

# CHAPTER 5:

# LEADERSHIP

This chapter explores leadership at different levels of the system. It addresses the role played by political leadership at both a national and local level; the importance of political will to drive and facilitate reform; the role of political leadership in an era of sector-led reform and the role played by headteachers as system leaders. It also identifies the aspects of leadership which underpinned London's improvement journey.

Over 20 years ago a youthful Michael Barber (educationalist and, during Tony Blair's first government, Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards) described the untapped potential of the London education workforce.

He pointed out that there was a particular 'esprit de corps' and idealism about London teachers. At the time there was a sense of crisis in London in the years after the abolition of ILEA in 1990. Presciently, Barber suggested that if properly tackled by effective leadership, the crisis could be overcome and London could become a very special place:

> *'Throughout the first century of education in the capital, inner London teachers felt an extraordinary sense of pride. Their motivation came in part from their participation in what they perceived as a great enterprise […] though battered by the conflicts and controversies of the 1980s, an element of that pride remains […] it needs to be nurtured and revived. Inner London needs to become a place once again in which people are proud to work and proud to have worked.'* **(Barber, 1992: 45)**

Two decades later there is evidence that the battered professional pride of the 1990s has indeed been revived as a result of purposeful leadership. Our interviewees described a widely pervasive cultural shift and an energised workforce that felt they were part of 'something special'. In searching for explanations for this change a common theme in their analysis was the effectiveness of leadership. Day and Sammons discuss the wide variation in definitions of leadership that exist across different jurisdictions, concluding that it encompasses a range of 'leading' and 'managing' concerns, including vision and strategic insight; responsibility for people; implementation; and operational responsibility (2013: 5).

This chapter is divided into two parts: the first deals with leadership at different levels of the system. It addresses the role played by political leadership, at both a national and local level; the importance of political will and sponsorship in order to drive and facilitate reform; the role of political leadership in an era of sector-led reform; and the role played by headteachers as system leaders. Part 2 of the chapter identifies the aspects and qualities of leadership which underpinned London's improvement journey. The section is concerned with the sense of possibility that existed in London during the 2000s and the search for coherence in educational provision. It deals in turn with:

- the moral purpose and values of leaders
- a strong reliance on data to guide leadership
- a relentless focus on positivity
- leadership guided by theories of change
- the exceptional key individuals in leadership roles in London.

## THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP IN LONDON

There was already a 'critical mass' of good leadership in London at the turn of the century: of those secondary schools inspected between 2000 and 2003, 85 per cent of those in London, compared to 81 per cent nationally, were graded either good or better in terms of the effectiveness of their leadership and management (Ofsted, 2006).[5] This trend has continued, with the gap between London and England widening in recent years. Figure 5.1 shows that between 2009 and 2013 the percentage of secondary schools with outstanding leadership in London improved by 12 percentage points (schools nationally only improved by six per cent during this period).

Figure 5.1: Change from 2009 to 2013 in Ofsted judgements of leadership and management




Source: Ofsted, 2014

[5] Although grading under the frameworks in operation in 2009 and 2013 is not comparable, the performance of London relative to the rest of the country illustrates the differences in the capital's trajectory.

**IN THE EYES OF OUR EXPERT WITNESSES, ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING FEATURES OF THE LONDON STORY IS THE ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP NOT JUST IN SCHOOLS BUT AT EVERY LEVEL.**

Our interviewees had, without exception, a highly positive view of the overall quality of the leadership in London schools now, after more than a decade of effective reform. One former minister talked about 'the amazing headteachers' of London. A senior figure from the world of higher education talked about the 'exceptional leaders and systems leaders' of London who were the architects of innovative new approaches to leadership that were now widespread in London and increasingly to be found across England. A highly experienced educationalist who played a key role in the London Challenge story attributed the improvement in teaching and learning in London schools to 'very much better leadership of schools' by headteachers who had become 'very clever at enabling teachers to improve their game'. While many headteachers before 2000 had been preoccupied with 'fire-fighting' and school-level crisis management, the headteachers of today had the opportunity and ability to focus on the leadership of learning.

## PART 1: LEADERSHIP AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF THE SYSTEM

In the eyes of our expert witnesses, one of the most striking features of the London story is the role of transformational leadership not just in schools but at every level. As one headteacher put it to us: 'It's all about leadership, isn't it? So whether it's leadership at local authority level, whether it's leadership at the Department [for Education] level, or whether it's leadership at the school level.'

The leadership contribution was multi-layered and our interviews with both key stakeholders and focus groups of teachers revealed evidence of leadership effectiveness throughout the education system – national government, regional agencies and initiatives, 'middle tier' organisations such as local authorities and academy chains and schools. There was a virtually unanimous view that this was a key factor in the transformation of London schools. Our stakeholders described a particularly powerful alignment of leadership energy, from senior figures in the government to individual headteachers.

While leadership at every level was an important part of the London story, the most potent element, in the eyes of our expert interviewees, was the role of leadership at school level and the innovative way that the best London school leaders had become 'system leaders'. As one former minister said to us, 'In the end it is at the school level that the change happens, and it is therefore [ultimately] about the headteachers and the teachers and the work that they did.' The OECD described the role of system leaders as follows:

> *'In this new environment, schools and schooling are being given an ever bigger job to do [...] One of school leaders' new roles is increasingly to work with other schools and other school leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust. System leaders, as they are being called, care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own'* **(OECD, 2008: 6)**.

