

# **Could do better:**

**the journey to improve a small primary school...**

**submitted by JULIA LONGMAN for the degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)**

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# Abstract

This thesis set out to research the process of school improvement in a small primary school as well as to take a look at how that process might feel to the people working in that school. I also wanted to consider whether the size and thus potential intensity of working in a small environment would have an impact on people's feelings and actions especially as there is still not a great deal of published literature on small schools. I took accepted notions of school improvement and attempted to compare these with what was really happening in a small school struggling to improve. Different models of change, in particular Communities of Practice, were considered alongside what appeared to be taking place inside the research school.

The research was undertaken in two distinct parts. The first, a case study of the school in question during the academic year 2009 – 2010, involved observation reflection and regular interviewing of a number of teachers and governors. The second was an auto-ethnographic study of the preceding five years by the headteacher of that school. This came about when evaluating the possibility that real, embedded improvement cannot take place within a single academic year. To look at this further it was decided to situate the one year case study within a longer-term view of the school.

Events in the case study school unfolded in a way that reflected current change models. It transpired that embedding change can be a slow process but that without such embedding it is unlikely that sustainable change will occur. It became clear that participants needed to have ownership of the change agenda. However, it was also evident that good leadership plays its part too. If the leader does not have vision then change is likely to be rather aimless, like a journey without a map or compass. The role played by the headteacher in moderating, ameliorating and encouraging change is therefore examined.

Another slightly surprising theme that emerged was the apparent magnification effect in a small school. This was a thread which ran throughout both observation and interviews and which was deemed worthy of further exploration. I chose to look further at how the concept of a 'magnification effect' can help to explore processes of change and development, particularly in small schools. It was important to look at how this effect can inhibit or enable change in ways where the effects of the individual appear to be greater than in a larger setting.

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# **Contents**

**Chapter One: Introduction**

**Chapter 2: Literature review:**

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

**Chapter 4: The data**

- (i) The historical perspective 2004 to 2009 – from my viewpoint as headteacher
- (ii) Case study of a single year: 2009 - 2010

**Chapter 5: Themes emerging from the data**

**Chapter 6: The role of the headteacher and the change agenda**

**Chapter 7: Conclusion**

**References**

**Appendices**

**Glossary**

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Is a school really what it seems?

According to Ofsted (Ofsted Inspection, July 2000) the school where I was about to become headteacher was a 'good' school; certainly the governors and parents believed it to be so. Yet when I arrived for my first visit - after appointment but before starting the job - I was shocked to observe that it took twenty minutes to get the children in at the end of the lunchtime break. This immediately began to ring alarm bells and I wondered if the school really was as good as it believed. My concerns about behaviour were borne out when I arrived in the September with two particular events standing out. The first came at the end of my very first week in post. A group of children came to me at the end of the last assembly of the week telling me I had forgotten something..... It turned out they were expecting housepoints for 'sitting nicely' in assembly. The poor children were shocked and disappointed when I told them that there would be no housepoints and that I expected appropriate behaviour in assembly as the norm. The second was when I asked a group of children what they considered the problem with behaviour to be. They told me they needed strong adults around school who would tell them what to do and ensure that they did it! These events caused me to make my own judgement that the school was in fact not a 'good' school. In comparison to the school I had just left it seemed there could be some significant problems. Interestingly the children seemed aware of this too as shown by their comment about the need for 'strong adults.' Children are often very good judges of what is going on; teachers and other adults neglect to listen to them at our peril.

These experiences led me to wonder what a good school really looks like. Is it the same in every context? Are there certain 'non-negotiables' or do expectations change according to context? Like Chris (a fictitious name), one of the school's governors, I was:

dubious about the measures used to judge a school's performance.

Although of course you can measure the children's performance in tests, this is surely not the only measure of success. (Chris )

What was it that had led me to make a judgement in the space of a very short observation that all was not as it should be (and indeed not as it appeared on paper) with the school of which I was now about to become the leader? I decided to investigate and explore the experience of leading and 'improving' a primary school. I planned to look at the school from two angles: a case study of a single year situated within an account of my own experiences as headteacher of the school during a six year period.

Clearly, before I could proceed any further I needed to clarify exactly what it was that I was trying to research. I started with a hypothesis that the prevailing view that a school can be turned round quickly was incorrect. In some governmental and local authority circles it seemed to be almost accepted that when a school found itself in difficulties then a new person would be put in post as headteacher and that person would be able to turn the school around within a year. Were schools entering the realms of football managers? If schools were not 'winning' then it seemed that headteachers would simply be eased out of their posts and replaced by a better model who would of course sort everything out. A very emotive viewpoint and one that my observations thus far suggested would not work. It seemed that, in essence, it was impossible to secure embedded and lasting improvement with such a short-term approach.

### **What this research is setting out to do**

In order to try to understand how to secure lasting improvement, I settled on four main research questions:

- What is school improvement and how does it happen in a small primary school?
- What is the role of the various internal participants and external bodies in the process?
- What is the impact of and upon the headteacher?
- What part does 'ownership' play in the improvement process and how does this relate to issues of embedding and sustainability?

During the course of the research I also chose to examine the areas of time pressure and vulnerability which became key issues along with the sense of a 'magnification effect' which emerged as the research progressed. I decided to look further at how this concept of a 'magnification effect' can help to explore processes of change and development, particularly in small schools.

There is a clear difference between the prevailing government view that school improvement is a quick process in which a failing school can be turned around within a year and my own experiences. Much has been written in the body of change literature about the need to take time over change and to get people on board (see Fullan, 1993 and 1999, Mills et al, 2009, Kim and Mauborgne, 2009 in Chapter 2). Several writers (notably Wenger, 1998, McShane, 2009) have explored the notion of 'Communities of Practice' and how important membership of the community and ownership of a shared agenda are. Yet so much of this seems to have been forgotten in relationship to schools. Successive governments have handed down directives, expected schools to comply and to 'improve' as required. There is also that, often unspoken, assumption that such improvement can take place quickly, even within a year. The current 'cure all' appears to be Academy status. Apparently the problems in our education system will disappear if we all convert to academies. My own experience as headteacher of a small rural primary school suggests that this is simply not the case. The governmental approach seems to be entirely at odds with the way schools work. A great deal of research has been carried out on the subject of school improvement, with a variety of literature being readily available from academics as well as from Ofsted, the Department for Education and the National College for School Leaders. However it is not as easy to find information about the improvement process in small schools. Searches for small schools mostly give results for schools of several hundred pupils (see Chicago small schools, Wasley et al, 2000) or for campaigns for alternative education or against the closure of small rural schools such as those of the Human Scale Education Movement, the National Small Schools Forum and the National Association for Small Schools. Even less exists about what it is like to actually be

part of the improvement process in a small school (i.e. a school with less than one hundred pupils). Valerie Wilson states that:

In 1996 [the year of her first study of small rural primary schools in Scotland] there was a paucity of published literature on small schools

(Wilson, 2009, p.482)

and, although she goes on to state that there has been more published research since then, I would conclude with her that small schools are still relatively 'under researched.' The aim of this research is to explore that gap and try to understand what exactly is going on as a small primary school tries to 'improve.'

### **The organisation of this thesis**

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. The first is the introduction, looking at the prevailing climate in English schools alongside government expectations.

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature relating to school improvement and change.

In Chapter 3 I explain the methodology used and how the study of the single year 2009-10 sits within a much longer process of working for improvement. Chapter 4 is the summary of the data gathered for this thesis. It is divided into two sections:

- (i) The historical perspective 2004 to 2009 – from my viewpoint as headteacher, and
- (ii) A case study of the year 2009 – 2010

Themes emerging from the data are explored in Chapters 5 and 6. Finally I attempt to draw conclusions from my findings in Chapter 7.

### **Opposing views**

Views in schools and within the literature seem to fall into two camps: those that suggest change is a generic process growing from within the organisation and those who would describe it as a discrete process being directed by a strong leader. My own view as I started this research was that it is neither of these but more of a journey, with all its twists and turns, wrong directions, hazards, rough terrain and traffic jams. I took the view, expressed by one of the governors in the school being studied that:

improvement is a journey, never the destination (Chris )

However, it is not a journey without aim. The role of the leader(s) is to set the direction for that journey, to have the vision, but not necessarily to be sure about the outcome. Then others need to understand where the organisation is heading, be equipped for the journey and ultimately choose to get on board. Thus, the search for school improvement is neither in the world of Brooke-Smith where 'vision and mission cannot be mandated or imposed' and everything must stem from the 'creative state' growing and nurturing ideas from within the organisation (Brooke-Smith, 2003) nor in the more structured world of top-down leadership where:

the change process is intentionally initiated, carefully planned and implemented in order to achieve the desired results.

(Mills, Dye and Mills, 2009, p.42)

It seems that what is needed is more like Hallinger's 'transformational leadership' which allows a school to 'move in the direction of empowerment and shared leadership.' (Hallinger, 2003, p341) Hallinger uses the metaphor of a journey to describe improvement but he, as interpreted by MacBeath, seems to subscribe to a view of traditional leadership being 'superceded by a conception of mutual influence', in which leaders are 'shaped by the people and by the context in which they find themselves.' (MacBeath, 2003, p 325). However, it is the leader's responsibility to set the direction or compass bearing for the journey and in order to do this well they need to know for themselves where the organisation needs to head in order to secure improvement. If the organisation and its members have too much say in the shaping of their leaders then I wonder if we will find ourselves reduced to some sort of meaningless or directionless change: in other words, a journey without a map. In this research I set out to look at these factors and try to understand further the forces at play in a school's journey towards improvement.

### **School Improvement: the prevailing climate**

In many ways the year 2010 was a microcosm of the environment in which school leaders and teachers have to work. It demonstrated in close-up something of the tensions and speed of change continually expected.

At the start of the year, much of the status quo was still in existence: schools had to use the Self Evaluation Form to submit and continually update their view of their own progress and achievements, the Ofsted inspection regime was largely unchanged with its emphases on validating a school's own judgements of itself and on the Every Child Matters agenda, Local Delivery Groups and School Improvement Partners were much in evidence and appeared to be permanent fixtures and progress was well underway with the ongoing review of the National Curriculum with a new focus on skills to be taught rather than content.

Then came a general election and, almost overnight, everything was in turmoil. The Self Evaluation Form was to cease being compulsory, Ofsted inspections were to look very different, apparently Every Child [did not] Matter[s] anymore, Local Delivery Groups and School Improvement Partners were set to disappear and the review of the National Curriculum was halted. I, like headteachers in many other schools, was reimbursed for the money I had spent on ordering new curriculum materials which were now apparently worthless. School leaders and teachers waited with bated breath for the new education white paper due out before the end of the year. Until that paper appeared there would be little point in doing anything as, like the significant amounts of work that had been put into re-designing our curricula, anything we did was in danger of being a total waste of time. And yet the children's education had to continue. Should teachers follow their instincts and professional expertise or simply wait to be told what to do?

Although this was a huge amount of change all at once it was in essence no different to the way schools have been forced to operate for many years. Successive governments and ministers have felt it necessary to make constant changes to our education system seeming to believe that making unrelenting changes to the way schools operate is the only way to improve outcomes for children. The Department for Education has even changed its name several times in the short time I have been a headteacher. Currently (early 2011) it is back to being just that, 'The Department for Education', after flirting variously with being the Department for Education and Science and the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Each name change has demanded a different emphasis in our schools

and a different inspection regime not to mention the vast amounts of money spent on changing departmental logos and re-issuing various pieces of guidance to schools. With each name and 'identity' change schools have had to rethink policies and re-evaluate progress, often trying to forward guess what the outcomes would be if the school were to have an inspection. Not surprisingly, many people (including West-Burnham, 2009, Brooke-Smith, 2003 and Hallinger, 2003) have doubts about this as a model for any improvement at all, let alone sustainable improvement in our schools.

### **The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010**

In November 2010, the long-awaited paper 'The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010' was published (this is currently, autumn 2011, making its way through Parliament as the new Education Bill). I along with many colleagues rushed to get hold of it, anxious to find out what the impact was likely to be on our schools. We were also keen to find out whether any account had been taken of the two major reviews of education undertaken recently (The Alexander and Rose Reviews – both reporting in 2009) and what, if anything, had been retained of the new curriculum that had been at the heart of the previous government's policy. The title and the clean lines of the new Department for Education logo gave a clear message from the start. This was apparently a document that meant business. There was to be a return to the core purpose of teaching and learning with no frills or embellishments. But what would this look like for schools?

From the very first pages – the foreword – the paper was delivering somewhat mixed messages. On the one hand it stated that: 'no education system can be better than the quality of its teachers' (The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p3) a view that I and many colleagues would happily support. Indeed I had regularly told colleagues and students that they, the teacher, are the best resource their children will ever have and that it is important they appear in class fresh and well-prepared for every lesson. There were also a number of statements about 'raising the status of teachers' and 'devolving as much power as possible to the front line.' (The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p3) Yet from the start there were continual and

worrying comparisons with schools in other countries and an apparent obsession with Academies and accountability. Although the White Paper claimed that:

[the Academies'] freedoms allow them to innovate and 'ensure that educationalists can concentrate on education'

(The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.4)

I am not certain that the picture is quite as clear-cut as this would suggest, especially as that 'freedom' was being offered by the same politicians who:

had imposed a 'state theory' of education on teachers. (Ward, 2009 )

Important as that freedom is, it was the money that went along with being an academy that made so much difference. If any school had enough money in their budget it would be possible to devolve many of the functions currently performed by headteachers and free them to concentrate on education. But schools do not have the funds, especially the smaller ones where financial margins are tight and the cost of educating each child proportionately higher. In order to keep their schools functioning headteachers are often forced to undertake many tasks which distract them from their true focus. Instead of simply focusing on educational issues, I have had for example to manage building works over the past year and ensure the premises are kept safe – even down to organising the removal of wasps' nests - as I have no site staff.

There seem to be many inconsistencies in the comparisons being made in the White Paper: for example the delightful vignette of the 'ARK plus' programme (The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.37). It all sounds very promising, with the students taking part making at least one year's progress in English and Mathematics in just six months. Then it becomes clear that there was a cohort of just twelve children being offered a very intensive and individualised programme. While we would all applaud the difference made to youngsters' life chances through such a programme, it is not sound to generalise from this and assume such programmes could be available to and benefit all appropriate children. That is unless schools are given enough funding to make this a real possibility. Funding is always an issue in schools and, in my own context, often prevents us from doing things we know would be beneficial for the pupils. One of the schools cited in the White Paper had

taken the decision to offer free school meals to all children (The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.53). I can see the possible benefits of this but how could it be implemented in my school when I already make a loss of over £1 on every meal served despite charging £2 for a school dinner? This is not inefficiency, costs are pared back to the minimum, but because of the school's size, the staffing costs for the kitchen are disproportionately high. The same catering staff could serve many more meals in the hours they have but cannot serve our existing numbers with fewer hours.

Then there is the comment from the headteacher delighted that the SEF (the centralised Self Evaluation Form) is to go.

I'm delighted the SEF has gone. It took hours of head teachers' time or schools were paying consultants thousands of pounds..... It did not improve teaching, learning or exam results.

(Diane Khanna in The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.30)

Although the form itself was cumbersome and the online format not at all user friendly, it did force schools to look at themselves critically and thus it contributed a great deal to school improvement. Ministers themselves rightly agree the importance of good self-evaluation:

We strongly support the view that good schools evaluate themselves rigorously. (The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.29)

While no headteacher will be sorry to be free of the necessity to consider numerous issues, many of which were of little relevance in their particular setting, it is no secret that very few schools even attempted self-evaluation before the introduction of the SEF. Currently it is right to say that good schools evaluate themselves rigorously but will they – and less good schools – continue to do this once the requirement to do so has been removed? At the same time as removing the need to complete the SEF, ministers also plan to reduce the role of local authorities and 'end the requirement for every school to have a local authority school improvement partner (SIP).' While it may be laudatory to make it 'clear ..... that schools....have responsibility for improvement', I wonder how we will know that schools are performing well. There is much said in the White Paper about improving

accountability yet the teaching profession has no faith in external assessment, particularly the Keystage 2 SATs. Currently, it appears that ministers too are unsure of their reliability, and teachers eagerly awaited the publication of the report by Lord Bew into Key Stage 2 testing (published June 2011) and were a little disappointed that, although changes to the testing regime and to the measures used to assess childrens' performance were recommended, there was to be no fundamental overhaul or scrapping of the SATs. There was also a proposal to assess all six year olds in reading and use of phonics (due to begin in 2012) so that those at risk of falling behind could be identified. As an infant teacher with many years' experience, I find this a very strange way to proceed. It would appear to take no account of factors such as maturity, home background and simple 'readiness to read.' I have known many children (often boys) who were totally uninterested in reading at the age of five or six but who then took to it readily at age seven. My concern would be that the results of these tests would be used to force these children into participation in 'catch-up' programmes when they actually had no catching up to do. With this comes the danger that if these children are forced to learn to read too soon it may actually slow down their progress once they are ready to read. Also, there is strong evidence that specific learning difficulties often do not show before a child is seven years old. Additionally, even those responsible for the White Paper, acknowledge that the systematic teaching of phonics is not always the 'proven best way to teach early reading' and to achieve success in reading. Indeed for a small but significant minority phonics remain a mystery never to be decoded (White Paper, 2010, pp.22, 11). So we could find ourselves judging and being judged using a measure that is fundamentally flawed.

The White Paper refers repeatedly to the idea of reducing the bureaucratic burden on schools so that teachers and leaders can focus more closely on learning and teaching. The paper cites the removal of School Improvement Partners, the ending of the centralised Self Evaluation Form, the loss of central target setting mechanisms and quotas, the end of the Financial Management in Schools standard and generally less interference by both central government and local authorities. This all sounds quite encouraging until we remember that that both the School

Improvement Partners and the centralised Self Evaluation Form have had a positive impact on school improvement. There is also no suggestion that schools should no longer be expected to evaluate their performance or that they should not make use of external consultants to help with the improvement process. However, if they do choose to seek assistance from outside schools will either have to find the money to pay for this or enlist the services of another headteacher. The loss of centralised target-setting also sounds a good thing but the White Paper goes on to emphasise the importance of accountability to parents and others, listing the large amounts of data that will need to be shared in the public arena and accessible on-line. This does not sound much like a reduction in bureaucracy. Similarly, the assessment for the Financial Management in Schools standards is to go – I should think no-one will mourn its passing as many found it burdensome (in the school being studied an excellent Finance Manager resigned, citing the workload for FMSiS as the reason). But, it is to be replaced by an as yet undecided alternative...

As so often seems to be the case, ministers appear to have decided almost overnight what the problems are with our education system and how they will fix them. Comparisons with other countries seem to be at the centre of their concerns. Certainly English schools have slipped in the rankings of such measures as the PISA tests but we always need to be certain that we are comparing like with like. While of course we want to do as well as our 'competitors' and fit our young people for the workplace it could just be that the tests do not tell the whole story. If we, for instance, have been teaching slightly different skills and knowledge than others then our youngsters will be likely to perform less well in the tests. That does not necessarily mean that their overall standard of achievement is less good, though of course this could be so. Having apparently been outperformed by other countries our ministers are understandably concerned that we should be offering a 'world class education.' But do they really have the evidence that academies and free schools are the answer? For instance the success of the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Programme) in America is celebrated in the White Paper yet nothing is said about more recent research which suggests that this programme may not in fact be as successful as first thought. In the same way, it seems to be assumed that all

academies, particularly when part of a 'chain' or 'family' of schools, will raise attainment simply by existing. In the White Paper the case of primary school places in Enfield is cited and how the Oasis Family Hadley was asked to admit children in their reception year earlier than planned and thus become an all-age academy from September 2010, two years earlier than anticipated. This is hailed as a great success with:

sound progress towards improved examination results, increased levels of attendance, good standards of behaviour and greatly reduced exclusion rate

(The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.63)

all within two months of opening its doors to primary age pupils. This does not have the feel of thorough research and sound evidence yet is being used as an exemplar for other settings. At the same time no-one seems to have remembered the failure of another school in the Oasis Academy stable (TES 25.02.11). Ministers not only appear to have made the assumption that academies are the way forward and will sort out all the ills in our education system they also seem to have committed to this model for all schools ultimately:

...when all schools in an area have become Academies...(p.64)

...as Academy status becomes the norm.... (p.65)

...we plan, over time, to make Academy status the norm (p.82)

(The Importance of Teaching, 2010)

Little thought seems to have been given to what might happen if this approach does not work. Indeed it would also seem that ministers have not completed their research before committing to this way for the future. At the time of the White Paper we were still awaiting the findings of the Bew, Munro and Tickell reviews. Surely their findings might have had something to contribute to the decisions being made about the future of our schools. Also, those in our schools who will have to manage this transition to an entirely different way of working have not been consulted along the way. Reading the White Paper was the first many headteachers knew of the proposal to ultimately convert all schools to academies.

### **Other recent initiatives**

The research school was involved in one of the major initiatives of the previous government, the Making Good Progress pilot. This pilot, begun in 2007, was hailed as the solution to the problems that existed with testing children. It was suggested that more robust teacher assessment, coupled with testing 'when children were ready to be tested' was a much sounder model than the existing Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) taken by children at ages eleven and fourteen. It was anticipated that this assessment and reporting model would:

help parents and pupils to understand what progress they are making, in small steps as well as at the end of a key stage, and to become more closely involved.

It asks whether – without compromising the framework of tests, targets and performance tables which have helped drive up standards so sharply over the past decade – we could adapt the system to support a focus on **progress as well as absolute attainment**.

(Making Good Progress: How can we help every pupil to make good progress at school? DfES Consultation Document , 2006, p.2)

The document goes on to restate its aim of:

mak[ing] a reality of the aspirations of teachers and support staff, parents and pupils themselves – regular progress for all, no child left behind, every pupil reaching his or her full potential. (Making Good Progress, 2006, p.2)

Those schools involved in the pilot, including and in the same Consortium as the research school, were very much in favour of this approach and committed to its success. There was a considerable amount of extra work involved, attending training events and submitting large quantities of pupil level data to both the Local Authority and Central Government (often duplicated) but the teachers involved considered this a worthwhile investment in a sound process. Its particular strengths were in the new Assessing Pupil Progress approach to teacher assessment and in the way the assessment process was seamless between primary and secondary schools. Alongside these was the opportunity for individual tutoring (centrally funded) for children not making expected progress and, of course, the Single Level

Tests themselves. Instead of the existing blanket testing of all pupils of a certain age, it was proposed that we would:

explore the impact of enabling teachers to **enter a pupil for an externally-marked test as soon as they are confident (through their own systematic assessments) that the pupil has progressed to the next level.** The proposal would be to pilot an arrangement whereby schools are offered regular – perhaps twice yearly – opportunities to enter any pupil to sit a test for the next National Curriculum level. (Making Good Progress, 2006, p.12)

The avowed aim of such a process was to ‘sharpen the pace of progress’ (Making Good Progress, 2006, p.12) and it certainly did exactly this in my own school.

Teachers’ expectations of what children could achieve were raised and as a result several children went on to demonstrate attainment at Level 6 whereas previously teachers were generally happy if they achieved the national average expectation of Level 4. Also, in the early stages of the pilot primary and secondary schools worked closely together using the same ‘Assessing Pupil Progress’ materials and the same suite of tests. The idea of promoting a seamless approach to assessment between the primary and secondary phases seemed a good one. But the secondary schools were suddenly removed from the pilot after the first round of tests thereby ending one very strong strand of the whole approach. At the same time Keystage 3 SATs were also abolished. Participants assumed that this was because secondary schools had been shown to be achieving significantly less well than their primary partners. It was suggested (although we were never shown the figures) that only six percent of secondary pupils entered for single level reading tests in December 2007 achieved the expected level (against the intention that 100% of entrants would achieve the level). At the time schools involved in the pilot were disappointed. We wanted to see the issues that had been raised be evaluated and addressed. It seemed that the avowed purpose of ‘promoting a seamless approach to assessment between the primary and secondary phases’ had simply been ignored. The apparent U-turn only served to confirm so much of what I and other headteachers already believed: that ministers did not really want to know what was happening in education, preferring instead a simple ‘quick fix.’ Why would secondary schools be

removed from the pilot when the consultation document had stated very clearly that:

we still have more to do, for example to raise pupil achievement in Key Stage 3. (Making Good Progress, 2006, p.3)

Interestingly this 2006 consultation document takes a very different view of education standards in general to those articulated in the 2010 White Paper:

This investment [higher government expenditure in schools] has brought excellent returns already, by enabling many more young people to achieve their full potential. There have been dramatic and sustained improvements in the school system..... (Making Good Progress, 2006, p.2)

Yet by 2010, the Education White Paper is stating that:

the evidence from these [international] tests tells us that, over recent years, we have been slipping back in the rankings as others improve faster.....

[Although] our highest performing students do well..the wide attainment gap between them and our lowest achievers highlights the inequity in our system. (The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.47)

Ministers seem to believe that we must:

learn systematically from the most effective and fastest improving school systems in the world.....[and that] through taking these steps.....we will create a system in which schools are better able to raise standards [and] narrow the gap in attainment between rich and poor.....

(The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.15)

They conclude that 'our school system performs well below its potential and can improve significantly.' (The Importance of Teaching, 2010, p.8) Two further key documents published at about the same time were the Alexander and Rose reports of 2009 mentioned previously. Both were thought to be lynchpins of the previous government's (Labour, 1997 – 2010) policy on education. But although some of their findings have been treated with respect, so much of what they found seems to have disappeared with the major change of government in 2010.

### **School improvement: the local view opposed to the national**

The attempt to make sense of governmental rhetoric in the light of what was really happening in our schools is I feel key to this research and indeed to the success of our schools. Different groups, and indeed sub-groups within those groupings, are likely to have very different opinions as to what a good school looks like and therefore what in fact school improvement is and how it can be effected. What the Department of Education viewed as success in a local primary school was likely to differ considerably from what the parents of the children in that school might like to see. Indeed it appeared that even ministers themselves were not always certain what constituted good practice. With the very name of the relevant department changing from the Department of Education, to the Department for Education and Skills to the Department for Children, Schools and Families and back again to the Department of Education in the short period covered by this study there would appear to be considerable confusion as to what we were aiming for. The questions raised as to what really matters in our schools and for our children are huge ones. Are good results the overarching factor when determining whether a school is in fact 'good'? Is it important to look at 'softer' areas such as the children's wellbeing and behaviour? And perhaps most importantly of all, are surface improvements sufficient or do we need something far more embedded in order to ensure the best for our children?

Many, many teachers enter the profession because they want to make a contribution – they want to make a difference! (Fullan, 1993, p.11)

In order to 'make that difference', teachers need to be ready to look closely at their own and others' practice and to work together to secure the best possible outcomes for the children in their care. Much of the responsibility to facilitate this rests with school leaders.

[T]here is an imperative on [school] leaders to work in a way that maximizes the possibility of what they believe in and aspire to be translated into the concrete experience of every child and young person.

(West-Burnham, 2009, p.5)

To achieve this many schools will need to change and 'improve', but in order for change to have any meaning at all it seems to me that the leaders alone are not enough.

Educational change fails many more times than it succeeds.

(Fullan, 1992, p vii)

To plan for successful change, leaders need to get the rest of their organisation wanting the same things as themselves and must not assume that everyone views things in the same way that they do.

Because different people and groups in an organization approach historical experience with different expectations and beliefs, shared understanding cannot be assumed. (March, Sproull and Tamuz , 1996, p 8).

Leaders must then work with that organisation or community to agree and plan for improvement:

Transformational leadership seeks to build on the organization's capacity to select its purposes and to support the development of changes to practices of teaching and learning. (Hallinger, 2003, p3.30)

It makes sense to those of us working in education when we read that:

Schools as learning communities in their inside and outside relations will not happen by chance. They require assertive planning, the depth and likes of which we have rarely seen. (Fullan, 1999, p.80)

It would also seem to follow that such significant changes will take time, both to get people 'on board' and to implement the agreed actions. It is at this point that many educational leaders differ fundamentally from government officers. We are not sure we can accept the view common amongst politicians that a school can be 'turned around' within a year? For this research I decided to focus on the speed or otherwise of effective change and to consider carefully my own view that we need to work to embed change for improvement and thus hopefully make it more enduring.

While much has been written about the processes of change and improvement in schools, there is little first-hand discussion about what this is like on the ground. The gap is particularly noticeable in the context of small schools. In the UK, it is

difficult to find objective studies of really small schools and their engagement with the improvement agenda. Thus this research focuses on the day to day reality of working towards improvement in a very small school. It considers how change processes come together in practice and how this experience fits in with the prevailing government rhetoric.

# **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **Introduction**

When considering the forces at work in trying to turn a failing school around, it is important to have an understanding of school improvement and what different models of this might look like. It is also necessary to have an understanding of 'change' and some of the theories of change. In order to situate my research within the current body of knowledge I have reviewed some of the literature related to each of these areas.

### **School Improvement**

Schools are currently facing a tension between acting to meet standards and regulatory frameworks for the curriculum and acting on their professional judgement. (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2004)

Much has been written about the subject, often in tandem with thoughts about leadership and accountability, and this is hardly surprising as the results of any improvement activities (or otherwise) are likely to have a significant impact on outcomes for our children. The government published its White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching' in 2010 (a publication I explored at length in the introduction to this thesis) adding a whole new dimension to current thinking about school improvement. The renewed focus on standards and achievement, through promoting a particular understanding of 'good' teaching served to increase the tensions in schools. Leaders seemed once more to be caught between an externally imposed 'top down' agenda for improvement, similar in style to the policy changes of the 1980s (Hallinger, 2003, p 335), and their own perceptions about how to improve schools which may include approaches more in line with Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) or the use of distributed leadership (Harris and Muijs, 2005, Harris, 2008).

## Leadership styles

There is an imperative on [school] leaders to work in a way that maximizes the possibility of what they believe in and aspire to be translated into the concrete experience of every child and young person.

(West-Burnham, 2009, p.5)

West-Burnham seems to be looking here for a much deeper change in education than simply the 'improved standards' so often lauded by the politicians and in the media. His approach, though strong in areas such as emotional intelligence is still very leader-dependent. The role of the leader or headteacher is an area very much up for debate at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty first. The long-accepted role of the 'hero leader' or 'instructional leader' which had 'shaped much of the thinking about effective principal leadership' (Hallinger, 2003, p.329) began to be challenged during the 1980s and 1990s. A new or 'transformational' approach to leadership began to come to the fore:

Transformational leadership focuses on developing the organization's capacity to innovate. Rather than focusing specifically on direct coordination, control, and supervision of curriculum and instruction, transformational leadership seeks to build on the organization's capacity to select its purposes and to support the development of changes to practices of teaching and learning. (Hallinger 2003 p.330)

Hallinger goes on to explain his view that this is very much a 'distributed' style of leadership (see Harris and Muijs, 2005, pp 27-36) focussing as it does on developing a shared vision and commitment to change in school. Whereas the instructional leader will focus on setting and communicating clear goals which others are expected to work towards, the transformational style involves other participants in developing and working towards shared goals from the start. Hallinger suggests this is, at least in part, a reaction to the 'top-down policy-driven changes that predominated in the 1980s.' (Hallinger 2003, p.335) and notes how the model does not assume that only the headteacher will provide the necessary leadership. He also comments that this model is not focussed solely on the desired outcome for the organisation but also allows room for the needs of individual staff. It appears to be much more closely aligned to a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) or

'professional learning community' (Stoll and Louis,2007) approach than to any of the policy implementation required by successive governments in England. Hallinger is also very aware that there is a 'journey' of school improvement which offers 'a context for the development of new understandings' (Hallinger 2003, p.340) and that evaluating the impact of transformational leadership is likely to go beyond the traditional measures of standards achieved by pupils. He does not view this as an easy process but acknowledges that it requires a good deal of effort 'for a school to move in the direction of empowerment and shared leadership.' (Hallinger 2003, p.341) With Fullan (Fullan, 1993) and others, he reiterates that school improvement is a journey and that different approaches to leadership may be needed at different stages on that journey and, on occasions, even at the same time. In his editorial to the Cambridge Journal of Education in which Hallinger's article appears, MacBeath acknowledges that traditional leadership structures have 'been superseded by a conception of mutual influence [with] leaders being shaped by the people and by the context in which they find themselves.' (MacBeath, 2003, p.325). He comments on the way this is at odds with previous external pressures to raise standards, particularly noting the effect on British teachers of the Blair government's single minded drive to raise standards over several years.

Harris too notes the way schools are 'overwhelmed' by multiple initiatives (Harris, 2008, p 18), suggesting that the way forward is to build strong and effective infrastructures that help free teachers to teach. She argues that distributed leadership may well be helpful in ensuring this but also warns against reform for its own sake, stating that system reform is only to be sought if it leads to improvement in opportunities and learning for all learners (Harris, 2008, p 67). She warns that simply re-arranging structures is unlikely to lead to improvement unless cultural change takes place at the same time.

### **Distributed leadership**

A number of other writers recognise the significance of creativity and involvement of people at all levels if change is to be effective and enduring. It is this recognition that seems to have fuelled the movement towards distributed leadership. Harris

and Muijs argue that there must be a re-configuration of power relationships within schools (Harris and Muijs, 2005). This, they say, opens up the possibility for all teachers to become leaders, to be creators rather than mere recipients of change. The answer to improving schools lies, they assert, in 'cultural rather than structural change.' (Harris and Muijs, 2005, p.2) This suggests previous failures (and indeed current initiatives) in delivering school improvement which seem to be grounded in a pattern of overarching accountability and restructuring were almost destined not to succeed. Hargreaves concurs, arguing that;

many ignore or underplay one of the most fundamental aspects of teaching and of how teachers change: the emotional dimension.

(Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835)

Involving people at all levels in the important business of leadership can allow both for emotional investment and promote the sustainability of change, preventing the problem of ideas and energy within the organisation not having the durability to last beyond 'the tenure of key individuals.' (Fullan, 1992, p.121) It is likely to be capacity building, an important concept in ensuring sustainable change. In schools this should lead to the 'cultivation of learning' (Starratt, 2011, p. 37) for both teachers and pupils which will result in both a sense of community and commitment to one's responsibilities. Earlier in his book, 'Refocussing School Leadership' (Starratt, 2011) Starratt poses a number of pertinent questions about distributed leadership, notably who does the distributing? Is it something done to people from the top down, more like delegation, or is more like something that spreads among colleagues with almost a creative energy of its own. He asks:

Is leadership more like an energy field that contributes somewhat unpredictably to its own flourishing by the irruptions of creative energy as people work together to improve student learning? (Starratt, 2011, p.ix-x)

Starratt is very clear that it is important to be precise about definitions when discussing distributed leadership. Harris goes as far as to suggest that the way principals and teachers view distributed leadership can in fact be a barrier to its successful implementation. If it is seen to be simply delegation by another name, then it is likely to meet with resistance by teachers who may well view it as

additional work. (Harris, 2008, p51) Conversely principals may see it as an erosion of their power and therefore threatening. Clearly all players need to know precisely what is understood by the term 'distributed leadership' in their context and what is expected of them. Despite these potential difficulties, there appears to be a consensus that school improvement is more likely to occur when leadership is distributed (Harris and Muijs, 2005, p.42). Again, there is a sense that this will build capacity and thus sustainability within schools. Back in 1996 Hopkins, West and Ainscow coined the phrase 'working with rather than on' (Hopkins, West and Ainscow, 1996, p.61). They were talking about giving each school autonomy to determine its own priorities for improvement and methods for achieving these and thus for teachers within those schools to take responsibility for their own development. Interestingly, they too voice some concern over the clarity of expectations and roles. Although writing from the perspective of external consultants to the schools in question, the same questions of when to support and when to intervene are likely to be faced by the principals of those organisations that have embraced the distributed leadership model.

Leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. (Harris and Lambert, 2003, p.17)

When working well this can only benefit the school but what happens when it appears to be going wrong? What should the principal do when this shared learning starts to take the organisation in a direction that they had not foreseen? Harris and Lambert insist that the role of the head is more important than ever in setting the climate for improvement, empowering others and acting as a catalyst for change. (Harris and Lambert, 2003, p.37-8) Without a strategic and shared vision any amount of involvement or learning together is likely to be directionless. This interplay between instructional and transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2003) may well be of great significance in the school trying to create sustainable improvement. It is important that leadership capacity is responsive rather than fixed (Harris, 2008, p 35) and that distributed leadership within the organisation has the ability to 'respond to particular problems and issues as they emerge' (Harris, 2008, p 37). With this in mind, I tried to frame the questions I asked in the three rounds of interviews to elicit views on ownership and embedding of improvement.

