

The Leadership Challenge in Wales: Voices From the Front Line

PROFESSOR DAVID EGAN

Cardiff Metropolitan University

ANN KEANE

Formerly Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales

ABSTRACT

This edited transcript of a seminar held at Llandrindod Wells in November 2017 identifies the views of headteachers in Wales on a range of major issues including the qualities required for successful leadership, professional development for headship, the use of educational research, leading in different contexts, the importance of collaborative work and the need to change the dominant culture of excessive accountability in Welsh education.

Headteachers believe a range of leadership and practical management skills are required for headship and although these are generic to all leadership situations, additional specific skills are required in some contexts. The importance of ongoing support for headteachers commencing when they train for headship, continuing through their induction period in post and then proceeding throughout their careers is emphasised. The importance of leading collaborative models of professional learning based on school-to-school working and drawing upon educational research is highlighted. Whilst there is recognition that schools need to be held accountable, the excessive and often punitive nature of accountability within the current education system in Wales is viewed as being detrimental to innovation and as having harmful effects on recruitment to and retention in headship. These are all seen as being important issues for the new National Academy for Education Leadership to consider.

<https://doi.org/10.16922/wje.20.2.7>

Introduction

With the assistance of the Shadow Board of the National Academy for Educational Leadership, the Welsh Government and the Regional Education Consortia, a seminar was held at Llandrindod Wells on 13 November 2017 to discuss school leadership in Wales today and the aspirations of headteachers for the new National Academy for Educational Leadership.

Each Regional Education Consortium in Wales was asked to send representatives of primary and secondary headteachers and invitations were also extended to key Regional Education Consortium staff and the headteacher associations.

The discussion was chaired by Ann Keane and facilitated by David Egan who prompted discussion by highlighting the current state of educational research knowledge on generic and specific leadership qualities and the barriers that had been identified to successful leadership practice.

What follows below is an edited transcript of the discussion at the seminar which has been grouped under the themes which emerged.

Qualities of successful leadership

The starting point for this discussion was a list of the qualities that research suggests are required for successful leadership, that is vision, courage, passion, emotional intelligence, curiosity, resilience, persuasion and judgement.

- On any given day, you could need any of those qualities listed. The reality is, I suppose, that those qualities of leadership need to be balanced against the skills of management. Both are vital for the job. So, I wouldn't say that any of those are not important, they are all important, but they need to come with a raft of management skills that you may or may not see in headteachers but that are equally necessary to be effective in post.
- [speaks in Welsh] I would add 'humility' to that list: many school leaders I have met are very ambitious but not for themselves. They are ambitious for their institution/school. This is true not only of school leaders I have met but also of

David Egan and Ann Keane 117

leaders in the world of business. As part of that they acknowledge the role of the team: they may be the leader of the team but other people have important roles to play in the team too.

- The ambition that leaders have for their institutions is certainly a strength in Wales. What strikes me about the list is that those are all qualities we would like to see in our pupils. We would like them to be curious, persuasive, communicative, resilient, and ironically I think one of the things that we have been falling into the trap of doing in Wales in recent years is focusing on the metrics of performance rather than on those qualities. As we move towards establishing a leadership academy there is a real opportunity to focus once again on those qualities for our pupils as well as for leadership. The new academy offers a real opportunity here to re-establish those values that drove us when we were younger. We were passionate, we had to be resilient to survive in this job, and we try to be ambitious for our institutions and our colleagues, and role-model that to the children.
- And isn't it about aligning our collective focus on those qualities? I don't think schools have lost the focus on the child, but outside of the school itself there has sometimes been a misalignment of those core values. To create systemic change, to embed those qualities will take time and we need to align the vision collectively at all levels in the system.
- I would say that as a leader, you need all those qualities all the time and the lack of any one of them would seriously compromise your ability to be a leader. I am not sure that all these qualities are teachable but I think the distinction between leadership and management skills is very important and I think that management skills are teachable. One would hope that most people who are in a position in their career to aspire to headship will already have these qualities. But the skills that underpin them, the things that make the trains run on time, are teachable and I do think there is a huge gap in terms of leadership preparation in Wales for the teachable skills that make schools run efficiently and effectively.

