Driven or driving?
Flat or flying?
The state our schools are in
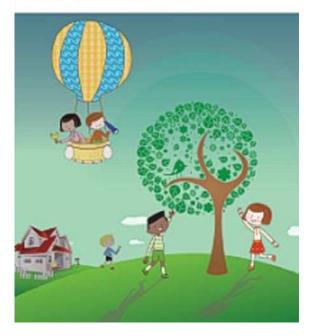
In this issue's review, **Chris Watkins** is inspired by *The Adventurous School*, operating way beyond the imagination of the government in its school vision.

The Adventurous School
Vision, community and curriculum for primary education in the twenty-first century

Jane Reed, Kathy Maskell, David Allinson, Rosemary Bailey, Fernanda Bates, Siân Davies and Catherine Gallimore

It's somewhat difficult to find the words for highlighting what's happening to our schools in current times. The centre continues to peddle the rhetoric of "standards" - which have never been defined and come to mean scores on tests and exams which are increasingly unreliable and inauthentic. And, as a recent editorial in this journal highlighted, recent governments have talked about improvement in a deeply mechanistic fashion. None of this illuminates what it's like to be in our schools as human institutions - how can we describe the current state of affairs? Two decades ago distinctions were identified between "moving" schools and "stuck" schools (and later "cruising" schools) but this said nothing about the direction or content of travel and was before the centralisation of education powers accelerated as it has (and before the culture of targets suggested a new description of "fiddling" schools).

I have recently had a number of helpful contributions to this question, to the point that I'm beginning to hope that we can name the game more effectively - and therefore address it more effectively.

The driving and the driven

The first was a study of leadership[1], undertaken by Dan Archer, an experienced LEA adviser. His starting focus was "distributed leadership" and its existence - or not - in primary schools. My own experience of this term is that it has not yet become fully understood, and current responses to it provide an interesting indication of a school's culture. In some schools people interpret it as "those being paid more dumping on us", whereas at the other end of the spectrum people in other schools say "Yes. And?" because the idea that everyone embraces a leadership role in their context is taken as read.

Dan found that the schools he studied varied along the following dimension:

Prospective	Retrospective
• Values are visible	• Values are unclear
• Focus on reflection and learning	• Passing on performance pressure
• Leadership is distributed	• Leadership is "top-down"
• Values of trust, respect	• "Toxic relationships"
• Open discourse	• Favouritism

For my own reading, this struck me as an important illustration of a key difference:

A school that's driving ←——————→ **A school that's driven**

It highlights a key issue in understanding schools and school improvement: agency - acting intentionally, making choices, making a difference and reviewing effects. Schools without a sense of agency are much poorer in every degree. Learners without agency are not effective learners, neither do they perform well. Maintaining a school's sense of agency is a key aspect of leadership, and external forces make that much more difficult than it should be. A decade or so ago it was common to distinguish management and leadership, along the lines of 'management = making things run smoothly, leadership = making things run somewhere'. Nowadays I feel that for school leaders leadership is what they do internally in the school and management is devoted to keeping the worst of the "outside" at bay.

What makes a school adventurous?

The next contribution to the theme is an important and very welcome book. In it, leaders of three primary schools that are really driving the agenda have come together to reflect compare and describe their experience and understanding. These are schools in very different places geographically, urban and rural, multicultural and monocultural, some of them in the most deprived contexts. They have all been successful in the official terms of tests and inspections, but a lot more as well.

These schools choose the description "adventurous schools" and state: 'We have come to understand that becoming adventurous in a school is a way of both taking back control and giving children a central and active role in their own learning in more than name' (page 32)[3].

Chapter 1 highlights three key dimensions of school which informs all the rest:

1) **Purpose:** not the narrow version of the dominant discourse, but school purpose which explicitly addresses the human, community, environmental and other contexts for the school and its learners - now and in the future. 'Children who can confidently perform closed tasks may do well in national tests but will not develop the mindset to solve the world's problems.' (page 64)
2) **Pedagogy:** not the "state view of learning" or the delivery delusion, but more learner-driven and more empowering learning.
3) **Power:** not power over, but power with: a shared version of power, which is based on trust, and is inclusive.

And a further development of the "driving" metaphor is used in regard to leadership. External specifications give school leaders 'a form of 'provisional licence' to run a school and that this is not at all the same as the full licence they want or have to earn'. So the taking of the full licence for themselves has been a necessary part of their success and creativity. 'Seizing the opportunity to take full charge is the first step' (page 31).

The main body of the book is each school giving a description and reflection under each of the three themes: vision, community, curriculum. Their accounts make compelling reading (and these nine chapters would make a great resource for a jigsaw reading exchange between nine staff or multiples thereof!).

Vision for school is reclaimed in challenging future-oriented ways. For many

schools children have slipped into the background of the vision, but here the vision clearly informs practice.

Community relations might start with the school seeing itself as moving outward to the community, but has developed well beyond this into something much more interconnected and reciprocal. These are on a par with the best I hear from inspiring examples in the Schools Co-operative Society.

Curriculum in these schools has learning designed around open enquiries, quests and challenges. Children learn by embarking on 'junior versions' of authentic and rich tasks. Development is skills-focused and cumulative but in a non-linear fashion, often building on the metaphor of a jigsaw, and the learning culminates in a finale of creating, performing and sharing - performance in the best sense.

Part 4 of the book is about leadership. It's interestingly short, which is an appropriate message in itself. Leadership has been embedded for everybody in the preceding pages, as a seamless element of action, co-action and agency for all. There's no package or quick fix for leading.

Overall the book provides a very welcome restatement of what it can mean to be a professional educator in current times, and of appropriate descriptive metaphors for our schools - flying, illuminating, growing. It adds to the small number (too small a number) of accounts of schools which operate "against the grain" in current times. I'm fully expecting another great example in the recently-published account of Wroxham School[5].

There's one element which is almost missing: how did these schools turn out to be the ones in the book, and how did they manage to come together? The answer to both these questions points to the importance of inter-school networks. Each of the three schools was originally part of a school improvement project with others, facilitated by Jane Reed, and the book has been created by the schools coming together to compare understand and develop further together. Currently such peer networks for schools are increasingly hard to find, but they are a key vehicle for improvement which enhances agency of learners. They are akin to how the Ministry of Education in Singapore describes its 'Teach Less Learn More' programme - as 'top-down support to bottom-up innovation'.

Adventurous schools operate well beyond anything that "governments" can imagine. The core issues of individual, collaborative and organisational agency as a learner is not understood by current politicians, whose only model of agency seems to be individual profit-making. So let's remember that 'Markets are for commodities, not children'[2], and let us continue to read and write accounts of schooling at its best.

References

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