## Inside Out?

In his book, 'Leading Learners, Leading Schools', Brooke-Smith describes a similar leadership process giving his 'new approach' the title 'Dynamical Systems Theory.' (Brooke-Smith, 2003) In this approach, Brooke-Smith argues that creativity and dynamism will be engendered from within the organisation rather than externally imposed. In this system, change starts with the individual and grows up through the organisation, almost gaining a life of its own as it does so. Dynamical Systems Theory places at least equal emphasis on the health of the organisation or 'system' than on any externally imposed policies or procedures. Brooke-Smith maintains that it is within the complexity of such systems that change happens. 'Traditional management frameworks and traditional approaches to school effectiveness have yielded disappointing results....' (Brooke-Smith, 2003, p.94), he claims, and have almost certainly led to low-morale amongst educators. However, he says, his new approach of Dynamical Systems Theory can:

engender creativity, learning and the wonderful morale that can come about when people work together in richly creative environments where individuals become originators and experience a high level of personal causation. (Brooke-Smith, 2003, p.94)

If the system and relationships within it is healthy then it appears there are no limits as to what can be achieved. However he goes on to sound a warning note, that anyone working within such an environment must be prepared for the unpredictability and messiness that often comes with change. This can then call into question the validity of strategic planning, a thought that will not sit comfortably with many school leaders. He reminds us that change can be threatening and that very often 'the processes of managing *anxiety*' (Brooke-Smith, 2003 p.2) are situated at the heart of managing change. We have to remember that:

Schools change over time. Some changes are planned and proceed smoothly, while others occur abruptly and without warning. We have learned that exact prediction within organizations is difficult if not impossible. (Brooke-Smith, 2003 p.99)

This serves as a timely reminder to any leader aspiring to effect change in their school that 'vision and mission cannot be mandated or imposed.' Contrary to the expectations of many, particularly it would seem those politicians who have their visions for improving our schools, vision and mission 'must grow and be nurtured.' Indeed, Brooke-Smith asserts that they:

will not flourish [at all] unless the system moves towards the 'creative state'.  
(Brooke-Smith, 2003, p.105)

Brooke-Smith also discusses the theory of 'deep learning' (Harris, 2002, pp 87-8), a concept prevalent in school and local authority circles in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Going deeper means hard thinking and soul searching about the  
fundamental value and purpose of what we do as educators.

(Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998, p.30)

Brooke-Smith proposes a cycle of theory and practice both being dependent on each other while at the same time subject to a continual process of evaluation which will ultimately lead to change and draws parallels between this and the functioning of a complex dynamical system. Each, if used wisely will lead to a process of deep learning. However, he describes the move towards change as a 'struggle' and warns against simplistic interpretation of the process, continually reminding us how untidy and confusing change can be. Brooke-Smith is clear about the value of striving for change in the school or 'real institutional learning, and tells us that this will come about when staff are 'able to occupy the space for creativity positively.' (Brooke-Smith, 2003 p.93)

### **Change Management**

Fullan, in his book 'Successful School Improvement, also highlights the complexity and multi-layered nature of the process of change. He shows us how the multiple levels of change in our schools are intertwined and in many of his chapters:

we go between the district office, the community, the school building, the principal's office, the classroom or project centre, even into the heads of individual teachers and pupils. (Huberman in Fullan, 1992, p.3)

Each of these 'layers' plays its part in the process of change alongside other elements such as national policy. Although some of his language differs from

Brooke-Smith, he appears to be discussing very similar aspects. As well as pointing out the complexity of change he is also interested in the ways in which institutions create the capacity to innovate. (Fullan, 1992, p.7) This sounds not unlike the 'creative state' of Brooke-Smith's 'Dynamical Systems Theory.' Fullan explains that it takes several cycles of action and reflection for such a capacity for innovation to take root. He takes pains to explain too that just because things may look easy, it does not necessarily mean that is the case. How is it, he wonders that what appears quite straightforward in the hands of exceptional teachers causes 'all hell [to] break[s] loose' when we try to replicate it in our own institution?' As with Hallinger's 'transformational leadership' Fullan describes change as 'a process of learning new ideas and things.' (Fullan 1992, p.22) rather than something that can be imposed. It is not 'whether a given innovation is implemented, but whether the basic capacity to deal with change has developed.' (Fullan, 1992, p.113) In many ways, Fullan was perhaps before his time in his emphasis on change. Currently it appears to be accepted in educational circles that change is always a good thing.

Today, change has come to be understood as something that is real, necessary and inevitable. For the organization, engaging in change means being on the cutting edge. For the manager, engaging in change is seen as a way of being progressive. (Mills, Dye and Mills, 2009, p.34)

This idea of change always being positive is one that successive governments seem to have taken hold of. After a long period of stagnation, undermining, recovery and regrouping in the 1970s and 1980s, education suddenly re-entered the political consciousness in the UK. Our leaders started to suggest that regulation was the way forward (the beginnings of the National Curriculum) and teachers had a crisis of confidence. Those few schools that were managing to make a difference even in very difficult situations were being largely overlooked. There was a hunt for a single innovation that would sort everything. Fullan argues that this was not the way forward and that we were in need of a totally new mindset, a fundamental shift in thinking, about educational change. He suggests that without this, if change is introduced top-down in a series of innovations it will result in

defensiveness, superficiality or at best short-lived pockets of success.

(Fullan, 1993, p.3)

To guard against this Fullan suggests that educators must begin to see themselves and be viewed by others as experts in the dynamics of change. We return to his assertion that teachers must be empowered to become agents of and advocates for change not its victims.

If they do become skilled change agents with moral purpose, educators will make a difference in the lives of students from all backgrounds, and by so doing help produce greater capacity in society to cope with change.

(Fullan, 1993, p.5)

He is clear that schools must exist in a culture that will support teachers in asking questions about what they do and how they might do it better. He does not believe that teachers need to be told they must improve but rather given the skills they need to effect such improvement. It should be noted Fullan was writing at a time when schools had more freedom in what and how they taught. Teachers now work in a climate where initiatives tend to be introduced in a much more 'top-down' manner and indeed appear to be at the end of a period of frequent and rapid changes being required. However, Fullan's ideas still have validity and his call to empower teachers is not so far removed from the more recent 'Professional Learning Communities' approach. (Stoll and Louis, 2007)

### **Communities of Practice**

In many ways I feel that Fullan has touched on the very essence of change. It is partly because change is so difficult to define that the notion of 'Communities of Practice' has come into being (Wenger, 1998). A community of practice starts with the assumption that all human beings learn through engagement in social practice. We all belong to more than one community of practice at any one time says Wenger: 'In fact, communities of practice are everywhere.' (Wenger, 1998) One of the key elements of a community of practice is the engagement of its members (see Wenger 1998). Immediately the use of the word 'members' rather than, say, participants conveys a sense of belonging that may not be present in other change models. It is when a community negotiates its own meaning and rules of engagement that it becomes especially powerful and it is this element that the government appeared to overlook with its introduction of Change Teams at the

time of looking at workforce reform in schools. Ministers had already formulated a desired outcome and were perhaps surprised to discover that:

the power – benevolent or malevolent - that institutions, prescriptions or individuals have over the practice of a community is always mediated by the community's production of its practice. External forces have no direct power over this production because.....it is the community which negotiates its enterprise. (Wenger, 1998, p.80)

It would seem that ownership has a key part to play and is indeed probably one of the major strengths of a community of practice. When we choose to ignore this then the opportunities for real, embedded change can be severely curtailed. It is this perhaps that the authorities are missing in their pursuit of fast turnarounds.

Mutual engagement in the negotiation of meaning involves both the production of proposals for meaning and the adoption of these proposals. In the pursuit of a joint enterprise, these processes of production and adoption must go together. New meanings contribute to a joint enterprise to the extent that they are adopted; only then do they become effective in the community. Adoption is a necessary part of production.

(Wenger, 1998, p.202)

This is at odds with more traditional models of 'top down' directed change. With the key role of participation emerging it is clear that different models may well necessitate different timescales and equally be more or less effective. Is this the problem that lies at the heart of the differing views about the speed in which change can be effected? Is it possible that varying models of change necessitate different timescales but that equally their longevity may vary too? Certainly:

..... the change process is so complex and so fraught with unknowns that all of us must be on guard and apply ourselves to investigating and solving problems. (Fullan, 1993, p.viii)

Equally, Fullan said that:

When complex change is involved, people do not and cannot change by being told to do so. Effective change agents neither embrace nor ignore mandates. They use them as catalysts to re-examine what they are doing.

(Fullan, 1993, p.24)

Could it be that it is only in this re-examining of what we are doing that allows us to arrive at truly embedded change rather than some sort of cosmetic add-on?

Government ministers and departments often appear to believe that their latest policy idea for change will be the one thing that solves all our problems. Then, when things do not work out quite as they had envisaged they move quickly to a new idea which they seem to endow with an equal capacity for solving all our ills. This is diametrically opposed to Fullan's view that:

Productive educational change at its core, is not the capacity to implement the latest policy, but rather the ability to survive the vicissitudes of planned and unplanned change while growing and developing. (Fullan, 1993, p.5)

He goes on to unpick this further, putting alongside the almost unstoppable forces of externally imposed change the need to manage those forces. If we are to arrive at a point where we and the organisations within which we function are able to grow and develop appropriately, he suggests that we need to learn how to manage external forces for change:

'Change Forces' (the title of Fullan's book) is a deliberate double entendre. Change is ubiquitous and relentless, forcing itself on us at every turn. At the same time, the secret of growth and development is learning how to contend with the forces of change – turning positive forces to our advantage, while blunting negative ones. The future of the world is a learning future. (Fullan, 1993, p.vii)

It is often in learning how to contend with those diverse external forces that a community of practice acquires its identity and ultimately its power:

...it is only as negotiated by the community that conditions, resources, and demands shape the practice. The enterprise is never fully determined by an outside mandate, by a prescription or by any individual participant. Even when a community of practice arises in response to some outside mandate, the practice evolves into the community's own response to that mandate.... Because members produce a practice to deal with what they understand to be their enterprise, their practice as it unfolds belongs to their community in a fundamental sense. (Wenger, 1998, p.80)

Wenger also identifies this tension and uncertainty as a key element in the process of meaningful change:

A community of practice.....is at once both a community and an economy of meaning. The definition of a joint enterprise brings the community together through the collective development of a shared practice. But the definitions of that enterprise.....are to be negotiated among the participants through what I have called, in Chapter 3, the politics of participation and reification. In other words, the very process that pulls the community together also creates an economy of meaning by generating something to negotiate; the focus of identification becomes the very object whose meaning is contested.  
(Wenger, 1998, p.209)

Neither Wenger nor Fullan would claim that change is a straightforward process. Rather they would take the opposite view that it is uncertain, anxiety-causing and time consuming. Only when we accept these truths will be ready to embark on a true process of change.

In *Communities of Practice*, editors Hughes, Jewson and Unwin bring together a range of different opinions about what these communities actually are in practice, how they function and the impact they have on the change agenda. They bring into the arena the concept of power relationships within a community of practice – not quite the group of like-minded people working towards a shared goal that we talked about before (Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007, p.9). They also highlight the importance of a shared language in negotiation of meaning (see Mill's sensemaking) but point out that as well as co-operation and shared journeying, this language can also

generate, communicate and constitute relationships of conflict, rivalry and tension... (Hughes et al, 2007, p.9)

We seem to have returned to the consideration of the role of the divergent thinkers as outlined by Mills, Dye and Mills. Jason Hughes even goes as far as to suggest that sometimes these 'problem people' are almost ignored or swept under the carpet as their very existence challenges the comfortable model of community of practice with shared aims and ideals. Yet we saw earlier that they could well be a very

powerful force acting for change. Hughes suggests that the difficulties go right back to Lave and Wenger's original 1991 text. He proposes that there is some ambiguity about the community of practice model and that this is couched in a confusion between how learning 'actually is' and 'an idealized projection of how learning 'ought to be.' ( Hughes et al, 2007, p.6) It is this confusion Hughes suggests that has led to the variable understanding of Communities of Practice as self-directed, analytical organisations of learning and as vehicles that can be used by 'outsiders' to promote a particular direction of learning. There is a danger that the power of such communities then becomes diluted and in some cases, while retaining the title of community they become little more than a loose grouping of people in the same situation. There also appears to be confusion between Communities of practice, Professional Learning Communities and even Networks at times. Indeed my own choice of words on occasions leads me to question whether the terms Community of Practice, Learning Community and Learning Organisation are interchangeable. I wonder if there are clear differences or whether the definitions are too imprecise to be able to truly separate them. Certainly some of the literature suggests that there is a wide range of interpretation of the title of Community of Practice ranging from a rather comfortable, cosy group with shared ethos and ideals, to a unit with shared language disagreeing, debating and formulating a way forward to a nebulous unit high-jacked by outside forces to implement their own agenda for change. In this thesis I will be using the idea of a group of people, often disagreeing at the outset, who use a shared language to make sense of the world around them and agree a plan of action.

### **Change at organisational level**

In their book, *Understanding Organizational Change*, Mills, Dye and Mills explore an example of when the best attempts at organizational change can go wrong. In their study of Hope Hospital in Eastern Canada between 1995 and 1999, they outline how although many of the agreed requisites for organizational change including a vibrant 'learning and organizational development department' were present the expected change never actually happened. Staff throughout the organization were left disillusioned and the 'learning and organizational development department'

was ultimately wound up with members of the department losing their jobs. What had gone wrong? Mills, Dye and Mills conclude with Thurlow that:

although the language of organizational learning was heard throughout the organization, the commitment to this concept, and the meanings it conveyed, were not shared outside of the learning and organizational development department. (Thurlow in Mills et al, 2009, p.75)

Once again we are presented with an example that shows just how important ownership of the change agenda by all participants can be. Because an understanding of and commitment to the change needed was not shared by everyone involved it seems it simply did not take off despite being grounded in a good understanding of what was needed and being well-resourced, to the point of having its own specific department. The notion of 'organizational change' was a relatively new one and its aims in this context were couched in somewhat vague terms e.g. 'team building.' It seems that for change to be effective not only must everyone be on board with the process but they must also have a good understanding of the aims and intended outcome of such change. It is, I would suggest, these twin necessities that have led to the concept of 'Communities of Practice' and ultimately perhaps to a more specific notion of 'Communities of Change.'

At first sight this concept seems not unlike Lewin's 'Three-Step Model of Change,' a process he identified as far back as 1947. With three steps consisting of 'Unfreezing, Change and Refreezing' this model has many parallels with current approaches to organizational change: first group members must acknowledge the need for change (the 'unfreezing'), then the change occurs and the organisation moves forward in the way agreed and finally there is the 'refreezing' when changes are reinforced and supported (Lewin in Mills et al, 2009). There appears to be nothing that is not straightforward in this model yet clearly it can and often does go wrong. In the Hope Hospital case it seems that the majority of the workers did not share either an understanding of, or commitment to, the specific change that was being sought. The admittedly lively and focussed learning department seemed to

have got caught up in an idea of 'change' almost for its own sake rather than establishing the direction and aspiration of that change from the outset.

It would seem again that the language of change is of paramount importance. Having a shared vocabulary and a joint sense of meaning appears to be essential and it is in this aspect that Communities of Practice can offer a useful analytical approach. A Community of Practice will already have (or at least be in the process of developing) a shared vocabulary and a negotiated sense of meaning which then lends itself very well to the introduction and agreement of new ideas. A deep understanding of change is needed and commitment to the process of achieving this is thus far more likely when the Community of Practice is already established. It becomes more of an integral way of working than a discrete activity, allowing Lewin's third step of 'refreezing' to happen naturally and therefore making it far more likely that any change will become embedded and endure.

### **Resistance to change or shared goal?**

When discussing the notion of 'resistance to change' it emerges that one of the key barriers to change is often when those involved:

do not understand the need for change, the details of the change and/or how the change might impact the individual. This barrier may be the result of poor communication..... (Mills et al, 2009, p.113)

When there is no shared language of community then the potential for miscommunication and resultant inertia is huge. For change to be effective and lasting this barrier has to be overcome.

What is interesting about the development of change programmes is the sensemaking processes they also go through.....It is not a simple process of identifying a problem and applying the appropriate method to deal with it.

(Mills et al, 2009, p.115)

This sensemaking process may well be part of the remit of a Community of Practice (Stoll and Louis, 2007). These communities developed the power to build capacity and thus potentially facilitate sustainable change that could transform schools by

‘promoting self-evaluation, reflective enquiry, dialogue, collaborative learning and problem solving.’ (Stoll and Louis, 2007, pp6-7)

Perhaps it would also be useful to take a look at Appreciative Inquiry, a change model with a very different approach that was developed in the 1980s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Shrivasta. Rather than looking to solve problems, Appreciative Inquiry works by looking for the best in people and organisations, identifying and building on success.

For example, an organization normally will follow a process whereby they identify a problem and perform an analysis of the potential causes of that problem and then look for possible solutions. Instead.... A.I. sees organizations as mysteries to be embraced.... (Mills et al, 2009, p.84)

If the Appreciative Inquiry approach is successful then, in time, the organisation will focus more and more on its positive elements and less on solving problems. As this becomes the norm so the entire culture of the organisation is likely to change. This approach could well have much more sustainable results than the more usual problem-solving emphasis. It also sits comfortably alongside Kim and Mauborgne’s ‘Tipping Point’ theory (in Mills et al, 2009, chapter 8). In their own words:

The theory of tipping points, which has its roots in epidemiology, is well known; it hinges on the insight that in any organization, once the beliefs and energies of a critical mass of people are engaged, conversion to a new idea will spread like an epidemic, bringing about fundamental change very quickly. (Kim and Mauborgne in Mills et al, 2009, p.130)

It could well be that, once engaged, schools would drive their own improvement at a very fast pace. This could represent a very powerful force for change. But, in order for this to have an impact, governments and leaders need either to identify those areas that will engage the masses or be courageous enough to stand back and allow schools to identify their own focus from within. Kim and Mauborgne do not view it as quite this simple, stating that there will always be four significant hurdles to be overcome by those wishing to lead change: cognitive, resource, motivational and political hurdles. They suggest that anyone wishing to lead change must have a strategy for overcoming each of these hurdles. The first of these, the cognitive

hurdle, is perhaps the one most often encountered. Change initiatives often fail because those involved in the process don't see or believe in the reason for change. This is particularly so when attempts are made to kick-start change from outside. When there is an existing and strong community of practice with its shared language and understanding the members of that community are far more likely to respond to or even suggest areas in need of change/improvement. The second hurdle, resources, is often given as a reason for resisting change or for less than successful outcomes. However:

According to Tipping Point theory, extra resources are not required. Great leaders of change, like Bratton [(the subject of the New York Police Department study)], merely concentrate resources where they are needed and where the payoffs are the greatest. (Mills et al, 2009, p.131)

Kim and Mauborgne make the point that all too often less than 'great' leaders will fall into one of two traps: either they lower expectations in line with their available resources or they enter into long and energy-sapping battles for extra resources. Neither approach is likely to lead to the fundamental change required.

The next potential hurdle is that of motivation. People must want to make the change in addition to seeing the need and having the resources for that change. In the New York study, Bratton's approach was to identify and knock out the key players by putting them in the spotlight and making them publicly accountable for the success or otherwise of the change. Other theories might suggest that giving people ownership from the start and focussing on their successes might render motivation an aspect that is no longer a problem but an inherent strength. Kim and Mauborgne's final hurdle is the political one. All too often attempts at change in organisations are hampered by conflicting interests and selfish concern about the possible impact on the individual. Bratton's answer was to silence opponents early on by either isolating them within the organisation or even ultimately dismissing them. Once again, in well-functioning communities of practice this should be less of a hurdle as members of the community are more likely to have a shared understanding of what is good for that organisation.

### **Change – planned or unplanned?**

Considering these different approaches to change it becomes clear that there is a possibility of both planned and unplanned change in an organisation. Unplanned change could well be something relatively random, the result of an unforeseen action, or it could come from the deliberations and shared purpose of a community of practice. Planned change is far more likely to be imposed from outside or by the leader of the organisation and, interestingly, in the view of many researchers it has a relatively unconvincing success rate:

.....planned changes are heavily influenced by a number of factors but even these can be derailed by forces that managers haven't considered.....even though the success rate for planned change is low, change managers remain optimistic and often oblivious to the failure of others.

(Mills et al, 2009, p.33)

With this in mind it is clear that the headteacher of a school has a duty both to weigh up and filter external demands for change and consider very carefully before initiating any changes personally.

A range of forces have been driving change from the time of the Industrial Revolution. Generally the focus is either to improve efficiency or create better working conditions but productivity nearly always lies at the heart of change. Managers are continually looking at how this can be improved. Employee discontent, conflict and changes in society (e.g. the fall of communism) and our expectations all have their part to play but all feed as well into the need for maximum productivity. Whether these are standards that should prevail in the sphere of education may be a different matter. Should teachers and education authorities try to take some sort of moral high ground preparing their learners for a 'better society' governed by a different set of forces? The Community of Practice or Organisational Learning approaches, with their emphasis on shared ownership and development from within an organisation may well lend themselves better to such an emphasis. Knowing your purpose and emphasis for change is more important than ever in today's fast moving society with its focus on the success of the organisation. Change can be a dangerous thing and it is imperative to get it right:

The process of organizational change today is as much shrouded in threat and fear as it is in opportunity and promise. In theory and practice, change management is part of a powerful discourse of management in today's world. (Mills et al, 2009, p.11)

This should not be surprising as change is often the product of opposing forces. The interplay of diametrically opposed ideas can lead to some of the most innovative and ground-breaking changes. Interestingly it is frequently assumed that everyone shares the same values and aims and:

the impact of those who have divergent values is ignored.

(Mills et al, 2009, p.37)

When these people are considered, it is often in the light of failure. However, taking the interplay of opposing forces as a key factor in change, it could in fact be that those 'divergent values' are sometimes a positive force for change. When we put this alongside one of the received definitions of communities of practice as

informal groups bound together by shared expertise and passion for an activity or interest and [which] are ways in which organizations share knowledge; (McShane in Mills et al, 2009, p.77)

it may just be that we are in danger of ignoring a significant factor in the change agenda. Often change directed from 'above', as with government and local authority initiatives in schools falls outside of the remit of planned change as viewed by the members of the organisation. Such planned change comes from within and as a result of the organisations own analysis of its needs:

One of the earliest and most enduring schools of thought to emerge from the increased emphasis on understanding organizational change focussed on creating prescriptive formulas for the successful implementation of change.....the change process is intentionally initiated, carefully planned and implemented in order to achieve desired results. (Mills et al, 2009, p.42)

Such planned changes can take a short or a long time but they always have a clear endpoint. The danger with externally imposed changes is that the timescale needed and that offered may well be a mismatch. Governments and others often do not seem to allow the time needed to own, implement and embed these changes. Planned change needs to have a clear time span as well as a desired outcome.

Leaders need to be very clear what their expectations are of the process and of different individuals within the organisation. There should also be a robust framework for evaluating the success, or otherwise, of the change once implemented.

### **Change from within**

Fullan asserts that, unless change begins with the individual and their commitment to it, that change is unlikely to be lasting. It seems, from the various top-down initiatives imposed on schools, that the politicians are nervous of anything that might appear untidy yet, as Fullan repeatedly reminds us, that the change process is likely to be uncomfortable, confusing and complex. It is only in dealing with all of these in a spirit of openness and inquiry that we are likely to be successful in solving problems and implementing real change. As he puts it, even going so far as to use the words as a subheading within a chapter: 'Problems are our Friends', change is likely to be a more powerful vehicle when the outcomes of any change have not been pre-determined. All too often the process of change can be obscured by the considered necessity to have a vision. If the vision is articulated too early, Fullan argues that the process of change may be stifled with the unwelcome result that outcomes are likely to be shallow rather than embedded and owned. If people are not involved in the process of developing their own, or a shared vision, the best they are able to do is to sign up to someone else's. The inherent danger is that you will only ever have compliance rather than commitment and that a culture of dependence will develop. Thus, when the tough times come, those same people are likely to give up on the change process. Whereas if the vision is developed jointly as part of the shared change process then participants are more likely to take ownership of that vision. This in turn leads them to develop more resilience. If all participants know where they are heading, and why, problems encountered along the way are much less likely to derail the process.

### **Small schools**

There is surprisingly little literature about small schools, possibly not helped by the apparent lack of a consensus about what is a small school: 'there is no definitive

explication of just what constitutes a small school.’ (Leonard, Leonard and Sackney, 2001, p 80) Some writers consider that anything under about 400 pupils is small (Tasker, 2008) whereas others are possibly still influenced by the idealised vision of a small Victorian building with just one or two classrooms (Wilson and Brundrett, 2005). For the purposes of this research, I will take a small school to be one with approximately 100 pupils.

What literature does exist rarely deals with the management element (Wilson and McPake, 2000) but tends to concern itself more with curricular issues or with threats of closure of small schools. However, there are clear benefits to small schools acknowledged such as the small size allowing for an intimate learning community which will facilitate raising standards of achievement and behaviour. (Tasker, 2008, p179). Although in fact writing about secondary schools in the context of the ‘School within a School’ project, Tasker identifies these features, often found in a small school, as the elements will that enable all children to succeed and prevent them falling ‘below the radar’ (Tasker, 2008, p 178).

In the current educational climate, the task for small schools (as for any school) seems to have become more complex and difficult to manage. The number of initiatives to introduce and strategies to manage continues to grow with leadership seen as increasingly important and at the heart of educational reform, ‘but the leadership of small schools appears to be particularly challenging.’ (Jones, 2009, pp129-30) There are concerns about the capacity of small schools to manage the reform agenda which has led many to consider the possibilities of collaboration through clustering or federation (Jones, 2009). This may help to address the issue of there being too few people to carry out all of the tasks required (Jones, 2009, pp 152-30) and the ‘daunting workload’ with ‘limited possibilities for delegation’ for headteachers of small schools (Jones, 2009, p 150) but may well bring difficulties in other areas which are outside the scope of this research.

Although it is clear there are many challenges associated with leading or working in a small school, there are also positives. Small schools offer the opportunity for a

safe, caring environment, strong and close personal relationships and parental involvement. They are in a strong position to exhibit the sense of community that exists when people are bound together by a set of ideas that compels their sense of purpose.... people belong, people care, people feel responsibility (Sergiovanni, 1996, p 100). However, leaders of small schools have the added challenge of 'continuously avoiding the potentially negative effects inherent in very close relationships within small groups. They have to be both leader and professional colleague at the same time. It sounds a huge task, especially when headteachers of small schools often have a substantial teaching commitment (Wilson and McPake, 2000, p 127) and their time for management activities can be very limited.

However, there are also clearly rewards as:

We formed the impression that many small school headteachers enjoyed their work; were happy in their current schools having pursued a non-linear journey to headship; and had very disparate experiences which undoubtedly helped them 'juggle' their current responsibilities

(Wilson and McPake, 2000, p.123).

## **Conclusion**

The change literature and the writings about school improvement seem to agree that change and improvement are not straightforward processes. They are both many-layered and multi-faceted, calling into question the view that change can be effected quickly. Certainly, cosmetic change can take place quickly but any real embedded change involving a change of attitudes and the learning of new skills will take longer. Many writers agree that a 'community of practice' approach is likely to be the most effective but there are notable differences both in the detail of how this is worked out and perceptions about the role of the leader(s) in an organisation. However, there appears to be consensus on the following issues:

- change has to be owned before it can be effective
- change cannot be externally imposed with any degree of success and durability
- change needs to be appropriately managed

- leaders need to 'let go' as well as to delegate. Giving autonomy to others is a powerful tool in the embedding of change
- change must be allowed to evolve and grow: it is a process
- the process of change is likely to be uncomfortable, confusing and complex: it can also feel threatening
- people need to be involved in the process of developing a shared vision, the community negotiates its own meaning
- participants need to know where they are heading (they are then much less likely to derail the process)

In the context of educational change, there appear to be two significant problems. Firstly, that so much of the agenda is handed down from above with politicians and Local Authorities dictating what should happen. This is in direct contrast to the necessary factors for successful change listed above. Also, partly as a result of this, many schools are not well prepared for the process of change and indeed form part of an education system that can be very resistant to change unless it is imposed. They have learned to wait and do what they are told.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

While this study is essentially a case–study of a small village primary school and its journey towards improvement, the research is in two parts each with its distinctive methodology. The first is a case study of one year in the life of the school, constructed from data gathered during observation and a series of interviews with teachers, teaching assistants and governors at the school. These interviews took place at regular intervals during the academic year 2009-10. The second element is the study of five years in the life of a primary school with all the tensions of the search for improvement as told by me, the headteacher of the school, as an auto-ethnography. Although there was the ever-present danger of making assumptions and thinking I knew the answers – through my own experiences - before I had interrogated and analysed the data, my own thoughts and ideas are triangulated by the one year case study. When writing up the data section, I chose to order the sections chronologically in the interests of making it easier for the reader to follow the course of events. I began with the auto-ethnographic account of previous history of the school and my involvement as the new headteacher in order to provide the background necessary to the case study of one year.

In this research I have tried to get under the skin of what really constitutes school improvement. Is it all around standards and achievement, or is there something less tangible going on? Something maybe that leads to a sense of a thriving, successful school but which is harder to capture and describe than examination results for example? This is only part of the question though, what I also aimed to find out is how to embed any such improvement so that it becomes part of a school's culture. The questions I identified to examine and which I hoped would help me really understand school improvement and the different factors at play are as follows:

- What is school improvement and how does it happen in a small primary school?

- What are the roles of the various internal participants and external bodies in the process?
- What is the impact of and upon the headteacher?
- What part does 'ownership' play in the improvement process and how does this relate to issues of embedding and sustainability?

I also chose to examine the areas of time pressure and vulnerability which became key issues along with the sense of a 'magnification effect' which emerged as the research progressed. I decided to look further at how this concept of a 'magnification effect' can help to explore processes of change and development, particularly in small schools.

Having attempted to answer these questions I then planned to consider what implications there might be for future practice in the case-study school and whether these implications might have a wider application. Although my overall aim in this research was to answer these questions I wanted to remain open to the possibility that such answers may not be obtainable and to remember that:

research is [primarily] about questions and not necessarily about answers.

(Yin, 2009, p.70)

I fully expected to end up with another new set of questions at the end of the research.

Although in two distinct parts, the different aspects of the research are mutually interdependent. The one year case study is the central piece of research and indeed where the data-gathering started, the in-depth examination of one school and its journey towards improvement in a single academic year. In this case study I have looked at the school from different angles, trying to tease out what was happening in the areas of improvement and change. However, since so much of what I found appeared to have its roots in the longer term life of the school, it seemed important to look at that longer period of time and the impact of the passage of time on both change and improvement. Thus I was able to situate the one year case study within the context of 'change' as perceived by myself as headteacher over a much longer period. It seemed that a year in the changing life

of the school was likely to be strongly influenced by the five preceding years. If, as I suspected, change was not a short term event then the longer-term study would provide a valuable commentary on the single year.

The data from the one-year case study appeared to suggest quite strongly that school improvement is a much longer term process than anything that could take place in a single year. With this in mind I decided to look back at the preceding five years to see what light these might shed both on the factors at play in the case study year and how a year in the life of a school relates to its longer term history. This five year period was selected as it was the period of time I had been headteacher at the school. This meant that I had my own reflective journal for the five years alongside records of visits from outsiders and notes of meetings. Thus I was able to draw on a wide selection of data when I made the choice to situate my research in the wider context of six years in the life of the school. As I began to look backwards, at the same time as studying a single year, I began to see how the two parts emerging from my research were providing a commentary on each other. How, viewed together, they were starting to triangulate each other and thus give a greater strength and veracity to the whole. The two distinct methodological approaches – case study and auto-ethnography – and the data derived from them provided such a strong opportunity for reflection on each other that I ultimately chose to use this as a device to interrogate the data from the different strands. (see Chapter 5)

### **The one year study – a case study based on interviews and a reflective journal**

The major part of my research took the form of a case study of the academic year 2009-10. 'A case study is a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle.' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.181) The study was designed to look closely at the improvement process in the context of one small school while remaining open to the possibility that the same factors may exist in other settings too. One of the strengths of case studies is that 'they observe cause and effect in real contexts' (Cohen et al, 2000, p.181). As all contexts are unique, case study could be used to both 'investigate and report' (Cohen, et al,

2000) the particular context of one school in the timeframe of a single academic year. It would provide a framework for describing the richness of events in that context and would allow myself, as researcher, to be legitimately involved in the case being studied. It would also suit my purposes well in '[allowing me] to blend[s] a description of events with [my] analysis of them. (Cohen et al, 2000, p.182) I would expect to be able to catch the close-up reality and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the relationships and events that made up the year 2009-10 for the school community in which I work. I could also allow events to speak for them themselves and participants to tell their story. However, it would be of the utmost importance not to allow my writing to become journalistic or merely anecdotal and I would need to avoid the temptation to report events selectively otherwise I would run the risk of misrepresenting everything I was researching (Cohen et al, 2000).

### **Data collection**

In addition to my own notes and reports already available, I interviewed teaching staff and governors at regular intervals throughout the year. This focus on interviewing teachers and governors was deliberate and I chose not to interview parents and children for two main reasons. Firstly, I was concerned about the ethical implications of involving children and their families. I also considered that the interviewees needed a deeper understanding of the workings of a school than most parents or children were likely to possess. For this case study I tried to capture the views of as many staff and governors as possible (see Table 1) endeavouring to find out what their understanding of school improvement was and to discover what factors they considered were at play and affecting the progress of the school. I intended to interview all of the permanent teachers (two full time teachers and three part-time) and as many of the teaching assistants as I could. My plan was to interview each person three times: at the start of the academic year, mid-way through the year (i.e. about February) and again as the year ended. This proved to be considerably harder than I had anticipated. Firstly the members of staff were generally fairly reluctant to take part. I believe this to be for one of two reasons. In some cases, teachers who chose not to take part were those who probably felt quite negative towards the school or towards me as their headteacher

during the time in question. In the case of the Teaching Assistants who did not participate I think they lacked confidence, feeling that they had little of value to contribute. With everyone there was also the possibility that the time that would be taken up by being involved just seemed too much. Whatever their reasons, two of my longer term teachers did not participate and of the teaching assistants, only the Higher Level Teaching Assistant agreed to be part of the study. Immediately my sample was skewed and in danger of being too small to be useful. However, by including the Graduate Trainee and a regular supply teacher (who ultimately returned to do Maternity Cover in the school) I managed to secure six staff members who were willing to take part. It was not ideal as their movements were likely to mean that I either could not interview them on all three occasions or that they were 'out of the loop' at various points and so could not make any valid comment on the school's progress at that stage. Although not part of my original plan to interview the Graduate Trainee and the supply teacher, I suspected that these latter two people may well have had a different view of things to those of us who had been more deeply involved in the 'improvement journey' and that their views may therefore shed light on other aspects and help inform my analysis of what I discovered.

### **Question and interview design**

I intended that the interviews with staff and governors would be as unstructured as I could make them. I wanted to talk to people and 'hear' what they had to say (see Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and was concerned that my questions did not get in the way of this. However there was also always a possibility that some people would not be ready to talk so I decided I needed a bank of questions to start the discussions off (see Appendix D). However my focus would remain on keeping the interviews as open-ended as possible in order to 'enable respondents to project their own ways of defining the world.' (Cohen et al, 2000, pp 146-7) The interviews were to be 'guided conversations rather than structured queries.' (Yin, 2009, p 106) I was prepared to let the interviewees travel wherever they liked, expecting that this would enable them to express their thoughts freely and also give me space to probe further when appropriate, but chose to use starter questions or an 'interview guide'

to help me 'keep the interview within the parameters traced out by the aim of the study.' (Wenden, 1982, p 39) I wanted to make a comparison between the views expressed by the different participants so used my interview guide 'to provide a clear set of instructions for [me] and .... provide reliable, comparable qualitative data.' (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006) Once written, I trialled and discussed the questions with two colleague teachers in other schools and one headteacher. I intended that the questions would be the same at each interview point but in reality this was not possible: it would have been pointless repeating some questions and others were of necessity changed by the fact that they were being discussed at different points in the school year. Having decided that I needed a set of interview questions it seemed that they should be used with all participants. However I did not want our conversations to be dominated by a series of questions and was careful to encourage interviewees to go off at tangents and discuss the areas they chose. In order to capture what I hoped would be entirely independent views, I asked each participant to complete a SWOT analysis (see Appendix C) relating to the school's current position before we met to talk. These SWOT analyses were intentionally untitled and each participant was simply asked to complete them according to 'where the school is now.' In the event, although participants willingly filled these in (see examples in Appendix C), I made minimal use of them as they showed very little, if anything, that did not come out during the interview process.

