

Born Free: How to create a School

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Keywords

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Abstract

School leadership is the pivotal role in school effectiveness (Huber, 2004), with research focussing on leadership in the context of an existing school. This study focuses on the critical role of leadership in creating a school, from initiation of the idea to the fully functioning three phase school it has become. It analyses the skills necessary to undertake such a task and highlights the barriers and opportunities faced in the process.

This study reflects upon the journey of one person to build a school. Therefore, it has a relativist stance as this may have been different for other people. However, the leadership qualities can be universal and therefore the phenomenon that emerge can transcend this scenario.

Following a thematic analysis of the data seven key themes emerged, those being vision/origin, resilience and determination, opposition and barriers, parents, staff, networks and support. In order to analyse such themes in the context of leadership the dimensions of school leadership by Bush and Glover (2014) were utilised as a theoretical framework.

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This study illustrates the tapestry of leadership skills required to create a school, including intrinsic and people skills, to build trust, reassure, and demonstrate resolve. Underlying this is a resolute commitment to the project, an undiminished belief in the philosophy of the school, and a skill based small proposer team containing financial and business acumen. The support of the team, including family members, enabled shared values and resolve to overcome substantial barriers to ensure the vision became a reality.

Introduction

The role of the Headteacher (also known as Principal) is key to school effectiveness (Huber, 2004). Not only do schools need a competent headteacher they also need one that can cope with constant change (Huber, 2004). School leaders are key to enabling a school culture and setting direction to foster improvement and advance school success (Day, Sammons and Gorgen, 2020). The leadership required in a school can be very complex and multifaceted (Huber, 2004) but that is without accounting for designing a school and overseeing its inception. The Free School programme in England created this new challenge for headteachers and this study reflects upon the journey and skills required in this undertaking.

The concept of Free schools originated in Sweden in 1992 and these schools had similarities to Charter schools in Canada and USA which also began in 1992 (EPI, 2019). Free schools in England derived from the white paper, 'The Importance of Teaching', (DfE, 2010) which set out a framework for parents or other groups to be able to establish a school where there was a need. The initiative was set-up under the 2010 Academy Act. Although many modern school leaders face new levels of demand and challenges (Huber, 2004), setting up a free school from inception is another dimension, as it is a complex scenario and something that demands time and certain capabilities in order to achieve the desired goal. Free schools are independent from local authority control and are funded directly from central government (DfE, 2010). It can be argued that greater autonomy, which free schools and academies have, can lead to better pupil outcomes (Machin and Verroit, 2011). Thus, with more schools required due to increasing pupil populations (Hatcher, 2011), free schools could be an effective way of meeting this need. Although many reformers advocate school-led curriculum design (Hargreaves and Ainscow, 2015) which this initiative created, it has provoked controversy (Hatcher, 2011). They are in essence state-funded schools that sit outside the national

curriculum, local authorities and national union agreements, which can be set-up and run by charities, business, religious groups, community groups or parents (Hatcher, 2011). The first free schools opened in September 2011 (EPI, 2019) and now there are over 600 in England (DfE, 2022). The free school featured in this study was approved as part of wave 2 of the programme, opening as a primary school in September 2012. Subsequently, it has developed into a secondary school and sixth form with 1,064 pupils from ages 4-18.

This study is not about critically examining the merits of free schools, rather the focus is on distilling what constituents are needed to build a school. It examines the journey of one such person who had a vision to design and develop a free school. There is much research undertaken on school leadership as the school leader is the pivotal role in school effectiveness (Huber, 2004), however such research centres on a functioning school, whereas this study focuses on such effectiveness in creating a school. Although it is merely one example, it is indicative of the skill set, resilience and leadership qualities required to undertake such a quest. This paper presents the journey undertaken by the headteacher from initiation of the idea for a school to the fully functioning three phase school it is today. It analyses the skills necessary to undertake such a task and highlights the barriers and opportunities faced in the process.

