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# WORK-BASED RESEARCH IN PRIMARY LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

*Primary education leadership must evolve to include the ability to generate organisational change. How can the education of leaders contribute to developing new models of leadership?*

The purpose of this paper is to explore the policy drivers for developing change capability within school leaders, and the potential of new pedagogical approaches to build capacity in the field of school leadership. The paper reviews change challenges impacting on school leadership in the UK and suggests the sector can learn from business models.

## Policy drivers affecting primary school leadership education in the UK

A recent paper by the think-tank 'Policy Exchange' entitled *The next phase of improvement for primary schools in England* highlights a range of challenges facing the primary sector today. The authors conclude that it is 'imperative that the government and schools take action to proactively build the capacity and capability in the primary phase to manage this transition and these higher expectations' (Briggs and Simon, 2014: p9).

An important driver is the 2011 Education Act which introduced a free market approach to schooling in England with academy chains and free schools. Whilst increasing the seeming autonomy of schools, the Act also signaled zero tolerance for failing schools and a challenge for leaders, with the introduction of a new Ofsted inspection framework in 2014. Performance-related pay was introduced to schools in September 2014. Raised targets in 2016 will require that 85% of all eleven year olds achieve 'level 4' in Reading, Writing and Mathematics. The policy logic is that educational excellence is to be driven by system-led reform and a more accountable teaching profession delivering 'world-class' education as an entitlement for all children.

## 'Adaptive' leadership

A further challenge for school leaders is the expectation that schools will leverage new technologies in designing personalised learning to engage learners and build 21st century skills. This has been defined as an 'adaptive' challenge, that is a 'gap between aspirations and operational capacity that cannot be closed by the expertise and procedures currently in place' (Heifetz, 2009: 1). At the heart of 'adaptive leadership' is the idea that change can be successfully addressed by leaders capable of distinguishing between tactical and adaptive challenges, knowing how to diagnose complex situations before taking action (Heifetz et al, 2009: 6). Through my work with schools and dialogue with school leaders, I have identified five substantive adaptive challenges across the following key areas:

1. **Professionalism** – new skill sets for inquiry, change agency and problem solving
2. **Partnerships** – partnerships with Universities to generate new professional knowledge
3. **Personalisation** – co-creation of experiences and solutions in consultation with learners
4. **Pedagogy** – demand for more innovative pedagogy supporting organisational learning
5. **Performance** – outcomes driven by change-capable, research-literate professionals

This highlights a shift in the locus of production of new professional knowledge from academia to the workplace (Hargreaves, 1999), requiring new models of 'collaboration for impact' (Briggs and Simon, 2014). It also suggests a shift in the locus of new pedagogical expertise to a consultative partnership between teachers and learners that taps into the intrinsic motivation of both. Within such a framework, a key challenge for school leaders today is to build capacity for innovation through personalised approaches to staff development that will build capacity in problem-solving.



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### Introducing personalised learning in schools

Interestingly, the challenge around personalisation of learning in schools is not dissimilar to the challenge around personalisation of service delivery in business (Pralahad and Ramaswamy, 2013). John Fallon, Chief Executive of Pearson, defines the leadership challenge within businesses committed to personalising services as ‘defining a problem that’s worth solving, bringing together the most talented people you can and then giving them the resources to go on and solve it’ (*The Times*, 9 August 2014). It is arguable that the function of leadership today, whether in business or education, is to sponsor a culture of continuous learning (Senge, 1990) where problems can be identified, defined and solved in order to secure competitive advantage within a broader knowledge economy. The skills requirements of a global knowledge economy are key drivers in setting the agenda for 21st century professional learning, alongside social capital and finance capitalism (Kagia, 2003). At the same time, as far back as 2001, a report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlighted a weak culture of investment in Research and Development in schools as an issue preventing change capability in the face of 21st policy challenges (OECD, 2001: 66). So, both schools and business face similar challenges that providers of postgraduate education for school leaders need to consider when designing courses.

What all this suggests, perhaps, is the need to re-frame professional learning for school leaders in terms of building capacity for change within a knowledge ecosystem (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Few of the insights on organisational change have been systematically applied to the education leadership sector, where arguably they have much to offer in supporting capability for innovation within the current climate.

### Pedagogical principles and processes in the design of work-based research

Quality professional development comprises opportunities for engaging in learning that is work-based and contextually relevant (Hargreaves, 1999). Brown (2009) has developed an entire model of change-by-design learning processes derived from contextually relevant design thinking in the workplace. He argues that a core feature of design thinking is the sequencing of processes related to identifying, defining, ideating, prototyping and testing ‘wicked issues’ or problems (Brown, 2009: 16). Brown’s approach has much in common with Tan’s approach to problem-based learning of ‘unstructured problems’ (Tan, 2003: 2). This includes the development of skills in metacognition, self-regulated learning, and higher order thinking within in a framework where technology becomes a tool to enhance ‘solution-based thinking’ (Tan, 2003: 208).



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## The focus on practical solutions within design research incorporates approaches to knowledge transfer and change management



### A focus on work-based research for school leadership programmes

In addition to problem-based learning and design thinking, new approaches to inquiry are emerging that prioritise work-based research to solve problems and generate impact (McKenney and Reeves, 2012). The focus on practical solutions within design research incorporates approaches to knowledge transfer and change management. An approach to school leadership development programmes that will address the policy requirements of organisational change might include:

- Defining postgraduate work-based learning as a collective rather than an individualistic endeavour
- Provision of support to senior leaders so they know how to sponsor a culture of inquiry in the workplace and create structures and systems to facilitate the translation of research evidence into agendas for change
- Support in the development of in-house R&D teams with appropriate protocols who know how to self-organise and collaborate around learning and research
- Support in identifying and defining practice issues as a starting point in learning
- Skills development in design research that enables course participants to frame good questions into even better strategic projects that generate new knowledge
- Synthesis of design thinking (Brown, 2009) and design research approaches (Wong et al, 2014) where intentionality, clarity of purpose, respect for learning processes and protocols are factored into the programme design from the outset

- More focus on the scaffolding and facilitation of learning that sees lecturers as coaches rather than as deliverers of content
- Attention paid to the assessment of learning that facilitates stakeholder engagement, knowledge flow and exchange through presentations, papers and participation in conferences
- Course provision that includes the politics of change in organisations to ensure that course participants are not naive about translating research evidence into a stakeholder change agenda

These components will support the development of change-capable professionals in either public or private organisations. In this framework, the role of the 21st century education provider becomes, in part, that of validator of new knowledge linked to how and where people learn.

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### Keywords

leadership education; organisational change; work-based research

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