- I think sometimes you need to exercise some leadership qualities more than others. I think emotional intelligence and persuasion are two key qualities you need because you have got to keep motivating staff to carry on working hard towards a common goal. For instance, when you know the English department is going to have to change schemes of work mid-year because of syllabus changes you need those powers of persuasion and team-building and motivation in order to support them. This kind of example is not at the periphery, it is actually quite central to what I do!

Preparation for headship and continuing professional development

- A lot of what we learn, we learn when we are already in the job, which means that there is a real danger of making substantial mistakes in the early part of your career in headship, because the preparation hasn't been sufficient to build up the skills which would allow you to deliver on the qualities that you bring to the role.
- I think there was a time when the majority of people who were undertaking the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) were trying to acquire those management skills but had no intention of moving to headship. They were doing it because it was the only leadership development opportunity available to them.
- NPQH offered ten days out of school in the past, time and space to learn from peers and that isn't the case now. And rightly so perhaps but it was an opportunity to hear what other people had learnt on the job but more recently it has focused on providing evidence for assessment.
- I did the NPQH in 2008, thoroughly enjoyed it, it was exactly what I needed in my career to get me into headship. The key thing that ran through all the sessions was that headship is completely different to teaching. It is all about juggling plates and prioritising. I know you are saying you shouldn't have to prioritise the leadership qualities, but if you haven't got resilience and passion you will struggle. With HR issues, retention, recruitment, finance problems, poor projections, premises management, safeguarding,

David Egan and Ann Keane 119

audits, challenge advisers – the different pressures are huge. I chose to pursue a Master's in leadership in education early on, which was the best thing I ever did because I had time to explore the issues. I think we had a one year induction for headteachers which was very useful, but I relied on picking up the phone and asking people for help. There wasn't really a network of people to talk to so I think that needs to be there for new headteachers coming in, who may be a fabulous teacher in the classroom but they will not fully understand the challenges when they step up into headship. I think there needs to be more support for them.

- As a newly qualified headteacher coming into the role, I think there is a really big role for the academy potentially in assuring the quality of NPQH provision. I am not entirely sure how it works in Wales having completed it in London, but it was an incredibly practical, useful, hands-on experience. We had eight days out of class, out of school, and then also worked in a couple of different schools in different phases, communities and leadership teams so you got an understanding of how the teams worked in different contexts. In the last year my consortium has created an induction programme for newly qualified headteachers. Although none of us is on our own it feels like a very lonely job at times, and it is hard to know who to speak to. So anything the academy could work on in terms of creating that cohort network – of people who have been through a similar programme to yours at a similar time (these would be people you could call on from local and other schools) – that would be very useful for people starting out.
- Different consortia operate very different systems for professional development. A head came to talk to our headship group about her leadership initiatives and we got a lot out of it. So, we do that quite a lot as a network of heads in our consortium. One of the best professional activities has been working in Triads, which is consortium-facilitated and I work with two other schools across the consortia. We are partners in a project but it is not one good school and two weak ones, there are three of us working on a shared agenda about supporting leadership at middle leader level.

- In terms of the availability of leadership programmes, I did my NPQH and then there was nothing for 10–12 years. Then in the last couple of years through the consortia, I have probably have had more courses and programmes, school-to-school work, presentations from heads from other schools, opportunities to work alongside heads from different sectors than ever before. Some of them have been through the private sector and these generic leadership programmes have offered an interesting perspective from outside education. But I think the important thing is be able to select from a range of opportunities, something that meets your needs. The opportunities I have had in the last three years have transformed me and the children in my school.
- We have got a very interesting programme running with leaders from industry coming in. NPQH as you know has also changed in the last two years, it is not just an assessment for a qualification now but more of a development programme. There is ‘lean management’ for new heads, a programme for new heads and for experienced headteachers that focuses on generic leadership skills rather than on education leadership. This runs for 5 consecutive days and it seems to have a direct impact on schools and leadership at different levels. The only thing that we are finding difficult is proving that it improves outcomes. It is a balance between hitting short-term targets and preparing for the future, and some things only have an impact in the medium to long term. We are working nationally on new provision for new heads and experienced heads across consortia and it seems to be something that headteachers feel would be useful.

