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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the symbiotic relationship between emotion and rationality in leadership in primary schools. It uses the literature of both emotion and leadership to ask whether school leadership has learnt some of the lessons from the recent interest in emotion and leadership. Drawing on recent research into the lives of primary school headteachers, it asks how far our knowledge of affective leadership has informed future research, and what it means for the practice of leadership in primary schools.

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# **Rationality and Emotion in primary school leadership; an exploration of key themes**

## **Introduction**

Researchers into emotion (Ashkenasy, Hartel, & Zerbe, 2000; Stanley & Burrows, 2001) acknowledge that emotion is central to all aspects of human experience. Recent research (Beatty, 2000; 2002; Carlyle & Woods, 2002; Gronn & Lacey, 2004; Hargreaves, 2000; James, 2004) has meant that the profile of emotion in educational leadership has never been higher. This focus fits intuitively (an emotional term) with research concerning schools as emotional workplaces (Hargreaves, 1998). People and relationships, and the social interactions this invokes, are woven into the fabric of the everyday life of a headteacher in primary schools. Each social encounter evokes an emotional response, sometimes immediately visible physically in the participants. Recognising and handling such emotion is an important aspect of everyday social interplay. Primary school leaders, therefore, have to be able to understand the part that emotion plays in the way that they lead their schools. In a review of leadership research, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) suggest that implicit in much of the research is the view that leadership is a dynamic, social influencing process. More than this, the review states, “it is a social process which is subtle and interactive”(2003/04 p.202). Leadership as a social process depends on the relationships that are built both within the school, and also in the wider community. This article has developed from a personal belief in the centrality of relationships; not just to any school related work, but as pivotal to the concept we like to call leadership. The core of a school lies in relationships; teacher/student; parent/teacher;

teacher/teacher; child/child. These relationships may be many and different but they are quite literally at the *heart* of education. Emotions can be viewed as the language of relationships. It is through the language and experience of emotion that we contextualise not only our individuality but also our sense of belonging in a group.

In this article, emotion is used as a conceptual lens through which to view the role of headship within English primary schools. It suggests that the rational/emotional debate in educational leadership has become polarized, to the detriment of our knowledge base. On the one hand we have the rationality of “effective leadership”, and on the other, the “emotional intelligence” of leadership, both of which may or may not lead to “learning centered leadership”. Leadership, whether from the top, the middle or bottom up, has been dominated, usually unproblematically, by rationality. Rational has been seen as the opposite of emotional in terms of describing leadership behaviours. Perhaps this tendency to rationalise emotions happens because emotion is not seen as a legitimate way of either presenting ideas, or suggesting how we reached conclusions (Fineman 2000 p.96). Emotion can be seen as “feminine”, and therefore somehow suspect. A different view of rationality, as the presentation of emotionalized processes so that they are acceptable to others (Fineman, 2000), has implications for how educational leadership is viewed. Despite a plethora of literature in this area over the last few years (Beatty & Brew, 2004; Boler, 1999; Crawford, 2004; Day, 2004; Ginsberg & Davies, 2002), very little has actually been about what this interest in emotion means for the practice of leadership in schools. How explicit should schools be about emotion, for example? Or does the rational

discourse provide a safer means of discussing the difficult aspects of emotional understanding?

The discussion in this article will focus on primary schools, and suggest that it is often more rational to act on the basis of emotion. Although primary schools were chosen as the research area, I recognize that presenting an acceptable public face is part of any teacher's role. A public face assumes even greater prominence when leadership positions are involved (Hochschild, 1983; Hoyle, 1988; James & Vince, 2001), as people in leadership positions want, or need, to show others that they are rational beings. Leaders tend to portray their leadership intentions, and the consequences of them, as rational (Fineman 2000:12) because it is socially acceptable to do so. Although it would be compelling to suggest that we could somehow read the runes of emotion and thus restore rationality, the article will argue that managing our emotions better may in fact move leaders away from a techno-rationalist standpoint, and towards a new understanding of emotion and rationality. Thus, the research detailed below illuminates the leadership of primary headteachers through their own voices. It is my attempt to focus leadership on that inherent emotional dimension of lived realities in schools.

