

The Leadership of Multi-Ethnic Schools: What We Know and Don't Know about Values-Driven Leadership

Clive Dimmock

University of Leicester

Abstract

For too long, leadership has been researched and written about without taking account of context and societal culture. This article takes as its context under-researched multi-ethnic urban schools, and looks at leadership – specifically five successful headteacher case studies – of these schools. The research project that it reports was carried out for the National College for School Leadership in the United Kingdom, but the implications from the study cross national boundaries. The findings confirm the centrality of passionate promulgation of values-driven leadership as the hallmark of successful leaders of these schools. Realising that global events and hostilities now for the first time penetrate inside schools to affect their micro-management, the study suggests that notions of headteacher as leader of local learning communities are now obsolete and need replacing with leaders as connected to communities at local, national and global levels. However, the project raised more questions than it answered: we still need to know how leaders conceptualise values such as social justice, inclusion, and equity, and how they put them into practice.

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Introduction

Urban and inner city areas throughout much of the developed world North America, Europe and Australia – are experiencing immigration and asylum seeking on an unprecedented scale – at least in modern times. As societies and communities become increasingly multi-ethnic, so do the schools that naturally reflect the demographic, ethnic and religious make-up of their local communities. Minority ethnic students often outnumber local indigenous students in inner city schools, and as some minority ethnic people begin to move from inner cities to suburbs, the phenomenon of mixed race schools is spreading. In 2010, Leicester is predicted to become the first UK city to have a majority of its population classified as minority ethnic. Minority will mean majority.

Taking England as an example, the ethnic composition of schools varies enormously – from mono-ethnic schools with no minority ethnic students to those dominated by ethnic minorities. Among the latter, the composition of ethnic minority schools also varies significantly – from schools with one minority group forming the preponderance of the student body to schools with seventy or more nationalities represented (Walker and Dimmock, 2005).

Besides immigration, another factor adding to the diversification of school populations in the developed world is the movement of school (and university) students across national borders – many of them private fee paying students going to independent schools. Such schools have steadily become more internationalised, especially in England, Australia and the United States, resulting in multi-ethnicity, albeit it for different reasons than state or government schools.

In state schools with substantial minority ethnic numbers (defined as at least 25per cent of the total students), leaders and teachers bear a challenging responsibility for their educational welfare. Traditionally, the school curriculum and its delivery have been based on principles of homogeneity and conformity – the moulding of a student body towards a generally agreed code of moral, religious, social and academic values – all woven around a standardised curriculum. The code and curriculum have normally been strongly aligned to the culture and values of the majority indigenous population. Recently, however, for the first time, this notion of homogeneity is being challenged. Minority ethnic groups are exerting their 'rights' to have their own cultures, religions and values fairly represented in the curriculum, values and practices of schools. The rise of faith schools – many of them Islamic – reflects such a demand – and indicates the pressure that many Muslims, in particular,

are increasingly placing on authorities to cater to their values and needs. Leaders and teachers are challenged by the demand to construct curricula that accommodate heterogeneity. The 'new' school is about satisfying demands for diversity, not meeting the traditional goals of conformity. At the same time, the 'new' school is not just about inclusion; it is increasingly charged with securing multiple goals – some of which appear to be in tension. Besides achieving a measure of social justice, these goals include – meeting needs for social cohesion, and developing in students a sense of loyalty to, even pride in, the nation in which they now live.

In addition, new political, economic and technological circumstances are framing the conditions within which school leadership functions. For the first time, events of a global and international scale are coming directly into classrooms, playgrounds and staffrooms to affect interpersonal relations between students, teachers and parents (Dimmock and Walker, 2000). For example, events connected with terrorism and the military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan – events happening across the other side of the globe – are transmitted by the electronic media straight into the lives and families of minority groups in the UK, USA and Australia. Tensions are thus created between ethnic and indigenous groups within schools, presenting new challenges to school leaders. Global and international events are now directly impacting on the micro-management of schools around the world. It was not so long ago that principals were being exhorted to be leaders of their local school communities – a somewhat obsolete and restrictive focus now, that the need has shifted for leaders with vision and capacity to connect local, national and global communities.

