Maintaining high quality: ideas that travel

Neil McIntosh, Chief Executive of CfBT Education Services, discusses the characteristics that make a school effective. The text is a transcript of a plenary presentation given at the International Conference held at Bilkent University, Ankara in November 1995.

Introduction

CfBT is an education resource management company. We operate internationally in economic circumstances as different as Brunei, which has one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, in the UK and in economically devastated countries like Mozambique and Uganda. While it would be wrong to employ precisely the same techniques in all these circumstances, it is highly desirable from our point of view to identify those developments which are likely to travel, in order that we can avoid reinventing the wheel in every project in which we work.

The description education resource management is important too, although at first sight it may mean little. Although there are cases where all a client wants from CfBT is the recruitment of competent staff, our task in most cases is to ensure that the educationalists who we take on for a particular assignment perform to the very best of their generally considerable ability.

I will be talking about educational management, as I am not an ELT expert, but as I hope I can demonstrate, it is entirely appropriate to look more broadly than just pedagogical issues. The bedrock of CfBT's work over the years has been in the belief that the teacher/learner relationship is the cornerstone of all good education.

Indeed the name of the organisation reflects that emphasis on the teachers.

The institutional framework point for my remarks is primarily schools. Partly this reflects the fact that CfBT's experience has been mainly, though by no means exclusively, at school level. Secondly, it reflects the fact that most research on the effectiveness of educational institutions has focused on schools.

There can be little doubt that schools are susceptible to good leadership. We have all observed the impact of a first class Head teacher on a school.

This presumably reflects in turn the difficulty in focusing on whole tertiary institutions. After all, the description from one US commentator of a university as 'a series of heterogeneous communities held together by a heating system' is probably recognisable to any of us who knows a university well.

But there are sections of tertiary institutions which can be viewed as institutions in their own right in terms of the management challenges which they present. One such section is BUSEL (Bilkent University School of English Language) and another, perhaps, is the Matriculation Centre of the IIU (International Islamic University). The elements of management to which I want to refer are as relevant to such institutions within an institution as they are to secondary schools or, for example, language schools.

So what I want to do is discuss the characteristics we should be looking for in the institutions we manage if we want them to have high standards and then look at how we put those elements in place and monitor their presence.

What makes an effective school ?

One of the first things to note in answering such a question is that in some countries the question itself would seem inappropriate. In Germany, for example, the focus is so exclusively on individual teacher performance that emphasis on the school is unusual. Indeed, it is in the English speaking countries in particular that there has been an emphasis on the school as a unit and the most research on what constitutes a good school. So initially, particularly coming from an organisation which purports to put the teacher/learner relationship first, it is perhaps necessary to justify focusing on the school as institution.

8

One of the key characteristics that is found in effective schools is explicit emphasis by the school on pupil achievement

1. The school as an institution

Well, there are some very practical reasons. The school either is, or can easily become, the unit for financial accountability. Secondly, parents and students tend to select an institution, although they may be influenced by an individual teacher in that institution. The selection is made with a reasonably clear notion of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' in education. And there can be little doubt that schools are susceptible to good leadership. We will all have observed the impact of a first ass Headteacher on a school. Thirdly, schools are probably the only institution essential to education delivery below tertiary level - a truth which sometimes makes educational bureaucrats uncomfortable. They all/we all can only justify our existence if it helps teachers and schools function better.

2. Systemic interventions for effective schools

But schools exist within an education system as e.g. BUSEL exists with a wider unit and the first thing to be said about the development of effective schools concerns the systemic interventions without which the creation and maintenance of effective ;hools is, at the very least, very difficult. There are different types of system level interventions.

a. *"Hygiene"*: this type of intervention is particularly necessary, though it does not always occur, in poorer countries. Schools have to have tolerable working conditions. They have to have water supplies and toilet facilities; arrangements for regular supplementary or basic nutrition through school breakfasts or lunches; basic security, whether from threat by weapons and intruders or from bullying. "Hygiene" factors exist even in

better off institutions e.g. worries at Bilkent about the educational impact of students' dormitories.

b. It would generally be at system level that the *boundaries for schooling* are identified. By this I mean, for example, what are the ages and hours for compulsory schooling and possibly details of catchment areas and gender/ethnic/religious composition.

c. *Effective use of facilities:* this may well be organised at school level but system level interventions can also be important. For example the effective use of facilities through multigrade classes in rural areas or multishift schools in densely populated areas.

d. *Setting of standards:* I will return to this in more detail later, but it is clear that standards are commonly set at levels above the individual institution.

But it is not the system level interventions which I want to dwell on this morning, though I will return to them.