### **Purpose and Methodology**

The psychological literature (Harris, 2004; Haviland-Jones & Kahlbaugh, 2004; Isen, 2004; Lupton, 1998) highlights the difficulties in researching emotion, both in terms of access to people and their memory of events. For example, people may be all too willing

to describe their experiences, but their response may be slanted by, for example, an aspect of the way the questions about their experience are phrased. There is no doubt that research into this area is problematic. As James (2004) argues, emotion and the study of them in education represents difficult knowledge. As he puts it, there are several key concerns:

- People may not wish to reveal their true feelings;
- Many do not have a vocabulary to express how they feel;
- People often split of their difficult feelings and project them elsewhere as a social defence. (p3)

I am writing as someone who was a primary school teacher, and who believes that the study of emotion is important to our understanding of leadership, or as James (2004, p.4) frames it:

The researchers' deep motivation will distort what is heard, how it is interpreted and the way in which it is theorised. So while it is understood that in qualitative research that the researcher will have a perspective and a value position and will need to be reflexive in their approach, in emotional research, the researchers' deep predispositions and desire needs to be worked with.

The research intention was to view how headteachers experience emotion and meaning in their daily interactions, and how, if at all, this impacts on their approach to leadership. It was an opportunity to specifically look at the way headteachers feel, describe, contain and manage their own emotions in the complex setting of a primary school. It was also

designed to see how this experience of emotion linked into their role as a headteacher, and if they had been influenced by events within their own autobiography. It allowed them to tell stories, as these are viewed by the researcher as a means of “opening valuable windows into the emotional, political and symbolic life of organisations”(Gabriel, 2000 p.2)

The five head teachers in the study were between the ages of 41 and 55. All were previously known to me, as the pilot study had shown that established relationships helped in discussing potentially sensitive issues. Some had been headteachers for a significant time (7 years plus); one was in his first term. Three were women. They were interviewed over the period of a year in order to explore the topic in depth, with each of the three main interviews lasting from two to three hours, based on Seidman’s framework (1998). One headteacher was then chosen from the sample to be part of an observation study. The first interviews were structured, while the second and third allowed opportunities for the headteachers to tell the story of their life, and also significant stories from school life. Gabriel suggests (2000 p.19) that organisational storytelling is reflexive as it continuously recreates the past according to the present. In this way, the headteachers were endeavouring to explain their emotional lives from the standpoint of their present leadership positions.

Because of the complex area of emotion, particular care was taken with designing an interview schedule. Harris (2004 p281) reflects that psychological theory would suggest that “our ability to know and report on emotions that we feel is limited” . However, he

argues that people do have access, “however partial” to their emotional experiences, and therefore “we shall not fully understand human emotions unless we take that capacity for awareness and reflection seriously”. Fuller understanding, he posits, may well depend on “a less immediate and more reflective meditation on their history and their subjective appraisal of events” (p.281.) It was clear from the beginning that more information was forthcoming from the interviewees towards the end of the interview, and later in the subsequent, written discussions about the interview transcript. The interviewees began to “warm up”, and to put their trust in the interviewer. If leadership is about creating a framework of meaning for followers (Fineman 2003:77), then the research discussions were part of the way that these leaders explained how emotion influenced that framework of meaning. Thus the reality of daily life is brought home most clearly in face-to-face situations with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Emotion is part of way that leaders create the social reality through a kind of performance. The headteachers in the study were professionally focused, all proud of their ability to influence pupils, staff and parents. Some found controlling their emotions and presenting a professional front more difficult than others. All of them noted times when they had achieved positive recognition from pupils, staff or parents, and how rare that positive affirmation appeared to be. There was an emerging concern about how to balance “being human” with “being a professional”. All of them revealed incidents of personal vulnerability. Rational behaviour was prompted by feelings at a deep personal level, reflecting values.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

### **The affective/rational interface**

If emotion creates part of the social reality of life, then social encounters are redolent of performance. Goffman (1961) proposed that in every kind of social interaction the participants can become more or less strongly engaged in a role, and fulfillment is more likely to occur when they are fully engaged in a role. In the early 1980's, Hochschild studied the role of emotion management in the life of flight attendants. She explored the tensions that build up when an individual has to give a particular performance as part of their job. One of her key examples was airline hostesses for Delta. They had to make passengers feel welcome onboard, and were constantly exhorted to smile. The significant concept that she developed was the phrase 'emotional labor'. Workers who spend a great deal of their working day with people may be required to simulate or suppress feelings. They have to do this in order either to maintain a specific outward appearance, or in order to produce the required emotional state in others. Hochschild stated that this labour/work operates through "feeling rules". Feeling rules are those that are deemed to be appropriate to the social settings, for example, happy when with good friends, sad at funerals. So, a person's expression of emotion is socially shaped. She contended that these rules can have a high personal cost (Hochschild, 1979). Positional expectations amid the hierarchy of schools can define the boundaries within which headteachers function in terms of emotional display. The ability to "play" the role of headteacher has emotional constraints, and is linked to the emotional health of the organisation as a whole. The headteachers' accounts showed this conflict. First, there was a major tension in the heads' accounts between appearing rational and yet feeling emotional. This can be depicted through the situations they described as an attempt to make a conscious separation of the professional and the personal; the affective/rational interface. There was a clear voicing of the feeling

that separateness was the professional thing to do, yet at the same time they argued for the use of such emotions as joy and hate. The affective/rational interface is very permeable, however, and the headteachers often described themselves as moving imperceptibly from one to another, through the use of performance.