Astonishingly, the leadership of multi-ethnic schools has received little attention in literature and research on school leadership (Reyes, Scribner and Scribner, 1999; Blair, 2001). This, despite the huge extent of multi-ethnic societies and schools, acknowledged earlier. More generally, research on school leadership, and the principalship in particular, has failed to take cognisance of context, especially policy and culture (Dimmock, 2000; Dimmock and Walker, 2005). It is depressing to find so many scholars in the field who feel qualified to write about leadership while divorcing it from, and even ignoring, the specific contexts within which it is exercised.

There is thus a clear and compelling need to study leadership within the context of multi-ethnic schools, and in particular, the problems and challenges they present, and examples of successful leadership practices

that can be identified. We need to know the extent to which leadership in multi-ethnic schools is similar to, and different from, leadership in other school contexts.

In response to this need, this article reports a project funded by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL, 2004) and undertaken by the Centre for Educational Leadership and Management (CELM) at the University of Leicester. The study focused on investigating and identifying good practice regarding the leadership of multi-ethnic schools. It purposively sampled five successful secondary headteachers with established and triangulated reputations for leading multi-ethnic schools. The project adopted a qualitative methodology and sampled leaders of secondary schools across England – in the cities of London, Birmingham, Leicester, Northampton and Bradford. Interviews were conducted with a broad representation of school community groups including the headteacher, deputies, teachers, and parents. They were asked for their views on the headteacher's leadership in regard to their multi-ethnic communities and how they judged it in terms of good practice.

Data analysis sought key themes that characterised successful leadership of these multi-ethnic schools. The following themes were identified and they form the structure to the paper: these successful headteachers – passionately articulate and implement the values they strongly believe in; create inclusive school cultures; focus on quality teaching and learning; recruit, nurture and develop staff; mobilise their communities and resources therein; and function at four levels – classroom, school, wider community, and global community.

Articulate and Implement Values

Passionately a defining feature of all the school leaders in the case-study schools was the extent to which they articulated their own leadership in terms of their personal values and beliefs. These values were clearly articulated and passionately grounded in a commitment to principles of equality and social justice. Within a broad values agenda, there were often appreciable differences of emphasis and nuance between school leaders, and there were certainly significant differences of view as to how these values might be applied in a school context. However, a common theme that emerged was that to be the headteacher of a multi-ethnic school provided an opportunity to challenge wider structural inequalities in society. Whilst recognising all the constraints imposed by

factors external to the school, the headteachers were driven by a belief that schools can make a difference, and that they have a duty to make a difference for those disadvantaged by wider inequalities.

The formulation and development of these values was clearly personal to individual headteachers. However, a common feature of the school leaders was the extent to which they clearly reflected on both the development of their personal values and the application of these values within the context of their schools. Values were invariably made explicit, for the individual and the organisation. There was, for example, explicit reference to ethnic diversity in the school's mission statement. Whilst such statements are always vulnerable to the charge that they are bland and irrelevant, the case-study schools provided several examples of how such statements were used to specifically inform practical school activity. Not least, there were explicit links between the school's statement of values and aspirations and the content and priorities of the school improvement plan. In these schools the commitment to ethnic diversity was no after-thought – it was central to the core purpose of the school.

Interview evidence provided by students emphasised the importance of these values. Concepts of fairness, justice, respect and equal treatment were keenly felt by students. Students were acutely aware of the implications of these values for multi-ethnic schools, and they valued the commitment of the school to principles of fairness, equality and justice. For the students it was important that these values permeated the ethos of the organisation and were translated into their lived experience of being a learner in the school.