Methodology

This study focussed upon the journey of one person to build a school. Therefore, it has a relativist stance as this may have been different for other people. However, the leadership qualities can be universal and therefore the phenomenon that emerge can transcend this scenario. The methodology used a qualitative approach to delve into the essence of the foundation of building such a school and the leadership qualities required to achieve such an aim. The data collection method took the form of a semi-structured interview with the founder and current headteacher of the free school. The vision of the school was so deftly intertwined with the founder/headteacher that it was essential to let her voice flow through. It was her experiential learning journey and therefore it was essential to quieten all voices (including those of the researchers) to hear what the journey represented for the leader. Due to the inextricable relationship between the research and the researched, the approval of the project by Northumbria University's ethics committee allowed the scrutiny and involvement

of the participant, in this case the headteacher. Although not involved in devising the research method or analysis, the participant undertook scrutiny for authenticity. In order to achieve an understanding and patterns within the data from the lived experience of the participant, a thematic analysis was applied (Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, and Palmér, 2019). The model of thematic analysis applied to the data was that of Braun and Clarke (2006). First order and subsequently second order constructs were distilled into themes. The themes which emerged add to the debate on the challenges faced and skills required to build a school from conception to full organisational delivery. The theoretical framework of the dimensions of leadership (Bush and Glover, 2014) were then used to interpret the analysis.

Themes

Following analysis of the data seven key themes emerged, those being vision/origin, resilience and determination, opposition and barriers, parents, staff, networks and support.

Vision/origin

An overarching theme that stretched across all other themes was the vision the headteacher had for founding the school, the clarity and certainty of the curriculum it would offer, and the structure on which it would be based. This was the key driver which supported resolve when times became difficult. Some major influences on the headteacher included the fact that she had studied a music and education degree at university, had been a pupil in the independent sector and indeed had taught in an independent school. Therefore, the typology of the school was to be a hybrid independent/state model with no fees. Experience of outreach work for a music school also created this sense of opportunity for disadvantaged children in the form of music, hence this would be at the heart of the curriculum. Social Justice through education lies at the heart of the vision with the headteacher stating that: *"We were educated privately. For me, music was really important. My sister went off in a slightly different direction, but everybody has benefited from a really, really good education, and we wanted other children to have a really good education. We could think of nothing better in our lives to help the next generation have a really good education. I could think of nothing better. This is about the next generation."*

Although the vision was clear from the outset the size and scale may not have been, with more modest ambitions nearly increasing by ten-fold as the project gathered momentum: *"My*

initial vision was for a primary school with 161 pupils. I have now got an all-through school in terms of its year groups. Next year, we will have an upper sixth. Then, once we are at capacity, it will be 1,064 pupils. I don't think I could have imagined how popular the school would have been."

Belief in the vision and determination are critical factors in achieving such growth: *"If you can just keep going and don't give up, then what you are doing is making a difference to other people's futures – the next generation. I just don't think there is anything else you can do in life that could be better than that."*

Given this strong vision and personal commitment and investment in the school it could prove difficult to let go: *"I don't feel I can run away because I feel this is part of me, this whole school, and the school journey. It would be like running away from your family."*

However, there is a realisation that such a time will come and how difficult that will be: *"Oh, my goodness, what about when I get to retirement age? I just can't even imagine leaving this school and stepping back and becoming a member or just a governor."*

This is not necessarily unusual when a leader creates a vision and brings it to fruition but what is unusual is that this extends to the leader's family: *"I think it is not just me that feels that. I think it is my family that feels that too. I feel that we are all very protective of this vision, and that is how we feel."*

Resilience and Determination

Resilience, drive and determination are key factors throughout this process. Building a school from inception is not an easy task, it is inevitable there will be setbacks and the Headteacher alluded to many of these along the way. However, this indicated a high level of drive, self-belief and resilience: *"You have got to live your life, and that means, for me, living and enjoying what you do every day, and when there are horrific times, knowing – and this has made our team stronger – that when you have a really difficult time, actually, it is not going to last. You are going to get through it."*

Such difficult times are compounded by the fact that being a Free School can in itself be a source of contention: *".... (the) Free school programme not positive in sector...Huge hostility in early days- Anti Academies Alliance but also people from other schools, who were quite hostile.....Staff would go to training days somewhere and people would not sit next to them."*