I feel that there is a great deal of acting in headship. For example when I had to talk to that boy just now (he had had to reprimand a small boy for kicking a door.) I call this acting cross. I don't often have to put on a happy face - I don't lose my temper in school. (James)

The danger to all of this is that your emotions, if not handled, might slip out somewhere else and colour your relationship with another person. (Ben)

This idea of a professional demeanour featured strongly in the discussions. The tensions between being professional and being able to show that you were human were very difficult at times. In primary schools, the way that emotion is displayed depends on the relationships between the key players and how each needs to be viewed within the "professional" context. As one head suggested:

I sometimes wonder if someone will find me out! I find it hard to step up my emotions at the end of term, but I feel I have to bounce around for parents. It's like being a stand up comic, as you get anxious and of course people know that you are performing. (Laura)

Even the words that describe this delicate balance between what might be professionally acceptable and the reality are emotionally loaded. The commonality is that managing your emotions through performance helps maintain professional demands, whilst at the same time reminding the headteacher of the emotions that lie beneath the surface.

### **Stories**

This leads to the second important issue from the research. The stories that are told give substance to the feelings held by the participants (Fineman, 2003; Gabriel, 2000; Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002). Social constructionists suggest that such stories not only represent personal emotions but also actively constitute the emotional form of work life. Fineman's argument, for example, is that although we can express our feelings directly: e.g. "I'm so glad you invited me", our feelings often are encased in the stories we tell, and that these stories importantly give legitimacy to our feelings. He goes so far as to suggest that they are a *key mechanism* of expression. This is a very telling point. As he says "The story is not a measure of the objective truth of an event, but is a fine indicator of our feelings and how we wish to present them."(2003:17). Two stories from the research indicate this; Eleanor's story of the caretaker and Mary's difficult teacher.

Both stories underscore the intentionality of giving the appearance of rationality, as discussed above, even under some very difficult emotional pressure. Eleanor told this story.

Earlier this year the school administrator made a written formal complaint about the caretaker. I had to see the caretaker and I found it upsetting as I sort of felt it was in some ways a complaint about me. I knew that that the interview with the caretaker would be difficult, and in fact he stormed out! I just had to deal with it. Later he did apologise, but it left a ...nasty taste. There's still an aftermath of the incident within the school – the govs sorted it by giving the caretaker a verbal warning. It was an uncomfortable feeling and I was only able to share it with the Chair of Govs and my husband. Who else is there? It's difficult to get hold of other Heads during the day.

This story shows another facet of leading and emotion; the personal nature of leadership (*I sort of felt it was in some ways a complaint about me*).

Emotional experience is made up of background feelings or moods, anticipated emotions, and task related feelings such as embarrassment or anger (Fineman 2000). Another story encapsulated the role of shame and embarrassment as two key features of social control(Oatley & Jenkins, 2003), and the emotional cost of leadership in schools. This was the story told by Mary, concerning the incompetent teacher. She gave a very detailed account of an incident in her school, which she felt had drained her emotionally.

Mary had received parental complaints about a temporary member of staff, Mrs South, not allowing children to use the toilet. She spoke to the teacher about school policy, but Mrs South said she did not agree with it. She was “adamant”. This interview took place in the Head's office, and Mary told her she had to conform to school policy. After she had