### **A variety of data sources**

The records of the various interviews coupled with my own reflective journal and various reports and visit notes that came into the school during the year provided a good data base for a case study of the institution during a single year which could then be compared with the study of the preceding five years. I anticipated that the variety of sources would allow me to stand back and evaluate the veracity of what I observed rather than see events purely through participants' eyes, including my own. I expected that looking at issues such as morale among staff during the cycle of school improvement and the effect that this might have across the board, even on the very improvement process itself, while considering carefully the stories of individuals caught up in the process might yield some fascinating insights. The

perceptions of individual participants were indeed at the very heart of what I wanted to find out about but I wanted to be careful to take a slightly more dispassionate view of events, trying to represent them accurately and not just through individuals' stories. The centre of my area of interest was around the simple thought that, when schools are working hard to improve, there are people working within those schools; people who have feelings and their own views of how things should be. I wanted to listen to their stories but also to consider and evaluate the themes that might emerge from those stories. I would thus move from simple narrative into the more specific discipline of case study, looking at the institution studied from a number of different angles. Once themes emerged I would try to use these to help me:

understand an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration. [The issue is likely to be] explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e. a setting, a context). (Creswell, 2007, p.43)

In my research the stories of the individual participants could not help but become part of a context. Interested as I am in the views of the people affected by the cycle of school improvement, ultimately this interest was likely to go only as far as those views impacted on the improvement itself. It is that process and its impact on the pupils within the school that is the driving force behind the research. Thus, valid as the stories of the individuals are, the research would be unlikely to stop with those stories but to lead into the wider arena of a case study of the school.

### **Analysis of the data**

In the first instance I decided simply to review the data gathered by listening to or reading transcripts of interviews several times over. As I did this I tried to stay alert to any threads that might emerge, leaving space for those themes to surface 'of their own accord' rather than attempt to impose any exterior structure on them. Once those themes identified themselves, I used the simple but effective device of colour-coding. Each apparent theme was given a colour and I went through my research notes highlighting each instance where this theme appeared. I was then able to collate the information into 'basic stories' which could be subjected to further analysis. I then went on to match these up with themes emerging from

other data from the single year (the interviewees' SWOT analyses, my own reflective journal and notes of meetings with, or visits by, other agencies). Once this was completed I would be able to analyse the analysis in conjunction with the finding of the five year auto-ethnography, using each strand as a commentary on the other.

### **The researcher as participant**

There would of course be difficulties once again arising from the fact that I am a participant researcher. My opportunities for doing effective and unbiased research may well be limited by the fact that I would be looking at the stories of people I know very well professionally but less well on a personal level. However, this knowledge would also be helpful in permitting me:

to collect extensive information about the participant, and ... to have a clear understanding of the context of the individual's life. (Creswell, 2007, p.72)

My specific knowledge would help me situate my findings in time and context and thus facilitate constructive analysis of the data. Since 'significance rather than frequency is a hallmark of case studies' I would still be able, with my small research sample to gain 'an insight into the real dynamics of situations and people.' (Cohen et al, 2000, p.185) It seems to me that, carefully handled, my impressions formed over time have validity within 'the pool of data' (Stake, 1995) rather than being simply a difficulty to be overcome. Certainly, in analysing different aspects alongside one another, I was able to view the same events and experiences from a range of different angles. I also discovered that when it came to interviewing people for the one-year case study of my research, my professional involvement with them turned out to be far from being the handicap I might have expected, indeed my existing relationships with my interviewees could be viewed as a positive factor. It seems that:

being an insider can make you seem less threatening, in part because you know the rules and are as bound by them as the interviewees are. Also, locating yourself in the social space that interviewees know and can control may be helpful [as well]. (Rubin and Rubin, 2005 p.87)

### **The role of the headteacher and power imbalance**

Power relationships within the school (see ethical considerations section) were certain to add another dimension to my role as an insider researcher. There was nothing I could do to eliminate the power imbalance between me and any staff members who were interviewed. However, as discussed above, this turned out to be less of a defining factor than it first appeared. I suspect it would have had a part to play in the refusal of some people to participate – though I can never be certain of this – but those who did choose to take part did not appear to be in any way constrained by our different professional roles. Again, it can only be my perception but they seemed quite confident in sharing things within interviews, knowing that they would go no further. Of course, neither interviewee nor researcher could guarantee to be entirely unaffected by what was discussed. With my dual role as researcher and headteacher the best I could offer was to undertake not to knowingly make use of anything from the interviews in the normal life of the school. If any of the interviewees wanted to share something with me as their headteacher then we both had to be clear that this must be on another occasion.

It was essential that I reflected continually on the responsibilities of my role as well as the power imbalance throughout the research. Being in essence part of the data, I had a real opportunity to use my position as both leader and insider researcher to consider that data from so many different angles. This provided an opportunity to look really closely at what was taking place within the school at many different layers during the time of the research. However, it was not my intention to act on the findings. This was not to be action research, aiming to influence and initiate change in practice but an attempt to understand the forces at work both for and against improvement during a given period of time.

### **The interviewees**

I wanted to interview both teaching staff and governors three times over the course of the year of the case study. Although the staff interviewed were not as representative a selection as I had hoped – some staff members declined to take part in the research – I did manage to include a teaching assistant, a trainee

teacher, a supply teacher and several more experienced and permanent staff. One teacher could not be interviewed on the final occasion as she had gone on maternity leave. Two others had a break in their time at the school and so could not be interviewed on the second occasion– one was on placement elsewhere and the other away travelling – but they were in school at both ends of the year of the case study so could still comment on progress made. In fact, their slightly more removed view yielded some interesting insights into the year.

| <b>role</b>       | <b>name given in research</b>                                                                  | <b>summary of information/skills</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Teachers:</b>  | <b>Jane</b><br><b>Diane</b><br><b>Ellie</b><br><b>Jenny</b><br><b>Emily</b><br><b>Harriet</b>  | include graduate trainee, regular supply teacher, higher level teaching assistant and three permanent teachers of differing seniority                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Governors:</b> | <b>Barry</b><br><b>Tina</b><br><b>Dawn</b><br><b>Penny</b><br><b>Chris</b><br><b>Charlotte</b> | include past (experienced) Chairman and new Chairman<br>some governors who have good in-depth knowledge of the school and spend a lot of time in school and others whose involvement is more at a distance<br>some governors who have children in the school and some who do not |

**Table 1: the interviewees**

Unfortunately I cannot give a great deal of detail about each specific interviewee as this would make them far too easily identifiable even with their fictitious names (see ethics section). As a result of this, they are listed above (Table 1: the interviewees) but only described in a very general manner.

### **The governors**

Being acutely aware of the slightly skewed sample of 'teachers' I was able to interview, I decided to try to get some balance into the process by deliberately selecting the same number of governors as teachers even though several more governors had declared themselves willing to be interviewed. I intended to try and achieve a good cross-section of governors: those who came into school regularly and those who did not, those who had been governors for several years and those who had not, those who had children at the school and those who did not. I was also particularly keen to interview the outgoing Chairman who had held this position for over ten years and the new Chairman who took up office in September 2009. For governors, like teaching staff, I planned to conduct interviews with them three times over the course of the academic year, once in each of the autumn, spring and summer terms. Governors, thankfully, were more than happy to be involved in the research. I selected six of them to take part as previously outlined so my research sample did ultimately have some balance to it – six members of staff and six governors. As I had a choice regarding which governors to use, I was able to create a sample that was a good mix of experienced and less experienced governors and which included some governors who came into school regularly and others who were not able to do this. The interviews I held with them were semi-structured with the aim of 'hearing' what each respondent had to say (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

### **Interviewing teaching assistants**

In addition to the teachers interviewed, I had planned to interview the school's three teaching assistants, one of whom is a higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) and therefore does some whole class teaching in addition to her role in supporting individual teachers. I anticipated that teaching assistants were probably less likely to agree to be interviewed than the other potential interviewees but suspected that, if they did agree to be interviewed, they would probably be able to shed a great deal of light on what takes place in different classrooms.

It is the teaching assistants who really know what happens in classrooms, whether there is any continuity and progression built into a school's curriculum. (Pie Corbett, 2010)

In many ways, I could envisage them playing the role taken by the television camera in the old fly-on-the-wall documentaries. However, I was to be very disappointed that of the teaching assistants in school, only the HLTA agreed to take part as this seemed to deprive the study of a whole layer of information. I found it very frustrating not to be able to instruct them to participate but I knew that I had to be exceptionally careful not to put pressure on anyone because of the imbalance of power in our professional relationship as described in the ethics section.

### **Structure of the interviews**

At the same time as wanting to 'hear' what each interviewee had to say (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) I had a range of questions/areas to explore (see Appendix D) which I hoped would both guide and facilitate discussion. I was also keen to try to access as much of each interviewee's independent thought as possible, before I had 'contaminated' them by my questioning. To this end I asked each person to spend a few minutes completing a SWOT analysis (see Appendix 2) on the school's current position before I talked to them. I asked them not to spend too long on this as I wanted to capture each person's gut reaction, rather than any considered views and very definitely not what they might think I would want them to say. I chose to use the SWOT analysis as it was a tool used regularly in school to collect opinion on a variety of subjects. Being familiar to the participants, I expected it to be a useful way of gauging their opinion independently of me and also a task they would not find too onerous although as explained earlier in this chapter it turned out to have contributed very little to the research process. To get some consistency into the process, I used the same interview structure and series of questions as my starting point for every interview (with minor adjustments to allow for the stage in the year that the interviews took place). Although there had turned out to be some difficulties with the interview questions (see section on question design), I decided to continue with the research design as planned. There was the possibility that some questions might be regarded as , 'leading' the interviewee towards a particular answer but taken alongside the semi-structured, conversational nature of the interviews and the opportunity for interviewees to share their views via the

SWOT analyses, it seemed that this would be unlikely to have a significant effect on the outcome.

In addition to using the SWOT analysis to try to capture interviewees' thoughts before we even began to have our conversations, I tried to be very careful to make it as easy as possible for people to talk and for me to 'hear' what they are saying (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). I was particularly conscious of the potential power imbalance (see ethics section) between myself and some of the interviewees – because of our respective roles in the setting in which we work – and considered that this may make it even more likely that:

Responsive interviewing can be nerve-racking [on both sides, as] during an interview you have to figure out not only what people are saying, but also what they mean (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.146)

I was able to help myself by having my questions/interview guide prepared ahead of time which allowed me to 'be prepared and appear competent during the interview[s]' (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006) but needed to ensure that I put each of the interviewees at their ease. It was of paramount importance to get the tone of the interviews right and to ensure that the questions asked, and any follow-up explorations were challenging and thought-provoking enough to encourage interviewees to share what they were really thinking even when they may not have known in advance that that was indeed what they were thinking. I hoped I had made the interview design flexible enough to allow me to follow and explore where people led. Yet at the same time I needed to be sure enough of the areas I intended to explore with them to enable me to search for, and maybe find, answers to the questions posed by this research. I viewed myself as 'the instrument, the tool of discovery', (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.37) whilst also taking the utmost care not to impose my own views on the interviewees. I was only too aware of the challenges this was likely to present in my particular context as many of my views were already likely to be well known to most of the people I interviewed. Putting the SWOT analysis exercise before each interview was one way in which I attempted to establish some distance between opinions that I am known to hold (and which respondents may feel they should share) and those opinions which are truly the

individuals' own values. Pause for reflection was also built into the design of the interviews, allowing time for participants to both take stock and then pursue those avenues that they deemed to be of interest. In this way analysis was to be part of the ongoing research, allowing me to change tack slightly or probe something in more depth for instance. It was also key to try to demonstrate to interviewees that no-one's individual interpretation would be seen as right or wrong but that each would put his/her own slant or emphasis on the story, articulating views that I would then put together to construct my own understanding of what was actually happening or had happened in the school during the year being studied. Together, these would allow me to begin to tell the story of the school's journey and why it may, or may indeed not, be a contrast to more accepted models of improvement. I was endeavouring through these interviews to establish the answer to the following:

Is there a truth out there that is independent of human perception? Or does truth differ from person to person, according to what individuals see and experience and how they interpret events, stories, and conversations? [I would want to know:] Do the findings of the research represent some objective truth, the understanding of the researcher, the various understandings of those being researched, or some combination?

(Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.21)

### **The longer term study: an auto-ethnography by the headteacher**

As the year of the case study, 2009-10, began to unfold it became increasingly clear from both the interviews and my observations that a single year is a very short time in the context of trying to improve a school. It became apparent that I needed to look at a longer period of time: I needed to situate the case study within a longer term look at the school. So I decided to look back at the preceding five years. This five-year study of the school during the years 2004-2009 is derived largely from my own diaries, notes and recollections about the development of the school and my experiences as a leader during that period - it is very much my own story, an auto-ethnography.

### **Why I chose this approach**

It is my belief that, in order for qualitative research to be effective, the researcher has to 'live' the research in much the same way as anthropologists often find it necessary to live among the peoples they are studying. It is only once they become part of the people group they are studying that true observation and effective research can begin to take place. Clearly, being present in the school during the time in question and actively involved in the improvement process – in essence being a key player in that process – I have been very much a part of the 'people group.' I have lived the research in much the same way that anthropologists would go and physically take up residence with a particular tribe or culture in order to study their lives in depth by becoming immersed in their day to day routines and their culture. Like them, my research is about 'getting underneath' the surface, asking the right questions and trying to establish what it is that people are thinking and what really motivates them. However, it has to be acknowledged that I was also a player in the story, not an outsider simply documenting change and that my observations would thus almost certainly be affected by previous experiences and opinions.

By examining the events in school over the past five or six years I was attempting to find out about the forces that are truly at play when a workforce is asked to 'improve standards.' My story became the filter through which the story of the school and its staff was told. As Woolcot tells us, it is the researcher's job to interact with his information in the way that most readily encourages it to yield up its secrets. By living the story and recording my own response to events and personalities, I was trying

to make sense of what goes on, to reach out for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis. (Woolcot, 1994, p.96)

As I was striving for that understanding, I was also searching for a way to embed change and gain ownership of the improvement process by the members of the school community. Could everyone really be a part of this? Was there a process that would aid this embedding. It would be no good me allowing my 'ethnographic

imagination' (Willis, 2000) to run wild. Although it might have been fun to become a bit of an 'academic vandal' (Willis, 2000, p x) and take my ideas, mix them with the data and see what happened this would have been unlikely to bring me any further forward in the quest to really get underneath the data than taking a purely quantitative approach. As Willis would say

well grounded and illuminating analytic points flow only from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life, somehow recorded. (Willis, 2000, p.xi)

Many of my concepts and opinions about the process of improvement were almost certainly already formed. By bringing them together with records of events of the past five years and re-examining them through the 'eye of the needle' of my ethnographic imagination (Willis, 2000), I hoped to arrive at an evidence based view of what school improvement looks like over an extended period of time, seeing where my approach differed from some of the received wisdom in the area and its effectiveness in moving the school forward.

I decided that using an auto-ethnographic approach should allow me to speak with the voice of authenticity since:

The voice of the insider is assumed to be more true than that of the outsider in much current debate. (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.4)

In being a part of the culture I was studying my aim was to paint as accurate a picture as possible of that culture. By falling in with the increasing trend towards self-reflexivity (Reed-Danahay) and taking the time to record my thoughts in a reflective journal I was considering and making judgements about the culture I depicted as I went, thus hopefully enabling me to look at how those reflections and judgements might change over time and indeed how accurate they were. However, I knew I must beware of becoming too inward looking in my research and to this end it would be important for me to find ways to ensure the reliability of the data gathered as far as this was possible.

### **Is auto-ethnography a valid approach?**

Not everyone would agree with me about the benefits of auto-ethnography as a research tool. Delamont (2007) is very scathing, although knowingly controversial,

about its validity seeing it as a 'lazy' approach with significant inherent dangers. She is concerned that it is very hard for the auto-ethnographer to 'fight familiarity' and almost impossible for them to write ethically. Being both honest and ethical was certainly an issue I encountered in my own study, although participants willingly gave their 'informed consent' there was the continual presence of the power imbalance between us. Despite trying to remain conscious of this at all times and putting in measures to counteract it this was never going to disappear. As Delamont highlights, there is also the problem of treating non-participants ethically. In an organisation as small as the research school it would be near impossible to ensure complete anonymity however much names and locations in time and space were altered. Although I cannot disagree with Delamont that there is an almost insurmountable obstacle here, in my opinion the benefits of and possible insights gained from research grounded in the everyday experiences of the participants outweigh this danger, provided that checks are in place to ensure that people are protected. Delamont is also concerned that auto-ethnography is far too introspective. Rightly, she claims that readers are not really interested in what the researcher is feeling but rather in what the research demonstrates. She is concerned that auto-ethnography can be so focussed on the self that it lacks rigour and ultimately 'analytic outcome'. These are very real dangers which must be guarded against but which do not, in my opinion, invalidate the approach. My research guards against being too focussed on the self by being situated in, and triangulated by, a series of wider events which help to give it the ring of a wider authenticity. This approach is more reminiscent of Leon Anderson's 'Analytic Auto-ethnography' in which the researcher is 'a full member of the research group or setting and visible as such a member in published texts'. This researcher, he proposes is committed to 'developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena', in essence to 'analysing'. Auto-ethnographers, says Anderson, should expect to be involved in the construction of meanings and values in the social worlds they investigate. (Anderson, 2006, p.384)

The aim is not simply to document personal experience but rather to use this 'insider's perspective' to gain a deeper insight into broader social phenomena. (Anderson, 2006, p.387) Anderson makes a clear distinction between 'analytic' and

'evocative' auto-ethnography, the 'autobiographical creative non-fiction' that concerns Delamont so much. Reed-Danahay (1997) takes up this same theme, explaining that auto-ethnographers may vary in their emphasis on 'graphy' (the research process), 'ethnos' (culture) and 'auto' (self). In getting this emphasis right, researchers can 'use their own experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions.' (Holt, 2003 p.2) In this piece of research I am attempting to do just that, underlining the way in which I, as ethnographer, interact with the culture being researched (Holt 2003), in this case both the individual school community and the wider education system of which it forms a part. Despite concerns over the use of verification strategies and of using 'self as the only data source' highlighted by both Holt and Delamont, I was convinced that auto-ethnography was a valid approach in this case and that indeed much valuable data was in danger of being lost if I attempted to write myself out of the story in more traditional research style. However, I would need also to keep my distance at times. I would have to be able move between proximity and distance frequently and easily in my role of participant observer.

### **How the data was collected for the longer study**

The main source of data for this auto-ethnographic study was my own reflective journal written over the five-year period of the research and continued into 2009/10, the year studied in more depth. Clearly this journal was a highly personal account of the school during that period and of its impact on me as an individual. It is interesting that there are periods when I have written a great deal in it and other times when not much has been recorded. Immediately there is a likelihood of the research being skewed. At this distance of time from the original writings it is impossible to say whether these periods of activity and inactivity were dictated by workload, my own emotional involvement in different aspects or something altogether different. To try to minimise the effects of this I collected additional data from a variety of sources, such as Ofsted Inspection Reports and visit notes from various advisers, I also looked back at my old diaries for jottings that had not made their way into my journal. Among the various visit notes were the records of visits by the School Improvement Partner (SIP). The SIP visited the school at least termly

to work with the headteacher in identifying and monitoring improvement issues. SIPs are not expected to tell the headteacher what needs to be done but to both support and challenge the headteacher in the judgements he or she makes. They also have a role to play in the headteacher's performance management cycle and in reporting to governors. Initially it was intended that schools would have a 'single conversation' with local authority, government agencies etc. and that this would be through the SIP. Somehow the model never really seems to have worked like this but the SIP remained a significant player in the improvement process. In my quest to understand this role more fully, I chose to undertake national training for accreditation as a School Improvement Partner alongside the research project. One of the strengths of being able to use these various data sources was the possibility of triangulating the data and thus avoiding some of the potential pitfalls of auto-ethnography. I had also chosen to adopt an entirely different approach to collecting data from the participants in the case study of 2009-10 in the school. Putting the two different methodologies alongside one another would, I anticipated, result in a strengthening of the data set still further. Although the longer-term research is by definition largely the headteacher's (my own) story, the presence of other significant players helps to add credence to that story. While it is often assumed that qualitative methods of gathering data are less numerically certain than quantitative methods and they are thus laid open to the charge of being somehow less pure than quantitative methods, I needed to do everything possible to guard against any suggestion of bias. It is of course true that any single method of qualitative data collection does have a high likelihood of being biased, especially when the researcher is a participant, simply because it cannot be numerically measured and thus have any variables removed. Collecting data in different ways and from multiple sources enabled me to look for a commonality of view that I hoped would help to confirm the findings. This triangulation of the data (Cohen et al, 2000) would help to reassure both researcher and reader of the accuracy of the findings from that data.

### **Analysis of the data**

As with the case study, I chose to read and re-read my reflective journal, listening for themes to emerge. Once I had a list of themes, I colour-coded references to them and used these to unpick what the data was saying. Some clear threads began to emerge. These I looked at alongside the data-analysis from the one year case-study to see whether there was in fact a commonality between the two aspects of the research.

### **General factors affecting both sections of the research**

#### **Ethical considerations**

This research was fraught with potential ethical considerations, some of which were explored earlier in this chapter. Because of the inherent power imbalance between the researcher and many of the subjects (see section: The role of the headteacher and power imbalance) all investigation needed to be handled with extreme sensitivity. At no time could I forget that each of the teachers or other staff members was directly responsible to me in the workplace. I needed to remain very aware of my professionalism and the potential vulnerability of their situation. Informed consent of participants is always important (see Appendix 3) but in this case I had to remain constantly aware of the need to ensure that each subject knew and understood exactly what I was doing and thus was able to give their informed consent to this. It was essential for the participants to have confidence that anything shared with me in the context of interviews for this research would remain just there, an anonymous part of a body of data gathered for the purpose of investigating an institution and undertaking a case study of that institution. I also knew that I needed to be very careful not to give any suggestion that I might be making judgements on things the interviewees had done. If for example they chose to share something about their own practice that had perhaps not worked as well as they had hoped, they needed to be sure that this would not reflect on them in any way negatively in our professional relationship as headteacher and staff. As their headteacher I had to ensure that they did not in any respect feel threatened or compromised by taking part in my research. It was vitally important that they were able to feel confident that while we all understood that it was not possible for me

to guarantee to be entirely unaffected by anything they shared during the course of the research interviews, I would undertake that nothing they shared would be used 'against them' in a different context. I also took great pains to assure and remind them repeatedly that they were totally free to withdraw from the research project at any time. I am as sure as I can be that I did not take information gleaned from the research project and use it in my headteacher role, however indirectly. However what I think may have happened was that a closeness developed between me and the participants which may inadvertently have cast non-participants in the role of outsiders.

Given the power imbalance in our relationship, particularly for those potential participants who were also members of staff, I was mindful of the fact that they might find it difficult to refuse me when I requested their participation. Although I had worked hard to try to eliminate this imbalance, it would be present in our relationship. I cannot alter the fact that I am their headteacher and, as such, hold a degree of power over them. With this in mind, I gave each potential interviewee 'cooling off' time before accepting their agreement and also asked other colleagues to talk to them and check that they were happy to talk to me in the context of this research. Indeed, despite being frustrated that some individuals declined to take part in the research, I was at the same time heartened to know that there were colleagues who did feel able to refuse my request even with the obvious power imbalance in our relationship. Once actually in the interview situation I tried to do everything possible to remain continually aware of the 'power' factor and my need to take account of this. It was of the utmost importance to do everything possible to put my subjects at ease and to become as invisible as possible, taking great care to ensure the interviewees understood and indeed felt that they had control of the interview situation and that they could be confident that I would only use what they told me with their full consent. I tried also to be extremely clear to explain that I would only use notes of past lesson observations, or visits made to the school by other professionals, with the individual's express consent. Indeed, as I began to think more about this I decided to include this as a separate element in the process of obtaining written consent.

The potential power imbalance seemed less likely to be an issue with the governors as they are each part of the school's Governing Body to which I am accountable for the way the school performs. In some senses, the power imbalance would perhaps even have the potential to swing the other way. However, I am in the fortunate position of working in an environment based on mutual trust and respect so I did not anticipate this becoming much of a problem. The ethical considerations more likely to be faced were, I anticipated, in the realms of confidentiality. I needed to remain constantly aware that nothing should be discussed that could hold the potential to identify any individual child at all or indeed any individual within the school community unless with their specific consent. Although I was fairly certain that governors would not be constrained by issues of power and accountability when talking to me, I needed to remain mindful that it was always possible that they might decide not to share something because of concerns about how this might affect our future relationship. This was perhaps particularly likely to have been the case for those two governors who had children in the school during the period of the research. Obviously I am clearly identifiable throughout the research and although that is, of course, with my full and informed consent I still needed to take care not to inadvertently disclose anything that is at odds with the role of headteacher. There were many occasions on which things were shared in situations that bore some resemblance to the 'sanctity of the confessional.' Without any doubt that is where they needed to remain. However, they also became part of my consciousness and the body of knowledge I carry with me on a day to day basis. Thus I knew that I would need to be extremely careful that I did not inadvertently betray anyone's confidences when telling my own story.

One other huge ethical consideration faced by this research was to do with protecting the confidentiality associated with colleagues whether or not they agreed to participate in the case study. Because the focus of the study is on school improvement there would naturally be a tendency to make and share judgements about other staff members. Interviewees would almost certainly divulge some of their opinions about colleagues whether positive or negative. I anticipated some considerable tensions arising out of my own role as a participant researcher. While,

as researcher, I was always going to want to dig deeply and try to get to the heart of what was going on this may not always sit comfortably with my role as the lead professional in the school. I knew I needed to remain vigilant and ensure that, if necessary, I could intervene to prevent interviews going down a path that might involve too much criticism of an individual teacher by a colleague or governor. I was aware that I might find this very hard to do especially if that same path appeared to be leading to something that might help further my understanding of the processes around school improvement. However I remained mindful of the fact that, in the event of a conflict of interests, my role as a professional and my duty to staff and children must always take precedence.

The potential ease with which participants could be identified was an issue I discussed at length with my supervisor. At one stage we even considered suggesting that there should be restricted access only to this thesis to ensure people within the school could not be identified. However, by taking great care with anonymity, even when it meant putting limitations on what could be shared about participants, I felt confident that we could protect people enough. While any of the participants reading the research would probably be able to identify themselves and maybe others, they would find no surprises within the text. The restrictions on what could be included about participants were, I felt, enough to prevent outsiders from recognising us.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation may be defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour.

(Cohen, et al, 2000, p.112)

The idea comes originally from the realms of surveying when several markers are used to pinpoint a location exactly. In the same manner, different views can be taken of an event or situation to ensure validity of the data. In the auto-ethnography especially, I considered it important that I corroborate my own descriptive data with other sources. I was conscious that simply telling a story would not be enough. If I was to attempt to answer the questions posed about

school improvement, it was essential to look at the story from different viewpoints. There is a point at which narrative must turn to case study and data must be gathered from a variety of sources. Interview records, reports from inspectors and advisers visiting the school and other records were examined alongside my own recollections and reflective writings in order to give the story credence. Using the case study method for the single year allowed me:

to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events

(Yin, 2009, p.4)

while attempting to triangulate my data was intended to prevent me from straying off into flights of fancy and seeing the story from my own viewpoint alone.

Whereas in 'narrative',

researchers collect descriptions of events or happenings and then configure them into a story using a plot line (Creswell, 2007, p.54)

I felt it was important that I corroborated my descriptive data with other sources. I was able to indulge my storytelling tendencies in the longer-term auto-ethnography but needed in the one-year study to be as academically robust as possible. While the central spine of the case-study is the interviews with members of the school community, coupled with my own reflective journal, I was keen to gather a range of data to ensure the emerging conclusions had a ring of truth about them that could be seen to be (in some ways at least) independent of my own personal views. I was aware that:

As a general rule, qualitative researchers are reluctant to generalize from one case to another because the contexts of cases differ.

(Creswell, 2007, p.74)

and I knew that I would therefore only be able to draw conclusions from the one setting with any degree of confidence. However, I was convinced that there may well be findings that are relevant and possibly even transferable to other school settings. It was with this in mind that I wanted to use as much as possible of the wide range of data collection which

...in case study is typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents and audio-visual materials. (Creswell, 2007, p.75)

Thus, to mitigate against the danger of seeing things from a purely personal view in the longer term auto-ethnographic study, I took care to use visit notes, Ofsted inspection reports and other reports from different agencies to weigh against my observations and reflections to thus hopefully triangulate or add validity to the data. If two or more sources suggested the same interpretation then the likelihood of its being a correct interpretation would be greater than if the data came only from a single source. The one-year case study was also strengthened by the existence of reports from external agencies (e.g. the School Improvement Partner) and other observations of the school at work. In addition, the two pieces of research should serve to help triangulate one another. If they have the 'ring of truth' about them then the two narratives should tell very similar stories. My supervisor also helped me to ensure the validity of the data, acting as a critical friend, asking probing questions and encouraging me to see situations and data from a range of alternative perspectives.

However I learned that, even when the researcher believes the data to be effectively triangulated, that it is important to take great care not to slip into invalidity.

[This] is both insidious and pernicious as it can enter at every stage of a piece of research.' (Cohen et al, 2000, p.115)

This is clearly something to be guarded against at every opportunity – as Denzin and Lincoln remind us: 'objective reality can never be captured'. (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.2 and Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.188) – but I discovered just how easy it is to miss occasions for ensuring validity when I realised that the design of my research meant that I had denied myself one potentially strong triangulation reference. Although I kept a reflective journal which turned out to be a rich source of data about the headteacher's views, I regretted not having data from the different participants that was directly comparable. With hindsight, I believe it would have been good to 'interview' myself at the same points during the year and using the same questions as the other interviewees. However, this was not done. I did decide to do a SWOT analysis and try to answer the interview questions on one

occasion – at the end of the academic year 2009-10 – but a good comparative opportunity had ultimately been lost.

### **Using the data**

While many researchers look to establish a very clear process working from the initial design and planning stages right through to the writing up of the completed project (Yin 2009), I prefer to view the whole research project as something that unfolds as the researcher engages with it. As Stake maintains:

There is no particular moment when data gathering begins. It begins before there is commitment to do the study: backgrounding, acquaintance with other cases, first impressions. A considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case. Many of these early impressions will later be refined or replaced, but the pool of data includes the earliest of observations. (Stake, 1995, p.49)

As I told my story, especially in the longer term study looking back over the past five years, I was aware that it was not possible for me to set aside entirely the knowledge and impressions I had already formed and that these would ultimately become a part of the data set whether intentionally or not. Now the question was what to do with all this data. Like Stake, echoing Wolcott's views, I am convinced that it is in the analysis that the data really begins to come to life and yield up its story. Clearly the analysis stage is a significant part of the whole process and I planned to use this analysis to be able to draw some helpful conclusions both for my own school community and perhaps for others too. It was likely to be no small task as:

Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations.

Analysis essentially means taking something apart.

Analysis and interpretation are the making sense of all this [data]. How is this part related to that part.

Analysis goes on and on. (Stake, 1995, p.71)

Although much of the evidence was already 'out there' either in the public domain or in my own thoughts and the records of the school's journey towards improvement, it had never really been put under the microscope. Gathering data, however that is done, is only a part of the process:

the real mystique of qualitative inquiry lies in the processes of using data rather than in the processes of gathering data. (Woolcot, 1994)

Woolcot goes on to assert that everything has the potential to be data but that

nothing **becomes** data without the intervention of a researcher who takes note – and often makes note – of some things to the exclusion of others. (Woolcot, 1994)

In his book 'Transforming Qualitative Data', Woolcot considers how the researcher can interact with qualitative data or 'field notes' in three ways or on three levels: description, analysis and interpretation. My task in writing the auto-ethnographical account of the past six years was firstly to turn my perceptions into an intelligible account, all the while acknowledging that the moment I began to do this, I would in essence be starting to change that very data. I needed to remember

in [my] reporting, regardless of how faithful [I] attempt to be in describing what [I] observed, [I would be] creating something that never existed before. (Woolcot, 1994)

Thus, however accurate I perceived my description to be I would need to examine it very carefully checking and re-checking that the account was as close to reality – whatever that is – as it could be. I intended to make use of the reports from the Ofsted inspections of 2006 and 2009 as checkpoints to help ground my data in a more objective reality.

Having analysed the data from each strand of the research independently, I chose to put the two parts together to establish whether they did in fact tell a similar story. There appeared to be clear themes running throughout the entirety of the research, so I decided to take these and re-analyse them in order to see what other information they might yield. In the event, I chose to take comments from my own reflective journal as a starting point and then use the words of the interviewees and other data to provide a commentary on those comments.

## **Description - Writing up the two studies**

With both the long term study and the interviewing process complete, or at least as near completion as they could be at a given point in time, my attention turned to how to present them to the reader. Indeed it can be said that it was at this point that the real research started (Woolcot, 1994), as I began the attempt to make some sort of sense of what I had found and answer the questions posed at the start of the research project. Only then was I able to start to communicate what I had found and perhaps what I felt too. In acknowledging my role as a participant in the process as well as a recorder of it I could accept and even celebrate my involvement in the way things turned out. I could trumpet the fact that I was an inherent part of the study and accept

the assumption that ethnographers cannot stand above and outside what they study. (Bochner in ed Bochner and Ellis, 1996, p.18)

Now I could happily transform my observations and jottings into more considered accounts and ultimately into the stories that make up the respective case studies. With Bochner, I could begin to see 'what [I] do not so much as representation but as **communication**.' I agree with him that:

Eventually we transform 'data' into an ethnographic text. Language sits in for life. We use words. We write. We take our audience into account. We worry about how our readers will interpret what we write, what they may think, and how they may feel. (Bochner in ed Bochner and Ellis, 1996, p.19)

With this in mind I was able to get on with the process of transforming the raw and untidy data into narrative text.

As outlined earlier, I had decided to present this narrative as two entirely separate accounts. The first of these was constructed to be an in-depth look at a single year in the life of the school, the academic year 2009-10. It was as broad as I could make it in approach, being based on interviews with a number of stakeholders in the school in addition to my own thoughts. I used the transcripts of interviews alongside SWOT analyses and my own reflective journal as the data for this second narrative. It was to be less of 'my story' than the longer study but instead was designed to become a more rounded picture looking at the school from a range of

different perspectives. The second study was something of a reflective commentary on the first which emerged as I discovered how important it would be to sit the one year study within the context of the school over time. This account looked back on the story of the school during the years 2004 to 2009, an auto-ethnography told very clearly from my own perspective (that of the headteacher). I took note of additional sources of data e.g. Ofsted reports and used these to lend credence to my story, yet it remained just that – **my story**. I acknowledged myself as a central player and rather than make any attempt to take myself out of that story I chose to ensure that my readers were clearly aware of just how involved I was. Although I took care throughout the entire process to eliminate bias wherever possible, I believe the strength of this auto-ethnographical account is in the very fact that it is grounded in my personal experience and my reflections as I attempted to make sense of what was happening and to arrive at a deeper understanding of the school improvement process.

After several attempts at recording the data in a way that would be meaningful for the reader I ultimately decided to reorder it chronologically. Thus I tell the auto-ethnographical story of five years and allow this to lead into the more structured research that took place during the academic year 2009-10.

### **Ongoing analysis**

Once the description was complete I took the pieces of new data (i.e. the written accounts) and subjected them to further analysis and interpretation. At this point I began to interrogate and analyse the data looking to identify significant features, the relationships between them and the patterns and trends that were beginning to emerge. It was essential to try to pull out themes from the data, looking at how timescale and personalities affect the outcomes at different times. I attempted to look at the data from different viewpoints – my own, the experience of existing and new teachers, whether teacher confidence has an effect, the impact of part-time and full-time working, the governors' and parents' expectations and what the children experience in the classroom. Then I tried to identify and analyse the

different voices emerging from that data all the while acknowledging that my own voice was likely to be the loudest.