Therefore, this was an added dimension to the pressure that most headteachers would never experience. Another example was not having a building and having to find one for your school: *"It was a huge pressure, yes. We had 44 children in there at the beginning but no building!.. So we found a gospel hall which had planning permissions that meant that we could use it as a school, and we opened there. Not ideal. Year 1 and Year 2 were in the same hall together and Reception had a classroom at the back, with a little bit of outdoor-learning space."*

It is not only the leader that has to show resilience, but the headteacher felt that the whole team involved in a project of this nature needed to demonstrate resilience: *"They are going to have challenges. They are going to have to show exceptional levels of resilience. They are going to have some really difficult times where they might feel they want to give up, but the benefits outweigh those difficult times. If you can get through the really huge challenges and get out the other side, then you just feel this is such a worthwhile project to be part of.....They need to be resilient. 'Resilience' is the main thing, I think, that I have had to have – the whole team has had to have."*

It also appears that drive, belief and mindset are all key as enablers to ensure that the project progressed: *"It is a story that has run away with itself. I feel very privileged that I have had this opportunity. Really, at difficult times, I just tell myself, 'I am only a person and I can only do what I can do.' That really helps me get through some of the really tough things. So there is definitely a mindset involved here."*

There was an anticipation to having *tabula rasa*, *"Exciting as no template to follow"* but also a fear: *"Terrifying but naivety helped."*

Optimism and faith in the project were certainly factors that helped overcome the fear and other obstacles: *"There is this thing that it was very frightening at the beginning, and you just had to keep going, take a step at a time and not be distracted by all the things you could be distracted by, including difficult things in the media, and yes, just look ahead. We are still looking ahead, optimistically, to the future."*

However, ultimately commitment, endeavour and hard work are key qualities that achieved the success: *"We work all the time. We work through the holidays. We work at the weekends. That is the same for most of the team."*

Opposition and Barriers

Due to the nature of free schools, they drew some hostility from various elements in the established education sector: *"I think I was quite surprised in some way about the hostility from other state schools, Trade Unions, Anti-academies alliance."*

Part of this could have been to do with the marketisation of schools and hence other schools seeing this new school as a threat to recruitment: *"Competition- I think there was an element of that, but I do think that private schools are used to having competitors. It is normal. Whereas in the state sector, that is not so normal."*

Attempting to get a building for the school was a constant barrier throughout the process starting with the initial primary school site: *"it was really difficult opening a school in under a year, and the difficulties have mainly been connected with the site."*

This necessitated creativity and resourcefulness to enable the school to have a building: *"No school for primary-used Gospel Hall."*

These problems continued with the growth of the school into a secondary school: *"[Senior school]-On 3rd July – I still remember the date – 2015 — the planning permission got turned down by a junior officer and it didn't even go to a committee. Suddenly, I knew. I had a sports day going on at the same time and I had no school building for 144 children to go to in September. That was terrifying. Absolutely terrifying. That was one of the lowest moments in this whole thing."*

This is one of the distinctive aspects of creating a free school as most headteachers already have a school building. Moving to their current site also created many planning permission challenges especially from local residents. However, this was not the only barrier that was faced, recruiting staff to a 'virtual' school can be hard: *"I think one of the huge barriers, one the huge challenges is getting your first staff. There is no school."*

Not only staff but convincing parents to send their child to a 'virtual' school is also a challenge: *"Funding not in place so uncertainty for staff and parents- your child's place is not secure either. In the first year of the primary and the first year of senior, they were able to apply for other schools as well."*

Parents

Starting a school from inception, does mean starting a school with no parents and consequently no parents equates to no pupils. However, the free school programme does give

parents a unique chance to be part of building and shaping a school: *"Parents are a critical partner in a school. They are so important. I know, sometimes, there are difficulties when people have different ideas – they go off in a slightly different direction and don't quite understand what you are trying to achieve. Parents, I just feel, have such a vital part to play in a child's education. I think schools need to be working really, really, really closely with them."*

This was compounded in a situation where there is not a large staff resource to draw upon and there are many complex jobs to do in order to build and open a school: *"I couldn't do everything myself, so I was asking parents to help me all the time organise things. We have a small staff team. In fact, we still do involve parents in a lot of the things."*