## POLITICAL LEADERSHIP



One major lesson from the London school improvement story is the importance of high-level sponsorship from policymakers. Under the Labour governments of 1997–2010 the reform of London schools was supported by politicians at Cabinet level, and their key advisers. Several interviewees commented on the interest of government ministers in London school reform. They were of the view that high-level political commitment and will was an important ingredient of the London success story. One of our interviewees was a junior minister in the Labour government prior to the 2005 election. In the context of London Challenge he described how both the Prime Minister and successive secretaries of state for education personally endorsed London school reform as a priority:

> *'Then, politically, you know, this was a programme that Tony Blair, Estelle Morris, Charles Clarke, David Miliband, you know, all of the senior people in the government that were there when it was set up, they believed in it, it came from them and it had buy-in at the senior level. I think, again, if we hadn't had that it might not have had the impact that it did.'*

The view that Blair and his inner circle of advisers, including Andrew Adonis and Michael Barber, were driving the policy for London schools was articulated by two of the headteachers that we interviewed:

> *'It really was driven a lot of it by the Government. They were pulling levers that were having an impact. And Blair, his mantra was 'education, education, education'. And I think he thought if they could really make a difference in London then it could be done elsewhere [...] So I think that is where the driving force came from.'*

> *'Personally I believe that Blair and Brown are the causes of it because in 1997 they were very clear to campaign on better schools and hospitals.'*

A former special adviser to a secretary of state for education confirmed the extent to which London was a high-level political priority. In one of our interviews he provided us with an 'insider's' view of how high-level political sponsorship opened doors and created an urgency about change among senior officials in the Civil Service and other influential people:

> *'Political support creates the legitimacy and soft power to make change and if you've got the Prime Minister, and you've got Andrew Adonis as a number 10 special adviser, and you've got Stephen Twigg, not to mention, you know, [the] secretary of state also backing it [...] that is a formidable weaponry to have at your disposal [...] if you're an official or you're involved in making the change.'*

JUNIOR MINISTERS PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT PART IN PROVIDING THE DAY-TO-DAY DRIVE BEHIND THE LONDON REFORMS.

The London reforms benefitted from particularly sustained political sponsorship. Teach First, which began in 2003, has continued to attract support from every secretary of state since Estelle Morris. The London academies programme has also been consistently supported at the highest levels from 2003 to the present day. One of the experts we interviewed was a university academic with very extensive experience in the evaluation of national government programmes. She described London Challenge as 'a very unusual programme' because it was implemented over a period of eight years. During this time there was considerable ministerial turnover but a sustained political commitment to the programme. She considered this long-term support to be 'absolutely extraordinary'. In her eyes the unusual commitment over time paid dividends. It allowed London Challenge to achieve a level of maturity which increased the return on investment. London Challenge was particularly effective in its final three years. As one of our expert witnesses said, 'Most government programmes to improve schools are sort of 18 months or two years at most; you don't get that length of programme, you don't get programmes with that consistency of leadership and focus.'

Junior ministers played a significant part in providing the day-to-day drive behind the London reforms. The role of Andrew Adonis is well known. He was successively head of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit from 2001 and junior minister in the education department 2005–2008. In both roles he energetically promoted sponsored academies and Teach First. He was well known to many of the key London stakeholders that we interviewed, who recognised and shared his passion for tackling the link between poverty and underachievement in London and elsewhere. Another important political figure was Stephen Twigg who was a junior education minister 2002–2005 at the time that London Challenge, Teach First and academisation were beginning to change the education landscape in London. Twigg was a London MP until he lost his seat in 2005. Crucially he was appointed as a minister with special responsibility for London schools. Twigg takes particular pride in his work for London schools in these years. In a speech in 2012 he talked about how success of London Challenge could provide a blueprint for local transformation in other places:

> *'I would seek to emulate the success of the London Challenge, which I was involved in as a minister and which developed a constructive partnership between central government, schools and local authorities. The key thing is that it worked: standards in London schools went from being below average to above average. And whatever his other faults, it's interesting to see that the Mayor of London is seeking to emulate some of the approaches taken in the London Challenge in the report he published last week.'* **(Stephen Twigg in Labour Teachers, 2012)**

Twigg's reference to Boris Johnson is noteworthy given they represent different political parties. There has been a surprising, although far from complete, cross-party consensus about some aspects of the London narrative. As Mayor of London, Johnson has made the further improvement of London schools one of his priorities. The Mayor's office organised a major education Inquiry which published its report in 2012 (Mayor of London, 2012). In 2013 the Mayor's office also published the first of a proposed series of London Annual Education reports, benchmarking London performance against other parts of England and high performing metropolitan areas worldwide (Mayor of London, 2013).