Using research, data and evidence

- There is a lot of research out there about what makes effective leadership. How much of that is used by schools? How many schools actually engage in school-based learning that uses research methods?
- I think it is about how you apply research. I did a doctorate a few years ago and it was focused on research in practice.

David Egan and Ann Keane 121

My topic was leadership and my thesis was about the role of the secondary phase SENCO and their impact in Welsh schools in relation to the changes that had taken place over the previous few years. I think you have to make sure that CPD is rooted in practice. I had somebody in my school doing the Master's programme and I didn't even know she was doing it, that is how big an impact she was having, and that is a shame. If research is disconnected from the day to day, it is not necessarily useful to the school. And modern schools are busy and it is hard to find space for research.

– I want to talk about this dichotomy between what constitutes big research and micro research. If we look at another profession for comparison: for example, if you take psychology, they have got a real crisis in the reproducibility of their research. So they are finding that, in different contexts, some of these biblically held beliefs do not hold up. In terms of research in education, there are things out there with little or no empirical evidence to say that they would work in specific schools. We hear 'mindfulness' and 'brain gym' being bandied about though there is little or no evidence of impact. But what we need is research that fits the Welsh context and its different conditions. And we are using blunt indicators, like the eFSM, despite having one of the finest data sets in the world in terms of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.

– I am really excited about the whole self-improving school system. I am excited about the new professional standards and the need to adopt professional research as part of our ongoing work. I have had two schools now where I inherited staff who are very expensive, most of them UPS3, a lot of them very good teachers in the class but they could do more to move the school forward. So in both schools, we adopted research practices and these staff have become active researchers, reading research and finding out what is happening in other schools so that they can re-engage with school improvement and support the less experienced practitioners. So it is a really exciting time at the moment because people are getting on board. It's true that there have been many CPD courses that I got nothing from and which

cost a lot of money. But when I was in School Improvement Groups in my consortia they were really valuable because it was groups of like-minded schools who were coming up with their own agenda for improvement, and I thought some of the work that came out of those was really high quality.

- I am going to put S. on the spot in a moment, because I am going to ask her to share what I have seen in her school recently. But I just want to pose a question – what have we celebrated in Wales in the last 5–10 years? Predominantly it has been the quick turnaround of schools in performance, and I will be frank with you, a lot of that hasn't come from any research anywhere, it has come from quick-fix approaches. We haven't celebrated enough the research that has got backed-up evidence or shared it with others. Instead what we have done, and we have all been guilty of it, is celebrate a school that has gone from red to green very quickly. All those quick fixes that are celebrated nationally are not encouraging headteachers actually to adopt approaches that make their school a learning organisation.
- In my school we have used inquiry to turn targets on their head. We have changed all of our school improvement targets into questions, so instead of saying x per cent of readers are going to achieve x, y, z this year, we asked how can we make children enjoy reading to such a point that they become readers for life? And that is our school improvement project, it is linked with the professional standards, and INSET time is earmarked for teachers to go and see practice elsewhere, to do some research, to sit and ask questions and speak to leaders at all levels. So, more time to research, time to question, time to practise, linked with the professional standards and therefore linked to performance management. Instead of being obsessed with all those different targets that we have to reach, we have turned it into an inquiry-based project. It has made my life so much easier. I can't hold the staff back: they are coming up with ideas, they are saying 'look what I have found'. It has invigorated a very tired teaching profession, because they are empowered to discover for themselves, rather than being taught or

David Egan and Ann Keane 123

told. And sometimes there are simple methods to get these practices into school. I think sometimes we over-complicate things. Let's just change our practices, change the way we are thinking – it is quite easy really.

