

## ESSAY REVIEW

PETER MORTIMORE, SARAVAN GOPINATHAN, ELIZABETH LEO, KATE MYERS, LESLIE SHARPE, LOUISE STOLL AND JO MORTIMORE. *The Culture of Change: Case Studies of Improving Schools in Singapore and London*. London: Bedford Way Papers, Institute of Education, University of London (2000). 154 pp. £14.99 (Paper). (ISBN 085473 606 9).

Effectively leading organizational change is a complex and demanding task; it is especially difficult in certain school settings. In this recently published book entitled *The Culture of Change: Comparative Case Studies of Improving Schools in Singapore and London*, we are thoughtfully introduced to some of the challenges that educational leaders face in facilitating the change process. This small but informative book realistically reports on the results of change initiatives in four secondary schools, two in London and two in Singapore. The schools were selected for in-depth study because they were located in areas where the children were relatively disadvantaged and the challenges that the school leadership teams faced were, as the authors put it, truly "against the odds". The multi-disciplinary research team that completed the study consisted of professionals from both the business and educational milieu. The questions posed, the methods used and the insights generated about the educational change process certainly merit our careful consideration.

Peter Mortimore, the Director of the Institute of Education, University of London, and Saravanan Gopinathan, Dean of the School of Education, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, together with their colleagues, begin by describing the socio-economic and educational context in which the four schools are operating. The two Singapore schools, Queensway and Xinmin, are fairly typical government secondary schools that have been identified by the Ministry of Education (MOE) as being worthy of study due to their outstanding performance in the annual "value added" ratings of school performance. The two London schools, Deptford Green and Morpeth, were selected on the basis of their successful performance on both qualitative and quantitative indicators pro-

vided by local school authorities. After meeting with the educational leaders and teachers in each of the schools, the research team was granted permission to conduct the study.

The study focused on three major areas: the successes and achievements of the schools in the face of considerable adversity, the school improvement strategies that were utilized, and the nature of the ongoing challenges that the schools faced. Even though the research team decided to focus on the above three common areas of study, they wisely agreed to allow themselves considerable flexibility in the methods they used to address them. Most importantly, the researchers used a broad definition of school improvement that included "objective measures, such as raised academic achievements, but also subjective feelings and observations about improvement in behaviour and the quality of relationships (both internal and external) which were interwoven with them" (p. 4-5). In recognizing the importance of both objective and subjective indicators the members of the research team demonstrated their understanding of the educational change process. We owe a debt to them for taking such a position when the current social and political mindset is so often focused on "hard performance data", which, as those who have spent time in schools know, often tells less than half of the story.

The research team spent from 14-20 days in each of the schools collecting data through the use of interviews, the analysis of school documents, and the careful tracking of individual students for an entire day, as well as observations of informal school activities such as assemblies, celebrations, and meetings of parents. In addition, a survey adapted from the National Foundation for Educational Research in Singapore was administered to samples of students in the Singapore schools related to their attitudes to learning, their teachers, and other matters. Samples of students in the London schools completed a similar questionnaire adapted from the Improving School Effectiveness Project that had recently been developed by educational researchers in Scotland.

In the introductory chapter, the authors provide an overview of the similarities and differences between the educational systems in the two countries. They pay special attention to the aims of education by noting the importance of "traditional Asian collective values" and the desire of Singapore to "maintain its political and cultural autonomy" through the development of a strong "learning culture" within the schools and society generally. Through a careful analysis of key educational documents including the Education Act of 1944, the 1988 Education Reform Act, and the more recent Education White Paper that was tabled in 1997, the authors report that the aims of British schools are focused on "a society in which everyone is well-educated and able to learn throughout life. Britain's prosperity and social cohesion both depend on achieving that goal" (p. 8). The authors also note

that while the Education Reform Act of 1988 increased the role of the central government in Britain it also provided considerably more power to individual schools. The result was that individual schools were given an increased role in their own improvement including considerably more control over financial affairs. In contrast, Singapore still has a relatively centralized educational system that is strongly influenced by the Ministry of Education.

In describing the context in which the schools operate, special attention is paid to teacher education, staffing practices, and major differences in the organization of schooling. For example, in contrast to the usual organizational practice in Britain, schools in Singapore often offer instruction to two distinct shifts of students in morning and afternoon sessions. The authors also describe the multi-ethnic and linguistic makeup of the schools and discuss the means by which these challenges are addressed. In sum, in a coherent and succinct manner the authors provide readers with an initial understanding of the complex educational milieu within which the schools are located.