The report of the Mayor's Education Inquiry in 2012 explicitly recognised and sought to build on the achievements of the Labour government in London schools between 2003 and 2010. Despite the different political allegiance of the Mayor, the report makes substantial references to the work of London Challenge. The report also recognised some of the fragmentation risks associated with aspects of national education policy around the expansion of the academies programme and the new parent-led category of free schools. Key interventions identified in the report are entirely in keeping with the philosophy of London Challenge and include:

- the Gold Club for schools which are particularly successful at ensuring the achievement of the most disadvantaged students. They will be expected to share their practice with other schools. Very much in the spirit of the 'families of schools' approach, the report stated that Gold Club School performance and demographic data will be shared across all London schools 'to allow those in similar contexts to identify those Gold Club schools which may be able to support their own improvement' (Mayor of London, 2012: 24).
- the London Schools Excellence Fund: this 'major fund' would provide pump-priming resourcing for projects intended to help schools make substantial progress on the most pressing education priorities in London, which the inquiry identified as literacy, numeracy and raising standards in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

WHILE BORIS JOHNSON SOUGHT TO BUILD ON LONDON CHALLENGE, IT COULD BE ARGUED THAT MICHAEL GOVE IDENTIFIED KEY ASPECTS OF THE LONDON TRANSFORMATION AND TOOK THEM TO NATIONAL SCALE.

While Boris Johnson sought to build on London Challenge, it could be argued that Michael Gove identified key aspects of the London transformation and took them to national scale. In particular the coalition government has had the following education priorities which link to the London story 2003–2010:

- an emphasis on sector-led school improvement
- the continuation of the national expansion of the system of consultant headteachers acting as NLEs or LLEs (this expansion was already happening rapidly prior to 2010, but was not slowed by the coalition government)
- the establishment of a national infrastructure of teaching school alliances intended to act as hubs for school improvement in their areas
- a dramatic expansion of the academies programme
- further growth for Teach First both at London and national levels.

Many of our interviewees disagreed with Michael Gove about his plans for school improvement but some also recognised the extent to which the transformation of London 2003–2010 had influenced the policy of the coalition government 2010–2014. The degree of continuity in policy for London schools between 2003 and 2014 is almost unprecedented and is likely to have contributed to the growing momentum for continuous improvement.

**The role of national and local government leadership in an era of 'sector-led' reform**

The key stakeholders in the story of London's improvement tend to see the changes as the result of a 'sector-led approach' rather than the implementation of a top-down policy by either national or local government. Nevertheless London schools appear to have benefitted from the interaction of political forces at national, regional and borough levels (and a sector-led approach was facilitated through political will) and from the multiple identities of Londoners as both residents of the capital city and members of much more local communities.

As we have seen, central government injected urgency, energy and resources into the London system. During the period 2002–2005 a national government minister and senior civil servants from the all-England ministry for education made London a personal priority and this undoubtedly acted as a catalyst for change. By appointing Stephen Twigg to the new role of minister for London schools the government ensured there was a 'lobbyist for London schools' in Westminster.

One of our interviewees argued that a positive aspect of London Challenge was that it closed the gap between ministers and the child in the classroom. Yet this did not mean that London Challenge was a top-down, centralist policy – as the Institute for Government note: 'London Challenge found effective ways to reconcile both top-down and bottom-up approaches' (Kidson, 2014).

London Challenge operated at a regional level and 'went with the grain' in terms of London teachers' perceptions of themselves as sharing a common cause with other London teachers. The more recent activities of the Mayor's office similarly play to this sense of pan-London identity.

Local authorities, Challenge Advisors, academy chains and in particular the NCSL (who brokered support from consultant leaders/NLEs to those schools that needed it) played the role of a mediating layer between the centre and schools. Their role can be characterised as finding and facilitating solutions (for example helping schools draw up improvement plans) and taking decisive action where needed (for example in closing underperforming schools or making changes to school leadership).

The best local authorities made use of the more intimate scale of the London borough, a view expressed in a number of our interviews with key personnel from the boroughs. Among other things, the interviewees remarked on the proximity of boroughs, their size (in terms of having enough schools to form effective networks, but not too many to be unwieldy) and the ability to have a sense of what was happening within each borough. One of our interviewees was a highly experienced director of children's services, who described the potential benefits of a small urban authority, compared to the much larger forms of local government found in some other cities and in rural England:

> *'You've got very small local authorities that are therefore able to have much more purchase, much more leverage, much more impact […] The relationships that you can build up […] I can get all the secondary heads around a table easily, and so you get 15 people round the table, and you build really good relationships and they know that you will lie down in the road to support them, and [...] they are clear about what they need to do, and you're clear that your job is to catalyse it […] having that kind of relationship where everybody knows each other so well, to be honest I don't know how, whether, even those of us that have done well, if we were doing it in Kent or Cumbria, at that level of leadership, with the real authority, that I could walk into any governing body or work with any, to have that authority at that level I think the scale of London boroughs allowed that to happen.'*

## SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL NETWORKS AND HEADTEACHERS AS SYSTEM LEADERS

By the time that London Challenge was beginning, the concept of 'system leadership' was part of the educational *zeitgeist* in England. The idea owed much to the thinking of Michael Barber and Michael Fullan about how school systems could move beyond dirigiste 'top-down' reform. The lesson of the National Strategies (which Barber had managed and Fullan had evaluated) appeared to be that the centralised prescription of the 1990s was appropriate for its time, but ultimately led to diminishing returns. After significant gains the results from primary schools in England had reached a plateau. In order to take an education system to a higher level of productivity there was a need for a greater degree of professional ownership of the reform and improvement process.