[Qualitative data] are sources of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts. (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.1)

However, it was not enough simply to have this rich source of data, it needed to be analysed in such a way that it would be encouraged to give up its secrets. One of the difficulties that often exists with the sort of data I am likely to collect is that it may well not be

immediately accessible for analysis, but [will] require some processing. Raw field notes need to be corrected, edited, typed up; tape recordings need to be transcribed and corrected. (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.9)

As most of the data collected was in the form of words, and the analysis of such qualitative data was also based in the collation and use of words and language forms I needed to be careful not to lose sight of the original aims and become sidetracked into a whole new layer of description. It was important to acknowledge that the analysis of the data is, in part, a continuous exercise which starts as soon as the first conversation is held, the first word written. I expected that the streams of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.11) would be operating continuously throughout the data collection phase and it was my task as researcher to analyse my findings as I went. Where necessary, I needed to 'check out' my findings, comparing them with data from other sources and attempting to find a defensible veracity in what the data were telling me. On occasions, I needed to gather additional data that might help confirm or refute my tentative findings. Once again, it was to be hoped that situating the case study of the year 2009-10 (taken largely from the accounts of teaching staff and governors as shared with me in individual interviews) within the longer-term context described in the auto-ethnography, would serve to shed additional light on the data from that case study, thereby helping to confirm or refute the earlier conclusions that had been drawn. I read and re-read the 'stories' trying to pull out where there was commonality from different respondents and where things did not appear to fit together as well.

## **Interpretation**

When this was done, I moved to the interpretation level to try to make sense of it all. I reflected on what everything meant, what to make of the conclusions I had begun to reach and how these might fit together into a coherent summary of the processes at work. It is this interpretation phase that is perhaps the most exciting of all. What is done with the data is potentially far more informative than the simple process of gathering information. Now all that remained was to consider whether the data gathered and the story told had gone any way towards answering the original research questions.

## **Conclusion**

As so often happens, this research raised far more questions than it could ever answer. Although this is one of the exciting things about research (Yin 2009), there must also be the attempt to provide answers to the research questions posed. Although there were tentative conclusions to be drawn from this study, they were far from definitive answers. Firstly, constraints of time and the unwillingness of some people to participate meant that the research sample was too small to yield any real patterns. In order to establish whether the factors at play in this single very small school were typical of other settings and whether my findings were transferrable I would need to replicate this research on a much larger scale and across a range of different schools. Also, it proved extremely difficult to isolate specific factors. Although there were a number of clear themes emerging it was apparent that there was also a huge amount of overlap. It would be good to be able to define these themes and their impact more precisely but designing an appropriate research model to achieve that would be likely to prove very challenging. My own dual role as researcher and participant also proved problematic at times. I began the research with a number of assumptions both about the events unfolding and about my relationship with the other participants. I think it is true to say that, during the course of the research, every one of these was questioned at some point. The research also raised the issue of the 'magnification effect', an area that was not one of the original research questions posed but which appeared to have a significant bearing on what happened in the school during the

period of the research. It became important to consider how the concept of a 'magnification effect' could help to explore processes of change and development in a small school.

# **Chapter 4: The data**

- (i) The historical perspective 2004 to 2009 –  
from my viewpoint as headteacher
  
- (ii) Case study of a single year: 2009 - 2010

## **Chapter 4: The Data: (i) The historical perspective 2004 to 2009 – from my viewpoint as headteacher**

In this section I tell the story of five years in the life of the school from my perspective as headteacher. The contents are drawn mainly from my own reflective journal, written throughout that period although somewhat sporadically. I also make use of diary entries, reports from outside agencies and my termly headteacher reports to the Governing Body. However I have not been able to make as much use of these supporting reports as I would have liked, as in many instances it was simply impossible to do so without compromising anonymity. I chose to look back over the five year period in an attempt to understand whether the ‘roller-coaster ride’ of the year 2009-10 (see section 2 of this chapter) was specific to that particular year or whether there were other factors influencing things. It seemed to me that many of the issues experienced in that single year were somehow rooted in the past and that it was necessary to try to understand the past in order to make better sense of the present. Neither issues nor changes seemed to be contained within a single year.

### **First impressions**

When I first visited the school very soon after my appointment in 2004 to the position of headteacher, I had immediate cause to wonder whether it really was the ‘good’ school I had been led to believe it was at interview and that Ofsted had judged it to be in their inspection of the school in the year 2000. Having watched midday assistants struggle to get the children into school from the neighbouring Green, I rapidly concluded that behaviour was not as good as one might suppose. Although the children were not overtly badly behaved, it seemed clear they were working to their own agenda and timescale. This was confirmed when I was asked at the end of my first week in post why I had not given housepoints for ‘sitting nicely’ in assembly. The children were amazed when I explained that I would not be doing so as in my view good behaviour was the norm.

It seemed there was going to be a lot to do, and already things had not got off to the most auspicious start. The school was in the midst of a building project designed to provide two additional teaching areas. This was due to be completed before I started as headteacher but had run into major difficulties due to the instability of the ground. Excavations had caused the neighbouring Church tower to 'rock' and forced work to a halt. When I arrived back at the end of August from a month-long holiday I found myself meeting with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Governors in the Church as the school site was not considered safe. Our reason for meeting was to decide whether we would be able to open the school in time for the start of term in five days' time. Although the major issues had been resolved, extra work associated with the difficulties meant that the building project was running significantly behind schedule. We decided to try to open on time knowing that this would be with limited facilities and access. So to the next problem, the school site was still considered unsafe and the entire contents of the school were in a dusty heap in the school hall! We negotiated access with the builders and set ourselves to trying to create some sort of order out of the chaos. A handful of governors, the school secretary and I sorted through all the stuff and managed to set up three working classrooms as before. Thankfully, the creation of a new storage area meant we had somewhere to store the things that could not be used currently. There were still problems regarding access – the front of the school and side pathway were totally blocked and looked likely to remain so for a while. With the builders, we managed to create an access route over the village Green, entering the school building, via a fenced 'corridor', through the playground entrance to one of the classrooms. Having assured ourselves that this was safe for the children we were ready to open. However, we would continue to work on a building site for the next six months – with restricted access and no playground space for the children. In addition there was no staffroom and colleagues had to make do with a kettle in my office.

So here I was, new to the job working in a school that was only partially open, having to be extremely vigilant about health and safety and with resources all over the place. I may have identified issues that needed looking at but it was likely to

take a while before I could get to grips with any of them especially as I was going to be teaching for at least two days a week as well. The only consolation was that I did at least know exactly what the school had in the way of equipment. When I left my previous school (after fourteen years), one of the things I was worried about was that I would not know where anything was after many years of being the person people always went to when they wanted to find anything. A colleague had suggested that I should empty everything out, muddle it up and then put it back so that only I knew where it was. With the help of the builders this was in effect what happened!

### **The year 2004-5: new beginnings**

So we began the school year 2004/5 with three mixed-age classes (65 children on roll) taught by two full-time teachers, one part-time teacher and me. An experienced female teacher in her fifties taught the children from the time they entered school until the end of Year 2 – with the help of a teaching assistant. A younger teacher, also female, with four years' experience taught Years 3 and 4 (aged 7 to 9 years). She too was supported by a teaching assistant. The oldest children, Years 5 and 6, were taught three days a week by the part-time teacher (also an experienced female teacher in her late forties) and the other two days a week by me. Although time for reflection was severely limited, I soon became aware of several issues for the school. As suspected, behaviour was poor. The children were not particularly 'naughty' but had their own agenda and rarely conformed to the expectations of the adults. There was no sense of pace or urgency, children had got into the habit of doing things if and when they felt like it. I was also concerned that the children were not receiving their entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum – there was little evidence of art or P.E. being taught on a regular basis.

#### **Progress against areas of concern outlined in SEF**

##### **Breadth of the curriculum**

Children continue to receive a much broader and more balanced curriculum although our recent Ofsted inspection highlighted that we still spend too high a proportion of curriculum time on literacy and numeracy. This is often

at the expense of other subjects and, interestingly, of standards of teaching in literacy and numeracy themselves

(Headteacher's report to governors, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2006)

I had my doubts too about the quality of teaching and with this the planning that the teachers were (or were not) doing. Alongside this, there were concerns about how teaching assistants were being used. Finally, of course, the physical environment everyone was working in was barely adequate.

As the weeks went by, my fears began to be confirmed. I had a 'deputation' from the teachers concerned at the amount of planning they were being asked to do and talking of union involvement. I was shocked by this as the planning I had required was simply what was expected in most schools I knew of and indeed what was needed to do a good job. Maybe this was part of the problem with teaching standards. I decided to run a series of staff training sessions unpicking what a good lesson actually looks like. I can still remember the lack of response on the part of the teachers; they rarely engaged in any sort of discussion but simply sat listening to what I said. I wondered whether what we looked at would have any bearing on their future teaching or whether they would simply carry on doing what they had always done. Indeed, I started to sense a feeling that nothing I did would make a lot of difference. There was an unstated feeling that 'headteachers come and go with their good ideas' and that if they could just hold out long enough then I would be gone too and they would not have to take any notice of what I was asking them to do. This was not entirely surprising as I was the fifth headteacher in six years. I also wonder whether this attitude has lasted somehow right up to the present day even though I had been in post for over five years by the year 2009-10.

The picture got steadily worse. I became aware that many children were rarely, if ever, being taught by a qualified teacher. It had become the pattern that the younger and less able children in each class were 'taught' almost entirely by teaching assistants. These assistants, however skilled they might be, had never been trained to teach. In some cases too I had serious doubts about their capacity to allow children to learn. Everything seemed highly structured with very few if any opportunities for children to use their initiative. I remember on my first day in the

classroom deciding to teach a science lesson first thing and causing great consternation. Apparently only English and mathematics were ever taught in the mornings and usually in that order, the poor teaching assistant who was working with me was completely thrown as she told me 'I only ever support literacy.' It seemed to me that she just did not know how to cope with a science lesson first thing in the morning. This same teaching assistant was found on several occasions going around the classroom (of 9 – 11 year olds) with a wastebin collecting their paper off-cuts as she thought this would be easier than them getting out of their seats to throw their own rubbish away! From my perspective, this seemed like 'spoon-feeding' but perhaps this was how she viewed her role. On another occasion I was called from the classroom to take a telephone call. I had left extension activities (written on sheets) at the front of the room for any children who completed the original task while I was away. On my return to the room, I could not find these sheets. It turned out the teaching assistant had them in her hand. She had thought this would be less disruptive than the children collecting them for themselves. No wonder there were issues with pace. The children were getting no opportunities to engage with and take ownership of their own learning. A change in emphasis was needed but proved to take a long time with vestiges of this teaching style still being evident as late as 2009-10 despite an enormous amount of training and discussion along with significant staff changes. Following on from this observation, I discovered too that the children were being offered very few opportunities to learn practically and find things out for themselves. Resources were limited and even the youngest children seemed to spend hours completing worksheets. It seemed that what I viewed as good standard practice had not reached the school yet. Teachers seemed to know nothing of experiential learning and children had little chance of learning through discovery. I well remember the day I produced some plastic measuring cylinders – hardly the most exciting resource ever. The excitement on the faces of the Year 6 boys when they were actually allowed to measure out various quantities of water for themselves was amazing to see.

By the end of my first term in post one of my full-time teachers had 'refused' to teach physical education and art, and been reminded of her contractual duty to do so. The other was complaining regularly of overload and the part-timer seemed to be doing what she always did and what she would continue to do for the next five years. The children were still unable to play outside but seemed to be responding well to the more active approach to their learning. The one really bright spot was that I had been able to appoint a new teaching assistant with considerable skills and experience elsewhere (she is still at the school and went on to qualify as a Higher Level Teaching Assistant). The remainder of that academic year continued in much the same vein. The teacher who had been refusing to teach art and P.E. resigned at Easter and I was able to appoint a temporary teacher for years 3 and 4 for the summer term. This teacher turned out to be a breath of fresh air – and an outstanding teacher too – and we were both disappointed that she could not stay permanently. The new classrooms were officially opened at the end of March so the children and teachers now had a much better working environment. It also enabled us to appoint an additional teacher and split the younger children into two classes – a set-up we have rethought and experimented with many times in the intervening years. Following from this I was also able to release myself from a regular class teaching commitment which I believed essential to free me to spend time looking at how the school was really functioning and how it could be improved. All seemed to be going well and we were looking forward to a good start to the following academic year.

### **The year 2005-6: improving teaching**

Unfortunately it was not to be so. Parents took one look at our newly appointed teacher for years 3 and 4, a keen Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), and decided she was too young to be any good. Within three days we had parents threatening to take children out of the school, children being rude to their teacher (presumably regurgitating what they had heard at home) and a general feeling of malaise. I called a 'crisis meeting' with parents, trying to reassure them that teacher was in fact a good teacher and that if they would give her a chance they would see the benefits for their children. It was to no avail. Children began to leave and school

numbers fell to just 58 on roll, the lowest for some time. As a school dependent on attracting at least 30% of out-of-catchment children, we were in a very vulnerable position. Then, understandably, the NQT concerned began to doubt herself. The accusations that had been without foundation began to become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy and she started to falter. Unbeknown to me at this point her mentor (the part time teacher mentioned earlier), whilst being extremely supportive of her on a personal level, was allowing her to 'get away' with teaching that was less good than it should be and thus contributing to her downslide. This culminated in her turning into the 'no good' teacher the parents had feared and ultimately failing her induction year. As the headteacher of the school, it would be my job ultimately to address these issues.

I am sorry to report that \_\_\_\_ did not meet the Induction Standards at the end of last term. It is generally acknowledged that she has had a very difficult first year with a number of significant health issues to contend with. In recognition of this, she has been granted a term's extension to her induction year and will continue to have support from experienced teachers in order to help her meet the Induction Standards by Christmas.

(Headteacher's report to governors, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2006)

She was not the only teacher struggling either. The other new teacher (another NQT, appointed in April 2005 to enable the splitting of the class of younger children) was also finding it hard to meet the required standards. Her mentor (the remaining teacher of the original two full-timers) did not appear to be supporting her as she should and was herself really starting to struggle. She was not enjoying dividing her time between children of different ages (I had asked her to work half the week with the year 2 children and the rest of the time with the oldest children – taking over the class commitment that I had had in the previous year). She was also beginning to experience some health problems and these were starting to make us question whether she could carry out her job effectively. Certainly she too was now trying to refuse to teach physical education.

One term in, with the threat of Ofsted looming, the school was not in a good place. By now I had alerted the Local Authority to my concerns that we were only barely

'Satisfactory' and very vulnerable in the event of an inspection. Indeed it could easily happen that we were put into 'Special Measures' or given a 'Notice to Improve.' My plan was to get improvements underway and hope to have made enough progress by the time Ofsted visited that they would have confidence in what I was doing. If this succeeded maybe we would be lucky enough to get a judgement of 'satisfactory' and so be allowed to continue with our own timetable of improvements and not have a plan thrust on us 'from above'. The response of the Local Authority to my concerns was a very interesting one, and very mixed too. On the one hand they were supportive, offering funding and a series of sessions from an adviser to help staff get to grips with good learning and teaching. Yet, on the other hand, my School Development Adviser (the person assigned to support me and the school) seemed to take it into her head that I was the problem. It appeared to be relayed to her superiors that she had identified the issues and was putting measures in place to 'sort them.' I found myself not only having a very difficult position in school to manage but also having to watch my own back. I was very thankful for two things: firstly that I had shared my opinions very openly and honestly with the school's Governing Body two months before I was 'instructed' to do so by the school's Development Adviser (special meeting of Governing Body on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2005) and secondly that I work in a Church of England Voluntary Aided school which meant that the Governing Body, not the Local Authority, was my employer. The governors had been shocked when I first shared my evaluation of the school with them – seeing my opinion that the school was barely satisfactory had been a hard moment of realisation for them – but I was lucky that they trusted my judgement and gave me their full support. They were prepared to challenge the Local Authority too if needed. Also, because I was in a Church school, the authority had no powers to get rid of me. I remain convinced to this day that, had I been headteacher of a community school, I would not have survived for very long.

So here I was, early in 2006, headteacher of a school where two out of four teachers were struggling to complete their first year of teaching successfully, one experienced teacher was going downhill fast (both physically and emotionally) and was starting to take long periods of sick leave and the other experienced teacher

was demonstrating, through her mentoring role in particular, that she had very little understanding of what good teaching looks like. Once again, we faced a spectrum of problems that were to last well into the future and have an impact on the changes being sought later on. As it stood currently, things seemed to have gone from bad to worse and an Ofsted Inspection was expected in the next six months. I really began to take issue with the government's viewpoint, backed up strongly by the Local Authority, that a school can be turned round within a year. How? I had now been in post for approximately eighteen months and the school was, if anything, in a worse position than when I started. I knew what the issues were and what needed to be done but was making very little headway in achieving anything. Yes, teachers had received a lot of training in teaching and learning – I think they now knew what a 'good' lesson looked like but I wasn't convinced that they had yet developed the skills to deliver one – and this was starting slowly to have an effect. Children were enjoying their learning more and behaviour was better. They were enjoying the 'Challenge Days' that I had started to encourage them to think for themselves and I believed we were seeing results of these in terms of an increased independence and resilience in their approach to learning. But there seemed such a long way to go before we could be that 'Good' school that only a short while before we had believed ourselves to be. Were the issues affected by some sort of 'magnification effect' because I was in a small school or was it always like this? Certainly, with such a small staff there was nowhere for poor practitioners to hide.

At Easter, the first of my NQTs was able to complete her induction year successfully. She only just achieved this, with me taking over her mentoring role and also brokering a lot of external support from advisers and Advanced Skills Teachers. Although it had been a close thing, I hoped she would at least now have strong enough foundations to build on and develop her teaching. I was less happy with the progress of the other NQT (due to complete her induction year by the July) and began discussing what to do with the Local Authority representatives responsible for Newly Qualified Teachers. I was concerned that I would have a 'fight' on my hands as her mentor was of the opinion that she was meeting the induction standards (more a reflection on the mentor's own skills than anything else it seemed

to me and another factor that was to continue to have an effect for many years in the life of the school). One bright spot was that the Local Authority offered me a highly skilled teacher on loan to fill the place of my teacher who was now on almost permanent sick leave. This was followed by the opportunity to recruit a good but very newly qualified teacher just days after completing her training to cover for the sick teacher for the final month of the year. At last it felt as if I was making some progress. I was also looking forward to a visit to Bristol to look at the ELLI (Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory) project which I believed could have a positive impact on the children's learning in our school. I was going with other members of the Consortium we had recently joined and although none of my teachers were prepared to accompany me, the HLTA was coming.

### **An inspector calls**

Then the call from Ofsted came! With five days notice we were inspected on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> July 2006. This could be make or break time. Had we done enough to be graded 'Satisfactory'? I felt very pleased that we had a lovely and professional inspector. He was very thorough and asked lots of questions. But we got the judgement I wanted – 'Satisfactory'. Although we had only just avoided anything less good, this judgement felt right. I was thankful that we had put so much effort into our own self-evaluation and that the SEF (school's Self Evaluation Form) reflected very accurately where the school was. The difficult days when governors first had to accept that we were not in fact a 'good' school had paid off. We had worked hard to be certain that we knew where we were and what needed to be done. Indeed I had already begun working with teachers to help them understand what good teaching looks like and to encourage them to improve their own practice.

The fact that we had not been put into 'Special Measures' or given 'Notice to Improve' meant that I was now free to continue with the improvements I deemed necessary in my own way and at a pace I felt to be right for the school. In this way I believed I had a far greater chance of achieving sustainable improvement than

would be 'owned' by those involved. Two years into the job and, at last, I felt I could be getting somewhere. To quote Ofsted:

The headteacher's clarity of purpose, leadership and strong direction supported by the whole staff is showing its impact in improvements in the quality of teaching and rapidly increasing achievement among all groups of pupils. (Ofsted Inspection Report, 2006)

### **The year 2006-7: a more even path**

September 2006, the start of the next academic year, found the school on a more even path although we still had the one teacher on long-term sick leave and the young NQT who had not met the induction standards (she was given an extension of one term to meet them and I took over as her mentor). The excellent teacher who had worked for us for one term had returned on a part-time contract, sharing teaching of the oldest children with the long-term part-time teacher and we still had the support of the teacher provided by the Local Authority. Next, being a Church school, we had to prepare for our additional Section 48 Inspection looking at the teaching of Religious Education, worship and our effectiveness as a Church school. This took place in October 2006 and we were graded as 'good' although it was made clear that we were only just into that category. This was a very fair judgement which clearly reflected the caring ethos of the school while acknowledging difficulties in other areas that still needed to be overcome. It also acknowledged the progress we had already made and our plans to continue improving. Two months later, the young NQT finally met the induction standards and achieved full Qualified Teacher status. At last she was on the way to becoming the good teacher she was capable of becoming.

During the next term, the teacher on long-term sickness leave agreed to retire from the school staff on the grounds of ill-health (after a long drawn out appeals process) and I was able to appoint another highly qualified part-time teacher to fill her place. This meant we had one young full-time teacher teaching the youngest children, with the new experienced part-time teacher working with the Year 2 children for half the week; the newly qualified teacher teaching the seven to nine year olds; and

a job-share taking the oldest children. Although we were a bit part-time heavy it seemed as though we had a good team in place. Now at last, over two years after we had first started to do this, we could return to the raising of teaching standards and take a thorough look at our staffing structure.

### **The year 2007-8: a story of staffing**

We began the new year with a stable staff and a clear focus on raising standards in teaching. I agreed to take part in the national “Making Good Progress” pilot (see Glossary) as this seemed to fit really well with the school’s identified needs to focus on “Assessment for Learning” (AfL) and to ensure that teaching was meeting pupils’ needs. This turned out to be a really key project for the school. The close focus on assessment began to show results very quickly. A watershed moment was when one teacher said to me in January 2008: ‘I used to think they’re an average year 6 child so they must be working at level 4, now I **know** what level 4 looks like.’ At last teachers were beginning to understand what was expected of them. The Making Good Progress pilot was also set to have a significant impact on teacher accountability with the expectation being that if a child sat a Single Level Test they would be ready to achieve it and would indeed be judged to have reached the required level. Teachers’ assessment had to be robust enough to be certain that they were entering children at the correct levels. The first round of Single Level Tests took place in June 2008 with the school achieving a good pass rate. I met my new School Improvement Partner at this time and despite an inauspicious start, she made the incorrect assumption that not much art or creative activity was taking place, this has developed over time into a very strong partnership based on mutual respect. Also, for the first time since my arrival at the school four years earlier, the children in year 2 had got through an entire academic year without any changes of teacher!

The next thing to tackle was the school’s staffing structure. All schools and their governing bodies had been encouraged to engage in ‘blue sky thinking’ around their workforce and to come up with an ideal staffing structure which was not necessarily limited by budgets or existing personnel. The governors and I were not particularly

enthusiastic about this process as it was hard to see how we could ever afford to make changes. However, it forced us to look very closely at our existing structure and whether or not it met the school's needs. Historically the school had had no Deputy Headteacher and it was difficult to see how we could ever afford to appoint one. The teacher who left after being on long-term sickness leave had been what was known as the 'Head's Deputy', a post which carried neither financial reward nor specific duties but which meant that the incumbent had the authority to act in the case of the headteacher's absence. I was of the opinion that this arrangement had not served the school well and that, although we could not afford to appoint a Deputy Headteacher, we could use this opportunity and the creation of 'Teaching and Learning Responsibility' (TLR) posts to design a Senior Leadership Team that would work well for the school. My aim was to have a group of people to share in the leadership of the school and to build this team to the point at which there would be a new sustainability in leadership so that if I, or any other leader, were to leave the school's progress would not be impeded. With this in mind at the end of the year we created two Senior Teacher (TLR2) posts and formed a Senior Leadership Team. The current staffing was such that we actually had three part-time teachers on the Senior Leadership Team with the headteacher rather than two full-time teachers. This had its flaws in that none of the members were natural leaders but at least it was a start.

### **The year 2008-9: shared leadership at last?**

In September 2008, a teacher joined the staff who did appear to have significant leadership potential. Technically there was no post for her but I was pretty certain that one, or even two, of the existing teachers would be leaving before the end of the academic year. It was a gamble worth taking for the long-term future of the school so she was appointed on a temporary contract and this turned out to provide significant benefits for the school later on, as well as a few problems. I also took the opportunity at this time to move the classteachers around a bit. My 'almost failed' NQT, Ellie, was developing into a good teacher and at the same time I had some concerns about the behaviour of the oldest children and the behaviour management skills of the experienced part-time teacher who had been teaching

them for many years. So I moved her, with her job-share partner, to the middle of the school and put Ellie in Class 3 with the oldest children. With her went Jane, the new teacher on the temporary contract who was an experienced Year 6 teacher and who I felt would help her hone her teaching skills for this age group. The youngest children had their existing full-time teacher and the now not-so-new part-timer. All seemed fairly settled until it transpired that the two teachers with the oldest children were struggling to work together!! Each seemed to feel threatened by the other and the newcomer, Jane, made it very clear that she felt she was here to 'sort out' the other teacher. This proved to be a forerunner of the difficulties Jane experienced with other colleagues later on and a factor really working against the aim of improving the school. What a pity it was going wrong as the two teachers had so much to give and each had so much they could offer the other one. We held a meeting to define roles and responsibilities and things did begin to improve. Indeed, the positive impact I had hoped for began to happen and these two teachers together started to lead their colleagues in improving the quality of their teaching. The one big disappointment for me though is that it appears Jane has never really managed to maintain this with any consistency and thus in my opinion not truly fulfilled her leadership potential along with her anticipated ability to help move the school forward.

At the same time as this I went on the national training for School Improvement Partners (SIPs). Although to date I have not practised as a SIP, doing the training and gaining the accreditation were valuable tools in my own quest for school improvement. However, in spite of all I had learned about how to go about improving schools, I remained very aware that you can only achieve as much as the materials you are working with allow and that you can only effect any lasting improvement if you move at the speed of the slowest learners in the group. Try to go too fast and nothing is likely to be embedded; change is then unlikely to last very long.

Of my two full-time and four part-time teachers I was only confident in the teaching abilities of one of the full-time teachers (incidentally the young NQT who had so

very nearly not met the induction standards) and two of the part-time teachers. This meant that although we were in a much better place, I still had doubts about the teaching skills of half of the staff. These concerns were serious in one case and, in another, the teacher had the abilities to be a good teacher but seemed unable to maintain high standards with any degree of consistency. It was of course not the first time that I had had cause to question the quality of teaching throughout the school. Clearly there was still a great deal of work to do and, of course, we knew that we were likely to receive another visit from Ofsted before the year was out..... At Easter that year, one of the teachers resigned (to try retirement for a second time) which meant I could confirm the position of Jane, the teacher who had been on a temporary contract, and move her to work with the younger children. Once again there was a glimmer of hope that we might at last be able to create a Senior Leadership Team that would actually help lead the school forward. Certainly Jane was already exhibiting a great deal of leadership potential. If she turned out to be the natural leader I thought her to be, then her presence on the Leadership Team would be almost certain to have a positive impact on that team. However, we know from later observations and her own comments (Jane, interview, July 2010) that although Jane turned out to be a good initiator her capacity for sustaining initiatives was limited and therefore had the potential to be a negative impact on embedding change.

The major focus for the next term was our provision for Early Years and Foundation Stage (EYFS), our youngest, children. At last it seemed that some funding might be available to remodel the building in order to improve the learning environment for them. Much as I didn't want another major building project, we had the ongoing problem of not having toilets and access to outdoor playspace for the children on the same level. This meant we could not take children before the term in which they have their fifth birthday. This had already appeared to have an effect on our admissions with some parents preferring to send their children to schools where they could start at a younger age. Also, the recommendations of the Rose report (Rose, 2009) were likely to cause difficulties for the school as children were all to be admitted in the September following their fourth birthday from September 2011

and yet our facilities meant that we were also unable to admit under-fives. It seemed that either way we would be 'illegal'. So, if there was any way of funding the proposed remodelling of the building then I was going to go with it. I was convinced that by improving the learning environment for the our youngest children we would be able to get their 'formal' education off to a much better start than we had managed previously. But I was also aware that I needed someone other than me to take hold of the 'vision' and drive those improvements forward. I was acutely conscious that the current 'Phase Leader' was unlikely to be the person to achieve this.

Then, there was a fortuitous event. Diane, the EYFS and Keystage One Phase Leader, one of the teachers I was concerned about and who I doubted in her ability to take a strong lead in driving the changes forward, overheard a conversation between me and the Chairman of Governors in which we were sharing our concerns about her lack of leadership skills. With Ofsted imminent and EYFS receiving separate grading we were worried that this could drag the judgement for the whole school down. To her credit, Diane came to me and told me that she was aware that she was not a good leader and that someone else should take over the leadership role. This unlocked a whole host of possibilities and meant that I now had a Senior Leadership Team with one Senior Teacher responsible for ICT, Healthy Schools and leading the Foundation Stage and the other being the school's SENCo as well as leading English and P.E. At about the same time I heard that there was a strong possibility that the school would be given £83,000 to help provide a kitchen on site. Careful use of this, alongside money we had saved over years and our Devolved Formula Capital (money assigned for capital building projects), could mean that we had nearly £300,000 to spend on the building project. Suddenly the dream I had had from the moment I was appointed of getting it 'right' for the youngest children seemed as though it might become a reality. I remember a meeting held at my home that Easter, where we began planning for the children's learning as though they were going to be taught in that purpose-built unit. It felt such an exciting time.

At the same time, the school as a whole felt much more stable. The move of teachers had worked well and the behaviour of the older children was so much better. My concerns about two of the teachers had not gone away but in each case I had been able to partner them with a much stronger colleague and so minimise any negative impact on the children. I felt in a much more confident place should we have the expected Ofsted Inspection and was convinced that we could demonstrate that we were now a 'Good' school. I had also spent a lot of time with staff and governors looking at self-evaluation and was confident that we all knew what the school's strengths and weaknesses were. The year ended on a very positive note. On 21<sup>st</sup> June 2009, we heard that the funds were to be released for our building project. We would need to move quickly but could be in a position to get the building work completed during the six week summer holiday. Then I appointed Jenny, the trainee teacher (on the authority's Graduate Training Programme) who seemed to have some really good qualities to bring to the school. Finally, Ofsted did come knocking as anticipated. We were inspected on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009 and received a judgement of 'Good'. We were also acknowledged to have many 'Outstanding' features. It had been a struggle but the school had moved from only just 'Satisfactory' in 2006 to a very strong 'Good' three years later. Everyone felt very encouraged as the year ended which was just as well since we now had to clear the entire school for the building works to begin! In terms of the expectations of 'turning a school round in a year' it had taken me five years' hard work and although we were currently in a very good place, I still knew the school to be vulnerable.

### **Learning from the past?**

This longer-term story has very strong echoes with the one-year case study which follows in the second section of this chapter. There are the same feelings of vulnerability and inconsistency over five years as were evident in the study of the single year. The term 'rollercoaster' used by interviewees in 2009-10 could equally well apply to the previous five years it seems. In chapter 5 I go on to explore the themes emerging from both time periods, looking for links and exploring the ways in which the two periods serve as a commentary on one another.

## **Chapter 4: The data: (ii) Case study of a single year 2009 - 2010**

For this case study I tried to capture the views of as many staff and governors as possible. I wanted to find out what their understanding of school improvement was and try to discover what factors they considered were at play and affecting the progress of the school. I was keen to see how other people's views resonated with my own. Unfortunately a number of staff chose not to participate in the interviews that I set up and, disappointingly, the non-participants probably included those individuals who were most likely to have dissenting voices.

The academic year began on a high note. The school had had an Ofsted inspection in July 2009 and had been judged as 'good' with many outstanding features.

[This] is a good school where pupils achieve well...Teaching is of good quality and some aspects are outstanding...An outstandingly strong climate of care and support is evident. (Ofsted Inspection Report, July 2009)

After a lot of hard work, it seemed we were on the right track. As well as the good inspection outcome, we had got the funding to start work on a building project to remodel the interior of the building, providing for a kitchen and, even more significantly, improving the facilities for our youngest children. I had also managed to appoint a very strong graduate trainee who I anticipated would add a new dimension to the staff team. Everything should have been good and yet I still had a niggling feeling that we were vulnerable:

We feel totally understaffed yet the budget is under threat – there is a danger of it not balancing next year. We could have to consider redundancy..... (Headteacher, reflective journal,, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2009)

The feeling of vulnerability persists. There is such a sense of being under pressure. So little time for reflection, planning and being strategic.

(Headteacher, reflective journal, January 2010)

### **Starting the year**

My concerns about our vulnerability were proved right even before we returned to school in September with one of the two full-time teachers letting me know that

she was pregnant. It seemed we were in for another year of instability with 25% of the teachers changing. Once again, it meant re-addressing areas of weakness and repeating previous training. The start of the new term was a really challenging time with the building work overrunning and teachers unable to prepare their classrooms. For the second time in my headship I was facing the prospect of being unable to open the school at the beginning of a year. Thanks to superb efforts from a couple of governors who worked with me late into the night we did manage to open in the end, though the youngest children had to be taught in the hall (their new classroom was not ready for another couple of weeks). We did not get fire safety clearance to open until 7.30pm the evening before the children were expected! It was a close run thing but we did it. However, the ramifications of not being able to be properly prepared lasted for much of the following year. Indeed this was borne out in interviews with staff and governors (see Chapter 5) where the words 'rollercoaster', 'unsettled' and 'challenging' were used many times and by different people to describe the year. It was to be a long time before the school would feel 'on an even keel' once more.

Yet, most people felt optimistic as the year started. One of the teachers, Jane, talked about learning a great deal from leadership training, particularly about how to be more understanding of where other people are at a given point and she began to reflect on the benefits this could bring both to her and the school. She started the year on a very positive note, saying:

We have moved a long way in a year, especially in Keystage One over the past two terms.

Strong leadership, understanding of what is expected and the opportunity to be creative are all driving factors in improvement. Motivation and feeling like you have a place and a sense of worth help. You feel like you are making a difference. (Jane, interview, October 2010)

Jane's optimism was echoed by Diane, another teacher, who also reported feeling very positive about the way the school had moved forward. She was very excited about the changes that were being made to the curriculum:

I really like the changes we are making to the curriculum, especially in 'skills based' learning. It is pleasing to see signs of a more 'child-led' approach beginning with the older children. (Diane, interview, October 2009)

She had enjoyed being part of the changes in EYFS/Keystage One and was encouraged to see similar things taking place across the school.

However, other teachers were more cautious. They seemed to have picked up on the same sense of uncertainty that was exercising me at the beginning of this new school year. Although recognising the impact Jane was having on provision for our youngest children, saying:

Keystage One needed a good old shake up and [she] has done that.

(Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Ellie also observed that Jane seemed 'proactive but a bit burdened,' and was thus aware of the possible negative impact this might have on the school. Alongside this, Emily was concerned that we might be at risk of losing our improvement focus, and she wondered if there might be a danger of complacency on the part of some staff ('though not on the part of the headteacher!' she added). The school had, she felt, undertaken a long and difficult journey to achieve a 'Good' Ofsted outcome and, with parents and governors very much on side, it was likely that staff could think 'all is rosy' and stop pushing for improvement. She seemed to believe that genuine, embedded improvement takes time and is rarely, if ever, achieved easily. Her concerns appeared to be shared by several of the governors, including Penny who was convinced that a school could not improve in a single year, stating that:

Any improvement, in order to have any meaning at all, would take three/four/five years. Anything less is impossible.