- One might reasonably expect that those involved in delivering initial teacher education should spend a certain amount of their time on research. I think we should expect more from them and expect them to make the research useable in schools. Time is under pressure in schools and there is only so much you can do in terms of accessing this wealth of research out there. I just think that we are missing a trick, in schools that have a link with HEIs, in terms of how we get the quality of their research back into our school. So I definitely think that is something that needs exploring by the academy.
- I have responsibility for research in my region but what we almost never do is use that research for the purpose of school improvement. I run a Master's programme and we do research, Estyn produces survey reports, challenge advisers produce lots of words, we all produce lots of words. What we almost never do and we absolutely don't do systematically is turn that into something that people can find useful without having to read a book for 16 hours. That seems to me a critical function.
- In our project we have tried to address some of these issues with school staff. We want to make research findings accessible to everybody within the system and support research to have direct impact in schools. It is early days but it seems to be having a good impact in north Wales at the moment. We have to make sure that the headteachers and teachers understand how research can have direct impact in schools. If you ask a number of teachers to engage in research, they often don't understand what that would mean. If I asked someone who has been teaching for years if they wanted to get involved in research, some would say they were too busy marking and preparing lessons. We need to enable teachers in the classroom to see that there is a reason to get involved in research. When we offered our middle leadership development programme we asked participants if they

wanted it accredited and three quarters have said no straight away. When we asked them why, it was because they automatically thought it would lead to a pass or fail, or they thought they would have to write a dissertation, or they thought it was something they had to do on top of their day job after they had finished their marking. So, there is a general misunderstanding I think within the profession, about what exactly research means, and how they can access credit through research as part of their day job, not in addition to it.

Culture and collaboration

- I think that the collaborative work that is currently going on certainly in our consortium has actually been really powerful. Mine is a curriculum pioneer school, but I work in a cluster of schools and that collaboration has had an impact on changing the pedagogy throughout the school because it gave us time and space in a larger professional context in which to have a dialogue. Before that I had been feeling that I didn't have any thinking time as a head anymore, even about teaching and learning. But being a curriculum pioneer school actually gave me and my staff more thinking space.

Now school-to-school working has been invaluable, not just in the curriculum pioneer schools but in the consortium. So there *are* heads out there who go beyond the quick fixes! I think in order to do that, you need a strong personality to be able to stand up to those who come in to hold you to account and want a quick fix. My concern at the moment is that there are a lot of new and acting heads in schools and I wonder if they are strong enough to say no to quick fixes and to do what is morally right. We need to support new and acting heads. Teaching and learning have got to change because society is changing. Children are influenced by so much more outside of school time. We have got to be willing to be flexible and that can be quite a challenge for us so hopefully the academy will do something to help.

David Egan and Ann Keane 125

- I think the most important element in our school is the culture that we establish. We need to create the right culture to develop leaders for the future and also to develop teachers so that our pupils get the best possible experiences that they can have. We tend to use the term ‘love the one that you are with’. I’ll explain. As headteachers and leaders, you are never going to go into a school and have every single member of staff where they need to be in terms of meeting the school’s needs and developing their own career. So it is actually about working with those people and creating that culture together in a way that makes everybody feel safe. Yes we have got accountability but actually it is about relationships within our schools and relationships within our cluster. And I am very fortunate within the cluster that I work with to have a very open-minded group of heads, and everybody feels that moral purpose to improve opportunities for our young people. Allowing people that opportunity to grow is absolutely key and creating a culture where that can happen is the most important thing that we have to do as leaders at the moment. Sometimes I have to park a lot of stuff so that teachers can actually focus on teaching and learning.
- I am in the best job in the world! I absolutely believe that, I am honoured to get up every day and go to school. I have clear expectations laid on me by my governing body and they support me in setting a work/life balance. You have to balance what is expected of you with what is realistic, achievable. I don’t fear the word accountability because I believe I have got the right definition, my own definition. It is about how we celebrate what is vital to the functioning of the school. As a head you can set expectations for behaviours, you can set the parameters, so you get to shape the culture. It is very hard to teach someone how to do that but they can actually do that if they are given time and space to work out what they think good looks like. It is about making sure you get the balance of support and challenge right.
- But there are some teachers who are still doing what they did ten years ago and it is still not working and they are not

getting it, and that is the challenge isn't it? And that is leadership – when you say 'I know you don't get out of bed to do a bad job but it is not effective and we need to look at it differently.' That is the challenge and that is the personal skill that some aspiring heads need. I think people are looking for leadership more than anything nowadays and we shield teachers from an awful lot that goes on as head-teachers, otherwise they wouldn't be able to do their day job. I think it is really important that we support those who are struggling to do the job better with professional development that has a focus on the classroom because that is what most people want.