The architects of London Challenge were able to apply these ideas to the improvement of London secondary schools. In doing so they were supported and encouraged by NCSL. Some of the best schools and best headteachers were encouraged to lead improvement networks with other schools and other school leaders. The lead schools were designated as teaching schools and their headteachers were recognised as LLEs or NLEs.

IN ORDER TO TAKE AN EDUCATION SYSTEM TO A HIGHER LEVEL OF PRODUCTIVITY THERE WAS A NEED FOR A GREATER DEGREE OF PROFESSIONAL OWNERSHIP OF THE REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT PROCESS.



In 2010 the Portuguese academic Jorge Avila de Lima reviewed the literature relating to effective networks in education. De Lima argues the most effective networks are 'goal directed' and have four key features:

> *'Network change is driven primarily by goal directedness. Network participants see themselves as part of a whole and are committed to clear [...] network-level goals. All relations between network members are structured in order to achieve these goals. Usually, an administrative entity (a steering committee, a coordinating council, a leadership team, or the like) is formed and endowed with the function of planning and coordinating the activities of the network as a whole'* **(de Lima, 2010: 10).**

The networks that were built up through London Challenge are a perfect match with de Lima's four characteristics:

- **Part of a whole:** Schools were 'London schools', with 'London pupils' and 'London teachers' taking on the 'London Challenge'. One headteacher described how at national conferences 'you will very often get a reference to "that band of London heads".' She argued that this was not previously the case and has changed over the last decade.
- **A clear and specific goal:** Schools were united around the clear goal of breaking the link between poverty and poor outcomes and making education in London the best in the world. These were goals that teachers and leaders could get behind because they tapped into the reasons why many originally went into the profession.
- **Relationships structured around goals:** There was recognition that careful pairing of schools was important (Ainscow, 2012: 299). Pairings needed to take into account schools' context, where they were on the school improvement journey and the personalities of the leaders involved (Poet and Kettlewell, 2011: 16). The NCSL brokered this relationship, allocating consultant leaders/NLEs – in dialogue with skilled Challenge Advisors and local authority staff, and through the use of data from schools/families of schools – to those schools that needed them.
- **Planned and co-ordinated activity:** An exceptional leadership team drove the process and provided the logistical infrastructure to take the weight off individual schools. Hutchings describes the City Challenge central co-ordinating team as one of its most effective elements (Hutchings and Mansaray, 2013: 5) and emphasises that schools tend to lack the capacity and bureaucratic infrastructure to manage networks. By providing this centrally, the 'cost' of collaboration was reduced.

The NAO (2009: 8) and West (2010: 98) also summarise key features of effective collaboration and again, the approach taken in London overwhelmingly followed these good practice models. Importantly, the skill to collaborate effectively was built rather than introductions being made and then schools being left to it. For example, after being carefully selected, NLEs received careful and effective training (Poet and Kettlewell, 2011: 14) and their designation could be revoked if necessary (Hill and Matthews, 2008: 37), a process which was overseen by NCSL.

Key individuals who managed the development of networks of school-to-school support were interested in the theory of knowledge management and knowledge mobilisation. They identified some of the naive assumptions that often weakened attempts to 'share good practice' in the context of London schools. One of our expert witnesses described three techniques, used by London Challenge, to optimise the chances of effective knowledge mobilisation by consultant leaders:

1. It was important to quality assure the expertise that was about to be 'shared'.
2. It was necessary to identify a 'fit-for-purpose' mechanism for sharing expertise which could include such different media as one-to-one coaching or large scale e-learning.
3. Expert practitioners needed very careful training if they were to undertake work as coaches of other, weaker practitioners.

This structured approach to the identification and training of expert leaders as system leaders was undertaken by London Challenge in partnership with the NCSL. From the perspective of headteachers and others, the result was a new form of collaboration. Interviewees contrasted the networked discussions under London Challenge with previous manifestations of networking:

> *'I mean there always used to be sort of cluster group meetings, but it was heads sitting round and having a moan and it didn't really affect the rest of the staff.'* **(Headteacher)**

> *'I think there is a real spirit of collegiality across London schools. There is much less competition than I experienced in the early days of my headship. But there is a real pride in being in a London school, being part of this very successful movement [...] And even though people know that circumstances can be challenging they also know that there is support out there because the support will come from other London headteacher colleagues.'* **(Headteacher)**

> *[Headteachers] were really supportive of each other, [a] very strong collaborative group.'* **(London Challenge Advisor, Barking and Dagenham)**

**SUCCESSFUL SYSTEM LEADERSHIP REQUIRED A CHANGE IN THE MINDSET OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS.**

Successful system leadership required a change in the mindset of highly effective school leaders. This was commented on by many of our interviewees. In addition to a professional responsibility for the life chances of students at their own school, system leaders accepted that they had a shared and collective responsibility with other school leaders for the well-being of all students in their community. One of our interviewees expressed this clearly. He had successively been a London headteacher and the head of an academy chain:

