Lighting the Way

The case for ethical leadership in schools

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Introduction

The title of this book is inspired by the authors and communications experts Nancy Duarte and Patti Sanchez. In their book, *Illuminate*, they set out a captivating description of what it means to be a leader, as they depict leaders as those who 'patrol the border' between what has been and what will be. They, the authors, explain that it is a leader's role to 'light the way' to a 'better reality' (Duarte and Sanchez, 2016).

That said, the genesis for this book came many years ago and well before I was a headteacher. It came during my time as a teacher and senior leader, when watching the many ways the school system failed to adequately support some of our most vulnerable students. Around that time, I began to talk about the 'nourished school', an idea that acted as an umbrella for all the things I thought the school system needed to take more care to incorporate.

The pillars of the nourished school, I believed, were 'nourishment' through healthy food, a focus on the 'spiritual dimension' of the human being, 'time spent in nature' and the 'development of a craft'. These elements I saw as foundational and as contributory to the successful development of young people.

Most of the books I had read while I was a trainee teacher had been about curriculum and pedagogy. Naturally, as I progressed through school leadership, I began to read books about how one should lead a school and the skills, knowledge and understanding one should possess. The thing is that many of these books didn't meet me where I was. I often felt awed, flawed and a bit crumpled when I read these books of school leadership success and I began to feel that I wanted to set out a counter narrative to leadership.

Time passed and I realised that many of my ideas had been naïve. The pressures of leading a school through financial difficulty led me to conclude that the pillars of the nourished school could never make it onto a headteacher's list of priorities. Nevertheless, the call to enact and articulate a counter narrative remained. I felt there was a compelling narrative to tell of what school leadership could be, and my ideas and behaviours began to coalesce around this.

In 2017, the multi-academy trust I worked for was invited to take part in a BBC documentary series called *School*. Our work as a trust and my role as acting headteacher in one of the schools were captured through the lens over a school year.

I was keen to take part in the programme because I believed that, in demonstrating some of the challenges and in being open about them, it could help to normalise experiences for other educators and shine a light on just how difficult life in many schools had become. I also wanted to light a way towards ethical leadership in the face of these challenges.

What the programme did was to depict an education system on the edge of crisis, with staff and students burning out and more importantly a system failing to fulfil its role as what could be considered the fourth emergency service. Responses to the series underscored the resonance of the issues the programme highlighted.

My part in the series was relatively brief but what I hope I demonstrated was that school leaders, now more so than ever, need to be prepared to lead in the face of social turmoil, need to be prepared to be torchbearers and to light the way to a new and as yet unimagined reality. Schools need leaders who are unafraid of the dissolution of the institution and who are prepared to face the disintegration of all that is not working with optimism and faith in renewal.

After the series was aired, the themes for this book emerged with greater clarity and I set about writing *Lighting the Way*, a book for the ordinary school leader who tries and sometimes fails, but who then tries a bit more. This book is for those who, lost in the nuances of their context, are not looking for the 'right' way but are looking for the courage to forge 'their way'. This book is for the thousands of everyday headteachers who are just trying to get it right and who know that the time is coming when something must give or completely change.

In this book, I have attempted to light a way for school leaders in need of encouragement and support towards ethical action and to light a way for new leaders who are keen to do things differently. I make no judgments about leaders who are leading in the tried and true ways of the educational establishment but rather I attempt to carve a space for an alternative model of school leadership that places ethical action, compassion, knowledge of self and a commitment to human flourishing at its core.

PART 1

The case for school leadership

1 Communities in crisis

Chapter overview

This chapter considers the extent to which the communities that many schools serve are in crisis. It looks at the recent past in which, when families or children were in crisis, there was a hope of supporting them, providing signposting or helping in some way, and considers the current reality: times in which poverty is prevalent and pervasive. Why? Because to light the way we need to understand the current position and start to envision a brighter future.