– One of the finest pieces of research that we could do, in conjunction with HEIs possibly, is look at how to change organisational behavioural cultures. We need practitioners to feel happy to do that piece of research, to write it up, in collaboration and publish it. Because that is what will need to change and when it happens it will be a groundswell at classroom level.

– We have got examples of the profession working more in collaboration with each other. Research, generally speaking, was, in the mindset of teachers in north Wales, something for people in universities and not relevant for people in schools. But we have included in our project a mix of people collaborating to bring research into the real world, as it were.

Leading schools in different contexts

– [speaks in Welsh] It's important that we understand how context affects leadership. We have some heads in schools with fifty children and for them the pressures of leadership and management are different from those in bigger schools. Some heads teach for three days a week so paperwork is done outside school. Every head needs equitable opportunities to carry out their duties. For some in particular, there is limited time for research and reflecting on practice.

– I ran one of the last all-girls school in Wales and the 'all-girls' aspect is not as important as the 20–30 per cent free school

David Egan and Ann Keane 127

meals. Every school is different, every school is unique and what makes mine unique is different from what makes yours unique.

- I have worked in three hugely contrasting schools in my time, so I have got a lot of knowledge that I bring to the job that I do now, a professional capital aspect that I bring to it. I agree that there might be different challenges in a school three miles away, compared to my own. But how much difference is there in the skills and qualities you need to be successful in either of those schools? I am going to look at M. in a minute because I know he has just gone from one school to a very different school, so maybe he is in a better place to comment on that. But I'm not sure we want to get too hung up on that.
- Until April 23rd of this year, I was headteacher of a school which is currently eFSM 10.5 per cent, has a level 2 plus in 2016 of 79 per cent, and from April 24th I have been head of a community school with an eFSM of 28.6 per cent and a level 2 plus of 37 per cent, so two very different contexts obviously. I don't think the leadership qualities required within the different contexts vary enormously. But I required overnight a slightly different skill-set from the one that I had exercised for the five years prior to that, as a headteacher at my current school because of the sheer numbers of pupils who face particularly high levels of social disadvantage and also because of the complexity of the agency work that comes into that, which hadn't been part of my working life before but is a large part of my working life now. So I did need to develop some new skills. I don't know if I am an effective leader of my community school and I won't know for some time. But I do know that there are skill-sets that I didn't require or barely required for five years, that now have to be very finely honed and probably some leadership qualities too.
- [speaks in Welsh] That was the exact point that I was going to make, i.e. I agree that the qualities needed are generally the same from school to school but the challenges will vary and maybe there need to be different kinds of professional development for leaders in different contexts. We have just

heard of one example of the need for different skill-sets for different types of schools. On one hand we have schools with a few hundred pupils and on the other hand we have heads in charge of three or four schools which haven't been federated so each one has a different board of governors and separate inspections. The challenges in either are very different and require different support and professional development. Some schools have no deputies, some have acting heads, some heads teach and some don't so it is important to differentiate the kind of development that is needed.

