
Trainspotting: leadership at a critical junction

ROBIN PRECEY

ABSTRACT This article argues that education leaders in this country, and indeed leaders of other public services, are facing life-changing decisions. The way ahead is full of possibilities and pitfalls. The article employs the metaphor of a railway journey to explore these. In particular it considers the implications for leaders in terms of how they prepare for, and display, leadership in the current complex and seemingly contradictory policy climate.

A Picture of Clapham Junction

I have a recurring image in my mind. It's a picture of the many school leaders I work with standing on the platforms at Clapham Junction. Their numbers grow as trains pull in and familiar faces disembark; some stay on, resolutely staring out of the window or reading a newspaper. Others are walking up the stairs onto the platforms for their very first journey. Increasing numbers go down the stairs, leaving the station with a mixture of emotions on their faces. A handful of people jump on trains as they are about to depart but most remain waiting, wondering what to do. Many are eyeing each other up and down, trying to catch the mood before following the crowd. A few stand apart at the end of the platform, certain about which train they are catching and too far away from the stairs to switch platforms if their train pulls in elsewhere.

Where have these school leaders come from? Where are they going? Why?

It's an image that has grown in my mind as I have listened to many leaders on leadership programmes around the country. It resonates when I describe it. Colleagues in other public services, including health, social services and the police, also connect with this image.

Finding Meaning in the Picture

It does not take a Joseph to interpret this image. We live in an age of rapid change where much seems strangely familiar. It is a time of increasing complexity when policies offered are simplistic and where statements of certainty are often underpinned by confusion. This is a leadership world where risk-taking is encouraged yet accountability is harsh and there is much to gain and lose. For many leaders, Clapham Junction is an oasis of calm compared with the reality of their working lives. In education, and indeed in other public sector services, leaders now arrive having followed a number of different tracks. Many are deciding where to go next: carry on in the same direction or deviate, and if so to what extent and how quickly. New arrivals have the same decision to make. Some experienced leaders have had enough and are off, relieved that they do not have to decide. As those who remain know only too well, they are not just deciding for themselves; their decision will affect the lives of many other adults and children, both now and in the future.

As things stand, government policy offers two main tracks. To continue with the train metaphor, one track leads to a place called 'Standards'. At this place, and indeed along the journey, all that matters is measurable. Life is focused on performance and a relentless pursuit of continuous improvement as measured by statistics. At the end of the journey there is the professed promise of successful employment in a competitive, global market. This is the fast train with little time to take in the scenery. The other track heads off in a very different direction to a place called 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) where that which is measurable is less highly valued. Here, people are happy, healthy, wealthy and wise – or so we have been told. But no one has been there yet. This journey is to a more distant destination. There could be other journeys: is there perhaps one, which arrives somewhere in the middle or that deviates less from the two extremes? Can we jump on the ECM train and at the same time improve measurable targets? Can we focus on standards as currently defined and at the same time provide a wider, richer curriculum rooted in that which we most value?

Leaders with whom I work are grappling hard with these decisions. Where to go next? It's tough stuff. Many firmly believe that their values, their hearts and their inner minds tell them they must be guided by a holistic approach, seeing the child as a whole human being. But they are painfully aware that an inspector might appear at any moment to make sure they are on the Standards train. Some of these inspectors are less enlightened than others; in such cases the consequences of breaking the rules can threaten careers – and lives.

Even in some government circles there is a growing realisation that the standards agenda has run its course. Indeed, some fear a continuing emphasis on inflexible targets will seriously damage public services. The ECM agenda, enshrined in legislation as the 2004 Children Act, is striving to ensure a broader vision for children and young people. Children and their families are seen as

being at the heart of the process and the five outcomes, identified by children and young people themselves as mattering most to them, are becoming ingrained in the consciousness of all who work with children. But a tension remains between the two agendas – and the environment is becoming increasingly uncertain, complex and dynamic. If these are not to be separate and potentially diverging tracks then public sector providers, including local authorities, schools, social services and health trusts, will need to change significantly.

Precisely what changes are needed is a matter of growing debate (see, for example Allen & Ainley [2008] and the current *iNet* online debate facilitated by David Hargreaves). Much of the debate is couched in the language of ‘transformation’, implying a paradigm shift in thinking, and indeed in the very nature of public services. Whatever the future, reconciling the two apparently conflicting goals of the Standards and ECM agendas remains a formidable challenge. Travelling on a life-enhancing journey and arriving at the best possible place – both for individuals and for society as a whole – is a profoundly complex issue.