established the facts, and heard the teacher's hard line, Mary felt quite angry and also nervous. Mary's own daughter was in this class and one break arrived at Mary's door distraught and wet, because she had been kept in and not allowed to go to the toilet. She got a Teaching Assistant for her child, and went to see Mrs South straight away. The teacher was brought up to the Office for an explanation. Mrs South said that she was making an example of children who had not learnt their spelling. Mary explained that this was not school policy, and certainly not part of their spelling strategy. She told Mrs South that the children were so frightened that they couldn't learn, and that she must stop it immediately. Mary also told her that she was very angry. She was now very concerned, so she began observations of lessons. The teacher was told when this would take place, and had to give in planning beforehand. What she saw was awful, and she described it as "really a holding operation". Mary went back a week later, and found the work set was now too difficult. Mrs South challenged the feedback – "I feel you are doing this on purpose, challenging me". The attached inspector was then invited in. Observations were done across the whole school and work sampling in the Year group. It was obvious that levels in this teacher's class were not appropriate. There were more observations by the attached inspector. During the feedback, Mrs South became very angry. She shouted, "I don't know what this bloody woman wants!" and ran out of the school. The situation moved to capability. There were targets and observations for three weeks. The teacher went off with stress for six months. Mary got an Occupational Health assessment and Mrs South didn't come back. Mary had to teach the class herself for a term because of the disruption. Mary said that she felt frustration and anger together. She also was

disappointed that Mrs South could not be helped. She feels that she would have acted quicker if her own daughter had not been in the class.

The telling of this story reflects the dilemma of the affective/rational interface. Mary had to work very hard with suppressing her own feelings. Her own values and what she believed about education were deeply involved in her recall of the situation, as well as having to separate the roles of parent and headteacher even more than is usual. It is also possible that the meaning of this story will be different for Mary, Mrs South , this researcher and the reader, as good stories can possess many meanings.

### **The role of negative and positive emotions**

Many of the stories told in the research have a negative focus. The negative emphasis in these stories is intense. George (2000) suggests that feelings play an important role in leadership because it is likely that a diversity of feelings influence leadership effectiveness. The negative emotions, such as those expressed in these two stories, are of the type, George argues, that foster careful information processing (p.1031). The details foster this processing. These intense negative emotions may also act as signals to point the leader in the direction of the issue that requires immediate attention in that particular situation. In other words, in pursuit of rational management objectives, headteachers emotions can point out the path to take. In Mary's story the rational objective would be to have the best teacher in front of that class, and all the steps she took were rational (observation, involving the link advisor). However, her emotions gave her clear indications, early on that this was the direction to take.

Interestingly, those emotions that were reported in a positive manner could be viewed as Headteachers being rational in pursuit of emotional ends. Persuading people towards a certain emotion e.g. happiness, may mean that the person actually feels that emotion and then it can become *socially contagious* (Fineman 2003:19), or as Eleanor suggests in the context of the whole school:

As the Head, you need to show a calm presence, and calm exterior. You may want to kill staff or parents, but...if the Head is not calm the school is not calm.  
(Eleanor)

Both negative and positive emotions go back to the acceptance of the reality of emotional labour in school. It shows that ‘acting’ can be draining but also exciting, as the headteachers often wanted to play a role.

I think that it’s important to control emotion in a lot of situations, certainly to do with work. Eyes and teeth! (*She gives me an overemphasised smile*) Makes people feel better. (Francesca)

Ben was an unusual man in the case studies. He was a relatively new headteacher – when first interviewed him he had been in post ninety days, and he was working in the English First school sector with children from 4-8, a role that not many men choose. He said:

As a Head, you have to not take things to heart. You need to be more philosophical than a class teacher. I'm learning not to take things personally.

He suggested to me that as a person, he was easily moved by emotional events. For example he told me that when the previous Head left, people cried, and he thinks that it is good for the children to understand that people can express their emotions like that.

It's all to do with how something might be affecting someone else. For example, there's a child at school with a serious condition and the longer-term prognosis is poor. You have to support the staff in readiness.

This quotation does not reflect the strength of the feeling that showed in his physical demeanor as we discussed this. It seems that in the context of young children in primary schools, emotional expression is never too far away, and is a natural part of work with younger children. Men have been constrained by the leadership literature's focus on rationality to the detriment of understandings and expressions of emotionality as important for effective leadership. George (2000) argues strongly, from work carried out in neurology, that the evidence suggests that feelings are necessary to make good decisions, and whilst very intense emotions may be construed negatively in terms of decision-making, little or no emotion may also lead to irrational behaviour.

### **Looking forward**

Within the study of emotion itself, there are a variety of approaches. Lupton (1998 p.10) makes a helpful distinction when she divides these into two broad groups; 'emotions as

inherent' or within the person, and 'emotions as socially constructed', as part of societal discourse. She emphasizes that this is a continuum with a significant degree of overlap. Fundamentally she points to the idea that the emotional self is always related to the body, because we experience and are aware of emotion only through our own bodily reaction to stimuli and events. Being aware of our own bodily responses links most of the perspectives on emotion, but they differ in the emphasis that is put on the cognitive appraisal of these responses. This has implications for how we train potential educational leaders to understand, and work with, the cognitive appraisal of emotion within schools.