3. Key characteristics in effective schools

The most substantial research on school effectiveness, which contradicted earlier assumptions that the effect of schools on educational attainment was very minor, was by British researchers during the 1980s. A team led by Peter Mortimore, now Director of the Institute of Education in London, identified key characteristics which are found in the most effective schools. They were[1]:

1. explicit emphasis by the school on pupil achievement, including the identification of principals and teachers with outcomes for pupils, focusing pupils' attention on learning activities including use of time in classes, policies on

lateness and absence;

2. making full use of class time for learning, optimising homework, reflecting learning priorities in allocation of time;

3. rewarding and praising students; their engagement in the organisation of school and classroom work and life; motivation of pupils to achieve; high expectations;

4. attention to assessment and evaluation; recording of students' progress; using progress knowledge and records constructively;

5. engagement of parents and community representatives in the management of the school;

6. firm, purposeful but not autocratic leadership, with clear and agreed goals and norms; the pedagogic involvement of principals, their engagement in the academic/learning plannning and life of the school;

7. consultative/ collegial decision-making to ensure staff participation and build support, so that all feel part of the common enterprise - e.g. common policies on curriculum delivery, teaching styles, homework policies, sanctions/rewards - and procedures fostering the common implementation of these policies;

8. Staff development related to the school's pedagogical and organisational needs;

9. Well prepared challenging lessons conducted in work-centred ways; limited focus and structured teaching with clarity, sequencing, prompting, intervening, informal assessment and feedback; aims of lessons understood by students.

What is interesting about these characteristics is the extent to which they combine classroom activities and characteristics which are non classroom. Of the nine characteristics I would suggest only one is exclusively

effective schools

classroom. Four are largely non-classroom and four are part classroom part non-classroom. This is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it contradicts the psychology, one might even say the pathology, of education/teaching. The curious thing about teaching as a profession is that for much of the time teachers are entirely unsupervised (though observed by their pupils/students). However, when supervision does occur, it can be very overt indeed. At its extreme, in the English school inspection system, an outsider comes into the classroom, observes what the teacher is doing, writes up that experience and the results are then published and sometimes commented on in the local press. Individual teachers are not meant to be identified by this process, but in a small primary school in particular it is difficult to hide the identity of the individual about whom comments are being made.

It is not perhaps surprising, therefore, that I, as a non-educationalist, see in the teaching profession more extreme resistance to measurement of performance and what might be defined as a management culture than in about any other profession. Yet, as we have seen, characteristics of an effective school cannot be separated from management issues.

The second thing that is interesting, looking at the list of characteristics of a 'good' school, is just how big a gap there is in the in-service training for educationalists which is currently provided. Indeed it was particularly interesting to hear Peter Mortimore's inaugural lecture when he became Director of the Institute of Education. He also put up on screen these characteristics of a good school. But thereafter he concentrated almost exclusively in his comments on the pedagogical aspects of the creation of a good school. It seemed to me at least possible that this reflected the fact that, like many educationalists, Professor Mortimore may not, before his recent promotion, have had much direct managerial experience except in managing an extremely effective research team. In CfBT we see this

lack of management experience all the time. In the English school system there is a new type of school called Grant Maintained where the budget of the school is fully devolved to the governing body and head of the school, rather than being controlled by a unit of local government. CfBT inspection teams go in to inspect such schools and it has always seemed to me worrying that none of the inspectors have faced anything like the management challenge faced by the heads of Grant Maintained school. Neither members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (the previous inspection body) nor local authority inspectors have typically had much management experience. There is, as Don Finlay said, an inability to analyse problems in organisational terms.

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It would seem then that training in the aspects of management relevant to the development of the common features of effective schools we looked at earlier should be a priority. Yet, in the UK at least, there is almost no in-service training for teachers or, until recently, even headteachers, which focused on anything other than the individual classroom activities of the teachers. Almost none of the training that exists reflects the fact that teachers operate as a team, and that they are part of an institution. In fact I see no recognition, even from those who have conducted research on effective schools, that the characteristic 'staff development related to the schools pedagogical and *organisational* needs is understood. Teachers are not just autonomous individuals, kings or queens in their classroom, and their training should reflect that they are members of a team. We should be in no doubt

about its importance. It is extremely difficult to be a good teacher in a badly managed school with a poor learning environment. Less obviously it is difficult to be a damagingly bad teacher in a really good school.

Interestingly these characteristics also suggest that another systemic intervention may be desirable. Decentralisation of decision making to schools optimises the scope for schools to contribute their distinctive effect. It also enhances the scope for management contribution by Headteachers and there is absolute uniformity in all research that has been undertaken on school effectiveness that Headteachers are absolutely central to the development and maintenance of quality and standards. Thirdly decentralisation allows maximum scope for teacher involvement and meaningful parental/community involvement.