- [speaks in Welsh] We have carried out research in the region to identify the needs of the bigger, urban schools as opposed to the smaller, rural schools etc. The hope is that we work nationally to offer some generic leadership programmes but also have bespoke programmes for small rural schools, for urban secondary schools, or specialist secondary schools, e.g. leadership for maths leaders. The variety in even one area in north Wales is huge. It's not possible to have a one-size-fits-all provision. One other thing to add is the need for specific training for staff as well as schools on managing change. A lot of what we have been talking about today is about changing the system and how we manage that change in schools but we as a service also need to manage change in our organisation.
- [speaks in Welsh] Do there need to be different management styles for schools in category, e.g. special measures as opposed to a smoothly run school?
- It is about deploying a particular leadership style at a particular point. If the school is in a difficult situation and needs pulling up by the boot straps maybe it needs a more autocratic style to drive people on. But once you pass that turning point, if you don't revise your leadership style, then you are going to be back revisiting that school in five years. So you need the right style at the right time.
- I think we need to add adaptability to the list of qualities and trust too. We talked about the importance of humility, of collaboration, we talked about the culture within an organisation but I think we need trust at all levels as well.

David Egan and Ann Keane 129

We need to develop that sense of trust, so that right from the top of the Welsh Government all the way to the teachers in the classroom, that sense of trust needs to be grown really, and then we can perhaps move the focus away from the word accountability and start thinking about how we generate trust. And that is where the optimism will come from I think.

- I think that the knowledge and skills you need when you go from one kind of setting to another are to some extent going to be different but the important thing is to know what they are, ideally before you get there! And the thing I would say about going from a comfortable to an uncomfortable setting, having done that many times in my own career, is to know you will be managed differently by the system, and it is how you respond to that when you go from one kind of school to another, particularly if you go to a school in special measures, or a merged school, or some of these really critical situations. You need to recognise that everything around you is different, and having an understanding of that is critical.
- But I think that having enough confidence in yourself and in what you are trying to do, to actually say ‘no, back off’ is important. When I went to X school and back to Y school in 2012, they were purple. In our region, this was below red and actually the number of people who wanted to come and tell me how to do my job was phenomenal! We had too many different people and bodies coming in, so when we got Schools Challenge Cymru it was absolutely fantastic because I had one person only, and that made a huge difference. I had the confidence to tell directors that I didn’t want all these other people to come in, we needed to be able to work with one person. Sometimes so many people want to manage you that it actually gets in the way when you are leading a school in challenging circumstances.
- I look after a school in special measures for two days of the week, and then I am back in my school for three days a week, so when I am in the school in special measures, I feel like I have a split personality and I have to give myself a good talking-to going to that school in the morning. I

know what qualities, skills and knowledge are needed but sometimes I have to think now what did I do about that in the previous school? You need to apply your knowledge and skills to a different setting and you forget how hard it is. But the one thing I cannot believe is that when I meet the consortium, maybe one on a Monday and one on a Friday to talk about progress I cannot believe I am going through the same process. Sometimes I feel like the two schools are in different countries because the approach is so different, and sometimes the processes that you have to go through for categorisation can be so time-consuming. I know how easy it was for me in my other school on a Friday and I have had a wonderful week there talking about learning and teaching and pedagogy and reading, etc. but I also know when I go to the school in special measures, it is going to be a different experience on the next Monday. So, yes skills are transferable, but I think what you face for schools in serious difficulties is very restrictive. I don't have the time to do the luxurious things that I get to do in my other school.

I think that people need different things at different times. We have offered a CPD menu for a couple of years now. We have some things that are non-negotiable, the core values and the national priorities and things like that, but during the course of the year we have two or three CPDs going on in the course of a week, and everybody has to do at least five. Last year, the staff averaged about seventeen each, and didn't realise most of them that they had been to seventeen, but that varied from how to apply for a job (laughter) to protecting your own well-being to improving learning and teaching. We also do direct some people. If in a lesson observation they get less than 'good', then we do direct them to the CPD they need otherwise what is the point of observing? There has to be a consequence and accountability in terms of that. But I think it is also really important to give the vast majority a choice and it works.