The parents themselves had to take a leap of faith to join a school that did not 'exist' with the headteacher admitting that she, *"Had to market hard for first admissions"* and it was *"difficult for those parents who had chosen to come to our school when they were hearing, 'This is not going to open,' but it had to open, really."*

Parents remaining committed was crucial to the existence of the school: *"Until the funding agreement is signed, your child's place is not secure either. In the first year of the primary and the first year of senior, they were able to apply for other schools as well."*

However, the parents being steadfast brought unique benefits to the school as well as themselves, and created a strong bond: *"we were able to watch the school grow next to us, so the pupils really felt part of that.... We were in this together. We were a community. We were all aiming for the same thing and parents understood and believed in the vision that was there school was becoming more popular, it wasn't just me anymore on my own at those meetings and those public meetings in the paper – planning meetings. There were parents there. My community was growing and, suddenly, I had other people alongside me. That was really great. Really great."*

This type of strong bond was apparent in the reaction of the parents when in July there was no senior school building ready for September: *"By the time I had made it up to sports day about midday and I had got my comms ready to go, the parents had all seen, on the planning portal, the outcome. I was, actually, just dreading walking into the group of parents and for them to say, 'What on earth is this? You have sold us this vision and our children have nowhere to go in September.' I was expecting that, but that was not what I was met with. I was met with parents who came around me, and said, 'We really trust you will sort this one out. You have done it before. We trust you. You will sort it out for us.' So again, a bit of pressure there."*

However, this unique bond can also cause issues especially when the school begins to grow and resemble the structures of other state funded schools: *"Some of the difficulties came from parents not understanding that although we had no fees, we were still a publicly funded school and we still had the same regulations as other state-funded schools, albeit academies. Yes, I don't think they saw us as an academy, and I think they felt that they could possibly bring in their own ideas and change to the school to what they wanted it to be, which is fine. I am always open to suggestions, but you have to be very careful because different people want a school to be different things. That is where we have had problems. We had some tricky meetings with parents sitting in tears some of the time because things weren't going quite the way they wanted them to go."*

Having been far more involved in shaping the school than they would have been at other schools, it can then be hard for parents to step back: *"... so some of them were really anxious about the fact that we were going to become an all-through school. I had things like, "Yes, you are going to lose your focus on the primary school." So yes, I have dealt with a lot of anxieties, really, and some really tricky, tricky situations."*

Repositioning the relationship with parents can be difficult but a necessary step for the functioning of the school: *"Well, some of them still think that they can have that level of involvement, and I think that is where difficulties come. In the early days, they might have said, "I want the swimming cap to be red," or something – I don't know – but, actually, this is a big school now and we have to have decision making at a different level. 'It is lovely to hear your views, but, actually, other people have got different views'."*

Staff

When someone has been so close to creating such an entity as a school and has a clear vision and ethos, it can be hard to then appoint a headteacher who understands and can fulfil that vision: *"Interviews for Headteacher-and there just wasn't anybody really who could see the vision in the same way, I think. We knew it inside out, myself and the original proposers."*

This is the rationale behind the creator of the school becoming the headteacher. However, it is not just the headteacher that is difficult to appoint. Staff are crucial for any school, but convincing teachers to join a school that currently does not exist requires a degree of faith and trust: *"I think one of the huge barriers, one the huge challenges is getting your first staff."*

There is no school. The teachers would continuously ask me, "Can I resign now from my current school?" and I would say, "No, you can't." That was really hard. We had a letter of comfort that we gave them after the May date. There was still risk, but that is what we did. It was very uncomfortable."

The reason for this is that the school could not confirm the appointments of the teachers until the funding agreement was signed (June), yet serving teachers at other schools needed to resign their current posts by May, in order to take up their new role at this school. Therefore, critical leadership was required in this instance to build trust, hence the letter of comfort, to ensure experienced staff were appointed.