School leaders were supported in their aims by the development of the inclusion agenda within national educational policy. Inevitably, this agenda was interpreted differently by different school leaders, and headteacher participants were by no means uncritical of aspects of this agenda. However, the inclusion agenda has clearly opened up possibilities to promote issues associated with ethnic diversity and a feature of the school leaders in the case-study schools was the extent to which they were able to capitalise on this agenda and align it with their own priorities for progress. In these cases school leaders did not simply follow policy – they actively shaped it, so there was a powerful synergy between internal and external priorities in pursuit of promoting inclusive multi-ethnic schools. As one headteacher claimed:

When I arrived it was an ethos of control and I wanted to turn it into an ethos of respect and equality of opportunity. I think whatever systems and

structures you have the key way that you do that is by leading by example, and making it clear that you are what you preach. You put into action ways of working which are based on your fundamental principles of human beings – that is why I am a head, and that is what I have tried to do while I've been here.

Create Inclusive Organisational Cultures

The interdependent nature of school leadership is illustrated by the link between leaders' personal values and the commitment to creating inclusive organisational cultures within the school. Booth *et al.* (2000) identify the need to create 'a secure, accepting, collaborating, stimulating community in which everyone is valued, as the foundation for the highest achievements of all students' (p.9). School leaders in the case-study schools placed strong emphasis on the creation of such cultures and clearly prioritised these over systems and structures which, in contrast, were perceived as facilitators to support the development of such an organisational culture.

The existence of structural inequalities, such as those associated with ethnicity, gender and class, present a major challenge to inclusive organisational cultures. Where inequalities exist that create barriers to the equal representation and participation of all the school community it is necessary to develop appropriate policy responses. Apparently neutral, 'one-size-fits-all' approaches are inadequate to the challenge. At best they leave inequalities unaffected, and at worst they reproduce and compound them. Differential responses were required to secure equitable outcomes. School leaders in the case-study schools were committed to ensuring that all aspects of school life reflected the ethnic diversity of the school's local community. This required measures that tackled the twin issues of representation and participation.

It is possible to identify four levels at which such inclusive cultures might be considered to operate – students, staff, the wider local community and global society. A feature of many of the case-study schools in the project was the high level of student participation in all aspects of school life. Genuinely effective Student Councils were common, as were other forms of more traditional student involvement, such as Head Girls and Boys and the use of Prefects. In such cases efforts were made to ensure the ethnic profile of these bodies reflected the ethnic profile of the school population. However, in some of the case-study schools student participation went far beyond what is described

above. For example, students represented the school on local community action groups. In another case a teacher training day on underachievement and ethnicity involved students from various ethnic backgrounds being involved with teachers in the planning and running of the training. Where this was the case students enthused that their contribution was both sought and valued.

A key element in the creation of organisational cultures, for students, staff and the wider community, was the capacity for schools to demonstrate that ethnic diversity was valued, and indeed celebrated. Research from the case-study schools provided a host of examples of how this was achieved – from the celebration of students' work, through the physical presentation of the school's environment to the re-organisation of the school day to accommodate religious festivals. However, it is important to recognise that there were significant differences in approach between the case-study schools, and the specific context of each school had a substantial impact on school leaders' room for manoeuvre. For example, schools with a large majority of Muslim students found it easy to significantly change the timing of the school day during the month of Ramadan – a measure identified as hugely supportive, and much appreciated, by the local community. In contrast, in schools where different ethnic groups were more balanced, school leaders found it more difficult to adopt such measures.

Finally, whilst organisational culture was central, it was clear that culture was buttressed by appropriate systems and structures. For example, clear policies existed for dealing with racism. These were widely understood and students trusted them. Similarly, some schools supported their inclusion agenda with working parties or committees that were specifically tasked with promoting inclusion and monitoring the effectiveness of policies and initiatives. In some cases these groups included governor and student representation.

Focus on Teaching and Learning

In their different ways all the case-study schools demonstrated how they had prioritised improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. The provision of high quality teaching that engaged students and promoted achievement, was seen as an essential pre-condition to achieving wider objectives in the school. This emphasis on quality teaching, and student achievement, accorded with evidence from interviews with students. When asked what they valued most about the

school, a common response was to identify 'good teachers' who were effective subject teachers, and who delivered interesting lessons and responded sympathetically to student needs.