Taking risks

- One of the things that the system does is put up barriers to risk-taking. We are encouraged to take risks, but because there are so many layers and so many people you need to work with and discuss with and provide evidence for, risk-taking is difficult. People are too quick to copy what is going on down the road, instead of having the courage to do what works for them, with their own pupils in their own school. And I think if we can work on that aspect of leadership, the job becomes far more exciting because when you have got that courage to take risks you do different things.
- We have had a relatively successful school for six or seven years. But I still have to expend a lot of energy to show that I know my teachers, they are teaching appropriately in the classroom, we are going to have the appropriate results at the end of the year and in years to come. That is a huge amount of time and effort that could be channelled into other things, and I am one of the lucky ones. When I work with other schools who haven't a good track record of success, they are even more constrained to take the risks perhaps that they need to, to really move on. And how do successful schools continue to improve, year after year, without taking risks? One of the challenges we never discuss is how to help schools that succeed to keep doing it.
- I want to take that a bit further, because recently as a country, we have been encouraging a group of schools whom we have called pioneer schools to take risks, but the subtext of encouraging pioneer schools to take risks is saying to the rest of the schools 'don't'. And I think that means we are missing an opportunity if we are not encouraging absolutely every school to take appropriate risks, to look at innovation and to say 'I can do this as well' because we are all going to need to be able to deliver our new curriculum.
- I was in a position to be a pioneer school and it is the best thing I ever did because we have got on with developing an innovative Key Stage 3 curriculum. It has given us the opportunity to have a go and to see what works. I think that

non-pioneer schools should not just wait for the news from the others but I don't think we should worry unduly about non-pioneer schools.

Accountability

- We all work to an accountability model. The school I took over in 2016 was a struggling school and had the highest exclusion rate in the whole of the authority. Yes standards were low, but standards were never going to improve unless we focused on what was important, which was managing behaviour. We reduced exclusion rates by 25 per cent and we have had none this year so far, so we are now in a position to start really focusing on learning and teaching. Fortunately, our challenge adviser has been understanding but I have had some in the past who would be constantly challenging us on a narrow range of indicators and not looking at what needed to be done in the wider context of the school.
- I think teachers and headteachers are used to being accountable, it is just that the balance hasn't always been right and the focus has shifted too far into blame. And accountability and blame are two very different things. The mantra in our school is 'yes let's all be accountable' but let's not point the finger. Nobody gets beheaded on a Friday if they don't reach targets! But everybody knows what they are accountable for and that is really important because it means people own what they do.
- [speaks in Welsh] I think that we have reached a position whereby the pressures on schools and on leaders in schools is having a detrimental effect on the culture in schools and across the whole system because too much focus on the metrics can compromise professional values and can affect everyone's morale. So something needs to change. The second point I have is about time pressure. We need more time in schools if we are to create a curriculum of quality that offers worthwhile experiences to learners and practitioners.

David Egan and Ann Keane 133

- I do think that a leadership academy could be a cheerleader for school leadership and it is a concept that needs cheerleading in the public domain. We need cheerleading for schools in general. One thing that an academy could do is reset the semantics. We have heard a lot about accountability this afternoon. It has become a dirty word and there is no need for that because accountability includes accountability for success. Ours is a hard job, it is pressured and stressful but it is also well-paid from public money and the positives in it outweigh the negatives. But it is not a job that is as highly regarded in society as it used to be, partly because the focus has been on accountability for failure and blame and this is wrong. So I think there is a job of work to do to change the focus and the use of language.
- We have a top-down accountability process, putting data into quarters and of course your quartiles can shift dramatically. Even one pupil can make a huge difference to your figures and how you are viewed. And then we are criticised in the press for the categorisation of our schools.
- It is a punitive approach. I don't think the idea of accountability is the issue, I think we agree there has to be a level of accountability. It is the punitive approach to that accountability that matters and if we look at other systems such as Ontario in Canada, for example, there is a much less punitive approach and much more support. And I think that is what we have been missing.
- The Welsh Government are working on the overall pattern of accountability. It is so layered, however. We are not just accountable for all that data and those performance measures which are ever-changing, but to the consortium, to the local authority and to Estyn. Much of that could be taken out of the system, which would give us breathing space. Schools quite rightly have to be held to account. We all expect that but it is the day-to-day stuff I have to deal with. I spent a week recently putting in what I estimated pupils in the current Year 7 will get when they get to Year 10 and 11 in their GCSEs, level 2 plus, level 2 CSI: it doesn't even exist! That is accountability that can be taken out of the system straightaway.