In addition to the above contextual information, the authors provide information on the measures that have been taken to increase school accountability in the two countries. For example, in Singapore, teams of inspectors carry out school visits every four to five years. In addition, since 1992 Singapore has published national performance tables in which all public secondary schools and colleges are ranked. Moreover, each year the Ministry of Education publishes value-added tables that enable students, staff, parents and other stakeholders to assess "how far above expected levels the schools have performed" (p. 21). In 1992, England also established a formal system of school inspection in which accredited inspectors review the performance of schools every four to six years. In addition, school performance measures are published annually in "performance tables," which as they do in Singapore provide public information about school performance. However, as the authors note "the tables have been the subject of much controversy in England because, contrary to the good practice adopted by school effectiveness researchers, no account is yet taken of the level attained of students on entry to the school, or of their socio-economic circumstances" (p. 22). As the authors quite rightly state, "schools in relatively affluent areas that receive advantaged students, who tend to do better in public examinations, are disproportionately represented in elevated rankings in the league tables" (p. 22). With the above contextual information in hand, the authors begin an excellent discussion of the leadership processes and other factors that have influenced improved school performance in the four schools. A sampling of some of the more important factors driving the change process follows.

Deptford Green is a multi-racial, secondary school located in a socio-economically disadvantaged section of South London. The authors describe the change process that has transformed the school from one with poor results on the academic examinations and students exhibiting behavioural problems to one experiencing academic success and an improved public image. When a new Head Teacher was appointed approximately ten years ago, he used a variety of methods to initiate the school improvement process. Dedicated to changing the public perceptions about the school and determined to make Deptford Green a positive place to work, he set out to establish a working environment where staff could “debate issues openly and vigorously and where conflict between colleagues” could be resolved (p. 32). By identifying the need for change and encouraging open debate on key issues related to it, the Head Teacher was able to ensure that “the agenda for change was firmly in the hands of the school and all staff were involved in generating the energy for improvement” (p.33). In conjunction with a Senior Management Team that was fully supportive of the change process, over a number of years the Head Teacher was able to develop a “talented and enthusiastic staff who understood and appreciated effective leadership” (p. 33). He was also fortunate enough to be able to hire new teachers and facilitate their involvement in the change process. In addition, the Head Teacher promoted closer relationships with students and staff of the local primary feeder schools and with people in the local community.

Under the guidance of the Senior Management Team, the school decided to place greater emphasis on the visual and performing arts. Students began to achieve outstanding results on the examinations and staff believed that student success in these areas had positive effects on their behaviour and performance in other subjects. Another important part of the change process was the change in attitude that developed in the school. The authors report that “relationships at the school were striking in a number of ways. Social relationships across the board were open, direct and problem-solving in nature, from administrators through to teaching staff and between teachers and students” (p. 35). In short, an atmosphere of trust was generated within the school that the authors believed was having a positive effect.

A variety of other factors contributed to the increasing pride that students and staff felt for the school. One that is of particular interest was the role that the professional development partnership between Deptford Green and Goldsmith’s College of the University of London played in the change process. Through this ongoing partnership, teachers at the school mentored and supervised student teachers from the College. The supervising teachers reported that their personal involvement in the partnership was a rewarding professional development experience. Moreover, based on their experience with the student teachers, when the school needed new staff, it was able to identify and hire promising new teachers.

Morpeth Secondary School is located in a relatively deprived section of London. Five buildings, three of which were built in the last century, house a multi-ethnic student population of approximately 900 students. About 50% of students are of Bangladeshi origin, while a third of the students have English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish backgrounds. One of the academic challenges encountered by the school is the fact that English is the second language of over 60% of the students. Moreover, approximately 70% of the students receive free school meals, which reflects the difficult socio-economic conditions that families face in the area.

Prior to initiating the school improvement process, Morpeth had a reputation for poor student behaviour, racial incidents, low academic performance, and high staff turnover. About six years ago, after a particularly disturbing incident, a change process began that literally transformed the school. In recent years, the school improvement process has resulted in a much more positive school culture as well as improved General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination results.

As in the other schools, a number of factors combined to make a difference in school performance. At Morpeth, the appointment of an enthusiastic new Head Teacher actually initiated the change process. He strongly believed “that students can achieve more than they do” and that “kids in this area have been sold short for years” (p. 46). The challenge that he faced was certainly not an easy one. In fact, at first he “felt very isolated”; however, with the assistance of two deputy heads he began the change process. At first, the authors report that the teaching staff was reticent to assume leadership roles; however, an important part of the Head Teacher’s leadership strategy was “to create the right environment where middle managers, in particular felt enabled and empowered to take up their management role” (p.47). By talking with colleagues and by offering opportunities for staff development, the Head Teacher was able to develop “a teacher culture which would support and encourage change” (p. 48). With time, he and his Senior Management Team were able to facilitate the building of a shared vision in which increased academic achievement became a central goal within the school. During this process, the authors report that the Head Teacher was able to “manage the complexity and difficulty of inevitable institutional conflicts with skill, subtlety and sensitivity” (p.48).