The research also sought to explore the extent to which the curriculum itself reflected the cultural context of the school – both in terms of curriculum content (what children learn) and curriculum processes (how children learn). In all case schools, examples were provided of how different subjects reflected and valued cultural diversity and sought to prevent racism. Often these examples were to be found in similar curriculum areas – religious education, art and drama for example. However, examples of how the curriculum reflected ethnic diversity outside of these subject areas tended to be conspicuous by their absence. For example, there was often considerable discussion about learning styles, with little awareness of how this might relate to ethnic diversity.

In all schools a high priority was placed on supporting language acquisition amongst students, and this often appeared to be the dominant feature of curriculum development in the case schools.

It is worth noting that student expectations of ethnic diversity being reflected in the formal subject curriculum appeared to be low. Many of the student participants were in examination years and their focus was to achieve their target results in public examinations. Their attitude to studies had become quite instrumental. Students expressed surprise when asked if their Maths lessons in any way reflected a multi-ethnic perspective – 'maths is just numbers, isn't it?' One teacher of South Asian heritage indicated that students expected to 'leave their culture outside the door' when they entered their classroom. Whilst they may want lessons to reflect their ethnic identity, they did not expect that they actually would receive them. The study indicated that the extent to which the formal curriculum reflected ethnic diversity was limited. This was not necessarily seen as problematic by participants, either staff or students, but it may suggest that opportunities are being missed to fully reflect the cultural context of the school, which in turn may impact on student outcomes in terms of engagement and achievement. Given concerns regarding the apparent underachievement of students from specific ethnic backgrounds this may be a key issue.

The encouragement of minority ethnic teachers was one obvious strategy used by schools to develop a more ethnically diverse approach to the curriculum. Whilst this was almost certainly an important development for a number of reasons, there was little evidence that this,

of itself, generated a distinctive approach to curriculum delivery. A combination of league tables, centralised inspection arrangements and the National Curriculum exert a powerful influence on curriculum delivery that may militate against innovation and creativity generally, and specifically in terms of reflecting ethnic diversity. Certainly this research suggests that even in schools where at a whole school level ethnic diversity was recognised and celebrated, often in dynamic and colourful ways, there was little evidence that these issues penetrated the majority of classrooms.

The importance of monitoring student performance by ethnicity was identified as a key issue in some of the case-study schools. In some instances, where the school profile reflected the dominance of a single ethnic group, this was less of an issue. The very small numbers of students from other ethnic groups made it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons from the data. In these instances the emphasis was on the use of data to support individual target-setting. In schools that were more ethnically diverse, monitoring by different ethnic groups was a key tool for identifying appropriate intervention strategies. In one school there was evidence of highly sophisticated monitoring by ethnicity that sought to monitor achievement in relation to the linguistic background of students. In this school, the headteacher invested considerable resources, supported by personal commitment, to use monitoring by ethnicity of student performance to identify appropriate strategies for intervention. Where patterns of underachievement were identified the school was prepared to follow through with specific strategies focused on particular ethnic groups. In this case the school provided examples of specific initiatives it had developed to support Bangladeshi and African-Caribbean students in response to data generated by their own monitoring by ethnicity.

Recruit, Nurture and Develop Staff

A common feature of the case-study schools was the high emphasis placed by school leaders on the recruitment and development of staff. This was presented as a key priority for the school leadership and one that assumed corresponding importance in terms of the allocation of organisational resources and the personal commitment of the school leader. Human resource priorities broadly fell within two, complementary areas – both were identified as problematic. First, was the need to recruit and retain high quality staff at all levels of the organisation. Second, was the commitment to develop a staff profile that

broadly reflected the ethnic profile of the local community and the student population in the school. All of the case schools struggled to develop a staff profile that reflected their local community, and problems of under-representation increased at higher levels within the organisational hierarchy. This is in part illustrated by the fact that all of the headteachers in this study were white.