I qualified as a teacher in 2001, taking my first job in an inner-city school in Bristol. The school drew from a wide range of ethnic minority groups and was located in what, for generations, had been a working-class community with Victorian housing stock designed originally for miners and mill workers, latterly peppered in the 1950s with the first high rises to be built outside of London.

The arrival of high numbers of asylum-seeking Somalis fleeing civil war, as part of the diaspora settling into this area of Bristol, meant that in the three or so years preceding my arrival at the school there had been a focus on services that could support families in crisis, as well as the need for integration. This meant that our school in particular was a place in which numerous funding streams converged.

This area of the city fell into the first round of communities benefitting from Tony Blair's New Deal for Communities regeneration programme. This was a programme designed to tackle the impact of poverty in 22 of the most deprived wards in the country. One of the benefits, and sometimes challenges, of working in a school transformed by the diaspora was that there were a number of children who spoke English as an additional language (EAL). For these children, additional funding made it possible for us to fund extra-curricular sessions targeted at supporting English language acquisition in order that our recently arrived children could make progress in line with their peers.

Additional funding for students with EAL made a huge difference. As an English teacher, there was very much a sense that you were supported by skilled practitioners experienced in harnessing the aptitude for language learning of many children. Indeed, the two-way flow of communication between the English department and the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) team was a critical factor in developing a rich understanding of the cultures, diversity and richness of our school.

The funding available at the time did not stop there. Parents of students who had EAL were also able to attend classes in English and basic skills to ensure that they would be able to fully participate in their local community, would be able to fully access the services they were entitled to and would be able to more fully support their children with their studies.

Between 2001 and 2003, 500 million pounds was poured into the Excellence in Cities programme that had been established by the Labour government to promote inclusion in the inner cities and tackle the chronic underachievement of many children. Under this programme, learning mentors were introduced to schools, and with this funding, schools were better able to set up specialist learning support units within their communities to support their more vulnerable children.

In our school we were able to use resources to both employ learning mentors and set up a specialist learning support unit. Indeed, so rich were the opportunities for funding that we were successful in bidding to open a provision purely for children at risk of exclusion on our school site. This pot of funding came from a youth charity but again was aimed at supporting the most vulnerable children and consequently their families.

Children who were identified as being in need of more support were given an allocation of time during the school day to work with trained colleagues. The provision for those children who had behavioural needs ran alongside the provision for children who had special educational needs. Again, our school was relatively time- and resource-rich (although even back then it didn't feel it). We had a school nurse, a school counsellor, a dyslexia teacher, a special educational needs and disabilities coordinator (SENDCo) and a deputy SENDCo, as well as numerous learning support assistants within the team.

New Labour had also committed to Sure Start Centres and, between 1991 and 2002, 452 million pounds was allocated to these centres, which were designed to provide integrated learning and childcare five days per week in the most deprived areas, along with family support and parenting advice, as well as access to specialist targeted advice.

As an assistant head overseeing an inclusion brief, I always felt that if I didn't have the answers, help would be at hand. Following the death of Victoria Climbié

(who was murdered by her aunt and her aunt's boyfriend after suffering months of abuse, despite repeated contact with social services, the police and the NHS), schools, social services, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and health services that supported children and families had been quite rightly directed through the Every Child Matters agenda. The idea was that they would work more effectively together to safeguard children and ensure that no one slipped through the net. Yes, we all thought wryly, of course every child matters, and there was a sense that we were being taught to suck eggs, but this agenda meant that a new approach to multi-disciplinary working was set into motion, and the attention to rallying around families to ensure that the best possible support was being offered was palpable.

I remember multi-agency meetings in which every dimension of a family's support network was represented. Meetings in which one sometimes felt the overwhelm that the family must be experiencing as the multi-disciplinary army of colleagues were squeezed into a room to jointly action plan, signpost and agree resources and strategies to support them.