> *'There was an increasing sense in London schools that London teachers and London headteachers, London leaders, were there for all the children in London, not just the children that were in their school. And that sounds a little bit idealistic but I kind of think there was a bit of that, and still is. So that sense of collaborating for the London child rather than just for the child that goes to your school is really important.'*

The same interviewee, while convinced of the power of the new system leadership, also identified some limitations to the work of the best consultant leaders. He considered that they were particularly successful at providing credible and useful support, but less comfortable exercising an accountability function:

> *'What schools find very difficult actually is holding one another to account. And so, you know, even with the London Challenge, that was sort of done more by the Challenge Advisors [...] than it was by the heads challenging one another. They would go in and work and support and have challenging conversations but they weren't kind of holding those schools to account in quite the same way.'*

## PART 2: QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN LONDON

The second part of this chapter deals with the qualities that underpinned leadership at a political, system and school level and the key features of leadership during the 2000s in London which contributed to the success story. It also addresses the key individuals who are often highly credited for their leadership roles.

Any emphasis on rival solutions within London (for example the role of academies versus LA maintained schools) is misleading. In reality there has been a surprising degree of convergence between the leadership approaches of the most thoughtful professionals operating in each 'camp'. Underpinning many of the comments from our interviewees, regardless of their background, was a set of linked ideas about how leadership had transformed London schools. The ideas of the 'LA people' and the 'academies people' were almost indistinguishable. The concepts or guiding principles can be summed up as a view of leadership based on ideas of *possibility* and *coherence*. London leaders approached their work with a strong optimism relating to the possibility of change and an impressive understanding of the practical action needed to bring about more coherent educational provision.

The 'coherence logic' had several strands, shared by the different constituencies. They shared a leadership concept based on a kind of leadership value chain, comprising the following 'links':

- Transformational leadership was driven by moral purpose, and a strong sense that leaders' first responsibility was to optimise outcomes for learners and not to promote the 'provider interest'. This moral purpose and sense of advocacy meant that leaders needed at times to challenge or confront a 'provider interest', represented by underperforming groups of professionals either at school or local authority level.
- Moral purpose is not enough; it requires leverage. Our group of leaders believed that moral purpose could be translated into effective leadership action through the 'relentless' and 'forensic' use of data: potentially powerful management information about the performance of students could be used to identify and challenge local authorities, schools and individual teachers whose performance was sub-optimal.
- Challenge must be combined with support and recognition that while accountability was essential, simply 'demonising' others (through, for example, a name-and-shame approach) could be counter-productive.
- Support was typically based on a coherent 'theory of change'. Simply telling professionals that in terms of benchmarked data their performance is below par will not lead to improvement. Effective leaders went way beyond criticism and exhortation. Our stakeholders typically possessed a set of ideas about how schools and classrooms could be organised differently, and how the performance of teachers could be enhanced through effective professional learning. In other words these leaders had a theory of change that could be applied to specific examples of underperformance.

AN INTERVIEWEE RECALLED THAT MANY OF THE SCHOOLS WHICH HAD BEEN TRANSFORMED AFTER THE YEAR 2000 HAD BEEN CHRONICALLY UNDERPERFORMING SINCE THE 1980S AND THAT GENERATIONS OF CHILDREN HAD BEEN DENIED THE GOOD QUALITY EDUCATION TO WHICH THEY WERE ENTITLED.

## LEADERSHIP AND MORAL PURPOSE

The concept of 'moral purpose' was explicitly or implicitly articulated by many of the people we interviewed. A teacher in one of our focus groups exemplified the ambitious culture and moral purpose of the capital's workforce in recalling their school's previous underperformance:

> *'Sometimes I think to myself, "How many students have we failed (in the past)?" The school has failed so many people in the community that I know personally, like my friends, family members, neighbours and – you know what? If you were in school now your life would have been changed.'*

A senior educationalist and former Chief Inspector of Schools made a very similar point when interviewed. He recalled that many of the schools which had been transformed after the year 2000 had been chronically underperforming since the 1980s and that generations of children had been denied the good quality education to which they were entitled. This moral failure of the system was belatedly put right during the period of reform in the new century.

All of our interviewed stakeholders exercised some sort of leadership position during the London education reforms. Many were clearly personally motivated by a powerful sense of advocacy for children and an equally powerful sense of frustration with some of the attitudes that were prevalent in the 1990s. This was often associated with a sense of outrage at the way disadvantaged students were let down by the system. As a senior educationalist commented to us:

> *'I used to get fed up to the back teeth of going to see schools talking to schools about where they were and when you talked to staff it wasn't very long before someone said, "I have worked here for 25 years" and blah blah blah. And you think yes that is the problem, you are doing now what you did 25 years ago and you think it is all okay. You think that the quality of education [provided to] these kids, because of their background [...] is acceptable. And you think you are some kind of great hero'.*

## DATA-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

One former special adviser to the government told us that educational leadership in London today was typically based on 'a forensic focus on performance'. This strong association between leadership and the use of data as management information was mentioned often in interviews. Several interviewees remarked on the dramatic change in accountability in London schools. This increased accountability was made possible by a revolution in the use of data, as one interviewee commented:

> *'I think the biggest change among teachers is around accountability. I think that there is a real understanding that individual teachers are accountable for the outcomes of their children and that there is a much clearer expectation now about teachers, about the fact that their performance is judged by pupils' performance than there ever used to be.'*

For this respondent, data-based accountability was closely associated with the question of moral purpose. Access to robust comparative data fuelled a 'righteous indignation' that students' precious life chances were being blighted by existing poor provision. This allowed leaders to create a powerful case for change based on the proposition that: 'Our children can achieve better, and that what they're achieving is scandalous and that what we have to do is make a difference'.