There can also be a consequence in the wider teaching community for staff working in a new school that can be 'a pariah' in the system: *"They would go to training days somewhere and people would not sit next to them."*

Staff are not joining a school that is already delivering a curriculum with schemes of work and systems in place. This can have ramifications for the teaching staff: *"We work all the time. We work through the holidays. We work at the weekends. That is the same for most of the team."* However, being a free school does mean that there is the flexibility to do things differently so teachers can benefit in other ways such as having longer holidays, similar to the independent sector: *"Teachers need time to plan and be creative, and that comes through long holidays. I knew that was one reason that I did not enter the state sector after training."*

In order to work at the free school there is a certain type of staff member that the headteacher is looking for: *[Someone who would say]"I share this passion for developing something new and I really want to be creative in the way that I am teaching. I have my own ideas for this innovation. It is not about, "Mrs XXX, what is your idea?"."*

Out of this can come community, with social activities being a key part of team bonding: *"They come to my house at the end of the term in the summer. There is fun. People have fun."*

Networks

Networking and having networks seem to have played a pivotal role throughout the journey of the free school: *"... I used all the contacts I could. We worked closely with the DfE to deliver the school. Various other stakeholders helped us, including XXX County Council, by moving a school out of a site in XXXX to a new school, which was planned for the October. They moved them out early. Luckily, I had those contacts, and I think the thing with this project is that you*

need as many contacts as you can. The networking is absolutely crucial. It is very much wrapped into politics. You need the networks."

It seemed important to build networks and raise awareness of the school in order to promote the concept and vision: *"I suppose everywhere I went, I talked about my school, and it was a really exciting project."*

A school as an organisation needs a range of skills and expertise, therefore in order to generate these having a network to draw upon was crucial: *"Building that governing body was very, very strange, but we were lucky to attract people with skill sets that we needed. That was all about networking. That was all about, 'Who is going to be suitable?'"*

Many of the skills needed in the network especially for setting up a school were from fields of business and finance: *"I think it is really, really important that you have the right set of skills, and I think it just happened that our group did you would definitely need to understand governance and how that works, and to have legal skills to be able to scrutinise funding agreements. I would say compliance skills are really, really important. You need to be very good at financial modelling because, especially with funding for schools we had the financial oversight from somebody very high up in a financial institution, and some people with particular skill sets in finance and financial regulations.... Then, you need somebody who understands planning and property, which is actually what we had. Then, we needed somebody, who I suppose was me, who knew what they wanted from the education... it is a business and you need commercial skills."*

Therefore, it appears a key skill set and an effective but small team was optimum in the development of the free school: *"Number one, make sure, on your team, you have the right skill sets. You do not need a large team. A small team with the right set of skills is far more valuable and effective than a big, unwieldy team."*

Support

A unique aspect of creating this free school was the support and involvement of the 'close knit' proposer group. There were only four members of this group, but they covered a wide range of skills from education to business to finance. This involvement occurred from day one: *"My sister and I enjoyed writing this bid. We sat there over a bank-holiday weekend feeling slightly guilty that the children were not going outside for any fresh air, and were just writing this bid."*

The small proposer team including family members and Chair of Governors now contribute with others, to the board of members, with a separate governing body to ensure appropriate independence: *"Our governance structure is that we have members and they are founders. Of course, I am a founder, but I am not allowed to be a member because I am salaried. The founder members are my husband, my sister and the Chair of Governors – these key people were the original proposers – and the person from the [Music] School who I worked with has stuck by me all this time."*

A consequence can be that in the early days of setting up the school, home life and school life can blur together at times: *"I think because my family were so closely involved... In fact, at the weekends, we would be sitting in a somewhere together, reading the funding agreement through."*

The school for the headteacher is an extension of life rather than work, *"I don't get up in the morning and think, I am going to work."*

This integration between work and home has created a shared sense of ownership across the proposer group: *"I think it is not just me that feels that. I think it is the proposer group that feels that too. I feel that we are all very protective of this vision, and that is how we feel. I don't think it is just me. Certainly, other people in my proposer group feel very strongly that this is our school."*

The small proposer group had shared values and understood the vision leading to a coherent strategy and support for each other and in particular for the headteacher in her pursuit of creating the vision. However, this close involvement could prove to be problematic when it is time to leave: *"We are not here forever. It scares me a bit, that. I, sometimes, think, 'Oh, my goodness, what about when I get to retirement age?' I just can't even imagine leaving this school and stepping back and becoming a member or just a governor. I would probably be a member."*