I remember a thick booklet detailing the support services available for vulnerable children or families in crisis. It was like a phone directory of support, with a paragraph per charity or agency explaining what they could do to be of service. Little did I know that, just a decade later, the comfort I felt in reaching for that booklet would be replaced with the desperate feeling that I had no answers, nothing to offer this family coming in to meet with me and no solution to mitigate the crushing reality of poverty, depression or difficult life circumstances they faced.

Today things feel markedly different in schools and, as the focus on high-profile cases of abuse and neglect has led policy and practice towards greater protection of children at risk and vulnerable families in need, so too has come a rise in the number of children in these categories. In 2017, the Children's Commissioner estimated that '670,000 English children live in "high-risk" situations, including with parents addicted to alcohol or drugs or in temporary accommodation, at least 800,000 have mental health disorders and 580,000 are in need of direct intervention' (Crenna-Jennings, 2018). Although between 2010 and 2016 the rate of all children in need per 100,000 decreased by one per cent, the rate of children issued with child protection plans rose, as did the rate of looked-after children.

The impact of poverty

These statistics are somewhat unsurprising, as the knock-on effects of poverty have a bearing. According to the report 'Vulnerable Children and Social Care in

England', the relationship between poverty and social care involvement is strong. '30 per cent of school-age children in mainstream provision on child in need plans and 37 per cent of those on child protection plans live in areas of high deprivation (based on IDACI bands), compared to 18 per cent of other children and 17 per cent of looked after children.' (Crenna-Jennings, 2018)

The 2018 annual Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report on poverty in the UK revealed that child poverty has been rising since 2011–12 and that 4.1 million children are now living in poverty, an increase of 500,000 in that time. The same report revealed that workers are now increasingly living in poverty and that 'in-work poverty has been rising faster than employment, driven almost entirely by increasing poverty among working parents'. The report continues that 'virtually all this rise in child poverty has taken place within working families. In the last five years, poverty rates have been rising for all types of working families – whether they are lone-parent or couple families and regardless of the number of adults in work or whether they are part-time or full-time workers.'

Poverty reaches into the nooks and crannies of our schools; it is pervasive, unavoidable and distressing. And it is not just limited to the children and families we work with. Indeed, increasing numbers of teachers also find themselves living the dire reality of poverty in modern Britain.

The charity Education Support Partnership, which was founded in 1877 as the Teachers' Benevolent Fund, received 85 applications from education staff in need of financial assistance in April 2018. This was the highest number of monthly applications it had had in its 141-year history. An article in the *Guardian*, written in June 2018 (Ferguson, 2018), stated that this spike in applications represented a 157 per cent increase compared with the same month last year. It continued to explain that the charity had already had over 300 applications for financial support halfway through 2018 and was starting to use cash reserves to try to meet the demand of the applications received. In addition to financial support, the number of educators accessing the teacher helpline had also risen sharply. The Education Support Partnership dealt with 9,615 cases between April 2018 and March 2019, which represented a 28 per cent rise from 2017.

This rise in the working poor is worrying and yet it is not often spoken of. The research (Cribb et al., 2018) tells us that since 2002–03, average housing costs have risen four times faster for children in low-income families than for those in middle-income families and that for those in the latter group, housing costs have risen by 11 per cent. The forecast for low- to middle-income families is that they will be worse off in 2024 than they were in 2004, with 37 per cent of children forecast to be growing up in poverty by this point.

Across the country, food bank usage has been on the rise. The Trussell Trust (2019) state that 'Between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019, the Trussell Trust's food bank network distributed 1.6 million three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis, a 19% increase on the previous year. More than half a million of these went to children.'

And we can see this in our schools. Watching the increasing numbers of children who have not eaten or do not know whether they will eat after school. Witnessing the stress and distress for parents caused when a teacher explains that a replacement pair of trousers will need to be bought. Witnessing the decline in the numbers of children able to go on school trips and visits. Knowing that conversations will inevitably lead back to what is unaffordable in a household when a parent comes in initially to talk on a different topic. These markers of poverty are ever present and they have been increasing but, like the frog becoming accustomed to the increasing water temperature, perhaps we have not truly realised the dire state we are in and the huge cost to our communities of poverty in modern Britain.