This association of data-based accountability with professional responsibility operated across the education system in London. Local authority managers, leaders of academy chains, headteachers and individual teachers were all challenged to perform by the existence of student data that was available and was analysed at every level of the system. While ILEA and London boroughs in the 1990s had pioneered the development of comparative data, the difference from 2000 onwards was that the data was increasingly used to support a tough performance management regime. It was the combination of moral purpose, data literacy and the application of a theory of change that made transformation possible. Interviewees described how the data allowed leaders to challenge low expectations in a highly practical and effective way, for example:

> *'I thought the way the data allowed you to pair schools up in ways that we were never able to do inside an authority was a revelation, so I could go to a head of a school in East London and I could say "I know you tell me you're like no-one else in Tower Hamlets so what about this school in Hammersmith, it's got exactly the same proportion of boys there, exactly the same proportion of free school meals" you're just knocking off excuses really and then say "now tell me why you're not doing as well as that school?" '*

LOCAL AUTHORITY MANAGERS, LEADERS OF ACADEMY CHAINS, HEADTEACHERS AND INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS WERE ALL CHALLENGED TO PERFORM BY THE EXISTENCE OF STUDENT DATA THAT WAS AVAILABLE AND WAS ANALYSED AT EVERY LEVEL OF THE SYSTEM.

Our expert witnesses, many of whom were themselves London leaders, linked the data-driven approach to the idea of focus. They talked about the need for unremitting and relentless leadership action. One highly experienced director of children's services stated this succinctly: 'I remember back in 2004 I think [...] I remember the phrases being used in our Ofsted report about just 'relentless', you know relentless leadership, relentless activity and that's what we did, that's what we did.'

## ACCENTUATING THE POSITIVE

Many of the people at the heart of the London reforms adopted a deliberately positive view and sought to avoid a 'deficit model' for school improvement, placing an emphasis on solutions rather than blame.

London Challenge was intentionally designed to change the culture of education. The Challenge's approach was influenced by Michael Fullan's influential book *'Leading in Culture of Change'* (2001). This text and Collins' *'Good to Great'* so impressed London's Schools' Commissioner Tim Brighouse that he ordered a stock to hand out to headteachers (Collins, 2001). Fullan begins his book with a conceptual model that emphasised ways of unleashing 'energy, enthusiasm and hope' – one of Brighouse's catchphrases (Fullan, 2001: 4).

While London Challenge was the most sustained and wide-ranging mission-driven attempt to build collective moral purpose, a range of programmes, organisations and initiatives took a similar approach:

- The transformation of Tower Hamlets was motivated by a sense that pupils should be able to achieve more: sandwiched between the City and Canary Wharf, the borough's pupils should not be trapped by intergenerational underachievement.
- Teach First is explicitly designed around a 'mission' that 'no child's success in life should be limited by how much their parents earn' (Teach First, 2014).
- The high-performing academy chain ARK couches its recruitment in terms of 'Make a difference' and an aim of creating 'outstanding schools that give every pupil, regardless of their background, the opportunity to go to university or pursue the career of their choice' (ARK Schools, 2014b).

One interviewee coupled London Challenge and Teach First together as two initiatives that were 'very, very positively focused and so much in education reform is negatively focused'. The positivity of London Challenge's approach was constantly emphasised during interviews.

Further examples of positive practices that built a sense of possibility and collective moral purpose include:

- employing language that emphasised London's shared identity – for example 'Chartered London Teacher' emphasised what schools and teachers had in common rather than what set them apart
- using inspirational, aspirational language and targets: London needed to become 'the best' even when this seemed 'pie in the sky'; Christine Gilbert in Tower Hamlets is credited with negotiating DfES targets up because they were not aspirational enough for her borough
- labelling the most challenging schools 'Keys To Success' rather than 'failing schools'
- celebrating headteachers' achievements with honours (for example making key figures Knights and Dames)
- Tim Brighouse following up school visits by writing personal letters to the teachers and headteachers he met: this was then 'modelled across London by the headteachers, a sort of culture of thanking people' according to one headteacher
- challenging limiting beliefs, as one director of children's services told us: 'If I caught anybody saying that "what do you expect from these kids?"[...] that would be something that would be deemed very serious indeed. We had a phrase around then: "You can do anything, you can't do everything, but you can do anything".'

DESPITE THE FACT THAT WE CANNOT 'MEASURE' THE IMPACT OF MORAL PURPOSE AND POSITIVITY, THESE EXAMPLES SHOW THAT HEADTEACHERS WERE SENSITIVE TO THESE ISSUES OF LANGUAGE.