Discussion

In the journey of this school, it does seem apparent that it takes a vision, belief and resilience to build a school, alongside capability and hard work. However, in addition to this there does seem to be engendering trust in others such as parents and staff. These together with networking and family support have been the ingredients to build this particular school. In order to analyse such themes in the context of leadership the dimensions of school leadership

by Bush and Glover (2014) were utilised as a theoretical framework. The emergent themes can be linked to these dimensions which then illuminate the leadership skills required in this process. Analysis of such themes, illustrating subsequent leadership skills and attributes required to create a school, use the three dimensions of leadership, these being leadership as influence, leadership and values and leadership and vision (Bush and Glover, 2014)

The themes extrapolated feature under the different dimensions, see Table 1.

Dimension	Theme
Leadership and Vision	Vision and Origin
Leadership as Influence	Staff Parents Networks
Leadership and Values	Support Resilience and Determination Opposition and Barriers

Table 1: Themes and Dimension of Leadership

Leadership and Vision

A key aspect throughout the interview was that of the vision of the headteacher, which seemed very much linked to underlying values (Hallinger and Heck, 2002). This sustained her through the challenges and always acted as a guiding light for the ultimate goal. Vision is an essential aspect of leadership (Day, Sammons and Gorgen, 2020; Bush and Glover, 2014) and can lead to motivation and hard work (Southworth, 1993). It was a requirement of the free school application process to provide an educational vision alongside staffing and curriculum plans (Higham, 2014). The sense of vision in the creation of this free school was particularly strong and to a certain extent quite unique. The pursuit of the best aspects of private education in the state sector and emphasis of extra-curricular activities such as music were a powerful and clear driver in pursuit of the free school. Inclusion was at the centre of the school, which is in keeping with many free-school applications (Higham, 2014). However, although many can fail to demonstrate this and end up not reflecting this in their admission of disadvantaged students (Higham, 2014), this was not the case in the operation of this school. Transcending self-interest, having a calling and a strong moral framework all

contribute to positive school leadership (Murphy et al, 2017). Headteachers may not ordinarily have the flexibility to implement their specific vision (Bush and Glover, 2014) but the free school model gives the freedom to create a different type of school. That said, not all free schools necessarily take the opportunity to do so, but this particular Headteacher did so, realising the structure, curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities such as music, which drove her vision.

Is a vision static or dynamic? The vision for this school did evolve such as in size of school, originally a primary and then developed with the addition of secondary provision. Therefore, visions are not necessary static although they are an essential guide, and the core experience and extra-curricular emphasis did endure.

Although many teacher-led bids can include a school middle leader that seeks to become the free school headteacher (Higham, 2014), this was not the original vision. However, it did become the reality mainly due to the vision, which was driven specifically by the current headteacher and proved problematic when interviewing potential headteachers whom did not possess ownership of such a vision. Motivation for this free school did not reflect the norm, such as oversubscription of local schools or perceived local needs (Higham, 2014), it was more a case of curriculum design and that was strongly linked to leadership vision, meaning a difficulty for someone not immersed in the vision to fulfil the design. The vision did however incorporate many of the free school themes including extended provision, outdoor learning and smaller class sizes (Higham, 2014).

It could be argued that this free school is not in keeping with the movement as it is not in the highest quartile of disadvantage, rather the opposite. However, this is in keeping with many of the successful bids (Higham, 2014) and effective bidding was also linked to having networks in a particular area which this application did encompass (Higham, 2014).

One consequence of such a strong vision and bringing it from inception to reality is the investment of the person and the family, which can prove difficult to let go. This point has not been reached but will be a true transition point for the school.

School leaders would argue that setting a vision gives direction and is directly related to success (McKinsey & Co., 2010; West-Burnham, 2010). This is apparent in creating a school and was crucial to sustain the project when challenges arose. Leadership and vision is an overarching dimension as it is strongly linked to both influence and values and thus can sustain both during the journey.

Leadership as Influence

A critical aspect flowing throughout the whole experience of creating the free school is that of influence. This includes influencing staff, parents, the community and various networks to support the implementation of the school.