In addition to developing a shared vision, the Head Teacher fought for increased financial resources for the school, encouraged leaders at each level to be accessible and open to both students and colleagues, and enhanced the role of “heads of years” and “form tutors” in the school’s organizational structure. Most importantly, he tried to establish a “climate conducive to learning” based on improved human relationships among students, teachers and the community. Fortunately, as the authors note, as the climate in the

school improved, "it became possible to afford teaching and learning a greater priority. The shift in emphasis was deliberately made, once it was felt that systems and structures were in place and that problems with behaviour, attendance, punctuality and support for students and year management had been addressed" (p. 57). At the time of writing, the process of developing a truly positive teaching and learning climate at Morpeth still posed a challenge; however, the change process is underway and those involved believe substantial progress is being made.

In Singapore, the story of school improvement at Queensway Secondary School is, as the authors put it, one in which "an ordinary school has consistently been able to produce better academic results than might be expected, given the nature of its students intake" (p. 75). Located in an older residential district of Singapore, the school was built in 1961 and its facilities are relatively cramped and quite old.

Approximately 1000 students attend Queensway in two operating sessions, one starting at 7:30 a.m. and the other at 1:00 p.m. each day. The T scores of the students entering Queensway on Singapore's Primary School Leaving Examination fall below the national average. In fact, they are among the lowest T scores reported by the forty top schools listed on the value-added table of schools. Since 1991, the Mean Subject Grade (MSG) obtained by Queensway students have steadily improved, especially in mathematics, science, and mother-tongue languages. In fact, the graduating students outperformed the national average in five of the 11 Express stream examinations and eight of the 12 Normal stream examinations. Moreover, there has also been a significant increase in the number of students enrolling in post-secondary education. As a result, over the past few years, students at Queensway have demonstrated increased pride in their school and a much greater willingness to participate in the host of extra-curricular activities that are available to them.

At the beginning of the change process, the Principal and Vice-principal facilitated the development of a mission statement that indicated that Queensway Secondary School wished to provide "a well-balanced education to nurture our students to become knowledgeable, responsible, independent, and useful citizens of a multi-racial society" (p. 84). With time, that vision gained widespread acceptance and it helped guide the transformation process. In fact, in order to reach its mission, the staff agreed to extend the school day so as to optimize the time that students could spend studying. Not surprisingly, all members of the teaching staff spend a great deal of time at the school. In addition to the dedication of the teachers, the students provided additional leadership by supervising each other at break times and organizing classroom committee's to ensure that the learning environment is kept clean.

The authors report that a major factor in the improved academic success of the school was the establishment of special academic programs that “helped promote a general attitude towards, and relationship with, learning” (p. 87). The most successful of these programs, in terms of improving examination results, is the Peer and Group Learning Programme. The programme began in 1993 following a discussion in a Science Department meeting on ways to help graduating students prepare for their examinations in science. The program became so successful that it was subsequently offered to students graduating in mathematics as well as to some of the Secondary 2 or 3 classes. The program takes place after school for one and one-half hours, one day, each week.

The Peer and Group Learning program involves four or five average students receiving tutoring from a peer tutor who is performing well in the course. Students who are performing at the lowest level in the course also meet with peer tutors but on a one-to-one basis. The authors report that “a system of tutor-tutee contracts, parental approval slips and consistently good examination results ensures maximum participation with minimum teacher supervision and encourages in the students the qualities of self-worth and self-discipline that the school is seeking to promote” (p. p.82-83).

In addition to the emphasis on academic achievement, students and staff at Queensway place considerable emphasis on student deportment. Under the guidance of a staff member, a discipline system has been developed that includes “an explicit set of collaboratively drawn up school rules and lessons and talks on ‘student personal development’, all of which aim to create a caring, sharing and orderly environment” (p.83). In fact, the authors observed that a major reason underlying the success of the school has been the “family atmosphere” that has been developed in the school. They note that “students regard themselves as Queenswayans’ and value Queensway as ‘a place to be’ (p. 89).

