represented a common voice from the interviews, and importantly, a testimony to the success of the principal leadership in that she had shaped a high degree of consistency in values, expectations, and behaviour across the school.

> I think colleagues understand the need for accountability. You would think that there are very few colleagues who are in that position where they are bordering on being incompetent, if you like. The majority are hardworking and conscientious people who want to do right by the kids. So, the idea of the appraisal system is to support them to improve and it's just about evidencing what you do day in and day out. That's what needs to happen really: it's finding out the people who are perhaps dragging their heels and making them more aware and more accountable and getting them to perform to their best.
>
> (Head of Mathematics)

**Conclusion**

External policy initiatives—whether they are foreground or background noises that schools can or cannot ignore—represent some, but not all, of the many demands, challenges, and opportunities that schools face in their everyday working worlds. Enacting policy successfully essentially relies on building and consolidating the capacity for further growth and development. Key in this regard are school leaders who know how to design the social and intellectual conditions which engage the heart and mind of individuals in the school and, through this, harness their ideas, experiences, knowledge, and relationships to fulfil shared values and achieve shared goals.

Hence, policy enactment is in essence about change. Kotter (1996) argues that although managing change is challenging, the much better challenge for most organisations is "leading change" (p. 30). Evidence from our research shows that in successful schools, what the leaders appear to be doing exceptionally well is using policies and reforms as opportunities for change—purposefully, progressively, and strategically—to regenerate collaborative and coherent cultures and conditions which encourage and support the staff to learn, to reflect, and to renew their practice.

Evidence from our case studies suggests that building internal school capacity for improvement is not a simple, linear process. It requires directions from inspiring and visionary school leadership to create, develop, and sustain coherent and fit-for-purpose structures, cultures, and conditions to grow the knowledge, skills, and commitment of individuals and harness them to become the collective capacity of the school. This observation confirms what we already know from the research literature on successful school leadership: shared directions and goals and consistency in understandings of the standards of teaching and learning are key characteristics of high-performing schools where fundamental principles and values unite and drive teachers and leaders to be intellectually and emotionally committed to making a positive difference to the lives of their students (Day et al., 2011; Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Gu et al., 2014; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2006, 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2015).

What the evidence also shows is that in successful schools the process of policy enactment and the process of school improvement are not two separate processes. They are intertwined to form one overall process in which external policy initiatives and internal school improvement practices are purposefully aligned by principals to serve their moral purposes, educational values, and goals for the school. At the heart of this intertwined process are continuous leadership efforts to support collaborative professional learning and development and, through this, to build the necessary whole-school capacity for sustainable personal, social, and academic improvement in student outcomes. Investigating how school principals shape their school's improvement efforts from the perspectives of middle and senior leaders provides us with more insightful evidence on how and why

some schools have the capacity to enjoy greater degrees of autonomy in their management of change, despite facing the same external challenges and demands, whilst others do not.

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