Implications for Leaders

If change is to be transformational, it is axiomatic that leadership needs to be less managerial or transactional. In some respects Bottery (2004) is right to remind us that using these labels can be unhelpful. Just as the Standards and ECM agendas are not as polarised as they appear, so transactional and transformational leadership are not mutually exclusive. Effective leadership needs effective management, and vice versa. Having said this, leaders are now being called upon to display high-order skills that some would call transformational (Burns, 1978; Tomlinson, 2004). There is some consensus that such leadership involves:

- building a compelling vision of a better future underpinned by high moral confidence;
- establishing shared organisational goals;
- displaying high levels of interpersonal engagement with a profound understanding of personal, team and organisational learning;
- offering individualised support;
- modelling best practices and important organisational values;
- demonstrating expectations of high performance;
- providing intellectual stimulation for others and seeking best practices;
- creating a productive culture with a commitment to community;
- developing structures to foster participation in decision-making;
- personal resilience.

If these are some of the ingredients for transformational leadership, then critical perspectives – although often resisted – are essential if we are to provide high-quality education in an increasingly frenetic world. The wisdom to make the best possible decisions in the busyness and confusion of our Clapham Junction rests on leaders' abilities to employ intelligent, informed discrimination between choices of trains. Reflective practice is an essential prerequisite, as is a passion for social justice and equity, but critical thinking is pivotal to such leadership. Transformational leaders should want to question; they should have the courage and the capacity to challenge conventional wisdom and to critique accepted but untested assumptions, beliefs or value systems. By so doing, they allow ideas to become more open, more accessible and easier to validate:

Perspectives transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (Cranton, 1997 p. 22)

Back to the metaphor ...

The Significance of Waiting Rooms

Important decisions are being made about our education system and our schools. Pressure on schools – both internal and external – is forcing the pace. The fat controller is urging them to go 'faster, faster, faster'; it is tempting to jump on any train, so long as it is going somewhere. But surely, now more than ever, is the time for reflection and criticality; now is the time to take time.

Waiting rooms can be places for reflection and dialogue. In the real world schools do not stand still. However, taking time out to develop an intelligent, thought-through, shared vision is essential if leaders and their schools are not to end up on the wrong train, hoping for a set of points so that they can get back on track further down the line. These waiting rooms need to be places of genuine, honest reflection, where dialogue is encouraged and judgement suspended. Many school leaders I have worked with are grateful to spend time in such waiting rooms, and to be supported in developing their criticality and in challenging conventional assumptions.

Identifying a Desired Direction and Destination

In order to choose the right train you need to know where you are going. For those on the separate Standards or ECM platforms, this may seem straightforward. In reality, however, most leaders are trying to find a new middle way. This involves a redefinition of 'Standards' to encompass a much broader range of what leaders want for those whom they serve – and what

those who are served want for themselves. It would be great to start the journey backwards, secure in the knowledge that you know where you are going. It would also be helpful if earlier travellers could return with detailed news about the destination. In reality life is messy. However, if there is a compelling shared vision of what it is like to be both on the journey and to arrive at the destination, it is entirely possible to hop on and off trains and make the right connections.

Checking out the Journey and Telling the Story

It is, of course, important to be rigorous and skilful in identifying and analysing progress along the journey. 'Standards' can be redefined in such a way that they relate more intimately to the collective vision. Many schools are already developing sophisticated and inclusive ways of collecting new, convincing and important evidence. Done well, the process can be illuminating, affirming and empowering, encouraging leaders and their communities to continue their journey with courage and confidence. The evidence may inform strategic deviations in direction, or adjustments in pace, but the journey continues and the overall direction is clear. Leaders develop a narrative; they tell the story of the journey and are confident and clear in communicating progress, not only to those on board but also to onlookers.

Size and Scale Matter

In schools, successful transformation depends essentially upon the quality of relationships that are nurtured and grown. Encouraging participation, involvement, respect for self and others, dialogue and effective communication – indeed, the nurturing and fostering of community – is most effectively accomplished in organisations that are of a human scale. There is an increasing recognition among policy makers, school leaders and many others that size and scale are fundamentally important in terms of how we conceptualise schools as communities of learners with the best possible conditions for individuals to relate to one another. As Michael Fielding has rightly pointed out (2000), size and scale do not of themselves produce person-centred communities, but they are necessary prerequisites for such communities to develop.

On this journey we are not just passengers crammed on board impatiently whiling away the time; we are all travellers learning from each other. The dialogue necessary to ensure this learning is both rich and deep best takes place in a forum where people know and trust one another. For human relationships to flourish, it is crucial that attention is paid to the size, structure and systems in schools and in other learning organisations.