Emotionally engaging with emotion (Lupton, 1998) especially in the area of leadership in schools, involves both the researcher and the interviewee on a journey of discovery into the affective aspects of leadership, of the way feelings and emotions shape and inform particularly the strong moral purpose of leadership (HayMcBer/TTA, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994). It is as Beatty (2002) describes it:

Dominant in the discourse of educational leadership are cognitivist, rationalist and behaviourist frameworks that do not feature the inherent emotional dimension of lived realities in schools. These views position thinking and feeling as separate and often competing factions. ... what is required is a comprehensive view of educational leadership that acknowledges the importance of emotion (2002:2).

Educational leadership is beginning to do this. One fundamental way in which emotions can be expressed in leadership is through talk. As Oatley and Jenkins (1996:99) muse:

In talk, we cultivate, define, and redefine, ourselves and our relationships by presenting out experiences to others- we elaborate our emotional bonds and antipathies with specific people we know.

This research consisted of talk, as the Heads daily lives revolved around this kind of communication. Talk to clarify emotional meanings is a subtle undercurrent in well-managed meetings. Emotions, then, both help and hinder schools core purposes (James, 2003). For example a school may want members of staff to hold strong views in order to move ideas forward, but not if they hinder classroom practice. Argyris (1996; 1999) suggests that organisations that function well are psychologically safe, but also argues that it is common for organizations to be places where relationships are superficial and wary. This superficiality needs to change as part of building trust in leadership, and the capacity of an organisation for trust (Beatty et al., 2004; Bottery, 2002; Seashore, 2003). More research is needed about the links between building trust and emotional understanding, as well as the ways in which both positive and negative affect can be importance influencing factors in leadership judgements.

## **Conclusion**

From the research and the educational leadership literature, a strong thread emerges. Emotion is potentially so powerful that its influence has to be “managed” in some way.

We may collapse the rational/emotional distinction. Rationality is no longer the ‘master process’, neither is emotion. They both interpenetrate; they flow together from the same mould. From this perspective there is no such thing as pure

cognition; thinking and deciding is always brushed with emotion, however slight... we may be dimly aware of these processes, or they may be unconscious. (Fineman 2000:11).

Because we want to think and believe that what we are doing is rational, we create social discourses that define norms of feeling and displays of emotion. These discourses are part of the fabric of a school, and can go unchallenged because all participants are so used to them. Grint (2000) describes leadership as having talismanic qualities. If schools are to be psychologically safe, then the affective part of leadership may well be the talisman that is needed.

The affective side of leadership was very important to these primary school heads, whether male or female. Interior emotional spaces colour how people frame situations, and the way that they engage with other. When Carlyle and Wood (2002) studied teachers under stress, they commented that policy makers have only just begun to realise the significance of emotion in teaching and learning. They also noted that schools where many teachers described themselves as stressed were ones in which there was a negative emotional climate, marked by fear, lack of trust, blame, low respect and chronic anxiety (8-13). They report that teachers felt that many of the problems they were facing in schools were caused from the leadership's inability to handle difficult emotions. A label such as "being emotional" was used to individualize and discount individual emotion (p.14). Thus, leaders could imply that an individual teacher's emotional expression "exposed an individual personality trait, rather than signalling organizational anxieties."

In the same way, failing schools may expose an individual leader's personality traits, but this is never the complete picture of organizational breakdown.

The process of socialization into teaching, and then into leadership roles, requires that as developing teachers and leaders staff learn certain ways of looking, sounding or even "being". This forms part of the collective culture of the school. The expectations of parents and children, perceived, or real, may reinforce this. This process of emotion shaping means that professionals and their client groups are in some ways complicit in defining the boundaries of what is, and is not, appropriate emotional display (Fineman 2001, p.227). Headteachers can unwittingly support the notion that ideal 'professional' behaviour is rational and carefully emotionally controlled. This may well be illusory, not just in terms of desirability but also in practice. Leading effective schools has been described (James, 2000) as a recognition and understanding of the political environment created by emotions and the intricacies of managing it to make fundamental and deep-seated transformation. As Carlyle and Woods make clear, negative emotional climates combined with low levels of organizational emotional competence, or the way emotion is handled in the collective space, leads to a huge increase in stress and breakdown. Research into emotion in educational leadership can enable educational leaders to examine the way they handle their own emotions, how that interacts with the emotional climate of a school and the implications for their own leadership. Recognizing that emotion and rationality have a symbiotic relationship is one part of that process.

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