In a period of six years, Xinmin Secondary School was transformed from an institution where students were failing and enrolment was falling to one in which students wanted to stay after school and were proud to be part of a successful learning community. Even though few of the parents had the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education and only about 7 per cent of the students use English to converse at home with their working class parents, a high proportion of the students now graduate and go on to junior colleges, polytechnics, and institutes of technical education. Moreover, the improvements in the average results on the “O” level examinations for students attending Xinmin have also been very impressive.

As with the other schools, several factors have influenced the educational transformation. The authors believe that a major reason for the change has been the effective leadership provided by the Principal. For, they found that “ it is generally accepted that this principal was the major force in the

school's turn-around and that the changes he introduced have been responsible for the school's continued success. We found his vision, policies, strategies and drive to be widely acknowledged in the school itself. Moreover, his reputation has spread over the island, making him a much sought-after speaker by other school principals, the National Institute of Education (NIE) and the Ministry of Education (MOE)" p. 102).

In their discussions with him, the authors found that the Principal had a "strong desire" to transform the school, perhaps because he had been a graduate of it. Actually, he indicated that like many of his students, during his childhood he had known poverty and had experienced a lack of guidance and support. He believed these early experiences had taught him to understand his students and their need for discipline, direction, and encouragement in their efforts to achieve.

Like many other successful leaders, Xinmin's Principal was fortunate enough to have been mentored by another highly successful principal in the system. In addition to the positive guidance provided by his mentor, the Principal acknowledged that he had been greatly influenced by his reading on educational leadership in the professional literature. Driven by the goal of making Xinmin "the best neighborhood school in Hougang", he developed a shared vision based on four key priorities; namely, discipline, care of students, public image, and improved facilities. In essence, those priorities became translated into a "culture of effort" based on the Principal's strong belief in the value of sustained personal effort. As the authors report, the Principal believed that effective learning "is the result of effective teaching plus immediate practice and immediate correction. Practice, practice and more practice is what is required" (p. 107). The authors asked students about the degree to which they adhered to the 'culture of effort' as expressed in the school's motto: 'Improve to excel'. Not all of the students who were asked could remember the exact words of the motto, however, "they all said they believed the motto to be true" (p.109). Moreover, in keeping with the motto, the authors observed that students were very attentive in class and did make good use of opportunities throughout the day to study and complete assignments in a conscientious way. At the same time, the students indicated that they did feel pressured to succeed on their examinations, but they also understood that it was their extra effort that helped produced Xinmin's good results on the O level examinations.

In addition to clear academic goals and a 'culture of effort', Xinmin Secondary School's performance was also influenced by the strict disciplinary system that had been developed within the school. A comprehensive list of school rules and a set of merits and demerits associated with them, ensured that students were aware of the behaviour expected of them and the consequences of not adhering to the rules. Even though some students felt



that the disciplinary system was too strict, most of the students and parents felt that it was a beneficial feature of the school.

Some of the other factors that influenced Xinmin's successful transformation were the special academic programs that were established within the school, the dedicated commitment of the teachers and the teamwork exhibited by the staff. The school was organized into eight departments and the Heads of Department willingly took on a heavy middle management load. Each of them was involved in several different committees and they worked effectively with teachers to plan and carry out the day-to-day activities within their units. The decentralized organizational structure instituted by the Principal encouraged delegation of responsibility and action, which resulted in the smooth operation of the school.

The final chapter of this book discusses the similarities and differences between school improvement strategies in Singapore and London. Insightful comments are made about the importance of developing a shared vision and the challenges leaders face in transforming that vision into reality. Special attention is paid to the role that leaders play in the change process and how leadership style may be quite different depending on the situation. After studying the differences in leadership style in the four schools, the authors concluded that " what appears to be essential is to be positive, accessible to colleagues and to the outside world, and be able to communicate with – and draw out – staff " (p. 127). Quite simply, effective educational leaders are able to empower teachers so that they take ownership for the change process within their school.

The authors conclude their book by sharing several lessons they learned about the school improvement process. Perhaps, the most important lesson is that there is no one best way to improve school performance. However, motivating staff, focusing on teaching and learning, securing resources to support change and enhancing the physical environment seem to be essential elements in successful school improvement initiatives. At the same time, the authors stress that the change process "has to be carried out by the school itself"; that is, "the will and the effort to change have to come from within" (p.143).

This is an excellent book that provides deep insights about the leadership of educational change under very trying conditions. The authors share many practical suggestions and innovative strategies for those who are willing to take up the challenge of change in our schools. From a more general perspective, students, parents, and others interested in education should read this book in order to appreciate the expertise, energy and commitment that are involved in leading and implementing the school improvement process.

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