Recruiting and retaining staff was problematic for all the reasons relating to national teacher shortages that are already well documented. However, within the case-study schools these problems were often compounded by the challenging urban context within which they were located. For obvious demographic reasons, multi-ethnic schools are largely located in urban areas and experience many of the social deprivation factors that are characteristic of schools in such localities. These are demanding places to work and schools in these areas generally find it more difficult to both recruit and retain staff. In the case-study schools, leaders had to work hard to successfully recruit and retain quality staff.

Developing a staff profile that broadly reflected the ethnic profile of the local community and the student population was a high priority for headteachers in the case schools. The need to provide positive role models was an important objective. However, national staff shortages in the education sector were considered to be more acute amongst staff from minority ethnic backgrounds, and this in turn impacted on the ability to recruit and subsequently retain such staff. Students identified several reasons why they considered it important for their school to have an ethnically representative staff profile. First, they valued the role models provided; second, they valued staff who they felt understood their cultural background; third, and most importantly, they argued that the ethnic profile of the staff was a visible and genuine indication of the school's commitment to justice and equality issues.

Promoting an equity agenda for staffing was a major priority for the school leaders in the case schools. Careful consideration was given to how difficulties might be overcome, and it was possible to identify a number of strategies that had some success in these areas.

Headteachers indicated a commitment to recruiting staff who were themselves committed to working in a multi-ethnic environment. In some cases staff suitability was assessed within the selection process with specific interview questions focused on ethnicity issues, whilst in other cases headteachers relied on presenting the school as it is. As one aptly stated, 'we're absolutely up front about what sort of school we are

and what we stand for – if you don't like it, you won't come here. But everyone knows what they are coming to.'

A common approach to tackling problems of recruitment and more specifically the recruitment of staff from minority ethnic communities, was to adopt a longer term, 'grow your own' approach. Many of the schools reported that the increase in non-teaching staff in recent years had increased the profile of staff from minority ethnic backgrounds within the school. Such members of staff are more likely to be drawn from the immediate local community, than is the case with teachers. A feature of leaders in the case study schools was the way in which they nurtured these staff, often with a long term aim of supporting them to acquire qualified teacher status. There was a clear recognition that there were no quick fixes to this problem, but rather a willingness to take a longer term perspective to support and invest in staff development. In this sense school leaders had a crucial role to play in 'talent spotting'.

Retention strategies were equally, if not more, important. It is possible to identify two approaches that appeared to be common, albeit in different forms, across the case studies. These approaches are not discrete, but interdependent. First, was a commitment to staff support. School leaders valued the work of their staff, and they showed it. They took an interest in what staff were doing and they took time to acknowledge their contribution. This was not restricted to an interest in teachers, but in all staff – those working directly with children in classrooms, and those involved in support roles. Staff felt recognised and valued. They also felt engaged and involved. A feature of the inclusive organisational cultures identified previously was the way in which school leaders involved staff in decision-making processes. The prevailing organisational culture was collective and collaborative. Staff were provided with genuine opportunities to be involved, and to work together. Specific attention was also paid to valuing the contribution of staff from minority ethnic backgrounds. Responding sensitively to the needs of staff from minority ethnic backgrounds was highly valued by those staff we interviewed. Regrettably, some minority ethnic staff had not always experienced such a positive approach in previous posts and reported that this had impacted on career decisions to move schools.

The second approach was to focus on staff development. The case-study schools were dynamic places to work in and school leaders had seized opportunities to both directly develop staff, or to provide opportunities which indirectly developed individuals' career trajectories. Retention was in part achieved by ensuring that careers were moving

forward. This was not serendipitous, but was part of a wider strategy to provide career opportunities not simply to develop staff effectiveness, but to ensure that good staff wanted to continue to work within the organisation. In some cases it was clear that positive action was taken to develop the careers of minority ethnic staff within the school, and again, the willingness to do this often reflected the personal values and priorities of the school leader.