Without parents there would be no children and without children there would be no school. The headteacher recognised this from early in the process and indeed understood that *'Parents.....have a vital part to play in a child's education'*. Not only are they crucial but when you do not have a staff base, they can be essential in sharing the organisational load and leadership in the embryonic days of the free school. Therefore, influencing them to join and giving them a belief in the vision was critical to the success of the school. Constructive behaviour exhibited by the headteacher seems to be key to influence (Lukaszewski, 2008). This influence seems particularly strong in this instance for example they still retained a strong belief when potentially catastrophic events occurred such as planning permission being turned down in July for a September opening. They could have panicked and decided to enrol their children at another school but the staunch belief in the headteacher showed a strong degree of trust that she would resolve the situation, as she had done so in the past and ultimately due to her creativity and resourcefulness, she did resolve this issue. A crucial leadership behaviour is one that keeps moving people and processes ahead (Lukaszewski, 2008) which is reflected in this instance. This was also apparent when the school was first establishing itself as until the school funding agreement was signed the child's place was not confirmed and parents could have gone for a *'safer'* option. They were also enrolling their children in a school that had no metric data such as Ofsted reports or exam results, or anecdotal data from other parents to base their decisions upon, all they had was the influence from the headteacher and belief in her vision. Other schools with a track record would have been less of a risk, so at the inception of the school the headteacher needed to have

substantial influence over the parents. Attending to the needs of the pupils' families and wider community is good leadership (PSEL, 2015) and such skills were vital to establish the school. Although it can be claimed that free schools are supported more by private school parents than state school parents (NUT/YouGov, 2011) there is no evidence that this was the case for this school.

The benefit to the parents of such commitment, was also influence. They were given roles that would be done by staff in existing schools and were decision makers in a way they would not have been at other schools. This, of course, tied them to the school and created a strong bond between headteacher and parents. It also created a support base and can help improve pupil achievement (Orphanos and Orr, 2014). However, this can have a consequence as when the school grows and more distant school-parent relationships emerge, tensions can arise when parents do not have the influence they once held. It was particularly hard for some of the original parents, *'some of them think that they can have that level of involvement, and I think that is where difficulties come'*. The leadership skill of the headteacher is not only to influence parental involvement but also to know when to limit and distance such involvement to not inhibit the decision making of the school.

When creating a school there are no inherited staff members, so all need to be recruited including a headteacher. When there is such a distinctive vision of a school that has been created by a small number of people and driven by an individual it is quite a challenge to recruit an 'outsider' to fulfil that vision in the role of headteacher. This indeed proved the case and resulted in the creator of the school becoming the headteacher. The next issue for the now appointed headteacher is recruiting staff to a school that does not exist and has no infrastructure, no curriculum and no building. Once again being able to influence staff to make a leap of faith is fundamental to the leadership role as without staff there is no school. To convince teachers to resign their substantive posts with a *'letter of comfort'* rather than a signed contract requires a very influential leader with a clear vision in which they can believe. It is essential to communicate such a shared vision to staff with optimism and achievability (Sun and Leithwood, 2015). Similar to the parents, the staff trusted the headteacher and also benefit themselves as being influential as they could design curriculum and innovate in ways they saw fit, rather than inheriting an established curriculum and pedagogical model. Staff did

have a consequence of joining the free school due to the political controversy surrounding the initiative. This included a degree of shunning by their fellow colleagues in other schools. They also needed to extend working hours to put systems and schemes of work in place but as a benefit were given longer holidays to enable such creativity. However, unlike some organisations where staff can play a passive role (Murphy et al, 2017), staff in this school could be active members influencing curriculum and pedagogy from inception. It can be advocated that teachers should play a far greater role in decision making in schools (Harris and Jones, 2019). Such a role for teachers in this school can be positive and empowering (Donaldson, 2015) and can build the attraction to take the leap of faith. Likewise, this can be very productive for the school, as allowing teachers to be creative and innovative can make a positive difference to learner outcomes (Harris and Jones, 2017). Ultimately, relationships and interactions between staff and headteacher are critical to good leadership (PSEL, 2015).