- The layers are baffling to a new head. There is Welsh Government, Estyn, the consortia, the local authority targets, the governing body expectations. There are all sorts of layers there and the goal posts move, depending on who you are talking to and when. That is the difficulty. What do I ask my staff to aim for? It is very hard to lead and motivate your staff towards a clear objective.

System-wide challenges

- I don't think we have an education system in Wales that functions well. And most experts on system change say that it doesn't really matter where you start with system change but at some point you have to address all levels within the system to establish the credibility and integrity that sustains change. Currently, we have got an awful lot of change in an emerging system but there are too many strata of leadership and that needs to be simplified.
I think there needs to be more autonomy for schools that are successful and opportunities perhaps for organising groups of schools into not-for-profit trusts where they could work together regardless of where they sit geographically. It may be that schools in the north and the south potentially have a better fit than those in one consortium. I think we are in an era when communication and collaboration can cross borders. But what I really want to say is that we need to foster leadership qualities in the education system beyond schools too.
- We have talked quite a bit about change and I think we can all agree on similar messages about it. But unless change is system-wide, top to bottom, it isn't going to be effective. The National Academy for Educational Leadership is a great idea but it needs to be taken on board across the system and it needs to lead to real actions otherwise it will lose the trust of headteachers. I think the well-being of headteachers must be a critical focus for the academy if we are going to encourage more people to join the profession.
- We all need development, all of us in the system, there is a need for leadership development for all of us, including the

people who manage our challenge advisers and the challenge advisers themselves. Some of the barriers people have raised are actually symptoms of the problems caused by levels of policy incoherence. So if the academy is to champion leadership, then it has to challenge policy and its coherence and it has to do it from the bedrock of evidence that you all know about. The second thing is a simple recognition of lead times around effective change. We have new requirements for more Welsh second language: there is evidence about what is good practice and we are breaking some of the rules of that evidence. And the third thing is what I would term testing and modelling consequences – when we make changes it is not hard to put those changes into a box and model them for a bit and see what blows up. We don't have to do it in a classroom full of pupils, we can do it in relatively safe environments, and we really don't do that now.

- If the academy can help bring stability to the system, and recognition and acknowledgement for what the job does, I think it will be a really good step forward.
- I think there is validity in focusing on the few things that are really important and releasing a bit more space for schools to do the right things. I also think there is a theme emerging in our discussion about mutual responsibility in terms of leadership. I know when I came into leadership, I was lucky that I already knew people in the system. New heads who come into a difficult situation where they are not familiar with those around them need to be able to talk things through with peers. I did that in an informal way but I think we need to look at how we develop that kind of peer support more systematically school to school. As heads we also need to recognise our responsibility to the whole system, to pupils who are not just the ones in our own schools. In terms of moral purpose we should be talking about making sure it is right for every pupil in every school. Where the academy could help is to put the focus on doing fewer things well and releasing us from what may be stifling the freedom to innovate.

Recruitment and retention

- I think that one of the things that we haven't touched on yet is how desirable the role of a school leader is to an assistant head or a deputy head. We all know there is a recruitment crisis across education in Wales at teacher and at teacher-assistant levels, especially in some parts of the sector. I have lost count of how many acting headteachers there are in my local authority. This is not because people walk away from the job, it is because schools can't recruit or sometimes even get a credible short list. I think that we need a national drive towards creating a leadership profession that is desirable. At the moment potentially talented people who have leadership qualities stay where they are because they see the job that headteachers are doing and think that they are better off where they are. And actually they have got a huge amount to contribute so we need to engage them through career-long development that will help succession planning for the future.
- If I am certain of one thing today it is not that people are unhappy in their jobs or that they feel negative about their job and don't want to stay in it. It is that some things in the system make their job unnecessarily hard. If the academy is to be a champion of headship, one of the things it could do is start talking about how the whole system can improve and not through introducing more accountability because that is suppressing ambition and innovation.
- [speaks in Welsh] Recruitment will not be helped by current workload issues and the lack of time to do the essential things including preparing future leaders. We need to look at what's important and concentrate on that.