Similarly another interviewee recounted that when schools he worked in talked about the challenge of having high proportions of pupils for whom English was an additional language, he would say: 'Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it wonderful? You've probably got a Shakespeare in there!'

The impact of a positive approach is clear when headteachers talk about why they made the decisions they did. One highly successful headteacher told us that she would never have taken on the KTS if it were not for the positive language used by the senior figures from London Challenge. Similarly, another headteacher described being pleased to work on KTS because she had 'heard about this London Bus' and was pleased to join it. She went on to describe KTS as 'the best thing that happened to me'. Despite the fact that we cannot 'measure' the impact of moral purpose and positivity, these examples show that headteachers were sensitive to these issues of language.

It is difficult of course to quantify the effect of positivity; however, we can get some measure of its role by contrasting the 'buy-in' achieved in London with other initiatives that had similar goals but which were presented more negatively. London Challenge became a much-loved brand with schools celebrating being part of the programme. For example one Challenge Advisor described a big billboard outside a school proclaiming 'We are part of London Challenge' and one director of children's services admitted he labelled lots of things 'London Challenge' even if they had nothing to do with it because it had such positive associations. Casting London Challenge in a positive light was a substantial achievement given some of the initial attitudes:

> *'Initially when London Challenge was set up with five boroughs nobody wanted anything to do with it, because to be part of London Challenge meant that you were a problem. But when the five boroughs that got involved showed how it could work I think other boroughs started to say "Hey, we want a piece of this".'*

In contrast, when in 2008 the government launched an all-England initiative based on features of London Challenge, the branding did not accentuate the positive to the same extent. This project was known as National Challenge and when National Challenge schools were announced, headlines emphasised the punitive and negative aspects of the programme – for example: 'Civic chiefs face a caning on schools' (George, 2008) and 'Minister's threats put schools in turmoil, say heads' (Curtis, 2008).

Berliner describes the 'devastating' consequences of the negative associations of National Challenge, asking the question: how could a large investment in schools have such unintended consequence?

> *'Why did a scheme that would pump £400m into the secondary school sector play so badly? Because the government didn't understand that a policy which included a list of schools below a target and an ultimate sanction of closing them would be the top line of a news story, rather than a generous package of support. It's like going into the lion's den with a tin of cat food. You'll be on the menu first.' (Berliner, 2008: 1)*

## LEADERSHIP UNDERPINNED BY A THEORY OF CHANGE

The stakeholders interviewed were drawn from different professional backgrounds and collectively had experience in:

- school leadership
- management of academy chains
- LA leadership
- management of national and regional school improvement strategies
- management of the national school inspectorate
- senior roles in the Civil Service
- management of national professional associations.

Across these different contexts for leadership there was a common sense of professional efficacy based on the need to apply tried and tested ideas about action. For some these ideas were based on a reading of the research literature. For others the frame of reference was the previous experience of the individual. However it was derived, our stakeholders typically had a theory of change or action that gave them a framework for their work as leaders. There was a common view that school reform was not, in the words of the cliché, 'rocket science'. The content of these leadership theories varied from individual to individual but collectively covered such topics as:

- reforming large educational systems
- managing middle-tier functions such as local authority school improvement services or the leadership of academy chains
- knowledge mobilisation and effective school-to-school professional learning
- school improvement at the level of the individual institution.

Possessing a framework for action strengthened the sense of possibility and encouraged optimism about change and impatience with those who thought that the status quo could not be changed. One respondent, for example, summarised his view of the required method for urban school reform in 20 self-confident words: 'Use the best school leaders, focus on high quality teaching and learning, bring talented young teachers in. There you go.'

Other leaders interviewed had rather more detailed versions of the same thinking about the overall theory of change. For another of our interviewees the London reforms were, either by accident or design or some mix of the two, an effective application of a formula based on the best research into system reform which requires:

- exceptional people in system leadership positions
- the data needed to hold people to account
- high accountability and high autonomy
- a commitment to empower school leaders.

MANY OF THE INDIVIDUALS WHO WERE INVOLVED IN THE LONDON STORY WERE CONSIDERED BY THEIR PEERS TO BE QUITE REMARKABLE LEADERS.

A clear theory of change typified the leadership thinking of the outstanding headteachers and senior staff within academy chains that we interviewed. One head of an academy chain described the consistent 'turnaround' strategy that his organisation implemented in London schools. This involved the use of standard operating procedures in core areas such as the performance management of teachers, approaches to pedagogy and student assessment:

> *'We introduce a different curriculum, we introduce intensive literacy and numeracy schemes. We feel we have got a technology for school improvement. In other words we have a view [...] you have to have a view. How do you actually improve literacy? because it doesn't happen by wishing for it. How do you improve numeracy, what is the stuff you do, how do you target kids, how much do you expect them to improve by, what are you expecting from those? So we have got all that stuff and we put that in.'*

Another stakeholder who had played a key role in London Challenge talked passionately about how the profession knew how to bring about school improvement through structured support and challenge. He described this as 'the methodology', and expressed his frustration that it was not universally used: 'The methodology! I'm getting a bit too enthusiastic now, sorry! The methodology is there. We don't need the talk about the radical solutions because we've got them.'