(Penny, interview, February 2010)

### **Staffing the school**

Although staffing was stable for the moment, apart from the impending maternity leave, one of the part-time teachers reduced her hours to one and a half days per week because of circumstances outside of school. In fact she had offered to resign but I wanted to keep her, so we agreed to her reduced hours. However, her hours

and the fact that she was not really on-form almost certainly contributed in the end to the decline in behaviour in Class 2. With hindsight, excellent teacher that she was, keeping her on such reduced hours may not have been the best decision. Her job-share colleague (the part-time senior teacher about whom I was having ever-increasing concerns) did not in my view seem able to maintain any order and consistency in her approach to the children. In addition, the GTP student was doing some teaching in this class and a regular supply teacher was also in the class one day a week. The fact that the children were 'all over the place' (Headteacher, reflective journal,, October 2009) was blamed on the number of adults working with the class. I was not convinced. While this was undoubtedly a factor, I felt the problem was a more fundamental one of classroom organisation and management and that the main issues lay with the one teacher. Because circumstances had left her less supported by her colleague it had become much clearer that she was not performing well. A visiting school advisor noted that her 'attitude to feedback was defensive, her planning needed improvement and her teaching needed to move from satisfactory to good in order to raise standards.' (SDA Visit Note, March 2010) Her poor performance was becoming an increasing problem and one which was in danger of dragging the whole school downwards. This was the same teacher who all those years ago had been a big factor in the young NQT not meeting the induction standards. In my view, backed up by a Local Authority Adviser, as her mentor she did not demonstrate high enough expectations of her, as evidenced in another visit report which underlined that a key action for the school was 'to consider **appropriate** support to embed progress in the NQT' (SDA Visit Note, June 2006). At this same time, several of the younger and less able children in her class were clearly unhappy and eventually all but one of these transferred to other schools. I came up with a plan to take this teacher out of the classroom from February though I was worried that while minimising any negative impact on the children she would not have the opportunity to improve her teaching. Any more formal approach or chance to really get to grips with the issues around her teaching would have to wait until the following September when she would return to her normal teaching commitment.

Most of the interviewees were very clear that staffing levels and engagement would have a significant impact on the school's performance. Tina, one of the school's governors, noted that there had been significant changes during the three years leading up to the present and that:

staff in general were taking more ownership of and having more involvement in the self-evaluation process and that ....[they were] able to see where the school needs to go. (Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

This had led to staff who:

can see where the school can go. They can see the opportunities and want to be involved. (Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Tina felt this improved understanding by staff to be a significant factor in moving the school on, a view very much supported by Charlotte, another of the governors. Charlotte identified training and successes of individual teachers which she expected to have a continued positive impact on the school. However, she was also concerned that some of this training necessitated teachers being out of school a lot. In the same way, she stated that she was pleased that one of the teachers had achieved Advanced Skills Teacher status feeling that this would mean that she would bring new advantages to the school. But she also acknowledged that she was worried that this would mean that we would lose that teacher for one day a week when she was working in other schools. Charlotte could see both the benefits and drawbacks in offering improved training opportunities to staff. Another possibly harmful factor, commented on by Dawn, was the number of part-time staff in school and the likelihood that this could have a negative impact on progress because of the difficulties in communication and the way in which this could add to everyone's workload. Dawn was also a little anxious about the fact that there had been or were about to be 'quite a lot of staff changes, especially for a small school.' Although she was confident that this was being managed effectively she commented on it feeling like a 'major change' because of the small size of the school. This would appear to be another instance of the small school magnification effect I had begun to observe.

Ellie was also very aware that the school was in a vulnerable position with imminent staffing changes. She was concerned too about the Senior Leadership Team which she felt was not giving the lead that it should:

If the Senior Leadership Team was firing on all cylinders, then things would improve significantly. (Ellie, interview, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

Ellie too was concerned about the number of part-time staff in school, asking: 'Can the school sustain it long term?' (Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Ellie's fears appeared to be shared by several of her teacher colleagues who talked about their concerns about both staff fragmentation and ownership of change. Jane talked about her concerns, that despite the benefits of both leadership training and opportunities to use her new skills, she found it hard being out of the classroom. This was especially so at a time of significant changes to classroom practice which she felt others perhaps did not understand very well. She was worried that some staff, particularly the Teaching Assistants, did not appear to have ownership of change and improvement, stating that they 'probably haven't got a clue' and they 'don't have any idea where [the new way of working] is coming from.' (Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010) Both Jenny and Emily appear to have shared their concerns that not everyone appeared to have ownership of the improvement agenda. Despite reporting that they felt accepted and part of the team very quickly:

It is the only school where, as a supply [teacher] I feel involved in what is going on. I love it here...it doesn't matter whether you are part-time, supply or full-time you are part of it and included. I feel I matter...

(Emily, interview, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2009)

both teachers remained unconvinced by their colleagues' engagement with the process of school improvement. Jenny felt that this was demonstrated by occasional 'give-away comments' which made her wonder if fear of change was part of the problem. Emily also raised some interesting questions about involvement. Although viewed by others as 'a very professional and committed teacher', (Ellie, interview, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2010) she felt her own feelings about her job had changed a lot since September probably because she was in school full-time now:

...I don't feel temporary, just another staff member until I am not there anymore – I have been given subject responsibility. Also I see the whole week and not just one day. With [being] full-time and 'more permanent' [my] responsibility level changes. I can't just walk in and walk out after doing my bit. I have a responsibility to the children and colleagues to pull my weight. (Emily, interview, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

Do Emily's comments about feeling more 'responsible' once she became full-time and more permanent mean that the part-time teachers are by definition less committed? Do the number of hours worked by an individual really have an effect on their level of commitment or is it simply that 'having the right personnel in school is crucial'? (Penny, interview, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2010) Certainly one of Penny's fellow governors suggested that this was the case:

one or two key staff appointments have made all the difference.

(Charlotte, interview, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Charlotte was also concerned that the school was disadvantaged because it has no deputy headteacher, feeling that they might play a part in helping good things to continue.

Other interviewees took a slightly different view of the important factors relating to staffing. While they might well agree with many of the comments above, they seemed to suggest that it is the opportunity for staff development and a nurturing environment for this to take place in that make the real difference:

There are lots of opportunities to discuss and know what is happening. Everyone has the opportunity to be included in staff meetings and training and it is good that governors attend curriculum moderation meetings although it would be even better if more governors came. The different perspective that governors bring to these meetings is really helpful; they challenge us to get out of our teacher box.

(Diane, interview, October 2009)

We are a great combination and often have professional dialogues in the car! I could feel alienated without [Jane]. It is good to have someone else doing stuff, interested in where the school is going...

(Ellie, interview, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

I have observed the way teachers' attitudes at assessment meetings are different from a few years ago and see this as evidence that ways of thinking have changed for the better. I believe this will feed into future improvement. (Barry, interview, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2010)

Throughout this time, the magnification factor appears to have been at work within the school. Because of its small size, relatively minor changes such as one teacher going off on Maternity Leave appear to have had a greater impact than might be expected. I think this is because each teacher is a huge percentage of the total teaching complement (usually around 25%). This means that in order to maintain continuity it becomes urgent that any training for example is revisited very promptly. If there were more teachers in school it would probably be easier for them to be absorbed into the staff group and pick up the school's way of working over time.

### **Viewed from the outside**

There appeared to be many opportunities on the horizon at the start of 2009-10. On the plus side, we were beginning to develop good relations with our nearest local primary school, this was a school that had 'poached' several dissatisfied families at the time when we had 'concerns' about a new teacher in 2005. A change of headteacher there enabled us to start building the good relations that should have existed long ago. Then came our Section 48 Inspection as a Church School. After a shaky start and the ongoing building works we had no evidence of children's work in R.E. to share: we do not do much written work as we consider R.E. to be mostly about thinking and feeling and we still had no display boards in school, let alone children's work on them. However the inspection went extremely well and we achieved a grading of 'Outstanding' as a Church school. What a great moment in the life of the school.....

Not all external comment on the school was either as positive or as useful to the school as that Section 48 Inspection report however. I was conscious of a breadth of opinion among the interviewees about the role and judgements of external bodies. This opinion ranged from unquestioning acceptance of those judgements to views that the various external agencies had no impact at all on school improvement. Although having little direct experience of the school, Jenny had done her homework before applying to us for a training placement. From her research she thought the school was a good school that had 'changed for the better from what I hear.' (Jenny, interview, October 2009) She felt that the inclusion of everyone involved would be a key driving factor in improvement as would having someone with vision who can engage people. Her opinion was that improvement has to be 'kicked' in the initial stages but that it can be embedded and sustained over time. Small steps and regular evaluation would be important and participants would need to develop confidence that they were working towards a shared goal. From what she knew, previous Ofsted and Section 48 judgements had been right and were backed up by what she experienced of the ethos of the school once she had joined the staff.. Emily too was able to take a slightly more distanced look at the school and its progress. She felt the Ofsted judgements of both 2006 and 2009 were right. In 2006 there was, she thought, a mixture of 'stick in the mud' (Emily interview, October 28<sup>th</sup> 2009) and very new inexperienced teachers and that, while the headteacher knew where the school wanted to be, they were not there yet and in a lot of cases were stuck in the routines and values of the past. In 2006, Ofsted saw the potential for the school to improve and thus be where it eventually was in 2009. Emily felt that now the school was in the process of embedding that improvement. In her view, the main driving factor in improvement was a leader with vision:

A headteacher with a clear idea of where they want the school to go for the benefit of the children. One who continues to encourage the staff despite the many frustrations. (Emily, interview, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2009)

She considered embedding of improvement was possible with a lot of input from the leaders. A headteacher with vision would start to put things in place (e.g. changes to planning structure, ELLI). They then needed to support the staff in

following those things through. In Emily's view this leadership and support from within the organisation was of more importance than external factors such as support from Local Authority advisers, regular visits by the School Improvement Partner (SIP) or even Ofsted inspections. However, she could see the value of the School Improvement Partner's involvement if the relationship was allowed to work effectively:

My experience elsewhere is that a visit [by] the SIP instils fear into the heart of senior management! But I suspect that a healthy relationship between headteacher, school and SIP could be very helpful in terms of accountability.

(Emily, interview, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2009)

From the little she saw she thought that a healthy relationship might be the case in this school. However, her colleague Harriet was less convinced. She did not believe that the involvement of the School Improvement Partner (SIP), or of other professionals, had much effect on school improvement. She did think the SIP might give a different perspective on things which the headteacher may at times be too close to in order to really see but felt that was probably outweighed by the fact that he or she was not as familiar with the children or the school. It seemed Harriet was not very aware of the role of the SIP but she did report that that one of the teachers she worked with was very positive about the SIP's involvement. Harriet was more convinced than Emily about the positive impact of Ofsted inspections. She had found out about the changes to the Ofsted criteria and felt that although categories remain the same expectations have been raised. In her opinion:

Anything that makes someone up their game or evaluate what they are doing is a good thing. (Harriet, interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

Ultimately though Harriet was convinced that it is the headteacher whose leadership is crucial in order to secure school improvement and felt that her view was given weight by having worked in a school where leadership was weak and which eventually went into 'Special Measures.'

Here the headteacher gives [us] strong leadership. Without a strong headteacher we can't move forward. We are also lucky that the headteacher is open to and interested in change. There has been vast improvement. [She is good at] getting others on board and disseminates

[ideas] down through the staff. [She ensures that] all staff are regularly involved in staff meetings and often mixes everyone up. This builds a good team. (Harriet, interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

Barry too suggested that the school itself would have more impact on improvement than any external agencies. He felt confident that the school knew what to do in order to improve further and was improving all the time although not necessarily at an even rate. He thought that this is because those at the 'chalkface' (Barry, March 2010) had a better understanding of where they are and what needs to be done in order to move forward than they had previously and that this is something the headteacher has 'instilled' in them. He considers the main driving factors in that improvement are:

The headteacher's clarity of vision and ability to stand back and analyse where the school is, where it needs to change and what levers they need to pull in order to get that change effected by remote control.

(Barry, interview, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2010)

Barry did not discount the role of outsiders and, indeed, felt that in our specific case the relationship with the School Improvement Partner was a positive one which allowed the headteacher to have professional dialogue with someone at the same level and afforded an opportunity to discuss things frankly that otherwise might not be there since the school had no deputy. He felt it was necessary to be able to have that conversation knowing that views would be listened to and considered professionally and that the conversation would be supportive but about improvement. From his observations he felt that our SIP provided that opportunity. However he was not convinced that the structure/system of SIPs as it was currently being implemented would 'broadly contribute to improvement'. In his opinion the multi-faceted relationship between SIP, school, governors and local authority could, with different people in the various roles lead to conflict or protectionism.

Although I have been trying to look at the impact of external agencies in this section, it has proved difficult to separate this from the role of the headteacher. A number of factors could be at play here, for example the fact that most interaction with external bodies is brokered and managed by the headteacher. Also, many staff

and governors do not really see what is going on but have to rely on reports given to them by the headteacher. In addition, I was the person interviewing them. It is of course very possible that the interviewees responses about the headteacher were biased and thus more positive than they might have been because they were talking to me. Certainly there were very few negative comments about the headteacher's role and some interviewees (e.g. Harriet) were perhaps over enthusiastic. I took great care to try to separate the role of the headteacher from perceptions of me as headteacher when interviewing. Clearly though some interviewees found this difficult as is shown by the apparently random choice of the words 'you' or 'the headteacher' in some of the interview responses. On occasions, it would seem they too were trying to create distance by talking about me as 'the headteacher' but at other times they reverted to talking to me and about me as 'you'. This I did not consider surprising as I was doing the interviewing but it did at times lead to rather odd sounding excerpts from the interviews.

Other governors also had mixed views about the impact of external agencies and the accuracy of their evaluation. Tina tended to take Ofsted judgements at face value and commented on how the Ofsted inspection in 2009 'acknowledged that the school had come a long way' (Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010). However, she also took care to back this up with her own observations on the improvements in Keystage One. She felt that the Governing Body, as a sort of 'half way house' had a very big part to play in school improvement and was pleased to notice that governors were taking more ownership of the self-evaluation process. She felt that governors had become stronger and, whilst they had always been supportive of the school, their monitoring had changed enabling them to be more questioning of what happened in school. She too commented on the supportive relationship with the School Improvement Partner but was also very aware of how the headteacher impacted on the school's progress. She thought the headteacher was driving the school forward the whole time, that she had high expectations of staff and was always planning to improve things. She stated that this was probably the single most significant factor in improvement. (Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010).

Tina's comments here echoed an oft-repeated theme about the headteacher driving change forward. One of the difficulties as a researcher, rather than as the headteacher of the school, was to try to understand how much of this was the interviewees' original thought and how much simply echoed my own opinions. It is clear from my diaries how much weight I gave to the role of the headteacher in 'driving change forward' and I have to wonder what impact my views might have had on the perceptions of other people in the organisation.

This governor was also very aware of the changing nature and speed of improvement and thought that, while it had never come to a standstill in the school, to effect any lasting improvement was a time consuming and ongoing process. Dawn too noted that it was often the 'headteacher [who is] pushing the governing body to question things.' (Dawn, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010) But she did consider the Governing Body to be a 'good, robust' body of people working together as a team for the good of the school. She felt that they were 'challenging constructively, being critical and questioning' (Dawn, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010) Both Penny and Charlotte were also unsure about the role of external agencies. Penny in particular critiqued the way in which external measures of improvement are used. Indeed she went on to describe these processes as 'impositions' and 'misconceived' (Penny, interview, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2010) She said she was particularly against the 'one size fits all' judgements that seem to be so prevalent as:

each school is so very different, largely because of the different communities they serve. (Penny, interview, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Her language here was particularly strong. She appeared to have a very deep sense of the issues around power and ownership, suggesting that external authorities often tried to both measure and impose 'improvements' without taking due account of the particular circumstances of each individual school. Charlotte went as far as to say that she was not convinced that external factors make much difference to the improvement agenda, reporting that her own governor training did not appear to have made 'any actual difference' to her execution of her role as a governor. (Charlotte, interview, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Whatever the rights and wrongs of external views of the school, no-one in school was about to disagree with the outcome of our Section 48 inspection. We were thrilled to have been judged 'outstanding' as a Church school.

### **Into a decline**

Our excitement was relatively short-lived though as it was very soon after this that things started to go seriously wrong with the staff team. The issues in Class 2 were continuing to escalate with teachers all blaming each other for the problems. While they did this, my day to day observations suggested that the children were suffering. Teaching was rarely good, assessment was non-existent, classroom management poor and, as a result the children's behaviour was awful. They struggled to stay on task, were very intolerant of each other and often disrespectful of adults. In addition, there was very little sense of purpose in the classroom with children wasting time and rarely completing work set for them. Harriet was very sensitive to the difficulties both in relationships and in the different teaching styles and expectations. She commented that even she had at times found it difficult to adjust to the different ways of doing things in that class. I was spending a lot of time and energy trying to keep things on an even keel and also listening to other staff members who were unhappy with the one teacher in particular who they perceived was not 'pulling her weight'. Then we had a staff training day looking at progression in English and mathematics. This was led by the respective subject leaders – the maths leader being the 'young NQT' who had so nearly failed her induction year and the English leader the part-time teacher who was causing me such concern and who had previously been her mentor. This was such a 'day of two halves' that it was embarrassing to be part of it. The maths training was excellent (with the trainee teacher taking pages of notes) but the English was another story altogether. Clearly the teacher leading it had done very little in the way of preparation and it appeared that she did not really understand the expected progression during different school years herself. In the end, I had to interject and 'rescue' the session to avoid it being a total waste of time – bearing in mind that I was paying supply teachers for the day to create time for the training. It was all the more noticeable in that the English leader was one of the Senior Teachers while the

maths leader was not – this session had really highlighted what the English leader was not doing.

The low expectations and poor subject knowledge of some teachers, [especially \_\_\_ ] has a negative impact on standards.

(Jane, interview, Autumn 2009)

Jenny was particularly concerned by this day and began to wonder whether her colleagues really took ownership of the changes:

If they thought about the school as a whole, I feel they would share my views about the school moving forward. But I think their views may depend on the number of hours they work. (Jenny, interview, Autumn 2009)

Following this awkward training day, the other teachers (including the maths leader) came to me to say how unhappy they were. I told them that they could not keep moaning to me (Headteacher, reflective journal,, October 2009), especially as they did not want me to relay what they had said to the teacher concerned, but that they needed to confront her directly. We agreed to set aside a staff meeting for this purpose. I sent Jenny, the trainee teacher, home (feeling that she did not need to be part of this), bought cakes and then let them take the time to air and discuss their worries. What followed was a very tough but constructive meeting. At the end of it I thought we had a result that might help everyone move on. The teacher concerned had listened to what people had to say and volunteered to consider resigning from the leadership part of her post. I believed this would help us all as her colleagues might be able to accept that she was 'underperforming' if she was not claiming to be a leader at the same time. Unfortunately after considering this option for a few days she changed her mind and said she wanted to continue in her current position which of course she had every right to do. My problem now was how I was going to keep the school moving forward. Teacher morale was low, with the young maths leader in particular being very unhappy, so much so that I was concerned she might leave. She told me she felt her colleague was a stumbling block to the school moving forward and that she found it difficult to accept that this colleague was in a position of leadership despite demonstrating her own weaknesses so clearly. (Headteacher, reflective journal,, October 2009) If she left, it would be a real blow to the school as she was currently the best teacher

by far. I only hoped that having begun to look with her at the possibility of applying to become an Advanced Skills Teacher this might just be enough to keep her at the school. Things went from bad to worse. The building works (expected to be finished in September) were dragging on and still having a negative effect on the running of the school, my finance manager resigned and at the same time several of us were having a tough time outside of school which was starting to have an impact on things within school. It felt as if we were imploding somehow. Jane reported feeling that her 'job had become more stressful' (Jane, interview, Autumn 2009) and Ellie very perceptively questioned her own readiness to get involved in tough areas, stating that:

I am not sure if I would even do "stuff" without [Jane's] support. I would feel very alone. (Ellie, interview, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

Governors too picked up that all was not quite as it should be even though they were not immediately involved in the difficulties. Barry noticed that 'not everyone takes ownership' and Tina described the year so far as 'busy' and 'unsettled.' Yet despite all this it seemed that the children were OK and for the most part were in fact still getting a good education, a view borne out by the report from the Church schools inspection not long beforehand. Once again I was forced to wonder about the significance of the 'small school magnification effect' as I have chosen to call it. Would the difficulties various staff members were facing have the same impact in a larger school? Was it simply our small size that caused the sense of imminent implosion or would such events have affected the morale and performance of a bigger staff group in the same way? Whatever the cause, it seems that the 'magnification effect' may have come into play again, with the difficulties among the teachers becoming very intense and emotionally charged (I remember Ellie describing this time as our 'Oktoberfest'). While the same issues would have been present in a larger organisation, I suspect they would not have had the same direct impact on so many people. Indeed, some staff members would almost certainly not even have been aware of what was happening. Alongside this, the personal difficulties facing many of the staff at that time had an effect on the organisation as a whole. Again, it seems likely that they would not have been as evident in a larger school, or at least not throughout the entire organisation. Events and actions

appear to have a disproportionate effect on a small community. Jane went some way towards summing this up:

[this school] is stressful to work in. It is small. The set-up and intensity can feel overpowering sometimes. (Jane, interview, Autumn 2009)

### **Improving....again?**

By the end of the autumn term things seemed to be improving once again. We had appointed a new finance manager, the school had opened its kitchen and the children were enjoying the high-quality meals. Also Jane, my other Senior Teacher, appeared to be much happier and this was having a positive effect on her teaching. She was enjoying her 'Leadership Pathways' training and with this was developing a vision for the EYFS/Keystage 1 children and how to make the best of our lovely new unit. She was also beginning to work with me on revising the curriculum for the whole school and the two of us attended an inspirational training day. Jane seemed very positive and was able to articulate the impact she had had on improving provision for the younger children. She commented:

I feel my opinions are valued by more people. It feels like I have a say and can impact on the headteacher. The headteacher is good at seeing potential and nurturing people...(Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Jane's choice of words here is interesting. Did she make positive comments to enable her to get closer to me and perhaps have an increased influence on decision making in the school? Maybe there was a divide developing within the school which Jane had become aware of. Perhaps she felt that there were people 'with' me and others who were not on board with what we were trying to achieve. Or did she, like me, genuinely believe that the school was in a better place?

Everything was going well...then the snow came! We managed to be one of the few schools in the area to remain open on the last day of term but unfortunately had to close for three days at the beginning of the next term. Once again, we were unable to be as prepared for the children as normal and so seemed to begin the term trying to catch up. With this, the pregnant teacher was starting to perform less well and her colleague, Jane, was getting very impatient with her. We had been to London

together on 4<sup>th</sup> January for training at the National Gallery as part of an exciting project, 'Take One Picture' which would centre a block of teaching on a painting. We planned to hold an in-house training day on 5<sup>th</sup> January to look at this in more depth and to explore the changes we wanted to make to our own curriculum and ways of planning. Unfortunately one teacher was unable to attend the day as she was unwell and our trainee teacher was understandably far more concerned about her next placement - half a term in another school - which was due to begin the following day. However, we did make some progress and everyone agreed to try a different way of planning for the 'Take One Picture' topic that was going to be taught in all classes for the second half of the term. At this point Ellie reported feeling involved in change (her word was 'absolutely') and that there were lots of opportunities to discuss and know what was happening. Diane also noted how she had enjoyed her professional dialogue (with Jane) and said that she felt more confident in her own expertise as a result. She was also clear about the role of the headteacher in moving the school forward and stated that the headteacher works in a way that is 'enabling'. At the same time Jenny commented that our participation in the 'Take One Picture' project was very positive and had meant that teachers were starting to think about planning in a different way. She felt that this was having a positive impact on the development of the school's curriculum and that we were probably ahead of other schools in this. Governors too concurred in the view that the school was still moving forward. Chris reminded us that:

Improvement is a journey, never the destination. You need to know what your goals are and to have them clearly written down. And you need to know when to take the next step. (Chris, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Although aware that it still would not have 'arrived', he expected the school to be in a better place by the end of the academic year, a view supported by Charlotte who believed the school to be moving forward and was convinced that it should be 'better' by the end of the year.

It is worth noting how often the interviewees described the school as moving forward. We are forced to question whether they really felt the school to be getting better or whether they were on occasions trying to reassure themselves that things were improving. They could even have, knowingly or not, been trying to reassure

me. As a researcher, it is almost impossible to tease out how much bias there was in these expressed opinions. However, it appeared the school had managed to continue improving despite having had to weather a few storms.

#### **And down.....**

Yet the remainder of that term felt quite difficult and muddled. We had the superb opportunity of working with an outside agency to design and build an 'Outdoor Classroom.' The downside of this was that funding streams and tight deadlines meant that it took up more of the children's and teachers' time over a concentrated period than I would have liked. It had a direct and negative effect on the 'Take One Picture' project but could not be shelved or delayed because if we missed deadlines the funding would have dried up and it was clearly a superb investment for the children's future as well as offering some great opportunities at the time. Our trainee teacher was back in Class 2 which left me initially with a 'floating teacher' – the Senior Teacher I had taken out of the classroom temporarily – and made us all feel unsettled and unsure of our roles. This began to manifest itself in a feeling of unease throughout the school which Jane equated with 'stress' and 'frustration'. (Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010) In the younger section of the school, the pregnant teacher was finding it harder still to cope and her colleague, Jane, seemed to be feeling that she was bearing the entire load. Jane said:

It feels like it is all me. Sometimes I wish I didn't care as much.

(Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

I wonder whether, as the leader of the school, I might have managed this unsettled period better. Could I have found a clearer role for the 'floating teacher?' If I had done so maybe the feeling of uncertainty and unease which permeated the school would not have taken hold.

Then, two weeks before the end of term, Diane went on Maternity Leave and I covered the time in her class to minimise disruption for the children. Those two weeks ran really smoothly and I could begin to see how our new unit (which was two terms old by now) really could have a positive effect on the youngest children. Sadly, Jane immediately seemed to start worrying about what would happen next

and began to appear very stressed again. At the same time Jenny, our trainee teacher was struggling and just not coping with her workload. I had a very difficult meeting with her in which I spelt out very clearly what she would need to do in order to pass her training year and qualify as a teacher. My concerns were serious enough to involve her external tutor yet many of the problems appeared to have their roots in the lack of support from her classroom colleagues. Despite being a trainee Jenny was conscious that she was often around more than some of her colleagues and that this probably had a negative impact. At the same time as putting my energies into getting Jenny back on track I started to have concerns once more about the teacher I had taken out of the classroom. Was she using her 'free time' wisely? There were various tasks I had asked her to do but she didn't appear to be completing them. I found myself having to create a timetable for her and needing to see evidence of the finished tasks – not really what I would expect of a leader. My response to her poor performance, while considered necessary in the short term, held the strong possibility that it would make things worse in the longer term. By creating this timetable I had effectively taken away any opportunities she might have to use her initiative, take ownership of events and re-establish herself as a leader. So, both my Senior Teachers were struggling in one way or another. Things did not look good for the school and for embedding the improvement we had worked so hard to secure.

Other staff members did not appear to view things in quite as negative light as I did with Diane saying at Easter 2010 that the school 'feels in a good place'. This difference of perception was probably because most people were relying on the current feel of the school whereas I, as the person responsible for improvement would have been looking at the capacity to make and sustain such improvement. Diane's opinion was that the school had definitely moved forward and that it would continue to do so. Emily also reported that things were 'settling down' currently although she went on to say that this settled period did feel rather fragile and that overall she viewed the year as something of a 'rollercoaster'. Harriet too thought that the school was in a pretty good place at this point but was concerned that the period of Maternity Leave and the various placements of the graduate trainee could

make it vulnerable. Although she felt that the staff worked well as a team, much better than in her last school, she was also worried that at times some people did not see the whole picture. Indeed she wondered if perhaps they were not able to do this. She was concerned too by the potential for overload and asked herself whether this was a feature peculiar to small schools. Governors also appeared aware of the problems but perhaps less concerned by them than I was. They continued to say how they viewed improvement as a journey with all its ups and downs, summed up by Chris who said that any movement towards improvement centres on 'never being satisfied, always being committed to change.' (Chris, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010) This being the case, there would inevitably be those periods when things did not seem to be working out quite as we would wish. This seemed to be sufficient to explain the current phase for most of those involved. However, Ellie seemed to be as worried as I was by the apparent downturn. She was concerned by some of her colleagues' performance and felt that improvement would be more durable if every teacher was 'excellent.' Currently, she was also of the opinion that only two of the teachers had really taken ownership of the improvement agenda and that she was one of them. Her concerns were made worse by a sense of not really knowing her place in the staff team. She found it frustrating not to be part of the Senior Leadership Team and felt that there was a lot she could make happen if she was part of that team. She was also worried by Diane's departure as Diane had the capacity to play a part in both 'camps' and be something of a peacemaker. After the failure to resolve issues in October 2009, Jane and the other senior teacher had taken up almost polarised positions. Ellie herself was strongly in support of Jane, wanting to see improvement happen quickly. In addition she felt her own position as a former mentee of the 'problem' senior teacher, knowing that she was now regarded as a better teacher than this past mentor. She was becoming increasingly irritated by both this teacher's underperformance and her apparent lack of encouragement for colleagues who wanted to progress in their teaching:

I would have hoped to see a marked improvement in [her]. I can't be in an environment where I feel "punished" for wanting to get on in my career.

(Ellie interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Other members of staff were less vociferous about their views but there did seem to be an undercurrent of dissatisfaction. Taking everything into consideration, I felt it had been another very challenging period in the life of the school.

### **More stability?**

As we returned from the Easter break I was determined that this was going to be a better term. We were a teacher down because of the Maternity Leave (she was now the proud mother of a beautiful baby boy) but I had arrangements in place to cover the first half of the term and a very good teacher lined up for later on. Also for the first time since June 2009 (i.e. for almost a year) teachers were able to get into their classrooms during the holiday without interruptions from builders or bad weather. At last we could start a term prepared for the children in the way we liked to be. We continued to work on the revision to our curriculum and were not deflected when a change of government resulted in the new National Curriculum planned for September 2010 being withdrawn. It was interesting that Jane, who was meant to be leading this, lost impetus once it ceased to be something imposed from outside. At the same time she appeared increasingly stressed by her daily workload and the changes of colleagues she was having to cope with and began to doubt her own efficacy as a classroom teacher as well as a leader.

My job has become more stressful. (Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

This year had been hard. You can lose security and confidence because you worry about getting things wrong... (Jane, interview, July 2010)

I tried to encourage her to look back at what we had achieved and at her part in that and she was able to agree that at least the Teaching Assistants had moved on. She thought this was probably a result of better management as they seemed to need a lot of directing. Interestingly, even when pushed, she had little to say about their understanding of what they were required to do even though they were now doing it better. Was this a reflection of her leadership style? Do people need to understand to perform well? I wondered if this was a key question about the effectiveness of school improvement. We had moved from fairly unexciting ways of teaching the children in the EYFS and Keystage One to developing a really good provision and one that was being recommended to other schools as a beacon of

good practice. In addition, the partnership with her fellow Senior Teacher was working out better than anticipated and it would not be long before she had a colleague with similar strengths to work alongside. Then, at the end of April, she completed her Leadership Pathways training and this seemed to enable her to look back and see just how far she had developed as a leader and how much better her people skills had become. The trainee teacher got over her difficult patch and was beginning to show signs of developing into a good teacher. Once again, with the exception of the one teacher, the school seemed to be in a better place. This continued until about the end of June. The new teacher, Emily, arrived and slotted into EYFS/Keystage One very quickly, soon getting the measure of both children and colleagues. Our recently opened before and after school care was going well. Jenny, the trainee teacher had made good progress and was aware of many changes she had made and was continuing to make to her own practice. As she gained in knowledge and confidence she said that she felt more useful, no longer just an 'extra body' as she had been at the start. She passed her training year and got a permanent job for the autumn (unfortunately we had no permanent vacancies so could not keep her). The Class 3 teacher/maths leader achieved accreditation as an Advanced Skills Teacher. She reported feeling very much a part of the improvement agenda and was pleased that colleagues would come to her for advice. She was also pleased to be joined on the staff by another full-time teacher from June 2010. This teacher, Emily, returning after eight months away felt the school had improved but could not be quite sure what had changed or why she felt this:

It has not gone backwards nor stood still. It has a feel of doing, things are happening. Is it just because it is busy or is there something else? There is a positive feel about staff banter. (Emily, interview, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

The fact that she talks about 'banter' as well as describing this as 'positive' suggests that things really were calming down within the staff group and that people were at ease with each other once again. Emily felt there had been some positive moves on a whole school level with recent work on the curriculum bringing staff together on a 'joint mission.' She also liked the way everyone was involved in the process of change in this school and that things were 'not just plonked on your desk for you to

get on with.’ (Emily, interview, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010) She commented too on the way everybody was consulted and expected to take part and contribute

All seemed to be set for a stable period of consolidation and improvement. But would that turn out to be the case?

### **Or free-fall?**

As the end of term approached, I saw an example of how one person can rock the morale of the entire team in a small school. Once more, the question had to be asked as to whether this would have happened in any staff grouping or whether it was again precipitated by our small size. Was it another example of the ‘magnification effect’ and was it the case that someone enthusiastic and energetic could have an equal positive impact? Indeed, this could go some way to explaining the many positive comments about the headteacher by different interviewees. Jane, had for so long wanted a colleague with some initiative and ideas to work alongside yet seemed unhappy with the situation now where she was not fully in control. Having spent all year complaining that she was having to initiate everything and that Diane did not seem to be able to make things happen she now appeared not to like it when Emily did!

I am very happy here. I walked in as a temporary member of staff and already feel part of the team. However, I am a bit worried that [Jane] doesn’t seem to like it when I take it on myself to do anything. That can be difficult especially as she only works part-time.

(Emily, interview, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

The end of year interview with Jane was fascinating; there was a clear sense of dissatisfaction. Also, most of what she had to say was related very specifically to how she felt about herself and her role. She recognised that:

I am not an even keel person [and that I] would like to be a bit more like that. I can’t maintain that pace all the time. I need an injection of new ideas. There is a loss of output. I have run out of steam.

(Jane, interview, July, 2010)

When we consider that each teacher is a huge percentage of the total in such a small school it has to be asked how much one person's 'mood swings' will affect the performance of everyone. Certainly Jane's low morale and negativity started to have an effect on everyone in school at this time. Looking back, I wonder if I could and should have done more to try to understand where Jane was coming from. Was there something more I could have done to minimise the impact of her unsettled period? Maybe I too was dragged down and temporarily 'paralysed' by the feeling of negativity which seemed to permeate the school.

Just when I had thought things were going well it became clear that this had been only a temporary reprieve and that the school was vulnerable once again. As the leader, I needed to do something that would prevent the school going into free-fall. After reflection, I decided to move the teachers around. I left the new AST with the older children and continued her partnership with our Higher Level Teaching Assistant so that for the 20% of time she was going to be out of school (another potential problem in itself) the children would have continuity as the HLTA would be able to teach them. I moved Jane to Class 2 (aged 7 to 9 years) partnering her with the other Senior Teacher who had taught that age group relatively unsuccessfully for the past two years. Although this would ultimately mean re-defining the responsibilities of the Senior Leadership Team, I felt that it could have some very positive spin-offs. Ellie too could see the potential in this partnership:

If [they] embrace it positively, it could have a huge impact.

(Ellie, interview, August 2010)

It would break a partnership in which I felt that teachers had been 'covering up' for each other. Also I believed that it would allow Jane to return to teaching older children, where I knew her skills lay more naturally and so she should be happier. I hoped too that some of her good practice and classroom management skills would rub-off on her new partner. We spent a lot of time discussing this move and the reasons behind it. Jane was pleased to be teaching these older children and also thought she could have some of the positive impact I was hoping for.

It will feel like going back into a normal classroom, what I am used to and feel comfortable with. Not team teaching. I will get my confidence back as me. (Jane, interview, July 2010)

This comment was quite revealing I think. The suggestion that Jane had lost confidence may go a long way towards explaining her negativity and the difficulties she appeared to have working alongside other colleagues. If she felt insecure then it was perhaps not surprising that some of her interactions with other staff members were not very positive. She also talked about feeling 'stifled' on occasions (Jane, interview, July 2010) and it being:

easier in a small school for the headteacher to know what is going on....it is hard to get away from it. (Jane, interview, July 2010)

It was as if she felt continually in the spotlight and was thus prevented from doing some of the good things she might otherwise have done. As her manager, maybe I should have picked up on this sooner. Helping Jane to address her insecurities and move on may have had a beneficial effect on everyone. It was pleasing to see Jane enthusiastic about the change of year group and in addition moving her would help address some of the concerns we had about transition from Keystage One to Two. She would be moving with the children who were transferring from one keystone to another and would therefore have a very good understanding of their needs both academically and emotionally. We both expected that she would be able to play a key role in solving some of the transition issues for the children. Hopefully this would also address some of Jenny's concerns who although she believed the school had moved forward throughout the year was aware that some areas still needed work, especially Class 2. She had wondered whether teachers always took and used the information from the discussions they had. She also commented that although her colleagues appeared to be mostly on board with changes and improvement, there was always the danger of overload in a small school. I felt the staffing changes should help address those concerns as well as those shared by Harriet along similar lines. Harriet was concerned about what would happen when Jenny left in a few days' time and shared that she would hate to see the behaviour in Class 2 go backwards again. She believed there were still some colleagues who were not willing to take on responsibility and found this frustrating at times. She wanted to

be sure that we were indeed doing the best for the children, sharing Emily's doubts as to whether currently we could really guarantee the quality of children's education throughout the school as there did not seem to be consistency across all year groups.