4. Applicability to developing countries

Regrettably all of the research on effective schools, or almost all of it, is in developed countries. Nonetheless ODA surveys do suggest that many of these ideas are equally relevant in underdeveloped countries. However, there are some aspects which are not much discussed in research on less developed countries. For example, most research identifies the desirability of (a) having a development plan for the institution, (b) the creation of local governance bodies and (c) the involvement of parents and, at tertiary level, students. All too often I suspect that it is thought that these concepts are too sophisticated for societies where the "hygiene" factors have not been dealt with. However our experience in one of the poorest countries, Uganda, suggests otherwise.

In Uganda parental involvement and even control has been forced on the schools and school system by the government's lack of funds. Yet, even without "hygiene" needs being met the keen involvement of PTAs is one of the few encouraging signs in these difficult circumstances.

However a caveat is necessary here. The common feature the British, US and other systems share with Uganda is comparatively low teacher status. In Germany, perhaps in Japan, a more centralised, less participative model may be made possible by high self esteem and status of the teaching profession. Not, regrettably, a common feature of education systems.

Quality control mechanisms

Standards are generally set at a wider level than the individual institution. Teachers and others need to know how far students are progressing and all will recognise the desirability of being measured, from time to time, against externally validated criteria. It is ɔvious, of course, that such tests will not be enough on their own. For teachers to be able to assess progress and take early enough corrective action, intermediate diagnostic and formative assessments, both teacher and externally 'marked' will be necessary.

But that is to express the need for evaluation from the perspective of the teacher. When the three types of quality control, results, external ɪspection and internal review are looked at as elements in developing school effectiveness and/or assessing teacher performance there is, commonly, a good deal of resistance from educationalists.

We can all understand why. Partly it is ʾʾe overt nature of the supervision - ρartly the fact that quantitative data allows only crude analysis of cause and effect while qualitative data, which is by definition subjective - involving as it does lots of individual judgement - tends to become meaningless when quantified.

Nonetheless there is no avoiding the uncomfortable truth that institutions are judged by outsiders primarily on their students' performance in public examinations. This has always been very clear to private institutions but resisted in the public sector. It would be as well for everyone to accept the fact that increasing attachment to the notion of accountability will require that institutions become more transparent, not less.

1. External inspection and internal review

But while accepting the inevitability of external evaluation based on exam results we should certainly continue to assert the limited value of such judgements. We then turn to external inspection and internal review.

External inspection has limited but real value, particularly in the short term. If there is to be such inspection the more external the better - the more widely accepted legitimacy which the inspectors have the better. The more the process allows for comparison with similar institutions the better. Only by external inspection being viewed with some trepidation by the institutions is it likely to have a beneficial effect - the gains are likely to come from the process of preparation and - assuming a good quality inspection - working together on recommendations rather than from the inspection itself.

But just as every commercial company needs an external audit but no company was ever made successful by such an audit, so we cannot rely on external inspection to improve teachers. Staff in any company are led by their line managers, teachers by their Headteachers.

So, if a system exists for occasional external inspection I think institutions should welcome its existence, but ensure that its value is maximised (and its perceived threat diminished) by developing teacher led self evaluation models which reinforce the external system.

So, unsurprisingly, we find that quality control comes from within. And here, if it has not already become obvious, I should admit my professional and cultural bias. I am not an academic. I am British and typically pragmatic. These two factors presumably are important factors in my finding myself increasingly resistant to the concept of Total Quality Management, to the increasing use of standards in Britain which try to systematise quality - indeed resistant to the very word 'quality' which now seems to me to be vying with words like 'community' to be the most grossly overused in the English language.

The problem with the word is partly that it is appended to their service by every organisation without any validity in many cases. The bigger problem is that there is a tendency to think that quality is a part of an organisation like sales or production or curriculum development - in other words, someone else's responsibility.

In fact, in schools, the essence of quality control is to be found in the very characteristics we looked at earlier. Look at them again and we find the particular thread running through all of them is involvement and active participation. Everyone - teachers, students, parents are all contributing to high standards. This is not to say that there are not particular ideas - like peer observation - which may be valuable. But I stress that the creation of a good learning and teaching environment - which is what the existence of these characteristics amounts to - is not dependent on any one technique.

Conclusion

In conclusion an effective institution will have in place a number of particular educational components - proper curriculum specification; relevant teaching and learning materials; good assessment arrangements, but will also apply techniques relevant to any well run organisation concerned with human development which, I believe, in the case of a school will be school level management; decentralisation of responsibility; parental and/or student involvement; a sound development plan; teacher involvement in school organisation and appropriate training to support all of these.

1. Adapted from: Scheerens (1992) *Effective Schooling*; Mortimore and Reynolds (1991) both in *School Effectiveness Research; its messages for school improvement*; OECD (1989) *School and Quality*.