This idea of the application of proven practice, rather than a search for innovation was also expressed by a former civil servant. In discussing the ITP and OTP programmes, which appear to have helped improve pedagogical practice in participating schools, he commented that the thinking behind these courses was not new or particularly innovative. It was the energetic application of existing proven practice that characterised the programme. One interviewee explained:

> *'That was just a well-designed programme to help people adopt known effective practices [...] On the whole we thought more about how to get the known effective practice more widely used, rather than thinking about how to develop innovative methods, models and so on.'*

## THE EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP OF KEY INDIVIDUALS

Many of the individuals who were involved in the London story were considered by their peers to be quite remarkable leaders. The person who attracted the greatest number of comments about his individual contribution and distinctive leadership style was Tim Brighouse. He was closely followed by the senior civil servant, and now academy chain leader, Jon Coles. Both Brighouse and Coles were thought by their peers to have brought unusual leadership energy and insight to the transformation of London schools.

Their work was described in positive terms by people from many different backgrounds:

> *'I wouldn't underestimate Tim Brighouse himself, [or] Jon Coles himself. You know, there were people leading this programme who, because of their combination of experience, ability and authority, commanded the respect that was needed for this to be something that everyone signed up to.'* **(Former minister)**

> *'There could have been civil servants who would not have let that approach work because they were more used to working in a prescriptive top-down way. So I actually think Jon's ability to understand that, probably alongside Tim Brighouse, and the ability to let that function – when possibly there may have been concerns raised about needing a more clearly structured top-down approach – I think that was a strong contributory factor.'* **(Senior university academic)**

> *'Brighouse spent hours doing all this stuff, and he engaged everyone, and he had the confidence to do it; without his leadership we would never have got anywhere.'* **(Leader of a headteachers' professional association)**

**BY SHAPING A COLLECTIVE, MISSION-DRIVEN CULTURE AROUND EDUCATION IN LONDON, KEY INDIVIDUALS WERE ABLE TO SET A CONTEXT IN WHICH TEACHERS AND LEADERS COULD FLOURISH.**

By shaping a collective, mission-driven culture around education in London, key individuals were able to set a context in which teachers and leaders could flourish. One headteacher explained that the workforce was willing to go to huge lengths and do 'whatever it takes' to achieve the vision as a result of these individuals' approach: 'People will walk over glass for those kinds of people because it's so interesting and exciting and you feel as if you're doing a great job and you're really making a difference.'

The theme of exceptional leadership extends well beyond Tim Brighouse and Jon Coles. Teach First has been led energetically and successfully from the beginning by Brett Wigdortz, and he has given the organisation a distinctive character, particularly in terms of its moral purpose. Key academy chains, such as ARK Schools and the Harris Federation, have benefitted from leadership of a high order and, like Teach First, a substantial measure of leadership continuity over the last decade. Some of the most effective LAs enjoyed significant 'stability' of leadership, according to some of the borough interviewees.

In addition to the Tim Brighouse's charismatic leadership, London Challenge had real depth in terms of leadership expertise. The same names repeatedly crop up in discussions with key stakeholders about talented and influential leaders: David Woods (who worked for the DfE as principal London Challenge Adviser and later Commissioner for London); George Berwick and Sue John (both London headteachers who worked for NCSL in directing the leadership strategy for London Challenge) and many more. At the next managerial level, one highly regarded group were the Challenge Advisors who worked closely with the KTS schools and the vulnerable local authorities. They adopted a problem-solving approach and had a high degree of credibility with both schools and local authorities.



They won the trust of headteachers and local authority officers who could easily have perceived them in fearful or antagonistic terms were it not for their professional skill. In their 2010 evaluation of London Challenge Ofsted paid tribute to the role of the Challenge Advisors for their relentless commitment to the key messages of the programme:

> *'From the beginning of London Challenge, London schools have received clear, consistent leadership from the team leaders appointed by the DfE. Their message has been the pressing need to improve educational standards and the sense of professional duty incumbent on teachers to do this for London children. Over time, that message of commitment and encouragement has been repeated consistently by the London Challenge leadership team. These endeavours have reinforced a clear sense of moral purpose among teachers and school leaders to close attainment gaps between London and the rest of the country. The staff in almost every school that contributed to this survey expressed their commitment to London children, not simply to those in their own school. Their sense of pride in being part of a city-wide education service, irrespective of whether they were receiving or providing support, was a fundamental characteristic of London City Challenge.'* **(Ofsted 2010: 4)**

## SUMMARY

As with the school improvement strategies discussed in chapter 4, the successful role played by leadership during the London transformation cannot be allocated to one single facet of the concept, and instead is due to a complex combination of approaches and individuals.

Aspects of leadership which can all be considered crucial to the success of London include:

- long-term sustained political will and support
- the identification of outstanding headteachers from across London to provide system leadership and to support the KTS schools
- the role played by key individuals such as Tim Brighouse and Jon Coles
- an approach to leadership which was underpinned by data and based upon theories of change
- an emphasis on a shared moral purpose and values
- an overwhelming sense of positivity in the approach.

An emphasis on effective leadership at different levels of the system (political, system and school level) was underpinned through a number of overarching approaches, and it was this combination which can ultimately be considered responsible for much of the London success story.