So, for Keystage Two, it seemed the school was in the strongest possible position for the coming year. The same could not be true for EYFS/Keystage One. Although Emily, the teacher recruited for the past half-term, had turned out even better than hoped, her position was only a temporary one and Diane, the teacher on Maternity Leave, was due to return in January 2011. I had witnessed previously that she was no leader. Alongside the temporary teacher, Emily, I had put a part-time colleague who despite being 'Outstanding' in the classroom showed very little in the way of leadership, vision or organisational skills. So, we had an excellent set-up for the autumn term but at the expense of leaving EYFS/Keystage One very vulnerable from January onwards. I decided that this was a risk worth taking if it meant there was good chance of securing consistently good teaching throughout Keystage Two. Again I was dealing with one of the key factors in a small school, by definition its size meant that there were limited opportunities to hide or dilute the impact of less effective teachers.

### **A good school?**

In the short term, the moving around of staff proved to be a good decision. Morale was improved almost overnight and teachers began to look forward to planning for the new academic year. They were all keen to get into their classrooms over the holiday period and set them up for the coming term. Clearly though, the effectiveness of the changes would remain to be judged by two main criteria i.e. had they led to consistently better provision for Keystage Two and what would happen in the EYFS/Keystage One unit in the longer term. We were at the start of yet another new phase in the life of the school. Only time would tell whether at last we would be less vulnerable and therefore be able to maintain the standards needed to continue to be a 'Good' school or maybe become even better.

Although the year ended on a positive note, everyone interviewed felt it had been a real period of ups and downs. Nothing had stayed on an even keel for very long. Was this peculiar to the single year or was it a trend running through school life? Again, it had to be asked whether some of the fragility around relationships such as that between Jane and Emily, with the difficulties of shifting identities, ownership of the classroom and ultimately who was in control and when, were effects peculiar to the small size of the school and staff group. My feeling is that the same factors would have been at play but that they would have been much less evident to other members of staff in a larger institution. There were similar tensions in the relationship between Ellie and her former mentor. Again, these might have been much less evident to other people in a larger community.

My own role throughout this year was quite a complex one too with obvious tensions between my role as researcher and that of leader and manager. These tensions have clearly influenced the data despite my own and others' attempts to prevent this. I think it would have been very difficult for them not to, even though I have tried hard to keep a distance from me as headteacher when reporting and analysing the data. Whenever possible, I have taken a step back and attempted to understand my own actions and to consider what I might have done differently. Another aspect worth considering is the impact my doing this research had on the way the school year unfolded. Did asking questions of people at various points in the school year affect their own view of that year and even possibly influence their actions?

# **Chapter 5: Themes emerging from the data**

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As I began to engage with the data a number of themes started to emerge from the various stories and interviews. There appeared to be some consistency between the pressures and concerns felt by the headteacher over the five-year period and the issues raised by other people involved with the school during that same period. Issues emerging from the story are how school staff feel constantly pressurised by lack of time, the way we feel as though we are on a rollercoaster ride with 'ups' and 'downs' following closely on each other, the way everything (good and bad) seems to be magnified in a small school and how this contributes to that rollercoaster ride, the impact of interpersonal relationships and how there is nowhere to hide. There is also a recurring suggestion of vulnerability especially in my own reflective journal. Each of these themes helps to highlight why improvement is unlikely to be something that happens quickly but is far more likely to be a journey that takes place over several years.

To highlight the way themes from the case study and the longer term auto-ethnographical study by the headteacher are intertwined and in some cases interdependent, I have used the device in this chapter of taking a thought expressed by the headteacher and then using the words of other participants as a commentary on this opinion. There is of course an inherent weakness in this approach as all of the teachers interviewed are managed by me and several of them are still relatively inexperienced and junior in their positions within the school. Although I would suggest that they did feel free to express their opinions, whatever these were, the fact remains that very few of them were critical of me and my role in the school. Would they have been more critical if I had not been their boss as well as the researcher? Another concern with this approach is that those teachers who might well have been critical of me chose not to take part in the research. So, although they feature in general description and in the comments of others, they are never given their own voice in the process. I wish this could have been different as it might have presented a more rounded picture. However, there were as many governors interviewed as teachers and as I am ultimately accountable to them in

my role as headteacher they were unlikely to have felt the same level of constraint as the teachers.

Although I have made some comments about the leadership aspect of my headteacher role and how my actions relate to some of the themes and outcomes identified in this chapter, I have chosen to address this area in more depth in Chapter 6.

### **The time factor**

Everything mitigates against taking time to stand back and consider where you are and where you need to go.

My time seems to have been entirely taken over once again. It seems there is no possibility of an acceptable work/life balance.

(Headteacher, reflective journal, January 2009)

Time seems to have a huge impact on the improvement agenda in a variety of ways. Firstly there is the lack of time felt by staff in all schools.

Time – there is always a shortage of this commodity. It seems to matter not one jot how often we reallocate time, the cry is always the same – we need more. The use of time is frequently on our agenda. (Nias et al, 1994, p.276)

Clearly, time management and how to prioritise are areas to be considered and as headteacher something I needed to look at with the staff (see Chapter 6). Trying to keep on top of all the various government and local authority initiatives as well as their associated paperwork in addition to doing a good job as a teacher can feel almost impossible. There just never seems to be enough time to achieve everything that needs to be done in school. Many teachers work a lot of ‘additional hours’ trying to keep on top of things and do the best for their pupils.

The most obvious effect of Ron’s afterschool work was that he frequently worked well into the evening. It was not unusual for him to be in school two or three evenings a week. He also put in time at the weekend. In short, Ron worked long hours. (Southworth, 1995, p 87)

This is a fact that is true of my own working life and that of the teachers in my school although ‘the time available for teaching needs careful analysis.’ (Pollard,

1997, p223) It can be all too easy, even since 'workforce reform', to get sucked into routine and relatively unimportant administrative tasks and lose sight of what matters in the school and classroom. Yet most teachers report feeling under pressure most of the time and that there always seems to be more to do than there is time to do it:

I find the job quite stressful, not sure if I enjoy it

(Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

There is always the tendency to think, 'Oh no, not another thing...'

(Emily, interview July 2010)

Ellie concurs with her colleagues when she too comments on the issues of having too much to do and not enough time to do things:

I worry about [the extra things people do]. We always feel pushed for time

(Ellie, interview, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

There is possibly more at work here than the straightforward issue of lack of time. Do people feel more pressurised when they are not entirely convinced of the usefulness of what they are being asked to do? Perhaps I, as the leader, should have done more to enable them to view the demands on them in a more positive light, seeing that any improvements we make will be for the benefit of the children who must always be our primary concern. Maybe I could also have done more to help them with the perennial problem of effective time management. Clearly, each of these teachers is feeling the weight of all that they have to do in the limited time they have available to do it. While they acknowledge that there may be actions they can take to make the workload manageable:

We put too much pressure on ourselves (Jane, interview, October 2009)

It's important to know how much time things take

(Jenny, interview, October 2009)

and that there may even be a positive side to the daily demands:

No two days in teaching are the same – anything can happen however planned you are (Emily, interview, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2009)

each of the teachers feels that ultimately there is no simple answer to coping with their workload. They are aware that in order to do their job properly with the many layers of planning and differentiation needed in order to address the needs of every

child in their care takes far longer than the hours they have in a working week. The job of teaching is a complex one and it seems that it is only just beginning to be recognised that in order to teach a subject well, a teacher not only has to have thorough grounding in the area they are to teach but also be master of a plethora of skills and anecdotes to make it come alive for their students. This is because:

....education sits at the intersection of virtually all domains of inquiry, including the disciplines that serve as source domains for curricula. It is becoming increasingly clear that the knowledge needed to teach these disciplines might be understood as a legitimate branch of enquiry within those disciplines, as evidenced by journals devoted to engineering education, medical education, and so on. (Davis and Sumara, 2006, p166)

The next part of these authors' explanation of the links between subject knowledge and teaching skills go some way towards explaining why teaching well can be such a time-consuming occupation:

This [link] has perhaps been best developed within mathematics education, where teachers' mathematics knowledge is coming to be recognized as a legitimate branch of mathematical inquiry in which attentions are paid to the largely tacit bits of knowledge – the metaphors, analogies, images, applications, and gestures – that bubble to the surface in moments of teaching. (Davis and Sumara, 2006, p166)

Teachers in the school studied seemed to feel the weight of trying to do too much and yet not seeming to have the space to do those things which are most needed.

We try to do everything, I sometimes wonder what we do well. There is so much more we could do to improve.... (Jane, interview, July 2010)

Not only can this be detrimental to staff wellbeing but it also makes it very difficult to focus on anything other than the day to day requirements. I was particularly aware of this tension as headteacher, noting frequently in my reflective journal that I felt the weight of everyday tasks crowded out the opportunities for working more strategically. What I was perhaps not always clear enough about was my role in helping other staff look beyond the immediate issues. The teacher's first call is to be teaching the children in her class, 'meeting the needs of the individual child' and creating a 'stimulating and purposeful' classroom environment (Wilcock, 1994,

p274). This takes time in the classroom. Balanced against this was the knowledge that in order to hone their skills and develop other aspects of their role, teachers need to take time out of the classroom to attend training. How much time out is acceptable? How long before it has a negative impact on the children's learning? Or on the teacher's own sense of feeling in control of their working environment?

For a while (in September) I felt on top of things. I need to let go of my worry e.g. [about things] not happening when [I am] not in class

(Harriet, interview, February 2010)

This sense of being on top of things for a short while and then feeling a loss of control seems to be a recurring theme for all school staff. There is a feeling that there really are not enough hours to get the job done properly and that, while we can all juggle the balls for a while, it will only be a matter of time before one or more of them comes crashing down. I wonder if this is simply about lack of time or whether the feeling of loss of control is a factor. Fear too may well be at play here – if teachers are worried that ultimately things will come crashing down it could be that this engenders a sense of paralysis. If this is so then it may just be that lack of time is not as significant a factor as first appears. This also leads us into the debate about what is effective professional development. While agreeing with those proponents of on-site, whole staff training, - something I have often facilitated in school - this has to be balanced with the difficulties of covering the class while teachers are out and the government and local authority bias towards offering 'required' training at central locations and pre-determined times:

Effective professional development is supposed to foster lasting change in the classroom. When it doesn't we waste valuable time, resources and most important, our teachers' trust that time engaged in professional development is well spent. We can avoid this by offering proven content in a delivery model that aligns with characteristics of effective adult learning in school. Professional development also works best when it's on-site, job-embedded, sustained over time, centred on active learning, and focussed on student outcomes. (Chappuis et al, 2009, p57)

Chappuis and colleagues advocate 'Learning Teams' as an effective and time-efficient approach to professional development: a similar approach to our own

school's use of 'Lesson Study' (DCSF, 2008, Improving practice and progression through Lesson Study) alongside other schools in a local 'Learning Network.'

In addition to the constant demands on them in the classroom, in a small school everyone wears so many hats. As well as being English subject leader, for instance, a member of staff might find herself being the school's Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) and the physical education (P.E.) subject leader as well. In the case of the person who does this, it is all supposed to be fitted into 0.7 of a full-time working week too. Not only is it a tall order to fit all those roles into one part-time position, it also brings with it other time pressures. How do you keep up to date with current thinking in all those areas? Yes, there are always plenty of courses available to help but then there is the problem of which ones to attend and the impact on the teacher's day to day classroom role as outlined earlier. It seems that again it is not simply a question of time available but that this is somehow wrapped up with feelings of anxiety and fear of not being able to cope, emotions identified by Emily in her July 2010 interview. Once again teachers are in danger of being overwhelmed by their feelings of simply not being able to manage everything there is to do in the time available.

Is there sufficient time and are there sufficient resources to accomplish everything on the teacher learning plate in one year?

(Chappuis et al 2009, p59)

I feel particularly aware of this factor in my role as headteacher and, indeed, have shared with several colleagues my opinion that it is 'only when we accept that the job is simply not do-able' that we have any chance of dealing with the stresses it creates and maintaining our sanity let alone any sort of work-life balance. When teachers are able to do this then they may also be able to manage their time more effectively and thus in effect create more time to do the job. Time that is no longer spent worrying may well be freed up for doing things. Unfortunately, and I suspect probably counter-productively, this constant feeling of being under stress seems to have intensified following the changes to the Ofsted inspection regime in 2010. One of the governors interviewed showed a real understanding of this and the particular effects it might have on the stress felt by headteachers:

It has put a lot of pressure on people, especially headteachers who are very worried..... the goalposts have shifted. Some elements have increased box-ticking. It could be viewed as a threat – [it] doesn't feel supportive. It has led to increased pressure and workload. (Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

These changes, with their increased paperwork and box-ticking had a noticeable impact on the way I was feeling about my job and the time available, or rather lack of time, to do it well. I was becoming increasingly anxious that everyday issues were taking too great a percentage of my time and that I was in danger of not addressing the issues an Ofsted inspector might require of me:

I think my job is virtually impossible. There is the ongoing problem of balancing the teaching I need to do with time that needs to be spent in the office. The key issue is how to prevent the everyday overtaking the strategic element of the job. My workload is huge and there just never seems to be enough time..... (Headteacher, reflective journal, January 2009)

In autumn 2009, I again echo the feeling of lack of time when I write about having 'a rare opportunity to stop and think' (Headteacher, reflective journal, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2009). I go on to reflect how

my constant issue is how to find time to consider where we are [as a school] and then plan and carry out the things needed for improvement. I have learnt a) to shut out noise and b) to multitask but it is wearing and sometimes the strain really shows.....

(Headteacher, reflective journal, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2009)

Perhaps it is not surprising that I regularly feel this level of pressure when we consider the demands of the job and how they have changed in recent years. There seems to have been a shift away from learning and teaching, although surely these must remain our core purposes, to a much more externally driven agenda. When trying to juggle this with the many other aspects of the role, it is no wonder that lack of time is a recurring theme. The current educational climate appears to be focussed on:

the expansion of target-setting, accountability, monitoring, assessment and evaluation, giving rise to the statement .....that it is 'a wholly different profession to the one I was appointed to.'

(Barrett-Baxendale and Burton, 2009, p 98)

Maybe it is not surprising that a headteacher in today's climate finds herself feeling under constant pressure and with little time to focus on her own understanding of the direction the school needs to go in. When added to this are the additional tensions caused by the small size of the school, the job can teeter on the edge of becoming impossible to carry out:

it is a grave mistake to imagine that there is less administration in a small school than in a large one for there is the same amount of paperwork in both. (Wilson and Brundrett, 2005, p.45)

In the same way as the perceived lack of time means that the headteacher finds it difficult to focus on the strategic element of her role, teachers struggle to look beyond the classroom walls. This was a potential problem recognised by some of the governors who were interviewed:

Staff workload is likely to have a negative impact on school improvement

(Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Weighed against the constant pressure of 'not having enough time' there was a general sense among all the interviewees that improvement cannot be embedded quickly but that it takes a considerable length of time for improvements to really take hold. This is evident too from the case studies in the Ofsted publication 'Twenty Outstanding Primary Schools; excelling against the odds.' Although centrally published by the very body that tells us how schools can be turned around within a year, the examples quoted in the report appear to demonstrate that sustainable improvement takes time. Each of the following excerpts highlights that it has, in fact, taken many years for the schools in the study to become 'outstanding' and that it takes both time and stability for improvement to take hold and begin to become embedded:

All the schools in the sample have shown an exceptional capacity to sustain their excellent performance for a number of years, spanning two or more inspection cycles.(p50)

To achieve this, the school has been on a long journey, and has many long-standing staff and governors. The current headteacher...came to the school in 1990... (p66)

The headteacher....has been here for the last three highly positive inspections. (p69)

The headteacher....and the senior team have brought stability to the school since 2004, following a period when headteachers changed rapidly..... (p71)

(Ofsted, Twenty Outstanding Primary Schools, 2009)

Considering these experiences, it is hardly surprising that, in the school being studied, there was a sense of improvement needing both the day-to-day momentum to get things done and an extended period of time to allow changes to become embedded and 'part of what we do'. When asked about her thoughts as to whether there would be significant improvements in the children's attainment in English and mathematics by the end of the academic year, one governor's response was that she would:

expect it to be on its way but [it] takes longer than that to improve.

(Dawn, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Another governor said:

One year, no it can't! . Any improvement, in order to have any meaning at all, would take 3,4 even 5 years. Anything less is impossible.

(Chris, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

All of the respondents shared similar views about the time taken to improve things in a range of different areas. There is a suggestion that the interplay between the time available and the improvement sought has a significant effect on outcomes. For now, it will be good to consider the way that lack of time appears to contribute to the feeling many people in school have of being on a bit of a roller-coaster ride. This time pressure, coupled with the fast pace of school life can lead to a real sense of fluctuation in both feelings and an evaluation of the progress being made.

### **The 'rollercoaster' feel**

When asked to describe the year 2009/2010 in the life of the school in a single word or phrase, the word 'rollercoaster' was used by several members of staff and by

governors too. Others used words such as ‘fragmented’ and the need to continue ‘being like a tortoise’ i.e. acknowledging the need to be resilient and to keep on going. Nearly everyone expressed in some way the feeling of a bumpy ride with lots of things happening both good and bad. The following selections from my own thoughts over time give an indication of how things can go up and down in the life of the school. One minute it seems that things are sorted and we are moving steadily forward, and yet in no time at all everything can change:

**Easter 2007:** The school finally seems to be on a more even keel

**January 2008:** Our involvement in ‘Making Good Progress’ seems to be having the positive impact I had hoped for.

**September 2008:** I have moved the teachers around, largely because of behaviour issues in certain year groups – some of them just do not seem to be coping with the children in the class, yet they are not ‘difficult’ children.

**October 2008:** [Jane] has the leadership skills we need

**February 2009:** [Jane] and [Ellie] are struggling to work together. Such a pity as they have so much to offer each other

**July 2009:** Ofsted – ‘Good with outstanding features’!!! The year ended on a very positive note despite having to clear everything for the coming building project.

**September 2009:** I have serious concerns about Class X. They are all over the place. It is being blamed on the number of adults but I am not so sure.... I have concerns about both quality of teaching and consistency.

(Headteacher, reflective journal)

This sense of constant change and struggling to retain control and continue the move forward was echoed by other members of the school community. One of the factors that would impact on the continued move towards improvement would be how different people coped with the feelings of stress engendered by the sense of ‘loss of control’ at various points:

....when people attempt to cope with heavy pressures they bring into operation skills, experience, knowledge and personality characteristics in addition to supportive relationships at work, at home and in the community.....the extent to which individuals experience stress in any

situation depends on the manner in which they assess both the demands and their competence in dealing with them....

(Dunham in ed Bennett, Crawford and Riches , 1992, p284-5)

Many studies have been done on the effect of workload on teachers at different stages of their career. The sense of 'loss of control' identified in this research could very easily tip a teacher over the edge. In their study of teacher burnout, Goddard, O'Brien and Goddard report that:

there was an increasing proportion of respondents reporting that the effort they were putting into their teaching work was greater than the rewards they believed they were getting back from being a teacher.

(Goddard et al, 2006, p.870)

Although the teachers in this study were all beginning teachers, it is easy to see how this feeling of lack of reward for their effort could quickly undermine teachers' confidence and send them into a downwards spiral which could ultimately result in 'burnout':

It is now well accepted that the burnout phenomenon is a chronic state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that arises in personnel from the cumulative demands of their work. (Goddard et al, 2006,p.857)

While I am not suggesting that the teachers involved in this research were at the point of burnout, it is not too great a journey from feeling out of control to something more damaging. It seems that all the time teachers can see positive results coming from their efforts then, despite being far too busy and pressured in their working lives, they feel able to handle the feelings of overload and the prospect of being out of control.

While acknowledging that 2009/10 had been an extremely busy year and expressing concerns about the coming year, Harriet said it was a year in which the school had:

progressively and steadily moved forward, including awareness by the staff

(Harriet, interview, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010)

Many good things had happened including the development of the Outdoor Classroom and the improvement of the learning environment for the younger

children yet somehow the school continued to feel vulnerable. I had commented at the end of my account of the years 2004 to 2009 that although the school had been graded 'good' by Ofsted, it still felt in a vulnerable position to me and it seemed that both I and colleagues had little reason to change our viewpoint by the end of the summer term of 2010. Several of us spoke about this at the time:

Is it ever possible to drive things forward and keep moving? Especially in a small school where one or two staff can have such an impact.

(Headteacher, reflective journal, July 2010)

Clearly I was concerned about how to maintain the school's journey to improvement, even at a time when all the external validation was suggesting that we were doing well. Teachers voiced similar concerns at this time alongside their anxiety that they might not be able to maintain the necessary forward momentum:

We need an injection of new ideas. There has been a lot of output. I have run out of steam. (Jane, interview, July 2010)

I have to admit to finding it very difficult to support Jane at this stage. I had been very supportive of her wish to develop her leadership potential, sending her on 'Leadership Pathways' training and spending time in some really invigorating discussions with her as her coach. She had also, only weeks earlier taken:

a call from the Local Authority asking for a Newly Qualified Teacher [from another school] to visit our Foundation Stage and Keystage 1 unit. It seems we are becoming known for our good practice.

(headteacher, reflective journal, May 2010)

I was struggling to understand why she 'had run out of steam' and how I could help her re-energise. Maybe this was a reflection of my own position at this time as I note from my journal at the time that 'this seems to have been one of the most difficult years since I started.' (headteacher, reflective journal, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010).

Why did we continue to feel so vulnerable? One key element would, I believe, always be the 'spiky profile' of children's attainment. In cohorts as small as ours (ranging in size between eight and fourteen children in a year group) where one child usually represents approximately ten percent of the whole group this was always likely to be so. However, in a regime which judges a school's success by its

examination results, such small schools were always going to be vulnerable. One teacher even went as far as to question the entire validity of the Ofsted inspection system:

How can they possibly see through people telling a story? The grading system is very misleading, particularly for people who don't know much about what the grades mean. Not enough notice is taken of a particular setting. (Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Jane had, I think, hit on something significant. We had started the year on a real 'high' with a good Ofsted grade closely followed by the 'outstanding' achieved in the Church school (Section 48) inspection but we knew too that our results could easily dip again. Coupled with this was the excitement of work on the Keystage One unit commencing. But this also had its negative impact with teachers returning at the start of the year unable to prepare their classrooms and be ready for the children. With other factors impinging, it was not to be until after Easter that teachers had a 'normal' start to the term. Except that even then they didn't as, by now, one of the only two full-time teachers in the school had gone off on maternity leave. With moving colleagues around to fill the gap we were left once again with a feeling of uncertainty, of not being entirely sure what we were meant to be doing. Although I felt I had no choice but to make the staff moves that I did at this time, I was aware that this made it even harder for me to convey a sense of security to others in the school. Once again, it seems that the 'magnification effect' may well have been a factor. One or two staffing changes which may well have gone unnoticed in a larger school appeared to have the capacity to create a significant feeling of uncertainty here. The moves also impacted on an already unstable situation in one of the older classes.

I felt the class 'wobbled' when [Jenny] first came although it has stabilised since her return. There were too many styles and [Jenny] was still trying to find her feet. The children were unstable because different teachers have different expectations. People manage children in different ways and this leads to a sense of inconsistency. Even as a teaching assistant you can't always adjust to the different styles. Will the inconsistencies still be there next term? (Harriet, interview, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010)

Harriet articulated what we were all feeling. Everything felt very unsteady and we were worried about what the next academic year would look like. Having started the year on a 'high' (after the 'good' Ofsted inspection which was corroborated by an 'outstanding' Church schools inspection) the rollercoaster had suddenly dipped and we were all feeling very vulnerable once more.

Harriet's comment seems also to highlight another factor in the 'rollercoaster ride': that is the way different people respond to change.

Some teachers, depending on their personality and influenced by their previous experiences and stage of career, are more self-actualized and have a greater sense of efficacy, which leads them to take action and persist in the effort required to bring about successful [change] implementation.

(Fullan, 1992, p.117)

Some can cope quite easily with change, embracing and even initiating new ways of doing things but others seem to find it very disorientating or simply 'don't like change' (Emily, interview, July 2010). While everyone would acknowledge that the changes we made to Keystage One were really good, not everyone found themselves coping well with those same changes at the start. Harriet shows herself to be sensitive to those who find change difficult. She acknowledges that it often takes people time to adapt but that a rough ride is often part of the progress towards effective change.

The teaching assistants need more persuading [before they are prepared to change the way they work]. They are much happier in the Keystage One unit now. (Harriet, interview, April 2010, 8 months after the changes to the ways of teaching in KS1 began)

She had picked up on the fact that less skilled staff often seem to find it difficult to change but is perhaps more aware of some of the reasons for this than her colleagues. They appear quite dismissive of the teaching assistants:

TAs probably haven't got a clue [what is going on]. I don't think they have any idea where we are coming from. Are they used to being directed?

(Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Support staff don't always have a grasp of where we are going.

(Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

The teachers working in Keystage One did not appear to understand their role in convincing their teaching assistants that the changes implemented would be beneficial for both children and staff and in training them in the new ways of working. They seemed to have assumed that somehow the teaching assistants would 'catch on' or learn what to do through osmosis. Although the school had a regular pattern of team meetings and an expectation that teachers would share their ideas and planning with their 'team' neither Ellie nor Jane chose to use the meetings in this way or to request any specific training for the teaching assistants. Both teachers and teaching assistants expressed their unhappiness with the way things were working out which was a pity as a considered and planned approach by the teachers might have lessened the sense of sudden change and at least slowed the rollercoaster ride somewhat.

Teaching assistants have a significant role to play in school-based professional development in this new era of workforce reform. The way in which they are trained, encouraged to develop as individual members of staff and incorporated into the school community will have an impact not only upon their individual development but also upon the professional development of those teachers who work closely with them.

(Burgess and Mayes, 2007 p.390)

Unlike Harriet they do not appear to have realised how important it is to 'persuade' people and get them on board with proposed changes.

....change is a learning experience for all the adults involved....a key part of [implementation] is ensuring that people try out the innovation and providing lots of support for them as they do it. (Bennett et al, 1992,p11)

They seemed not to remember the hours we had spent planning for the changes and therefore not to realise that the teaching assistants were likely to need a similar level of preparation. The teachers had a responsibility to get their teaching assistants on board and to mentor them into the new ways of working. Collins and Simco are clear that both teacher and assistant have responsibility in the training process and for building an effective team:

the degree to which teaching assistants are encouraged to reflect and learn is likely to be influenced, to some degree, by the extent to which teachers are themselves implicitly and explicitly reflective practitioners involved in reflective activity that involves ongoing professional dialogue.

(Collins and Simco, 2006, p.202)

By reflecting on their own practice and leading by example in new or challenging situations, the classteacher can do a great deal to enable the process of change to be a smooth one for the teaching assistants involved. Having watched a more recently appointed teacher (Emily) do just that and work hard to build a cohesive team with the KS1 teaching assistants (the same individuals who 'didn't have a clue' previously), it is clear just how great an impact the teacher can have on the team. Finding time for planning, training and communication is never easy in a busy primary school but when you make the effort needed to create that time then the dividends are enormous:

Teaching assistants who work with small groups often take on a huge responsibility in planning work for those children. This planning is officially under the supervision of the teacher. However, the teaching assistants said that finding time for forward planning was difficult to organize during their paid working hours. The need to provide the children with constant support resulted in teachers and teaching assistant having staggered breaks.

Moreover, staff meetings and other forms of professional development often took place after school when teaching assistants needed to attend to domestic and childcare responsibilities. Consequently, there is little time for collaboration during the school day.(Collins and Simco, 2006, p.207)

If the classteacher can help create that time and set up regular meetings then the potential for creating an effective team and at least reducing the rollercoaster feel is good. Hancock and Mansfield (2002) identify considerable variation in the extent to which classroom teams are created, a view that was borne out in my own school with the same team of teaching assistants being led by two very different teachers. The second teacher was very concerned to create the time to build a team and 'get them on board' with what she was doing. As a result, the team became very productive and also very close. Each team member appeared to be conscious of

being significant and having their part to play, as was evidenced by a new willingness on the part of the teaching assistants to remain behind at the end of each day for a few minutes 'catch up time' with the teacher. They were not merely doing what the teacher told them....

In some situations there is effectively a team between the teacher and the teaching assistant whilst in others the teaching assistant is more reactive to the teacher's requests and direction. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the creation of a team is not something that can necessarily happen by osmosis. It needs careful nurturing and development.

(Collins and Simco, 2006, p.209)

The teacher concerned had indeed nurtured and developed them into an effective team. That nurturing and development is likely to be particularly important when embarking on a new venture that is as significantly different from previous ways of doing things as the new Keystage One Unit was going to be:

It has been assumed that people would slide effortlessly into the [new] classroom. ... But a decade of experience has shown us what we should have appreciated at the outset: groups and teams are fragile, fickle creatures. Bringing people together to work on a project— especially if they aren't prepared to do it—can do more harm than good. To work well they need a lot of help. (Thomas, 1992, p.197)

Because Emily was prepared to invest time and effort into the team, the teaching assistants were no longer perceived as people who 'haven't got a clue' but began to be seen as, and became, valuable partners in the improvement process. It is a pity that none of the teaching assistants mainly involved in this change chose to take part and be interviewed for this research. I am led to wonder whether their response to being invited to take part would be any different now that they know how much they are valued... All this suggests that the achievement of this empowering circumstance very much depends on the creation of a team where the teaching assistant is a full and respected member of that team. Such an achievement may not necessarily be straightforward (Thomas in Collins and Simco, 2006, p.209).

Different responses to change were further highlighted by what Ellie described as the 'Octoberfest' in the autumn of 2009. Having identified some issues in progression across the school in both English and mathematics, the respective subject leaders were asked to have a close look at this and lead staff training on progression. It became clear during this time that one teacher in particular was not able to cope with the changes needed. This led to a great deal of unrest among the remaining teachers as they began to question this person's credibility as a leader within the school. Her own reaction to colleagues did not help and led to something of a 'divide' between teachers that had not existed previously.

I would have hoped to see a marked improvement [in her performance]. I can't be in an environment where I feel 'punished' [by certain colleagues] for wanting to get on in my career. (Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Sadly, the teacher in question declined to take part in this research. What a pity as it would have been so valuable to have her 'take' on the unrest and ill-feeling that developed among the teachers at that time. Would she have had a totally different view on where the school was and how different factors contributed to the journey of improvement?

Another element that appeared to contribute to the rollercoaster feeling and the sense of 'fragmentation' felt by Ellie was when her only full-time colleague left to take maternity leave.

It is strange being the only full-timer. It feels fragmented with lots of different people around. (Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

This feeling of fragmentation is something I identified with very closely. In my role as headteacher, I struggled with trying to keep everyone 'in the loop' and feeling that too many threads had to be held by me. I was at the hub of more things than I might choose, simply to facilitate the flow of information.

Staffing is an issue with so many part-timers. Can the school sustain it long term? It needs at least two full-timers.....Can the commitment of part-timers to moving the school forward ever be the same?

(Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Ellie had hit on a key issue. However, it was one I wrestled with, knowing as I did that I had on occasions actively sought to employ part-time staff when I was unable to recruit full time teachers with the necessary skills and strengths. In the short term, it was my role to help Ellie cope with this upheaval. This I did by engaging her in lots of informal chat about her job and about education in general. Our 'professional dialogues' often seemed to last well into the evening on a Friday and were a positive time for us both. However, my support only went so far as I could not alter the staffing situation quickly, if at all. I was aware that there needed to be changes:

Current events make getting the staffing structure right even more important. (Headteacher, reflective journal, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

but, as is so often the case with employment issues, these were unlikely to be achievable quickly. Governors too shared the view that something needed to done:

The issue of personnel is crucial.....a lot depends on consistency....I hope [the school] can build on the level of stability and confidence it has currently. (Penny, interview, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

It was clear that despite my support Ellie was still feeling rather isolated and maybe even under threat in her position within the staff. Although she was striving for better things both for herself (she was working hard to earn Advanced Skills Teacher Status at the time) and for the school she clearly felt that many of her colleagues did not share her passion for improvement. It is interesting to note at this point that both of the teachers she identifies as not being committed to the improvement agenda declined to take part in this research as did two of the three teaching assistants working in the school at that time. Is there a full-time/part-time divide here or is it simply down to the personalities and commitment level of the people involved? Emily's response to the changes in her own situation would suggest that the number of hours worked per week is a factor:

With a full-time and more permanent post [now] my responsibility level changes. I can't just walk in and walk out after doing my bit. I have a responsibility to the children and to colleagues to pull my weight.

(Emily, interview, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

However, Jane who has worked part-time at the school for two years might not agree:

[Although]I enjoy the leadership side of things, I am looking forward to being in class more... It has felt like it is all on me. I wish I didn't care as much sometimes... (Jane, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

I feel that some of the school's governors got under the skin of the rollercoaster feeling better than the staff, probably because they are that little bit more removed from the daily life of the school. One in particular got into quite a lengthy discussion with me about the 'change versus stability' tension and the effects this might have on both staff and children alike. He was of the firm opinion that if we want to achieve and then embed improvement we have to take a conscious decision that 'change is necessary.' (Barry, interview, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2010) Even though we know it may well make people uncomfortable, we have to commit to change in the search for improvement. I think I will leave the last words in this section to the Chairman of the school's Governing Body:

2009/2010 was a challenging year though this was not always a negative thing. It was not an easy year for many people either professionally or personally but progress continued. (Tina, interview, July 2010)

Maybe that is what the rollercoaster of progress is all about....

### **The magnification effect in a small school**

We always seem to be right up there or down in the dumps. There never seems to be a happy medium. (Headteacher, reflective journal, March 2008)

There is a sense that everything, good and bad, is magnified in a small school. This appears to be partly because of simple numbers: one teacher can represent as much as 25% of the teaching staff at any given time so whatever is happening to them is huge in proportion to the full staff complement. Alongside this numerical effect there is an issue of intensity. In her chapter about her own school, Miriam Wilcock recalls the words of a headteacher she met early in her career:

My teachers teach most effectively when encouraged to develop their own skills and personal styles. (Wilcock, 1994, p.275)

She then goes on to say that:

In any group of people there has to be a willingness to give and take, to acknowledge and respect the contributions each can make towards achieving the aims of the school. (Wilcock, 1994, p.275)

I wonder if these two requirements are in an almost inescapable tension and, with small numbers of people working closely together, maybe there is not room to both 'be yourself' and be ready to give and take enough with colleagues. Things that might well go unnoticed in a larger establishment seem to impinge on everyone. Because there are not many people on the staff, relationships are closer and awareness of others' feelings is usually shared by everybody. If one person is 'having a bad day' this is likely to spread. Conversely, good feelings also have a tendency to spread. This magnification effect seems to apply to the children too. Again, because numbers are small, any issues are likely to affect the whole school. It is just not possible for one child to be in trouble, or to do well, without the whole school knowing and thus being affected.

Although it is difficult to find any reference to this 'magnification effect' in the body of literature, the reality of leading a small school in today's educational climate is very different to the prevailing view. The idea of a cosy village school where the headteacher is also a class teacher, with perhaps half a day a week out of class for administrative tasks, is virtually impossible with the demands currently made on headteachers. Yet, financial constraints mean that headteachers of small schools nearly always have a teaching commitment.

It is a popular misconception that running a small school is considerably easier than running a large one. There are, of course, many advantages in a small school, including easier communications, yet the nature of the post itself makes it in essence a most complex and difficult task to perform successfully. (Wilson and Brundrett, 2005, p.44)

Wilson and Brundrett have identified that leading a small school has become a complex and challenging task. Expectations on headteachers are now so demanding and diverse that such a headteacher has somehow to balance all the

external demands with the necessity of being far more actively involved in regular teaching commitments than their counterparts in larger schools:

....there are specific problems of fulfilling the role of Headteacher in a small school for not only does the position involve the full range of normal Headteacher duties but it may also include a major responsibility for a class of children. (Wilson and Brundrett, 2005, p.44)

Like so many other aspects of working in a small school, this tension in roles from the headteacher down can, I believe, contribute to the magnification effect. Things that would not merit a mention in a larger institution seem at times to have a colossal effect on everyone in a small school.