The other aspect of influence that was key to this process was that of networking. Such influence was critical to the successful delivery of this project. In order to complete and deliver the free school the headteacher was required to, *'..use all the contacts I could'*. These included stakeholders such as the local council. However, it needed to stretch wider than stakeholders for success as, *'networking is absolutely critical'*. Influencing the community that the school was a worthy development required informing many groups about the school and the benefits it would bring. Having contacts with skills that could help out the school before they had such infrastructure was also crucial to its survival. Successful free school bids tend to have internal team members with key areas of expertise such as banking, company directors, marketing and education (Higham, 2014). Research does suggest that certain forms of capital can be an advantage when structuring this kind of proposal (Thompson, 2005). It does appear to reflect the internal team capabilities of this application and going forward has been a key ingredient in the success of this school.

Leadership and Values

Good leaders have values, both personal and professional, which direct the purpose of their school (Day, Harris and Hadfield, 2001). However, in most schools, values can be mandated by government (Bush, 2008). The free school programme is different and allows for values to be set by the headteacher, which is readily apparent in this case.

Leadership is a lonely obligation (Lukaszewski, 2008) but in this scenario such values have been forged not only by the headteacher but by the small four-person proposer group which included family members. The support given and the role played with the original proposers being such a 'close knit' group and including family members makes the creation of this free school quite unique. Although the value set can extend across the family and all members have a stake in the free school, giving a strong sense of purpose, it can result in the blurring of work and family life. This could make it easier to spend the weekend as a family while still working, *'we would be sitting in a coffee shop somewhere discussing our ideas for the school'*, but also give a greater sense of attachment to the school. Consequently, making it a hard task to distance from the school at an inevitable time to leave. This is something that the headteacher is already aware of admitting, *'it scares me a bit that'*.

Such a value set can be critical in the face of opposition. This particular school faced opposition at a local level which added to the national criticism of the initiative. Unions were against the schools (Hatcher, 2011) and only 7% of serving teachers felt such an initiative would support underprivileged pupils (Stewart 2011).

Opposition and barriers were multifaceted including many non-academic such as planning permission and not having a school building. However, the resilience and determination created in a sense by the values led to an optimism and excitement which enabled positive outcomes and the overcoming of barriers. According to Bush and Glover (2014. p555) 'leaders are more likely to be enthusiastic about change when they own it', which can attest for resilience of not only the headteacher but the parents, staff and headteacher's family. The values of working hard and positivity created an outcome focussed environment which is a facet of good leadership (Lukaszewski, 2008). Certainly, the values placed upon the school as a benefit for the pupils and the community sustained the headteacher through the many challenges and created a bridge to surmount such barriers. Placing an emphasis on values and sharing with the community, inside and outside of school, is an attribute of successful leadership (Day, Sammons and Gorgen, 2020).

There are many values exhibited throughout the influencing and vision of the school. These include opportunity for all pupils, inclusion, staff creativity and community orientation. In such a complex and multifunctional role, it is essential that leadership is based upon a value-centred paradigm (Huber, 2004). Such values seem to have acted as a grounding mechanism to shine a light to illuminate the way forward which was invaluable in the more challenging periods.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the tapestry of leadership skills required to create a school. This is only one example of building a school and is relative to that person and particular situation, however it is indicative of the leadership skills required to sustain such an immense and complex process from inception to delivery. It is apparent that critical leadership skills were required featuring the dimensions of influence, vision and values (Bush and Glover, 2014). Such skills included intrinsic and people skills, to build trust, reassure, and demonstrate resolve. Without such skills the ingredients to build the school such as infrastructure expertise, parents, pupils and staff would not have been realised. Underlying this is a resolute commitment to the project, an undiminished belief in the philosophy of the school, hard work and an optimism that the goal would be attained, and the product would be worthwhile. Without such essential skills a project of this enormity could easily flounder. It can be argued that every leader is an individual actor (Lukaszewski, 2008) but this scenario demonstrates the importance of influencing others such as parents, staff and even family to join the journey. Although the bond and trust with parents was critical to success, the understanding that such a bond needed to be re-constituted when the school was established demonstrates another aspect of leadership.

School leadership is critical to the success of every school but building a school from inception can test such skills to the limit. However, the ultimate achievement is being able to create a learning environment that you believe in. In the words of the headteacher, *‘I don’t think there is anything else you could do in life that could be better than that’*.

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