Preparing for Leadership

A public services system that places most value on the achievement of a narrow range of apparently measurable outcomes encourages a managerial approach where the main questions asked are: 'What do I have to do?'; 'How do I do it?'; and 'By when?'. Such systems are based upon the false premises of predictability, reproduction and standardisation for a common future experience. A broader approach, and one with greater aspirations for human beings, requires transformational leaders who before asking 'What?', 'How?', or 'By when?', will ask 'Why?'

Transformational leadership rests on transformational learning, which O'Sullivan (2003) helpfully describes as:

experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice, peace and personal joy. (p. 327)

Transformative learning is thus a deeply challenging, truly educational and intensely liberating process. It is an endless journey with no prospect of reaching a final destination. It is essential that our school leaders are engaged in such learning if they are to be genuinely transformative in their work.

There are proven ways that transformational leadership can be learned. Burbules & Berk (1999), for example, emphasise the practising of criticality as essential in educating leaders who might build learning communities and take the risks necessary to foster democracy and social justice, rather than 'those teachers who play it safe by simply massaging the rhetoric' (Greenan & Dieckmann 2004, p. 242). They stress four components to such learning:

- the ability to think outside conventional frameworks and to analyse across disciplines;
- the maintenance of the essential tension of controversy;
- an interactive collaborative construction of meaning; and
- fallibilism (as with Ellsworth's [1989] inability to know fully).

Darder (1997) also supports the idea that transformational development is possible by suggesting that, in fostering a cultural critical pedagogy:

Students can learn to make problematic views of life; search for different ways to think about themselves; challenge their self-imposed as well as institutionally defined limitations; affirm their

cultural and individual strengths; and embrace possibilities for a better world. (p. 342)

All of these professional and personal developments are necessary in leaders for them to bring about transformation in their organisations.

The Train on Platform ...

In England, there is a growing expectation that public services in general and schools in particular will be the locus of societal change. For this to be achieved, effective leadership at all levels is essential. Carefully constructed conditions can be put in place that are more likely to encourage criticality and the development of the sort of leaders armed with moral courage who are best equipped to meet the enormous expectations placed upon our public services in the twenty-first century.

Transformation has to be accomplished by those who dream about the reinvention of society, the recreation or reconstruction of society. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 36)

We now know enough about the nature of leadership that given the will and the skill, and with support and encouragement, those leaders who dream about a better future can now bravely guide us forward from Clapham Junction towards that better future.

References

- Allen, M. & Ainley, P. (2008) *Education Make You Fick, Innit?: what's gone wrong with England's schools, colleges and universities and how to start putting it right*. London: Tufnell Press.
- Bottery, M. (2004) *The Challenges of Educational Leadership*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Burbules, N.C. & Berk, R. (1999) Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: relations, differences and limits, in T.S. Popkewitz & L. Fendler (Eds) *Critical Theories in Education: changing terrains of knowledge and politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Burns, J.M. (1978) *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Cranton, P. (Ed.) (1997) *Transformative Learning in Action: insights from practice*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Darder, A. (1997) *Creating the Conditions for Cultural Democracy in the Classroom*. Westport: Greenwood.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989) Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy, *Harvard Educational Review*, 59(3).
- Fielding, M. (2000) Community, Philosophy and Education Policy: against effectiveness ideology and the immiseration of contemporary schooling, *Journal of Education Policy*, 15(4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/026809300413419>

- Greenan, N.P. & Dieckmann, J. A. (2004) Considering Criticality and Culture as Pivotal in Transformative Teacher Education, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(3), 240-255.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022487104263764>
- Hargreaves, D. System Redesign – 1: The Road to Transformation in Education. INet online debate for educators, The Road to Transformation in Education.
<http://dx.doi.org/www.Ssat-inet.net>
- Miller, J.P. & Seller, W. (1990) *Curriculum: perspectives and practice*. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman.
- O’Sullivan, E. (2003) Bringing a Perspective of Transformative Learning to Globalised Consumption, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 27(4), 326-330.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1046/j.1470-6431.2003.00327.x>
- Shor, I. & Freire, P. (1987) *A Pedagogy for Liberation: dialogues on transforming education*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Tomlinson, H. (2004) *Educational Leadership: personal growth for professional development*. London: Paul Chapman.
-

ROBIN PRECEY has worked in secondary schools in different parts of England over 32 years in a range of leadership roles, including 15 years as a head teacher. For the past four years he has been at the Centre for Education Leadership and School Improvement (CELSI) at Canterbury Christ Church University where he is now Director. This role involves teaching postgraduate leadership programmes, consultancy in England and overseas, and research. *Correspondence:* Dr Robin Precey, Centre for Education Leadership and School Improvement, Department for Professional Development, Canterbury Christ Church University, Oak Lodge, Salomons, Broomhill Road, Southborough, Tunbridge Wells TN3 0TG, United Kingdom (robin.precey@canterbury.ac.uk).