When one teacher went off on maternity leave, in itself a routine event, it had an impact on the whole school because everyone knows each other so well.

[The last six months were] fairly ordinary. Nothing major happened but it was 'big' when [Diane] left. I was worried because I was the only full-timer..... The staffing felt fragmented, not stable.

(Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Ellie is clearly significantly affected by her colleague's departure on Maternity Leave, a view that was echoed by her colleague:

[Diane] going is a vulnerability. (Harriet, interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

Likewise, during the year 2009-10 three of the teachers had difficulties in their personal lives. The impact of this spread far beyond them as individuals:

We have been through a period where everything felt a bit unstable.

(Harriet, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Harriet is again articulating what everyone appeared to be feeling. This feeling was clearly strong enough to be picked up outside the immediate staff team:

Personal issues have added to staff pressure.

(Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Again, the fact that this was felt by the whole school was, I feel, directly related to the fact that the three individuals represented over half of the teaching staff. It would have been very difficult for their difficulties to have remained localised. In the same way when two teachers got married (in 2007 and 2010 respectively)

everyone's spirits soared and there was a 'buzz' throughout the whole school. Clearly there is likely to be a much greater closeness in relationships in a small school simply because there are not many people and there is nowhere to hide (see next section) but is this always a good thing? Wilson and Brundrett are quite right to ask the question 'Relationships – the greatest strength of a small school?' (2005) In my experience there are some real positives about the closeness of relationships and they quite rightly point out that:

The relationship with staff and parents is one of the greatest joys of being a Headteacher, this is especially so in a small school where it is very easy to form and develop very close links. (Wilson and Brundrett, 2005, p.47)

But, as with so much else in the small school, there is another side. The magnification effect is once more at play and the same closeness that causes that 'buzz' when things are going well for people can make it extremely difficult when problems appear:

Recruitment of staff in a small school can be challenging. Less effective teachers cannot be 'carried' by supportive colleagues; no one else will be teaching the same age group and there are no Year Group Leaders. .... 'An unsatisfactory teacher (is)... difficult to 'hide' on a small staff'

(Galton and Patrick, 1990, p.44).

Once again the magnification effect has come into play and in this case this is likely to have a significant detrimental effect on the school's journey to improvement. Where it might be possible to dilute the impact of an unsatisfactory teacher in a large school, this just cannot happen in a small school as any teacher is such a high percentage of the total staff complement. They are likely to have an effect on around twenty five percent of the school's pupils at any given time. Dealing with an unsatisfactory teacher is a difficult process whenever and wherever it takes place but, once again, it is made all the harder by being in a small school. There is almost certainly going to be significant fallout which cannot avoid having a direct impact on that person's colleagues and their relationships with each other.

Dealing with a failing teacher is one of the most difficult problems a Head encounters and all the more so in a small school for the situation will impinge on the whole staff. (Wilson and Brundrett, 2005, p 46)

This magnification effect is not only felt on a personal level but also in the area of statistics. With each child usually representing around ten percent of a cohort, it is very difficult to track progress. League tables do not show the true picture of the school's progress, or lack of it. One or two children only have to have a particularly good or bad day when taking tests such as the national SATs for results to be skewed by around 20%. Another way in which the effects of something are felt disproportionately is in the many courses etc on offer to help schools improve. Because staff wear so many different hats, it is difficult for them to engage fully in as many of these as they might wish. We are always having to weigh the advantages of undergoing training against the effects of any one individual being out of the classroom too much.

In-service opportunity clearly benefits both staff and children but there are some problems too. Teachers are feeling both anxious and guilty at the amount of time they are away from their own classes. We become frustrated with the dilemma of knowing the value of in-service training and fulfilling our commitments in the classroom. (Wilcock, 1994, p280)

In addition there is the constant danger that people will be learning so many new things that there is never the opportunity to practise and consolidate what they have learned. In a larger school there would simply be more people to go round!

### **Interpersonal relationships**

I often feel like a mother figure in school especially with the younger staff.

(Headteacher, reflective journal, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2010)

One specific area in which the magnification effect is felt is within personal relationships. As the above quotation suggests, relationships can become very close between staff in such a small school. Also, several of the teachers came as very inexperienced practitioners and have been nurtured and mentored by me until they became successful teachers. While this has been really good for both them and the school, and a pleasure to observe, there is the inherent danger that these teachers will continue to remain too dependent on me. This is especially likely in a school the size of ours where, although headteacher, I am also nearly always too readily available to them. It can be very easy to come and ask me when in fact they

should be making a decision for themselves based on their professional expertise. In situations where it is not appropriate to make an issue of their asking it would be good sometimes to have a legitimate reason to be elsewhere and thus not immediately accessible. Some of the staff also show their awareness of my availability and the demands this can put on me:

Sometimes I think you are too readily available to us. You should close your door more often to give yourself the space to reflect and recharge.

(Emily, interview, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

In a small school [like ours] it is easier for the headteacher to know what is going on. (Jane, interview, July 2010)

Clearly this can be both a positive and a negative force. As well as the toll it can take on me personally, it can also be both good for teachers to know that I am aware of what is happening; as well as negative, if that then prevents them from using their initiative. It may be that knowing I am aware of almost everything that happens makes them feel unable to take risks in case things go wrong.

Not much happens without the headteacher driving it.... if she didn't have the vision for building etc, the school would still be stuck in the past.... I would send [my child] there now. The children get a really good deal.

(Jane, interview, July 2010)

Clearly it is a good thing to have a leader who 'drives things,' but is there a danger that the headteacher is too involved? Barry would say not:

The headteacher's role is very direct and very significant. You have to have the vision, get support and then pull the levers. You work through other people and thus improvement happens. (Barry, interview, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2010)

This governor appears to have identified both the headteacher's role in the improvement journey and the way that role works out on a daily basis. There seems to be a point of balance that is needed between being visible:

You are an active headteacher, you don't hide in your office.....

(Emily, interview, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

and standing back enough to allow other people to act. Once again, the closeness of relationships in a small school play their part and make it crucial that the headteacher knows when to be visible and when not. Emily appears to have

pinpointed something noteworthy in commenting on my visibility, though maybe it is not really the size of school that is the issue here but more to do with my leadership style which is very much about being involved. This same teacher, as well as some of her colleagues, also remarks that:

I know I am free to use my professional judgement and change things if needed. (Emily, interview, July 2010)

Maybe this teacher has understood more about my role and the difference between 'vision' and strategic thinking and the more everyday elements of my job than some of her colleagues. It could be that it is not simply my availability that is the issue here but also the teachers' willingness to be more independent of me and to take responsibility for the outcomes of their actions. Interestingly, in his case study of the headteacher of a much larger school than mine, Southworth notes:

Ron was usually available and his approachability no doubt encouraged callers. (Southworth, 1995, p.79)

It is possible that that was occurring in my situation too. Equally it could also be something of a 'learned dependence.' Many of the teachers had started at the school as very inexperienced practitioners who had needed a lot of coaching to enable them to develop into good teachers. It could be that they had simply got into the habit of running everything past me. Yet, of course, that is often not helpful in moving an organisation forwards.

Sometimes the headteacher may be too close to see how things really are.

(Harriet, interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

Perhaps it was more a change of approach I needed than 'legitimate reasons to be elsewhere.' I had to take care that my leadership style, coupled with the ease of being closely involved in events in a small school did not slip over into interference. I knew that different leadership stances are needed at different stages if an organisation is to move forwards. It was clear too that there could be a lot to be gained from a more distributed leadership structure in the school and less dependence by staff members on the headteacher. This would also put the school in a better position to embed and sustain improvement. I took care on many occasions to distance myself from events as it was important to retain my role as leader. However, this does not take away from the fact that, in an organisation as

small as ours, closeness in interpersonal relationships is a factor for everyone in the school community.

The small size of the school plays a significant part in the working out of personal relationships. If two teachers do not get along very well in a larger school it is often possible for them to avoid each other. In a small school there is nowhere to hide. This can have really positive results as shared by two of the teachers:

The staff are really pulling together as a team.....[they] are a much better team than at my last school. (Harriet, interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

The staff are quite together and all know what we are doing as a team. We are on track. (Ellie, interview, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

Also, many people have commented on the welcoming feel of the school:

Everyone was very open and welcoming...there is a sense of community that has a positive impact on our feeling of wellbeing.

(Jenny, interview, October 2009)

This clearly helps people to feel good about their workplace and the job they do but the small size and consequent closeness in relationships also mean that when things do go wrong they usually have an impact on everyone. In addition it can be a factor that saps energy from the organisation as a whole. If staff are having to work hard at maintaining good relationships then this can take from the other things they need to do. Once again, in a bigger organisation it may be possible to simply avoid those people you do not naturally get on well with and so not use up precious resources in trying to find ways of working well together but in a small staff group this is not usually possible. Somehow you have to find a way of getting along even when this comes with a cost:

[It] takes energies away from other things when you are putting them into different people....it has affected my performance

(Jane, interview, July 2010)

Jane also felt that things were not always what they seemed.

Some people aren't honest [about their opinions] and you never get to know anyway. (Jane, interview, July 2010)

She found this very difficult to deal with in a small school but would probably have found it easier in a larger organisation. Indeed, she may not even have been aware of how many of her colleagues felt in a setting where relationships were less close. Another comment of hers only serves to underline the pressure she felt under while working in a small setting:

[This school] is stressful to work in... the [small] size and intensity can feel very overpowering sometimes. (Jane, interview, October 2009)

She clearly finds working so closely with colleagues a struggle at times but I do wonder if she has any idea of the part she played in the process. I find myself beginning to wonder how self-aware this teacher really was. Did she know the messages she herself was giving out? It could be that the perceived dishonesty of colleagues was in fact rooted in their response to her own confused opinions and feelings:

It might seem at first glance that our feelings are obvious; more thoughtful reflection reminds us of times we have been all too oblivious to what we really felt about something..... (Goleman, 1996, p.46)

Relationships, whether close or otherwise, are often more complex than they might at first appear. With this in mind, I spent a lot of time discussing relationships with Jane. Her initial difficulties in working with Ellie were resolved to the point that they became (and still are) very firm friends. She learned to get along with both Diane and Emily and to see the strengths that each brought to the classroom. Jane still finds her relationship with teaching assistants a little difficult, struggling to see them as partners with her in the teaching process, but following training she is now much happier in her working relationships.

When we had to confront some difficult leadership issues in October 2009, it was primarily because of the negative effects these were having on everyone that we needed to do this in a head-on manner. For a while, relationships were difficult on every level, first in the run-up to the 'explosion' when there was a very strong undercurrent of discontent and then afterwards as things were said in an open meeting that were very difficult for other people to hear. The small size of the teaching staff meant that there was no possibility of people's opinions remaining

confidential and anonymous. However much we might have wanted it to be otherwise, everyone knew what everyone else was thinking and feeling and we had to spend the next few weeks and months repairing damaged relationships as a result.

That episode was monumental/pivotal. It changed things quite a lot.

[People] saw me as less junior. (Ellie, interview, July 2010)

The impact on interpersonal relationships was such that Ellie continues to refer to it as our 'Oktoberfest' and nearly a year later was still wondering:

Feelings within the teacher team..... are they any better?

(Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Another, slightly surprising, thread that emerged is just how much one person can impact on the whole team. Jane, as she shared in her interviews, is in many ways a person who tends to be either all for something or very disengaged. She has superb leadership skills and is excellent at initiating a project but then will sometimes struggle to see it through, a characteristic that colleagues can find difficult to deal with:

I am a bit like that, big bursts of energy then stop for a bit..... I am not an even keel person but I would like to be more like that..... I can't maintain that pace all the time. (Jane, interview, July 2010)

While the benefits of her 'bursts of energy' are obvious:

Jane has made a difference. (Charlotte, interview, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

what is not quite as immediately apparent is how her down-times can drag colleagues down with her. Ellie was acutely aware of her colleague's moods, worrying that Jane was feeling burdened and insecure and knowing that this was impacting on her own feelings although not entirely sure whether this was just 'on a friend level' or whether it was something that was affecting the work environment too. She was very aware of the way things were going for Jane:

[Jane in that class] didn't work for the school or for her. [Jane] was not keen to teach the children. She was always doing something with the laptop, to divert herself away..... She got very frustrated with [her colleague]. It was evident very early on. (Ellie, interview, July 2010)

Interestingly, Ellie's personal involvement with Jane appears to have blinded her to the good that Jane was doing despite her obvious empathy with Jane in the 'down' times. She had been instrumental in setting up a whole new way of working which was showing enormous benefits for the children yet Ellie sees this period as not working for the school. In reality it did work really well for the school, and continues to have a positive impact. In this case, the close interpersonal relationships seem to have got in the way of objectivity. Emily appears to identify something of the forces at work in this:

There was a sense [that year] of staff being very up and down. Teachers were relatively sensitive. Emotional. If they were feeling overworked, stressed or under pressure etc. then they would struggle. They tended to struggle if they were not quite sure they were fully in control of the situation.... Generally there was a lot of change and settling into those changes. People don't like change. (Emily, interview, July 2010)

She seems to be able to take a step back and, perhaps because she was less personally involved with Jane, see the bigger picture. She recognises that change is unsettling and tends to view Jane's response in this context and is thus apparently less affected by her downturn. However, it is clear from what she says that she realises that the way the year unfolded,

It has been a rollercoaster from what I have seen. We got off to a wobbly start.... (Emily, interview, July 2010)

had a big impact on the way people were feeling and their relationships with one another. Once more, there seems to be a link between the small size of the school, the 'magnification effect' caused by this and the close interpersonal relationships between the staff. Ellie bears this out when she comments on changes to the administrative staff. In many schools teachers would be relatively unaware of this but, with relationships being as close as they are, she reports 'missing' two office staff who left and being positively affected by another who was 'thorough and calming'. A colleague notes how tangible it can be when everyone is working well together:

I noticed today, at the leavers' assembly, a very strong sense of cohesion across the school. The feeling of togetherness seems to have increased for both children and staff. (Jenny, interview, July 2010)

I believe the last word in this section should go to Emily, who in comparing this school with other places where she has worked makes reference to the closeness and strength of relationships in the school. She says:

I feel I matter here. It is not only the headteacher who checks I am OK.

(Emily, interview, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2009)

### **Conclusion**

A number of key themes or factors have emerged from the data as having a significant impact on the improvement process in the school being studied.. Each of these themes (the time factor, the rollercoaster feel, the sense of vulnerability, the magnification effect in a small school and the effect of interpersonal relationships) appears in the headteacher's narrative but also comes up in the interviews with other members of staff and with governors. Within these themes, both the role of the headteacher and the factors driving the change process feature frequently and are thus worthy of further examination. The next chapter looks at these.

# **Chapter 6: The role of the headteacher and the change agenda**

## Chapter 6: The role of the headteacher and the change agenda

### The role of the headteacher

For teachers, one of the great unanswered questions is 'what do headteachers do all day?' They know their heads and leaders are busy, but even those who work alongside them sometimes find it hard to fathom all the leadership myths, mystiques and mysteries. (Southworth, 2008, p.153)

One obvious working out of the interpersonal relationships in the school is of course the way different individuals and groups interact with the leader of that organisation, the headteacher. I was surprised at the way people viewed my role and the significance they put on it. Having had an avowed aim from the moment I joined the school to try to enable people to become less headteacher-dependent it shocked me somewhat that so many people viewed my part in the organisation as extremely significant. While there are obvious differences between being significant (having a meaning...inviting attention, of considerable ...effect or importance: Concise Oxford Dictionary) and having people dependent (depending on another for support...conditioned...subordinate: Concise Oxford Dictionary) on oneself, there still feels to be a certain amount of incompatibility between the aim of encouraging people to be less reliant on the headteacher and acknowledging that person's significance. The headteacher does, of course, have a key role in the organisation, particularly in terms of improvement or driving it forward and in shaping its ethos. Indeed I heard it said on a course once (NPQH, 2003) that 'the only thing you can count on remaining once you leave a school are the daffodils you planted!' It is the headteacher's job to have a vision for the school and to put in place measures to help effect that vision. Indeed a headteacher with no vision or even limited vision is probably no use at all for a school and certainly unlikely to have much impact on its future. But within that vision there has to be room for others to take on part of it and put their own stamp on things. If teachers do not have an appropriate degree of autonomy then they are unlikely to take ownership of change, rather they will be waiting to be told what to do. This can of course become a vicious circle as people who have previously been dependent often find it difficult to be self-motivating even when they are given permission and space to do so, a thought reminiscent of

Mills et al (2009) who point out that it is very often people who do not appreciate the need for change and how to effect this who are the barriers to effective change. There would seem to be an ideal balance point somewhere in which, although the driver of change, the headteacher or leader is able to stand back a little and allow others space to do things in their own way. Having reached a 'tipping point' (Kim and Mauborgne, 2009), things will then gather pace and hopefully enable fundamental change to take place very quickly. Several of the respondents noticed a point at which I was able to stand back and allow staff more opportunities to be autonomous in their working.

Although the headteacher is the main leader, things have changed now and staff (especially teachers) can see where the school can go. They can see opportunities and want to be involved. (Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010)  
Staff are supported in putting things in place. They are given reasons for it and regular checkpoints [if needed]. Through this, professional practice improves. (Emily, interview, July 2010)

Harriet also observed this process of the headteacher standing back and encouraging staff to be more self-reliant and to take increased responsibility for the outcomes of their actions. Her observations are backed up again by Emily who also comments on some of her perceived reasoning for the headteacher stepping back:

If things are always presented on a plate, people will not be developed  
(Emily, interview, July 2010)

By implication, as staff take increased ownership then their skills and professionalism will be developed too.

I have [a sense of] motivation and feeling like you have a place and a sense of worth. You feel like you are making a difference.

(Jane, interview, October 2009)

Clearly Jane is seeing value in what she does and is beginning to take ownership. She appears to be at least as much motivated by the sense of 'making a difference' than by any directions from the headteacher. Emily echoes some of this when she says:

I like working [at this school]. Mainly because I feel valued as a professional. My opinion counts. (Emily, interview, July 2010)

Again, there is a sense that she is doing things for reasons other than because she is being told to do so. She suggests she has been given the space to be 'professional' and to develop and implement ideas of her own. She is also aware that this is not necessarily the case in all schools:

Everybody is consulted. They are expected to take part and contribute. I have worked in [other] schools where this has not happened.

(Emily, interview, July 2010)

Clearly these two teachers are becoming much more independent of the headteacher and can see the value in using their own expertise and initiative. For this to be effective then it seems power relationships within a school need to change (Harris and Muijs, 2005) and thus open up the possibility for all teachers to become leaders. This involves the headteacher in stepping back even further and allowing staff to reach solutions that the Headteacher may not have come up with or even wanted. (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2007)

From the headteacher's perspective this could be a risky business. After all, other members of staff are often less aware of the external pressures on the school and the measures by which its 'success' will be judged.

Even allowing for the part played by encouraging others to take greater ownership, people seemed to struggle to imagine the school moving forward without me at the helm. We are back to the distinction between dependency and acknowledging the significance of the leader, knowing that the right leader, or otherwise, can help an organisation succeed, destroy it totally or anything in between. They acknowledged the importance of a strong, focussed leader and recognised that was what they had. 'The strength of the headteacher is key' says Jane and goes on to add that this was useful at times when interacting with external bodies, noting especially how this strength had an impact on dialogue with the Ofsted Inspector who visited in 2009:

[She was] able to defend our corner and demonstrate that we are a good school. (Jane, interview, Autumn 2009)

Janes's view seemed to be backed up by the following extract from the inspection report:

The headteacher's clarity of purpose, leadership and strong direction... is showing its impact in improvements..... (Ofsted Inspection Report, 2009)

Harriet is also very mindful of the importance of a strong leader, all the more so as she came from a setting where this was not the case.

A school needs strong leadership [like we have]. Without a strong headteacher you can't move forward....It was like that in my last school [because] the leadership was weak. (Harriet, interview, January 29<sup>th</sup> 2010)

She goes on to identify some of the ways in which that strong leadership helps a school to develop its staff and to improve by trying new things. Although the role of the hero or instructional leader has been much debated (Hallinger, 2003) and a new or 'transformational approach' applauded, it seems to me that there is still room for school leaders to fight for what they believe in and attempt to translate this into experience and opportunity for every child. (West-Burnham, 2009) Governors too showed awareness of the headteacher's role and how easily things can go wrong when a good headteacher leaves:

[We] hear of schools that do very well. Standards go up. Then the headteacher leaves and everything goes 'pear-shaped.'

(Penny, interview, July 2010)

This particular comment resonated very strongly with my own desire to develop staff and make them less dependent on the leader of the school. I wanted the school to be ready to continue its journey to improvement even if I were no longer in post.

Interviewees were all very clear about the significance of the headteacher as leader, yet they found it extremely difficult to articulate exactly what it is that I do. It seems that both they and I have a far from perfect understanding of my role. I wonder if this stems from the reasons many teachers go into headship...

Most teachers become heads for idealistic reasons, wanting to make a difference to the lives of children and young people. Yet serving heads suggest the job is getting harder, talking openly about stress and leaving the job. Many teachers now see headship as a risky business...

(Thomson, 2009, frontispiece)

Maybe the idealism that draws us in the first instance also serves to cloud our judgement about what exactly it is that we are doing. Maybe it simply takes time to learn to stand back and 'pull levers' as Barry suggested rather than try to effect change personally. We need to learn that as a leader we can make a difference **through** others. A large part of the headteacher's job has to be developing and nurturing those others until they arrive at a place where they can both make and implement decisions independently. In essence they have to be given the confidence to take ownership of the change agenda. It seems to be as Fullan (1993) suggested, that it is only when change begins with the individual and their commitment to it that it is likely to endure.

### **Reflections on the role**

It really struck me while doing the interviews for this research just how significant my own role as headteacher is for the school and how I have tended to underestimate this. Although I knew the importance of my job in one sense, hearing people articulate it has underlined for me just how readily the leader can make or break the organisation. I have also had to stand back and re-examine my own leadership style. Although aware that I use a number of different styles and have learned to alter these according to people, purpose and circumstance, I wonder whether I have a tendency to get too closely involved. Certainly my involvement has been very 'hands on' at different points but I believe this to have been of necessity, at times when particular issues or staffing scenarios meant that this was the best approach at that particular time. However, this can pose a problem in redrawing the boundaries once the particular need has passed. Whether the propensity for a leader to make or break things is more or less significant when the organisation is of a small size I cannot determine from this study. I have a feeling that the significance is probably the same but that the timescale for any positive or negative impact may vary with size. I am aware that when schools are asked to take on new initiatives or look at different ways of working, that the small size of our school makes it relatively easy to disseminate and discuss information. By implication, some things can be taken on more quickly. An example in point is when schools were asked to try the DCSF's new 'Assessing

Pupil Progress' materials. While colleagues were trialling parts in one or two classes, and often only with a small group of children, we were able to introduce this way of assessing for all pupils in every class within a very short time span. We also wrote our own Keystage One materials long before anything was published for this age range. This had the dual effect of enabling us to see the impact throughout the school very quickly while at the same time deepening our personal understanding of the assessment process we were using. Such a fast whole-school implementation would have been difficult in a larger setting and the shared writing of additional materials virtually impossible. However, the real test would be in whether the skills learned became an embedded part of school practice. Or would this simply be another example of fast superficial change that was not sustained?

Having established the importance of an effective leader, I still have to question whether the small size of our school community and the fact that we are all in regular contact may have given people an artificial sense of how much impact I do in fact have. I refer back to the comment on my NPQH (National Qualification for Headteachers) course that 'the only thing you can count on remaining the same when a headteacher leaves a school is the patch of daffodils they planted by the playground.' Are the changes I have led fully embedded or are they destined to disappear with me when I leave the school?

I wonder too how much people's opinion is coloured by the fact that I am a highly visible leader. It would certainly appear that some changes are not well enough established to endure even when I am out of school for a few days.

School Council confirmed what [Emily] said in October: behaviour dips when I am not in school....an interesting theme to explore.

(Headteacher, reflective journal, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2010)

Clearly my presence, or lack of it, in school has a huge impact in all sorts of areas. Is my presence as significant as it appears or has it simply become the accepted norm? Would people view my role differently in a larger organisation with a more established hierarchy and less direct communication? Both the small size of the school and lack of opportunity for establishing other leadership roles and my own choice to be visible would appear to have a noticeable effect here. This also leads

me to wonder whether it would be possible for a larger organisation to make better progress than a small one with an ineffectual leader. Maybe their effect would be counteracted or diluted if there were strong leaders at different levels within the organisation. However this could also have a detrimental effect. Consider this contrast between two fictional headteachers:

Dumbledore was an ethical head both in the school and in the wider world. He modelled what was right, sat Solomon-like in judgement on disciplinary misdemeanours, and took a lead in defeating the forces of darkness by protecting, advocating for, and supporting the battles of a vulnerable student from an unhappy home, Harry Potter. (Thomson, 2009, p45)

Whereas

Umbridge set herself up as a rival to Dumbledore. Her authority was obtained from the government and exercised bureaucratically. She made life miserable for the staff loyal to Dumbledore and ignored the moral code he espoused and to which the majority of the staff were committed.

(Thomson, 2009, p47)

The ongoing rivalry between the two headteachers almost did irreparable damage to their school. It is clear that, with Dumbledore removed from the scene, none of the staff had the power to countermand Umbridge's decrees. The fear is that this is a situation reminiscent of conditions which may exist in reality in many of our schools. Of course this is a picture of extremes, I know from my own experience that many headteachers use elements of both approaches within their leadership style, often to good effect. However, I consider it is important to demonstrate consistency also as too much swinging from one extreme to another is likely to make it difficult to keep the organisation on course. In the school in this study, one of our avowed but as yet unachieved aims has been to develop the Senior Leadership Team to such a point that the departure of any one of its members, including the headteacher, would not adversely affect the school's progress.

If the SLT was firing on all cylinders things would be much better.

(Ellie, interview, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

In the case of the scenario outlined above, getting to that point would have meant that they would have been both sure enough of the direction of the school and also strong enough to stand up to Umbridge's excesses.

Although all the interviewees were clear about the importance of a strong leader, not everyone could identify the role of the headteacher in various areas. They knew that the headteacher was very 'present' in the school but seemed to be less aware of the headteacher's strategic role. Only Harriet, not the most senior of those interviewed, could articulate various strategies used by the headteacher to encourage others to grow professionally though several others reported the effects of those strategies upon themselves.

I notice the headteacher stepping back, making people realise their responsibilities and begin to take responsibility for them.

(Harriet, interview, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010)

Surprisingly, even some governors found it hard to explain the headteacher's role. Although it was clear they knew this was both operational and strategic, they seemed to find it difficult to pull out the different elements. One notes, after a meeting in September 2005 to discuss the school's first Self-Evaluation Form that:

When the headteacher shared [her assessment of] where the school was, it enabled me as a governor to know. It was a brutal sharing but enabled us to be realistic about the school. (Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Having this shared understanding of where the school was contributed a great deal to the improvement, a view that was echoed by Ofsted in 2009:

Leaders, managers and governors are exceptionally accurate in their evaluations of the school's present and underlying provision and its impact on achievement. (Ofsted Inspection Report, 2009)

yet, it is not a part of the headteacher's role that appeared to spring readily to mind during the interviews for this research. Southworth's case study of Ron Lacey, a primary headteacher in England, demonstrates some of the contrasts and conflicts between different aspects of the headteacher's role. 'There were several strands to Ron's work as a headteacher', Southworth remarked. Sometimes he will be caught

up in seemingly mundane tasks and unending encounters with a range of different people:

Each week involved a number of relatively permanent points (such as fixed appointments and timetabled commitments....), but there were also numerous unexpected meetings with people who arrived without warning. Ron was frequently meeting people....all of whom usually wanted to talk with the head, but who also wanted Ron to focus on different things.

(Southworth, 1995, p.118)

At other times he needed to find the time and space to focus on the more strategic part of his role, ensuring that the school continued to move forward:

While [the headteacher] believed that development arose first and foremost from inside the school, he also knew that...initiatives from outside the school had to be taken into account. Innovation had to be managed in the school, but some of the changes sprang from sources beyond the school's boundaries. Consequently he saw his work as blending developments arising from inside the school and changes created from outside the school.

(Southworth, 1995, p.118)

It is all too easy to assume that the headteacher's role in a small school is different than in a larger one. Indeed it is, in as much as the small-school headteacher is likely to have a much greater teaching commitment than his large school counterpart but in all other respects it is the same job:

what [small schools] have in common is a headteacher with a full-scale management and leadership role together with significant class teaching responsibilities. (Jones, 2009, p.133)

Maybe it is the contrast and apparent incompatibility of the various elements of the headteacher's role that make it so difficult for 'outsiders' to define it. One governor almost seemed to view the headteacher as the 'man in the middle', somehow brokering ideas between staff and governors. When discussing who leads the school her comment was:

Staff have the edge. The headteacher often comes to the governors with [their] ideas. (Dawn, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

This apparent lack of understanding was surprising, especially in a school where the governing body had been judged as 'outstanding' by Ofsted (2009), and raises a lot of questions about the mechanics of change and why 'real, embedded change' seems to be so difficult to achieve. The members of the Governing Body of a school are supposed to take a strategic view of where that school is and what it needs to do in order to improve. Their role involves holding the headteacher to account and ensuring that they are proactive in driving improvement forward. If governors have the feeling that the 'staff have the edge' then it could be that neither governors nor headteacher are actively driving things forward. Of course it might also have been a perfect picture of a Community of Practice at work (Wenger 1998) with participants negotiating and implementing a shared vision. If so, that would certainly be a positive situation for the school but unfortunately I believe it to be symptomatic either of a misunderstanding by a single governor or the outworkings of a state of some confusion. If it is the latter, then it is highly likely that changes will not be strategic and aimed at improving the school but merely a haphazard collection springing from the desires and whims of the moment. If there is no cohesive plan for improvement then culture change is likely to be extremely hard to achieve. There appears to be a significant tension between this deep change and short quick fixes. Is there a danger that as change becomes more embedded, and therefore the role of the leader is less noticeable, that a perception creeps in that the change is not in fact being led? Could this then lead to a sense of being directionless that might then work actively against the processes of change and improvement? Is it a very unusual leader that can give people ownership and empower them to make changes whilst still keeping hold of the overall direction of the organisation? Or do leaders do this anyway but unobserved by others?

### **Visible or otherwise?**

Brooke Smith explores similar issues and a creative model of change in his book, 'Leading Learners, Leading Schools':

This is not an attempt to create a new recipe for instant success for managers. No such thing exists in spite of the free flow of management fads and gurus and new approaches to school improvement in recent decades. I

have attempted to break away from deeply ingrained ways of thinking about schools as organizations and to tease out ways of occupying that most elusive of localities – the creative state. (Brooke-Smith, 2003, p.xx)

Brooke-Smith seems to be at odds here with the prevailing view, endorsed by Ofsted, that school leaders are and need to be highly visible. In this study too, interviewees tended to view it as important that, as well as being a strong leader, the headteacher was highly visible. However, they were also aware that very often the headteacher has to act through others or 'pull levers' (Barry). In other words, they were aware that the leadership process is not simply one of seeing, being seen and doing. I think the difference here is one of complexity and subtlety. Ofsted seem to have taken a simplistic view. In acknowledging the importance of the leader's role they appear to have concluded that if the leader is visible all will be well; and, conversely, when you are not overtly aware of the headteacher's influence then nothing can be happening. Yet, as Barry commented, the headteacher will not always be visible, rather their strength is in knowing where the school should be heading and knowing how to ensure that it stays on track, 'standing back and pulling levers' which allow others to implement the required changes. Brooke-Smith takes a similar view with his suggestion of occupying a particular locality or zone, 'the creative state'. (Brooke-Smith, 2003, pxx) He reminds me of Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' that area we try to reach with learners where they are ready to learn quickly and master new concepts. If the headteacher is always highly visible, then other people have little opportunity to be creative, try out new ideas or master new skills. Surely that visibility can then stifle others and thus potentially slow down or even halt the improvement process. This was a factor picked up by Jane in the study:

It doesn't seem right to make decisions without telling the headteacher. I wonder if sometimes that stops people doing things. (Jane, Autumn 2009)

There is a subtle difference between being in overall control and being always visible. I feel it is very fine line which, if crossed, can lead either to a school with no sense of purpose or a school in which staff are not encouraged to be creative and use their initiative. In the worst case this could result in an institution where nothing happens because everyone is too afraid of doing the wrong thing. Ofsted

reports comment rightly that ‘the dedication, drive and vision of the headteacher need to be evident to the whole school community.’ (Ofsted 2003, p27)

Experiences in the school being studied suggest that this is indeed the case. Where we might differ is again in a sense of subtlety. Having ‘drive and vision’ does not necessarily equate to being visible and controlling at all times. On occasions the headteacher’s influence may be much more behind the scenes, and indeed it often has to be that way if others are not to feel prohibited from taking action. However, people do need to have confidence that the headteacher is in fact leading the school even when this may not be overtly visible. They need to know that the headteacher can ‘fight our corner’ (Jane).

The headteacher has a major role to play in the self-evaluation of the school.

The strength of the headteacher is an important factor in convincing Ofsted that we do know where we are. (Jane, interview, Autumn 2009)

The sense of the headteacher being visible seems such a key one to Ofsted that they continue to discuss this in their report:

Headteachers must have a clear sense of direction, be tough, and maintain a very high profile. They cannot hide behind a closed door or seek refuge in paperwork, but need to be highly visible throughout the day, so that staff and pupils are reminded of the headteacher’s expectations of them.

(Ofsted 2003a, 27, p.131)

Once again, there seems to be an element of confusion. Although I would agree that the headteacher cannot ‘hide behind a closed door or seek refuge in paperwork’ it is also apparent that, in my opinion, Ofsted have muddled here the need for a leader to have a clear vision and strong sense of direction, felt by all concerned with the organisation, with a perceived need for this to be spelt out and obvious at all times. They do not appear to have caught up with Brooke-Smith and others in understanding that:

In many respects leadership theory and practice are also moving away from one way to lead, or also different definable styles of leadership, towards a fusion of leadership principles and practices that seem right for the leader and for the leadership challenges he or she is facing in a particular time and place. (Hargreaves, 2011, p.229)

If '... emotion is a key part of that social reality in which leadership is exercised.' (Crawford, 2011, p.203) then a leader has to be sensitive to events and moods around him and not always be the same directive, visible leader apparently approved of by Ofsted. Indeed, Robertson suggests that successful leadership, and thus real change, are born out of a very different leadership style. She agrees with Noddings that

effective leadership influence is through relationships and leadership and learning are relational care processes (Noddings, 2005).

then goes on to highlight the importance of 'reciprocity'.

Reciprocity – the give and take of information, the levelling of power relations, the sharing of vulnerability – allows and enables professionals to enter a deeper place of learning and being. (Robertson, 2011, p218)

This strikes a chord with both Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' and Brooke-Smith's 'creative state'. Once again, we are forced to think about the subtleties and complexities of different, and changing, leadership styles. The headteacher can be neither the 'man in the middle' talked about by Dawn (interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010) nor the autocratic leader apparently envisioned by Ofsted as each could be equally detrimental to the pursuit of improvement. Rather, they must adapt their approach in order to develop and encourage others:

We need to maintain leadership that creates a culture that encourages staff to evaluate their own performance and practice and allows them space to seek the solutions for themselves. (Harriet, interview, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010)

It is perhaps that thought of '**not always** be[ing] the same directive visible leader' that has passed Ofsted by. Successful leadership appears to demand a number of skills and a range of different styles. So a good leader needs to know when to be visible and when to retreat into the background a little. Being less overtly present does not automatically mean that a leader has lost control but may rather imply a willingness to stand back a little and empower other staff to enter that 'deeper place of learning and being' talked about by Robertson. I begin to wonder if there is a much bigger area to explore here about the visibility of the headteacher and how, when a conscious decision is made to stand back, this can be achieved without

sacrificing the sense, which people appear to need, that there is a strong leader in charge.