The wide gap in school performance

The effects of community disadvantage, as well as family disadvantage, begin well before children start school, and this effect can remain with them throughout their schooling (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). This means that for children in our classes who come from areas of persistent disadvantage (for example, the south-east of England, where chronic disadvantage has been a persistent feature of many communities and where childhood poverty reaches 50 per cent in some constituencies), their outlook is markedly different to non-disadvantaged children or those who have not grown up with this persistent history of poverty.

Growing up in poverty is more likely to have an impact on a child's physiological and physical health, on their wellbeing and on their ability to retain information and 'perform' under pressure. Before birth, a mother's perinatal health is already having a bearing. The research tells us that 'stress during pregnancy is linked to poorer foetal and cognitive development' (Crenna-Jennings, 2018). Crenna-Jennings continues that 'living in challenging social and economic conditions breeds chronic stress; analysis of UK-wide GP records found that the odds of deprived mothers aged 35 to 45 years experiencing antenatal depression or anxiety were more than two and a half times greater compared to non-deprived mothers'.

Breastfeeding has been strongly linked to positive cognitive development in children and yet in the UK we have one of the lowest rates of breastfeeding in the developed world. Rates of breastfeeding in the UK also differ in terms of social economics, with a greater prevalence found within women in managerial positions and with 15 per cent fewer women in routine or manual jobs breastfeeding their children (Crenna-Jennings, 2018).

The impact of smoking, alcohol and diet all contribute to maternal and early childhood health and, with the research telling us that 'expectant mothers living in deprived areas in the UK are substantially more likely to smoke [which has been] attributed to higher levels of stress associated with hardship and a lack of access to support' (Crenna-Jennings, 2018), clearly a child growing up in a house in which there is poverty is facing challenges very early on in life.

Adverse childhood experiences

In 1998, a doctor in San Diego collaborated with a doctor from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in America to conduct the largest ever study on the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their impact on health later in life. The 17,000 participants in the study were largely middle-class, white, college-educated professionals and they were asked about the existence of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, divorced parents, a parent in prison, mental illness, substance abuse or domestic violence in their childhood. The results were profound. What became clear to the researchers was that the prevalence of ACEs was high; indeed, two in three adults had suffered from one or more ACEs. One in eight participants in the study had suffered four or more ACEs and, with this higher prevalence of trauma in their lives, were more likely to suffer from health problems or engage in risk-taking behaviours. The study (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019) found that those with six or more ACEs were likely to die an average of 20 years earlier than those without one.

A few years later, Dr Nadine Burke carried out similar research (Burke et al., 2011) with some of her patients in a socially deprived area of San Francisco. What was interesting was that, although the sample population was very different, the prevalence of ACEs was not. Again, in her community, two-thirds of the population had experienced one or more ACEs and one in eight had experienced four or more. What stands out from Burke's study is the correlation between ACEs and learning and behaviour in school. For those with four or more ACEs, there was

a far greater prevalence of learning and behaviour issues in comparison to those with no ACEs (51.2 per cent as opposed to three per cent).

In the UK, Mark Bellis, across two studies, one in 2014 and one in 2015, found that nearly 50 per cent of the population had experienced one or more ACE, that in England eight per cent of the population had experienced four or more, and that in Wales that percentage rose to 14 per cent. A 2014 study identified people with four or more ACEs as being four times more likely to be high-risk drinkers, six times more likely to be smokers, 16 times more likely to be crack cocaine or heroin users, 15 times more likely to have been involved in violence over the past year and 20 times more likely to be in prison during their lifetimes (Bellis et al., 2014).