All of these approaches required commitment, planning and resources. The commitment was often over and above that which might be sufficient in many other schools, especially those located in less challenging localities. In these schools staff, like students, required nurturing. This is about recognising that schools in urban contexts present more challenges, and experience greater pressures, than schools where levels of deprivation are less significant. Leading staff in such circumstances is correspondingly more challenging. For school leaders, creating schools in which staff want to work, and continue to work, requires careful consideration.

Mobilise the Community

All of the case schools had strong links with their students' communities – recognising that the school community and its students' communities were not necessarily synonymous (in some cases the impact of preference area boundaries, or the consequences of parental choice decisions, resulted in schools and their immediate local communities being disconnected). Strong links with the community were a high priority for all the schools and perceived as essential. Each school leader had devoted substantial resources, both in terms of their own time and commitment, and in terms of the school's wider resources to developing effective links with the community. A feature of these schools was that this was not seen as a luxury, or a 'bolt-on', but central to the core activity of the school. Working *beyond* the school was a pre-requisite if the students were to achieve *within* the school. Despite this common emphasis on community links it is important to recognise that there was no 'one best way' to develop these links. A powerful message that emerged time and again, was that school communities are unique to each school. There are significant differences *between* ethnic groups, and there are significant differences *within* ethnic groups. A particular ethnic group, in a particular location, will have its own context shaped by a number of factors including its history, its politics and its socio-

economic profile. School leaders needed to develop their school's links with their own community – this required them to learn to lead within the context of the community they were working in.

General features of community contacts that were highlighted by the research were:

- Detailed knowledge of individual children and their personal circumstances outside of the school. Understanding what is happening, or has happened, in the lives of individual children outside of school, was seen as crucial to promoting achievement within school. Understanding students' cultural heritage was one feature of this information building.
- Strong parental links – a high priority was placed on contact with individual parents. A number of barriers might exist to such contact (language issues, local working patterns, lack of safe transport options), and in the case study schools, in different ways, considerable efforts were undertaken to overcome these difficulties. An obvious example is the high level of outreach work in which school staff visited parents in places, and at times, that minimised the problems identified above.
- Links with community groups – a feature of many ethnic groups is that they retain a more collectivist culture with a strong network of local organisations and self-help groups. These groups were seen as a powerful resource in terms of articulating community concerns and aspirations and working with such groups was a common strategy adopted by school leaders.

Whilst much of this work was undertaken by senior staff in the school, or those with a designated community link role it was clear that for each headteacher in the case-study schools the issue of their personal participation in developing community links was crucial. School leaders demonstrated their commitment to their communities by being seen working in, and with, their communities. In these schools 'walking the job' was not restricted to classrooms and corridors, but extended to wherever was necessary to develop links with the wider community.

As indicated, much of this work was underpinned by the crucial role played by staff with a community link role. These individuals did not simply support more effective communication, but could often provide the most detailed knowledge about aspects of the communities represented in the preference area. In some cases this role had a connection to special funding, but increasingly aspects of this work were

taken on by learning mentors funded through the *Excellence in Cities* initiative (where available – not all case-study schools could access this source of funding). Certainly these roles were seen as pivotal. However, as they were not part of the mainstream activity of classroom teaching it was easy for them to be potentially marginalized. School leaders had a clear vision about how the activities of these individuals could be brought from the margins to the mainstream of the school's work. This was not peripheral activity, but central to the school's mission.

In summary, these schools did not see their commitment to their students stopping either at the school gate, or at the end of the school day – these boundaries of time and space were considered largely artificial. This support for students derived from the personal values and convictions of the school leader and other staff. In the words of one headteacher:

I think the staff realise we're an extended school. School is such a limited part of students' life. I could never take the view ... and there are Heads in the town I know, and there are Heads who have been here who take the view ... that once the child leaves the boundary of the school they're not their responsibility. I can never subscribe to that. I cannot take that attitude.