I am reminded of late 2009 and early 2010, when we were looking carefully at the school's curriculum and how we might redesign it to make it more creative and holistic with a possible emphasis on skills rather than the more traditional outcomes. As part of this process I went with one of the school's senior teachers to a training day about the skills-based curriculum and how this might fit in with proposed changes to the National Curriculum. I also took all the teachers to the National Gallery for training about their 'Take One Picture' project. This involves taking a work of art as a starting point for a topic encompassing many areas of the curriculum. Following this we held a training day for staff and governors looking firstly at our current curriculum and how we could change it and then having a go at planning for a topic in an entirely different way. In my head, although I had intentionally handed over the leadership of much of the process, there was a clear plan to engage in different training and planning exercises that would give us the skills we needed to remodel our curriculum in the way I felt was best. But from conversations with other people, I soon became aware that they thought the alignment of the different elements was accidental and that the changes grew out of this rather than these things being put into place to support a process that I had already identified as being desirable for the school. Maybe those people, like myself on occasions, had not really understood how the headteacher's role really works. Can the leader of the organisation ever truly hand things over? Do they, even when appearing to allow others to influence the direction the organisation is heading in, still feel that they must remain in charge? Even when appearing to hand things over:

Ron [still] had a game plan and could apply pressure in pursuit of his interests. (Southworth, 1995, p.145)

Things were not quite what they seemed then. As Brooke-Smith shares, this is not surprising in an organisation as complex as a school where:

Nothing is simple in the day-to-day culture of schools, and such simplicities did not fit the slippery and messy realities I found myself confronted with.

The insights of complexity and complex adaptive systems have provided a powerful set of theories to help explain and manage the realities I was engaged in. (Brooke-Smith, 2003,p.23)

Clearly the issues surrounding leadership and ownership of change by other members of the organisation are far from straightforward. How does a leader remain in control, driving the organisation forwards and at the same time encourage others to be involved, be creative and take ownership of the change or improvement process?

### **Ownership of change**

Even with two weeks' notice of our meeting to look at assessment data and discuss the children who are 'stuck', teachers did not have the evidence at their fingertips. Why? Did they think it would go away? Does this mean that so many improvements are really not embedded?

(Headteacher, reflective journal, March 2010)

Much of my experience during this research has served to underline how difficult it can be to secure ownership of change. People so often appear to do things because they are asked to do so rather than because they are inherently committed to doing them. Bridging the gap between the two seems to be one of the hardest things to achieve. In my setting, I have worked hard to develop and implement a shared vision yet it seems that there will always be people who merely pay lip-service to it.

Some staff feel ownership: those who wish to go further have ownership, are involved and are actively seeking to improve their own practice.

(Emily, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2009)

The problem is what to do about the others. In this research it was very difficult to get any sense of what those 'others' were feeling as they were the ones who chose not to respond to questionnaires or to be interviewed. I am tempted, although this cannot be presumed to be true, to assume that this is a result of lack of interest on their part and that it is this same lack of interest that leads them to be unwilling to take an active part in monitoring the children's progress. However, the fact that they chose not to participate in the research means that they have denied themselves an opportunity to be heard. This lack of a 'voice' means that it is

virtually impossible to know what they are really thinking and is a source of frustration to me in the attempt to get 'under the skin' of what is really happening as we seek to improve a school and sustain that improvement. It may be as simple as Harriet suggests:

Some people are just not willing to take on responsibility. This can be quite frustrating at times. (Harriet, interview, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010)

Harriet was also very aware of the different phases of change in the school, from highly directed activity to giving people the freedom to take things on for themselves. She was very conscious that I, as headteacher, was choosing to step back and allow people to take on responsibility. She picked up on the ways I was doing this, noticing that on occasions I would even allow things to come 'crashing down' rather than step in and sort them when it was someone else's responsibility to do so.

The headteacher is stepping back but making people realise they have responsibilities and that they need to begin to take that responsibility.

(Harriet, interview, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010)

Knowing how much freedom to give people and when it is 'safe' to let go is not always straightforward. While I went through a conscious stage of 'stepping back' and occasionally allowing things to fall because no-one had picked them up, this could only happen at a point where I judged that people were aware enough of their responsibilities and willing enough to shoulder the burden so that things would not go catastrophically wrong with the entire organisation. Having tried unsuccessfully for several years to encourage leadership at different levels it seemed right to try to put people in a position where they had to take responsibility however unwillingly. They had been given training and support and now it seemed time to put some of this into practice even though I was aware of the inherent risks. I felt the school could sustain the occasional 'glitch' but would not survive a major breakdown. At the end of the day, I would remain responsible for what is happening in school even though I was not directly implementing things. I would also ultimately bear the responsibility for getting the organisation back on track if it all went terribly wrong. This can be a real tension when trying to encourage more self-reliance and responsibility in staff members as Southworth points out:

[The headteacher] consulted staff and sought to involve them in policy decisions. Yet such participation did not mean that power was necessarily devolved from him to them.....He was willing to consult but not at the expense of his control. (Southworth, 1995, p.149)

I might not agree totally about the need to retain 'control' but there is no avoiding the fact that the headteacher is ultimately accountable for the school's performance. Although it is quite understandable that the headteacher, knowing they retain this ultimate responsibility, might be hesitant over letting staff 'have their heads' I believe that this has to happen. The leader has to find the courage to let go and allow people autonomy as it is only at this point that change will begin to become embedded. However, the question still remains as to what to do with those people who are not really on board with the change. A few people opposed to an idea, a change, a new direction can have a negative effect totally disproportionate to their number. It is important to be continually looking at ways to enthuse these people and get them on side. What is clear is that even a few people who are not on side can have a huge effect on any change that has been planned. However carefully managers have planned for changes,

these [plans] can be derailed by forces that managers haven't considered.

These include... how the change is made sense of by organizational members. (Mills et al, 2009, p.33)

The importance of the way change is managed and getting everyone on board must not be underestimated. To get this in perspective, any leader should try to understand how members of the organisation truly perceive any proposed change.

When an idea works well and people 'buy into' it, such as with the establishment of the Outdoor Classroom then it seems to gather a momentum of its own.

Why did the Outdoor Classroom work so well? Staff made it happen along with the community and [outside support]. The children are really enjoying the different ways of being taught. Lots of people have worked hard in a multidisciplinary way. There has been some good joint working. Teachers bought into it. (Dawn, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Jenny picked up on another aspect of ownership, that is the need to be resilient and to keep going. This necessary factor is picked up on by Northup who explains that our periods of high energy and motivation are often followed by times of self-doubt and lack of impetus:

One commonality that has surfaced again and again is that human experience continually moves from periods of high energy, confidence, determination, motivation and feelings of omnipotence to periods of self-doubt, anxiety, fear, feelings of failure or an emptiness or searching for that 'something' that seems to be missing from their life. (Northup, 2008 paper)

Northup goes on to explain how we may cope better or less well at different times, depending on a range of internal and external factors:

Our reactions, coping or non-coping strategies, in other words our resilience, become automatic. We are often through the process, at our destination, before we realize we have taken the trip. We may respond proactively, with assertiveness, purpose and direction in any given situation. That same situation encountered at a different time may find us totally unprepared to handle the crisis of the situation. (Northup, 2008 paper)

Jane picks up on the thoughts about resilience, yet there is a sense that somehow she is less committed to keeping going. She could be at risk of ending up in the place of complacency suggested earlier by Emily.

The school has benefitted from the change, especially in Keystage One. Lots of major stuff has been done and hopefully we are now at a point where things can run more smoothly. It will take less energy out of the school.....This year has been hard. Next year we should see the benefits from what has been put in. (Jane, interview, 2010)

Interestingly Jane was very committed to the change process and had been something of a leader in moving various aspects forward. However, she does not sound here as though she is ready to continue putting the same effort in during the coming year. Is this another factor in securing sustainable change? People may well be on board with the ideas and vision yet unable to maintain the physical and mental energy needed to keep the momentum going...

...our ability to employ resilience during the 'ups and downs' can make the difference between our success and failure in our personal life and on the job. (Northup, 2008 paper)

As Jenny pointed out, there is a great deal of resilience needed if we are to stay on track and continue improving; a thought echoed by me in my most difficult moments:

This serves as a reminder as to how long a week is in the life of a headteacher! I am responsible for so much even when I am not there.....It is no wonder headteachers go under...and some of us are teaching too!  
(Headteacher, reflective journal, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2009)

Maybe after all, ownership of change is not on its own such a key factor as it would first appear. Time and energy levels are clearly important as is understanding what it is that keeps us going when times are tough.

### **The climate that fosters a move towards improvement**

Two weeks into the summer term and this is the first opportunity I have had to sit and write this [reflective journal]. I have tried so hard to pace myself but the result is that so much gets left undone. It was lovely to spend an hour on the train this morning with Teacher X chatting and planning for the future. (Headteacher, reflective journal, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Energy levels and motivation would both appear to be key factors in keeping improvement as a focus. Although it is clear buildings, finance and staff capacity all play their part, it seems that each of these factors is not quite as significant as we might first think. Certainly, in the interviews conducted in 2009/10 none of them featured as much as I might have expected. What seemed to appear most prominently was a sense that people needed to feel valued and that also, although they might be fully 'on-side' with the improvement agenda they could only maintain momentum for so long. They struggled to find the 'resilience' identified by Jenny in the previous section but would run out of steam after a burst of activity and need a lot of encouragement to begin moving forwards again. It also emerged just how sensitive many teachers appear to be and that any difficulty, either personally or professionally was likely to blow them off course.

I was worried about being the only full-timer. Staffing felt fragmented, unstable. There are so many part-timers. Can the school sustain it?

(Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

In reality the change was quite small, one teacher going on Maternity Leave, but it seemed to have the momentum to throw her colleague totally. Capacity was unchanged with supply cover being bought in but Ellie did not feel this was so. There is something quite nebulous but, at the same time important, going on here. The way Ellie was feeling and the effect this had on her output was likely to have a noticeable impact on the school's progression even though the actual event causing this feeling was relatively minor. This sense of needing to feel good about self and what they were doing was echoed by other teachers.

I was lacking in confidence and self-belief. We all needed the headteacher's time [to help us cope] – did it have a negative impact generally?

(Diane, interview, October 2009)

I like working [here] – mainly because I feel valued as a professional. My opinion counts...I can use my professional judgement.

(Emily, interview, October 2009)

What also came out from the interviewees was how fragile people's self confidence seemed to be:

There is a sense of the staff being up and down. Teachers are relatively sensitive, emotional. If [we] are feeling overworked, stressed, under pressure etc. then we struggle if we are not quite fully in control of the situation. (Emily, interview, July 2010)

Sometimes I feel stifled. I like to have space. I can lose security and confidence because I worry about doing things wrong.

(Jane, interview, July 2010)

Clearly there is something significant going on here. Does it mean that teachers' feelings play a bigger part in the improvement agenda than other, more usual factors such as time and money? Certainly Ellie suggests this when she comments, in the context of some colleagues' reactions to things she was doing to maximise her own opportunities, that:

I can't be in an environment where I feel 'punished' for wanting to get on in my career. (Ellie, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

This teacher went on to say that she would feel unable to do certain things towards improvement if she did not have supportive colleagues alongside her. The sensitivity and volatility of staff members and their feelings should not be that much of a surprise. After all Goleman has been saying for well over a decade that the emotional intelligence of an individual or organisation is at least as significant as other factors such as IQ. He reminds us that things such as self-awareness, motivation and empathy are qualities that mark people and organisations who excel. (Goleman, 1996)

Goleman concludes that:

even mild mood changes can sway thinking. In making plans or decisions people in good moods have a perceptual bias that leads them to be more expansive and positive in their thinking. (Goleman, 1996, p.85)

If this is the case then no wonder teachers feel more disposed to try new ideas and ways of working when they are feeling good about themselves and have the back up of supportive colleagues. This seems to be what Ellie was talking about although she framed it more negatively. Goleman also reminds us that worrying has a negative effect with the resources expended on the worrying detracting from the resources available for processing the task in hand (Goleman, 1996, p.84). Again, this seems to fit very closely with the themes emerging from this research which also chime rather happily with Goleman's assertion that:

good moods, while they last, enhance the ability to think flexibly and with more complexity, thus making it easier to find solutions to problems whether intellectual or interpersonal. (Goleman, 1996, p.85)

One of the school's governors highlighted a similar thing when he pointed out that

Laughter plays a role in bonding. Laughing reduces barriers because humans are social animals. (Barry, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2010)

He went on to explain how he works hard to put people at their ease as he believes that makes it easier for them to perform well. He was quite clear that it is important to:

produce an atmosphere in which people, staff, feel respected, appreciated and recognised for who they are and what they do...and that if they do something which goes wrong they won't be 'punished' for making a mistake.

(Barry, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2010)

It was not that he thought this had happened in the organisation in question but that he was keen to ensure that it did not. He seemed very aware of the importance of the right culture in allowing people to grow and develop their skills. Interestingly, both he and Ellie used the word 'punished' although in different contexts. They both pull out how it is important that people do not feel they will be 'punished' for their actions. A climate where people are not worrying about the possibility of getting things wrong is clearly a place where change can happen whereas a climate of fear is likely to mitigate against any significant change.

### **Improvement is a journey**

We can choose to view improvement as a series of changes following on from each other, a journey. Unknowingly, I used the metaphor of journeying when I talk about the changes we were making to the curriculum:

I like what we are doing with developing the curriculum. It is hard but a real positive move forward. It is good to have everyone coming on board.

(Headteacher, reflective journal following staff meeting, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2010)

This is not a new metaphor but in this and many other views expressed, there is an almost unconscious or subliminal feel that the whole improvement agenda has something to do with journeying or moving forward. If improvement can be viewed as a journey then the headteacher will have his or her hand very firmly on the rudder in order to give direction to that journey. There was in fact a very strong sense which emerged from all aspects of my research that improvement is indeed a journey and one in which it is often not easy to keep going. This journey is one in which although it does have a start and an ending, these are not always apparent. There is more a feeling that the end is a long way away and is the vague notion of a perfect school: and that the original start point is far too long ago for anyone to be entirely sure what it was.

Looking back over five years, there have been enormous changes for the better. We have come a long way but we still want to take the school further. (Tina, interview, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

This all sounds very good but what is it really saying? When we unpick this statement the governor is saying little more than that it feels better now than it did. We want to 'take the school further' but can this interviewee articulate what that really means? It appears not. Indeed when asked to explain what she meant by the above statement, Tina, struggled to amplify it in any way. With hindsight, maybe I as interviewer should have been able to help her do this more readily. A better reframing of my questions might have enabled her to get to the real meaning of what she was trying to say. However what does come across is a sense of continuing progress towards improvement. In 'Beyond School Improvement' the authors describe this continuing progress as:

a journey that starts with examining the underlying paradigm of leadership and checking that paradigm against what systems need today. It involves shifting the vision of leadership to principles more in line with the way people are connecting and working together today. It is a journey where leaders look inward to examine their practice against the needs of an evolving world. It is a journey that requires patience and celebration as new capacities develop. (Davidovich et al, 2010)

The current journey in the school seems more like a stage of the total distance travelled and is probably bounded by the length of service of the headteacher in post. Certainly, all the interviewees stated that improvement is not something that can happen quickly and that they felt the school would always be vulnerable to the departure of the headteacher. It is also important to know when to take the next step. It can be all too easy to get the timing wrong or even fail to keep moving at times.

Like a moving vehicle, once the progress has been permitted to come to a halt it can be almost impossible to start things moving again. A moving vehicle, or organisation, however slow its progress, is much easier to keep moving than one which has ground to a halt. Emily was quick to recognise this:

[We, the staff, are] in a possible place of complacency because it is a long and difficult journey. Thankfully the headteacher does not share that view and keeps on prodding us forwards. There are pockets still keen to improve.

(Emily, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2009)

She also commented how there was a time when the school was 'stuck' in the routines of the past but that the headteacher knew and shared where the school wanted to be although we were not there yet. When Ofsted inspectors came in 2006 they saw both this potential for improvement and the young teachers who, although new to their craft, were keen to improve their practice and be part of the school's journey to improvement. These teachers were beginning to see that:

One of the most important things teachers can do for any learner is to make the learner less and less dependent on them... (Holt, 1994, p.9)

They had discovered that the teacher's and student's greatest enemy is boredom as:

If this goes on long enough....they forget what it is like to grasp at something, as they once grasped at everything, with all their minds and senses; they forget how to deal positively and aggressively with life and experience, to think and say, "I see it! I get it! I can do it!" (Holt, 1994, p.11)

More importantly they were keen to improve their teaching, to work hard and develop the skills needed to enable children to learn with enthusiasm and be ready to shout out those three phrases: '*I see it! I get it! I can do it!*'

In 2009, Ofsted inspectors returned and saw the evidence of that journey: the school was now in a much healthier place and was in the process of embedding good practice:

[This] is a good school where pupils achieve well..... strong leadership, supported by an excellent governing body and a knowledgeable, effective and hard-working staff, has brought about many improvements since the last inspection. (Ofsted Inspection Report, July 2009)

Governors too, recognised the improvement the school had made and was continuing to make:

Improvement doesn't stop, it carries on. We are working towards getting a tight framework for embedding good practice. The governors' monitoring

cycle helps with this. I think an ethos can also be embedded in a school especially in the children. This can be personally or as a group. It is important that we continually improve and continually question.

(Dawn, interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

I believe Dawn has touched on something profound here. It is not only the journey that is important but also the ethos of the organisation. There does seem to be a sense in which a school's ethos is so embedded that it outlasts many changes of staff and pupils. I have often remarked on how various ways of doing things seem to be in the very walls of the school, so much so that changes of emphasis, different staff, different governors and even a different curriculum seem to have little effect. This is clearly in tension with the views expressed earlier that many things only seem to endure as long as the current headteacher is in post. In fact, I think both are true and both can work for good and bad, for positive and negative outcomes for the organisation. It seems to me that this tension may be part of the issue of sustainability of improvement. Although surface changes can be made quickly and, all the time they are being 'driven' by a committed and inspirational leader, they will remain; it seems that more enduring and self-sustaining change takes much longer to effect. It is only when change permeates the walls of an establishment that it gains a life of its own and will thus be likely to endure even when the leader who initiated is long gone. In my view this will only happen once all involved are ready to take ownership of such change.

### **How does the data reflect the views in the literature?**

Several of the interviewees commented on the significance of change being owned. They mention staff becoming more self-reliant and taking increased responsibility, linking this quite closely with the headteacher's 'stepping back' and giving more autonomy to other people. They observe a 'letting go' by the headteacher which goes beyond simple delegation; Emily comments on being given the space to be professional and 'to develop and implement ideas of [her] own.' This agrees with comments by Barry in which he notes the headteacher standing back and operating by remote control or 'pulling levers.' Barry's view here reminds us that although people need to be given space and autonomy, change also has to be managed.

Several respondents note that the headteacher is a key driving force who manages the change agenda albeit often at a distance. Indeed interviewees also remarked that once change gets more embedded and self-perpetuating the role of the leader becomes less visible. Although largely a good thing, they also noted the inherent danger that it could start to seem as though any change is not being led and is simply haphazard: indeed this happened in the research school where staff apparently had no idea that the headteacher was actually directing the curriculum changes. Several people thought that events were juxtaposed purely by chance! (see Take One Picture episode) Clearly there is a significant interface here between the need to step back while at the same time giving confidence that the organisation is actually being led. While other key factors are the need to develop a shared vision and negotiate an agreed meaning within the community of practice, it would seem that people feel a need to know that someone is in overall charge. I wonder if this is connected with the fact that change can feel very unsettling and even threatening. When people are going through a time of confusion and complexity perhaps they seek reassurance that will help them to feel more secure. It may be that knowing someone is in charge gives that reassurance. The balance sought here though is a long way from the ever-present, highly visible superhero headteacher that appears to be recommended by Ofsted (Ofsted 2003a, p.131). Indeed, many of Ofsted's and governmental recommendations go entirely unnoticed by the participants in this research, adding weight to the view that change cannot be externally imposed. Their talk of improvement is all based on what was actually taking place in school. It would appear that change was evolving and growing, gathering a momentum of its own that was largely unaffected by others' agendas.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### Questions and themes

In this research I set out to try to answer four main questions:

- What is school improvement and how does it happen in a small primary school?
- What is the role of the various internal participants and external bodies in the process?
- What is the impact of and upon the headteacher?
- What part does 'ownership' play in the improvement process and how does this relate to issues of embedding and sustainability?

I also chose to examine the areas of time pressure and vulnerability which became key issues along with the sense of a 'magnification effect' which emerged as the research progressed. I decided to look further at how this concept of a 'magnification effect' can help to explore processes of change and development, particularly in small schools. In trying to answer these questions I took a close look at the journey of one small primary school towards improvement. I considered the different factors at play and tried to understand further the forces affecting change and the school's journey towards improvement.

A number of themes emerged from the research, namely how school staff feel constantly pressurised by lack of time, the way we feel as though we are on a rollercoaster ride with 'ups' and 'downs' following closely on each other, the way everything (good and bad) seems to be magnified in a small school and how this contributes to that rollercoaster ride, the impact of interpersonal relationships and how there is nowhere to hide. The sense of a lack of time seemed to be wrapped up too in issues of fear and anxiety and of loss of control. At times, these emotional aspects appear to have drained away energies from the prime purpose of school improvement. Underlying these themes was a very strong sense that the role of the headteacher is a significant one and that he or she will have a part to play in directing improvement but also in creating a climate that will encourage that improvement. Alongside setting the course for the improvement journey the

headteacher also needs to demonstrate an openness to change and to the possibility that others may well choose to go about this process in a different way than they would themselves. This of course raised issues of delegation and distributed leadership as well as questions about what the headteacher could and perhaps should do to help provide a sense of calm and equilibrium that would lead to a feeling of regaining 'control' and thus enabling staff to continue the quest for improvement. Although this is a commonly accepted role for the leader of any organisation, the research suggests that emotions were magnified, like so many other things, in such a small school thus perhaps increasing the significance of the headteacher in maintaining the aura of calm.

Each of the areas explored seemed to have a significant impact on the school's capacity for improvement and, more importantly I feel, on the likelihood of that improvement becoming embedded and thus sustainable. In my opinion it is only at the point that an improvement has become embedded to the point that it is self-sustaining that we can truly say that improvement has taken place. It is largely because of this that I would have to disagree with government and local authority assertions that it is possible to turn a school round in a year. I feel that any change or improvement on this timescale is almost certainly going to be cosmetic only. With the Association for School and College Leaders, I am forced to conclude that 'a year is not enough time in which to turn around a failing school...'. (Times Educational Supplement, 16<sup>th</sup> Oct 2009, p.29) In essence, the journey is unlikely to be a fast one. Although in chapter 4, I describe an example of rapid change within the school this was within a very limited area and there was little evidence to suggest that the change became embedded.

The magnification effect in such a small school is surprising in that it is something that other researchers do not appear to have identified. When references are made to 'economies of scale' in such small settings they only appear to be considered noteworthy because of the negative effect they can have. Valerie Wilson's observation during her study of headteachers in small rural primary schools is one such example:

While having a good teacher could provide a small school headteacher with invaluable support, a poor teacher, one who was absent or a probationer seemed to have a disproportionate effect on small schools.

(Wilson, 2009, p.486)

My findings suggest that she is absolutely right with this but it is a pity she has not chosen to explore the factor further. In this study, a 'magnification effect' has emerged that appears to have both positive and negative consequences. Interviewees report being significantly affected by the moods and activities of colleagues. When one staff member is having a tough time, or when things are going well for them either in or out of school then everyone's morale is affected. It does not take long at all for morale to nosedive but equally everyone can be lifted and a buzz of excitement travel through the school as a result of something seemingly relatively minor. In the same way it was observed that the children's behaviour and attitude changed almost instantly on occasions. Again, the circumstances relating to one pupil were rarely confined to that individual or even just to their classmates but would somehow seem to have an effect on everyone. I believe the magnification effect is somehow wrapped up in the feeling of 'intensity' and of at times feeling 'stifled' that Jane talked about. It is almost as if the closeness added to the sense of being overwhelmed which could on occasions have an almost paralysing effect. This magnification effect must, I believe, contribute to the sense of being on a 'rollercoaster ride' that many interviewees talked about with the attendant extreme highs and lows.

### **What is school improvement and how does it happen in a small primary school?**

Although this research looks closely at different facets of school improvement in the case study school, I am not convinced that I have really managed to arrive at any sort of definition as to what school improvement actually is. In my mind it is certainly not simply about academic progress. There is an almost subliminal thread running through many of the interviews and observations that improvement is somehow different and more all-encompassing than the test results, so often considered in isolation by the various authorities, but no-one comes near to defining the more holistic improvement they imply. Respondents are clear that

there is no template for school improvement as such. Every school is different, with very different people and in its own unique context. Thus the 'one size fits all' approach taken by the various authorities is not likely to be a good one.

Conversely, a lot has emerged from the study about the **process** of school improvement and the ways in which the journey has unfolded in the school being studied. This process is an arduous one with pressures of time and lack of expertise mitigating strongly against improvement. In the case study school the process was often described as a 'rollercoaster ride' with its many ups and downs. However, when things were going well and staff took ownership of the improvement agenda then the change seemed to gather a momentum of its own, as described by Kim and Mauborgne (2009, p 130), it became internally driven. Improvement began to take place with very little involvement from either the headteacher or any external bodies,

### **What is the role of the various internal participants and external bodies in the process?**

Much has been written and discussed about the role of different external bodies, from the government with their policy decisions, to the Local Authority somewhere in the middle to more hands-on people such as the School Improvement Partner. However, to most of the participants in this study they seemed to be little more than 'add-ons' to a process that was internally driven. The consensus of opinion seems to be that although all of these external bodies have some part to play and that on occasions they can be useful, in the end the process is largely driven from within the school. There was a strong feeling from the different respondents that, whatever the policies and guidance, it was the headteacher who would ultimately drive any improvement. For the headteacher though, this probably only added to the pressures already felt with the tensions between external demands from government, Ofsted and the Local Authority having to be weighed against the needs and demands of staff, governors and pupils. Somehow the headteacher has to find a way of reconciling these with their own vision and determination to do the best for every child (West-Burnham, 2009, p5). Although agreeing with the prevailing view of the participants in the research that improvement is most successful when

internally driven, I would also add that some externally led initiatives such as the 'Making Good Progress' pilot had a significant effect on the school's journey towards improvement. In the final analysis though, however good an external initiative is, it will only have a positive impact if it is well led and supported from within the institution. The participants have been quick to acknowledge the influence of the headteacher in leading but less sure about their own role. Once again, it is as they get involved and begin to take ownership of the process that change actually takes place. Important as an effective leader is, if the support and willingness to move forward are not present than nothing will happen.

### **What is the impact of the headteacher?**

Although some strong views have emerged throughout the research that the headteacher's role is vital, it must be remembered that it is the headteacher doing the research. In addition to the auto-ethnography being the headteacher's own story which, by definition, leaves it open to claims of subjectivity, a significant proportion of the interviewees were employees of that same headteacher. As discussed in the ethics section, it is virtually impossible to ensure that people were unaffected by that relationship. There is always the danger that the imbalance of power might have prevented them from being able to be entirely open. However, it seems clear both from the case study school and from other research that the headteacher has a significant impact on the improvement process, possibly even more so in a small school where there are few, if any, middle leaders.

Good management and good teaching are, understandably, the two most important characteristics of successful schools. These two characteristics are uniquely combined in the role of the small school headteacher so that his or her influence is a more than usually important factor in determining the quality of the school. (Ofsted, 2000, p.5)

What struck me as really interesting though in this study was that although everyone was convinced of the importance of the headteacher's role, they found it very hard to say just what it is that I do all day! This of course is less surprising than it might at first appear when we look more closely at the way the headteacher's role is interwoven with the whole change process. If the headteacher is to be the

transformational leader described by Hallinger (Hallinger, 2003, p.335ff) their particular role will not be entirely evident as they are intentionally allowing others to shape the course that the school is taking (MacBeath, 2003, p325). While not agreeing entirely with Hallinger: in my experience the leader cannot hand things over totally, they must keep control of the overall direction of the organisation, I can see that this transformational style will make the headteacher less visible and indeed feel that this was the case in the school being studied. It is perhaps because of this that others struggle to articulate what the leader's role actually is. In one sense we could say that this defines successful leadership.

### **What part does 'ownership' play in the improvement process?**

The evidence of this study suggests that ownership plays a key part in the improvement process. Governors observed staff taking increasing ownership and teachers declared themselves keen to take responsibility for improvement. Indeed, on occasions this was so marked that people declared themselves unable to isolate the role played by the headteacher or leader. When staff were enthusiastic then change, and with it improvement, appeared to gain a momentum of its own. It seemed that Kim and Mauborne's 'Tipping Point' had been reached. (Kim and Mauborgne, 2009) As the change evolves and grows then it gathers pace and there is almost no stopping it. Unfortunately in a small school the 'magnification effect' comes into play once again. It only seems to take the departure or non-cooperation of a single member of staff to derail the whole process. At this point someone, usually the headteacher, needs to step in. Experience has shown that even as improvement slows down and is at risk of derailment, it is crucial not to let it come to a halt. If some forwards movement, however slow, can be maintained then it is likely to be much easier to get the whole process going again. The wise leader will step in and direct things for a while, always hoping that the participants will soon re-establish their ownership. To continue the metaphor of the journey, the leader has a map and compass, knowing the exact destination. While he can allow the passengers to choose to take a different route to the one he had envisaged he cannot allow the destination to be changed or the journey halted part way. Interestingly, although the teachers interviewed talked a lot about taking

responsibility and enjoying being allowed the freedom to make their own judgements, there was also a sense that they needed to know that someone was in control and would take over if things went wrong. Change is rarely straightforward. It is usually complex and can be unsettling or even frightening. It is not surprising then that participants also want the safety net of a strong leader when they feel they need them.

### **What is the impact upon the headteacher?**

It has been said that the headteacher of a small school needs to have a huge amount of energy (Wilson, 2009) and certainly this has been my experience. Just the day to day running of the school is more than a full-time job, especially as there is unlikely to be the same range of support staff as there would be in a larger establishment. It is not unusual for the headteacher to be responsible for locking the school or to undertake a range of maintenance tasks unless they can find a willing volunteer. In addition, they are very likely to have a regular teaching commitment, maybe even being responsible for a class of children. Little wonder then that:

many teaching headteachers face serious problems: time (or lack of it) [is] still perceived to be the most disabling. (Wilson, 2009, p.487)

Yet alongside all of these regular daily commitments it is the headteacher's job to develop and share a vision for the school. If they cannot find the time and 'headspace' to do this then progress towards improvement is likely to be an uphill struggle. The school might continue journeying on but it is highly likely that the journey will become mere aimless wandering. My own auto-ethnography is punctuated with phrases that highlight both the feeling of exhaustion and the sense that there is just too much to do.

I have tried so hard to pace myself but the result is that so much gets left undone. (Headteacher, reflective journal, Spring 2010)

I am forced to wonder whether this affected the morale of other staff too. There were occasions in the study when people seemed simply to have run out of energy (see Jane's comments in chapters 4 and 5) and needed someone to help re-charge and re-energise them. An effective leader should play this part but on occasions it

appears that I failed to do that. Although talking primarily about distributed leadership, Starratt (2011, pp ix-x) makes some very helpful observations about leadership as an energy field. Maybe at times we simply ran out of energy.

### **Agreement with other researchers**

Some of the themes I have summarised here are very much in tune with what other people have discovered. For example the sense of lack of time is a recurring thread in educational literature, with many writers asking questions such as:

Is there sufficient time and are there sufficient resources to accomplish everything on the teacher learning plate in one year?

(Chappuis et al, 2009, p.59).

Ownership of change too has been thoroughly explored by many writers, notably Fullan who has written several books about the process of change generally and also more specifically about change in the world of education. He points out that there are nearly always many layers to change, each playing its particular part, and that change is a complex process which if not owned by the participants will almost certainly be unsuccessful. My research endorses the prevailing view and lines up very happily with theories of 'learning communities' (Fullan, 1999) or 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) and the positive impact this approach can have on securing ownership of change. These writers support my opinion that it is only at the point that an improvement has become embedded enough to become self-sustaining that we can truly say that improvement had taken place. There has also been a great deal written about ensuring the right climate to foster change, as Fullan, for example, says:

conditions of uncertainty, learning, anxiety, difficulties and fear of the unknown are **intrinsic** to all change processes (Fullan, 1993, p.25).

Given that these emotions are likely to be present and that therefore effort needs to be put into putting people at ease and creating a positive atmosphere for change it was no great surprise that thoughts about the prevailing climate emerged as a theme from this research.

### **Differing opinions**

The idea of improvement being a journey is also not an entirely new thought (see Hallinger, 2003) but my findings differ from others in the expectation of there being a 'roadmap' for that journey that has been decided by the leader of the organisation, in this case the headteacher:

A school needs strong leadership [like we have]. Without a strong headteacher you can't move forward....

The headteacher pushes, encourages people to explore areas they might not think of exploring themselves. This helps to move the school forward.

(Harriet, interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2010)

When the leader knows where the journey is heading, then they can encourage others to do those things that will help the school move forward on that journey. Although ownership of change is still crucial, it is important too that someone has the overall view of where the change is leading. Change without vision is likely to result in a meandering and aimless journey.

Both the extreme sense of being on a 'rollercoaster ride' and the 'magnification effect in a small school' appear to be findings particular to this study. Although others have observed a cyclical effect to improvement, for example in Kurt Lewin's three steps of 'Unfreezing, Change and Refreezing' (in Mills, Dye and Mills, 2009) or in later work about Action Research they seem to have viewed this as a hierarchical process with one step building on another rather than observing the ups and downs of the 'rollercoaster ride' that has come through in this research. Equally, I can find nothing elsewhere about the magnification effect in a small school that has emerged so strongly from the data in this study. While I had a niggling feeling right at the start that this would turn out to be a factor in our journey towards improvement and knew that it was a force at play in my own perceptions of events, I was surprised by the strength with which it emerged from other respondents:

the [small] size and intensity can feel very overpowering sometimes.

(Jane, interview, Autumn 2009)

We have been through a period where everything felt a bit unstable.

(Harriet, interview, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2010)

Others have noticed the way that poor performance by one teacher can have an enormous impact in a small school (Wilson, 2009) where there is likely to be only a handful of teachers who will often have the same child in their class for two or more years. However, the magnification effect is more than this, it appears to be situated in a sense of emotional intensity that is not just about a teacher's performance or professionalism although of course it is likely to have an effect on these. One staff member's personal circumstances – whether they be good or bad - can affect everybody and what is happening with one child in one class is likely to permeate the whole school. What would probably go unnoticed in a larger school seems to have a colossal impact in a small one and almost certainly contributes to the feeling of vulnerability expressed many times in my own journals and by several interviewees too. This 'economy of scale' has positive benefits too. For example, when introducing a new way of working, maybe a changed curriculum or a different assessment focus it is relatively easy to disseminate information and get everyone 'on board'. It could be said that when it is good it is very, very good and when it is bad it is horrid! (with apologies to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

### **What can be drawn from this research?**

It is very difficult to make generalisations from the research as it focusses on only one school with just a small sample of people being interviewed. However, it does give an in-depth view of that school and a very real sense of what it feels like to be a teacher working for improvement in that small school. We can infer from the observations, in tandem with change literature, that it is important for leaders to stand back and allow momentum for change to grow within their organisation. But we should also recognise that improvement is a journey and that someone needs to know where they are going. The headteacher needs to know what is important for the school at a given time, taking time to weigh up government and local authority directives for their usefulness. This is particularly pertinent at a time when the demise of the local authority appears imminent.

Although it is difficult to generalise and apply these thoughts to other settings, the research has alerted us to the presence of a 'magnification effect' in small schools.

It also points out the need for a balance between ownership and evolution of change on the one hand and appropriate leadership on the other. Without ownership, change and improvement are unlikely to take place and even less likely to become embedded. Without appropriate leadership, lots may be happening but there is the constant danger of wandering off course. There may be a great deal of change but very little improvement.

As always, research raises more questions than it can answer. It would be good to look at the 'magnification effect' in a range of schools and other organisations to determine whether there is an optimum size and particular set of conditions in which it comes into play. However, what has been shown is that it can produce positive results as well as negative.

Finally, in order for a school to move forward and improve it must have an effective leader as well as a committed and talented staff. In order for the journey to have a purpose and a destination and not be merely aimless wandering or a rollercoaster ride, the leader must have a vision:

Created with integrity, visions can point us in a desirable direction, affect the way we feel about life's possibilities, and shape how we frame our daily actions. (Novak, 2002, p.4)