The intergenerational nature of ACEs makes the jobs of schools and educators more nuanced, and the cross-population reach of them means that every teacher is working with crisis to some degree. From private schools to schools in areas of multiple deprivation, the impact of ACEs is profound.

That said, there is compelling evidence that the community within which a child grows up will have a significant impact on their outcomes. In a study undertaken by Chetty, Hendren and Katz (2016), the researchers reviewed the outcomes of the 'Moving to Opportunity' programme, a scheme in which participants were given vouchers to help them move from deprived housing projects to social housing in more affluent areas. Previous studies had demonstrated that the programme had an impact on the health and wellbeing of participants but there had been no evidence that it had a bearing on participants' ability to obtain better earning potential. However, they found that, to the contrary, 'children who moved to lower-poverty areas when they were young [were] more likely to attend college and have substantially higher incomes as adults'.

The panacea for all social ills

In her wide-ranging speech at the launch of Ofsted's 2017–18 Annual Report, Amanda Spielman explained her view that schools should not be the panacea for all of society's ills (Spielman, 2018). While I understand that position, she gave the example of children coming to school aged four still wearing nappies or pull-ups. This, she said, was a disruptive factor for teachers and other children, as schools were now having to deal with issues that should be being dealt with by parents. Spielman also talked about knife crime in that speech, explaining that while schools do have a role in educating children on the dangers of knife crime, they can't actually take on this problem for themselves, even if crime creeps up

to the edges of what is happening in school. And finally, she gave the example of the obesity crisis, stating that schools that try to tackle issues such as rising obesity levels with children and families are in fact making no greater in-roads than schools that don't tackle these issues at all.

I take this point; I agree that there can be an over-involvement on our part as educators, particularly with issues that feel as though they are hampering our ability to do our day-to-day work. However, isn't it also the case that we cannot truly disassociate ourselves with society's ills when education has become, as Spielman acknowledged, a frontline service? The fact is that the context in which children are growing up has a huge bearing on the ways we are able to support and work with them. I really do not believe these things can be separated, nor should they be.

So, while we cannot be a panacea, there seems to be a responsibility to shift ourselves and bend ourselves according to the times we find ourselves in. We are no longer just providers of education; indeed there is an expectation that as professionals we take on a new level of responsibility. In fact, I think there is an expectation foisted upon us by parents and I understand why. Because generally there is an absence of leadership. There are no community leaders, church attendance is down, there are no community spaces, there are few shared free services, and there is little in the way of mentoring, advice or advocacy. There's barely anything left.

I think it is incumbent upon us to turn our heads towards the most pressing of society's ills, line ourselves up with them and try to work with them. This means that we need to understand poverty and we need to understand the impact of poverty, not just on the attainment gap but on all aspects of childhood. We need to be able to accept our role in supporting families because without this the impact of education on a child's life will never be fully realised.

This work requires a new style of leadership and, as this book will explore, it requires the kind of leadership that asks us to look into ourselves and determine where we stand in the world and what our beliefs and values are. If, as school leaders, we believe that we should not participate in the realm of social transformation, if we believe that children can come into our schools and drop their context at the school gate, and if we believe we are just filling their heads with knowledge and sending them out into the world, then we are really failing to engage with our leadership potential.

Given the scale of the crisis we are witnessing, the school as a standalone institution is not, in my opinion, a responsible place to reside. Too many children today are growing up in dire circumstances and so schools must work together

with other agencies and organisations to do everything they can to alleviate some of the difficulty. This means that schools must be outward facing and must develop an assuredness in their ability to manage a broad range of challenges and issues that exist as part of life in modern Britain.

Key questions to help you light the way

1. What are the challenges that poverty brings to your school or community?
2. How does your school manage the challenges of poverty?
3. How well attuned is your school to the experiences of families in poverty?
4. How successfully is your school addressing the poverty gap?
5. How comfortable does your leadership team feel about your school being a panacea for many societal ills?
6. What is your vision for our society? How can you light the way?