Values-driven Leadership, Within and Beyond the School

We believe this study highlights many of the features of successful leadership in multi-ethnic schools, and the way leadership processes emerge in these contexts. Leaders in the case-study schools were motivated strongly by their own personal convictions and values. There was often a passionate commitment to use education as a means of challenging inequalities and promoting values of fairness, respect and justice. In the case study schools these headteachers lived these values and modelled them. They were able to inspire and motivate others through their own practices. As such they secured high levels of commitment from across the school community. However, a crucial factor in the leadership of multi-ethnic schools is that any conception of the school community could not be restricted to within the organisation, but must look beyond. The participant school leaders were passionate about making connections between the school and the wider community – parents, community representatives and local residents. In these schools this was no added luxury, but absolutely central to what the schools were about, and what they were trying to achieve. There are four domains within which school leadership functions – the individual

classroom, the whole school, the wider community, and global society. A feature of multi-ethnic schools is the absolute need for the headteacher to function across all these domains. To this extent boundaries between the school and its wider community must be seen as artificial. In the case study schools these boundaries were not sharply defined, but rather they were porous. This meant that although global and international events impacted on the school and came into the classrooms, leaders and teachers had created a culture of openness towards confronting issues of war and terrorism, such that strong and trusting interrelationships overrode problems of multiple identities and loyalties among minority ethnic students.

Conclusion

The main findings of this study support the conclusions reflected in much current literature, that 'values-driven' leadership is an essential component of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership, in turn, has become the preferred and dominant mantra for school improvement, and is the model championed by the UK (and other governments), and espoused by the National College for School Leadership.

In highlighting the importance of values-driven leadership, however, the study has raised more questions than it has answered. We believe the study has improved the knowledge base on values-driven leadership. For example, it has shown that values underpin leadership in the areas of inclusive cultures and staff development. But the distinctive feature of values leadership in multi-ethnic schools is that leaders' values are constantly challenged by issues arising from ethnic diversity. This was exemplified by the general desire to engineer a staff ethnic profile that mirrored the student profile. But herein lay a tension. How far should a leader go to proactively appoint and promote an individual because of their ethnic background? While one argument might be that all staff should be treated equally, and promotion decisions be taken on merit, the school leaders in our study wanted more minority ethnic teachers in senior positions and often took 'positive action' to support staff from British minority ethnic backgrounds. Such situations are not uncommon ethical dilemmas. But we have little idea how leaders see these issues, how they resolve them, and what this tells us about how they conceive of social justice.

The knowledge base in respect to values-driven leadership remains at a primitive level. Literature is replete with vacuous terms and concepts describing successful leaders as 'valuing all students', and 'people-centred'. These make good reading, but what do they really mean in practice? The lack of detailed empirical work means that although we know that effective leaders of multi-ethnic schools demonstrate passionate commitment to issues in their school communities concerned with social justice, equity, and inclusion, we know little about how they conceptualise these values and how they articulate and express them in daily actions. To take just one value – equity – which is concerned with distribution, distribution of what – power, resources? And distribution between which individuals and groups? And how do leaders interpret equality? Do they treat everyone the same, or exercise positive discrimination according to need (in which case, how is need defined)?

In short, we need to know how leaders conceptualise and implement notions of equity, social justice and inclusion in multi-ethnic schools. This is given added poignancy by the fact that such concepts not only create internal emotional, cognitive struggles for leaders, but are increasingly given expression in formalised government policies. Individual leaders may consequently wrestle to find compromised meanings between their personal values and the values underpinning government national policy agendas.

It appears that the concept of values-driven leadership is crucial in understanding successful leadership – not just in multi-ethnic, but in all, schools. It is to be hoped that future studies will penetrate beyond bland statements to ask – What values? How are values formed? Whose values? How are values shaped by context? What is the relationship between values and practices – which shapes which? Only then will we really appreciate the true contribution that values make to leadership and schooling.

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